

Excerpts from “Donemere’s Music, Thy Path Begins”

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From Chapter 2, *This Home Is Yours*:

Donnie thought of her mother tenderly and her eyes filled with tears, which she brushed away immediately. No sense in starting that behavior again. What she needed right now was activity. Okay, what she really needed was to go home, but until she could figure out a way to do that, she was determined to make this place seem like home. And since her belongings had arrived, it was time to get busy.

Her most pressing problem was how to fit everything into the cottage. Even though its main room was quite large, it was, nonetheless, far too small for all of her furniture. She decided there and then that she’d just have to add a room or two. “How hard can it be?” she muttered wryly. “It’s not like I don’t already know the floor plan. Although, I really hope my DIY section’s somehow improved because I don’t think I have anything to fit this bill.”

She considered what to use for materials. She had no clue how to cut stone from a quarry, but she did know how to fell trees; well, in theory anyway. Besides, the house she’d rented in Wales was mostly a wooden structure. And so, using magic, she could easily build the necessary rooms herself, right? She figured she could use Catie’s instructions on woodworking to help her and she would just have to pray that she could actually trust the information the book contained.

She went back into the house and began reading the most relevant sections of Catie’s journal. Most of the tools Donnie needed, she herself owned. Those tools she didn’t have, she found amongst Catie’s in the workshop at the back of the stables. Thankfully, Donnie’s parents believed in teaching their daughters to be independent and, even better, handy with tools. She wished she could use her electric saw to shape the boards, but, for the present, her power tools were useless to her. Eventually, she would attempt to build an electric generator—but then again, no, she didn’t intend on being here that long, now did she, she scolded herself severely, if not convincingly.

She decided to add a bathroom and a larger room at the back of the cottage for her office, which would also house her bookshelves. It took a little while for Donnie to realize that she truly was modeling her construction plans after the rambling cottage she’d been renting the past few months, although she was still a number of rooms short. She guessed they must’ve been added at another time. “Who knows, maybe even by me!” she grinned cheerfully.

A little while later, she rode the horse down the small rise the farm was situated on and up the hill to the top of the valley, where the forest began. There she walked around and started choosing which trees she would cut down. Sylvester and Rex came along with her; the dog to explore and the cat apparently to stare at her with curiosity. For the longest time, he neither said anything nor moved from the horse’s rump, where he sat almost statue-like with his tail curled tightly around his feet.

Donnie had brought along a hand saw and, once she had two appropriately sized trees chosen, she untied the implement from the pack on the horse’s back. Sylvester turned to

watch her, unblinking, following her every move with his green eyes until finally he spoke, his tone forbidding. "You are not intending to fell a tree, surely?" he inquired.

"Well, yeah, how else can I build some extra rooms?" Donnie replied, absentmindedly pacing around while she worked out the directions in which she wanted the trees to fall.

"You might try asking the trees first."

Donnie took a few more steps before comprehending exactly what the cat had said, then she stopped in her tracks and twisted back to look at him. "Ask a tree if I can cut it down? Well, that's an angle I would not have thought of," she deadpanned. "Um, what happens if I don't ask it? Is it going to do something nasty to me?"

"Most assuredly."

"Ah, these are magical trees then," she said knowingly, bobbing her head.

"Naturally," Sylvester assured her. "This area resonates with magic. Therefore, its inhabitants are, by and large, almost all magical. Most magical creatures must live on magical lands."

"Why?"

"These days, they tend to distress nonmagical beings."

"I can see that. So, *pray tell*, just how far does this particular magical land extend?" Donnie asked with a devilish gleam in her eye.

The cat ignored her mockery and answered smugly, "Outside the valley, it runs for precisely twenty-four miles in every direction."

Donnie pursed her lips. "Let me guess, that's why there're no other humans living within twenty-five miles of here, right? Isn't that what you said earlier when you gave me that unbelievably long-winded lecture about my clothing?"

"You are correct."

"Okay, so why don't humans live closer to us? I seriously doubt they're aware the land is magical, so what's to keep them from settling here? Is there something in the water?" When Sylvester merely stared at Donnie for several seconds without speaking, she added, "You know, makes it taste bad or something like that."

The cat, still sitting on the horse's back with his tail wrapped tightly around his feet, blinked and intensified his stare, obviously perplexed. "I am unaware what water, bad tasting or otherwise, could possibly have to do with it," he finally intoned.

"Okay," Donnie sighed dramatically, just barely managing to stop herself from rolling her eyes heavenward, "instead of me guessing, how about you just tell me why no other humans live in these magical lands."

The cat looked at her as if she were a particularly dense specimen of her kind. "They are not magical creatures, of course," he said, clearly believing he was stating the obvious.

Donnie put the saw down carefully, leaned back on her hips, and crossed her arms in front of her. "Oh, I see, it's kind of a vicious circle then, innit? I mean, you can't be magical if you don't live in some part of the magical lands, but you can't live in any part of the magical lands if you're not magical. Well...I guess that'll certainly cut down on urban sprawl." She put a finger to her lip thoughtfully and tapped it, arching her right eyebrow as she enquired, "Does this mean that if I leave the area, my magic won't work?"

"No, your powers are permanent."

"Oh, goody," she drawled. "What happens if a nonmagical human does come onto the magical lands?"

"They become magical to some degree," the cat said, then admitted uncomfortably, "Mostly, they go mad from it."

“Why?” Donnie asked suspiciously.

“Because they fear magic so. Therefore, it weighs heavily upon their sanity.”

She gave the cat a long look before pointing out, “I wonder what that says about me? Or haven’t I been here long enough to tell whether I’ve gone mad yet?”

From Chapter 4, *Comin' Straight for You*:

When they came to the forest's outer edge, Donnie peered through the opening between the trees and gulped. It wasn't the valley that greeted her this time! While numerous stands of trees carpeted the hills immediately before her, beyond them lay lush, green moors stretched out for as far as she could see, resplendent with the glory of the new day. She'd almost forgotten the sight, how achingly beautiful the rugged hills could be, especially in the mornings when they were swirled with fog, the airborne, crystalline water droplets glistening dreamily around the trees and bushes in the rising sun's rays. She quietly asked Otis to stop for a moment and closed her eyes on her tears.

So Sylvester had been correct in his surmise of last night and she *was* finally freed from confinement. Donnie breathed deeply and opened her eyes, her face set resolutely. Then, with a wide, slow smile spreading across her cheeks, she declared, "Okay, Otis, I'm ready whenever you are, my friend."

Sylvester and Otis both noticed the sudden, pale blue wave of magical power that emanated from her when she gave the horse her command, but neither of them mentioned it because they knew how uncomfortable these waves made her feel. Donnie, on the other hand, was far too busy looking around her with renewed hope (and humor) to notice anything other than the countryside and how good she felt inside suddenly. Much relieved to find she was (mostly) glad to be away and that her earlier fears had subsided for the moment, her heart soon began to soar with joy.

Even the birds seemed to have caught her mood and sang melodically to her from their perches high in the trees. About a mile or so from the valley, Donnie saw one flock that particularly captivated her interest. They were small songbirds, about the size of a wren, and a good fifty or sixty of them crowded the limbs of a young elm off to her right. At first, Donnie thought they *were* wrens because of their rufous coloring and said as much to Sylvester.

The cat replied that the birds were called *Sûlrím*, or Wind Wings. "They once were quite common throughout the land," he explained, "but for years now they have been sighted only rarely, and never in such a large grouping. This flock took refuge some while ago on Catie's, or rather *your* lands, just as the trees and other magical creatures have done. Their name derives from their ability to—"

Donnie gasped in surprise, cutting the cat off in mid-sentence to exclaim, "Omigod, they just changed color!" It was true; in the blink of an eye, the birds' coloring changed to neon-bright apple green, then again almost immediately to a darker, richer green, making the elm's branches appear to glow unnaturally for perhaps a half-second. The effect was quite startling. Donnie stared in consternation at the still sweetly singing birds. The most amazing part of this phenomenon had been that the shift in color had been as complete as it was sudden.

Otis tossed his head toward the birds as he passed under the elm tree. "There you go, Donnie, now you know why they're called Wind Wings. Practically every time the wind shifts, they change color, and not only that, but every last one of the same flock changes color at exactly the same moment. Weird, eh? I've never figured out how they all know to do it at the same time, but they do it whenever two or more of 'em get together. Legend has it that they are the Salvation of A'Rontauk, but who or what A'Rontauk was and what part the *Sûlrím* played in its salvation, no one seems to know anymore."

"Well, they are certainly very dramatic, or, as the dormouse said to Frannie, that's a flea from a different family," Donnie muttered, doing her best to remain calm and force a return

of her former lightheartedness. She'd wondered what sorts of creatures she would encounter in this unknown world, and now that she'd had a small taste of just how strange they could be, her nervousness threatened to rear up again. Okay, the Sûlrím appeared to be perfectly benign, but there were sure to be some not-so-benign beasts and monsters running around here too; she'd bet on it.

Then again, she reasoned with herself, what could possibly be more of a monster or beast than man himself and she'd survived thousands of encounters with them; why, she'd even been mugged a couple of times, once in San Francisco and another time in New York City. Sure, she'd walked away from those rather violent incidents a bit lighter in the pocketbook (all right, *without* her pocketbook both times) and, yeah, the one time she'd gotten a blackened eye and a badly bruised and bloodied set of knees and a painfully wrenched ankle and a—well, the point was, she'd walked away from these brushes with the worst side of humanity. And she had not let the terror she'd felt then get to her, to change her or how she lived her life. She would just have to take it on faith that she would prevail here too, no matter what or who she met.

From Chapter 4, *Comin' Straight for You*:

To keep her mind occupied, Donnie settled back on the horse and wondered for the umpteenth time why Sylvester was so secretive about everything. It was clear that her little kitty was keeping a great deal of information from her, but she didn't know what would be the one thing that could happen which would tip the scales in her favor and finally make him unload at least the most germane facts to her. He was also adamantly averse to imparting any helpful knowledge of the most advanced thaumaturgical or psychical spells of Witchcraft to her, especially those that might be strong enough to take her back to her time. He said (quite pedantically, every time the topic arose), because she wasn't taking her magic lessons seriously enough to suit him, he saw no cause to enlighten her on magical subjects such as this.

She supposed, to a point, that what he said was true. She certainly did not take the same grave approach to magic as he did. Which threw them into an almost continuous conflict that both appeared to thrive upon. There'd been many times when he'd pushed Donnie so hard in her lessons, she'd shouted at him in sheer vexation, "There had better be a damn good reason for all this, Sylvester, because this kind of thing just shouldn't happen to a person without a *really* damn good reason!"

Sylvester ignored these angry outbursts and calmly continued to drone on each time about the proper way to do this or that magical task. So Donnie would devise yet another impossibly outrageous scheme that was destined to drive the cat bonkers, which nearly always worked beautifully. The best thing about these crazy schemes of hers was that she usually came up with at least one new magical skill from each. Not that all of these new skills were necessarily useful, even she had to admit that. But some of them had turned out to be a whole lot of fun.

All in all, looking back on it now, Donnie would have to say that it had been an exceedingly frustrating six months for both her *and* the cat. Sighing, she realized that, deep down, she actually liked and admired this pompous little windbag sitting in front of her on Otis's shoulders. Sylvester had conviction in spades, and you gotta admire someone that dedicated to his creed. He took this magic stuff very seriously. Since she hadn't, that is until the last couple of months or so, their enforced relationship could best be described as "mostly strained."

But she truly had found the honorable side of magic through her long hours of studying its history and its principles. Of late, she could usually be found in her office, during her rare periods of spare time, poring over books on various types of Witchcraft (or Wiccecraft as Sylvester would sometimes call it, which Donnie had looked up in her library and found was the Old English way of saying the word, providing her with one of the very few clues she'd garnered about the cat's background). In the tenets of Witchcraft, she'd found a way of life and love for nature that she could respect and live by happily. She'd even begun to notice that there now resided a small core of peacefulness deep within her whenever she practiced her craft.

But Donnie was very careful with her magic. For instance, she didn't yet have the nerve to try casting a theurgical spell, which called for a protected circle. According to her research, they would be the big daddies of her powers because she would be mixing her magic with that of the gods. These were the sorts of incantations that just might prove impossible even for her to reverse. Her aversion to casting spells this way was about the only point she and the cat agreed upon. Sylvester never tired of announcing that he definitely didn't think she was ready for them either.

Underlying everything she did was the Witches' Rede, which Donnie had instinctively adopted as her own credo, recognizing its intrinsic common sense almost immediately upon reading it. It stated:

An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will

Doing what you want, as long as you don't harm others, when strictly adhered to, could make life somewhat convoluted. The ramifications of your actions could be endless. And then there was the Rule of Three, or Threefold Law of Return, which decreed that everything you do will come back to you at some karmic level. It ran:

Ever Mind The Rule Of Three

Three Times Your Acts Return To Thee

This Lesson Well, Thou Must Learn

Thou Only Gets What Thee Dost Earn

For a while, after learning about this lodestar, Donnie had refused to practice any magic at all. Early on, she'd been overwhelmed by the possibility of doing harm to another living creature with her magic, an abhorrent thought to her. On top of that, the fear of having this rebound on her had finally made her revolt against her craft and she'd vowed to abstain from using it. Not surprisingly, the magic in her fingertips had refused to cooperate with this decision and she'd often found that merely wishing for something would suddenly make it happen. But she had plugged on, staunchly doing her best to avoid overtly and consciously using magic.

The cat had suffered through this period for nearly a week before unloading on his errant pupil. He'd listened patiently to Donnie's passionate explanations of her developing beliefs and then had reminded her testily that avoiding doing real, deliberate harm to others with your magic is one thing, which is certainly what all Codlebærn must do or risk forfeiting their power to the next strongest of their line; but inadvertently shielding anyone from peril, regardless of its origin, went against other tenets of Wiccecraft that teach all creatures are here to live and let live. She would simply have to trust her instincts and use her powers judiciously.

But Donemere must learn never to correct the natural formula of life, he said, even if that meant she must stand by and let something die because of her magic. And when this were to happen, as it most surely would one day, then Donemere, like every other living creature, would just have to deal with the consequences. Caution, when measured, was required by any witch, but not to the point where it overshadowed living or made one deny their very nature.

Thinking about it now, Donnie could see that it was at this point that she'd begun to like the cat. Her magic lessons had continued thereafter without interruption and she had progressed from being a Yfel Witch to Déadl and from Déadl to a Madra Witch in record time. In truth, she'd been ready to welcome magic back into her life anyway; she'd had enough freezing cold sponge baths that long week without it to last a lifetime.

From Chapter 6, *Forever Love*:

The boombox materialized beside Donnie and began playing Mackenzie Mack's "Forever Love." Donnie hummed along with it.

The man wore a thick, silver-looking chain around his neck, on which hung a massive pendant that had slid around to his back. Donnie shifted the pendant to get a proper look at it and laid it upon the man's shoulder. It gleamed red and silver against his skin. The pendant was comprised of an immense garnet-colored stone held within an ornate setting, with nine serpent heads snaked across the stone to keep it in place. At first glance, she'd thought the setting was made from silver, but upon closer inspection she could tell that it was not. It was of a metal composition she'd never seen before. It had veins of bright and dark colors running through its quick-silvery depths, along with glowing, miniscule multi-colored flakes of a substance unfamiliar to her that were embedded within the metal. The colors of the veins and flakes appeared to change with the shifting light as Donnie moved the pendant this way and that with her fingers. The metal itself was sparkling and warm, as though it had just this minute been polished. She noted that the metal in the chain was also of the same curious composition as the setting.

She turned the pendant over to inspect the smooth, rounded backing. The glare from the refractive metal danced across her face, its myriad colors flitting over her features. Only faintly detectable at first glance, she saw that an inscription ran across the oval backing. She squinted, trying hard to read the letters, but to no avail. They were too small and blurry for her to see clearly. Donnie realized wryly that she was going to need reading glasses soon. Oh, great joy, she loved getting old. She hefted the pendant in her hand a few times. It was inordinately heavy and looked extremely valuable to her. She took the chain off her patient and stashed the necklace in the far corner of the stall, under some hay. It could remain there safely until he was well enough to retrieve it.

She resumed washing the man as the song went into its last verse. Donnie murmured to the box, "He's my forever love, is that right, boombox? Well, I guess that remains to be seen...or are you just trying to tell me that he's immortal?"

She suddenly sat back and stared off into space, her expression one of shock. *Oh, good God, no—does this mean I'm immortal?* she wondered to herself, greatly disturbed by this very much unwanted possibility.

She shook her head and blinked several times, completely unnerved by her musings. Which was really stupid of her, she chastised herself a moment later. More information was needed before she could safely start forming conclusions about her situation and where this was all headed, so it would be best to wait until she'd talked to Warren and Sylvester before letting herself freak out over what were only guesses right now, right? Right. And after that, then she could freak out quite properly, she promised her pounding heart.

From Chapter 7, *Won't You Come In?*:

“Over the ensuing months,” Sylvester answered, “Catie began to use her magical self more and more when she traveled. She practiced the old ways of magic to hide from the peoples of the times she visited instead of blending into their midst, as she had done previously. She also took to drawing herself in several times throughout the day to listen to the rhythms of the Earth. It was on one such occasion that she heard the dark power’s whispers. It was calling forth yet another vile creature. Catie cast a spell to block the dark one and came home at once, finally fully aware that she brought the black shadow and its evil influence with her wherever she went. She used the amulet only once more—in order to transport you, that is—because she wanted to contain the fiendish entity here.” The cat hesitated again, frowned, then went on hurriedly, “And so it came to pass during the last year, evil has once again beset our own lands. The Sire Lord, the would-be god, had been sent to oblivion years ago. In his stead rose another dark power; this creature who threatens us now, this Valledai. And he has made it known that he wants the amulet from Catie. On two occasions, she was nearly killed by those caught within his magical slavery in their attempts to steal it from her.” Once more, Sylvester looked at Warren, who again signaled his approval with a nod.

Sylvester resumed the tale. “Catie eventually decided to call upon another witch to aid her. Something had happened after Valledai’s first attempt at having her killed, something that she would never speak of, but which changed her opinion of him. All she would say was that she could feel his power expanding and knew that if his growth continued, as it was certain to, he would soon be far stronger than she herself would ever be. She said that she had already cast a spell which called out to all her progeny, searching for the strongest, and that you were the only one whose image had come to her, Donemere. After the second attempt on her life, she used the amulet one last time and went to your world to get you. I went with her there to keep watch. The shadow followed us, but did not show itself. I felt his presence though and I can attest to his power. It was indeed already far greater than Catie’s by then, and he himself was much more substantive than a mere shadow should be. But neither Catie nor I could get a glimpse of his true self.

“We brought you, Donemere, and your belongings back almost immediately. Again the shadow followed, but when we arrived here at the cottage, it was no longer with us. Catie stayed for only a short while that night before bidding me goodbye. She instructed me to watch over you and do whatever I must to get you to read the final entry in her latest journal. Then she disappeared. I have not seen her since, but we have recently had word of her. She was observed near Moên Tádtelu, or Mount Treyfal as both you and Catie refer to it, Donemere, and was seen leaving that area little more than a full moon ago, heading northward. That is the last knowledge any here in Medregai, perhaps even Írtha, have of her.”

Donnie jumped on this immediately. “Medregai? Írtha? That’s where we are?”

The cat nodded, adding, “To be most precise, we are in Ga’Medregai.”

“Really? Why do those names ring a bell?” cried Donnie, breaking off momentarily. “No, no, I’m wrong, they can’t—but, yet they do too sound familiar! Why? Why do I feel like I should know them?” She stared at the cat, who was viewing her with incredulity.

“Do you remember so little of your first fortnight here, Donemere?” he reproached her. “You certainly picked up Catie’s book regarding this land often enough before I persuaded you to read her journal instead. I would have thought the story would be seared into your mind, you read the book so often and so avidly.”

Donnie gaped at him, then hastily recollected herself and closed her mouth. She called out to the library to give her the book. Nothing happened, so she rolled her eyes toward the heavens, heaving a loud sigh, then held up a finger and put her tea cup on the table. She raced from the room and returned a minute later with a thick book in her hands, in the midst of muttering absentmindedly, “Damn testy library, it could’ve given it to me in here, but oh no, I couldn’t have a library that’s that trusting! After all, it’s been at least two months since any of us damaged one its kiddies.”

The cat and werewolf exchanged glances with each other and then Warren went back to watching Donnie intently with his hunter’s eyes, while Sylvester appeared to be perfectly content to sit silently.

Donnie sighed again, then began to flip through the book when she sat back down. After a minute or two of perusing its initial pages, she exclaimed, “Oh, yeah, now I remember this one! I wouldn’t say I actually read it though, because I was kind of an emotional wreck way back then. But I do recall thinking it was a total rip-off of a Fantasy story from my time, albeit slimmer on details. You see, I really wasn’t sure if it was fiction or non-fiction since the story was so fantastical, yet the writing so dry—er, scholarly, I mean. I guess I just figured that the fantastical stuff was metaphorical, not literal, but that the rest of it was basically true, so I eventually settled on non-fiction.” She paused for effect, looked up from the pages of the book which she was still riffling through, and quipped impishly, “And of course, the names of people and places were changed to protect the innocent.” She shot the other two a quick grin and then realized they hadn’t gotten the joke. Jeepers, how she missed talking to people from her own time. Aw, hell; she missed talking to people, period!

From Chapter 7, *Won't You Come In?*:

The Wolf King looked directly at Donnie, but he was not seeing her, she knew. From the shadows in his eyes, she could tell that deep within, the events he was relaying held him imprisoned painfully within the past. “I believed then that Catie had not arrived at the cave in time to save me,” he murmured sadly. “I felt an all-consuming desire course through my body to taste human flesh and wanted nothing more than to eviscerate my dear friend. I leapt at her and would have torn out her heart, but ere I could reach her, I felt the same fair magic that had shone in the cave. And there, between us, now stood those same eight women blocking my path to Catie. Their power held me still as they whispered in a language that was strangely familiar, but which I myself do not speak. They encircled me and passed their hands over my body until I felt the darkness leave me. I fell to the ground and knew nothing more until morning.

“Catie had also recovered well enough by then to move around the cottage. Both of us were quite weak and ill for many days afterward. Although I pressed her often during the time we had together thereafter, Catie refused to speak further of the eight women or the Magic of the Nine. She would only beg my forgiveness for being unable to save my family. Her magic was not strong enough, she cried. Over the following three—no, nearly four moon cycles she regained her strength and we provided counsel to each other. We soon discovered that many more dark deeds had been accomplished by Valledai and his armies than either of us knew separately.”

Warren stopped to regroup his thoughts. When ready, he continued slowly. “A few days after the incident in the cave,” he said, “Catie called out to other magical creatures, those who were still under the influence of their own magic and not Valledai’s. We met in this cottage a fortnight later on the eve of the new moon, under the concealment the black night provided. Each of the fair creatures who came had bitter tales of their own to tell, of losing family and friends to Valledai’s dark magic and his savage hordes of roving warriors. We agreed as one that someone with much stronger magic than Catie’s was needed if we were to defeat Valledai and his vast legions. But who that was to be was stuff of legend, or so we believed.”

Donnie raised an appraising eyebrow and repeated, “Stuff of legend, you say?”

“Yes,” the Wolf King assured her guilelessly. “At this juncture, Catie left us to be alone in her workshop. What she did there, none of us knows. She returned to the gathering an hour later and explained her plan of bringing one of her progeny here. She also told us of the amulet and that she feared it was through her that Valledai came to be in our world. There were those in our alliance who wanted to leave and take their chances on the Sarn King of Medregai and his men, but Catie averred that her plan could not fail. She held that there was no longer anyone left in this world who could hope to challenge Valledai and the armies he leads. Even combined our magical powers would soon not be enough. I remember her telling us, *‘Massive and overwhelming fair magic is the one tool that can defeat this lunatic and his black earth-eaters, for their power will only continue to grow. I have foreseen this,’* she exhorted the council, for the strange beings aiding Valledai had greatly shaken her confidence in her ability to face him again.

“She went on to argue that with her descendent here, that being you, Donemere, and that once you had accepted your powers, Valledai would know a force far more powerful than his existed in this world. He and his allies would do nothing more for a time but wait and watch the new power. She hoped this would give you the opportunity to embrace your magic

and become wise enough in your powers to defeat him in battle. The need for that time is come,” Warren announced, peering intensely at Donnie.

She, completely spellbound by this time by Warren’s mesmerizing account, was caught off-guard by his last statement. A few beats went by until, realizing that he was expecting a reply from her, Donnie blurted out, “Why, what’s happening now?” She raised her teacup to her lips to cover her nervousness and added, “I mean, I haven’t noticed any dark shadows, er, pun intended there folks, ah, following me around or anything like that. Valley Guy still seems to be lying pretty low, doesn’t he?” She took a sip of her tea and wondered just what the heck she was supposed to do in this looming battle!

Warren gave her a level stare. “As far as we could tell, for the first few months after you were brought here, Valledai did nothing because of your presence. But, recently, with the new moon of Hrethmonath, he has openly resumed amassing an army of dark magical creatures. He has the fair creatures he has turned to his will, and there were also many dark creatures left over from the great battle between the forces of the Sire Lord and the Free Peoples of Medregai. Most of the Sire Lord’s fiends have migrated to the mountains just north and east of here, desiring to be close to your realm, where magic still resides even though it was meant to have died out by now. Valledai has taken command of these creatures and is laboring without restraint to increase their numbers many times over. His domain extends throughout the Brumal Mountains, all the way to their eastern edge, where his legions are gathering in his mountain keep at Moên Gjendeben. His influence is felt as far north as Marn Díim, home to most of the Mountain Folk. He has filled their hearts with darkness once more and their hatred for the Free Peoples of Medregai grows, overshadowing the great steps we’ve taken toward an alliance.

“Since the night Valledai stole my pack, the remainder of my people, the North Wolves, have taken to the ground to ensure our survival as a free race. Though we have suffered great losses at the hands of Valledai’s armies, we have managed to gain knowledge of their intentions. They are planning to march on Marn Díim in less than a fortnight and, once that is taken, as it is sure to be, they will make their way south to meet with the main thrust of Valledai’s forces, which shall undoubtedly come from Moên Gjendeben.”

Here, Warren’s tone deepened and filled with great anger. “They will ride over all in their path, burning a wide swathe through the countryside, killing every fair magical animal, every free man and their families, their livestock—in fact, all living creatures, until they reach the lands of the west, where the Sarn King makes his home. They will destroy the world of men and, in the process, they will attempt to bend all magic to their dark will, if they are able. This farm lies directly in the path Valledai’s forces must take from Gjendeben.” The Wolf King looked intently into Donnie’s eyes once more and warned, “Donemere, do not underestimate your foe, for he means to conquer all of this world and, with the aid of the amulet, rule time itself.”

Donnie blinked and returned his stare. “Okay, Warren, that’s...really frightening,” she said in a small, thin voice that was strangled with apprehension. “I guess we can’t just bury our heads in the sand and let them go by unhindered, can we?” she grimaced, biting her lip. She released a heavy, slow breath and with it exclaimed, “Hoo! Not exactly gonna be a cakewalk, is this?” She looked at the other two and gulped down the huge lump that had formed in her throat. Things were getting worse and worse, not only for her, but for Medregai as well, it seemed. Just how was she going to stop an entire army of dark magical creatures, plus their apparently quite powerful leader and his wormy buddies? She shuddered and then shut down the fearful part of her thoughts.

A good start, logic dictated, would be to gather as much information as possible about Valley Guy and how he did things. She nodded to herself before saying to the others, “All right, I’m beginning to understand the situation—not that I like it, mind you. Being an intrepid heroine has never been one of my goals.” She knew that her voice had come out sounding high and tight from stress, so she again paused to collect herself and cleared her throat. “Putting all that aside for the moment, I need to learn more about this Valley Guy of yours. How did Catie even know that he wanted the amulet or that he was the shadow following her through the portal each time she traveled?”

It was Sylvester who answered this time. “She recognized Valledai’s triune when she rescued Mynydd Uchaf, from the cave. That is how she came to know the shadow’s name. As to your first question, Valledai sent a man to steal it,” the cat announced with asperity, adding disapprovingly, “Catie has always had a weakness for comely men. This one was beautiful...*and deadly.*”

Warren grimaced ruefully at Sylvester’s dramatic comment and explained, “It occurred during the waning moon of Haligmonath, at least three fortnights after our council of magical animals. I was called away from the cottage and was traveling north to my people. They were under orders to learn what they could of Valledai’s plans and I had received word that a certain pack had news of grave import to relay.”

The Wolf King shook his head slowly, in amazement. “When I eventually tracked them down, they knew nothing of this supposed message. I saw then that I had been duped, drawn away from the cottage by ruse, so I raced back as quickly as I could. Early the next morning I returned to the cottage to find this man standing over Catie’s body, sword drawn and bloodied. He had run her through with it and made his mark upon her shoulder.”

From Chapter 8, *Take a Little Trip with Me*:

Warren and Donnie managed to get the Black Rider onto his horse without too much trouble. Thankfully, he'd been in mid-lunge when he was frozen, so his knees were already bent. Donnie levitated him onto the horse while Warren steadied him and guided his feet into the stirrups as best he could.

Donnie floated up the few feet necessary to take the sword out of Galto's stiff hand and then slid the blade into its sheath. She looked into the man's frantic, darting eyes with compassion and said, "Don't worry, if your master can't unfreeze you, the next time I see you, I will. And believe me, I will see you again. Until then, you're just gonna have to keep like that because, well, to be quite honest, I don't trust you. Nothing personal, you see, but you're working for the wrong side right now and I need to make sure you're out of commission for a while. I promise it's not permanent—Girl Guide's honor." And naturally, she raised her hand, three fingers straight, while she swore her solemn oath to Galto because that's what Girl Guides do. Okay, okay, so she'd never actually been a Girl Guide, but why bother him with that detail?

By the time she drifted back to the ground, Donnie felt distinctly queasy. The few times she'd levitated herself over the past few months, even just lifting herself a few inches off the ground had always produced this very same response within seconds. She'd hoped that particular side effect would pass on its own once she got used to the sensation of being airborne, but alas, it had not. She doubted that it ever would, since she couldn't play high-action video games for the same reason; that is, because of motion sickness. But, hey, what good was being the most powerful witch in history if she couldn't come up with a potion or spell that would keep her from getting sick when flying? And after all, her sassy sassafras broom might actually behave now that the binding spell had been broken. She found she was excited at the very real probability that she would get to experience something that, to her, defined classic witchdom—the very singular skill of broomstick flying. She was certainly going to attempt that soon, she vowed to herself now, as her feet hit the ground and she was once again on terra firma.

They used a rope to tie the Black Rider securely to his horse, looping it around his legs and waist and over the horse several times. When they were finished, Galto was tied up tight. He wasn't going anywhere without the horse.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much Donnie could do about the position of his arms or the expression on his face without unfreezing him. Oh, well, she supposed he'd just have to take his chances when he passed through any villages or near other people. After all, he had tried to kill her and that still rankled a bit.

She immediately chided herself for sheer wickedness. She'd better charm his journey back to Valley Guy. That would be the fair thing to do and it really would make her feel better to know that Galto would get there in one piece, looking the way he did and all. Donnie thought for a moment, then quickly canted:

"This man on his horse shall be safe to pass,
To Valledai he'll ride,
Through all the lands between here and there,
Trussed up and hog-tied.
While along the way,
No harm shall come to him or his, er, to his ass."

It was by no means her best bit of doggerel, but it had a certain verisimilitude about it that Donnie felt was endearing. She slapped Galto's horse on the rump and willed it to follow Warren until he abandoned them, and then to take his master the rest of the way back to Valledai by himself. She watched as they disappeared into the forest, with Warren leading the way far enough in front so that he stayed in wolf form.

Rex had not been called back yet, but at least Donnie knew he was safe because she could feel him with her mind. She sent this message to him telepathically, "You can come home now, you big scaredy-cat. The bad guy's gone."

Sylvester had sat quietly off to the side since Donnie had rebuked him. He was amazed at the sudden change that had come over this trying and tempestuous pupil of his. She strode purposefully now and used her magic with confidence and imagination. She appeared to be accepting her powers fully and was nearly fit to fight Valledai, he thought with triumph. Even her aura had strengthened in larger bursts than usual with each passing hour today. She now seemed almost ready to become Fægre.

He began to preen himself. Yes, he had undeniably performed extremely well at instructing Donemere on the finer points of Wiccecraft, and he congratulated himself heartily on a job well done. Teaching her craft to her had been a thankless task, but he had been up to it. The proof of this was now standing in front of him waving her arms wide, joyfully shouting something to him about his exceptional character.

"Hey! Earth to Sylvester, are you in there?" Donnie demanded loudly. "I said, how did a completely fictional character end up in our sorry little story? What's up with bringing Galto to life? And too, the man lying in the stables, this Lord Falwain? He reminds me just a little too closely of a very similar character in the book from my time that I was telling you about earlier; you know, the one that's a near-facsimile of Medregai's history. Only, the guy in that story was named Bæltan. Now, both he and Galto are supposedly figments of two very imaginative authors, and both of them are almost dead-ringers for the actors who portrayed them in the movie versions of their stories. You, kitty-kitty, have got more explaining to do. Just how the heck did Catie, or Valley Guy, whichever it was, manage to make this mess?"

Sylvester blinked hard, taken aback at Donnie's frontal assault, just when he was about to compliment her on maturing into a wise and powerful witch. He searched his mind frantically for the answers to her questions. Catie must have told him, had she not? Vaguely, he recalled a conversation he had had with his former mistress that, at the time had made no sense whatsoever to him, which might now provide the illumination Donemere sought.

He huffed uncertainly before saying, "Catie told me once, after one of her many sojourns to the future, that she had been having a bit of fun with some authors and some other people called directors, whatever they are. Something to do with these actors you reference, that much I recall. She said she had visited many time periods and she liked to study someone who was brave but rather obscure from one, then leap ahead to a different time. There she would find an author and appear to them in their dreams, telling them the story of the person from this other period. That way, even though their history should have been lost to oblivion, it was now recorded in a different century. Ofttimes as fiction, but at least they were recorded, she said."

Sylvester licked his lips nervously and began rushing his explanation because of the thunderous look that had gradually overtaken Donnie's features. "As for these men having similar appearances to actors from your time, she said she would also appear to these people called directors and some others I cannot recall the names of—oh, yes, you are correct, producers—ah, er, ahem, and she would appear to them in their dreams then, imprinting upon

their minds an image of the person the story was about and urging them to find someone who closely resembled the, oh, what was it, what did she call them, the proto something. Yes, protagonist. My thanks to you, Donemere,” the cat thanked her earnestly, regarding her with an uneasy smile.

Donnie, who was staring at him in great alarm, shouted incredulously, “Are you telling me that Catie was not only playing muse to the authors, she was also the casting agent for the movies?” Donnie paced around excitedly, all the while windmilling her arms as she ranted at her familiar. “I’ll bet Martin Drake would be more than a little shocked to learn that! Hell, for that matter, Pareto Rodriguez would positively turn in his grave, as would Erik Mueller—once he gets there, that is—if they knew that the wonderful, fantastical stories they’d imagined they imagined, were not so darned fantastical or imaginary, or even theirs! And, good heavens, Sylvester, whatever was Catie thinking by bringing Galto back here?”

“Oh, Catie would never have brought that man here,” Sylvester assured Donnie confidently. “She held to very strict principles whenever traveling through time. For instance, she never went to the past for fear of meeting herself and she never transported anything or anyone from one time to another—er, not to stay, that is,” he hastily amended this declaration.

Donnie eyed him with disbelief, her right eyebrow slowly arching ever higher toward her hairline. “Never, huh? Well, you’ll forgive me if I have a spot of trouble swallowing that one whole, given my circumstances,” she pointed out, her voice dripping with sarcasm. She again paced back and forth in front of the cat. “Criminy, didn’t she even think about the space/time continuum problem? I wonder just how much she changed the future by insisting that history be recorded, come hell or high water. Oh, no,” groaned Donnie suddenly, stopping in her tracks and rolling her eyes toward the heavens, “how many other times did she do it? Who else is going to show up here? Heeeyyy, I just thought of something, if Valley Guy really is the one who brought Galto back here, why isn’t he mad at Valley Guy? Why does he think Valley Guy’s the good, Catie’s the bad, and I’m the ugly? Is it possible that Galto truly doesn’t know who brought him here? Now, how did Valley Guy get around that one?”

Sylvester responded with a series of helpless shrugs throughout this litany of rhetorical queries. Donnie ignored him. At the end, she expelled a heavy breath that underscored her immense irritation and hissed, “Questions, questions, and so *few* answers!”

From Chapter 10, *Look What's Goin' Down*:

Donnie leaned back against the wall of Diana's stall and thought about how much she should hold back. Should she at least explain about Mueller's books and that the song was about that tale, which, granted, was a near facsimile to the story of Medregai? That would certainly open up a whole new can of worms, wouldn't it? And if she explained even just a little bit more than that to him, what kind of damage would occur to the historical timeline, once she sent him back to his own lands?

She looked at Falwaïn appraisingly, still unsure of just what to tell him, and said, "That's a really hard question to answer right now without giving you more information than what's good for you to know. The long and short of that is, I'm not prepared to answer that particular question at this time. Ask another."

Falwaïn stuck his jaw out stubbornly, then gauged it would be wise to wait. Donnie did not strike him as someone who would prevaricate without good reason. He had so many questions to ask, so much to learn about this strange honey woman and her even stranger friends, he must give her time to get to know him. He switched tactics and asked who was this Don Diego with the exotic accent and the strange sword?

Donnie grimaced. "Um, well, I guess you have a right to know something about the guy who attacked you," she began, carefully picking her way through the verbal land mines set before her. "He's, ah, he's from another time too. One of them, either Catie or Valley Guy—that's Valledai to you—brought him back here to this time. It's not really clear how he got here or why he was brought back. As for his sword and his accent, well, that's because he's not from this land, not even in his time. Obviously, he knows English—er, well, I guess you call it *Mannish* here, don't you? Anyway, because of the phonetics—oh, do you even know that word? No? Well, okay then, because of the sounds and rhythm of his native language, he has this exotic accent, as you call it."

"Is he from your time?" Falwaïn asked, nodding his comprehension.

"Ah, no. No, not my time," Donnie replied uncomfortably.

"How far in the future is your time?" A smile tugged at the corner of Falwaïn's mouth. He had finally caught on that she was not willing to readily impart information about the future and he'd decided to have some fun with her dilemma.

"Oh, long, long time," she replied hastily, "and so's Galto—er, Don Diego. Galto's his pseudonym, or nickname rather, if that helps any." Seeing that Falwaïn still looked at her with curiosity, Donnie decided to disclose a general outline of Galto's story. To that end, she added, "He and six friends swore one day that they would take up masked personas in order to right the wrongs committed on the poor by the rich; sort of a war against wealth and injustice, if you will. They wore the masks so no one in the community could identify them. They were referred to as the acérokholá, which I think means steel brothers or steel friends, one of the two. This particular member, the one you know as the Black Rider, called himself Galto. But his real name, when he wasn't wearing the mask I mean, was Diego Gaél Anzio Lituñius Tórandó Ortiz. Whew, that's a mouthful, innit? I'm pretty sure I didn't leave any names out in that little recitation, but don't hold me to it. I only know his full name because I looked him up in a book—oh, shoot, I wasn't gonna tell you that part!" she exclaimed, faltering momentarily before pushing on. "Anyway, because of the social position he held in his time, he's called a Don, sort of like you're called Lord or Prince, oh, whatever it is you're called—your title, I mean." Donnie stopped and breathed heavily, realizing with dismay that

she was literally sweating this, so she mopped her glistening brow with her sleeve and flashed her princely patient a self-conscious grin.

Falwaïn studied her, considering what she had just told him with her words and with her expressions. “Then he must be from a time before you, seeing as you have a book about him in your library and know so much of his background,” he observed cautiously, making it more of a question than a statement by raising an enquiring eyebrow.

Donnie smiled her surprise and let out a nervous laugh. “That’s a good guess!” she exclaimed appreciatively. “Yes, as a matter of fact, he is from before me. I read the books about his exploits when I was really young and watched the—ah—well, let’s just keep it at that. He’s, in truth, a pretty good guy—I know that’s hard to believe right now,” she interposed quickly when Falwaïn looked as though he’d argue the point, “but you have to realize that he’s been brought back here against his will, probably told a pack of lies, and now he thinks we’re the enemy. The trick will be to get him to see the truth. Once we do that, I guarantee he’ll be on our side.” She prayed that had come out as confidently as she’d intended. “And we could use him,” she added, “he’s very handy with that sword of his.”

“As I found to my peril,” Falwaïn admitted resentfully.

“Yes, well, you’ll have quite a scar to go along with the harrowing tale, won’t you?” Donnie noted.

Falwaïn eyed her with mild astonishment. “What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

Donnie’s lips formed a silent “O,” and then, more than a shade diffidently, she replied, “I thought that, well, that you would have realized already, I mean, because of what Catie predicted about him branding you. Er, well...okay, see, if he gets the chance, he slashes an ‘X’ on his foes with the tip of his sword to declare war against them.”

The muscles around Falwaïn’s jaw tightened perceptibly. “And I have this same mark on me?” he asked, holding her gaze intently for several silent and uncomfortable seconds.

Rueful now, Donnie replied, “Yes, on your side. But at least he added the arrowhead on the lower left terminus,” she said, hastily explaining further when Falwaïn sent her a horrified glare, “which meant that he thought you were worthy of his respect, even if he was declaring war on you. The symbology comes from the language of his mother’s tribe, by the way, the Iquakawi.” Donnie sighed and smiled weakly. “Yes, well, I, er...if we hadn’t rescued you yesterday, you might be dead by now, you know,” she pointed out, hoping to change the subject.

Falwaïn acknowledged the truth of this statement with a small nod. “It would not be the first occasion death has settled upon my shoulder, poised to usher me into the next life,” he announced gravely, looking down at one of the old, healed scars on his right side, the tip of which was visible above the line of the blanket.

“Yeah, that was a nasty one, and so unnecessary.” It was out before she thought about what she was saying. Falwaïn’s head snapped up immediately, catching her momentary moue of chagrin. Donnie pursed her lips, then quoted, “Und to him, at the last, Unthgor drew his Falwaïn, his true arrow.”

Falwaïn studied her for some time with an expression of thoughtful curiosity before remarking slowly, “You know my father’s lament, it seems, though we have just met. Have you also read of me in your library—am I too in a book somewhere?” he inquired. “Is that why a melody from your time refers to Baleraime and the evil creature Daux?”

From Chapter 11, *Soul's Solace*:

And so, Donnie was able to slip away quietly to the stables, intent on finishing her saddle. This she took from the wall where it hung and slid it onto a section of railing. She dearly hoped that completing this mundane task would foster the return of a sense of normalcy to her unsettled mind. Too many events were happening way too quickly; she couldn't take them all in fast enough. She needed time to digest things, parse through the mountains of information that had been thrust at her so she could analyze it all effectively. To do that, though, she first needed to find peace within herself. She thought about this for a minute and then decided to do what she always did at times like this; she would meditate.

She sat on the ground, arranged herself in her usual meditative position, and focused on her breathing, slowly filtering out the sounds of spring all around her: the buzzing of flies, the drone of a bee, the chirping of the few birds who had ventured from their nests today, even the sounds of the cow and horses as they lazily ate some hay and periodically moved their heavy feet on the hard-packed dirt floor behind her.

When Donnie opened her eyes some twenty minutes later, she was completely calm and felt much better prepared to carry on with her day. Pleased, she set to work on the saddle. Nearly a week before, she'd fashioned new stirrups from a piece of the wood left over from her home improvement projects. The wood came from Brindle, with whom she had developed a special relationship, possibly because he was the only one of the house trees used for something in all of the rooms, be it a wall, floor, cistern or door, so she spent the most time around him.

Donnie reached up and took the stirrups off the shelf just inside the doorway of the stables. She ran her hands over them to dust them off, rubbing the moist warmth of the living wood with her fingertips. She also grabbed her sewing kit and some heavy fishing line from the shelf and placed these on the rail near the saddle. She sat down on the stool below where the saddle hung and threaded the fishing line through the large needle. Then she wrapped a thick strap of linen around one of the stirrups and began sewing the loop shut, using magic to force the needle through the dense material. As she began the process of attaching the stirrups, she informed Brindle firmly, "Well, dear friend, it's time to attach you to the new saddle. We've got some riding to do tonight."

"What is our destination, Donnie?" the old wood's gravelly voice rumbled the question at her.

"Oh, no particular place," she answered him absentmindedly. "We're just gonna ride around for a while, looking for a flying machine thingy that's turning our forest friends to stone. I want to get a close look at it, so we'll have to be quick once we locate it."

From his open stall, Otis volunteered, "I'll be ready whenever you say, Donnie."

She looked up, not for the first time wishing heartily that she'd paid more attention to the sewing classes in her high school Home Economics class, and replied to the horse, "No need, Otis. We won't be riding you."

His face took on a hurt expression as he tossed his head toward the stall where Gallantry had established residence the day before. "I suppose you'll be taking him?"

"Nope."

Somewhat mollified, Otis looked at her curiously. "Then who are you taking?"

Donnie grimaced facetiously. "It's not a who, it's a what. At least I hope it's a what and not a who...but, then again, the way previously inanimate objects are reacting to my powers lately, it may very well be a who by now." She emitted a low groan of exasperation. "Oh,

well, the fun is only starting, it seems. Hey, Otis, how about giving me a lesson in Medregai geography? Where exactly are we located?"

The white stallion finished another mouthful of hay before responding. "We are in the southern part of what was once the realm of the Red Warlock of Fal'Adîn, in the northern section of Medregai," he began. "It's a region called Annûar and its capital is Marn Dím, which lies north of here two to three days' ride with good weather. More than a millennia ago, the Red Warlock's realm was destroyed by the Gossalyn forces in the War of Sorrow. In recent years, Marn Dím has been rebuilt through an alliance of Mountain Men and the Sarn and is now a thriving city, worthy of King Belnesem's allegiance. Between here and Marn Dím is the village of Mâlendian, almost due north by approximately twenty leagues. On the road to Mâlendian lies the fortress of Banaff Dír. There are also several smaller settlements along the way.

"South of us a good ten leagues are the Ettin Moors, so named for the giants who long ago wandered its cliffs and bogs, where the moors are even more treacherous than those surrounding us. To the east are the Brumal Mountains, and to the west is a region called Sedarau, and beyond that Gainál, where, it's only fitting, the King of Men has once again made his capital at Anûmanétus. That is the central city of the ancient Aldera, the old name for the west of Medregai." Donnie made Otis repeat this a few times so she could get her bearings when she studied some maps later. She didn't want to get lost tonight.

Sylvester, Warren and Falwaïn walked into the stables as she was charming the finished saddle, just in time to hear her cant:

"I deem this saddle,
Made from cotton,
Sound and whole,
And padded well.
It shall keep me astride,
All in one piece,
And when I ride,
Be kind to my bottom.
If we're anywhere on Earth,
In the heavens,
And especially in hell!

"If we ever go to hell, that is, or anywhere like it," Donnie amended quickly, "which I'm really, really, really hoping won't ever happen." A small wave of cerulean light shimmered over the saddle, then settled into its depths, lending the white of the cotton a distinct bluish cast.

Falwaïn came over to inspect the saddle, studying it for a minute before grinning at Donnie. "It is most certainly unlike any other saddle, is it not?" he observed.

"Yes, and I'll thank you not to make fun of it. It's going to be just fine for me," she retorted.

"Are you set to ride it somewhere in particular, I wonder?" he inquired. "And who shall you ride with it? I suspect no self-respecting horse would allow themselves to be fitted with a saddle such as that." He smiled teasingly at her to soften his words.

"Oh," interjected Otis, "she said she's not taking a who but a whaaa—ouch, that hurt!" the horse cried when Donnie stepped backward to his stall and shoved him hard with her shoulder.

“It did not, you loudmouth. Ixnay on the atwhay uffstay, illysay,” Donnie griped, giving him a dark look.

The horse took a half-second to translate this, nodded agreeably, and chirped, “Kay-o.” He then went back to eating hay.

Donnie gave the others a recalcitrant glare and told them, “Don’t ask.” She put the saddle back on the fence and remarked somewhat sharply, “So, we’re all set for tomorrow, right? Know where we’re going and all that, I suppose?”

Falwaïn moved to within her line of sight and peered at her curiously. Donnie studiously avoided his gaze.

Warren looked at them both with a glint of amusement in his crystal-blue eyes before replying, “Yes, Donemere, we have finished laying our plans for the morrow. We shall follow the Annûar Path to Mâlendian, where we will stay the night while you do what you can to free the people of their...affliction. Then it is on to Marn Dím. The last I saw of him, Galto was headed north, toward the Bitterbend Marshes. We can discuss the journey further later.” He held Donnie’s gaze for a long moment, finally asking, “Have you an answer for me?”

She nodded her head and pursed her lips, then looked down at the ground and began doodling with the toe of her sneaker in the dirt and hay. “Yeah,” she replied, “but you’re probably not going to like what I have to say because I can’t do what you asked of me. It’s just that—oh, come on, let’s go into the library, shall we? We can get comfortable and talk about it there.” She did not look at Warren’s disappointed face, but rather strode purposefully toward the house.

From Chapter 11, *Soul's Solace*:

As Donnie completed the invocation, there came an almost instantaneous surge of the elemental Guardians, each swirling around the circumference of the magical sphere, blending with Donnie's own power to create a semi-transparent wall of churning colors that streaked and curled and rolled into fantastical patterns which occasionally occluded the view of those outside it.

Still holding the knife in both hands, Donnie moved to stand in front of Warren, bidding him to take hold of the athame, to become part of her power while in her circle. The Wolf King clasped his hands around hers a little unsteadily, for each of his nerves, muscles and bones were sharply stimulated by her concentrated magic. The deep nothingness and, conversely, the fullness that surrounded him were also disturbing, for everywhere he looked, other than at Donnie or the lit candles on the points of the pentacle (as if they somehow grounded him in reality), all he could see was forever in the ages of the Earth. He caught a glimpse of its birth over there, and then everything shifted. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw tall spires adorning the Earth's surface, with what looked like flies buzzing around countless graceful towers against the backdrop of a waning Sun. Suddenly, the shift repeated and he watched huge, lumbering beasts make their way across a plain, the Sun now brilliant and red in the distance; and then a darkness engulfed the Earth after something very large flew at it from the heavens. Yet none of these snatched visions stayed put or could be looked at directly; rather, they swirled all around him dizzily, and between them was the taste of true freedom and a sense of immense power.

Feeling as though this must surely be a waking dream, as soon as he touched Donnie's skin, he was startled by the extreme clarity of his eyesight and his ability to focus on his greatest desire of becoming his own master once again. With her power (which he knew instinctively was being tempered so as not to cause him harm) now coursing through his body, he took a moment to consider what it must be like for her to have this much magic within her, to feel it running through every bone, every sinew always, relentlessly injecting her with its energy, just as it now was doing to him. He thought it must be truly frightening at times.

Once Warren's hands were wrapped around hers, Donnie lifted her head high and invited the Goddess and God of her craft, crying out in a warm, clear voice, "O' merciful Mother Earth, I call upon you from my circle of power. You, who bear the fruit of all life; we are your beloved children and guileless students of your teachings. We are blessed to be born unto you at the beginning of this life's journey and graced to return to your folds when that journey changes to the next. Great Father, I call upon you from my circle of power. You, who bring grace and movement to all who wander our Mother's beautiful lands and waters, and who bestows upon us the gifts of smell, sight, and sound as your endowment to our future. The racing of our hearts, the coursing of our blood is our tribute to you. Your strength fills our dreams with truth, for which we are forever thankful. Dearest Mother and Father, I beseech you to come to me now. Your aid is needed in rectifying a most egregious wrong. I ask this of you. Hail, and be welcome!"

Two forms of pure energy, both robed in flowing gowns of blazing light, emerged slowly to stand on either side of Donnie, facing her. The Lord appeared first, a magnificent set of antlers set atop his stag's head, and the Lady arrived but a second later, her long robes billowing with color. Delicate, rolling tendrils of argent energy silently emanated here and

there from their regal bodies. Their beauty was breathtaking and their light infused the room with its Divine radiance.

Despite the sudden rush of low roars that were intrinsic to each of the elements, Falwaïn distinctly heard Sylvester utter an imprecation. He looked down at the cat enquiringly, then had to lean close-in to hear the reply.

“I have never seen the Goddess, the God, nor the Guardians manifested so strongly,” explained Sylvester. “Verily, I have heard of such a manifestation only once before, in all my more than four hundred years as a familiar. ’Tis truly a wondrous sight; one that few who may walk the Earth shall ever be allowed to witness.” The cat spoke solemnly, obviously awestruck.

Falwaïn straightened in the desk chair, his own expression thoughtful.

Donnie asked the Lord and Lady to clasp the athame. More tendrils of their power filled the circle as the ghostly entities closed their hands over Donnie’s and Warren’s, these lashes of pure magical energy clouding the watchers’ view of the circle even further. Donnie was silent for a moment, then made her request of the Divinities surrounding her. Falwaïn and Sylvester were just able to make out her words over the growing din of the Guardians.

“Within this circle stands a man who is not a man, and who once was a wolf but is no more. He seeks to gain his balance in the alternating mantle that was thrust upon him by evil. Light his path for him, my elemental Sisters and Brothers. Join your power with mine, most honorable Ceridwen and Cernunnos, and stand beside me while I gift to him control over his destiny, that for which he asks. Will you grant his request and answer my plea?”

Through the diffuse, whorling screen of the elements, the watchers could just make out the Mother and Father nodding affirmatively to Donnie’s request. Four androgynous faces, their eyes shining with blinding energy, appeared out of the storm of colors encircling Donnie and Warren and also gave their answer by a gentle, approving nod from each. Donnie canted the spell once by herself and twice with the wispy echoes of the Gods joining her:

“Our powers joined,
To make Warren whole.
The choice is his,
He alone has control.”

The scene before the watchers shifted instantly at the end of the spell. It appeared as though all figures within the pentacle were sucked into the spirit wall encircling them, drawing them into its churning mass, Donnie and Warren included. The cacophony of the elements continued to rise as this roiling chromatic tempest expanded inwardly to fill the entire circle. Falwaïn gasped with alarm and stood suddenly, as did Sylvester. But when Falwaïn made as though to come around the desk, Sylvester checked him loudly. “No, Lord Falwaïn!” the cat remonstrated. “Donemere forbade us to enter the circle. We must trust that she is powerful enough to control the force of her own magic combined with that of the Gods.”

“What if she is not?” Falwaïn shouted back, frantically searching the jumbled refractions of light for any sign of Donnie. He realized with an unsettling jolt that he had already begun to think of this honey woman as his own, almost as though she were predestined to belong to him. Sylvester had to call his name three times before he managed to tear his eyes from the circle and stare at the cat. Their gazes locked for a long moment and finally Falwaïn felt calm returning to his troubled soul.

“We must trust in her and do as she asked,” Sylvester repeated firmly. “We shall wait here, in this spot, until the spell is complete. That is *all* we can do, Lord Falwaïn.”