



W. The.
Wittering
Way

Nat Burns

The Wittering Way

by

Nat Burns

Mystic Books
by Regal Crest
Tennessee

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Dedication

My dedication goes out to Chris who spent so many hours either reading this work or listening to endless confusing litanies about the characters. You rock, sweetheart!

I'd also like to dedicate this book to the women of my family—mother, grandmother and aunt—who brought me up in the way of magic and shared with me their world filled with enchanted creatures from the Isle of Éire.

The Witta Clan

Widdershin Join

DaisyFir—Irine (Female)

Paria—Fede (F)

Cleome—Afton (Male)

Avapeony—Kes (F)

Straw Join

MayApple—Ninne (F)

Craghn—Arthfael (M)

Yewsy—Brennen (M)

Pine—Cin (M)

Mint—Freyan (F)

Thorn Join

Olive—Lomhr (M)

RoseII—Cathal (M)

Villia—Thaid (F)

RoseIII—Byrne (F)

Hippa—Ashe (F)

Choya—Uilie (M)

Pear—Lews (F)

Song Join

Aria—Niadh (F)

Capel—Walsh (M)

Lyric—Beara (F)

Mel—Phaid (M)

Adagio—Robin (F)

Lore Join

Holly—Grace (F)

Talew—Finner (F)

Rhyme—Them (M)

Memo—Higen (M)
Elder—Caft (F)

Basil Join

Airgialla—Quest (M)
Pedro—Clery (F)
Lemon—Maol (F)
Saffron—Gewwt (F)
Stem—Kahan (M)
Purp—Hando (M)

The Brinc Clan

Ray Join

Morn—Wood (F)
Ronat—Purth (F)
Signe—Lorne (M)
Blass—Jiff (M)
Cathe—Tupe (F)
Sentr—Mays (M)

Prosee Join

Dot—Carlae (M)
Proet—Anta (M)
Signal—Holin (F)
Ste—Colle (F)

Resin Join

Ambley—Thoom (F)
Carh—Steel (M)
Effie—Lister (F)
Kitri—Span (F)

Givan Join

Isten—Comlie (M)

Stub—Ban (F)
Martry—Saml (M)
Locre—Afran (M)

Outlie Join

Ani—Oombs (M)
Darrin—Turl (F)
Mon-twin—Aidd (F)
Noor-twin—Ild (F)
Peak—Sheer (M)
Frant—Ura (M)
Imi-twin—Doud (F)
Ami-twin—Dowd (F)

Sky Join

Lasse—Kaely (F)
Kent—Hou (F)
Jeren—Silhu (M)
Ceru—Disten (F)
Filem—Beer (M)

Part One

Book One

DUST MOTES, STIRRED by my silent, frantic movements, rose up and choked me. I stifled a welling cough and continued my protection work. I drew beautiful, flower-like designs, ovals of protection becoming fragile petals at the touch of my nubby lump of charcoal. Focusing on each thick stroke, I lost myself in the working. If I drew my attention away, listened to what was going on in the rooms above me, sanity would elude me. So I focused on my silent vigil, sending positive energy to my parents as I repeatedly mouthed a soothing working.

Air moves
Fire transforms
Water shapes
Earth heals

I began a new row of protective runes just as my sister, Avapeony's, face appeared in my mind's eye. As a sensitive, I realized new alarm, knowing that she had to be somewhere nearby. I paused, one finger uplifted as if an antenna to capture this new information. She had been away, at Lore join with her birth friend, Memo. Had she returned?

Abrupt silence descended. I glanced upward, indecision gnawing a hole in my gut as my fammie, my birth familiar, Afton, snuggled close to my neck in reassurance. The silence grew, extended.

My mother had shoved me into the cellar when the Brinc clansmen approached, entreating me to silence and invisibility, no matter what I heard. She'd kissed me gently before lowering the hatch, whispering for me to protect myself. In my mind, I envisioned her opening the hatch. I could feel the fresh air rush in, bringing her lemony scent to me. I closed my eyes, bidding reality to my will. To no avail. The hatch did not open and the eerie silence persisted.

"Go see," I said to Afton.

He pulled away and whirled nervously, his color yellowing. He wrapped a cloud-like tendril around my arm, connecting. "I hear the cries of my brethren," he said into my thoughts. "I do not go."

"No," I whispered, shaking my head in negation. "Not Irine?"

Afton renewed the link. "And Fede."

"No. No, no, no," I chanted aloud as I pushed against the hatch. Mother had thrown the bolt and it was still locked. I suddenly feared that she would never pull it back, that no one would

ever discover me there and I would die with no join, my failing Fammie fluttering down to cover my face, unable to properly return me home to Lake Feidlimed.

“Calm,” Afton beseeched, his tendrils stroking my bare arm. “Need calm.”

I ignored him and continued to push against the wooden hatch. Old dirt shook loose and peppered my face. My weak arms were ineffective so I turned a shoulder and shoved hard against the thick, planked wood. It would not move.

“Mother Tree, let me free,” I invoked quietly.

Afton backed away, so as not to interfere with the magic. I made the insignia of the tree with both hands to enhance the working.

“Mother Tree, let me free,” I invoked again as I felt the wood soften beneath my forearm. Thrice would do it, so I took a deep breath and bunched my leg muscles.

“Mother Tree, let me free. Blessed be,” I said forcefully.

The grain of the wood above me loosened as the molecules separated. I pushed upward with steady force, and the bolt slid away from the planks, allowing me to lift the hatch. I inhaled a deep breath and coughed immediately. Smoke. Afton spread his foggy form and wrapped across my mouth and nose, filtering the air so I could breathe shallowly.

Why was there smoke? I turned slowly and saw that Mother’s workbench was scorched and still smoldering, burning herbs scattered across the table and onto the floor. I glanced toward the door of our small, cozy cottage. It stood open, hanging forlornly from one leather hinge.

I moaned and Afton tightened his hold for comfort. What catastrophe had befallen the Widdershin join? I knew the Brinc clan, often led by Signe of Ray join, had increased their hateful attacks on the Morri and the Witta clans, but to do this? To attack another join in such an overt way? I shook my head.

“Irine calls to you,” Afton said.

I pulled myself from the cellar opening and staggered through the common room. “Mother?” I moved toward the sleeping cells, willing her to be there. “Father?” Hope was slim but it was all I had.

The cells were empty, the beds upended, the coverings torn and scattered. I sobbed, feeling Afton tighten in a new attempt at comfort.

“No!” I exclaimed, pulling him from my face. He spiraled next to my head, his color kaleidoscoping in helplessness. How could he comfort me? My happy life had been invaded, sullied.

I crept through the main room and toward the front door, unsure and cautious. “Mother? Irine? Ava?” I paused at the door. “Do you hear Fede now, Afton?”

Afton connected with a slender tendril. “She weeps outside.”

I nodded, unable to speak. Tears swelled my eyes. If Fede wept, then Father’s light had been extinguished. How could this be? We are not a violent people, living our lives in peace and only passing back to Lake Feidlimed after many centuries of joyful life.

I paused at the door and took a deep breath of the fragrant forest air, letting it fortify me. Yet nothing could help me deal with the sight of my parents’ bodies. My father, Paria, had fought until the end, evidenced by the glowing dagger near his outstretched hand. Strange, black burns dotted his skin. He had fallen in the courtyard and now lay sprawled and vulnerable, in a way I never would have expected to see him. His fammie, Fede, hovered above his chest, awaiting my farewell.

My mother, DaisyFir, had fought as well, with her own powerful magic, and her hands still glowed orange from the power she’d shed. Her body had gentled down onto the steps leading up

to our cottage, her morning robes swirled gracefully around her legs and hips. She, too, had black burn marks on her neck and arms. Her long, dark hair had fallen across her beautiful face, as though she hid her eyes from witnessing the tragedy around her.

Her fammie, Irine, swelled to twice her size, and her normally rosy form deepened to the gray of mourning. I stretched out an arm and she came to me. She touched Afton, and I could feel their combined pain even before he connected with me. When he did connect, grief seared through me and I felt my heart stop for a brief moment. Tears cascaded along my cheeks and I could not breathe. The fammies moved away and I bent forward, trying to incorporate the loss. I had to absorb and accept or I could not move onward with my life.

A quiet rustle drew my attention.

“Cleome? You’re here.” MayApple didn’t look at me as she approached. She was watching her sister’s body in disbelief. “Oh, DaisyFir,” she wailed quietly. Ninne, her fammie, darkened in grief. MayApple reached for Ninne, and her fingers entwined with tendrils of cloud, seeking comfort and physical support.

Craghn and the rest of the Straw join followed their matriarch. They stood in a small cluster, shocked as they took in the aftermath of the viciousness. Yewsy, my dearest friend, my birth mate, broke loose and came to me.

“Oh, Cleome, what has happened? We heard the noise and felt the power of the magic.” She watched me expectantly.

I turned from her and took my mother’s hot, limp hand.

“They’ve been taken from me,” I whispered.

I pressed my lips to my mother’s long, slender fingers, remembering their gentle touch, their reprimand, their magical power. My mother had been the strongest wit of all. How could her power have failed us? I didn’t understand. It made no sense.

Book Two

“COME AWAY, CLEOME,” MayApple said, taking my hand.

“But...I don’t understand,” I muttered aloud. My other hand sought the warmth and comfort of Afton.

“We need to know,” Craghn said. He pointed to Fede. “Tell us,” he ordered.

Fede lifted from my father’s chest and floated heavily to Irine. The two fannies moved close to us and extended tendrils to Craghn’s fannie, Arthfael.

“Afton, I need to see,” I said, rising and moving to them. I could feel Afton’s reluctance, but I stood strong. He connected with Arthfael and images inundated me.

It was the Brinc clan who had visited this tragedy upon us, but with no Brinc Mother present, sanctioning it. Signe watched from the clearing just outside the Widdershin cottage as a small cadre of his brethren swarmed the house. Lorne, his fannie, suffered, evidenced by his patchy, pocked surface. Signe’s tall sons, Blass, Cathe and Sentr, stood guard while actively directing the attack. Their fannies were dark and small, as well, and I wondered why the Brincs could not see what was happening to their very essence. Their love of technology and lightning power was killing the source of who they were as Meab. If their fannies left or died, what would happen to them? I could not imagine life without our fannies, the entities who birthed us, cared for us and carried us back to Lake Feidlimed when our light was snuffed. Would their beloved machines sustain them if their fannies died?

I turned my attention back to the panorama before my mind’s eye. I saw my mother pulled from the house by Signe’s men, their puny fannies joined into a circular shield so that her magic was stymied. I almost cried out but knew it would do no good. That time had passed.

My father leapt forward, breaking free from two of Signe’s men. He drew his dagger and sent death along its blade, taking one man down. He was promptly attacked by three of the Ray join who held small boxes which they pressed against the skin of his neck and arm. He went down, his face a study in agony. My mother screamed and rushed toward him only to be pulled back by the men.

“We have word,” Signe intoned loudly, “or rather, our watchers tell our Mothers that your join has violated our treaty. That you bewitched two young men of our Outlie join so that they would hinder production. Is this true?”

My mother, even in her grief, her face wet with tears, drew power about herself and stood tall. “I have told you before, Signe, our join, indeed, our clan, has no need for your machines. We are still children of the forest. Why would we interfere in your clan when we ask you to leave ours be?”

Signe adjusted the lapel of his long, metal-plated coat then looked at my mother. “DaisyFir, I know the rebel in you. I know how strongly you wish to maintain the ways of the Witt...”

“Not at the expense of your clan!” Mother interrupted. “An’ it harm none, don’t you remember? We would never interfere with your lives.”

“Why would my watchers lie?”

“Why would we bewitch anyone? To what end? Stop the machines? Not hardly,” Mother countered.

Signe studied my mother and the look in his eye reminded me of an old tale told by MayApple about how Signe, before he joined with the Brinc clan, had wooed my mother with the intent of joining Widdershin. I wondered if the rejection had spurred him toward the Brinc clan and Ray join. And the machines.

“Who understands the way of the Witta?” Signe responded with a sneer.

My mother glanced once at my father’s supine form then took advantage of the distraction to defend her join. She raised her arms and the trees began to sway and shake. Even now, after the fact, I quailed at the power she invoked. Irine swirled bright orange and spun rapidly as the power of wit filled my mother.

“Stop her!” Signe cried. “Stop her now!”

Members of the Brinc clan descended on her. They pressed their machines to her skin and her eyes went suddenly blank, the magic forever locked in her hands. I turned away, pulling from Afton. I could watch no more.

The fannies parted and the images faded. The result remained, however, and I approached my father. I knelt and laid my palm against his cold forehead as I bid him goodbye. “Paria Widdershin, child of the Basil join, man of the Widdershin join. We welcomed you, loved you and now we say farewell.”

I nodded to his fannie. I stood and the members of Straw join moved to stand next to my father. MayApple wept quietly and was comforted by a grim-faced Craghn. Yewsy clung to her little sister, Mint, as her brother, Pine, stood apart and scowled his despair.

Fede stretched across my father and descended, wrapping around the body. My father’s outstretched arms and legs were pulled in to his torso, and Fede lifted the now streamlined body. The dirge began then as our two joins linked hands and sang Fede onto her journey to Lake Feidlimed. I’d seen the taking a few times before but never with someone this close to me. Grandmother Glory had been the closest but I’d been a young wit then, just learning about life and death.

And then there was Mother. How could I let her go? I dropped my gaze to the ground, seeking strength from Mother Earth under my feet. Would I survive without her? My training was incomplete. I was only fifteen centuries old, with so much still to learn. The thought that Mother would not be there to guide me through my own mother and crone cycles rankled. I turned and looked at DaisyFir Widdershins, powerful wit and loving woman. Sudden anger and hatred filled me. How dare Signe Ray come into my join and take those I loved from me? How dare he? I bit my lip on the inside to keep from growling in fury. Afton sensed my all-consuming anger and glowed red and yellow. I could feel calming energy washing from him.

I mounted the steps and knelt next to my mother’s form. “I’ll avenge you, Mother. You and Father. Somehow,” I whispered. “Soon.”

Irine touched my face and my mother’s beautiful eyes exploded onto my mind. She was talking to Irine, and it was a message for me.

They have Avapeony, she said. Cleome, save her.

I beat my fists against my stomach and leaned across my dead mother. In my bewilderment and grief, I had all but forgotten my sister.

“Cleome, don’t,” MayApple said next to me. Sobs welled in her voice, choking the words.

“They have Avapeony,” I muttered.

MayApple gasped. “No, DaisyFir said she was at Lore join today.”

“She was,” I nodded. “But she came back. Brinc clan took her.”

“To what end?”

“Conversion,” Pine answered.

We turned and studied him. Tall and lanky, with long, white-blond hair, he was on the verge of manhood. He’d yet to commit to a join but many believed it would be soon. He was drawn to Hippa of Thorn join. His hands fiddled with the edge of his tunic as he regarded us and his fammie, Cin, settled calmly onto his shoulder.

“Conversion?” I asked.

“Yes.” He nodded. “I still see Locre from time to time. He told me once that Signe wants to grow his numbers. They make periodic raids on some of the outlying joins.”

“He’s Givan join. Brinc clan. You know it’s forbidden for you to talk with him, Pine,” MayApple said. She glanced toward Craghn and found him entertaining Mint, too far away to hear their conversation.

Pine shrugged. “Just because Brinc clan decides they no longer want to associate with us, it doesn’t mean that birth unions just go away.”

I knew the truth of this. The new Brinc rules of separation had pitted join mates against one another as interjoins between the clans had always been the norm. In happier times.

“But, we have the lake, Pine. They can grow atrebuds there,” I said, scrubbing tears from my face.

Pine spread his hands. “Locre has never said for sure, but what I am led to believe is that their fammies are too weak to create.”

“Oh no,” I muttered. This was too horrible to contemplate.

Afton pushed against me. “Irine,” he said, connecting against my shoulder.

“Enough,” I said. “We need to say farewell to Mother. Irine swells.”

We turned as one to see the bloated, gray fammie bobbing above my mother’s body. If a clan member is left too long away from Lake Feidlimed after death, his fammie would perish as well, and its energy would be lost.

“Tell her it’s time,” I said to Afton.

Afton drifted across and connected with Irine. He sped back to me and Irine took up the body of my mother as we circled and chanted her away. Sorrow seared my heart as I watched her body float along the tree line and a sense of hopelessness washed across me. How could I go on? My entire join had been killed. I allowed a few moments of self-pity, wallowed in it, then pulled myself together. I welcomed the anger anew. One thought filled my mind: rescuing Avapeony.

Book Three

“YOU CAN’T GO after her, Cleome. It would mean certain death,” Yewsy said. She leaned back in her chair and lifted her mug of tea to her lips. Her fingers smoothed the polished wood of the cup as she drank and the sight soothed me and grounded me with normalcy. Yewsy had been caressing her wooden mugs since old enough to sup.

She and I had been birthed together, atrebuds summoned by sister Mothers on the banks of Lake Feidlimed at the same time. Our fannies had been lifted from our faces at the same moment and so their connection had been forged as well. I studied Afton and Brennen as they hovered together. Both male energy fannies, they’d told our mothers that Yewsy and I both would have extraordinary courage. And so it had been.

“I agree,” MayApple said. She sat in a heavy, ornately-carved wooden chair near the open window, her gaze on the trees and plants outside. Wind stirred her curly, white hair and Ninne made purring sounds as she whirled in her lap.

It was the morning after my parents’ murder and my sister’s abduction. I’d spent a restless night in Yewsy’s cell, even though I’d been comforted by the heat of her body. I’d yet to cry heartily but knew that mourning would happen much later, after my anger had been spent.

“I have to go,” I replied, staring into my own cup of mead. Mead was the only food I could stomach, and though I didn’t really want anything, I knew I needed nature’s strength for the task ahead. “There’s no one else.”

Mint wandered to me, and I pulled her up and onto my lap. I brushed her fannie, Freyan, aside so I could press my lips to her pale hair. I lifted her grass dolly from the table and handed it to her.

“Men from the joins would go,” MayApple countered. “They are our soldiers. This is what they do, protect us, rescue us.”

“When in our history have we needed such things?” I asked.

MayApple grunted and turned to impale me with her crystal blue eyes. “Yes, we have enjoyed peace for many lifetimes but it doesn’t mean they have forgotten their very nature.”

“We are warriors, too, sister Mother. And our ken is much stronger than theirs. I feel we will need more than brawn to infiltrate Brinc clan.”

“Our wit does seem useless against their machines,” Yewsy muttered. “And I’m not sure that our men would fare much better.”

I hung my head, acknowledging the truth of her words.

MayApple stood and shed her morning robe. I was always amazed at the strength of her form even though she’d walked Mother Earth for centuries. Her arms and legs, clothed in tight flaxen weave, were slim, yet strong and sturdy. Her midsection was bound with supple, peeled woodbine which, when woven, supported her breasts and held her daggers. She reminded me very much of my mother, except Mother’s long hair had been ebon while MayApple’s was purest white.

“I’m going to the forest,” she said. Ninne glowed green then brown and green again, and I knew MayApple would be seeking answers there, in the sacred sanctuary of the Morri.

“What are you going to do?” Yewsy asked quietly after her mother had left the cottage. She stood and took Mint from me, carrying her to her mother’s abandoned chair. She sat and pulled Mint close, as if for comfort. The little atrebud seemed to understand and she wrapped her thin arms around Yewsy’s neck. Their fannies mingled and glowed brightly against the sisters’ white-blond hair.

“I don’t understand why Brinc clan has become violent. Why they have so little regard for life and magic. How did they come to be this way?” I muttered.

“They say it was a Mother from Prosee join. One who’s gone back to the lake now. She fell in love with a Milesian from the outside,” Yewsy said. She was making faces at Mint, causing her to giggle.

“Outside, outside? A Human? Not just someone from Outlie join?” Why had I never heard this tale?

Yewsy shooed Mint off her lap and came to sit at the table. Brennen was spinning rapidly in excitement. “I overheard Effie and her elder sister talking about it—”

“Effie from Brinc clan?”

“Yes, Resin join. I wasn’t with them, like Pine gathers with Locre, I just overheard them at the edge of the forest when I was collecting green grain. I didn’t mean to go so close to Brinc lands but got turned around onto the wrong path when I crossed over River Finlo. I have no idea why they were having lessons so close to the border but I could hear them clearly.”

I nodded my understanding. “So, why were they talking about this? You said a lesson?”

Yewsy nodded and sipped her cold tea. Her eyes wandered to Mint, who was sitting in the center of the floor, levitating her dolly. “I think so.”

“How did she meet an outsider? They never come this far into our forest.”

“I have no idea. But he must have crossed the Silver Veil somehow. The point is, he brought tech from his side and Carh was telling Effie that the Prosee mother, Kifly, they called her, became enamored of it and began incorporating the machines into her magic.”

“And that’s how it all started?” I was aghast. “How long ago?”

She scratched her head thoughtfully. “It’s been in our time. We were atrebuds, I think. Newly birthed.”

I sighed sadly. “So much has changed so quickly. I remember Mother meeting with Ambley Resin to exchange jams. So the foremother fell in love with a Human? How?” I asked again.

“He probably wandered from his lands, crossed over, then got lost in the forest, much as many Meab do.” Yewsy rose and carried her mug to the washbasin.

My gaze found Mint, and I watched as she chanted a mundane working to make her dolly grow hair the color of mine. Frustrated by no result, she groaned and looked up expectantly.

“You have to wrap the working, Mint. It won’t work unless you say ‘for the good of all’.”

She smiled at me and slowly blinked bright blue eyes. “Oh, I forgot.” She shook her head and mimed as if berating herself for forgetting. Freyan nudged her playfully.

“Humans usually have no contact with the Witts. Or the Brinc, for that matter. I can’t imagine the two falling in love. Humans are so…” Words failed Yewsy.

“Well…big,” I offered. “And they smell very strange.”

“Yes, and they are ruled by laws that go contrary to nature. They don’t even have fannies.”

“And don’t forget the machines,” I reminded her. “They call them industrial revolution, my grandmother Glory once told me.”

Book Four

“SO, CLEOME, WHAT are you going to do?” Yewsy asked, her gaze pinning me. She knelt on her chair and rested her forearms on the table. Brennen flattened himself on the worn wooden top as if awaiting my answer, as well.

I sighed again and leaned back in my chair. I fondled Afton, comforted by his trill of pleasure. “I have to go rescue her. Who knows what they are doing to her? I...I can’t just...ignore this.”

I let Afton go and leaned forward until Yewsy and I were almost nose-to-nose. “I hate Signe Ray for destroying my join.”

Yewsy gasped and Brennen rose to spin rapidly. “We are not allowed to hate, Cleome.” She looked around as if fearing the wrath of the forest would descend.

Speaking of hate was forbidden for it set a whole new set of energies into action. I could never take this back now that I’d said it aloud. The only way now was forward into this hate. I had to resolve it, even if my death was the result.

Yewsy moaned and covered her face with her hands. “So, now you have to go and, to keep you in one piece, I will have to go, too. I am not ready for this.”

I straightened my back. “There is no need for you to go. This is a path I must walk alone.”

She eyed me with amused disdain. “Umhm,” she replied.

She rose and opened the magic cupboard. She took out seven green candles and placed them on the workbench. She hummed the tones that would awaken the slumbering Lares, or house sprites, as she moved about the room gathering specific items. Mint approached, bringing her doll with her, fingers tangled in the long, black tresses the doll had magically grown.

“What are you doing, sister?” she asked, horizontally seesawing the doll on the heavy wooden worktable.

“We have to find Avapeony, so we can go rescue her,” Yewsy replied absently. She made an inverted triangle with the candles. The censer went into the center and she set it alight, as well as the candles. I came close and she took a handful of precious salt and scattered it in a circle around us.

“Would you like to sing us in, Mint?” she asked her sister.

Mint smiled, closed her eyes and began the working welcome.

Seven sacred shining ones speak words of power bright
Illuminated beings fill us with your light
Choices that we make tonight must stand the test of time
Step by step and stone by stone the future we will climb

Yewsy smiled indulgently and caressed Mint’s cheek. “Very good! Now, stand back a bit.”
“Anima mea, turbata et valde, usquequo,” Yewsy said, then muttered it twice more.

I leaned into the magic, Afton heavy on my shoulder. “Anima mea, turbata et valde,” I said in concert. Where was my sister?

A room appeared in the air before us. It was a sterile room, lacking the comforts beyond necessity.

“Ubi...ubi.. Anima mea turbata,” I whispered.

Avapeony strode into view. She still wore her brightest tunic and her best leggings and looked unharmed. Her long, auburn hair was unbound, disheveled, and the charcoal around her eyes was smeared, however. She was pacing the room, arms wrapped about herself for comfort. Kes, her fammie, hung limply next to her shoulder. She was no doubt exhausted by the battle and resultant abduction and could provide Avapeony with little comfort.

The image began to fade but was overlapped by a map leading from Witta lands into the Brinc village. As expected, Avapeony was being held at the large, white citadel in the center of the village square.

“We’ll never get in,” Yewsy breathed. “How can we get in there? We don’t even look like them anymore. We’ll stand out...they may even kill us with those...those machine thingies they carry. No. No, we can’t, Cleome!”

Mint looked from her sister to me, awaiting my response. I studied her sweetness, her innocence. What could I say? I knew what had to be done.

“Leaving the center of the circle,” I said to Yewsy, making the exit gesture for the Lares. I stepped over the salt and moved toward the door. At the portal, I paused and looked back. I wanted to burn an image of the two of them in my mind.

After leaving the Straw cottage, I followed the well-worn, tree-bordered path from their join to Widdershin join. Seeing the deserted, desecrated cottage again filled me with fear and sadness, and I could feel Afton respond in kind.

“Oh, Afton! What have they done?” I wailed.

Afton brought forth my mother’s happy, loving visage and showed it to me, seeking to soothe my grief. It did, but only momentarily. I shook Afton off and approached the gaping doorway. Pigeons had come in, and a fawn, but I paid them no mind. Instead, I moved through the home, righting what I could. Fetching scattered items from the floor, I worked to reset the worktable. Several candles were broken, some vials shattered. There was primrose oil, though, and sandalwood. I used these for a protection working, drawing the runes upon our most powerful waxen image. I sent it to Avapeony but also marked it for myself. I had a feeling I would need whatever defense I could generate.

Leaving the working to burn down into action, I went into my cell and sorted through the mess Signe’s men had made of my clothing. I found my cloak, an extra pair of leggings, two tunic tops, and my old, beaten-up felt hat. I placed the hat on my head, ignoring Afton’s protests, and pushed the clothing into a cloth pack. My daggers had remained undisturbed under a stack of coverings, so I added them. I found there my wood-bound grimoire, as well, which contained all my lengthy magic lessons. Holding it grounded me.

I thought of my mother’s book and raced back to the worktable to find it. Panic set in when it wasn’t immediately visible, but Afton finally sensed it off to one side. Tossed rudely against one of the timber walls, the grimoire now lay twisted at the foot of that wall. I went to it and gingerly straightened the spine and the pressed paper within. Mother’s book was bigger than mine, of course, and would be a challenge to carry. But I couldn’t leave it. I could leave mine behind, of course, and carry hers, but mine had been a gift from Mother and her sister Mothers to celebrate my first moon working. It was very special to me, and I did not wish to part from it. I sighed and

stuffed both into my bag. Perhaps I could glean some information from Mother's book during my long, solitary journey to the Brinc lands.

I stood in the center of the common room. Any journey requires a path bag so I began compiling mine. I grabbed my favorite pouch from the wall pegs and moved to the worktable. I selected a handful of candle stubs, a small vial of energy oil, tinder sticks, a sage bundle, and a horn cup for drinking as well as mixing. I searched until I found carnelian for fire, a small feather for air, a shell for water and a stone for earth. I took a holey stone and a pointy stone for the deities and an ouanga bag that was still empty. I filled it with salt and pulled the cinch tight.

What else? I studied the disheveled worktable, my left hand gathering a small sack of rolled incense. My right hand instinctively went for acorns although I had no idea why I would need them. It was unlikely I would need to engender a storm in the deep forest.

I turned away then felt myself whirled back around. Something was nudging Afton and he wouldn't allow me to leave.

"What?" I snapped, not even trying to hide my irritation.

He showed me several long, beaded necklaces, an aventurine stone and a peridot. Of course, pocket magic and healing stones. Always necessary.

"Thanks, brother," I muttered, stuffing the items into my bag. I strode toward the door but turned to look back.

My entire life had been centered around this one small, nondescript cottage. Mother's powerful energy had brought seeking vines which covered it with greenery all year long, with flowers in spring and brilliant color when the weather cooled. The home was filled with the intriguing scents of magic and fire. Shy Fey and Lares lived in each wooden or plant crevice and tree Mothers surrounded it on all sides. I hated to leave but vowed to return. With Avapeony. The two of us would fill it with life and laughter again.

Afton purred against my shoulder.

"Yes, it's time," I told him. And myself.

Book Five

I TURNED AT the doorway and settled the plank door into the frame. I knew our animal friends would be able to get in through the window anyway, but it felt right and true to block the portal. I was looking down at the floorboards, saddened by my departure, so I didn't see them at first. Nevertheless, I sensed them finally and turned, lifting my gaze.

"We couldn't let you go alone," Yewsy said quietly.

There were seven of them, all birthmates or close. Two of the Basil join, Lemon and Saffron were there, both small but heavily muscled from herb work. Saffron looked like her mother, Airgialla, and while both of them had Airgialla's deep green eyes and golden hair, Lemon had the more square jaw of a male Meab. Both fannies were female, healthy and clear in appearance.

I turned to Memo and Talew of Lore join. Memo was Avapeony's closest friend, almost a sister, so I knew her well. Talew had been birthed later and I'd never had the opportunity to get close to him. Memo's fannie, a young male named Higen, boldly approached and nudged me in welcome.

Capel from Song join stood alone, the only representative of her join. Tiny and petite like others of her join, her long, unruly blond curls seemed to overpower her slight body. Yet she had sung for us at Beltane many times, and I knew the power of her large voice. Her fannie, Walsh, was a powerful seer and had often brought Capel to our cottage to share insights with my mother.

Striding up from the rear was RoseIII himself, the son of Olive, Mother of Thorn join. His mother was a very powerful, very old wit. She alone had caused the final Human to stumble from our lands just before the Silver Veil was put into place. Her powers of bewitchment were strong.

And Yewsy, my dear, dear Yewsy, made seven. All were prepared for travel, as well, each carrying a parcel of their possessions and a path bag of magic.

"But, I..." I was made voiceless by their courage and support.

"Avapeony was my birth mate," Memo reminded me, the set of her small mouth determined.

I was taken aback. And uncharitably worried. How much would so many of them slow me down? I also understood, somewhat bitterly, that I would be responsible for their safety.

Safety. I shook my head at my outlandish thoughts. It was insane to think that some tribe of the Meab peoples would hurt another tribe. Afton brushed against me and I had a sudden awareness, surely from him. The Brinc clan had killed my join. They had taken my sister from me.

I glanced at RoseIII and nodded a welcome. Olive was an influential wit, and I was surprised that his join would allow involvement in this endeavor.

"Your Mothers permit—"

"They know, but are not joyful," RoseIII said, his gaze meeting mine. "They worry about harm befalling us, but such violence cannot be allowed. A meeting of Meab wit has been called."

"And the Mothers stay for that," I said, nodding my understanding.

“And the grown men and very young of the joins stay to feed and care for the Mothers and for one another,” he replied.

I knew the ways of wit and knew the Mothers would never stop conversing until a resolution was reached. This new resolution, and maybe even others, would be broached to Brinc much as the earlier treaty had been. War would be avoided at all cost. The rescue of Avapeony had to be left to us, those in maiden and youth stages only, just finding our wit. I knew that usually such discovery of personal magic was very potent but quite often hard to predict and control. I shook my head in doubt. Then again, perhaps our smaller senses would pose less a threat than older wits descending upon the Brinc village.

“Do you think she’s still...” Lemon drew my attention. He stepped forward and impaled me with his bright green eyes. His sister Saffron took his arm and pulled him close for security.

Yes, I could protect these young friends. And they would protect me. Together we would be stronger than any one of us alone. This was right and true.

I extended my hand and they moved forward, our eight hands clasping, our fannies flattening out and joining in a circle surrounding us. I felt the energy of the earth rise in us. Trees danced in our forest surroundings and leaves spiraled in a caper of joy. I felt the others’ trepidation but I found my own elation, which I tried to share. The future wasn’t revealed but I found new faith in the assurances of the forest Lares. That would have to be enough.

I pulled my hand away, slowing nature’s exuberance, and I hoisted my bags onto my shoulder.

“How shall we go?” RoseIII asked as he lifted his own bags.

“Well,” I hesitated, not having thought this through all the way. “They are many legs ahead of us now, but I sense they are heading across the Greens, missing Medwas, I’m sure—”

“Why are you sure?” Memo said. “I sense that they wish to conquer the Asti village, as well.”

Many of us gasped. If the Brinc clan had the ken to attack the powerful Asti kingdom, then surely we marched to our doom. I set my mouth in a determined line. I cared not what the Brinc did elsewhere, at least not for the moment. My being was directed toward reuniting with my sister. That was all I could deal with at present.

“We head north, crossing the River Adair and then through the forest,” I suggested.

“There lie the falls, Cleome. We all know the danger of Felshea Falls,” Yewsy whispered.

“Will we go south and cross lower on the Finlo or take the bridge across the falls?” RoseIII asked, nervously fingering his tunic.

I sighed. “There are Gobbyes in Tumpe for sure, and all throughout Ifrsa. At least the bridge is well above the Neisi village, up into Luti land.”

“The water sprites are in all water,” Lemon piped up. “My brother, Setine, said we can’t trust any of it, or them.”

“Setine is not all-knowing,” I responded. “My grandmother, Glory, said that the Neisi seldom wander far from the pools of their home. They are creatures of much habit.”

“Yes, lazy beasts, I heard,” Talew offered.

“We do not speak ill of others,” I chanted automatically as I turned back for one last glimpse of my home. It looked oddly hopeful to me, as if saying it would see me soon. I deeply, sincerely hoped that this was a truth.

Book Six

WE MOVED AWAY from the houses of the Witta village and made our way along the lanes toward the river crossing. The Witta, young and old, but without the Mothers, had come out to bid us a safe journey and had lined the lane on either side, fannies spinning in colors of celebration and good will. Flowers and herb packets were pressed into our hands and strings of pocket magic placed around our necks. Though there were murmured well-wishes, there was still a solemn, fearful air around the Witta. Fear nibbled at me, but I pushed it away. We were Meab, all of us, Brinc and Witta alike. A tribe does not divide, a tribe does not kill others of the tribe. I told myself that I was not seeking revenge, not really. I just wanted to bring my sister back home. I scowled to myself as I stormed quickly along the lane, Afton trailing behind, making his own farewells.

We found the small boats, left for any who wished to cross the river, tied to posts set into the rocky soil along the banks. RoseIII and Yewsy studied the water, looking for Neisi but it was early in the day, so they probably still slumbered after a night of frolic.

With the help of several village men, we piled into two of the small, circular boats but, inexperienced at handling them, we quickly became separated in the current. RoseIII stood carefully in his wobbly craft and magic grew in his hands as he pulled my boat close and, using a working, bound them as one. Thus sealed, we crossed away, downriver from our village.

I looked back once, forlorn at seeing everything familiar falling into the past.

We had to drag the boats against the current a short way to tie them to posts on the older forested side, but then we stood as one unit, fannies united, staring up at the towering trees. The Mother Trees on this side of the river were even older than the ones that cradled our Witta village. They swayed in welcome and seemed to open a path for us.

The ever-buoyant Capel lifted her voice in song and the others joined in, repeating the phrases as we turned as one and marched along the well-worn trail leading into the forest.

May we all fly like eagles
All fly like eagles
Flying so high
Flying so high
Circling the Universe
Circling the Universe
On wings of pure light
On wings of pure light
O E Ah Cha Chi O
O E Ah Cha Chi O
O E I O
O E I O
I circle around

I circle around
the boundaries of the Earth
Wearing my long tail feathers as I fly
Wearing my long tail feathers as I fly
I circle around
I circle around
the boundaries of the Earth
I circle around
I circle around
the boundaries of the Earth

Trees drew closer and the air darkened around us as we traveled several legs farther into the wood. Soon a sudden chill swept across me and Afton quaked. I looked around anxiously. I could perceive no danger. Our voices fell silent only to be replaced by the noise of a heavy shuffling of leaves.

“The Morries claim a heavy toll these days,” Capel said, moving her small form close to me.

“What do you mean,” I whispered.

“You’ve been busy,” RoseIII said quietly. “They are seeking recompense for Brinc damage. The Brinc are stealing trees and the forest has never been so abused.”

They were eyeing me wonderingly, surely curious that I was not aware of what had been going on within my own lands. It was true that I often allowed book magic to win out over tree magic, and I suddenly felt the imbalance keenly.

“I’ll take care of it,” Memo said, stepping forward just as the Morri stepped from behind a large oak tree.

He was from the tree village of Brnclea, in the northern Hites, and his long robes bore the village colors of brown and two greens. He was stoop shouldered, as were all the Morri, and his long, white beard seemed to graze the ground as he moved forward. He observed us with luminous yellow eyes made brighter by the dull tangerine of his skin and the thick overhang of his bushy, white eyebrows. His fammie seemed to be a cheerful one, making up for the accusing cast in the Morri’s eyes.

“I see you wish to enter our forest,” he said, in a soft, creaking voice. “May I ask which direction you seek?”

Memo drew herself up as tall as possible before speaking. “We go to rescue our sister wit, Avapeony Widdershin, from the Ray join of Brinc clan.”

A faraway look appeared in the Morri’s eyes. “Avapeony Widdershin? A nice wit. Very kind to all of us,” he muttered thoughtfully.

His attention shifted to me.

“Rescue?” The trees danced in response to his mirthful laughter. “Oh, a fine thing is that. You? Atrebuds rescuing atrebuds? Why are your joins not with you? All of you?” He eyed us angrily.

I stepped in front of Memo.

“Step aside, Morri. We only seek passage to the other side of the forest. We mean no harm to any of you.”

“A fool’s mission you go on. You seek death at the hands of the Brinc. Why?” He stepped to one side and tree roots lifted from the ground, providing him a handy seat. He sat, crossed his

legs and adjusted his robes. Leaves fluttered down upon his lap as his fammie settled onto his shoulder.

I studied his dark, weathered countenance and wondered at his age. Wit means knowledge and I wished suddenly to know more of what he had experienced in his life. His lips and teeth, as well as the beard around his mouth was marked a deep brown with age and eons of smoke.

“Why is it sure death, wood sprite? Suppose we are victorious and bring our sister home?”

He shrugged slowly, his eyes blinking languidly. “Have you no knowledge of the Brinc clan then? Do you not know how the machines have made them stronger, fearless?”

Talew stepped forward, his agitated, whirling fammie disrupting his short, dark hair. “But they have Avapeony. We need to bring her home before they hurt her.”

The Morri rested his eyes on Talew as he drew a pipe from under his robes. I gasped as the distinctive scent of sopore filled the air around us and tree roots twisted up from the ground behind each of us. Tendrils of morning glory tapped my back then pulled me down to sit on the roots. The Morri manufactured fire on his left hand and lit the pipe. Fragrant, heady smoke swirled all around us.

The Morri chuckled softly as smoke feathered from his mouth. “You might turn home instead,” he said gently. “They keep her, they will keep you.”

“No,” I countered, even as I felt the effect of the sopore wash over me. I smiled without wanting to. “Signe Ray killed my parents. She is all the join I have left.”

“Surely with the might of so many of us, we can escape with her,” RoseIII said dreamily.

A silence fell and I could feel the inertia filling me. The Morri would trap us there for all eternity, or at least until he tired of us, smiling and smoking. My legs were heavy, my mind dull. I glanced to my left and then my right and saw the others in much the same state. Tiny Capel had fallen asleep, head tilted to one side, her long, blonde curls falling across her acorn-shaped face.

“We can fight,” Lemon muttered. His fammie, Maol, spun slowly but I could sense her indignation at this turn of events.

I reached out one hand and connected with Afton. The sopore wasn't as effective on fammies as on Meab folk, so he was able to do my bidding. He spiraled his form down and into my bag, encircling and lifting a speckled blue rod of sodalite. He pushed it into my open hand, and I closed my fingers around it. I chanted slowly, the words half formed but still powerful.

Clarity of thought
Come to me now
I am yours and you are mine
Clear thought and vision intertwine

Book Seven

THE VINES JERKED and began to move away. I repeated the chant and fell backward as the tree root holding me moved down toward the ground. I repeated the chant again then bound it so that all the Meab tree seats went away and the vines retreated. All eight of us were sprawled onto the ground, the others stirring more slowly.

The Morri studied me with slitted eyes, his brown teeth clenched around the stem of his pipe. “A powerful wit you are,” he said then giggled inanely.

I rushed to rouse the others, even resorting to small face slaps to waken them from the sopore’s powerful effect. Memo brushed the hovering Higen aside and looked up at me. “What has happened?”

“Morri magic,” I replied. “Will you get the others and move along the path?”

She nodded and scrambled to her feet. I saw Yewsy trying to wake Capel. Even Walsh, Capel’s fammie, was having some trouble rousing her.

I turned and studied the Morri. I rubbed the rough sodalite against my palm. “We’re moving on into the forest,” I told him.

He grinned at me and removed the pipe with one large orange hand. “I won’t let you.”

“Father!” The piping voice came from behind me. I felt the wash from the Jana’s wings as she fluttered close. She was a blur of blue skin and huge green eyes, so upset that she was flashing into and out of visibility, only her tiny pink shoes remaining steady.

“Now, Tsisi, don’t interfere,” he muttered, rising to his feet.

“Why do you do this to the good people?” she asked him in her screechy little voice. “We’ve discussed this.”

“But they go to sure death,” he responded loudly, annoyance clear in his tone. “They are going to Brinc lands.”

The Jana, Tsisi, turned to me. “But...but why?” she asked, aghast. “Going to Brinc land now is like...like going to the scorching land of the Humans. We just don’t do that anymore.”

In typical Jana way, she changed subject abruptly, and her small blue form lifted higher into the air. “Are you of MayApple’s join? I left her earlier. Her grief destroys me.”

“Yes, some of us—”

“There’s been a death, you know,” Tsisi continued, as she bobbed in front of my face. At least she was remaining solid now. “Widdershin join. They say it was Brinc soldiers.” She turned to the Morri. “Did you know there were Brinc soldiers, Father? Soldiers!”

I swatted at the Jana but she shied away before my hand could contact her. “Those soldiers killed my join, you winged annoyance!”

The Jana hid behind her father but not even my anger could quiet her.

“Did you see that, Father? Why do the Witta annoy so easy?” She grew somber. “Your join? Really? I am so very sorry for your losses. Ahh, you’re going to avenge their deaths. I see. Father, you have to let them pass. I’d do anything to avenge your murder.”

The Morri shifted his heavy form slightly, his fammie bouncing against his daughter and knocking her askew. She immediately began flashing into and out of visibility again.

“Hornswiggle!” she cried out, holding her grape-sized head. “Father, can’t you control it a little better?”

He laughed. “Control a fammie? You’ve got to be joking.”

I stomped one foot heavily against the ground. “Enough, you two. Morri, step aside. We waste precious moments.”

The Morri looked at me then swiveled his body to look at my seven companions. They huddled together in the next forest clearing, surrounded by tree branches. “I am timeless. What matter time to me?” he said.

I sighed heavily and held up a forestalling finger to Tsisì when she opened her mouth to speak. “What do you want from us, Morri? What can we give you to ensure our passage?”

The Morri curled one long finger around his chin and closed his odd, yellow eyes. “Let me see,” he said. His eyes opened. “What do you have?”

“Ohhh, Father! I am sure they have many lovely things. The Witta always do, don’t they? Do you remember the golden thimble you got me that time? That was Witta, was it not? It’s a lovely golden cup for me. I do love it so.”

I growled loudly, scaring the Jana back behind her father, then placed my bags on the ground.

“What do you think, Afton?” I muttered. I knew the candles were of no use to the Morri tribe. They hated prolonged fire and only a select few could create magic fire and then only momentarily. They had no need for help with vision in darkness, relying on the trees and plants to guide them. They had no use for magic potions either as the plants they loved provided whatever they needed.

Afton connected. Upon his suggestion, I held up the strand of beads. “These are magic,” I told the Morri.

“Oh, Father, they are lovely, are they not? What would we do with such a strand as this?” She fluttered close and laid one tiny hand around the clasp. “I can feel it, Father. Powerful wit magic.” Her pearly hair, disturbed by the energy, spun about her head.

The Morri waved the suggestion of the beads away. “I have many, a trunk full,” he said. “Have you nothing else?”

A sudden thought occurred to me. Janas, though always full of silliness and happiness, sought to feel emotion of all types. If I could but make the Jana feel something, the Morri would be honor bound to accept the gift.

I stood abruptly. “Very well. I shall give you a story.”

The Morri eyed me doubtfully. “A story.”

I dropped to the ground, folded my legs, and pressed my palms to my outstretched knees. “Yes, a story.”

The Morri sighed and took his seat, tucking his fammie under his forearm.

I began slowly, watching to see if I could snare Tsisì’s interest. “Artemis, one of the original Milesians, so very, very long ago, was a beautiful goddess of the moon and an extremely gifted protector. Orion, her lover, was a very talented warrior as well and a handsome young man. They foraged together, dined together, and slept peacefully together.

“Artemis had a twin brother, Apollo, who looked upon their relationship with foreboding and disapproval. He believed Artemis should cling to her oath of never forming her own join without

him. Her new relationship with Orion appeared to be moving her farther and farther from him as they excluded him from their time together.

“Apollo was a god of the sun and would ride his chariot across the sky during the day to give light to the world. One day, as he was driving through the heavens, he looked down and saw Orion swimming in Lake Finlo with just his head visible above the water. Near the shore, he spotted his sister resting, enjoying the warmth of his sun. A plan formed in his mind so he alighted from his chariot to speak with her.

“After the usual greeting and pleasantries, Apollo brought up Artemis’s skill with the bow...or lack thereof. Now, it was widely known that, although Apollo was the most skilled warrior with a bow and arrow, Artemis was his twin there as well and had proven herself time and again. But now, he raised the claim that although she was quite good, she couldn’t hit everything she aimed at like he could. Naturally indignant and upset, she rose to his challenge and told him to name any target and she would hit it.

“He pointed to a small dark speck on the lake’s water far out in the distance and repeated his claim that she couldn’t hit it. Scoffing, Artemis strung her bow, not knowing the target was her lover, took quick aim at the tiny object and shot. The arrow flew with deadly accuracy and, of course, hit Orion. Acknowledging her success and her skill with the bow, Apollo then returned to his chariot, pleased with his own success in keeping his sister bound to him.”

I studied the Jana and noted that her little blue bottom lip quivered with sadness. I was immensely satisfied and continued.

“Later that day, Orion’s dead body washed ashore. When Artemis saw her own arrow piercing his body, she realized what she had done and was inconsolable in her grief. To make amends, she had him placed in the night sky as a beautiful row of stars, where he might be seen forever and where she might forever see him when she took her nightly flight across the sky in her own chariot.”

The Jana flitted close and shoved her little face into mine, her cold fingers pressed to my cheeks. “Oh no,” she breathed, her breath smelling of honey and nuts. “Such a sad, sad tale. I know I shall never recover.”

I watched, mesmerized, as her large green-orbed eyes filled with tears. One eye leaked a tear, but it ran along her blue-skinned cheek and back into her tiny mouth. The other eye welled ever fuller until one tiny tear escaped and fell through the air. I opened my hand and caught the brilliant gem as it fell. It was an amethyst, clear of flaw and a brilliant purple in color.

I rose and moved to the Morri as the Jana flew up to perch on a branch above us. I could hear her humming as she tried to recapture her natural joy of being.

I held the gem out to the Morri, knowing he was honor bound to accept his daughter’s tears. Sure enough, he touched my forehead, leaving the mark of safe passage.

“I never thought you’d resort to such,” he said. He plucked it from my hand and deposited it somewhere in the folds of his robe. He lifted his pipe and I moved away, toward the others. I looked back once, before the forest thickened, and saw him still sitting there, his fammie appearing to dance with the swirling smoke emitting from his pipe.

Book Eight

YEWSY MOVED CLOSE to me as we gathered up our path bags and moved farther into the trees.

“So, what did he say? I saw him give you the blessing. What did you have to give him?”

She was whispering but her voice was worried. I tried to put her at ease.

“A Jana gem,” I answered, winking at her.

She stopped walking so abruptly that Saffron plowed into her.

“Hey!” Saffron complained. “Why did you stop?”

Yewsy smiled at her then beckoned the others close. “Cleome made a Jana cry!”

“You didn’t,” RoseIII declared.

“Was it a gem, truly?” Memo asked, taking my arm.

I laughed. “Goddess knows, you are curious. A good trait to possess. Gather and learn then, gather and learn.”

I connected with Afton and he quickly linked with Walsh, Finner, Higen, Byrne, Maol and Gewwt. The eight of us closed our eyes and the fannies showed us the entire scene. We broke apart then, and I was surprised to see Capel weeping.

“That really is such a sad story,” she sobbed.

I pulled her into my embrace. “Oh, sweet Meab. It’s only an old legend. I think it was a Human tale, from long, long ago.”

“Human. Really?” She had always been fascinated with anything Milesian. “I must remember it,” she said, pulling at her bottom lip. She connected with her fannie, Walsh and I knew she was asking her to remember it for her.

“They really are gems, then,” Lemon said. He walked slowly forward, easing us along the path. “I’d heard my grandmother speak of such but never thought I’d see it.”

“I always believed she fabricated it,” his sister Saffron said.

“Mother says it’s very hard to do, to get a Jana gem,” Yewsy said. She stopped again. “Shh, listen!”

We paused as one unit. I heard the shuffling sound. Another wood sprite. The Morri paused when he spied us but, seeing my forehead, he just smiled and moved on.

“This is frightening, this travel,” Memo said. “Will we get to Avapeony soon?”

“It will take two or three suns,” Talew said. “And we still have to cross Felshea Falls and the Hites.”

“It didn’t take me that long,” Yewsy replied thoughtfully. “But I only made it to the Greens.”

“Well, one thing I’m sure of is that we must keep moving. Your joins are missing you already and we don’t know how long we will have to be on Brinc lands before we find my sister,” I said, herding them forward.

We walked for the rest of the afternoon and evening, only encountering one more disinterested Morri and a host of Jana, who mostly ignored us. As dusk fell and the moon grew into prominence, I scouted out a flat clearing close to Felshea Falls. We would wait until sunlight

to make the treacherous crossing. Levitation magic would help but I'd still rather have good light for such an arduous task.

"Let's stop here and rest the night," I said, slinging my two bags to the leaf-strewn ground.

"This looks a safe place," RoseIII agreed. He walked the perimeter of the clearing as if making sure. "Talew, you and Lemon gather fallen wood for the fire." He whirled and eyed the two younger men. "And remember to give thanks. The last thing we need is more Morri trouble during the night."

My stomach grumbled and this time I paid attention. I glanced around and found Yewsy smiling at me.

"You never gave the first thought to food, did you?" she asked.

I grinned ruefully. "No, I didn't. I'm sorry. We can gather some nuts, though. It's been a good season."

"No need. While you were at your cottage, I packed some things." She sat cross-legged on the ground and shook a cloth from her bag. She laid it out then drew out several cloth wrapped parcels.

"I'll fetch water," Saffron volunteered, green eyes bright.

"RoseIII, will you go with her?" I said. "It's not safe to go to the water alone."

RoseIII approached and handed me his bag. "There's mead in here," he said quietly.

I glanced up at him. "Thank you, RoseIII. It's very kind of you."

He nodded once, imperiously, but his freckled cheeks did pinken at my words of gratitude.

I sat next to Yewsy, as did Memo and Capel. We unwrapped a feast of apples, shelled walnuts, young, sweet lettuce leaves, nasturtium flowers and a honeycomb oozing into a small crock.

"If you'd told me, I would have helped you carry this weight," I said to Yewsy.

"No bother," she replied happily.

"Let's put half back away," Memo recommended. "For tomorrow."

I nodded, impressed with her forethought. "Yes, let's do that. We are not sure what the future holds."

By the time RoseIII and Saffron returned with cool, fresh water, overflowing a tightly woven basket, Lemon and Talew had laid the fire and had curled shavings for tinder. RoseIII lit it with an old Gobbye incantation and soon we all were seated around a warm, cozy fire. As we ate, Capel, youngest of Song join, lifted her voice.

Back to the river, back to the sea
Back to the ocean, one with thee
Back to my blood, and back through my veins
Back to my heartbeat, one and the same
Back to the forest, back to the fields
Back to the mountains, mother revealed
Back to my bones, back to my skin
Back to my spirit, that fire within

After one refrain from her perfect voice, we joined in and our voices blended as darkness descended around us. Soon another sound penetrated and we quieted.

"It's true!" Capel whispered. "They do sing and dance."

I thought at first it was the tiny lights bobbing through the trees and the faint humming that had caught her attention, but this was nothing new. Janas often made merry before retiring for the evening. What held her, and eventually all of us spellbound, were the larger bodies visible just through an opening in the trees.

“It’s over by the falls,” I said. “Water sprites.”

“Watch them dance,” Yewsy muttered. “It’s bewitching.”

“They’re singing, too,” Lemon said, elbowing in for a better view. “Listen to them.”

I was unable to look away and suddenly understood the hushed Human tales of the mer-creatures who so easily stole them away into the water. Watching the sleek, hairless water sprites, the Neisi, even from so far away, I wanted to jump and twist with them. Their lithe, wet figures gleamed in the moonlight as they leapt and frolicked in the falling spray from the high falls. The thump of their bodies hitting the water in the pond below highlighted the rhythm of their ongoing, guttural song. I could not make out the words from this distance but I felt no gentleness from the Neisi. They frightened me.

“I wonder...” I began.

“What?” Yewsy asked at my elbow. Brennen patted my shoulder soothingly until Afton pushed him away.

“Maybe we should move on.”

“Move on? Why?” Her pale eyes searched my face for answers. Or for fear.

“We can’t move on,” RoseIII said as he approached. “Basil and Song joins sleep already.”

I glanced over his shoulder and saw that indeed the three youngest of our troupe had fallen asleep watching the display. Someone, probably Memo, had covered them with a linen wrap to stave off the night’s chill.

My gray eyes met the sapphire blue of RoseIII’s eyes. He must have read my thoughts there.

“Talew and I will sleep later,” he said. “You other three sleep first.”

I nodded and took Yewsy by the arm. I fetched my bags and we walked to Memo. Together we prepared to sleep, all of us huddling close just behind Lemon, Saffron and Capel. My last sight before drifting off, huddled with the other two women under my warm cloak, was RoseIII and Talew silhouetted against the glowing Neisi dancers.

Book Nine

I SMELLED IT first, an earthy, fishy smell. I felt the coldness too and knew I would loathe such a frigid existence. Afton trembled beside me so, warily, I opened one eye. It was right above me. We were face to face. I slowly opened both eyes and stared into cold, soulless orbs, surrounded by black, wrinkled flesh.

“I saw you,” the Neisi said, its voice low and garbled. One of its webbed hands reached for my long, black hair, which it twisted into ringlets around its arm. “You are so very beautiful,” it muttered.

“Th—thank you,” I managed to squeak out. I still felt the warmth of Yewsy and Memo against my sides but wondered how the Neisi had gotten past our two guardians. I’d heard the elders say that the Neisi moved as water flows.

It shifted position and its coldness crept farther into me. “I danced for you. Did you see?” it asked, nudging the highly indignant Afton aside.

What should I say? I didn’t want to encourage its advances, nor did I want to anger it. “No. Will you dance for me now?” I whispered finally.

“Oh. Oh. Oh, I see the game. You wish me away.”

It moved back and studied me. “You find me so repulsive then? Because I am not of your kind?”

“No...it needs to be my decision, is all,” I muttered, taking a surreptitious breath of the fresher air between us.

“Ahh, a strong wit. Strength is beautiful, too,” it said. Its black eyes disappeared momentarily behind white membranes as it...blinked? A small black tongue appeared between a front gap in a mouthful of small, pointed teeth. It wasn’t repulsive, exactly, yet I found no affinity to this creature.

“You are a water sprite?” I asked, seeking distraction.

The Neisi cocked its egg-like head to one side and studied me. “I am. The water obeys my will. I am very powerful. If you join with me, then you, too, can be very powerful.”

I felt anger tap against the back of my neck. “And why do you believe I’m not already powerful in my own right? I am the daughter of DaisyFir Widdershin of Widdershin join. She is one of the most powerful of wits. She, as peyton, asked for me at Lake Feidlimed so that her join could be strong from her teachings and her legacy. For the past fifteen ages, she has taught me and I have learned well.”

Afton began to glow with my anger, and I allowed heat to rise up and seep from me. The Neisi recoiled when it sensed my rising internal fire as I encouraged magic to grow within me. The doubt on its face gave me much satisfaction. The doubt changed rapidly to fear, however, when a thin cord, a vine glowing with restraint magic, slipped over the Neisi’s head and shoulders and bound its arms to its sides.

The Neisi hissed loudly and tried to turn to see its attacker. The cord came around once more and in its light, I could see RoseIII’s grim face.

I shoved Memo roughly, awakening her as I scurried out from under the Neisi. She scrambled behind me as RoseIII pulled the creature upright. It was small in stature, yet strong, but the binding cord held well.

“What shall we do with it?” RoseIII asked.

I had no idea. “Afton, give me light,” I said as I dug my mother’s grimoire from my bag. Surely there was something addressing Neisi magic in there.

“No, don’t,” the Neisi whispered hoarsely. “I must go back to my tribe. They will miss me and come looking for me soon. You will let me go!”

RoseIII shook the Neisi roughly. “Silence, water sprite.”

Afton glowed brightly at my shoulder, and I placed my palm on the open book. I sought guidance from our foremothers, and my hand turned pages until the right one was found.

“It says here that a captured Neisi must do our will for one sun only then peacefully return to its people without harming us. If we do not release it at or before that time, the Neisi will die and a curse will follow the wit all her days.”

The commotion had wakened all the sleepers and they gathered around, gawking at the captive creature. They were a silent lot, surely amazed by their first view of a Neisi, and the Neisi regarded them patiently, slowly blinking. I took the opportunity to study it as well. More frog than Meab, there was yet an elegance to the creature. The skin was smooth, with a soft, leather-like texture. The hands and feet were wide and webbed, yet equipped with malleable claws on the tips. Most disturbing to me were the eyes—deep-set, black and lacking in merriment. And then there was the small, pointy teeth set into a pouty mouth. I shuddered.

“Hold it, RoseIII. It may try to escape as the magic takes hold,” I said. Following the directions in Mother’s book, I circled deosil three times as I chanted the holding work.

North south east west
A magic cord shall bind it best
East west north south
Hold its limbs and stop its mouth
Seal its eyes and choke its breath
Wrap it round with ropes of death.

An’ it harm none, for the good of all

I stepped away and studied the creature. It was suddenly limp and docile, eyes dimmed.

“You can let it go now, RoseIII,” I said. “It will help us until tomorrow night.”

“Can’t we just let it go now? Leave it?” Yewsy said. She was wringing her hands together nervously. “I don’t like holding another living creature this way.”

I wrapped one arm around her shoulder and pressed my palm to Memo’s hand to reassure them both. Afton dimmed and darkness fell but for the moonlight through the trees and the glow of the dying fire.

“We’d be harming it more now, leaving it defenseless in the wild,” I told her. Neisi didn’t have fannies for protection as we did and would wander aimlessly if left alone. Or perish from being too far from their watery home.

“I can’t sleep now,” Talew said loudly. “Not with that...that thing here with us.”

I understood his sentiment but knew we might get lost if we moved forward at night. Stunned by indecision, I jumped nervously when Afton connected with me. "Afton says we light our own path and move on. Upstream, so we can release the Neisi back into the water when it's time."

"That's a good plan," Talew agreed.

"Lem, will you look after the Neisi, please? Just make sure it doesn't get hurt until we let it go."

Lemon nodded slowly as he watched the Neisi. "So beautiful in the water but so clumsy on land," he said.

Yewsy moved closer to me. "Why do we need the Neisi? I don't understand."

"It's not malice, Yews. It's for our own protection. We don't

need it telling its tribe that we are here," I answered. "Do you really think they'd hurt us?" she asked. She

stumbled and her fammie lit dimly.

I shrugged as I glanced at her pinched face. "I don't know for certain but I don't want to chance it. At least after the binding, it shouldn't remember us except as a very faint recollection."

"I'm really tired," Capel said. "Can we rest?"

"We can't," RoseIII answered. "Here." He lifted her onto his shoulder. Her fammie lit and the higher light helped brighten our path more thoroughly. "We have to keep moving. We want to be far upriver when we let the Neisi loose."

"You know, Neisi can be a nasty lot," a piping voice said, just above our heads. A new light flashed into being and I could see an all too familiar Jana.

"Tlisi?" I asked.

"I heard that they take dead Meabs below the water. You know, to soften them, then they suck out the insides," Tlisi said.

Yewsy shuddered. "Eww," she whispered.

"Why aren't you looking after your father?" I asked her.

She flashed away once. "And miss this adventure? You jest. Father should be just fine on his own. Once he gets out his sopore, he forgets I exist anyway."

"Doesn't it affect you, the sopore?" I asked curiously.

The Jana flew rapidly to one side. I got dizzy trying to track her with my eyes.

"No, Janas seem to rise above it. Honey water makes us giggle though. And tell secrets that shouldn't be told."

"Secrets? Secrets? Tell us all your secrets," Memo said, clapping her hands together. Higen lit happily, increasing visibility further. Tlisi also flashed repeatedly, causing my vision to blur as light overlaid dark and vice versa.

"I don't think so," Tlisi said. "Telling secrets for Lore join is like shouting it from the top of Ziv Mountain."

"Hey," Memo objected, frowning. "That's not true!"

RoseIII turned and he and Capel eyed Memo disbelievingly.

"Just walk on," Memo muttered, shooing their stares away with both hands, her fammie bobbing merrily.

I was increasingly disoriented by all the bobbing lights around me, so I turned and looked ahead into the darkness. The Jana was chattering on as Janas are wont to do, the Neisi was stumbling blankly next to Lemon, and my fellow travelers were tiredly conversing.

I hated that we'd had to move on with so little rest, but I felt the urgency of my sister's fate. Time passing was an unknown danger. Normally, I would not have felt this fear but, after seeing

the tragedy that had befallen my join, I realized that anything could happen to her. I was also unsure about why they had taken her. To what end? The longer we dallied, the greater the danger could become.

“What’s next, Yewsy? You’ve gone farther into these woods than most.”

Yewsy turned a quizzical gaze toward me. “No, not really. I usually go the other way around and south, to avoid the Neisi. Mother has burned the hazards of Felshea Falls into my very breast.”

“Ahh,” I agreed. It was common knowledge that crossing the falls was the closest way out of the forest but it was fraught with danger, both from the Neisi and from the Gobbyes, who often camped beneath the bridge. Rumor had it that children were the favorite food of both creatures.

I thought of my own mother, heard her repeated warnings and felt a flash of pain rip through me. Thankfully, this mission was helping me place her death to one side. I firmed my jaw and mentally repeated again—I would grieve later.

Book Ten

A SMALL HINT of sunlight brightened the eastern sky some hours later and I breathed a sigh of relief. The wooden bridge across the top of Felshea River loomed large against scattering clouds. It was a welcome sight. I was fatigued from the many legs we had traveled through the forest during the night and knew my companions were as well. Though well past atrebud stage, they were nevertheless young and had even less stamina than I.

I narrowed my eyes together, creating slits. I shut out all surrounding sound, especially Tsisi's chatter, and listened for my sister. She was talking to...a young woman. A very thin young woman, of Brinc clan. The glimpses I saw of her face showed shadowed, gaunt cheeks with sharp cheekbones and sunken, gleaming blue eyes. Oddly enough, I sensed feelings of affection radiating from Avapeony.

I snapped my eyes wide as we trod forward toward the river. This was a puzzlement indeed. How could Avapeony feel anything other than hatred for her captors?

RoseIII approached closely behind me. "Cleome, what say we rest a time before we make the crossing? We will need powerful wit about us."

I nodded and lowered my bags as we moved deeper into the trees that were nestled against the foothills of Ziv Mountain. In the brightening dawn, the nuances of the Neisi's form were even more evident. I saw now that gill slits laddered up the sides of its torso. They moved as it breathed in air but it was heartily evident that the creature needed to return to the water and soon.

Tsisi buzzed by my head. "I'm off to get food," she said. "I'll bring back some for all."

"Wait! There's no way you can carry enough," I said wearily. I turned and spied tiny Capel watching me with bright brown eyes. "Would you go with her, Capel?"

Her fammie, Walsh, brightened and broke into happy tendrils which she wrapped around Capel's head, making a tall hat. Capel knocked the fammie aside absently and smiled at me, one cheek dimpling in as if touched at birth by a Jana finger. "Of course! Come, Tsisi, we'll sing as we work."

I smiled as I watched her skip away, the Jana and the fammie spinning in dance above her head. I knew Tsisi would protect her from any Morri magic so turned my attention back to our rudimentary campsite.

Lemon and Saffron, fammies limp, sat together to one side, murmuring to one another, the Neisi standing slack behind them. I marveled again at how similar their appearance, with matching short golden curls and huge clear, green eyes. Twinning did occur from Lake Feidlimed but it was greeted with a sense of awe. Only very powerful magic received twins. I thought about their mother, Airgialla, who certainly fit that criteria. She was a daughter of RoseIII's Thorn join before entering into the Basil join as a young woman. Once settled in, she had worked hard to foster her household skills and was now one of the most powerful hearth wits out there. Even my mother, so powerful in her own right, had sought advice from Airgialla's hearth.

"So, what's next," Yewsy said. "Shall I pull out the food from home?"

“No, the forage they bring back should be enough to sustain us,” I said and sighed deeply.

Yewsy nodded then called out to the dark youth sprawled against a tree trunk. “Talew, can you and RoseIII fetch us some water?”

Talew lifted the basket from RoseIII’s pack and they set off down a slope toward the river.

“Memo’s gone,” Yewsy said suddenly, alarm etched into her tone.

I spun around. “What do you mean, gone?” It was true, neither Memo, nor her small blue linen pack was there.

“Oh, Goddess,” I breathed, my heart thumping in my chest. “When did we last see her?”

“Moments ago. When we stopped,” Yewsy answered. “Memo!” she called out, walking toward the river.

I set off toward the bridge, also calling out for her. I kept my voice low, however, not wanting to alert the slumbering Neisi to our presence. I felt frustration bubble up in me. What was the little Meab thinking, wandering off by herself?

I walked some way, angling toward the river, and I came upon a small cave that yawned wide beneath an overhang, no doubt hollowed out by past floods. I thought it might have beckoned to a curious wit so I crept close. Muffled sounds reached my ears so I paused, new fear filling me. It sounded like a struggle.

“Ha! Is this what you’re looking for?” A Gobbye strode from the shadowed interior of the cave, Memo dangling from one stubby hand. Her eyes sought mine and I saw her regret, her apology.

Gobbytes are terrifying, rawboned creatures who have large, square-jawed faces, which they begin scarring religiously at a young age. This one had rubbed red color onto the intricate spirals carved into each cheek and centered on his forehead. Gobbytes also forced their fannies around their waists, pinning them there with binding magic. His fannie, imprisoned thus, was the dark gray color of misery. I could sense the fannie’s pain battering at me, as well as Memo’s fear.

“Yes,” I choked out, mind whirling with possibilities about how best to proceed in freeing Memo and maintaining harmony. “Thank you for finding her.”

The Gobbye let Memo go and she scurried up the embankment to me. I hugged her briefly then shoved her behind me as other Gobbytes stepped from their river boulder and tree hiding places. They were a populous, motley crew, dressed in ragged clothing and animal leather. Even the atrebuds were scarred and fierce in appearance. The Gobbytes seemed to live together in one large clan, not separating into smaller joins as the Meab did.

“I see you have the Morri mark of safe passage,” the Gobbye next to the cave opening said, squinting at my forehead.

I stretched myself to my full height, motioning behind my back for Memo to run back to the others. “I do,” I replied. “We seek the far side of these lands.”

A Gobbye female stepped forward. “I say we mark her, as well,” she said, stooping and lifting a small, sharp stone. “Let’s make her as one of our own.”

One of the Gobbye atrebuds jumped gleefully and lobbed a stone at me. It struck my shoulder before I could make the sign of protection. I rubbed the sore spot and glared at the young Gobbye.

“There’s ought but Brinc land on the far side,” the cave Gobbye said, peering at me. His matted black hair moved as if vermin lived inside and I suddenly felt queasy.

“Yes, we go there to rescue my sister Avapeony, from Widdershin join. The Brinc clan have taken her.”

“Taken her?” He eyed me in disbelief. “To what end?”

I shook my head. "I don't know. Certainly not to foster harmony among our clans."

He nodded agreeably. "Certainly not."

"Harmony. Huh," the female said, moving closer. I watched the hand with the sharp rock closely, wondering if she really would scar me against my will. Glimpses of her bare skin showed mud residue amid the prevalent, raised scarring. She smelled muddy, too. And, most alarming, I could smell old blood on her. My queasiness increased and I had sharp, sudden compassion for the fammie strapped to her middle.

"Don't come any closer," I warned. My hands heated with magic.

"Lise," the cave Gobbye said in a menacing voice. The woman paused and studied me, lip curved in distaste. "Pale, smooth face," she sneered, as she flung the stone to the ground and returned to her clan.

The cave Gobbye, obviously a leader, spoke again. "So, you cross the falls?"

"Yes." I had a flash of inspiration. "With your permission, of course."

He narrowed his eyes at my guile.

"What makes you think you can reason with them?" he asked, changing the subject.

I glanced around before answering, uneasy that another menacing Gobbye might be ambushing from behind or from the side as their leader delayed me.

"They are still Meab, once of the wit, though they have abandoned this part of themselves. Surely they must see reason and return my sister to us."

Tsisi fluttered to a screeching halt between us. "Gobbye! You'll not bar our passage," she said. "We simply must cross the bridge and gain the other side. The Brinc have one of them and they just can't go on without her. The wit love deeply, you know, they always have. I once heard this beautiful love story but it was sad because one shot an arrow at the other—" She paused and placed her face in her tiny blue hands, as she slowly flashed into and out of visibility. She let loose a shuddering sigh. "I just can't bear it, I just can't."

The Gobbye wore a look of confusion on his scar-muddled face but it quickly changed to annoyance. He glanced at me, looking for an explanation, but I just shrugged.

He finally turned his back to me and Tsisi and walked toward his clan. He looked over his shoulder one final time and grimaced at us. "Meab, bah!" he said.

Book Eleven

WE DECIDED AS one voice to let the Neisi go immediately after we crossed the Finlo River above the falls. We'd be closer to the edge of the low forest then and well away from the Neisi clan. If fortunate, we would be but a dim memory in the captive Neisi's memory after we let it loose. Hopefully, it would attribute the time lost to a forest assignation or too much dance frolic in the falls.

The trek to the high, swinging bridge was an arduous one, however, and trying to pull the docile creature up the steep, rocky hillside was rough. I was glad we had eaten and rested earlier.

I paused halfway up and looked around. The views from the hill were magnificent. On one side below, there sloped a carpet of ancient oaks along with maple, hickory, elm, walnut, and tall, whitish birch trees. The other side was a gentle spread of green grass edged by the riverbank at the bottom of the falls. Just northwest, past that greenery, was a border of magic enhanced hedge, layered with woodbine and morning glory some eight feet tall. Peering through the branches of the trees, I could see part of the white edifice of the citadel. Fear stirred within me but I squelched it quickly. There was no time or energy for fear. I needed only my senses, my determination and my magic.

"I really am sorry," Memo said again as we mounted yet another huge boulder. "I thought I heard voices—"

"Your join has surely warned you about the dangers of Gobbyes," Yewsy interjected harshly. "And it was stupid for you to go wandering off that way. You should know better than that."

"I know. I do," Memo mumbled, studying her feet.

"She meant no harm, Yew. I'm just glad it ended well," I said, gauging the distance to the bridge. It was close. We had endured the worst of the climb. "Not far now," I muttered.

I glanced at Lemon and saw he was taking good care of the water sprite, guiding it carefully over rocks and across crevices. He glanced at me, and I smiled my approval.

I heard Capel trill a note and it drew my attention her way. She began singing in a low warble, barely heard above the rushing water below us.

May the powers of our Universe,
the source of all creation,
pervasive, eternal
with the Goddess of the moon
with the God of the sun
and the spirits of the stones,
rulers of the elemental realms,
the stars above and the earth below,
bless this place, this time, and who we are

Eight voices joined in and rang as one as we prepared for the final hoist upward to the bridge. We sang it three times to make sure the Jana clan would hear and bless our journey into the highlands.

I'd been told that the bridge had originally been built by Lutis, the keepers of the underworld, so that they could transport gold, mined in the mountain, down to the prosperous kingdom of the Astis. Since the Lutis are a stocky, sturdy lot, and the weight of the ore considerable, the suspended bridge was crafted wide and heavy, but during the centuries it deteriorated. Now used sporadically, only for high passage across the Finlo River, it was seldom maintained by its Luti builders and could be treacherous with broken boards and fraying ropes.

We paused at the top and looked west toward the oddly barren Brinc lands. The borders of those lands would be upon us soon and we needed all the wit energy we could muster. Our brief time by the falls had energized us, although, truthfully, some of that may have been Tsisi's abundant energy spilling over. I glanced at our little troupe, actually grateful that the Jana had stayed with us. Her constant chatter had buoyed all of us at one time or another. I studied RoseIII and saw grim determination on his face as he examined the bridge. His spiky ginger hair seemed to glow fiery in the sunlight, and I realized that he would make a good leader of the Thorn men when his father, RoseII, passed him the rule.

I was worried somewhat about Lemon and Saffron. They were so fatigued that their pale skin appeared translucent in the day's brightness. I was tempted to send them home but couldn't send them back through the forest alone. I sighed, remembering earlier doubts about traveling companions.

Capel and Memo seemed fine, even enthused about the adventure we were on. Memo had braided her ruddy hair into long braids and secured them with vine thread. They hung on either side of her head, making her large black eyes seem huge on her small face. She smiled at me and nodded encouragement.

"I go ahead," Tsisi said, buzzing about my head. "I take a lower route, away from the harshness of my Mother Wind."

I scowled at her impetuous buzzing but it did no good, she was gone as quickly as her words.

"That is a good idea. We'll have to tuck our fannies," Memo mused. "The wind will surely snatch at them."

"We can use their buoyancy anyway," I agreed. "Afton, will you tell the others that we will need their strength to get across?"

He spun away just as Yewsy grabbed me and hugged me from behind. "Have you caught your breath," she asked merrily.

I turned and smiled at her. "I'm well, just wondering which blessings to leave."

Capel touched one of the ribbons adorning the bridge upright. "I think we should each leave something," she murmured, her words almost snatched away by sister wind. She untied a bright blue ribbon from the strap of her pack and tied it to the closest bridge rope. It fluttered there with thousands of other Meab offerings to the Lares of safe travel. She lifted one arm and Walsh spun underneath. Capel giggled, which made the others laugh.

"Lares, hearken to prayer," Capel sang out as the others moved forward.

"Lead us in safety, guide us in peace, and support us in our journey," Lemon sang as he stepped forward and added a beautiful crimson stone to the pile of stones next to the upright. Maol wrapped once around his neck then she entered the front of his shirt.

“Save us from every enemy and ambush, from robbers and wild beasts on our journey,” RoseIII sang. He draped a strand of pinecone scales over and under the rope, securing it. Byrne swept along the back of his neck and under his coat.

“We ask a blessing upon the work of our hands and grant us grace, kindness, and mercy,” Yewsy whispered, offering two walnut halves. Brennen moved to lock himself around her waist as a type of belt.

Memo took a leather bracelet from her wrist and affixed it to the rope. “Bestow upon us abundant kindness and return our Avapeony to us.” She took Higen into her hands and moved back.

Talew and Saffron approached together. Saffron was humming the Lares into awareness as she placed an unpolished diamond atop the rock pile. “Help us reach our destination and return in joy,” she whispered.

I hummed along with her to make sure the Lares saw our offerings as Talew bowed and laid a tiny secret bundle, wrapped and tied in cloth, against the rocks. He whispered words that were snatched away by the wind as he said them. Finner, his fammie, crept up the sleeve of his tunic, making a lump at Talew’s shoulder.

“Hearken to the voice of our prayer, Guardians, for you hear the prayers of all. Guide us with your blessings, for the good of all,” I said.

I pulled two acorn tops from my bag and filled them with a few drops of blessed energy oil. I placed them where the wooden panels of the bridge met the earth and stone. I knew we would step across them there and they would energize our path even as the Lares received the gift.

We stood in silent blessing for another moment, Afton’s cloudy warmth pressing against my stomach under my tunic, and then RoseIII stepped onto the bridge. He held out one hand and Capel grasped it. Next Lemon and Saffron stepped onto the bridge, hands clasped.

“Levitate and allow your fammies to help,” I reminded them all as I helped Talew guide the Neisi onto the boards. I looked at the rushing water far below. “Talew, Lemon, if it falls, don’t try to catch it. The Neisi live in the river and the fall won’t hurt it.”

Talew nodded but held the Neisi’s arm even as he made the sign for levitation with his free hand.

“Come, wits,” I said, taking the hands of Memo and of Yewsy. “Avapeony awaits.”

We stepped onto the swaying bridge.

Book Twelve

THE VIEW FROM the center of the long bridge was breathtaking. We could see all the way to Lake Feidlimed to the southwest and past the southern greens toward our own little forest hamlet to the east. I paused for a quick look only, for sister wind was devastating as she rocked the bridge and almost sent us tumbling. Levitation magic kept us secure, however, and we crossed without incident.

At the end of the bridge, we turned back toward the riverbank so we could release the Neisi. Before we could reach the water, however, we were quickly surrounded by the local clan of Gobbyes. They appeared suddenly from the brush and boulders along the descent from the bridge. I immediately recognized the same cave Gobbye that I had encountered before. Lemon, Saffron and Capel squeaked and ran behind me. Surely their first sight of a Gobbye must have been frightening for them.

“Ahh, you again,” I said, standing tall.

“Yes, me again,” he responded then sighed in a deep, wheezing breath. “We require a token of good faith before we allow you to cross into Gobbye land.”

“It’s but a short way across, a narrow stretch of your land,” RoseIII interjected. “Less than a leg to get to the other side and onto Brinc land.”

I laid one hand on his arm to try to calm him. “Gobbye, there is no need for this. We mean no harm to you or your clan.”

He scratched at his beard with one grimy hand. “There are many layers of harm,” he said quietly. “Give us the water sprite and you can pass.”

I frowned. “The water sprite? Why do you want such a creature?”

He moved to one side so he could see the Neisi better. “We like this one. It’s not like the others, full of mischief and self-importance. This one we can add to our clan as a pet for the atrebuds.

I smiled. “No, you really don’t want this one,” I said. “It’s very much like the others and the magic keeping it under control will end soon. I don’t think you want to be here when that happens.”

The Gobbye was angered and rushed toward me. RoseIII and Talew leapt to my defense but I waved them back. “Threaten as you will, there is no way I will give one creature to another to be enslaved. It goes against my ken as a wit.”

“You can’t tell me what I can and cannot do,” he roared at me.

“I can and I do. Choose another payment.” I folded my arms to show him I stood firm in my decision.

The Gobbye moved close, so close I could smell his foul, onion-scented breath. “Perhaps we will keep you then.”

Alarm jangled along my spine but I held fast. “I think not. Choose again.”

“I know,” Lise, the Gobbye’s female, said as she moved forward. She leaned to one side, eyes fixed on my face, and chose a stone by feel alone. “Let’s mark her. Use blood as payment.”

I tried to keep the alarm from my features as I studied her. The male Gobbye said no word of arrest this time, but I glanced at him expectantly.

“Don’t you know who she is?” Capel said from her position behind Talew. She peeped around and glared at the Gobbye female. “She’s the daughter of DaisyFir Widdershin, Mother of the Widdershin join and of the Witta clan.”

Lise sneered at Capel, who ducked back behind Talew. “I care not for titles, smooth face. But payment. Payment must be true and fast.”

I backed away from Lise and held up my hands. “Choose another way. We have many treasures that we can use as payment.”

“No.” The male Gobbye finally spoke but not in my defense. “Blood is a good honest payment. Blood it is.”

The Gobbys, men, women and children, rushed as one toward me. I felt my own little troupe rush toward my back. In my mind, my sense, I clearly saw the injuries that would result from this encounter so I spread my arms wide and stirred magic deep within my core. It radiated out into my arms and the Gobbys and Meab both recoiled from the energy.

“Stop!” I cried out. “All of you.”

I inhaled a deep breath then pushed up the left sleeve of my tunic. “Fine. Blood it will be.”

I fixed the male Gobbye with a determined stare as I extended my arm to Lise. With my free hand, I made the finger gestures for the relief of pain, wishing that I had a good-sized sprig of rosemary to go along with it.

Lise took my arm in one hand and her unwashed smell wafted to me. I gagged but managed to get my disgust under control. I watched as she turned the stone in her hand, no doubt seeking the sharpest side, but looked away when I felt the edge against the skin of my inner forearm. I set my teeth together as the edge dug in. I refused to wince and kept my features neutral as I looked at the male Gobbye. I watched as his eyes took on a respectful cast.

“Lise,” he said quietly. “Enough.”

The Gobbye woman mercifully took the sharp edge away, but reached down and gathered a handful of dirt and tiny gravel, which she proceeded to rub into the wound. The pain then was unbearable and it was all I could do not to scream. Instead, I lowered my eyes as tears sprouted in them, pretending to examine the wound. It was a narrow, ragged gash, no longer than the length of my hand. It was layered with sandy soil, and I jerked the arm from her so I could shake off the loose pebbles.

“You belong to us, now,” Lise said jeeringly.

I blinked my eyes and turned to the male. “Will you allow us peaceful passage?” I asked.

He inclined his head and the entire group seemed to melt silently into the landscape.

“Talew, you and RoseIII let the Neisi loose,” I said, wrapping my arm in a scarf I pulled from my bag. “Go downriver some, toward the falls. He’ll get back to his tribe faster that way.”

“Do you want me to heal that?” Yewsy said, staying my hand as I wrapped the scarf. “I know it must hurt.”

“It’s fine,” I said, tucking the cloth in neatly. “Let’s get moving before they come back.”

“I think they’re done,” Saffron said, laying one hand over my bandaged wound. I felt the healing energy seep through, making the wound throb. “They got what they wanted.”

I nodded and sighed. “Yes. I just hope we won’t encounter them on the way back.”

Yewsy looked over my shoulder and I turned to see Talew and RoseIII returning.

“Did it awaken on its own?” I asked.

“No. I had to work a revival,” RoseIII said.

I nodded and we moved west. “Good. But let’s put some distance between us and the river, just in case.”

Book Thirteen

IF LORE ABOUT Brinc history was true, the land inhabited by the Brinc clan had deteriorated rapidly during the past century. Sorrow filled my heart when I spied the lanes filled with dirty, downtrodden Lutis who had been enslaved to provide Brinc with the metal ores required to construct their machines. Lutis were short, stocky earth sprites with dark heavy beards and wide, square feet shod in black boots. They had a very proud kingdom in the village of Earste in the Hites, so obviously they had been bound by very strong magic to be enslaved here. Or by very strong threats.

For Luti or Brinc, it was a horrible way to live. Obviously, the Meab people of Brinc lived quite differently, by very different principles, than my more forest-based clan.

Opening a hole in the new magical barrier the Morri had constructed against the Brinc was an arduous endeavor. It had eaten most of our afternoon, forcing yet another night on cold ground. This time beneath the diamond-like lights of the Brinc border instead of the usual stars in the sky.

A disgruntled, sleepy group of wit had greeted the dawn sun. Now we stood just past the small opening we'd created by combining our working skill the night before and stared at the destruction of the Meab way of life.

"Tsisi never came back," Capel said, her voice petulant.

"Janas are wind sprites. They are not dependable, you know that," I responded absently.

I was trying to decide the best way to approach the citadel, which was located in the center of the village. There was a wide, hard-surfaced lane that began a short distance away from us, but walking along it would leave us too exposed. I wasn't sure what Signe's men would do to us, but after seeing my parents' brutal murder, I was taking no chances. I consulted with Afton and he agreed that we had to be covert and find a way in without being seen. I looked right and left. Lanes stretched in both directions, with many small, seemingly deserted homes lining both sides of the lanes. Strange belts or cords strung each of the homes together then stretched off until they went out of my sight.

The surroundings were so very different from what I was familiar with. There were no plants, no Mother Trees at all, just periodic stacks of fallen wood at the end of each house-crowded lane. Tears framed my eyes as I surveyed the inhospitable landscape.

"This is not happening," RoseIII spoke my own thoughts mournfully. "Please tell me they don't really live this way."

I could only shake my head, unable to formulate words of comfort.

"Is this the way the Milesians live?" Memo mused aloud.

"This is what the legends say. The Humans' silver ships came from the sky to our Mother Earth. They used the wood to heat the metals they found here," RoseIII replied.

"How can we hide?" I asked, moving tentatively along the lane that stretched to our left. "There are no branches, no trunks, no vines."

Yewsy sighed loudly as she followed. "Maybe we should come back at night."

“But the lanterns...did you see the lights they have here? It makes it like day,” Capel said. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Let’s walk close to the homes, between them,” Saffron said shyly. “Maybe no one will notice us there.”

We turned to look at Saffron, who in her golden blondeness seemed to radiate a glow in the morning sunlight. She smiled tremulously as her fammie whirled.

“Good plan, Saff. It might just work,” I said.

I strode forward and ducked down the side of the nearest cottage, Afton pressing closely to the back of my neck. The rest followed. Moments later, we carefully emerged onto the next parallel lane. We proceeded that way in silence, lane after lane, avoiding Brinc and Luti alike, edging ever closer to the huge citadel building. The white fortress loomed large above us now and I studied it, trying to decide the best way in.

I saw a doorway set into the back left flank of the building. It was hidden by a large metal bin filled with what looked like rubbish.

“Do you see that door,” I whispered to RoseIII. “There behind that metal?”

“I do,” he responded quietly. “What if it’s locked?”

“Just a chance we will have to take.”

“There are no guards. Why would they leave the citadel unguarded?”

“I don’t ken,” I said, searching the area with my eyes. “But you are right, I don’t see anyone.”

“Do you think they have magic up?” He shifted position slightly so he could peer around the wall of the cottage that hid us.

The sound penetrated from the left, along the lane leading from the side and toward the main entryway to the citadel. We all turned that way.

“Dim!” I hissed. “Everyone dim.”

A strange, metal-plated conveyance rolled toward us on steel-shod wheels. A group of Meab sat atop it, but they were as different from us as night is from day. They wore morning robes but their robes had been woven with metal so that they shimmered with every movement. The females wore their sad fammies as scarves around their necks or else configured by metal constraints into odd, asymmetrical hats. The men wore grim expressions as they pushed buttons on small square machines that they held in their hands.

“I just adore tournament day,” one female trilled to the other as she tried to right the curls in her long, blonde hair.

“I think Jasper will be as victorious this year as last,” her companion answered. “Look how dedicated he is.”

Her gaze incited mine to follow and led to one of the men whose attention was immersed in his machine.

A new group of Lutis passed by, a small group of them, heavily laden with cloth bags. They didn’t see us as we were still dimmed and one almost trod on Capel, who squeaked and moved aside. One of the men from the carriage looked up and eyed the area where we stood suspiciously. Could he see us? Hear us over the noise of the carriage and passing Lutis? After a long moment of peering, he spoke into the lighted machine that he held in his hand as the carriage ambled away toward the citadel.

“This doesn’t look good,” I muttered to Yewsy. “I think our presence here has been announced somehow.”

“Announced?” Yewsy was watching the Lutis amble away.

“Perhaps we should split,” Talew whispered, shaking his head. “Together we are too noticeable.”

I nodded. “I think you may be right.”

Thoughts gamboled inside my head, and I silently asked our foremothers for direction. My hand crept into my bag and rested on my mother’s grimoire. Peace filled me.

“This is the plan,” I said, quietly and quickly. “Yewsy and I will go into the citadel to find Avapeony and bring her out. RoseIII, you and the others head back to the hedge and wait for us on the other side.

“But—” Memo began but I raised my hand to silence her.

“There will be too many of us. If there were more places to hide and we weren’t so exposed, it might be possible for all of us to go in. As it is, we will only draw attention to ourselves. This is the best way.”

RoseIII shook his head. “No. You need my protection.”

I nudged him gently. “We are strong wits, RoseIII. This is a matter for magic, not brawn, I am thinking. And besides, you need to survive to be leader Thorn for the men of Witt.”

“Some leader, to run from a battle,” he muttered.

I touched his arm and blessed him. “*Nos ex parte, ut semper ridere dum in amplexu tuae anam cara.*”

He sighed, nodded, and then turned to gather the other ones together to make ready to depart. I walked into the midst of them, laying hands, kisses and blessings all about. The fannies united and said their parting wishes as well.

Moments later, only Yewsy and I remained with Brennen and Afton pressing close. We looked at one another. I could see the fear in her eyes and felt compelled to reassure her. I took her hand and we turned toward the citadel.

Book Fourteen

THE TOURNAMENT WAS some sort of battle game using the small but brightly lit square machines that everyone here seemed to possess. We managed to unlock the door using an unbinding work but it opened directly into a huge hall of seated Meab, mercifully all with their backs to us. We entered silently, although Yewsy had to clasp her hand across her mouth as she lurched in alarm when she saw the number of players and watchers crowded into the huge hall. Luckily the machines made a steady hum of noise and all gathered were raptly involved. We scurried to one side, into an empty hallway, where we paused, getting our breath under control.

I felt the presence of my sister strongly here, so we ventured slowly along the empty passageway.

The citadel was a very old structure, built long before the time of Thad Briite. It hailed to a time shortly after the eternal light of Soldar brought the original people of Sheadha to Lake Feidlimed. Once it had been a beautiful shrine, well-preserved and filled with pageantry during the time of the planet shifts and alignments. I had attended them with my join when still an atrebud. Now, just a handful of centuries later, it was unkempt, the floors worn and dusty, the wall hangings in disrepair. I frowned in grief noting that the furniture, all made from forest gifts bestowed from fallen Mother Trees, had disappeared. No doubt helping fuel the ovens where the metal was crafted.

A sound along the corridor caused us to freeze in place. Dimming would be of little use in these odd, brightly lit passageways. Dimming worked best when shadow and plants were involved and there was neither here. I jerked Yewsy toward a door just as a trio of clanking metal-clad Meab turned into our hallway, immersed in a conversation. I received the sense that they were searching for intruders—us. Reaching behind, I oh-so-carefully, sprung the latch and leaned against the door. We moved backward, silently into the room. I pressed the door into a tiny slit and watched the Brinc men and women move past. As soon as they were out of earshot, I pressed the door closed and took a deep breath.

“Cleome?” Yewsy said, her voice wavering.

I lifted my eyes and they fetched up on the face from one of my visions. There, in flesh and blood, reclining on a bed, was the gaunt face and the sunken, gleaming blue eyes of the woman Avapeony had been talking to when last I envisioned her. The lavish bed rested against the far wall. To our left was a long, heavy table, which bore two large glass squares with bright colors on them. They bore images of the deep forest of our Witta lands. There were no window openings in the room but the flat boxes were realistic enough to make one think they were looking out onto our lands. I would have loved to study them but time was not our ally.

The rest of the room was littered with odd metal contraptions and many overstuffed linen cushions. Two chairs, one in a corner and one at the table were the only other furniture pieces. No wall hangings warmed the room and it had a sterile air and smelled metallic.

The young girl scooted across the bed and gained her feet, her fammie wafting behind her. We looked at one another for a long beat.

“I’m Cleome and this is Yewsy, with Afton and Brennen,” I said quietly, holding my hands out in the greeting of peace.

The young woman held her hands in the same way, though I could tell it was an unfamiliar gesture for her. “You’re Witta clan,” she breathed.

I was alarmed by the young woman’s thinness. In fact, now that I thought about it, everyone here was gaunt and starved looking, even the Lutis. The Lutis seemed wasted as well, with very little of their usual muscle flesh apparent.

“Yes. We are here to fetch home my sister, Avapeony. I know you talked with her. Can you tell us where she is?”

Fear contorted her face. “How do you know that? Who told you that?”

I realized suddenly that she wasn’t supposed to be talking with my sister. “No one,” I hastened to assure her. “I see things sometimes. No one else knows.”

“Good,” she said, then paused. “I’m Ronat. Ronat of Ray join, with Purth.”

I quaked even as Afton touched Purth in greeting. Ray join. Of course. We were in dire trouble. “We...I just want my sister. One of your men, your leader, took her from my home.”

Ronat’s eyes grew large. “You came all the way from Witta lands for her. That’s so far.”

“Yes, it is,” Yewsy interjected. “Not to be rude, Ronat, but we need to leave. Please tell us where she is.”

“On level two but you’ll never get there. Blass has men at the lifty thing.”

“Lifty thing?” I asked.

“The box that raises Meab from this floor to the next then up to the tower rooms.”

“What about the games they’re playing? They seem busy,” Yewsy pointed out. “Won’t Blass’s men play?”

Ronat’s eyes lit up. “I didn’t think of that! You may be right.”

She dropped her robe, revealing a strange, close-fitting suit that covered her from her cloth boots to her neck. It was woven of tiny metal strands mixed in with the linen. She looked so thin that she resembled ancient drawings of the inhabitants of Lake Feidlimed when they had first arrived here.

“Can you get us up there?” I asked.

“I’ve gone before but no one saw me. I...I don’t know if I can do it again.” Ronat was clearly nervous.

“Signe’s your father, isn’t he?” I asked, watching her reaction to my words. Her face tightened.

“Yes, and I’m sorry for what he and his men did to your join.” She turned and touched some of the items on the table so she wouldn’t have to look at me. “He is heartbroken. Avapeony’s mother, your mother, was a powerful wit.”

“Then why did he allow his men, no, order his men to kill her? We saw it all. He killed their father, too,” Yewsy said angrily.

Ronat whirled and looked at Yewsy. “Don’t you think I know that? My father has been sick on honey wine since. This...this has torn my join apart as well.”

To my surprise, Ronat’s face was wet with tears, her fannies dark.

Pain manifested in many forms, I realized anew. “We need to fetch her home, Ronat. Please, help us.”

She wiped at her eyes and fell into deep thought. By expanding my sense, I was able to feel her indecision. This was not just one Meab helping another, but would constitute a major life change for her. There was no going back from this moment on.

Her eyes lifted to me and I saw the decision become real, there in her eyes. “There’s an old stairway,” she said. “We can use that.”

Yewsy and I watched as Ronat fetched small metal items from beneath her bed and attached them to her suit. She shoved Purth aside and donned an over-tunic then shrugged. “Let us go,” she said firmly.

We crept from her room and followed her along a second hallway, then a third, each one obviously less used than the previous. The final corridor, festooned with cobwebs and old banners from happier times, led to a large circular stairway at the end. The dusty, debris-strewn stairway seemed dangerously unsteady but Ronat mounted it and quickly made her way upward. We followed at a slower pace, and I was alarmed at the protests the boards and metal sounded upon feeling our heavier weights.

“Careful, Yews,” I cautioned as we reached the top.

Ronat waited, her back pressed to a wall as she peered around the corner. “She’s just there,” she said, head indicating the hallway.

Afton moved ahead and sensed the corridor. He came back and connected. “Six doors. She’s two down on the right.”

“Do you sense any others?” I whispered.

“No,” he said in my thoughts. “But...”

“But what?” I questioned.

He disconnected briefly and touched Purth. “I thought I sensed someone but Purth did not,” he said, reconnecting.

I sighed. “Fine. We go forward.” I shoved Ronat around the corner and we three stepped into the brightly lit space. The brightness of the ceiling lamps hurt my eyes and made my head feel fuzzy. I could tell, by their low positions on our bodies, that the fammies weren’t enamored of them either.

We crept along, slowly, until we had passed one closed door. As we paused at the next one, Ronat lifted the latch and we slid silently inside.

Avapeony, sitting in a chair by the sole window, looked up in surprise. But the surprise was on us. Signe sat in the chair directly across from her. As soon as the door slid shut, it locked and a subtle, beeping alarm began to sound. Signe leapt to his feet and watched us as if bewildered.

“How did you...” he began, but broke off to turn his gaze on Ronat. “Daughter? What is this about?”

Ronat’s lips trembled but she drew herself up tall and spoke clearly. “We must let her go, Father. It’s wrong to hold her so.”

Signe frowned as if not understanding her words. “Ronat, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying...” She moved across and took Avapeony’s hand. “We are leaving, Father. I go with my love to her home.”

Her love? Yewsy and I looked at one another.

Signe was as amazed as we were. “Leave? What are you about, child? You can’t leave your home.”

Ronat laughed shortly. “This has never been a home for me, Father. I have no love of metal, of heat, of machines. I want cool water, trees with leaves. I want forest magic. I want to live by Witta magic, not Milesian cunning.”

Avapeony eyed Ronat with adoration just as heavy blows thundered against the door. Within seconds the door flew wide open and soldiers poured into the room. Signe was roughly shoved aside and Yewsy grabbed from behind. Ronat drew a weapon and leapt in front of Avapeony to

protect her as I grew magic and sent it through the soldier nearest me. He stilled, stunned by my will. Another lifted a small box and moved closer to me. I sidestepped and he fell against Signe. The chaos stilled for a mere few seconds as another soldier, one of Ronat's brothers, entered the room.

"Father? What is afoot?" he shouted.

"Get the Witta clan," Signe said, blood pouring from his nose. He swiped at it. "And Ronat—don't let her—"

He fell silent and we all realized that Ronat and Avapeony were gone.

Without taking time to think, I fetched a handful of acorns from my path bag and tossed them into the air.

Iaru, Chaac, Cocijo
I call upon you now
Fierce gods of the roaring
Boreas and Aossi
Sister and brother wind
Bring your strength to me now
Ninlil, blow, blow, blow!

I bound the working and quickly pulled Afton, Brennen and Yewsy close even as harsh, unbearable pain raced up my back, making me arc into the raging storm my words had wrought. Yewsy screamed in pain as well and, spun by the wind, we flew up and slammed into the rock wall. My flailing hand, covered in blood, slammed against an opening—the window— and grasped at the edge, pulling us toward it. Hands clasped about my neck and I almost lost my grip on Yewsy, but I spoke a work of release and the hands fell away.

"Levitation," I screamed, hoping Yewsy would hear me and understand. She must have, for she pushed against me and together we tumbled through the opening. I opened my eyes and looked down and saw the barren rocky ground rushing up to meet us.

"Hold us, Afton, Brennen," I cried out, my numb hands trying to make levitation postures. Our descent slowed and a great stillness surrounded us. I saw Lutis lifting their eyes, watching us. Their uplifted faces were the final sight that filled me before I lost consciousness.

Part Two

Book Fifteen

EXTREME SILENCE CAN be so loud that it's deafening. I discovered this when absolute silence drew me back to consciousness. Where was I? I saw only a slate gray solidness through my slitted eyelids. My sense was at rest so I knew I was no longer in danger, yet there was still a mild sense of unease. And pain. There was a lot of pain. I quickly made the pain relieving gesture but it wasn't very effective. My hands were still numb.

A swishing noise sounded to my left so I opened my eyes completely and carefully turned my head. Strange, lengthy forms floated past, most peering in at me.

"How are you feeling?" Afton said, arresting my movement. He sounded strange, and I soon realized why. He was surrounding me.

"Where are we?" I queried.

"You are healing," he responded.

"Ahh, so it is true," I muttered.

The Mothers had spoken of the waters of Lake Feidlimed saving lives when Meab were critically injured. I realized then that I was underwater and that Afton was using the lake's power to keep me alive and to heal me. "Where is Yewsy? Is she okay?"

"Her injuries were not as severe. She awaits you above," he answered.

"Good." Sleepiness washed across me. "There's pain...are you helping?"

"Yes. Rest. Heal."

MY WATERY SURROUNDINGS were brighter when next I awoke, but the pain was worse. I flexed my hands, gratified that the numbness was wearing off somewhat, but I was concerned about the lingering pain that seemed to be twisting my back into knots.

"Afton?"

"Yes?"

"Am I okay? Will I heal fully?"

"Yes, but you will be disfigured." His voice was sad.

"Will I function? Will my wit be intact?" Tears sprouted in my eyes. I had no emotional stamina at present. I'd lost too much.

Instead of answering, Afton began a slow, nauseating roll. "Stop! Afton, what are—"

I cried out, bracing my palms against his soft, cloudy form. Suddenly, he became more porous on one side and lake water leaked in against my back. The pain, set off anew by cool water, made me cry out then grit my teeth. Afton lifted me slowly until the bright light of the sun warmed my wet, tunic-covered arms. I could see little through his opacity but sensed our sideways movement. I also sensed other Meab nearby.

When Afton withdrew, I found myself outside, under a canopy of trees. Although Afton had gentled me onto a raised pallet, the renewed pain almost caused me to pass out. Once free of me, Afton spun himself dry then snuggled against my shoulder.

“Well, well. Looks like you may live after all.”

I turned and saw a delightfully familiar face.

“Oh, Goddess. Broc! It’s been too long.”

He smiled and toddled over to take my hand and pull up a stool to sit next to the head of the pallet. “It’s good to see you again, Cleome.”

I would have loved to embrace him, but there was no way I could lift myself from the pallet. Broc was one of Widdershin join’s dearest friends, but I hadn’t seen him for more than a century. He looked good. I remembered suddenly being lifted atop his broad back as we tromped across the greens, waiting for Avapeony to be born.

Broc was of the Iris clan, the ageless, eternal keepers of the wit. They, the entire small tribe, lived in the village of Ayfowg, which was situated directly on the banks of Lake Feidlimed. Whenever a Meab, as peyton, came for a new atrebud for their join, he or she would approach one of the Iris, who would then intercede with the ancient Sheadha of the lake. Three suns later, the atrebud would appear on the bank of the lake and the peyton would remove the fammie from the small atrebuds’s face, bringing both to full life.

“I was heartily saddened to hear about the passing of my friends, your parents. Please remember that I am here for you and Ava, no matter what you need,” he said in his gruff, whispery voice.

I squeezed his hand in gratitude. I thought of Avapeony then and my heart actually burned in my chest in a blaze of sorrow. My only hope was that she and Ronat had safely escaped the Brinc lands.

“I’m worried about the burns on your back. They were severe and are healing slowly. How is the pain?” His fammie, Hinchigordy, connected with Afton to get a full report on my condition.

“I will work on it, now that I am over the worst of it,” I said with conviction.

“Turn, let me see,” he ordered. He helped me turn over and then, lifting my tunic, prodded the skin gently. I tried to ignore the pain of his stretching the burned skin as he changed the bandages, but it was a tough task.

“This should help,” he said, plastering a fragrant mixture of pulverized herbs over the wounds. Herbs. I thought suddenly of my traveling companions.

“Lemon. Saffron,” I gasped. “Afton, where are they? Where are the others? Where is Yewsy?”

Afton had fallen into a somnambulant state and actually seemed to yawn before answering. “Lemon, Saffron, Yewsy, Capel, and Memo are fine.”

I thought a moment. Wait. “RoseIII, Talew? You forgot two.”

Broc touched me and I felt sleep take me over.

WHEN I WOKE, I felt small, cool hands on my cheeks. Wind washed across me. “Wakey, wakey, little Meab.”

I opened my eyes and was unable to focus on the green eyes made huge by proximity. A sudden gust of wind blew up my nose, and I heard the irritating hum of Jana wings.

"I told you she was awake," Tlisi said merrily. She hovered about my face, peering closely at me. "Are you well, Cleome?"

I brushed her aside and rolled onto my back. There was pain still but it was almost nonexistent when compared with the earlier agony. I stretched, finding that sensation had fully returned to my hands and arms.

Yewsy's face appeared above me. She smiled gently and offered a hand. "Can you sit up?" she asked.

"Maybe." I took the offered hand and allowed her to haul me into a sitting position on the end of the raised pallet. The pain was blessedly bearable. I moved my hand in the pain easing gesture and it abated even more.

Yewsy lifted my sleeve and ran one palm over the ragged, raised scar on my forearm. "Quite an adventure, we've had," she said.

I saw tears filling her crystal blue eyes.

"Yews, what's wrong?"

The Jana raced between us. "She cries for Memo. Ohhhhh, it's so sad, it is," Tlisi said, wailing in sorrow as she flew away from us.

I turned to Yewsy, my own eyes so full of sudden tears that I could barely see her. "Memo?" I squeaked.

"She mourns. Her join Talew was taken. He died a warrior though, saving RoseIII's life. And that of the others as well."

I took a moment to let this digest. "How?"

"They saw our fall from the citadel and RoseIII raced back onto Brinc land to rescue us before seeing the fammies lift us. He wasn't careful, of course, so was challenged by Givan soldiers who were coming for the games. They detained him and when he tried to use magic, they hit him. With their hands," she whispered.

"And Talew?" I swiped at tears that would not stop appearing. I thought of his sweet, smiling brown eyes, his need to be a powerful and mature Meab.

"He followed and was caught up in the fray. They used their machines on him. He's so small..." Yewsy dropped her head and sobbed. I pressed her hand, sending comfort. Sense filled me and I saw how she had been burned in the escape from Avapeony's room. The burns were down her left arm. She, like me, would be scarred forever.

"Avapeony?" I asked after a moment of silence.

Yewsy straightened her spine and wiped the tears away. "Captured as they tried to leave Brinc land," she said firmly. "Walsh saw in a vision that she and Ronat have been banished to the dungeon to await Signe's punishment."

I sighed and hung my head. All this had been for naught. Perhaps the Morri and Gobbyes were right that mine was a fool's quest after all. Afton tightened against me but I painfully shrugged him loose. "Leave me be, brother," I muttered angrily.

"Perhaps it was your anger that defeated us," Yewsy said, watching my face keenly.

"My anger? Why blame this on me?" I said.

"You started this by speaking of your hatred. You know that hate has to go somewhere."

"Well, I tried, didn't I? And got us all hurt...or...or snuffed out. And Avapeony isn't home...might never come home now."

"You're feeling awfully sorry for yourself," piped Tlisi overhead.

I looked up, adding irritation to my simmering anger.

“You know, one thing I learned from my friend, Wisn, who flies with me all the time, is that you’ve just got to keep going. Giving up isn’t really an option. But...” She paused and pointed one tiny finger to her lips. “There is the Brinc. They’ve become such...bullies...they have. I don’t know why they can’t just get along with everyone. I mean, what do they think their machines will do, benefit them? I don’t think so. How? Can they tell me how the machines will help? I’ve heard that they don’t even use them for anything productive. They just burn Mother Trees and melt the metal. That’s all—”

“I think they make those game machines,” Yewsy said, interrupting.

“And there’s some type of communication device, as well,” I contributed.

“But whyyyyy?” Tsi persisted. “Is this great Mother Earth not enough for them? Doesn’t she provide all the gaming we need? Have you seen how thin they become? And their fannies? Poor, poor creatures. Meabs have to have their fannies or they cease. They just cease.”

She continued as she flew in circles above us, one finger curled under her pointy blue chin. “We have to save them, show them how misguided they have become.” She balled up her little hands into fists. “There has to be a way.” She flew to me and fluttered in front of my eyes. “The Meab are one join, are they not? One big join? How can one tribe turn against the other? How can this be allowed? I met with the Mothers, you know. They are seeking answers but it’s Dot of Prosee join. She will not compromise. She talks of benefits from the machines. I listened but I heard no benefit. Will we war, do you think? The legend is that war was why we left our home and came here, oh, so many millions of centuries ago. See? Nothing has changed. The Witta Mothers are so frustrated.”

She clasped her hands to her cheeks and made figure eights back and forth through the air as she flashed into invisibility. “What to do? What to do? There must be something else that can be done.” She stilled suddenly. “We need help. Cleome? Can you get us help?”

“Of course not, you annoying fruit!” I swatted at her then hissed as my wound protested painfully.

“Ooooh, testy,” Tsi whimpered and flew off to buzz around Broc’s head as he bent over sacred writ, reading and making notes. He was very tolerant, nodding placidly as she chattered on.

Book Sixteen

BROC ALLOWED ME to return back to Widdershin a handful of suns later. Though my body was healing, my spirits were not. An unfamiliar depression had set in and I resigned myself to never seeing my sister again. I reunited with Lemon, Saffron, Capel and a wounded RoseIII, but even with them, sharing stories as we made our way home, I could feel no joy.

Memo had returned to her join earlier, and I was somewhat relieved. In my current state of mind, I would never know what to say to her. Talew's death was on my hands, and it was something I could not deal with just yet.

I had plenty of time to think during the long journey back to our village. About which path my life should follow now. I'd lost my entire join. I could build it back, true, but growing an atrebud at that moment would be impossible. I had no love in me, no life. Would my joy ever return? Of course, but it would be some time. I decided for the time being to experience the sorrow and frustration fully. I focused on healing energy and trying to repair my wounded back.

Afton had shown me what the wound looked like. A long, jagged burn that extended from my left shoulder across my back and down below my waist. It was mostly healed now, thanks to Afton and Broc's excellent care. I knew it would never fade, and I wore it proudly as a secret type of penance. And a memento of failure.

"The men and young repaired everything," Yewsy said as she opened the cottage door. "I...I hope that's okay."

Everything in the cottage had been put to rights. Tears stung my eyes as I moved forward and adjusted my mother's scrying bowl slightly to the right, into its precise home. "It's wonderful, Yews. Thank them all for me."

"Cleome..."

I turned and looked at her.

"May I stay here with you? I...I don't want you to be here..."

I leaned forward and laid my head on her shoulder. "Thank you, Yews," I whispered.

She tilted her head until it touched mine. Our fannies mingled as they hadn't in a long, long time.

"So what's next," she asked sometime later. We had set out a feast of grain bread slathered in honey, grapes from Airgialla's vines, and fresh foamy mead. Life didn't get much better than that, but I still felt as though a hedge stood between me and any enjoyment of life.

"Well, I'll see Lore join first. Then resume my studies. Alongside you. I guess your Mother, as my nearest, will teach me," I answered. I played with a bunch of grapes, trying to flatten them. I lifted my cup of mead and drained it.

Yewsy stared at me a very long time, until I became uncomfortable under her gaze. "And Avapeony? Do we forget about her?"

Anger rose in me and Afton quaked against my shoulder. "I will never forget my sister. Don't you think I would rescue her if I could?"

She rose and walked to the door of my mother's cell, as if pointedly ignoring me. Brennen seemed to be trying to pull her back toward me.

"Yewsy? I would. You saw what happened, how we almost died. How...Talew...how Talew..." I broke down and could no longer speak.

"Cleome, my birth mate, you have never been afraid. You have always been the bravest person I know. Why, now, when Witta clan needs you the most, do you fail us?"

"Fail you, but..." Embarrassed tears choked me. I was failing Witta. Depending on the Mothers to fight my fight. I was afraid, afraid of my own pain from injury, but also the possibility that others might be hurt by my actions. As they had been already.

I stood and strode from the cottage, telling Yewsy I would return soon. I needed Mother Trees to soothe me and provide important answers.

Three dark blue Jana escorts came to lead me to the grove. Luckily, they chattered among themselves and with Afton, leaving me to my gloomy thoughts. Stepping into the grove was stepping into the bosom of our Mother Earth, the orb which sustains us all. There was an unaccustomed silence there, unlike any other location, although it was eerily similar to the depths of Lake Feidlimed.

This particular grove was truly sacred land. Legend has it that it was the final stronghold where the original Sheadha tribe defended successfully against repeated invasions by the Milesian tribes. Located deep into the wooded Meab lands, northeast of Lake Feidlimed, the area was defensible thanks to the magic awakening of the Mother Trees and their keepers, the Morri.

It had been one of the Morri, one named Cleisin, who had, as peyton, begged the Mothers of Lake Feidlimed to form the Silver Veil which would separate the marauding Milesians from Meab lands. The veil made us invisible to Humans and allowed us to recoup our basic tenets of peace and magical harmony. Cleisin had returned to the lake many thousands of centuries ago, but this grove, this sacred place, remained a sanctuary.

No Mothers or other sisters were there, so I moved to the central dais and took a seat on the ancient carved chair in the center.

Sacred earth, precious earth, rise up
Sacred air, precious air, rise up
Sacred water, precious water, rise up
Sacred fire, precious fire, rise up

My chant rose from my lips and leaves began to dance around the bottom of the dais. Afton drew closer. I formed the summoning gesture with both hands supine on my knees. Tree trunks groaned and popped all around me. And I waited with my eyes closed. Waited until the air around me cooled into late afternoon.

I saw the ancient ones when they came close. Fierce, beautiful foremothers, a dozen of them. They were speaking, but I couldn't hear them. Their dialogue was important and I regretted that I could not take part in it.

Their gazes suddenly fixed on me, so I waited patiently to hear them. Silence grew as they stilled, watching me. Then they nodded to one another as if agreeing on something.

I was inundated with warmth, and I felt a sudden shift in my spirit, a lightening. My mother appeared before me, her hands light on my skin. I breathed in her lemon scent and tears grew in my eyes. I missed her so.

Grandmother Glory came close, her dark-haired beauty still undiminished by age and death. Her smile was gentle and sweet, and I felt love for her swell in my chest.

“You will do what you will,” a voice whispered next to my ear. “You are powerful and good, daughter of DaisyFir Widdershin.”

“I am defeated,” I muttered quietly. “I have no recourse.”

Sighs of displeasure swamped me. Both foremothers spun around my chair, expressing their frustration.

“There is always a path, a new path. An old path. But a path.”

A twinge of pain twisted my back, and I remembered falling from the citadel window opening. No, there was no path, no going back.

“My sister,” I cried in anguish. Sobs shook me as Afton pressed close.

The foremothers, all of them, wailed grief along with me, but only for a short time. Then there was a subtle, silent reprimand. I sat back, mopped at my tears with my tunic sleeve and set my jaw firmly.

“There is always a path,” I said with certainty. “A new path, an old path, but a path.”

I felt new determination flood me. I would rescue Avapeony. There had to be a way.

Book Seventeen

I SAT AT my mother's worktable and stared at her mystic supplies while Yewsy straightened the cottage then moved to pay the Lares and Fey with food and water. I needed a plan, but my mind was blank.

"Ah, brother. What to do?" I said, petting Afton. He extended a tendril and connected.

"See there," he said simply.

Puzzled, I looked at Yewsy. She was engrossed in weaving vines neatly around the window frame now. I frowned. "What?" I whispered.

Then I saw it. My path bag and my travel bag lay on a small table next to the working table. Of course. Complete answers had to lie in our grimoires. The two bags and their contents had dried finally, but the grimoires I pulled from the larger pack were stained and wrinkled from the water of Lake Feidlimed. I laid the smaller of the two, my book, to the left and mother's to the right. I opened her book and smoothed the water marked pages, imparting much love to them. I knew the love would be returned three-fold so I spent a lot of time on this action. Yewsy moved close but said nothing, just watched, mesmerized, as I worked.

Stars we were and stars we be
Circling through eternity
Stars we are and stars we remain
Walking on this earthly plane

We joined our voices in singing the ancient chant three times as I pressed my hand to sections of pages. I continued caressing the book as I waited for inspiration.

"Come on, foremothers," I whispered.

I saw a spark of color bloom in Brennen, just over Yewsy's shoulder. She felt it, too, for she turned to study him.

"It's Afton, too," she said, looking back at me.

Pain sparked in my wounded back as my hands trembled against Mother's grimoire. Those hands began to glow, and I felt magic fill the air. "Yes," I said as the pages flipped rapidly in the magic generated.

Shivers rocked me as the magic dispersed, and I avidly studied the page revealed. It was one I hadn't noticed before, filled with dark conjurings and hastily scribbled notes along the borders. I realized right away what the workings were for and recoiled in horror. At fifteen centuries only, I had not the ken—or the wit—to take on such a task. Surely the foremothers were wrong this time.

"What is it?" Yewsy asked, moving close. She looked at the book and a small gasp escaped her. "A Diarmin?"

I took a deep breath. "It looks that way."

Yewsy backed away, waving her hands. "No, no, no, no. We want no part of that."

"But the foremothers—"

“Are wrong,” she finished.

“I thought that, too, but we both know the book doesn’t lie.”

Yewsy glared at me for a handful of breaths and I watched, enchanted, as her gaze changed, softened. “It would be fascinating. You know, to actually see one.”

I nodded in agreement. Diarmins were the original crafters of Sheadha technology and they possessed powerful magic. But it was a male energy. And their energy was so powerful that they had tried to dominate the foremothers after arriving on this planet, so far from their original home. A great battle ensued with the Sheadha Mothers banding together and banishing them to Endet, the place between worlds. It was an unfortunate decision, for the Diarmins were a necessary part of Sheadha culture for work and for protection. The Mothers had replaced them with Meab males, a somewhat watered down version of a Diarmin.

To call up a Diarmin from Endet was a risky move and at the moment, I didn’t understand what purpose it could serve. I only hoped that more would be revealed to me in time.

“I suppose,” I said. “Any thoughts on why this needs to be done?”

She walked back to the worktable. “Let’s think about this,” she mused as she took a seat. “Diarmins are little, if I remember correctly, yes?”

I shrugged. “I guess...I think so.”

“Well, maybe it can enter the citadel without being seen.”

Excitement engendered a small fire within me. “That’s true! And they have powerful magic, maybe it can dim so it can’t be seen, even in that weird light.”

“But, will it do something as honorable as rescue Avapeony and bring her home?”

I sat back and laced my hands across my stomach, thinking about it. “There’s nothing else we can do, Yews. I don’t think we can get back in, or at least get very far. And they have Avapeony in the dungeon. I can’t even imagine getting that far.”

“So trust becomes the issue,” she stated.

“Trusting a Diarmin. I never supposed I would.”

A tap sounded against the front door. Yewsy and I looked at one another questioningly. She rose and went to the door and came back with Memo. I rose and embraced Memo, sending affection and sorrow with every sense of my being. I held her a very long time, mingling our fannies and allowing our breaths to synchronize.

“I never meant—” I began when I pulled back from her.

She pressed two fingers to my lips, staying my words. “My brother died a brave death, a warrior’s death. There is no sorrow in that.”

I studied her round, dear face for a long beat. “There is still sorrow,” I whispered, finally. I rested my forehead against hers.

“Come, Memo, we’ll have tea,” Yewsy said, drawing her away to the table.

I joined them, sadness still weighing down my heart.

“I miss Avapeony,” Memo said without preamble. “When do we try again?”

I looked at Yewsy, then back at Memo. “You want to try again?”

“Of course. We have to get her back.” Memo’s dark eyes were wide with surprise. “And we need to hurry. Are you healed enough to go?”

“I am, but I—”

“Good. I’ll go get my bags.”

I brushed Higen aside and took her arm. “Wait! Memo, there’s no way we can get into the citadal again. We were lucky to get out last time.”

“But, Cleome, we have to!” she cried out. “We have to bring her home. Goddess knows what they are doing to her. She might be hungry or...scared.” Tears trembled in her large black eyes.

I turned away, sudden terror filling me. I didn't want to think about any of that.

“We have a plan,” Yewsy said quickly. “We'll get her. And soon.”

“I want to be part of it,” Memo stated. “Don't leave me out of it.”

Yewsy handed her a mug of tea. “As soon as we decide for sure, you'll be told.”

I sighed, indecision making my thoughts spin. I knew one thing for sure, this plan had to be kept secret for now. Not an easy thing in a people known for their openness.

Book Eighteen

I WAITED UNTIL Yewsy was fast asleep before touching her between the eyes in a sleeping bind. I left the snuggly warmth of the bed and moved through Jana light shining in from outside. At the worktable, I lit candles and shaped them into a pyramid shape, the ancient shape of the foremothers. I pulled mother's book close and read the section on summoning a Diarmin.

It was a relatively simple working but had many layers of depth. It touched on all the senses—touch for earth, taste for fire, smell for air, sound for water and for sight, the ancient spirit of Akasha that all our tribes answer to. The energy of the working cycled through these senses many times until the message reached the particular Diarmin summoned. A special doorway had to be constructed in the center of the work surface so that some of the Diarmin's supernatural ken would be stripped away, otherwise it would be too powerful to exist on this plane, in this time.

I moved a separate candle closer to the grimoire. Each Diarmin was associated with certain signs and seals, so I pored over the short list of names and the notes my mother had scribbled about each of them. During the many millions of eons on this earth, some Diarmin had fallen away, and she noted the ones that had passed. They were not any more immortal than the ones they had served but many still remained. I studied the list until one candle had guttered and the wick on another had grown unmanageably long. Finally, I sighed deeply.

“Okay, Afton. Start the process. It's Occil.”

I felt his heat grow as I laid out the long sprigs of dried rosemary. I plucked a few more from the herb bundles overhead and completed the passageway. Reaching to the side, I placed a rock, part of a Jana wing, a candle and pulled a goblet of cool water close. I sat back and stared at the square center of the larger square of interlaid rosemary branches. There was only darkness there, but I cowered nevertheless.

Moon that gleams and glows
Let your wise eyes see
I summon the evil one, Occil
To draw it close to me

Hear my needy heart Hear my honest plea Evil cannot create love But to do my will can be
I spoke with a firm voice, tucking fear away so the wicked one would not see. I said it three times as the world howled around me. Afton was spinning faster than ever before and causing anything with little enough weight to fly, spinning about the cottage. I ducked as a wooden bowl flew at my head and momentarily bisected Afton, yet I continued the working unabated. The vines on the walls trembled and the Lares and Fey peered out at me with wide, frightened eyes. Doubt surfaced in me but I called up Avapeony's young face and I continued. A small murder of crows took flight and, though buffeted off track by the wind, managed to make their way outside through the window opening.

I bound the spell then closed my eyes for a brief moment to set the work. An object hit me in the shoulder, twisting me and setting off the old pain in my back. I snapped my eyes open and saw a deep red glow in the center of the sheaving square. One tiny hand snaked forth and a bulbous red eye examined me.

“Who are you?” a creaky voice asked as a wave of fire smell washed across me.

“Cleome of the Widdershin join, daughter of DaisyFir,” I responded.

“Ahh, a Meab,” the voice continued conversationally. “Will you take away the square? I fear harm to me.”

I glanced at Mother’s grimoire. Under no circumstances should the sheaving square be removed and the creature allowed full power.

“I am sorry, Occil, I cannot do that,” I said firmly.

Another clawlike hand appeared at the rim of the square. “Are you sure?” it asked, making me feel as though I were mistaken in my decision.

“Y...yes, I am sure. Pass through the square, Diarmin, or I shall summon another.”

Two pointed ears set vertically atop a head appeared and it paused. “I don’t like this,” it whined. “Why should you wish to harm me?”

I slid the grimoire closer and slid my finger along the list of Diarmin.

Occil’s red, vertically pupiled eyes appeared at the rim of the square. “Stop, wit, don’t you see I come forth?”

I sat back and waited silently as the tiny creature, no larger than a Jana, lifted itself from the square. It fell to one side and lay curled up, tongue hanging from its mouth. I studied it. The dark brown creature had a strange bifurcated mouth filled with tiny, sharply-pointed teeth. The flat nose above this mouth was a pink, inverted triangle. The pupil-divided eyes were large, bulbous and almond shaped, with an observant, eager gaze. It studied me as keenly as I studied it.

“Why have you called me, wit?” Its eyes roamed the cottage with a measuring glance.

“I need your magic to rescue my sister,” I answered.

“Rescue?” It slid across the table and grabbed two grapes from a bowl on the kitchen counter. “Rescue, how?”

“She was taken by the Brinc clan and is being held against her will,” I explained.

“The Brinc clan? Aren’t they your people?” Grape juice sheened its short chin as it awaited my answer.

“There’s been...complications,” I said as I got to my feet. “Our paths have diverged.”

“What do they want with her?” Occil rolled onto its back and extended its skinny arms and legs into the air, as if stretching them.

I sighed and straightened the magic tools, pressing out candle flames. “It doesn’t matter, and I’m not sure. All I know is that her home is here and this is where she should be.”

Occil sat up and studied me for a long moment. “So, you want me to get her from somewhere else and bring her here?”

I stared back. “Yes.”

“That’s all you want.”

“Yes. Can you do it?”

The creature smiled and new fear quaked in me. The smile was somehow more horrible than the Diarmin’s already disturbing appearance. “Can I? Of course. Will I? Hmm.”

I knew better than to let any fear through where these creatures were concerned. I lit a new candle and began the banishing.

In these names that are above all others
the name of the great Mother—

“All right. All right! Sheesh! You’re a bit testy,” Occil said. “Are you ready to go?”

“Go? Go where?”

He eyed me with one squinted eye. “Are you addled? Is this a mistake? I thought you wanted to go get this sister.”

I blinked. “Yes. You want to go now? And I’m going with you?” I hated that my voice squeaked.

The creature nodded slowly, still eyeing me as though I had two heads.

“Wait! I need to get something...someone. Wait there.” I spread my hands and made a staying work with my left hand. I rushed from the table and into my sleeping cell. I tapped Yewsy’s forehead.

“Time to awake. We are going back to the citadel,” I whispered loudly.

Yewsy opened her eyes and stared curiously at me. “I heard you say citadel?”

“Yes. The Diarmin is ready to go,” I answered.

“Diarmin?” To her credit, she rose immediately and began throwing on her outer clothing. “You summoned it?”

“I did.” I shoved Afton aside and pulled on my day tunic and my jacket, tucking my daggers into my woven waistband. I donned my hat then grabbed Afton back to my shoulder. He protested this rough treatment and I think Brennen was reacting in much the same way, evidenced by his indignant purple hue.

“What’s it like?” Yewsy whispered, coming close.

I just shook my head as I turned to the door. “See for yourself.”

We peered around the door together and watched as Occil gleefully dripped hot candle wax on its rounded belly. Yewsy looked at me.

“It’s so little. Are you sure it’s...”

“I think so,” I answered. “But watch it. It’s a troublemaker.”

“I can hear you,” Occil said. “Let me off this table. Then we can go.”

We approached it cautiously, and I formed the release symbol then stuffed my mother’s book into my bag.

“Ahh, that’s better,” it said, spreading its bony arms wide. “Let me see where we’re going.”

Before I realized what was happening, the creature had jumped on my shoulder and inserted one arm into Afton. The fammie squeaked, but the Diarmin petted it gently with its other hand.

“You know, I always wanted one of these,” Occil said, wistfully. “I can only imagine what it is like to have a constant companion. The Meab and the sprites are so blessed to have them.”

Afton pulled away, but gently. “Yes, our fammies certainly sustain us,” I said. “We know how blessed we are,” Yewsy agreed. The Diarmin held up its hands and wiggled them.

Book Nineteen

I BLINKED AND when I opened my eyes the three of us had joined Ronat and Avapeony in the dungeon of the citadel. It was a dank and airless place, made up of mortared stone walls enhanced by heavy metal fittings. The two Meab we sought were crouched in a far corner on a pallet of mostly disintegrated straw.

Ronat's head snapped up so quickly that I thought her thin, twig-like neck would snap. Avapeony's eyes widened as she clambered to her feet. "Cleome? Is it really you?"

"Well, hello there," Occil said, scurrying to Ronat's side. "You didn't tell me your sister was so beautiful."

"That's not her sister," Yewsy said. "That's the daughter of the man who caused all this!"

"It's not what you think!" Ronat responded sharply. "My father was a pawn in a bigger game. Prosee join and my brothers...they poisoned his mind."

"My join has been destroyed," I responded. "And the two of you are here. That's all that matters." I said, trying to stem my latent anger.

Occil was reaching up and touching Ronat's thigh, lovingly, and she repeatedly swatted the hand away as she glared at me. She turned to the Diarmin. "Why are you touching me? Who are you?"

A soft, plush bed suddenly appeared where the pile of straw had been. The air filled with a potent flowery scent and suddenly Ronat's close-fitting one-piece suit was replaced with flowing morning robes of fine silk. A chair filled with soft cushions appeared behind me and lush, colorful tapestries covered the stone walls.

Yewsy grasped my arm. "Cleome, what is happening?"

"Occil, what are you about, Diarmin?"

Occil was still staring adoringly at Ronat. "I make a beautiful, comfortable home for my love."

"Home? Love?" Ronat frowned in puzzlement. "No, stop it!"

"It displeases you, lovely one? Tell me what you want and I will provide it. Your wish is my desire." Occil waved one tiny hand and the wall hangings were suddenly a different design, a deeper color.

Avapeony moved closer to me. "Cleome, you brought a Diarmin? What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that we need to bring you home. There was no other way." I knew stubbornness rang in my voice.

Beautiful jewels appeared on Ronat's chest, fingers and ears. "Wh...what?" she gasped and reached up to rip them from her body. They fell on Occil's head but the creature seemed unfazed.

"How have you been treated, Ava? Have they hurt you?"

Avapeony shook her head. "No. They forget food and water sometimes, but Tsihi brings it."

"Tsihi has been here? I wish she had contacted me." I frowned at my sister. "I would have appreciated knowing that you were all right."

“I have more important things to do than...oooh...” Tsihi flew low and blinked into invisibility in front of Occil’s face, dropping a basket of water to the dungeon floor. “Why have you released it, Cleome? Do the Mothers know of this? Surely, they would never have allowed...we are so much better off with them locked away. They cause so very much trouble, Cleome. I am just having a...”

Occil waved a hand and, though Tsihi’s lips moved, her voice could no longer be heard.

“I apologize, my lovely,” the Diarmin said to Ronat. “Music would be a much better choice. Shall I bring up music? What is your preference, love of my life?”

Soothing harp music faded into the room. Ronat’s face was a morphing of disgust and bewilderment as she glared at Occil.

Tsihi flew to me as she tried to shake off the binding set by Occil. It was strong and took her three tries.

“See?” she said archly. “This is what I’m talking about. There is no possibility of controlling what it does. Have you thought of that?” Her voice lowered to a whisper. “They are tricksters, too. Do not trust it. Do not.”

She flew around in an agitated circle, finally pausing again in front of my face, wings flapping frantically. “Oh,” she wailed sadly. “I go to tell the Mothers. To bring them even more grief to add to what they deal with at present.”

I watched her fly out through one of the high windows and sighed heavily. “It’s time, Occil.”

The Diarmin ignored me. It was sitting on the bed, prone, chin on his propped up palms, staring longingly at Ronat who had pulled Avapeony aside and was feverishly discussing something with her. Every time she absent-mindedly shrugged out of the morning robe, Occil twitched a hand and magically placed it back on her shoulders.

“Diarmin! It’s time. Take us back to Witta.”

“Why?” it asked sleepily. “I like it here.”

“You don’t understand, you twit. The Brinc Meabs are trying to kill the Witta Meabs and we need to go back before they come down to the dungeon,” Yewsy explained impatiently.

This captured the Diarmin’s attention. “Kill? It’s unheard of for Meabs to kill one another. Surely you’re mistaken.”

“Send out your sense, Diarmin. The Brinc have embraced machines instead of magic. Do you feel magic here?” I asked.

Ronat approached. “It’s true, Diarmin. My clan have taken on the Milesian machines and technology. They use these weapons for ill.”

A goofy smile spread across Occil’s face when Ronat addressed him directly. “Machines? Technology? I like the sound of those words. Are they very powerful, these machines? This must be what the seers predicted.” Its eyes narrowed. “Is this your way, beloved?”

Ronat reached behind and grasped Avapeony’s hand. “No. My way is the Witta way.”

“Well, then Witta way it shall be,” Occil agreed amiably. “I will disable the machines.” He waved his arms.

Moments later, a great roar sounded and after that, just a few moments more, running feet thundered throughout the citadel. The stone walls fairly shook in outrage.

I gasped and glanced upward. “Diarmin! What have you done?”

“I think they’ve forgotten their magic,” Occil said thoughtfully. “They run amuck, helpless and stupid.”

I grasped my head in both hands. “Afton, go see,” I said.

Afton parted and squeezed around the heavy wood and metal door. The sound had not let up, indeed, it seemed to be louder as more of the Brinc joined in.

Afton sped through the doorframe and slammed into me. "They have guessed we are here," he said. "They come."

He showed me images of outraged Brinc, beating their useless machines, panic on their gaunt faces.

"Occil, we leave now, this moment."

Footsteps sounded on the stone entryway to the dungeon. A voice called out to Ronat.

Occil turned to Ronat, scowling. "Who dares speak your name? Speak the request and I will do away with him."

"No! It's my brother, only my brother," she said hastily.

"Please, do not harm him."

"Occil..." I warned. I made as if to reach for the grimoire in my bag.

The Diarmin let out a long-suffering sigh then lifted its arms and wiggled its hands.

Book Twenty

I KNEW I was in trouble when the Diarmin refused to go back to Endet. “You’ve got to make it leave us alone,” Avapeony said in a harsh whisper.

“What do you expect me to do?” I responded.

“You brought it here, now, send it back!”

“Oh, as if I haven’t tried.” I hoped I didn’t sound as frustrated as I felt.

Two suns had passed since the five of us had returned to Widdershin join. I could tell that Avapeony was relieved to be home, but the Diarmin, Occil, would give Ronat, and thus Avapeony, no rest. Its infatuation with Ronat was boundless and each day brought new luxuries to our door. Our sleeping cells had the finest beds. Our foods and breads were the freshest and most nutritious. Our clothing changed hourly so we were always perfectly neat and clean.

It was maddening.

I had allowed the Diarmin a second day in this world. It seemed an honest payment for rescuing Avapeony. But, on the dawn of the third day, when I forced the issue, the Diarmin refused to go back through the shearing hole. My banishments were never completed because it bound my words so they couldn’t be heard. We had gone back and forth like this until, frustrated, I decided to work smarter, not harder. I needed to figure out a way to outsmart the obnoxious creature.

A sudden disturbance near the front door drew our attention. A tiny fox, which had been sleeping on a cushion next to the hearth, leapt up, alarmed, and sprang through the window. Vines shook on the walls and my gaze roamed the room, seeking what had caused the unease.

The door sprang open and a monstrosity stepped into the cottage. It resembled a woman, a Mother, true, but she had a square metal cage around her head and wore strange metal circles over her eyes. One of the circles had a strange contraption attached to it. Her clothing was loose and flowing but was made up of long, thin strips of metal, punched with holes and woven together with flaxen thread. The thread had been dyed with berry juice so was a deep red in color. The metal was polished to a high sheen and caught the sunlight well.

The woman was followed by a trio of Meab servants. One helped lift the excess of the obviously heavy garment she wore as the others hovered expectantly, all the while studying and shaking the inactive machines they held in their hands. One spoke into one of the machines then shook it when he received no response after a few seconds.

“Hello?” I offered.

“Hello,” she said imperiously. “I am Dot of Prosee join. I understand that you have called up a Diarmin?”

I nodded shortly. “And if I did?”

“I need to speak with it, see it. Where is it?” She studied the room, the strange machine on her eyes whirring laboriously as it moved. “I don’t see it.”

“Why do you need to speak with it?”

She stared at me, a look of disgusted tolerance curling her lip. “Do you not realize what that...that...creature has done to our clan?”

I played dumb. “What has happened?”

Dot shook her head, sending out a tinkle sound of metal connecting on metal. “You know very well that your...interference has caused our technology to cease functioning. Our village has come to a standstill. I need your Diarmin to set things right again.”

Avapeony pushed in front of me. “Yes, take it, please. Make it fix everything for you.”

Dot lifted her chin. “Bring it to me. I will make it do my bidding.”

“It won’t work,” I said absently as I took a seat at the table. I crossed my legs and adjusted my tunic to cover my knees.

“Why?” Dot said, aggravation in her tone.

“It was my summon. It will only obey my will,” I answered.

Silence fell as Dot and Avapeony pondered this truth.

Dot approached the table and tapped one metal shod fingertip on the wooden boards. “You will tell him to obey me, to come to the citadel with me and restore our lights and the lightning that drives our tools and machines.”

I lowered my chin, thinking about how bad—and wonderful—it would be to refuse to re-power the Brinc village. Preventing Occil from restoring the Brinc technology would certainly solve a lot of the problems currently facing the Mothers.

“Dot Prosee,” I said finally, keeping my voice low and even. “Are you aware of what your technology has cost our clan? Me, especially?”

Dot made a dismissive sound with her lips. “Yes, yes, I have already apologized to all the Witta Mothers. We are trying to form a new treaty that will be amenable to both clans of Meab. By allowing this Diarmin to interfere, you have violated the first precepts of the treaty. Unless you bid your creature to my will, the ramifications could be severe.”

“Severe?” Avapeony questioned.

“War,” Dot said dramatically. She turned to me. “Is that what you want for your people, Widdershin?”

“Of course not!” I said bitterly, leaping to my feet. “But coming into our forest and killing innocent Meab, one a Mother, abducting a young girl from her home...these are the actions that incite war. You are fortunate that the Mothers entertain anything you might say in your defense. There is no defense. What Signe Ray did was wrong, plain and simple. Now, I am deprived of my join and my companion as I pass through various aspects of my wit.”

I heard Avapeony gasp at my challenge of a Mother, but there was no way I could stop now.

“Suppose you had been deprived of the Mother of Prosee join as you grew? Would you have been so eager to defend those who took her life? Oh, wait. You now have your machines to guide your decisions, machines to teach you, machines to hold you when you need someone to hold you.” I paused and chose my next words carefully. “You have machines so that you will be distracted, so you won’t see that the magic has left your lives.”

Dot’s eyes grew wide as my words reached her. “How dare you speak to me like this? You...you mindless little atrebud. You Witta play at being wit with your silly practice games, spending centuries learning archaic workings, unimportant lore. Our machines take us there and beyond before even one century has passed. Don’t you speak about things you can’t even possibly understand.”

I studied Dot’s angry features, as well as the terrified faces of her attendants. All I could feel was an overwhelming sadness for all of them.

“Dot, I can’t help the way I feel. And I ask you, if the machines speed up your achievement of ken in such a way, what shall you do with the rest of your time here, during the centuries that you will walk on Mother Earth?”

Dot’s hand crept to her throat and she fiddled with the collar of her metal robe. Her mouth worked but no sound came forth until she cleared her throat and tried again. “Just bring that evil creature to the citadel by dark tomorrow. If you fail to comply, you shall feel the bitter ire of our soldiers. You shall quake under their anger.”

She turned and passed from the cottage, the harsh scent of metal wafting through the room.

Book Twenty-one

THE GAUNTLET HAD been dropped. Avapeony and I stared at one another in shock.

“Ava?” Ronat entered the room, cautiously so as not to encounter Occil right away. “What was that about?”

“It was Brinc, my love. They wish me to restore their technology,” Occil said, stepping out from behind the mass of tangled vines where it had been hiding.

“You have to,” Avapeony said. “Our peoples cannot war. There has been no fighting in our lands for thousands of centuries. We cannot be responsible for causing war.”

“What care I?” the Diarmin said with some annoyance.

I sat down and stared at the Diarmin. “Care? Why should you care? It’s not your battle.”

I caught Occil off guard by agreeing with it. Eyeing me guardedly, it moved closer. “That is correct. The outcome will not affect me.”

“But it will me. And Avapeony. And Cleome. And all the rest of the Meab,” Ronat said angrily. “You are a selfish beast, aren’t you?”

A visage of horror plastered the Diarmin’s face. “Oh, no, no, no. You mustn’t think ill of me, love. It was a momentary lapse in judgement. Of course I will do anything you ask of me. Anything to make you happy.”

“The Meab are a strong people,” I mused. “Gather. We will work this out. There has to be a way. We will talk it through.”

“I’ll make tea,” Avapeony said, moving toward the hearth.

“And Aria Song brought rice cakes. I’ll get them,” Ronat said.

Moments later, we were seated calmly around the worktable, sipping green tea. I studied Occil, my sister and my sister’s love with a fond eye. This was, for all practical purposes, my new join. The Diarmin was temporary, true, but for the moment, it was with us.

“I am having a hard time deciding what is our best course of action now. Part of me wants to prevent the Brinc clan from regaining their machines. It would be best for all the Meab, in the long run. However, it is not our place to control what another clan wishes to do. The Wittta are not about dictating to others how they should act. It is not our way.”

Occil pulled Avapeony’s wooden mug close and proceeded to splash the hot tea on his face. Avapeony watched in horror. “I agree,” she said, coughing. “But I have to say, the Brinc joins are obsessed with their machines. I saw evidence of it, even held captive as I was.”

“I can attest to that fact. Magic is no longer a way of life for my clan. They have become completely dependent on technology for their very livelihood,” Ronat confirmed.

“And it’s not working that well for them, is it?” I asked.

She shook her head and her fingers teased at a half-eaten rice cake. “No. Our fannies are sickly, we have no food, very little water.” She sighed. “It seems the games and excitement provided by the machines are everything to my people. Nothing else matters.”

“And yet you escaped this. I’m not sure why,” Avapeony said, shaking her head. She reached out and grasped Ronat’s hand. Kes moved to Purth and the two mingled.

“Hey! Hey!” Occil pushed Avapeony’s hand away.

Ronat blew out a loud breath of air and leaned back, away from the table edge.

I ignored the Diarmin’s bad behavior. “I witnessed these conditions during the short time I was there. I can’t say I understand why your joins should choose to live that way but, again, Wittia cannot decide how Brinc should live. The problem now is that, thanks to our friend here,” I indicated the Diarmin, “The technology that they love has gone away. Dot of Prosee join insists that I bring Occil to the citadel by tomorrow at sundown. I’m to order him to return power to all their machines.”

“And you’re having trouble doing that, aren’t you?” Yewsy said as she stepped into the cottage.

“I am,” I admitted. “How is Mint?”

“She’s fine although she misses our Mother.” She grew pensive and pulled a seat to the table. “We all do.”

I patted her hand as she made comical faces to Occil. The Diarmin grinned and mimed back.

“What would you do, Yews? Would you nudge Brinc back to their wit?” I asked gently.

“Not if it isn’t what they want. I think that your little imp needs to reinstate the technology there.”

“How can you justify that though? After what they did to us?” Avapeony asked her. “Surely they will get even more bold and intimidating as time passes. Once they use up their resources, they are coming for our forests. They already have.”

“Yes, it seems as though we need to protect ourselves from them. Much as the Morri already do,” Yewsy said. She rose and took a clean mug from the shelf then filled it with hot water and tea from the hearth.

“So, it’s settled? I accompany Occil back to Brinc tomorrow? Then what?” I turned and frowned at the creature. He was mooning over Ronat again. “You! You know you have to go back through the square, right?”

The Diarmin turned his attention to me. “No. I want to stay.”

“You can’t stay. Your kind was banished in antiquity. There’s no place for you here.”

“But what if ...what if,” Yewsy said. “Suppose—”

I leaned forward. “Suppose?”

She stilled, deep in thought. Ronat watched her while absently knocking aside Occil’s possessive hand. Purth tried to intercede but the Diarmin was persistent.

“We do not wish to interfere in the Brinc path that they have chosen, yet we still want to maintain our seeking of the wit path.”

“This is true,” I agreed.

“Well, suppose there was a way to keep the two clans separate. I mean, even more than they are now. With no infringement on either side,” she said thoughtfully.

Excitement stirred in me. “It’s been done before, many centuries ago. The veil!”

“Yes, yes,” Avapeony said. “That would work...if—”

“If the Brinc joins would agree,” I finished.

“They never will,” Ronat said sadly. “They need your trees.”

“Well, they can’t have them,” Yewsy said.

“I’m more concerned with how the veil could be put in place. It would have to be petitioned at the lake and which of us has the ken to do that?” I said.

“I do,” Occil said. “I am one of the designers, remember?”

“Oh, Goddess,” I breathed. I had forgotten that the Diarmin created the magical framework for the Sheadha. “Of course!”

“I thought so. Can you?” Yewsy asked.

“Can I? Of course. Will I? Hmm.” It smiled that horrible smile.

“You will,” I said firmly. “Tomorrow we will go to the citadel and you will reinstate their technology.”

Occil strode across the table and stood in front of Ronat. “Is this what you want?” it asked.

Ronat, caught off guard, didn’t answer right away.” I...I think so. I hate what is happening to them but...but they seem to have lost all magic, anything nurturing that would sustain them. So, yes. Please, return to them what they want.”

Occil turned to me. “And then you will continue to try sending me back through the square.”

I sipped my cold tea and thought about the imp. True, it had done all I asked, with very little mischief. Could it be an asset in this world?

“Tell me what you want,” I said to Occil. “What do you desire most?”

It appeared shocked that I had asked such a thing. It stood, one talon-tipped finger at the corner of its odd mouth. “What I—”

We waited patiently and I was alarmed to finally see a tear form in one of the bulbous eyes.

“I want to stay here...where there are Meab, not just Diarmin. I want to feel the day star on my face.” It looked at each of us. “You are good to me,” it whispered.

I leaned forward. “I say this, if you do our bidding this last time, reinstate the lightning and set up the veil separating our two clans, we will not send you back.”

Its face brightened and it swiped the tear away. “You won’t?”

“A few conditions,” Avapeony said quickly. “The first is that you find another love. Ronat is mine and frankly, your attentions are annoying to both of us. Secondly, you must not harm others, or even cause them any anguish. Can you do that?”

A crafty look appeared on its face momentarily, but it banished it and seemed to answer sincerely. “Enough harm has been visited on me in Endet. Mischief has lost its appeal.”

“And Ronat? You will leave her be?” Avapeony persisted.

Occil studied Ronat lovingly, then sighed and looked away. “Yes, I will release her.”

“So, we are agreed then. You will come to the Mothers with me, we get their approval, then we reinstate the Brinc technology, and afterward, you will put the veil in place,” I said.

Occil nodded and extended one tiny hand in agreement. I touched it and the seal was set.

Book Twenty-two

THE HALL OF Mothers was situated deep in the heart of Ziv Mountain. The cavern had been worn large and smooth by eons of dripping water from the genesis of the Finlo River. The eastern half of the cavern was now dry and offered a large opening to the outside. There the Mothers had set up a long, wide table made of trees, with seats for each of the twelve Mothers and the Iris, Levi, who moderated their meetings.

It was the first time I'd been there since being a very young atrebud in my Mother's arms. Occil had transported the two of us to the entrance, and I hugged Afton close as I tried to gather enough courage to enter. I rubbed the large tigereye stone that Yewsy had pressed into my hand before we'd left.

"Don't you want to go in?" Occil asked, looking up at me in confusion.

I set my jaw. "Yes. Of course."

The two Iris who stood on either side of the door, greeted me with welcoming hand gestures and, smiling widely, allowed us through. They did study the Diarmin closely, however, leading me to wonder if they'd ever seen one before.

"Cleome?" MayApple rose from her chair and moved toward us. "Is everyone all right at home?"

I hastened to reassure her. "Yes, all is well. I just need to speak with all of you about an idea we've had."

MayApple pulled me close and hugged me. "Of course. Come, sit with us."

She looked at the Diarmin and nodded to it although she didn't speak a welcome.

She led me to the head of the table then took her seat. My breath hitched when I saw my mother's empty chair next to her.

"Someday, you'll sit there as Mother," Afton said, connecting.

I also noticed that Dot Prosee was absent, probably already on her way to the citadel. I cleared my throat, causing the sporadic socializing to quiet. I helped Occil onto the table and a host of gasps greeted him.

"Is that..." Holly Lore began.

"This is a Diarmin I summoned to help me rescue my sister Avapeony from Signe Ray who had taken her to the Brinc citadel.

Its name is Occil," I explained, introducing it.

Occil raised its hand. "Greetings to you."

Many of the Mothers raised a hand in welcome.

"I see you've come to admit your interference," Ani Outlie said with some malice.

I wanted to ignore her but knew to do so would be considered rude, and I did not want to hear about that, as well. "Yes, we have interfered but hopefully what we say here today will undo that interference."

I took a seat in my mother's empty chair and pressed my hands together. "I understand that a new treaty between Brinc and Witta clans has been hard coming to the table. At present, due to a

misunderstanding, the Brinc have been left without power to operate the machines that they dearly love. It is also my understanding that the Diarmin, Occil, here before you, is the only means Brinc have of getting their machines restored quickly.”

“Yes, and you need to bid it to do so,” Isten Givan said. “Our people need those machines.”

Isten looked bad, her pale yellow hair mussed, and eyes red-rimmed. I felt compassion for her.

“I plan to,” I said. “But here is the thing. Brinc clan has been steadily encroaching on the Morri forest and one of your clan tells me that there is a plan afoot to divert water from Felshea Falls, which, of course, will upset the Neisi homes. This cannot be allowed.”

The Witta Mothers murmured among themselves, and I waited for them to quiet before continuing. “It has also been sensed that the Brinc plan to steal adult Asti from Medwas, as well, preparatory to dominating them, much as they have the Lutis.”

Protests sounded from the Brinc Mothers but the Witta Mothers quieted them with calming stares.

“I feel we need to come to an agreement of separation if the two clans are to live in peace—” I continued.

“Separation! Yes!” Olive Thorn said excitedly. “Of course! For more than thirty suns we’ve been talking boundaries and interactions but have only met with frustration. This is the only way.”

“And how do you propose this separation?” Airgialla Basil asked. “It would be hard to separate two clans of the Meab tribes.”

I pondered these words, wondering how best to respond.

Occil had discovered food left in the center of the table and was devouring it as though it hadn’t eaten in days. The Mothers were watching it, some even smiling indulgently.

“We have a long and varied history from the days when the light of Soldar brought the original people of Sheadha to Lake Feidlimed, to the time of Thad Briite, when Cleisin asked the Sheadha to set up the veil to protect the Meab from the raids of the Milesians, to today when much the same thing is happening. Though today, it is not Milesians who attack us but the Milesian influence in one of our very own Meab tribes,” I explained.

“Wait!” shouted Morn Ray, older sister to Ronat, yet young to be Mother of her join. “You can’t compare what we do to what the Humans did centuries and centuries ago.”

“I can’t?” Anger grew in me and I remembered my declaration of hatred against that join. Though I regretted it now, especially after having grown so close to Ronat, I knew that the energy still lingered—on both sides. “Think about how you have changed from how we are. Would you say you are more Meab...or more Milesian now?”

She had no response other than glaring at me. I glared back, trying to defuse my anger.

“Only a Milesian would take a Meab against her will and hold her prisoner,” I added.

“And you took Ronat from us, from her home,” she said. “She needs to come back. Signe’s heart is broken.”

I just shook my head. “You can’t even see the difference, can you? Ronat is here of her own free will. And we have welcomed her. Far different from what your join has done.”

MayApple stood to distract from the argument. “And how do you propose we do this separation?” she asked me.

“A veil, like the Silver Veil on the other side of Lake Feidlimed,” Occil said, mouth filled with bread.

“A veil between the Brinc lands and ours?” Airgialla mused. “Of course. I can’t believe we have not seen it before.”

“Absolutely not!” Isten cried out. “The idea is ludicrous.” She looked around for support but found none from the Witta joins. Even Brinc joins could raise no defense. The Brinc Mothers just looked frightened.

“Cleome,” Olive asked quietly after some moments had passed. “How do you propose we petition the veil. A Morri? The Iris?” She looked to the head of the table where Levi sat raptly taking in all this information.

“A veil?” he responded, rubbing his chin with his overlarge hands. “An atrebud, yes, but a veil? I would have to go under and talk to the Sheadha. They hate to be bothered.”

“Occil can do it. His kind worked for the Sheadha until they were banished,” I said.

MayApple sat down hard, letting out a whoosh of breath. “To think all this endless talking might be over, that we can return to our joins...”

“Can we trust it, Cleome?” Airgialla asked.

We both turned and looked at the Diarmin together. It was lying on its back, scratching at its protruding, circular belly with both hands, purring contentedly.

“I have promised it asylum here,” I admitted. “It doesn’t want to go back to incarceration in Endet. I think it will do anything not to be sent back there.”

“And it will reinstate the machines before implementing the veil?”

I nodded. “That is what we bade it do.”

“And what of us?” Lasse Sky asked. “We break the motherhood of the Meab clans? The twelve Mothers have always worked as a unit. You expect half of us to be on the other side of this veil?”

Silence fell as the Mothers pondered this question. Finally, Olive rose to her feet.

“While we have the greatest honor and respect for our sister Mothers of the Brinc clan, it seems our paths, that of Brinc and Witta, have diverged greatly. Your way of life has become destructive to us, the Witta, and also to all the elementals and sprites that are the framework of our society. You seek to enslave others, disrespecting their ken and their physical bodies. You seek to destroy the forest home that the Witta so lovingly maintain. In good conscience, we cannot allow these things to happen.”

“But...but—” Ani said.

Olive held up a stalling hand. “As we have stated many times, we do not seek to interfere in the path you have chosen, but we must insist on the same from you.”

I spied fear brewing in the Brinc Mothers and, though I tried to disallow it, satisfaction grew.

“And the lake,” Lasse whispered. “Where shall our dead and born come from?”

I turned to Occil and motioned for it to answer.

“I can’t make the veil bisect the lake. It would kill the ancient ones.”

“So, how would that—” Isten asked hollowly.

Ani stood abruptly. “We don’t need your lake,” she said haughtily. “We will create new ways for our machines to do these things for us. We have infinite power in our lightning. We do not need your outdated wit ways. In fact, I would say that we will no doubt prosper better than the Witta because we do not have to bow down to the archaic rituals and superstitions that you live your lives by.”

A few of the Brinc Mothers nodded but not all. They just looked terrified.

A long silence fell as we all pondered these new truths that once spoken were becoming real.

Olive stood finally. "We vote. How say you, MayApple Straw? Are you agreeable to the veil separating Brinc and Witta lands."

"Aye."

"Ambley Resin?"

Ambley of Resin join had been a good friend to my mother until the Brinc had pulled away. She studied my face, hers filled with sorrow. "Aye."

"Aria Song?"

"Aye."

"Ani Outlie?"

Ani glared at me. "Of course not! It's a foolish idea."

"Holly Lore?"

"Aye."

"Isten Givan?"

"Nay."

"Airgialla Basil?"

"Aye."

"Morn Ray?"

"Nay."

Olive turned to Levi. "The count, Levi, please."

Levi scratched his nose. "How votes the eldest daughter of Widdershin join?"

All eyes turned toward me. "Aye," I said.

"And I vote aye as well," Olive said.

"Then that's seven for the veil and three against," Levi said. "The new Silver Veil will be implemented."

After another long moment of silence, the Mothers stood as one and strode from the cavern.

MayApple paused at my side. "Do you need one of us to go with you to the citadel?" she asked.

"No, I will have Yewsy with me."

I saw a flicker of pride flash across her face. She leaned and kissed my brow and spoke a working of protection. "Blessed be," she said.

Book Twenty-three

THE DIARMIN AND I made the long trek down Ziv Mountain, even though dusk was building. Yes, Occil could have taken us home instantly but truthfully, I wanted a few minutes to think about the revelations of the day. Seeing the Mothers in action had given me a new appreciation of who they were as leaders. Amazing, strong women, true leaders of their joins.

“I think I will like living here again,” Occil said as it negotiated a rocky cascade. “It’s quite different than before. The Meab have evolved well.”

I smiled lopsidedly, more for myself than for it. “Well, glad we meet with your approval.”

“You know, there’s no way the Sheadha could have existed out here. Their bodies were used to very different conditions,” it continued.

“What are they like? Physically, I mean.”

“The Sheadha? Well, they reek of stars—”

“Wait. Stars. Like in the night?”

Occil nodded and skipped over a hummock of grass. “That’s where all our power comes from. Didn’t you know that?”

I shrugged. “I never thought about it.”

“Not surprising,” it said. “We made you that way. The magic of star energy just is and you have the ability to manifest it from the earth all around you. We gave you that.”

“And the Sheadha?”

“Trapped here. Your star Sol is too far away to provide fuel for travel. So they stay, look after you,” it said, absently.

“Would we perish without them?”

The Diarmin stopped and pressed both hands against its round belly. “I don’t know...what is, is and probably always will be. It’s all I remember.”

“Do you remember coming here from the stars?” I asked, curious about its life before.

“No.” It shook its head and moved on, jumping to the next hillock. “I was birthed after the landing.”

I paused, filled with sudden trepidation. “Is this the best way, Occil? Afton? Do we do the right and proper thing?”

Occil was obviously pleased that I had asked its opinion. It paused with me and looked up to study my face. “Connect, please,” it said, raising one bony arm.

Afton divided and sent tendrils to Occil and to my arm. Images appeared. Meab, Brinc and Witta alike were dying, gasping for air. Lake Feidlimid appeared with painfully thin, tall creatures, the Sheadha, dying on lakeshores bereft of water. Fires burned elsewhere and harsh, black smoke choked the land. Fammies moved everywhere, searching for the lake, laden with the bodies of those they had loved and cared for.

I jerked my arm away, my heart pounding in terror. “No,” I whispered.

Occil broke the connection and shooed Afton away. “Believe in what you do, Meab,” it said. “We create a different reality by our actions.”

“Are...are you sure that’s how it would have been?”

Occil shrugged. “That’s what the seers have shown us. With the admonition that it can be changed.”

We walked through darkness in silence for a short time. Afton caressed my back, lovingly.

“So, separating ourselves completely from the Brinc destructive influence is the very best course of action,” I said finally, with conviction.

Occil nodded.

We had reached the shadowed shores of the Adair River and Occil glanced up at me, revulsion marring its odd features. “Surely we are not crossing this in a craft!” it said.

I sighed. “Guess not. Take us home, Diarmin!”

“What did they say?” Yewsy asked as soon as we appeared in the common room of the cottage.

I blinked slowly. Traveling with a Diarmin was unsettling to say the least. “They...uh...they agreed.”

Avapeony leapt to her feet. “That’s wonderful.” She clapped her hands and danced around the room with Occil.

Yewsy took my arm and together we turned to Ronat. Her head hung and sorrow radiated from her. Purth cradled her in mist, gray and brown.

“Ronat?” I said, moving close to her. “I am so very sorry it has had to come to this.”

She looked at me, wiping tears from her cheeks. She tried on an ill-fitting smile. “I...I understand, I do. It’s just....” She pushed Purth aside.

Avapeony slid onto the cushion next to her. “Oh, love, I am so sorry. I forget what you must be going through.”

Ronat straightened her spine. “Yes, and no regrets. My people have brought this on themselves by forgetting who they are. Truthfully? I want no part of who they are now. I’ve never fit there, never felt it my home.”

She looked adoringly at Avapeony. “You are my home now,” she whispered. “I knew that the moment I saw my brother leading you, wrists bound, along the hallway. When you raised your eyes to mine as you passed by, I felt an eternal connection such as I’d never felt before.”

I glanced at Occil, only to discover it was watching them, tears streaming down its ruddy cheeks.

“Occil? Are you all right?” I asked.

“It’s just...you all are just so...beautiful,” it sobbed, burying its face in Yewsy’s tunic.

Yewsy eyed me challengingly as she jerked the tunic from its grasp.

“So what is the plan for tomorrow,” she asked.

“Now, we all sleep and marshal our energy for tomorrow. We will need it,” I replied.

“Will the mothers be there or are we on our own?” Avapeony asked, still holding Ronat close.

“We’re on our own,” I answered. “But we have the most important ingredient.” I set my glance on Occil. “We will be fine.”

“I’m sure we’ll encounter resistance,” Yewsy said. “I think we should be prepared for that.”

“I agree,” Avapeony added.

“There’s not much resistance they can offer—” I began.

“Certainly not against me,” Occil said, braiding woodbine into a thick, woody rope. “Have no worries, Meab. Tomorrow we will go at midday. They won’t expect us then and all will be to our advantage.”

“So, tomorrow,” I said, extending my hand. The other Meab moved close and our hands and fannies joined. Occil leapt onto a chair and joined in, placing his little hand in our joined ones. Earthrise lifted and spiraled all around us. With peace and joy, we parted.

“Wow!” Occil said, plopping down into the chair. “What a rush!”

Book Twenty-four

“IS IT TRUE?”

The chirpy voice penetrated my closed lids and caused me to see a rainbow of bright colors against my eyelids. Wind, generated from fluttering wings, inundated my face and I found it hard to catch a breath. Wearily, I brought up my hand and swatted ineffectively at the creature.

“Are you really going to put up a veil? I heard it from Hirrup this morning, who heard it from one of the Mothers. So, in that case, it has to be true, don’t you think? Well, I knew that if I came to my friend, Cleome, she would know. It seems that you are just in the middle of everything, doesn’t it? So how will the veil work? Will the Brinc side be unable to see us anymore? Surely, there will have to be some...some doorway so that the two can connect.” She flew up and hovered above my bed. “But wait, that may not be what we want. We don’t want new atrebuds to be exposed...”

“Will you shut it up!” Yewsy cried out, shoving her pillow over her head.

I groaned and turned over onto my back. “Hello, Tsisi.”

The Jana flew close to my face. “So it is true, then? Another veil?”

I nodded and slid from the warm blankets. Daylight had dawned, and I felt a sense of relief. Today the issue of the Brinc would be put to rest, one way or another.

Tsisi followed me into the common room and watched, humming, as I reignited the fire and made the room ready for the day. I put a kettle of water on for tea then sat at the table to wait for it to heat.

The Jana perched on the table and studied me. “Isn’t there any way to put it all back the way it was,” she asked finally. “I hate that the Meab has to be divided this way. I mean, I remember how it used to be. Brinc and Witta, side by side, working together as one people. Then Dot’s Mother, Kifly Prosee, started behaving oddly. No one said anything at first but she started leaving her join to fend for themselves. Their hearth wasn’t dusted, the Fey uncared for, the Lares unblest. And no food brought in, if you can even imagine that. But if you don’t take care of the hearth Fey, you’ll go hungry.”

Her voice fell conspiratorially.

“Then later we discovered that she had found a wounded Milesian and had healed him with her magic. He went back across the veil, but before leaving, he gave her one of his machines and directions on how to create many, many more. Prosee join was the first to start making and using them, you know. It was Prosee.”

“That’s what I heard,” I agreed.

“I don’t understand the appeal, being magic based as we all are. Do you understand why, Cleome? They really should reconsider their way of life. Don’t they understand that to lose magic is to lose life—”

“Tsisi, it’s too early for this. Get Afton to show you the discussions we had yesterday. All of that was dealt with then.”

The Jana landed on my shoulder as I rose to get hot tea.

“Ahh, I see. Yes, it’s true we cannot force our will on another. It is just and true. It seems a veil is the best way to prevent them from taking what we have. You know, without magic, resources are finite, aren’t they? If we could maybe retrain them how to use their magic, maybe their own resources would grow.”

“But they have to want it, Jana. And they don’t seem to. Our hands are tied.”

“Good morning,” Occil said, emerging from behind a large pot of rosemary.

“Eeek!” Tsisi shrieked. “It’s still here!” She cowered behind the teapot.

I looked at her and blinked, trying to understand. “Tsisi, what part of what Afton showed you did you not understand? The Diarmin will put the veil in place. And will remain here.”

“As part of your join? Can they even do that? Diarmin, I mean. Don’t they have to live in Endet because they are such troublemakers?”

“Hey,” Occil said. “I don’t come around here saying bad things about you.”

“That’s because there’s nothing bad to say,” Tsisi shot back. “Are you sure the Mothers said that this was all right?” she asked me.

Yewsy yawned loudly as she entered the common room. “Can you be any louder?” she asked sleepily.

“You might as well stay awake and help me with these two,” I said, taking a sip of my rapidly cooling tea.

Yewsy yawned again but nodded. She seated herself and poured a mug of tea from the pot. She bent her elbow and propped her head in one hand. Her tired eyes studied Occil and Tsisi who were still hotly arguing, mostly about how neither one belonged in the Meab world.

“Think they’ll do this all day?” she asked me.

I shook my head. “They can’t. Occil has to help me at noon.”

“I’m going, too, you know.”

“I figured as much,” I replied. “I don’t think it will be dangerous. Dot may set her soldiers on us but our magic will prevail. The Diarmin is very powerful. Luckily, it’s on our side.”

Yewsy, still watching them, muttered her response. “Lucky us.”

“Good morning,” Avapeony said, entering the room. She paused when she saw Tsisi and Occil squared off on the table. “Looks like we’ve missed all the fun,” she said to Ronat who followed behind.

“Ronat!” Occil said upon spying her. “Good morning!”

Its interest allowed Tsisi the upper hand and she quickly bopped it on the back of its head with her wings.

“Hey!” it exclaimed turning to squint at her.

“Oh, I am sorry,” Tsisi said sarcastically as she immediately took flight and approached Avapeony. “Do you think allowing the beastie to stay is a good idea?”

Avapeony laughed as Kes twirled Tsisi around in an aerial waltz. “Don’t get me involved in this, Tsisi. I just want to learn my wit and get on with life.”

“Well,” she said over Kes’s misty form. “This is part of the wit, learning about Diarmin.”

Ronat fetched more hot water from the hearth, pausing to stroke one of the Fey. “I think we’ve learned all we could ever possibly need to know from our time spent with Occil,” she said playfully.

Occil’s eyes were originally on Ronat, but I noticed that its gaze had suddenly dropped. One of the hearth Fey, whom we called Jinni, was enjoying Ronat’s attentions, arching her back and closing her eyes in pleasure. Within the blink of an eye, Occil was on the hearth, next to Jinni.

“Hello,” it said jovially.

The Fey, notoriously shy as were all its kind, shrieked a high-pitched cry and disappeared behind morning glory vines. The plant, dotted with glorious purple trumpet-shaped flowers, swallowed the translucent creature. Yet, I smiled when I saw Jinni’s huge yellow eyes peer out from between two vines to study Occil.

“Hey, Tsisi, will you fetch Memo for me? I want her to go with us at noon.”

Tsisi glared at Occil. “Happily. Oh, this is so exciting. Historic, even. Memo will have to record it for all so we can retell it again and again.” She flew from the cottage and blessed quiet descended.

I glanced at the hearth and saw that Occil was offering a blueberry to Jinni. Not a bad idea. It was always good to make offerings to the Fey. Jinni took the berry with a shy smile, and I realized anew how sweet Occil could be. When it wanted something.

Book Twenty-five

THE MOTHERS AWAITED us when we appeared at the citadel at noon. We had thought to surprise Dot Prosee by our early arrival, but the surprise was on us. All eleven Mothers, Brinc and Witta alike, and even Levi were there to record the event and reinforce the working. I was glad to see them.

For that moment, we stood as one united force on the wide, expansive lane leading to the citadel. Lutis ceased working all around us, dropping their heavy loads of ore and standing in amazed awe. The lanes were heavy with Meab, who, without machines, were at loose ends with nothing to do. They stared at us in open-mouthed awe. I spied several older Meab running off, no doubt to inform Prosee just that we were there.

“Well, I think we’re being announced,” I said, nudging Memo.

“Higen, make sure you get every detail,” Memo told her fammie. “I want to savor this for many eons.”

“I wonder how the Mothers got here so fast,” Yewsy mused. “It should have taken one more sun at least.”

“Forest magic,” I whispered. “Branch magic.”

“Ah, yes, we touched on that once.” She paused and sighed. “We have so much to learn,” she added thoughtfully.

“Indeed, we do,” I agreed.

Branch magic was a way of riding wood for extra levitation and speed through the air. Only advanced Mothers could use it, after they had paid proper obeisance to the Morri of the wood and the Jana of the wind.

The front doors of the citadel opened and Dot Prosee appeared. She strode imperiously toward us, but I noticed how bedraggled she appeared. Her fammie wasn’t even high and healthy, it dangled limply from one hand. Her eyes roamed across the assembled Mothers, and I saw her quake slightly. My sense picked up fear from her but her bravado won out.

Sadness swamped me. I had hoped she would reconsider her demands.

“Well, I see you came early. This is commendable. Cleome, you obviously have seen the extreme inappropriateness of your interference. Where is the creature?”

Olive stepped forward. “Dot, child of Prosee, Mother of Prosee. A decision has been reached, a treaty agreed. It has been exhibited to all of us that the joins of the Brinc clans do not have the best interest of the Meab in their hearts. Your affinity for magic has been ousted by your love of technology and machinery. As you must realize, this is not our way.”

“Yes, yes,” Dot said, rudely interrupting another Mother. “We need the creature to reinstate the lightning which empowers our machines.”

Olive recoiled at Dot’s insolence but maintained control and spoke very calmly and firmly. “The Diarmin will reinstate your machines. We have allowed this to happen. There are caveats, however. Since you prefer your technology more than the overall benefit of your kind, we have decided that Brinc clan will no longer be allowed access to Witta lands.”

A gasp rose from all those watching. I hung my head, almost ashamed for them, that it had come to this.

“I don’t believe you. You cannot do this. We won’t let you,” Dot said loudly.

“It is done. Brinc Mothers, please, go home.”

The five Brinc Mothers stepped forward and joined Dot before the citadel. Ambley was in tears but the other Brinc Mothers remained haughty, filled with righteousness. Or at least bravado.

“Cleome, ask Occil to begin the veil, please,” Olive said gently, as all the Witta Mothers began slowly moving away from the citadel. And their Mother sisters.

I waved my hand toward the Diarmin, who lifted its hands and a great energy shook the land. Many of the Luti slaves, realizing what was happening, made a mad clumsy dash through the hedge and out of the Brinc village.

“A veil...what? What are you talking about? A veil,” Dot spluttered.

I saw Signe approach behind Dot and new rage rose in my breast.

“We leave you these things,” Airgialla shouted over the thunderous roar.

She paused as the first fearful cries of the Brinc masses sounded then continued on as loudly as before. “We leave you this.”

All the Witta Mothers raised their hands as one and orange light and energy filled the air. Their voices rose above the sound of the knitting veil.

We find joy in the golden buds of spring
There’s passion in the greening leaf
We find joy in the rising day
There’s passion beneath the growing sun
Come swelling tides of green
Come swelling tides of green

The parched Brinc land shook even more and rivulets of water rose up and flowed across the dusty earth. They led to a low point just past the citadel and high grasses grew rapidly.

As we watched, thick, verdant plants sprang forth and ran rampant along the wide, bare lanes before us. Vines crept along the walls of the citadel and made their way in through the open windows. Wildly dancing leaves and colorful flowers immediately festooned the cottages along the lanes and long stalks waved gaily as they emerged from Mother Earth, giving birth to huge flowers and leaves.

Airgialla lowered her arms. “We give you these things as a reminder of what Mother Earth and her magic can bring to you, if properly cared for. If you do not care for these gifts we give you now, there will be no more. This is your last chance to return to be the Meab you were born to be.”

Spiraling energy continued to rise from the land and began to solidify into an opaque membrane, separating the Witta Meab and the Brinc. The Brinc backed away, most staring in horror.

I felt their horror. And my rage. I, too, backed away even farther.

“But our machines!” Dot screamed, holding out a darkened slab of metal and baked sand. “We have to have our machines!”

“Yes,” Olive said, more to herself than to Dot. “You shall have your machines.”

She nodded at me, and I spoke to Occil. Immediately, the machines lit and sudden sparks rained down upon the heads of the Brinc Meab.

“Wait!” A voice sounded above the din. It was Signe Ray. He was running toward the veil. “I have to speak to my daughter and to the Widdershin daughters.”

The rising of the veil slowed somewhat, but I was leery of getting closer to it. The Mothers had been walking away toward the east and the river, but they turned now to see what was afoot. I looked to MayApple and she nodded her head once. I held my hand out to slow Occil.

“Please! Only a moment, only a moment,” he called out.

Ronat was bent into a curve of misery, sobbing, but she turned and looked at her father, blinking her tear-blurred eyes. She stood and the three of us moved toward the veil. It had already risen to Signe’s neck, so we stayed back a bit so we could see his face above it.

“Ronat, child of my join, I favor your decision to stay with the Witta clan, with Widdershin. I send all joy and blessings to you for a long...a long and happy life.”

He sobbed loudly then turned his attention to my sister and me.

“Widdershin join, I have visited a great wrong upon you. I was misguided in taking Avapeony to increase Brinc numbers. I will take regret for this action to my death. Your mother...your mother....” He sobbed again. “I ask that you, all of you, will forgive me for what I have done.”

Tears cascaded along his cheeks and his eyes were sorrowful. Unable to help myself, I rushed forward and reached out to him. Our hands touched briefly as the veil rose and forced our fingers apart.

I fell to the ground and Avapeony held me. We were both crying and our fannies hovered worriedly, offering what comfort they could. Ronat came close and pulled me to my feet. She hugged me close, breath hitching in her throat as she whispered apologies for her father’s actions. She turned to Avapeony then and they moved away, both sobbing yet trying to calm themselves, finding comfort in one another.

I stood alone, but felt a great energy break away as my rage and hatred left me. That new emptiness within me was immediately filled with powerful earthrise and my feet lifted from the ground.

Book Twenty-six

“I KNOW A secret.”

The voice that whispered against my ear wasn't Afton so, assuming I imagined it, I turned over and drifted back to sleep.

“Don't you want to know what it is?”

I opened one eye and saw Tsisi reclining on my pillow next to me. She was hugging Afton tightly and her big green eyes, just visible over his form, were bright with suppressed glee. I had to smile.

“Good morning, little Jana. What is your secret? You've already told me about Occil and Jinni. I can't imagine what else there could be,” I responded, yawning and stretching my arms.

“Well, actually, there is a great deal going on all around us, but it's not really my place to spread gossip. Broc, you remember Broc? Well, he says that gossip is a waste of time because what will come out will come out. Wind Mother Aurea says that we should give all our gossip to the Fey, that hearth Fey are the real keepers of secrets. And you know why? I will tell you. It's because they see so much. I mean the hearth is the center of every home, is it not? Umm hmm, so imagine what the Fey see sun after sun, moon after moon.”

Afton reached out a tendril to connect with me but Tsisi grabbed it and began to twist it around her tiny blue arm.

“Are you excited about the joining? I am. Though what Jinni sees in that horrid creature I can't even imagine. Still, the pageantry of it all. I think adding Ronat to your join is a wonderful idea, however.”

She sighed deeply before continuing. “I had my doubts, you know, Ronat being Signe's join and what happened with him and her brothers, but I do think that she brings Ava so much happiness.”

I watched as the silly Jana wrapped herself in Afton, like donning a shawl. “This feels really good,” she said. “It's warm, like a coverlet. Do you ever wear him? I think I would all the time, I do. I don't feel cold the way most of you do, being a wind sprite, but I must say he's very cozy.”

“Tsisi. Let Afton go, please,” I said, fixing her with a steely glare. Not an easy task as I was still mostly asleep. She backed off, and I reached out to connect with Afton. Of course, I found him highly miffed at being played with in such a way. “Where's Yews, Afton?”

“With Jinni,” he responded, shaking himself out and lifting off the bed. The Jana was right behind him though, wings fluttering loudly in the still morning air.

I rose, mostly because Afton was pulling me, but my head was still foggy from yesterday's lessons about creating sigil magic, a very difficult, precise technique. I still missed my mother and her casual, fun teaching methods each day, but MayApple was a fine instructor, and I was learning a great deal from our daily lessons.

I washed and dressed then stepped into the common room. It was almost unrecognizable as our humble home. Occil had offered its Fey every comfort known to Meab or Elemental but Jinni was having none of it, preferring her own little home nested in amongst the morning glory

and ivy. Fey spoke to Meab in a sort of sign language, as basic as pleasure or pain, joy or sadness but obviously Jinni spoke to Occil at length and the creature was in a state of perpetual bliss. And, of course, it had to share this bliss with us every chance it got. That included providing us with everything—linens, furniture, flowers, food—that Jinni had turned down, in the off chance that she might enjoy some of it at some time.

Today was a joining celebration and looking around the room, at the bright bunting and white ribbons swaying in the morning breeze, I was a bit overwhelmed. I stumbled across lacy, patchwork coverlets strewn about the floor and made my way to the hearth. Yewsy sat on the stone hearth, Jinni behind her.

“Hand me the hot water, please?” I asked Yewsy. I glanced behind her and saw the luminous little Fey wearing a lovely gown of embroidered blue silk and white lace.

“You are very, very beautiful, Jinni,” I said with deep sincerity as I took the kettle from Yewsy.

She tittered shyly and tucked her tiny chin. Yewsy smiled and I backed over to the worktable, which was laden with numerous crocks and urns of who knew what. I opened one and found sweet grass cakes inside. I helped myself.

“Should you be doing that?” Yewsy asked taking a seat across from me.

“I don’t know but they are really good.” I licked my fingers. “Are they for the celebration?”

“Yes. Have you seen Ronat and Ava? They should be here by now.”

“No, I haven’t. Occil? Have you seen my sister and Ronat?”

“How’d you know I was here,” it said, poking its head out from between two cushions that had been set against the far wall.

“If Jinni’s around, you are, too,” I said.

It appeared on the table in front of me and shoved a small crock of acorn butter out of the way. “They’ll be here soon. I’m waiting for the call.”

“What call?” Yewsy asked, frowning. “What are you up to, Diarmin?”

It was a portrait of innocence. “Me? Nothing. I just do as I’m bid, that’s all.”

“I know a secret,” Tsisi said, wafting by and waving to us.

Occil scowled at her. “Don’t you have someplace you need to be, wind moth?”

I looked at Yewsy and sipped my tea. “I think there’s something going on that we may or may not want to know about.”

“I agree,” Yewsy replied. “Are you going to ask or should I?”

“Let us pretend that they don’t exist,” I suggested. “So, what’s all this?” I indicated the piles of linens, furniture and food littering the entire room.

“Well,” Yewsy sighed. “Some of it is Occil’s contribution, but also, join members have been dropping off gifts for the new joins.”

We fell silent and I studied her face thoughtfully. “What are people giving a Diarmin and a Fey? I’m not sure we’ve ever had such a join before.”

She laughed and shook her head, rising to neaten the room. “There’s a little bit of everything here, I think. For Ava and Ronat, too. I’d say that they all have more than enough now.”

I rose and worked alongside her until the common room was presentable for guests. We also made sure that they would have room to move around if any came inside.

“Are you okay with Ava and Ronat joining?” she asked as we stood back to study our handiwork.

I turned to her. “It’s good to have the house full again,” I said after a moment of thought.

“Good. Occil’s gone,” she said, her face expressionless.

It took me a moment to catch up with the change in conversation. “Have you been studying Jana lessons,” mumbled. “Gone, where?” I knew it hadn’t gone far, as smitten as it was with Jinni.

Tsisi buzzed by my head and Afton swept her aside playfully. “Dontcha want to know my secret?” she asked, righting herself and grinning at me.

I wanted to be grumpy, I really did, but how does one stay grumpy when faced with such joy and happiness.

“Yes, Tsisi. Tell us your secret,” I said wearily, lowering myself to one of the plush chairs that had materialized almost overnight.

“Well, a few suns ago, I saw Ava and Ronat out walking with Occil. I knew the Diarmin was up to no good so I walked a ways with them. You know, following. Then, right before my eyes they vanished. Just poof! Gone. I was very upset, thinking that creature had done something horrible to my dear, dear friends. I was inconsolable, I was.”

Her face scrunched up, and I expected her to sob. Instead, she sighed and continued. “I saw the creature walking back by itself but it wouldn’t tell me anything about where it had taken them. I was sure it had dumped them over into that horrible Brinc land but it wouldn’t own up to doing that. So, I searched everywhere for them—”

“And here we are,” Ronat said, stepping into the doorway. She looked around, eyes widening. “Well, it looks as though there really is going to be a party here today.”

“Ronat!” Yewsy said. “Where have you been?”

“Ava and I took a little journey,” Ronat said. She continued to stand in the portal, which seemed odd.

Yewsy studied Ronat with a cocked head. “Where did you go?”

“Just to visit one of Ava’s old friends,” she said.

Uneasy, I rose to my feet. “Ronat! Is Avapeony all right? Where is she?”

“I’m here,” Avapeony said, stepping into the room. She had a large basket in her right hand.

“More food?” Yewsy asked.

Occil passed by and nudged the basket. “Some would say so,” it muttered. “Jinni, my love, where are you?”

“Well, we’re glad you are here. Guests are coming soon. It should be a fun day.”

MayApple entered the cottage, her arms laden with wooden bowls. “It’s always a good day when we add someone new to our joins. Where can I put these, sweet daughter?”

“Here, Mother, there’s space here.” Yewsy led MayApple past me and to a small side table.

“Cleome, are you happy about the joining? About the expanding of our join?” Avapeony took a seat in the chair next to the hearth. Ronat moved to the table and began looking in some of the covered crocks. I sat next to Avapeony, positioning myself comfortably on the hearth.

“I am. It is good to have a full house again,” I said. I took her hand and patted it. “I want you to be happy and you certainly need more than just me to be that way.”

“Or Occil,” she said, laughing.

“Definitely need more than Occil,” I agreed, chuckling.

“So, I have a present for you,” she added.

I sat back, surprised. “A present for me? No, no, this is the day for you and Ronat, not me.”

Avapeony lifted the basket and handed it to me. It was uncommonly heavy.

“Well, I guess it’s for all of us.” She glanced down, drawing my eyes to the basket.

I folded back the feather light covering and gasped. There, in the basket, tiny fist shoved in its mouth was a pale blue Jana with a long shock of bright white hair that came down and covered her little body. She looked up at me and blinked bright green eyes.

“Oh, Ava, look what you’ve done,” I breathed. “She’s so beautiful.”

“Ooooooooh,” Tsisi cooed in happiness. “You birthed a Jana! A Jana, like me!! I didn’t know your atrebud was gonna be a Jana!” She fluttered close to the atrebud and they clutched hands together. The atrebud looked up adoringly and we could practically see the timeless connection they forged in that moment. “Oh, that’s a wonderful name, Omie, of the wind.”

Voices sounded outside and I knew the party had already started out in the clearing.

I looked at Ronat, who had approached and was looking on the scene lovingly. “Omie?”

“You saved us. We wanted to name her after you,” she said simply, shrugging.

I turned my head and found Avapeony looking at me with fondness. I smiled at her. “Thank you.”

“Do you want to hold her?”

“Umm, I don’t know. I held you when you were little but Mother...” I stopped, missing my mother so much that my heart hurt. She would have loved this.

MayApple touched my arm. “Hold her, Cleome. Go ahead. Hold her.”

I reached into the basket and gingerly laid a palm against Omie’s side.

“Be very careful,” Tsisi cautioned. “She’s much littler than a Meab, you know. We are a very delicate tribe, made of wind and Fey dust. We can’t even have a fammie because the wind takes it. It’s actually unusual for a Meab to request a Jana. I remember tales from many centuries ago when a Luti requested a Jana. I mean a Morri like my father is big enough, a forest sprite, but a Luti? They are earth sprites and one of them mothering a wind sprite? I don’t know about that.” She shook her little head doubtfully. “I do know that Caress, that’s the Luti’s Jana, served the wind tribes well and was always loyal to both—”

I sighed as I lifted the atrebud. She smiled at me and blew a bubble with her little pouty lips. I straightened her tiny gossamer wings and she fluttered them at me with a little giggle. I smiled back at her and blinked my eyes.

“Please, please tell me you can’t talk yet,” I said.

Book Twenty-seven

THE BRINC CLAN had pulled away from their association with the Witta Meab much during the past century so their absence wasn't as noticeable as it could have been. When caught up on my lessons with MayApple, I found myself hiking to the bridge spanning the Felshea River quite often. I would stand there, staring west, at the pearly, undulating surface of the veil, and wonder what the Brinc were doing over there. Were they happy? Were they still dependent on their machines? Had they and their fannies perished? All I could see across the top of the partition was the very tip of the citadel tower. It told me nothing.

There was much sadness at first. We felt horrible about the Luti who had not been able to escape. When we shared what had happened with the other Witta joins, they gathered in the center of the village and shared stories about their positive interactions with those of the Brinc. Then, just a few suns later, life carried on just as always. There was less strife, too.

No more raids of vulnerable villages.

No more trees taken from the Morri without permission.

No more extensive meetings trying to mediate two opposing sides.

I soon began to fully understand that our decision, painful as it was, had been the correct one.

One morning, at sunrise, I rose and moved to the common room to bless the Lares and the Fey. Occil was curled up on the stone hearth, snoring loudly. I shook my head, wondering why it didn't pick a more comfortable place to sleep. It certainly had many more options to choose from.

I quietly put the kettle on and worked a little salamander magic to boost the flames without disturbing the Diarmin. I moved to the table and pulled Mother's grimoire off the storage shelf and placed it on the worktable. I rested both palms on it, hoping I could feel a bit closer to her. I realized suddenly, in that moment, that it was finally time to grieve. Without any thought about it, the tears came. And they came. I cried silent, harsh tears, arms crossed over my stomach, rocking back and forth in my sorrow. I envisioned my mother. My father. Their fannies, who were my parents, as well. They were all gone. And for what?

It still made no sense.

Sometime later, spent, I opened my eyes and wiped my face, finished with sorrow. I needed to look forward now, though I would always carry my parents with me in my heart. They would always be my first join. I took a deep breath and straightened my spine.

Just then, I heard a powerful humming outside the window. Lares and Fey awoke and stirred against the walls. Occil sat up and looked at me sleepily. I rose and moved to the window opening. They were there, in the clearing before the cottage, all facing me. There were eight of them now—eight Witta Mothers. Two had been added since the veil had gone up. I suddenly realized what was happening and my heart swelled anew. I raced to the door and stepped onto the front steps.

Endless eternal, powers of the night

Endless eternal, powers of the day
Endless eternal, by dusk and by dawn
Come to us now, come to us now
We who live in time
We who live and die
We who cross the veil
We who live in time
Are here and are there
Flow through us now
Flow through us now

The chant rose on the morning air, stirring the colorful cloth of the Mother's morning robes as they lifted their arms high. Earthrise spun around them and their fannies joined and made a circle above their heads and hands.

Earth, air, fire, water
Spirits open your hands to us
Earth, air, fire, water
Spirits open your hearts to us
Earth, air, fire, water
Spirits open your souls to us
Earth, air, fire, water
Spirits lend your power to us
Guardians of the dreamtime, shapes and forms
Roots of the mountain, silent and deep
Earth spirits dreaming, awaken to our touch
Shapers of the crystal, shapers of the leaf
shapers of the valley beneath our feet.

Cleome Widdershin
Cleome Widdershin
Cleome Widdershin

When they said my name the third time, earthrise woke in me, took me over, and I lifted up and floated down the steps and into the clearing. I found myself joining with them in the ancient dance of the mothers, chanting along with them, the chant morphing into a joyful song of elemental life. Earth my body, we chanted as we stomped the ground beneath our feet. Water my blood, we sang as we cupped our palms and swept them as if scooping the cooling water from our rivers. Air my breath, we whispered as our palms came up, fingers spread as if blown by a powerful wind. Fire my spirit! We shouted as our arms lifted high above our heads and our palms clapped together.

We eventually fell silent and the earthrise gradually settled around us. Each Mother filed past me and kissed my forehead as she moved silently into the forest. I watched them go, breath rasping in my lungs. Power, magic power tingled in my hands and feet and so many things were now clear to me. So many questions had been answered, questions I had never even thought of asking. One thing was sure.

I was now one of them. A Witta Mother.

About the Author

Nat Burns is a full-time novelist with a background in journalism, creative writing and medical publishing. She is from Virginia, near Washington DC, but now lives with her partner, Chris, in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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Gospel

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The second section, Psalms (We Love), shares the intense sensuality experienced by new lovers. “I feel a sort of hum, electric in nature” lays a path to “aching, hesitant, I limp emotion closer” as women explore issues of passion and deep need, abandon and trust.

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