

## Excerpts from “Donemere’s Music, The Cunning Sister Arises”

By Cheryl A. Gross

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### From Chapter 1, *Take Me to the River*:

Liz’s mouth opened in a defiant scream, her angry black eyes reflecting the horrific scene taking place too far away for her to reach. Julia was being shoved from one vile creature to the next. The young girl’s terror was so high that she had shut down both emotionally and physically, her shuffling steps stumbling and confused as several okûn clutched at her, grinning salaciously at the curve of her shoulder where her nightgown had been pulled down. Julia’s dark eyes were closed, her face stained white and sickly except for her cheeks, which were still wet and bright red from her earlier panicked cries, and her mouth was a thin line of surrender that showed more than anything else that the girl had resigned herself to her shocking fate.

Liz lunged toward her hysterically, but the okûn who had her in his grip held on and, with a surge, Liz rebounded backwards into his chest. She lashed out wildly, twisting from side to side, flailing her arms and legs, trying desperately to hit anything, to claw her way free and get to Julia. But the terrible creature holding her simply put his arms around her more tightly, burying his filthy face in her long red hair, a look of something akin to enchantment on his ugly features. Liz screamed again, a howl of hatred erupting from the very depths of her soul.

As though in answer to her cry, a huge okûn appeared a moment later and tossed others aside as he strode into the middle of the excited group of monsters, his eyes flashing with rage at the frenzied crowd. He tore Liz from the little okûn that still had her gripped tightly and pulled her along with him as he made his way to Julia. He let go of Liz momentarily so he could smash his fists into the faces of a couple of his more avid brethren, then grabbed Liz and Julia’s wrists, dragging them behind him while the furious okûns left in his wake sent him murderous stares. But no one challenged him as the women were led to a ledge and thrown over it, down to darkness.

Donnie awoke abruptly, catching her breath in dread, her eyes streaming with tears and her blood coursing loudly in her ears. She wondered frantically if the nightmare had been real, a vision of some sort, that was perhaps happening this very minute. Or was it just her fertile imagination imagining the worst? She thought back to the brutal scene and could not immediately say, but then she realized that neither woman had looked gaunt or hollow-eyed, just really, really terrified. Did that mean it was indeed a dream made up from her guilt, or could it have been a vision of what had happened to the women six months ago? Donnie shuddered with revulsion and a low sob escaped her lips. She raised her hand to her face, her fingers glowing slightly blue from her internal agitation, reminding her that she had yet to settle into her newly elevated status in the magical world.

Rex had woken with her, their internal time clocks in sync as usual. He stood up and gave Donnie a quick kiss on the cheek before he clambered off the sleeping bag. The German Shepherd Dog then crouched down again at Donnie’s head and placed his snout alongside her ear.

“Are you okay, Mama?” he whispered to her.

She turned and pressed her face against his, snuffling a little into his fur. “Bad dream,” she replied quietly.

He pressed his face back against hers in response and sighed. He understood exactly what kind of dream she meant. He’d had some bad dreams himself that night, chasing after Auntie Liz but not being able to catch her. In one of the dreams, he’d even tried to find Julia, who did not like him, but Rex had been unable to glean even the faintest scent of her trail. And nothing he did in the dream world had brought him any closer to Auntie Liz, even though he’d tried every one of his new abilities to reach her, and this made his heart hurt. While his dreams did not take as emotional a toll on him as his mama’s had on her, they were still unsettling, and he was glad that he and his mama could comfort each other this morning.

### **From Chapter 1, *Take Me to the River*:**

“Donemere, we must go,” Sylvester said impatiently as he jumped down from Otis and ran over to sit in front of her, hating the feel of the cold, wet snow on his foot pads and against his fur. “Why do you tarry?”

“Well, it’s just that I’ve been thinking,” she answered dreamily. “We’re not going to make good time, what with all this snow and these great big, rocky hills in our way. No, what we need is a nice, flat stretch of smooth road to run on.”

“While that would certainly make our travels more expeditious, we do not have the luxury of a road unless we go by way of Marn Dím, remember? And you have stubbornly rejected that route,” the cat reminded her querulously.

By this time, Falwaïn and Diego and their horses had moved forward to the edge of the rise and the men were giving Donnie looks of concern mixed with curiosity. Warren had also trotted over to sit next to Sylvester, his expression composed, although watchful.

“I know I did,” Donnie replied defensively to the cat. “But we could still use a good road and I’ve got an idea. See, I remember this one TV commercial from a long time ago where a car was driving down a road, but the road was being carved into the countryside right in front of the car *as* it was traveling. You know what I mean?” she asked, glancing around at the others.

Tentatively, Falwaïn questioned, “This was in a TV commercial, you say? Was it even real?”

“Well, no, it was all done with CGI,” Donnie conceded. “But I’m pretty sure I can do it for real,” she said confidently. She turned to look at her friends and recognized the same concern registered on their faces now that had been on them since their escape from the mountain yesterday. She pondered this for a moment, realizing that she needed to reassure them that she was not about to break into a million brittle pieces. To that end, she joked lightheartedly, “While I won’t gravel for your approval and I certainly don’t mean to rock the boat or give you a quarry of ‘boulderdash,’ I say we make like my rolling stone papa and leave only rubble in our roll.”

Always appalled by her periodic puns, Sylvester’s eyes widened and he hissed, “You did *not* just say that!”

Donnie grinned down at him slyly and quipped, “You know, Sylvester, sometimes I think you take me for granite! Ha, ha, ha!” she crowed, giving him an oversized wink.

Warren could not suppress the bark of laughter that left his lips nor his unhesitating observation of, “Oh, now we have really hit rock bottom! And that’s a lava pebbles to hurl around!”

And Falwaïn rejoined, “Yes, we appear to be between a rock and a hard place, and while nothing is written in stone, it seems we will simply have to trust in our witchly cornerstone here or we may well be emplaced on this snowy promontory for geologic ages to come!” Which just made them all laugh even more.

The general air of worry that had enveloped them all night and this morning loosened and their collective tension was released by this shared silliness. Well, except for the cat, who jumped onto Otis’s shoulder without another word, a familiar glower forming on his features as he turned around to stare down at his recalcitrant mistress, while the others shook their heads and smiled upon her with affection.

When Donnie had climbed onto Otis and Brindle had locked her in securely, she looked around at the others. “Before I start the road, I think we should probably be on the run,” she

advised. “And we’ll have to run hard because it’s going to close up again after us so we can’t be followed on it.”

The boombox came to life, suddenly breaking into “Rolling Stone” by Lightning Collins. Donnie grinned happily at it. That meant she must indeed be doing the right thing.

The others nodded, although most were still not exactly certain what she was about to do. She took a deep breath and asked Otis to go. He sprang down the hillside, with the others racing along beside him. Warren sped to the front, his big paws spewing back chunks of snow as he made his way down the moor. Donnie raised her face to the sky and called out:

“Cut us our freeway,  
On which we will safely travel,  
It must be straight and level,  
Maybe even resemble an arrow.  
We’ll ride it today,  
Through the gravel and granite,  
Flying all the way back to my lands upon it,  
And to prevent our being followed,  
Its reach must be narrow!”

As they approached the next moor, the ground opened before them at its bottom, cutting a flat, straight path for them to ride upon. The displaced dirt, snow, and rocks were thrown to the sides and then replaced behind them, leaving a thundering trail of churned earth in their wake. Donnie looked at Falwain, who was riding to her right, and laughed. “Cool, huh?” she said, her eyes flashing. Sometimes she just really loved using her magic.

“Very,” he replied, sounding much impressed. “But how are you going to stop it? The horses cannot run like this all the way to the cottage without resting,” he reminded her.

The glee left Donnie’s face and she looked ahead, and then behind them, in shock. Just what *had* she said in the spell? She thought about it and felt panic rise in her breast. She hadn’t said anything about taking breaks. She’d implied, and more importantly, had willed that the road wouldn’t end until they were all the way home!

Falwain was correct, it was over three hundred miles to the cottage. Even though their horses had far more stamina than the horses back in her time, there was no way they could maintain their current pace for that long.

“Otis?” she called, leaning forward to speak in the horse’s ear.

“Yes, Donnie?” the horse panted back to her.

“How long can you and the others run like this?”

“At this pace, half a day and we shall need rest. At least, I can go that long, and I think Gallantry can too. Tornado’s going to need some help from you, though, to run that long.”

Donnie turned to Falwain, who raised his right eyebrow at her. Smiling hopefully, she said, “Man, they’re good, huh? But don’t worry, I’ll come up with something by then. I will, really.”

“I have no doubt,” Falwain replied complacently and bent his head to hide his grin.

**From Chapter 2, *White Bird*:**

He searched the house for Donnie and then went outside to scan the yard. Hearing the strains of the boombox, he turned toward the sound and saw Donnie sitting up against a tree at the top of the valley. He watched her put her head down onto her knees with a visible shudder and knew that she needed him now, at this very moment. He stacked his reading material on the small, wooden stoop and purposefully strode down the rise and up the valley to her. Once there, he knelt quietly on the ground facing her. He said and did nothing but watch her bent head while the song played. When it was over, he switched off the player and reached forward to lift Donnie's chin, then placed his hands on the sides of her face and tenderly wiped away her tears.

"When you are sad, why do you listen to a song that makes you even sadder?" he asked, concern deepening the blue of his eyes.

Between snuffles, she replied, "Because beating my head on a wall repeatedly just doesn't seem like a good plan."

"No, I agree." Falwaïn stared at her, mock-aghast. "That would be most alarming."

"Very funny. Aren't you the master of understatement today," Donnie observed dryly, then sniffled again when he gently took hold of her hands and gave her an encouraging nod. Reluctantly, she began to explain what she was feeling, taking care to describe it all, from the simple to the truly tragic. "That song...see, it's the perfect metaphor for my situation here...I miss home so much...and I don't know if I'll ever see it again. So, does that mean I start a life here?" She looked up at him when he started to interrupt her, but then he shook his head and squeezed her hand, urging her to continue.

"I've asked myself a million times in the last six months, do I go out into this world one day, where I really don't belong, and try to find someone to live my life with here? Should I just forget about my life before? What if I'm wrong and I'm not immortal, does that mean I'm going to die in Medregai? If so...how will I ever make myself okay with never going back to my own time? And yet, for all I know, I could be sent home tomorrow! So starting a new life here seems kinda pointless. But it would be even more pointless to do nothing.

"Then there's that creep, Valley Guy, wanting to take over Medregai and control the future, change it into what he deems it should be, using his army of horrible creatures like those filthy okûns to destroy anyone who stands in his way, and...oh, dear gods, those poor men who died in Mâlendian! I so wanted no one to die that day, other than maybe some okûns, if anyone's death was even really necessary. But, then again, not even they should've died. If only I could've turned them all into vinca; now *that* would've been a real victory! And then, while I was sitting here, I got to thinking about dear, sweet Cyllwyn Mérd, giving his life so that others might live, and...and it's all just...weighing on my heart, you know?" Donnie cried earnestly.

Falwaïn nodded.

"And no matter what anyone else says, all that happened because of me. If it weren't for me and whatever is ultimately in store for me, none of us would even be here! Not me and Rex, or Liz and Julia, or Valley Guy, not Diego, heck, probably not even you and the others. You'd be off living your life the same as you were before we came here, still trying to get yourself killed by any means available just so you could forget the deaths of your wife and child."

She expelled a very long, forlorn sigh. "See, it's just that I know there's something about me, something I am, something I've done or that I'm to do or be one day, and whatever that

is, it launched this whole mess. Exactly what my task or purpose is, I have no clue, and I...well, it's all just too much for me to handle today." Her voice broke and she swallowed hard. "Some days are like that, you know? Where you feel like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, and for that day, at least, it's far more than you can carry. So I listen to sad songs on days like this." She bowed her head, staring at the ground between her feet, barely keeping her tears at bay.

Falwaïn waited, certain there was more.

When Donnie looked up at him again, angry tears were spilling over onto her cheeks. "And, oh, blessed souls that they are, I can't get Liz and Julia's faces out of my mind. It's totally my fault they're here," she asserted angrily. "And they *are* here. I know because I just checked on them. We were right; they're in Mount Genda—oh, whatever the hell its name is! And that loathsome goat brought them here six months ago! Six terrifying months as his prisoners and I didn't even know it! What a freakin' great witch I am! Damn, I feel so guilty! My life's been free and easy all these past months, while theirs has been a living hell! Oh, if only I'd known, I'd—well, I would give anything for it to be me in there instead of them, you understand?" She beat her fists on her knees a couple of times and let her tears run freely again, then reached over swiftly to turn the boombox back on. "And right now all I want to do is listen to my sad songs."

### **From Chapter 3, *Ready for Love*:**

Donnie clapped her hands and exclaimed with meaning, “Very, very good! You gave an excellent recitation and summation of the official story released by the federal government at the time!” she complimented him heartily, giving him a pleased look.

Falwaïn cocked his head to the side and noted soberly, “And you are now about to tell me the real story, I presume.”

She tipped her glass to him in a toasting gesture and replied, “As much as I know of it, yes, I will.” Then she drank some wine to whet her whistle, set her glass down, and leaned back in her chair, all the while marshaling her thoughts. “To begin with,” she said, “the official story doesn’t explain everything that occurred. For instance, what happened to the three hundred or so Iquakawi that had been living on the reservation with the Lakhóta Sioux? Where did their spokesman, Bernal Crowfoot, disappear to after he was interviewed on the local TV news program the day after the uprising? And how was it that no Lakhóta peoples or any Sioux were in the area of the protest at the time the chemicals were disbursed by the drones? While there were more than a hundred protestors killed in the chemical attack, none of them lived on the reservation. And were they all killed by the chemicals or was it something else? There’s some evidence to suggest it might have been something else, but the American government continues to refuse to release the autopsy reports on the victims. And then there is the question of just how the QS235, the secret weapon that supposedly angered and set off the protestors, was discovered? Someone had to have leaked that information— but who could have done that? And where did the weapon go, because it was not found at the site. And then there’s the problem of logistics for the chemical attack by the government: just how did twenty drones that were stored more than a four-hour drive away get taken out of the army depot they were in, which is located in the middle of a large and heavily guarded army camp, then get transported to the Oáye Reservation, armed and primed, and then set off in a little under two hours? Because there is substantial evidence that they were in storage in the depot two hours before the attack, but there is no evidence that anyone got the drones out, especially not through official channels.”

“What?” Falwaïn exclaimed, looking at her in surprise. “Does your book delve into these mysterious subjects?”

“To varying degrees, yes,” Donnie said, a note of satisfaction in her voice. “Some, like where the Iquakawi could have gone are still unexplainable, as is how the drones got to the reservation. And it wasn’t just the drones that were taken from the depot, you know; there was a whole host of other equipment and machines also missing and considered stolen along with the drones. The manifest of missing items is fifteen pages long, in fact. And there has been no sign, not even the faintest glimmer of a trail of their whereabouts since.”

Studying her face carefully, Falwaïn inquired, “Do you believe magic was somehow involved in that theft?”

Donnie, very much surprised by the question, sat back and stared at him. “Well,” she finally responded, “until your question just now, no, I had not thought that was at all a possibility. But, I wonder...ah, no! No, it can’t be!” She shook her head once with this proclamation, going on to explain brusquely, “Trust me, there was no magic back in my world, at least not anything like what we have here. If there had been, it would have been used against the people and we’d all know it existed. If there was anyone or anything magical there, I would have to presume it was really well hidden and the magic basically never used.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, pressing the point. “It’s just that some of the inventions you have are so innovative for their time and the way the technological advances seemed to occur ever more rapidly is quite odd in itself. Could that not have been caused by someone using magic?”

Donnie again considered the possibility of magic existing in her world, but this time ended up shaking her head in uncertainty. “I can’t say definitely either way, to be perfectly honest,” she admitted. “I mean, I always thought our accelerated rate of advancement was because we are such a consuming people. Seriously, we consume anything put in front of us, whether it be food, entertainment, advice, causes, resources, or just plain old ‘stuff.’ It’s as though we *must* acquire more and that’s a hard, driving need for many, which is true in peoples all around the world. And our politicians and lobbyists learned this about us long ago, so everything they do feeds into growing our acquisition needs. And like the pundits who preach caution about our extreme growth, I just always assumed our consumption was what drove our advancement.”



### From Chapter 3, *Ready for Love*:

“Oh, I’m not trying to paint a rosy picture for the people here,” she added hastily when Falwaïn opened his mouth to argue with her. “They have a much more difficult life than I could imagine leading. Yet they make it feel like it’s worth something, that they’re not just biding their time on Earth until the day they get their big break, like so many of my contemporaries are. Each generation here is still building on the last, working progressively toward a better, hopefully peaceful future for everyone. And what have the people of my time done with that future, with the possibilities it held? I’m rather afraid we’ve squandered it,” she observed ruefully, “burying it with our possessions and trends, never looking to the future, and I mean the real future, as in generations, not just the next twenty or thirty years of our own lives. Heck, look at me, I’m guilty as charged! What’s practically the first thing I did when I got here? I had to make this house bigger and better, of course. Even I’m running true to form. Like everyone else in my world, I had to make *this* world conform to me and my comfort levels, come hell or high water. I refused to accept this world as it was because I knew that I could be made more comfortable with my improvements. And all it is, is stuff!”

With this admission, she sat up taller in her chair. “For me,” she confessed, “if nothing else good were to come of this whole weird adventure, at least I’m glad I’m not so concerned about my stuff anymore. More than once now, here in Medregai, I’ve faced some of my very worst fears head on, along with some nightmarish beings I could never have dreamt up even on the heaviest doses of hallucinogens! My experiences over the last few days have made me grow and, for the first time in years, I’ve grown as something other than a consumer. I’ve looked those horrors dead in the eye and I’ve come away a changed woman.”

Falwaïn nodded, smiling his agreement. She *had* changed greatly, as he’d seen for himself in just the past week. Gone was the hysteria and the doubt in herself and her power, replaced with a quiet, steely determination to succeed. Perhaps Valledai’s machinations were having the opposite effect than intended? Looking at her clear brow and the fire in her eyes, Falwaïn felt that if it ever came to the point where he had nothing else to believe in, he could believe in Donnie. Whoever had bestowed this immense and powerful magic within her had certainly chosen well.

“I care what happens to Medregai; I care about its people,” Donnie contended passionately. “No, I can’t give them all a life of luxury, but I certainly can do my utmost to make sure that they still have life and the freedom to live it to its fullest measure. To stop sometimes and just breathe, you know? Which is what really counts. I know now that I can do my part to make sure the people here have the opportunity to grow and learn, to invent and produce, to partake of those things that give them joy. I can’t take away their fears, nor can I eliminate the dangers of normal, everyday life here. But I can destroy the evil devil threatening them the most right now; I’m sure of it. I *will* defeat Valley Guy, you know!”

Falwaïn acknowledged this bold assertion with a nod. He no longer had any doubts she would prevail.

“And I can hope that one day in the future, the people of my time will once again begin to care about the really important stuff, and we’ll find a way to at least slow down the monsters we’ve created before they consume us all.” Donnie then grinned impishly, adding, “Which, by the way, is not to say that I’ll give up my bathroom or my kitchen. No way. I’ve got ’em, I’m keeping ’em. But at least they’re no longer at the top of my list of priorities, you know? People are my primary concern now, people I don’t even know, people who may very well hate or fear me simply because of what I am and what I believe. Well, even that’s okay.

Let them hate or fear me, that can't touch me. I'm finally finding me, the real me. And I must say, I like who I am now," she announced, her mouth curved into an unabashed smile.

"As do I!" Falwaïn seconded heartily, lifting his glass to her in salute. He tossed back a mouthful of wine, then gave her a satisfied look because he knew he had succeeded tonight. She was, for perhaps the first time since he'd met her, well and truly relaxed.

Suddenly chagrined, she eyed him apologetically and said, "Guess I kinda got on my soapbox again, didn't I? I have a tendency to do that because I have some very definite opinions on some rather intense subjects."

He nodded his head in vigorous agreement. "Mmm, so I've noticed. It's an endearing quality. Your convictions are strongly held and that is to be admired."

She gave a small laugh. "You know, I remember thinking the very same thing about Sylvester, just the other day. Funny, it seems like a lifetime ago, but it's only been a week."

"Was that the day you found me?" Falwaïn asked.

Donnie gave a quick nod, her mouth full of wine.

"That was a good day," he proclaimed, his expression solemn.

"Wasn't it though?" she replied archly.

He grinned back at her. "Tell me, do you believe you can effect the types of changes you've spoken about on the rest of the world? Is that perhaps what your mission truly is, why you've been given your magical power? To stop humanity from ruining the Earth?"

Donnie's startled eyes flew wide open. "Oh, I doubt it!" she blurted out, clearly flustered. "I'm not really allowed to interfere with the natural course of events, only with situations or beings that are born from magic or are in some way unnatural, or so Sylvester informs me," she explained. But Falwaïn had given her something to think about. What if he was right? What if, just maybe, that's indeed what she was supposed to do one day? Was that a burden she would ever want to bear?

**From Chapter 3, *Ready for Love*:**

“Are you willing to give as good as you get?” she asked.

“As long as what I get is good,” he murmured. “Don’t worry, I know how to please you. I studied the writings of the Greek poetess Elephantis and her postures of venerary this afternoon, so I know how to perform—”

Donnie pulled back and put a finger to his lips. “Shhh! There’s a book being written about us, remember? What if the darned thing doesn’t just gloss over what we say and do, but actually details whole conversations? Salacious libertines, can you imagine that? Yikes! Honestly, I really don’t think we need be quite *that* explicit right now, even if it’s in Greek! Besides, according to Sylvester, my mother is going to read my adventures someday, which would make a detailed continuation of this scene wrong on so many levels, you know? So, um, whoever’s writing the blasted thing, show a little taste, will ya? This is, after all, a very personal moment!”

Falwain grinned widely at this reprimand, then went back to nuzzling her neck after murmuring something about how he loved her sense of humor, while she privately thought about how she was loving the way his lips trailed along her skin. When he carried her into the bedroom a minute later, both were unaware of anything except one another and the needs each was filling. Perhaps the uncertainty of the future made their kisses a little more passionate, a little more poignant, and perhaps this one act could make them both a little more whole and a little less sad about their respective paths leading to this moment of their first union. They both felt the hope of all that possibility coming to life within their breasts and they both accepted its solace gladly, if, indeed, without conscious measure.

### From Chapter 5, *Free Will*:

“I knew you would come,” he said unpleasantly.

“Yeah, well, you’re the one with the book,” Donnie reminded him, cruising over to face the dais now.

Valledai inclined his head in agreement, his eyes tracking her every move. “I was merely unsure how long it would take for you to break into this chamber.”

“You need a better book then, one that’s timelier with its information. After all, information is key, but if it’s not delivered in real time, it can be kinda useless,” Donnie snapped.

Valledai ignored this and slowly walked over to a huge wooden chair positioned to the side of the dais, sinking back into its shadowy depths. Donnie could see the amulet glinting on his breast as he breathed.

“I see that you and your...*menagerie* have succeeded in freeing your friends.” His deep voice filled with sarcasm when he uttered the insult.

Donnie gave him a grim smile. “Yep. Piece of cake. But you really should give better warning to your henchmen about me. They keep underestimating me, it seems.” She could just make out the shrug Valledai gave.

“They have been commanded to leave you unharmed.”

“Why? Don’t you want me dead?” she mocked.

“I would like nothing more. But, for now, you have what I want, o-old w-woman.” He hesitated on the last words, stuttering a bit as if he had to force them out.

“Old woman?” Donnie repeated, her tone resentful. “Now, that’s rather rude and downright hurtful. Shame on you, I can’t be that much older than you are. And anyways, for the life of me, I can’t figure out what it is you want from me. How about giving me some hints?”

“Do not play games with me, Donemere. If I so desire, I can keep you here until you give me what I want. Think about what would happen to your friends then. My armies will march on them in two days, and without you they will be defenseless. Your lord’s king will not reach them before my forces do; he will arrive in time only to bury what remains of your barnyard collection,” Valledai sneered, “and their deaths will be on your conscience. Come now, it is a very simple thing I require.”

“Golly, that’s so very passive-aggressive of you.” Slowly, Donnie arched an eyebrow, and then gloated with sudden insight, “You don’t know how to make the amulet work, do you?”

He gave no sign of responding.

“You don’t have any idea if it’s a spell, a charm, a chant, or something entirely different that opens the portal. I bet you can’t even see the inscription on the back, can you? Ha, that surprised you, didn’t it? I really do wonder why I’m the only one who can see it. And the book’s been no help to you on that score, has it? It won’t tell you what you need to make the time portal work.” She laughed, making the broomstick shake while she sat suspended on it a few feet above the pressure-sensorized floor. “Poor Valley Guy, thwarted by his own book. Oh, hey, wait a minute, that’s wrong!” She frowned for a moment. “It’s not *your* book, is it? Which means someone must’ve given it to you or you found it somewhere.” He still made no move to answer, but she could see pinpoints in his eyes from within the shadows of the chair. He was watching her closely. “Mind telling me where you got it?”

Valledai remained silent for a moment, then waved his hand as if to say the entire matter was of no consequence. “It came into my possession,” she heard him murmur.

“Is that just another way of saying you stole it?” she asked just to be snarky. Again he merely stared at Donnie, almost mesmerizingly so. “If you did, I wonder from where and, for that matter, from whom? A thing like that, you’d think the owner would want it back. Are you sure you’re not being hunted for it? Maybe some power just as ghoulish as you are is right now plotting your demise, totally pissed off that you stole his book about me.”

There was still no response from Valledai, although he continued to look fixedly at her.

“Hmm, let’s think about that for a minute...it would mean I’m probably not the only one who should give you cause for concern. I’d be pretty scared if I were you,” she warned.

“You do not concern me,” he replied arrogantly, finally goaded into responding.

“Oh, I think you’re bluffing on that one,” Donnie laughed, eyeing him with disbelief. “I think I concern you very much indeed. You’ve read the book, you know what I am. There may never be a more powerful witch than I am, no matter what you do.”

“I am not a witch.”

She gave him a quick, triumphant smile. “Aha! I suspected you weren’t, so thanks for verifying that for me. Now, let me guess...you’re a wizard, aren’t you? Or a sorcerer, whichever it is you call yourself.”

Valledai’s shadowed eyes reassumed their unresponsive stare.

“Tell me, why do you have two heartbeats?” she asked softly.

### **From Chapter 5, *Free Will*:**

Donnie eyed the oozing serpents with dismay as she flew through the crush of their coils and the debris they were flailing around in the air. “Look at you, Uncle, you’re a mess!” she wailed. “You’ve gone and eaten something awful, haven’t you? Didn’t you listen to anything I told you the other day about proper nutrition? Let me guess: Valledai gave you Thrangarak blood to drink, didn’t he? I’ll bet he promised it would do something special for you—that’s exactly the sort of thing he’d say. Aw, hell!” she susurrated angrily, turning this way and that, gyrating crazily to make sure she stayed away from the snakes and their deadly spittle. “Why would you drink that crap?” she asked, a deep-rooted fury stirring in her breast as she dodged more falling debris. “Do you really not know that it’s gonna kill you? From what I hear, you’ll be dead in one, maybe two days tops. It might even be sooner, depending on how much you ingested. And it’s not going to be a pretty death, either. Hideous hides, just look at what it’s doing to you already—those open sores and all that pus forming around your lips!” She stopped in mid-air to face her old foe. “Fire and damnation, Uncle, even I can’t save you now!” she cried, her voice wrenched with emotion. Cussing fervently a few times more, she again denounced Valley Guy’s treachery.

Ungôl glared meanly at her. He hefted himself onto the creaking dais, which was all that remained of the chamber floor, while the other three snakes crawled around the walls, circling her and Ungôl. “Even if what you ssssay issss true, lying Witccchhh, I sssshall have the ssssatisssssfaction of knowing you have died today. And if I fail here, the pleasssssure of sssseeing you dead sssshall passss to thosssse who ssssuccceed me.”

“Oh, now that’s unkind, Uncle, every word of it!” she rebuked him. “But given your, er, acid indigestion, I guess it’s not surprising that you’d want to strike out at someone, and so I shall graciously overlook your rudeness.” Glancing down, she saw that Valley Guy and the book were nowhere to be seen. She then looked the Great Serpent straight in the eye and said, “You know, I’d love to stay and chat, but I really gotta run. Tell your boss I’ll see him in two days. Oh, and tell him not to be late—it’s his party, after all!”

She ducked, letting the broomstick fall downward just as Ungôl snapped his head forward, great jaws opened wide. She slipped under the curve of his neck and zoomed down into what she had at first thought was a huge chamber below, where the serpents had been hiding moments ago. But once she conjured a light ball, Donnie found that it was more of a tunnel than an actual room. She followed this passage as it curved down and around, hugging the right-hand wall tightly, except for when she had to swerve at one point because of something hunched there that caught her by surprise. She only caught a glimpse of it as she whizzed by, but she would’ve sworn it was some kind of mechanized vehicle.

The passage dumped her out into one of the gigantic tunnels she’d seen earlier this morning. Only now, instead of being darkened, the tunnel was lit with torches spaced about every fifty feet, staggered along both sides of its length. Donnie glanced to her left and saw that she was only a few feet from where it and the other great tunnel intersected. She chose the darkened eastern tunnel since it was the only direction that didn’t have a chain of huge mountains running for hundreds of miles on top of it. She conjured up another light ball, sending the light from both balls streaming out in front of her like the headlights on a car, and kicked the stirrups hard.

Ungôl and his brother dove down after Donnie, the other two, somewhat smaller serpents following close behind. Since Donnie had hesitated a moment to get her bearings when she’d come upon the intersection of the huge tunnels, the snakes had gained on her. They

themselves also hesitated at the crossroads, but only long enough to see which direction their prey had taken. Her outline was silhouetted in the glare of her light balls in the eastward tunnel. They sped after her.

### From Chapter 6, *Purple Haze*:

“Omigod, Brindle, look at this place! It’s a breeding ground of some sort, innit?” She rubbed her eyes because she would’ve sworn that when she blew at the air, she could almost see a purple haze float away from her. Purple haze? Isn’t that what the boombox had warned her about, only a few minutes before? And then the purple fog again closed down upon her mind and she completely forgot both the question and the haze.

“Agreed, Donemere. It might also have served as a nursery of sorts, judging from the stalls set up in that far corner there and the decaying straw heaped around them.”

Brindle’s voice when he responded to her remark snapped Donnie out of her reverie. Something had just happened, something important, yet for the life of her, she couldn’t recall what it was. But it was something that was going to cause her trouble one day, that much she knew with certainty.

She grunted her agreement with Brindle’s assessment of the place and began taking a quick count of the recesses that were hewn into its walls. From her cursory calculations, she figured there were well over four hundred nests within the cavern. They seemed to be just like the one she’d investigated earlier, with quite a few still possessing the oddly glowing eggshells in their midst. These provided a sort of half-light for both the upper and lower echelons of the cavern, reminding her of twilight, with enough light to see where you’re going, but not enough to distinguish colors, other than the purple of the eggs. Some of these had the deep purple of their innards displayed, while others were faced away so that all Donnie could see of them was the dusky lilac of their outsides. She desperately hoped that they were all empty because she’d had enough of snakes for one day.

Her gaze fell over to her right, where there was a dark outline of something huddled in the corner. She squinted her eyes and could just make out that it was a stockpile of equipment of some kind, much of it in crates. Next to that were a number of pellucid screens set up in the shape of a large enclosure. The low light emitted from within this was obviously man-made. Donnie gave a little kick on the stirrups and the broom floated over in that direction.

As she approached the corner, she began to recognize some of the stuff stored there. Two ATVs and two motorcycles were parked alongside each other, and there were stacks and stacks of long, wooden boxes piled high. When they were within a few feet of the bikes, Donnie stopped and got down from the saddle, whistling with appreciation.

“Oh, man, Brindle, these’re *some* motorcycles. One’s an old Native and the other’s a Bucadi. But it sure doesn’t look like any Buc I’ve ever seen before, other than the fact that it’s painted the standard Bucadi red. I’ve got a feeling this puppy will really fly, maybe even literally since it looks like it’s got retractable wings. Wow, just look at how sleek she is.” Donnie walked over to admire the bike and noted wistfully, “Jeezum, is she ever pretty, even with an inch of that purple dust on her!”

“It is a vehicle of some sort, correct? Much like Plug?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s a vehicle; a very, very fast one at that,” Donnie nodded vigorously. She pointed to the ATVs and explained, “Those’re vehicles too. They’re called All-Terrain Vehicles because, well, because they’ll go just about anywhere. These are Rangers and might be from my time. They look it, anyway. Hey, that must be what we almost ran over in the tunnel back in Moên Grím, was another one of these.”

“These appear to be quite similar to it,” Brindle agreed.

Donnie looked beyond the vehicles to the wooden boxes and crates stacked neatly in a tall pile and a feeling of disbelief overtook her. She walked, almost stumbled in her haste, closer



to the boxes, staring at the lot number stamped on the sides of the boxes, her face white and shocked. It couldn't be, could it? But, yes, here was the equipment that had gone missing from the army base at the time of the Junction Uprising! She knew the lot numbers by heart and there was one staring her right in the face: MIL-STD-8458.

With a wave of her hand, she magically wrenched one of the crates open. It contained several thousand rounds of AX-3 8458 ammunition. She opened another box and there were the AX-3 rifles that took that size bullet.

If the bad guys had these weapons with them when they marched in two days...Donnie shivered with dread at the possibilities that presented. But wait, if they had these weapons, why were they here and not at Gjendeben so they could have been used on the rescue team today? Donnie shook her head, much puzzled at finding the weaponry cached here in this place, as though stored in secret.

She set about systematically checking each box and crate, just to see if there were any half- or totally empty ones, sneezing several times from the disrupted dust. She found only a hundred or so guns, but there were several boxes each of ammo, small rockets, and other explosive devices. She studied them carefully, since munitions were not her strong suit. She really had no idea how stable all of this was, just sitting here like this, packaged together. Obviously, some time spent in the library was called for when she returned to the cottage.

The boxes and crates she checked were all full, but at the back of the stockpile, she could see an outline in the dusty floor where at least one stack of crates had sat for some time. These crates were nowhere in sight. Telling herself not to panic, she climbed into the big armored transport vehicle she found parked behind the crates, its heavy doors unlocked. Inside the cargo area was a full pallet of more ammunition boxes. Were these the missing crates? She hoped so—whoa, wait a second, had she interrupted the transport process? Was someone here now, hiding, ready and waiting to attack her?

She jumped out of the vehicle, dropped to the ground and touched it with her hand. No, there were no other souls here. There weren't even any souls in the funny little plants that seemed to like growing near the eggshells, although she could see that many of them were thriving all around her in each of the alcoves. Now that seemed odd; what kind of plant didn't have a deva? How was that even possible?

From her current vantage point, Donnie could see more equipment assembled outside the screened room, on its back side. She walked over and found that a huge forge had been built there, which was stone cold at the moment. Piled near it was some welding equipment, crucibles, hammers, chisels, and other metal-working tools. There was also a long stone table set close to the furnace; it started almost at the nearest wall and ran about halfway down the cavern. The tabletop itself was easily the length of a football field and at least fifty feet wide.

Why would anyone would need a table that big? It's not like it would be used as a buffet for feeding little snakelets, so what other use could it have? She walked over to survey its surface. It was almost completely covered with blackened burn marks.

"Hmm, so Valley Guy has been welding metal on you, has he? And presumably he's been fitting long pieces of it together," she murmured below her breath. "But why, I wonder? What has the maniacal maniac made with it?" Heaving a weary breath, she added, "Oh, great joy, I can hardly wait to find out."

She turned to look through the partially open doorway of the dimly lit screened room and stopped in her tracks. It was a laboratory.

**From Chapter 7, *Silver Machine*:**

For Donnie, alone for the first time in a cast circle, this all meant that she could no longer see the library or Sylvester, there was no cottage, no farm, no Earth even, and no gods or elements to call upon for assistance, for they could not help her with this spell. She looked out upon the endless universe and her body shivered with fear. It was all so immense and she was nothing within it, a small speck of stardust that had the audacity to call upon the primal forces of creation and life, and she just knew in her heart that she had no right to do so. The intensity of her fears and doubts assailed her and, for a time, she was utterly lost. She knew no life, no body, no truth, there was only space and a sense of infinite possibility, but it was a world of opportunity that was not for her. She could not reach for it, taste it, or even smell it, for it was there but not there. It swayed and swirled temptingly, but eluded all capture...and then even the hope of coveted fulfillment was gone and all that was left was emptiness, a vast nothing that tore her apart, atom by atom, and she felt herself lessening by degrees, to waste away as if she had never existed.

Time was nothing here, a concept that had no value, and Donnie forgot it even existed, as all the thoughts she had in her head began to disappear, for they too were nothing and had no value here. This was the beginning and the end and there was no middle, no path to follow, no love to lose, no power to gain...nor had there ever been. She was to become like all else around her, pure primal energy, and she would then never know that she had been anything else.

As the Great Black welcomed her into itself and her thoughts drifted into the void, Donnie happened upon remembrance of the gift Ceridwen and Cernunnos had given her when she cast the circle spell with them on Warren. Their reassuring words now echoed around her and began a chant within her mind, so that when she heard herself whispering, "Each of us is worthy. Each of us may call," she found her place in the universe once more. She sensed the confines of her body, as it again contained her triune, and she perceived the magic running through her as if it were her life blood, and she knew that she was deserving to be a petitioner simply because she was as much a part of the universe as any other small speck of stardust. And each speck of stardust was worthy to be.

### From Chapter 7, *Silver Machine*:

Once the blue light of her circle had fallen back to her body, she again performed the concentrating ritual, then set her athame back on its stand, closing the cupboard doors afterward. She turned to Sylvester, who was gazing at her wide-eyed.

“Whenever you came closer,” he said slowly, awestruck and needing to explain as much to her, “you would fly or turn away into near nothing, then repeat the sequence again and again. Sometimes you twirled or twisted too fast for me to see you properly, and sometimes you moved as though caught in a mired *kanidra* dance, or you moved not at all, but only for a moment, before you would again be lost to the eye. It was both enchantingly beautiful and terribly, terribly frightening to watch,” he commented soberly, his voice suggestive of the fear he had known at the possibility of losing this errant witch—who, to his surprise, was becoming his closest friend—losing her to the cosmic gods, gods he did not know and to whom he could therefore not appeal if they had decided to keep her...he shuddered visibly and refused to finish his thoughts.

Donnie nodded in response to his observation, her face pale and drawn. “It was both enchantingly beautiful and terribly, terribly frightening to perform,” she stated dryly. “I would not have thought my forty-three-year-old body could ever again get into some of those positions the dance put me in. I may be quite sore later.” She gave a grimace and started stretching her back carefully to make sure it was okay.

Sylvester interrupted her in this by asking, “Er, am I mistaken, or will you have to physically redraw your pentacle the next time you wish to use it?” The cat was staring down at the floor.

Donnie looked down too, where the form of the pentacle still showed, but it was now ragged and faint. She turned back to the cat and said, “Um, yeah, I’m pretty sure I’ll have to redraw it next time. And that explains Catie’s advice about the chalk, doesn’t it?” She half stumbled to the couch and sank down upon it. “Wow, was that ever draining,” she complained, kneading her temples with her fingertips. She materialized a glass of water into her hand and drank from it thirstily, emptying it before setting it down on the table with satisfaction. At least she was recovering quickly.

Sylvester had jumped back onto the coffee table and was watching her closely.

“Shall I try it out on you?” she suggested, sure the cat would refuse, but he did not.

In fact, he nodded vigorously and said, “I think it would be best if you do it to all of us.”

Donnie considered this suggestion and found herself agreeing with it. She beckoned the cat to come closer, which he did. She then concentrated the cosmic power into her hands, the power that she could feel that was so different from any she’d known thus far, and her hands once again glowed with countless trails of cosmic light. She raised her hands above Sylvester’s head, spread her fingers wide, and waved her hands down his length. Instantly, numerous trails of light reached out and surrounded him with their glow. At first, he looked alarmed by this magical cocoon as it grew around him, but when it did not harm him in any way, and in fact he felt nothing at all from it, he then sat quite still, waiting for what might be revealed.

As Donnie’s eyes grew wider and wider, the cat became more and more apprehensive. “Donemere?” he questioned uncertainly.

Donnie whistled low and said, “Well, I guess we already knew there had to be some spells on you, huh? I mean, you were bound to the farm, bound not to tell me anything about what was really happening, all that kind of stuff.”

“Whatever do you mean—just how bad is it, Donemere? How many spells do I have on me?” the cat demanded, becoming querulous.

Donnie materialized the full-length mirror from the bathroom and had it appear in front of the cat so that he too could stare at his coruscating, brightly glowing body.

He gasped in shock, and then slumped down, as though greatly aged in that instant. “I-I-I,” he stuttered, “I had no idea...” His voice tailed away and he stared at himself, fascinated and appalled at the same time.

Each of the spells on him were colored differently, ranging through much of the color spectrum. Some seemed to wrap him in their entirety, while others were just a wisp here and there. Donnie reached in and picked out one of the bluer ones, discovering it was one of hers when she heard her own voice canting a spell to make him want to avoid Donnie for the afternoon. She vaguely recalled casting the spell on him a month or so ago when she’d badly needed an afternoon to herself. He heard the whispered spell now too and turned a haughty glare upon her. She grinned at him sheepishly and muttered, “How was I supposed to know the spell would linger?”

He hissed at her in angry response.

“Yeah, I guess I deserve that,” she admitted. “Do you think I can just cast it away? You know, like flick it off to see if it disintegrates?”

The cat looked horrified. “And what if it wanders off and finds someone else? No, you may not just flick it away, willy nilly, into the ether—at least, not without doing more research on whether it is even possible to eliminate a spell that way!”

### **From Chapter 9, *Don't Fear the Reaper*:**

Sylvester, his black tail curled tightly around his front paws, sat silent and unmoving as a statue upon a pedestal that was situated in the midst of veritable chaos. Atop another pedestal beside the one on which the cat resided stood Mickey T.

The old bat was trying to gain some semblance of order over the growing number of magical animals who were gathering within the circular clearing of the Gahal Glæd. He called out plaintively, "Pleathe, everyone thit or lie down thomewhere tho we can dithcuth what we muht do. Hear, hear, everyone! Make room for otherth, will you? And thilenthe, pleathe!"

It was a losing battle Mickey T was fighting. The birds and bees kept fluttering here and there in breathtakingly beautiful and whimsical choreographed groupings; a lively game of keep-away (using several kick bags pilfered months ago by Rex from amongst the games on the storage shelves in Donnie's workroom after his mama had decreed that he could never again serve as the object to be "kept away" by the skunks) was being played by many of the younger deer, skunks, foxes, squirrels, and rabbits on one side of the council circle; while, opposite them, the raccoons, badgers, opossums, beavers, and ratels were all wrastling each other, their bodies entwined into balls of fur that caromed wildly into the onlookers. To put it mildly, all around there was general pandemonium.

The only ones who were not contributing to the cacophony were the bats, along with the owls and their close brethren. These were all hung or perched throughout the glimmering branches of the towering trees above. The bats' bodies silently swayed in the light breeze that forecast the mounting storm. They were shimmering brightly with the pure white magic of the glade, as, indeed, were all of the animals assembled, for here within the Gahal Glæd was one of only five places, in the whole of Írtha, where magic from the very bowels of the Earth rose to the surface to protect all who stood within its light from danger. For millennia, the Glimmering Glade had been the safest meeting place for the magical animals in this part of the world. The Earth protected her own here.

For the hundredth time in the last hour, Sylvester fervidly prayed that Rex would return with the Great Bears and the Free Wolves, who all lived on the outer reaches of the magical lands, providing a ring of protection for the more docile creatures who dwelt within the border. Just as Sylvester was about to go in search of the dog, a great hush fell over the crowd in a fast-moving ripple. From the forest came the wolves all around, each one silently stopping at the edge of the circle to sit, their features impassive. In only a few moments, they ringed the entire council circle, three deep. There were the North Wolves, the Mountain Wolves, the Ettin Wolves, and the Weald Wolves, their thick coats rippling with power. Many of the females were just beginning to show their month-old pregnancies, while a number of yearlings stood close to their mothers, protectively.

Sylvester nodded to their newly crowned leader, the Ettin Wolf, Méath-Degnír. The giant grey wolf ambled to the center of the glade and jumped onto the second highest of the great pedestals situated there. He sat down regally, looking upon the crowd with disapproval. With a collective sigh, the restless council animals also sat or perched, watching and waiting attentively.

It took but another minute or so before the "chuff, chuff" of the Great Bears could be heard as they rumbled through the eastern end of the forest toward the glade. A moment later, a wide path was opened in the crowd for the Kaerdír of the magical lands, the Cave Bear, Bronadulach. Just behind him came Rex. As befitting Bronadulach's status, the enormous bear climbed onto the highest of the pedestals arranged in the center of the circle, while Rex

trotted over and sat down on the ground beside Sylvester's. The thirty-two Cave and Weald Bears with Bronadulach stood quietly behind the wolves.

Long ago, six round pedestals had arisen from the Earth within the heart of the Gahal Glæd, forming a descending circle. The highest of these rose six feet, with the lowest at no more than two feet tall. Upon them now rested the members of the High Council, the current leaders of the magical animal nations who dwelt upon Donnie's lands.

Bronadulach, the mightiest Great Bear of Medregai, had just barely reached his prime at sixty-two years of age and had been elected Kaerdír for the last ten years in a row. Next to him stood Méath-Degnír, his grey coat and white-grey eyes shining silver in the reflection of the glimmering light that was emanating from the ground and swirling like lightning bugs in the air throughout the glade. Mickey-T stood on the other side of Bronadulach, and on the bat's right sat Sylvester.

To the left of Méath-Degnír stood the Giant Deer stag, Mórbaen, so named because of the thick, black mane that adorned his neck and chest. His otherwise red coloring extended to his massive set of antlers, which measured thirteen feet at their widest. Bórlem, the much-revered Eagle Owl, stood quietly on the last pedestal. All that could be heard for a few moments was the shuffling and scuffing of feet and hooves as the General Council members closed ranks once the bear and dog had passed by. The High Council turned on the pedestals to face inward, toward each other.