

Danemere's Music

The Cunning Sister Arises

(Book Two in the Series)

The Cunning Sister Arises

Within the depths of Moên Flurbann, this weird and wild adventure had stopped being about going home and had suddenly become viciously personal. Donnie now had a score to settle with Valley Guy.

Donemere Saunders must soon meet her destiny, a destiny she sees more clearly with each passing day. But first she must free her friends from captivity and find a way to defeat Valledai in battle. Through the trials the gods set for her, Donnie learns to relinquish her fears so that she is fully prepared to wield the immense magical power that Fate and the gods have in store for her. But can she be ready to take on that responsibility before it's too late?

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, songs, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to all Wise Women doing their
best to be kind, fair and strong in life.
You inspire me.

And as always to Rex, my real-life Wonder Dog: Thank you for
teaching me so much about life and love.

Cast of Main Characters

Donemere (Donnie) Saunders is brought to an ancient land by Catie, an eccentric ancestor, because Catie failed to meet her destiny. This destiny is now passed to Donnie, who understands what it will mean for her and does not like her fast-approaching future one bit.

Rex the Wonder Dog is Donnie's German Shepherd Dog. He is her heart and her love, a piece of home that keeps her sane.

Tanygrisiau yr Eglwys Wen is Donnie's dour feline familiar, who she immediately renames **Sylvester**. Occasionally, he allows her to see how impressed he is with her magical abilities.

The boombox provides clues to what Donnie should do next in the form of songs and their lyrics. While it will listen to her requests and sometimes her remonstrances, she cannot touch it with her magic, nor can anyone else.

Otis the horse and **Diana** the cow are Donnie's best friends at the Codlebærn valley. Otis loves blues music and Diana has a penchant for romance novels. Donnie gives Diana the choice to return to life as a human.

The chickens on the Codlebærn farm are Donnie's affectionate prognosticators for expected visitors.

Brindle is the leader of the six magical trees Donnie uses to expand her house. He is also used for the stirrups on her cotton saddle, so he is able to travel with Donnie on her adventures.

Parry, another house tree, is in love with Brindle.

Carly, the youngest of the house trees, is great friends with Rex and oftentimes plays word games with him in the bathroom.

Fine Fellow is a curious, very talkative house tree who loves nothing more than to learn. Brindle is the only one who can reliably get him to shut up.

Mournful Jack is a very quiet house tree and seldom speaks. He is apparently quite depressed, as evidenced by the forlorn sigh he emits whenever he converses with anyone.

Sophie is the oldest of the house trees and has known Brindle for thousands of years. She is tired, always very tired.

Mecholatera, who Donnie renames **Mickey T.** is a venerable Noctule bat who is good friends with Sylvester. He loves to play board games with his friends at the farm. His daughter Sephala and her mate Malerop have just had their latest litter of pups.

Mynydd Uchaf, former King of the Free Wolves, who Donnie renames **Warren**, is usually the first to reprimand Donnie whenever she is being unhelpful. He chooses a new path for his life, but must first let go of the old.

Falwain, Prince of Faen Eárna, is a widower who has been traveling the northern lands in search of adventure and death; instead, he joins with Donnie and ends up coming full circle in life.

Don **Diego**, known in Medregai as the Black Rider, has also been stolen away from his world, but by whom is a mystery. One thing he does know, he was rescued from certain death by Valledai...or was he?

Cyllwyn Mérd is an old willow tree who gives his life, and his life essence, to Donnie when she requests it.

Ungól is a Badûran Vírat who Donnie mischievously renames **Uncle** after he unceremoniously grabs her off her comfy saddle and drags her through several miles of filthy marsh water to his den. Palat, Sonau and Felin are his little brothers.

Valledai is an evil sorcerer who wants to exact his revenge on his enemies of old in Medregai. Donnie renames him **Valley Guy**. He is successful in shattering Donnie's heart, but has he also broken her resolve?

Liz Campos is Donnie's dearest friend from her world, who has been secretly held in Valledai's captivity for the past six months. Poor Liz is at her rope's end.

Julia Campos is to be experienced to be believed. Donnie does not particularly like her, but she is also held captive by Valledai and must be rescued.

Plug is Donnie's SUV, which has been quietly sitting in the barn absorbing more and more of Donnie's power.

Bronadulach, leader of the bears, is the Kaerdír of Donnie's magical lands, which are more properly called the Ganlonds. As Kaerdír, he leads the High Council and makes a convincing argument for war.

Méath-Degnír, leader of the wolves, is prepared to pit every one of his wolf packs, young and old alike, against their hated enemies.

Bórlem, leader of the birds of prey, does not feel it necessary to risk so many lives in a fight that should not involve the animals.

Mórbaen, leader of the ruminants, agrees with Bórlem and advocates peace to the High Council.

Belnesem is the King of the Sarn, a good friend of Falwaïn, and the enemy of Valledai. He arrives fortuitously early.

Galæron of the Woodland Álvar is the king's trusted advisor and friend. He commands the archery troops for the king's forces.

Akanna is from the Zal'Dorek Vinca of Gainál and is the king's army commander. She finds Diana fascinating.

Gaia, the Great Earth Mother, takes an informative walk with Donnie.

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Prologue

“Theris?”

“Yes, it is I,” a voice answered, struggling thinly out of the black, desert night. A woman’s moon face appeared, shimmering in the reflected light from the hallway.

Quickly, Selma drew the other woman into the house and closed the door. She passed a hand over the bolt lock and felt the responding resonance in its brass as it shot home. She turned to hustle Theris and her bundles to the back of the house and on into the kitchen. Once there, Theris placed one bundle onto the table, but kept the other squirming one in her arms.

“We will be safe here?” Theris inquired anxiously, struggling out of her wrap.

Selma nodded, helping her guest. She noted that Theris’s normally silky, long black hair was now lackluster, her face drawn and pale, her eyes midnight bruises needing reassurance. “I have made certain of it,” she replied to her friend’s query, “strengthening the protector spell every hour upon the hour. I’ve done practically nothing else all day, other than bake these.” She turned away for a moment, then set a plate of warm sugar cookies on the table in front of Theris.

“Your husband, he is away?”

Again Selma nodded, busying herself with making tea for them both. “Yes, his new job takes up most of his time. He thanks me for it, you know, says that I have inspired his true calling in life. He swears he will drive the devil from me, even if it kills him. To that end, every day he is up and gone before dawn to learn what he must to banish Beelzebub from my fingertips, and never returns from his research into casting out the evil of my kind from this world until a little past ten at night.”

“He knows then—what you are, I mean?” Theris sank down into a chair and stared at the other woman’s back. “Is this why you stay with him?” she whispered, her voice rough with dismay.

Selma let out a bark of disdain. “Yes,” she replied derisively. “Gary Wayne has threatened to expose me if I leave him and, since he’s insisted that we live amongst the *šikšil*, if he ever makes good on his threats, it would most likely mean my death. At the very least, I would have to return to that prison in Utah they call a *reservation*.” She swallowed bitterly. “I would lose my teaching post at the college and my life would never be what I dreamed it could be...which would still be a death of

sorts,” she admitted slowly before shrugging her shoulders with forced carelessness. “So, I stay with him and do as he asks.”

“Selma, your life will never be what you dreamed it could be if you stay with him—nor by taking my baby as your own!” Theris reproached the other woman, then sat back hard in her chair and grunted, knowing that Selma would do as she pleased no matter what Theris said to her. After a few moments of heavy silence between them, Theris looked down at her precious bundle and asked curiously, “How will you explain her presence to your neighbors and colleagues?”

Selma cleared her throat, momentarily grateful for the change of subject. “The school year only began last month and because of a fall I had—” With a visible, frustrated shake, Selma stopped herself from telling the usual lies, although she did not turn to face Theris. She allowed a low, humorless laugh to escape her lips. “I will be truthful with you, my sister. Because of an argument I had with Gary Wayne in the spring in which I ended up being hospitalized in Phoenix for several weeks, I missed the last few months of school. You see, my dear husband had given me a rather large number of bruises and broken bones. That was a little more than six months ago. I am healed now and finally got my clearance to go back to work only yesterday. Because of this, no one has seen me for quite some while, so I have decided to tell everyone that my hospitalization was because of the pregnancy. No one will question me on that.” Selma retrieved two cups from the cupboard and placed them on the counter in front of her, staring at them with unseeing eyes. “My colleagues never come here,” she explained further, her movements stilled and her voice deadened as she looked backward into her unhappy past. “Most of them never even talk to me. Even as far as we’ve come out here in the west with social reforms, my presence is just barely tolerated, along with my studies on the First Peoples, and those seem to make the other professors very uncomfortable with themselves and their history.” She broke suddenly from her reverie and gave a soft, rueful chuckle, as if she had only now realized how pathetic her life sounded when it was described out loud. “Anyway, like most people who’ve met him, our neighbors all hate Gary Wayne, so none of them have seen us in months either.”

Theris had listened to the other woman’s solemn confession with growing dismay. “Selma, you must leave him!” she finally managed to cry, her distress plaintive.

Selma whirled around to exclaim, “Oh, you needn’t worry about the baby—he would never dare touch her!” Selma shook her head, and her expression hardened. “His days of hitting me are also over, for I now have x-rays and photographs to prove his abuse and he doesn’t know

where I keep them.” Again conscious of how all this sounded when said out loud, she gave her friend a weak smile. “You see, we are at a stalemate, leading very separate lives. But have no fear, your daughter will be forever protected from him and his insane violence.”

“But you will not be able to protect her from his *influence*,” Theris pointed out carefully, not sure her child would ever truly be safe in this house.

“Don’t you understand, Theris,” cried Selma, “you must give her to me—I have foreseen this, just as you yourself have! Her place is with me and you know that I will protect her to my dying day. There is no other answer for you or for her.” Selma stared at Theris and reminded her quietly, “Sister, you must trust the will of the gods.”

Reluctantly, Theris nodded in acquiescence. She slowly began to unwrap the bundle in her arms and asked, “Do you want to see her?”

Selma shivered with pure bliss, a wide smile lighting her plain features and making her fiery, dark eyes dance. “I thought you would never ask!” She strode over to stand behind Theris’s chair and looked down upon the most beautiful face she’d ever seen. The little girl’s hair was black and downy, her eyes darkly mysterious, her flesh a dusky pink. She was perfect in every way.

The baby moved her tiny arms and stared up at her mother, who cooed softly to her offspring. A bubble formed on the child’s lips and popped, amusing the surprised babe judging from the widening of her eyes and her infant attempt at a giggle. The two women laughed with her.

“This is but her second day of life, you know,” Theris declared proudly. “She graced me with her presence yesterday morning at barely five o’clock.”

Selma nodded. “Yes, I marked her birth within my own womb, as though she really were my child.” She thought back to the odd, but intensely painful occurrence and marveled. “She is a very special girl,” said Selma in wonderment, “who has much to discover in this world, and I shall be honored to shepherd her along her life’s path. You have given me the greatest blessing of my life, my dear, dear friend. I shall love her always as my own,” Selma vowed, making this heart compact with both Theris and the child. “Have you named her?”

Theris shook her head. “I leave that to you. I have my own secret name for her, but you must give her the name she will carry in this world.”

The kettle whistled and Selma turned back to the counter to pour its boiling contents into the teapot. The strong scent of lavender soon wafted through the air, combining with that of the sugar cookies. She did not ask

her guest if she'd eaten, for it was obvious from the voracious way Theris had already consumed four of the cookies that she had not. Selma made a sandwich and placed it in front of Theris, who ate it quickly and economically.

"I brought no food, clothing, or other supplies for her," Theris confessed, not looking at Selma directly, wishing to hide the shame of that statement.

Selma reached across the table and caressed the back of Theris's hand. "I will buy everything she needs tomorrow morning. She will never want for anything, I promise." The two women's eyes met and a wealth of understanding passed between them. "And I will see to it that she gets a good education, both in the Craft and in worldly matters," Selma added.

"No!" Theris exploded, shaking her head vehemently. "You cannot be the one to teach her the ancient traditions! I have had a vision about just that—you must not teach her anything of our wisdom or our ways, or else it will be turned against her before she is ready. She must know nothing of it in herself or in you. There will come a time and a place where she must choose for herself whether she wishes to take up the ways of the Wise. If she decides to follow our path, there will be one beside her who will impart the basics to her. Only then can she make her own future and rise to meet her destiny. But you, my sister, must not teach her even the simplest of our traditions, especially not those of the ancestral Iquakawi."

"You are certain of this?" Selma asked, her eyes dulling with disappointment. "I cannot teach her the ways of the ancient sisterhood?"

"I am more certain about this than anything else," Theris replied soberly. "She must stay as hidden as possible, for as long as possible, which means that she must not practice the Craft at all or she will be found long before she should be. Promise me, Selma, that you will refrain from teaching her anything of our ways. She can know only the most modern traditions and nothing of what history has taught us to hide."

Selma nodded reluctantly and they finished their tea, discussing their beloved clan members, some of whom were missing, others known dead, until it was time for Theris to take her leave, for Gary Wayne would be home soon and neither woman wanted that confrontation to happen.

Theris stood, came around the table, and placed the baby in Selma's arms. She made a quick hand movement over the child's face and then stepped back, her goodbyes to her daughter made. She tightened her jaw with resolve and immediately became businesslike. With a slight nod she indicated the other bundle that she'd brought with her, which had

remained off to the side of the table untouched. "You must also have them. Hide them away and give them to her when you feel the need arise. They will protect her when you no longer can."

"What are they?" Selma asked absently, her heart flooding with a mother's love at the sight of the tiny, serene face shining up at her trustingly from the white cotton blanket. She spared a glance for the other bundle Theris had brought with her.

"They are the *Sôla*, the Two. They were given to me by her father." Theris gathered up her wrap, digging her car keys out of the pocket.

Selma, having hardly dared to enquire before now, ventured to ask, "Where is he?"

Theris looked at Selma and then at a cupboard with glistening eyes. "Dead, I fear," she confessed in a small voice. "I have not heard from him for some time. The last I saw him, he was still being hunted. But he knew of the child, knew she would be a girl, and that she would be raised by you." Theris returned her gaze to Selma and smiled forlornly. "He and I shared that vision...our last together...his seed taking root in me even then. He arose from our bed and gave me the *Sôla*, instructing me that they must be given to our daughter at a time that the *Sôla* will choose."

"The *Sôla* will choose?" Selma repeated, much puzzled by this command.

Theris nodded. "Yes. He said that they are the Two who will find the One, and the One can only be reached through our daughter. When I pressed for more, he merely said that they will find their way to the One, the One who will lead us out of darkness and into light." Theris shrugged helplessly and admitted, "He refused to say more." She glanced at the child now asleep in Selma's arms, her hand unconsciously clutching her heart where her mother's turquoise raven pendant had hung for many of her twenty-eight years. She swept the necklace from around her neck and placed it carefully upon the table, its silver chain clinking softly as it rained down slowly onto the hard, wooden surface. "Please keep this safe for her too, and when she is big enough, give it to her to wear always."

Selma looked at Theris with some agitation. "But why do you gift this to her now? Later, my sister, later is the time for that. Surely you can come to visit us occasionally—send word to me and I will see to it that Gary Wayne is away when you arrive. That way, you may know your daughter and she may know you, even though she cannot be told of your real ties to her."

But Theris shook her head and hurried from the kitchen, almost racing down the hallway in her haste to be away. Selma followed her, greatly disturbed by the raw fear that had just flashed across Theris's face. Theris had reached the door and swung it open by the time Selma

herself made it there. She caught the other woman by the arm and whispered hotly, “Bérnal is not the only one being hunted since the uprising at the Junction, is he? They are after you too!”

“Yes,” Theris conceded uncomfortably, her eyes downcast. She began to turn away.

“But where will you go, Theris?” Selma entreated, worry etched deeply upon her brow, wanting now to know so many other things that she’d believed the women would have time to reveal to each other in the coming years. But before any of these questions could formulate upon her lips, Theris turned back and touched her fingers to Selma’s cheek in a gentle caress, then she stole another look at her daughter.

Selma’s normal reserve broke and she let out a small cry of despair when Theris, before slipping away into the darkness, replied huskily, “To my death, dear sister. I go to my death.”

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 women 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.

They remained with their faces pressed together until Donnie let out a resolute sigh and carefully began to move herself out of her sleeping bag, doing all she could not to awaken Sylvester. Rex stood again and waited for her.

When Donnie got to her feet, she glanced over at the lighted candle on the table, where Warren sat listening and watching. He nodded good morning to her and Donnie sent him a fleeting smile in response before joining him at the table. Rex followed her, sitting down next to her chair and keeping his gaze solidly upon her.

She waved a hand and a cup of steaming hot tea appeared in front of her. "Do you want anything?" she asked Warren, keeping her voice hushed so as not to disturb Falwain and Diego, who both had their heads buried inside their sleeping bags.

"Black coffee, if you would be so kind," Warren murmured appreciatively, and Donnie obliged him with another wave of her hand.

"Breakfast is cooking at home," she said to Rex, glancing down at him after taking a sip from her tea. His stomach had grumbled rather loudly the moment before. "It'll be just a few more minutes before I can

send it here.” She set her cup down again and materialized a hot, wet washcloth into her hand, using it to freshen her face. At the same time, she materialized another cloth for Warren and he gratefully ran it over his face and neck. Afterward, he took the used cloth and folded it neatly, setting it down on the table in front of him. It disappeared instantly, as did Donnie’s when she was through with it.

“How are you feeling?” Warren inquired, giving her a sympathetic look.

Donnie shrugged. “Dunno, really,” she confessed to him. She stared at the table and ran her fingertips over its smooth wood. “It’s all too mixed up and I can’t concentrate on just one emotion, so...frantic with a forced calm exterior might describe it best.” She grimaced at Warren helplessly, then returned her gaze to the wood grain.

Warren nodded his comprehension. He cupped his hands around the mug of coffee, its warmth spreading into his cold fingers. After a moment of concerned silence, he said quietly, “Tell me about them. Your friends, I mean. What are they like?”

Donnie bit back ready tears and tried to smile. “Julia needs to be experienced to be believed,” she said with a shaky chuckle, “so I won’t say much about her other than I’m not her biggest fan. Nevertheless, she certainly does not deserve what’s been done to her here.” Donnie gulped with despair, then plunged on with feigned brightness. “And then there’s Liz, her sister, and Liz is just the best. I mean it; she is the nicest, kindest person I’ve ever known and she always seems to know what the right thing to do or say is, while me, I’m forever making all kinds of gaffes with all kinds of people. But Liz is one of those rare few who makes others her priority; you know what I mean?” asked Donnie, raising a questioning eyebrow at him.

But Warren shook his head. “Not really, no,” he answered flatly. “My life has not been filled with nice people, to be honest. It has mostly been filled with people who want something from me or who are either fearful or hateful toward me.”

Donnie gave him a consternated look and gasped, “Really, that’s all you get from people?”

He shrugged, then nodded.

“Well, I’m very sorry for that,” she apologized, almost wringing her hands with regret for mentioning the subject. “We humans can be total pieces of shit, can’t we?” she then observed with a bitter note in her voice.

“Yes,” he agreed crisply, “but *you* aren’t, which is why you cannot blame yourself for your friends’ situation.”

“Oh, can’t I?” she queried dryly. “Watch me.”

“No, I mean it, Donnie, it’s not your fault,” he repeated, reaching a hand toward hers. “There was no way you could know who Valledai held prisoner—”

Donnie snatched her hand away, her mouth set grimly. “Don’t tell me how to feel about this, Warren. Of course you don’t understand; how could you, given who you are? And I-I’m not ready to talk about it yet, so just drop it, please!” she demanded, scowling at him.

Her ire dissolved the moment she realized that she had distressed him, as evidenced by the widening of his eyes and the flush that crept up his face. She hung her head, her expression dismal. “Forgive me for that,” she whispered, “I just meant that you’re not a woman, so...”

He took a deep breath and then reached his hand toward hers again, this time catching it up in both of his and holding it. “No, I’m the one who is sorry. You are right; of course I don’t understand. Not only am I not a woman, I am not a witch, and I can only imagine how hard this must be for you. But you mustn’t let it make you feel anything other than resolved to rescue your friends, Donnie. Because the situation is truly not your fault. All blame resides with Valledai, and with him alone.”

Donnie agreed with a noncommittal shrug, slowly but firmly pulling her hand out of his grasp again. “I hear what you’re saying,” she told him, then turned her head to stare at the wall of the tent, the sun’s light brightening behind the opaque fabric with each passing minute, lending that side of the tent an almost otherworldly glow.

Warren waited for something more from her, but she said nothing further. He and Rex exchanged worried looks, with Warren trying to silently encourage the dog to supplement his appeals, but Rex too held his tongue. Eventually, Warren said in a low voice, “That will have to be enough for now, I suppose.”

Soon after that the others began to leave their sleeping bags. Not one of them remarked upon the conversation between Donnie and Warren or gave any sign that they had heard any portion of it, although they obviously must have.

With a small wave of her fingers, Donnie laid the kitchen table with a full breakfast of eggs and toast. Conversation, at first stilted, flowed easier as time went by and bellies filled, although all of them avoided asking Donnie any direct questions and each stole concerned glances at her throughout the meal. When everyone was finally finished eating, Donnie cleared the dishes with another, more relaxed flick of her hand, sending it all back to the cottage. She materialized a pen and paper onto the table’s whitewashed boards in front of her.

“Here you go,” she said quietly to Falwain, handing him the writing materials, “you get the message written and Rex will take it to wherever

this Año Nuevo place is. Rex, you might as well wait for a reply from the king and bring it back with you.” She smiled fondly at her dog and ruffled his fur, kissing the top of his head. He gave her a smile in return and both of their hearts were lifted some.

While the others stayed inside to discuss the wording of the message to be sent to Anûmanétus, Donnie went outside with Diego and the horses. Falwain’s thoughtful gaze followed them to the flap of the tent.

Donnie strode to the edge of their campsite and looked south, studying the contours of the snow-covered land. Diego busied himself with saddling the horses, marveling over Brindle, after first jumping back when the saddle appeared to meld itself onto Otis’s back. Hearing his exclamation of surprise, Donnie turned and explained to him about the nature of the hand-made rig. Diego nodded his head, more than a little bemused.

The boombox, which had attached itself to Donnie’s saddle after Diego had moved on to saddle the other horses, suddenly turned itself on and began playing Black Adder’s “Rock and Roll Highway” at top volume. Donnie turned around again and eyed it thoughtfully, then slowly twisted back toward the breathtaking vista extending below the campsite. Could she do it?

A few minutes later, the others emerged from the tent and she asked if they’d agreed upon the message.

Rex answered her in a rush. “Yep, Mama, I’m all ready to go,” he said. “Got the paper tucked into my collar, and I even know exactly where I’m going ’cause I’ve been there before. Oops! Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that, huh?” The dog looked up at her with sudden apprehension.

Donnie chuckled, got down on her haunches, and took Rex’s snout between her hands. Looking him squarely in the eyes, she declared, “It’s okay, my love. Remember what I said before: I want to hear all about your adventures some time, and I promise I won’t get that funny look on my face.” She gave him a couple of kisses in the mama spot and said, “Go quickly now and make sure you get a reply from the king. We’ll meet you back at the cottage.” With an audible whoosh of air, her dog disappeared before she’d even risen to her feet.

Warren, who was the only one besides Sylvester who could see the dog when he went, and then only as a shadow of movement, whistled in awe. “I have never before known any creature who could move faster than the wind howls around the Brumal Mountains in winter, as he does.”

“Yep, my Rex has many wonderful talents,” noted Donnie. “Used to be, his most important responsibility was to eat half the junk food I’d buy

so that I wouldn't eat it all. He certainly seems to have come into his own in this place."

Warren turned and looked at her steadily with humor. "He does you honor, Donemere," the Wolf King murmured.

She smiled back, nodding her head in agreement. "That he does, my friend. That he does."

When they were ready to go, she dematerialized the tent and everything in it to the cottage's front yard. Leading Otis behind her, Donnie turned her back on the others to walk to the edge of the campsite once more.

Falwaïn made a show of checking his saddle before mounting Gallantry, but when he found it was rigged perfectly, he grudgingly thanked Diego, who was already astride his own horse. Warren transformed into his wolven form. They were all waiting for Donnie, but still she just stood there surveying the southern landscape.

"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 Dí, 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 Falwain 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.

"Drats, I don't think they ever showed that part in the commercial; did they? Just how did they stop it without the car and driver getting crushed?" Donnie grumbled to herself irritably, chewing her lip in concentration. "Well, the commercial's creators weren't worried about having it close right behind them so nobody could follow; were they? So

they probably never even thought about it at all. It looks like you'll have to figure this one out for yourself, you idiot."

Her watch now read six-thirty. She decided to stop the spell around twelve or twelve-thirty. That was perhaps stretching it for the horses, especially (as Otis had pointed out) Tornado, who wasn't from this time in Earth's history and therefore came from a very different stock than either Otis or Gallantry, but she would risk it because she wanted to get home so they could rescue Liz and Julia as soon as possible.

For the most part, the ride thereafter was monotonous, with an occasional glimpse of large, muscular figures seen mostly in the distance running toward the riders as they and their road passed through the countryside. Donnie asked Falwaïn about them and he informed her they were trolls, confirming her suspicions. At first there were Snow Trolls like the ones they'd encountered at the cavern in Moên Flírbann, then nothing was seen for some time until a few, even larger creatures began to appear, some of which came uncomfortably close to the travelers' road, looking even more malevolent than the Snow Trolls with their flinty dark eyes and meanly cragged faces. These Rock Trolls, as Falwaïn called them, glared at the passersby with violent hatred, waving threateningly at them with boulder-sized fists, and Donnie was glad she had made safety one of the first rules of her road spell.

The horses ran at a strong, very fast gallop for a little more than six hours, by which time all were obviously tiring. It had also started to downpour several minutes earlier, so everyone was drenched. The first lightning strike had actually hit the road in front of them where it was being dug up.

Donnie had hoped the road would automatically match their pace, but they soon found themselves falling back farther and farther from the head of the road's opening. The increasingly wet ground was not helping either, slowing the horses and making their haul even harder. Warren too had slowed and was running just a little ways in front of the three horses. Donnie had been giving Diego's horse a shot here and there of her power for the last two hours, just so he could keep up. Even Gallantry had needed a couple doses of energy. Realistically, they couldn't be expected to go on much longer like this because their hearts would give out, no matter how much power Donnie gave to them. And she'd never forgive herself that, which meant she'd have to stop the road now.

The boombox had gamely stayed with them when the rain began because Donnie had hurriedly materialized a transparent rain slicker from home, which she draped over the front of the saddle to protect the electronic augur. The box was now in mid-swing on Cap Miller's "Space Cowboy."

It gave Donnie an idea. She shouted, "Computer, pause program!" She readied herself to raise a protective shield over her and her friends.

But nothing happened, other than the road continued.

This puzzled Donnie. It shouldn't really matter what she said so much as what she willed, and she'd willed the road to pause, which it should have done. This time, she shouted, "Stop program," and willed the road to just simply end. She glanced over at Falwaïn, who was watching her with concern, and again readied a protective shield.

Again nothing happened, other than the road continued. Donnie tried to freeze the road and everything associated with its making, even though she knew that probably wouldn't work because laying a charm on top of a spell that had gone awry hardly ever works in magic. It didn't work this time, either.

"Space Cowboy" ended abruptly and Cyrus Green's "Take Me to the River" came on. Donnie glanced down at the music box, but its behavior distracted her for only a moment. She tried once more to stop the spell, this time concentrating all her will on killing it completely. She drew her power inwardly to focus her will, but nothing happened again, other than the road continued.

Now she was totally freaked. That last try should definitely have worked!

Falwaïn shouted something, but Donnie didn't hear what he said because she was looking anxiously down at the horses. Foam was forming around their mouths and their bodies were covered with rivulets of salty sweat, mud, and cold rain. They were nearly done in and would soon falter. Which was just great—then her stupid, friggin' road would close upon them and everybody would be crushed under its rubble anyway, unless she was pretty goddamn quick about raising that protective shield around them all, she berated herself wildly.

The boombox again commanded her to get to the river and Donnie's head snapped up. Over the heap of the road's crown, she spied a straight, flat river less than half a mile ahead. Suddenly, she knew what they had to do. She looked at Falwaïn, who was already pointing to the river, and nodded her head in silent agreement. She turned to her left to see that Diego was also nodding.

She looked back at Falwaïn, who shouted over the roar of the fast-moving road, "That's what I was trying to tell you just now, that we are approaching the Cabel'arík. We must move forward to the front of the road, and at my mark, cut into its waters. Agreed?"

At their riders' bidding, the horses increased their speed and, when they came even with Warren, Falwaïn shouted the full plan to him. They

all moved forward now so that they were only a few feet from the head of the road. Less than a minute later, they hit the open riverbed.

The Cabel'arik was a wide, shallow river, almost more of a creek. But it ran swiftly, so the wall of water the road held back on their left, which was the upstream side, had risen to well over thirty feet in the middle of the riverbed by the time the travelers passed it. The horses thundered through the foot-deep water and silt of the river bottom, throwing great gobs of mud backward. Donnie gazed around her and then upward at the cascade of water that was now forming an eerie, greenish-brown tunnel as it spilled over them and into the downstream side of the river. She was momentarily mesmerized by the show of force as the water rushed overhead, all manner of fish, insects, and river detritus sliding above her at dazzling speeds. Hearing a loud crashing sound from behind that quickly became deafening, Donnie turned and looked backward, swallowing hard when she saw the source of the noise: the river had already been released and a violent rush of water was bearing down upon them. She urged Otis on.

Just before the shoals on the far side of the river, the tunnel formation ended and only a towering wall of water remained, which stood about fifteen feet high and diminished in height as it reached toward the shore. At Falwain's signal, Donnie and the others increased their pace so that the head of the magical road was just in front of them and when he yelled, "Now!", all of them turned sharply to the left. In concert, the three horses broke through the shoulder-high wall of water there and ran upstream, pebbles beginning to pelt their heads and shoulders because the head of the road had already reached the far edge of the riverbed, and had begun heaving dirt back at them. Once out of danger from the road, the horses then had to bank sharply to their right to get out of the way of the fast-moving wake when the river was let loose from the road spell. Great torrents of water surged and pulled at the horses' legs when the river flooded its banks, and then again pulled at them when it receded to, once more, flow freely downstream.

Warren, anticipating their cut into the water, turned on a final burst of speed so that the wall of water he went through was no higher than his belly. He too then veered right and sprinted up the riverbank, successfully managing to elude the rebounding wave created by the river's sudden resurgence.

The horses came to a stop, trembling in the knee-deep waters swirling around them. Both the storm and the road churned on without the travelers, leaving a wide path of destruction leading toward home which Donnie knew she'd have to pay dearly for one day. Well then, she chided herself hotly, to make sure that didn't happen, she'd just have to right as

many of Valley Guy's wrongs as she possibly could by the time this was all over, wouldn't she?

Thoroughly soaked and even more thoroughly pissed at herself, she hung her head low, chin to chest. She wondered what the hell had gone wrong with her spell. Their ride here had been a little too close to disastrous for comfort, when it should've been a brisk, but perfectly safe passage for them.

The others had dismounted by the time Donnie raised her head, her eyes fiery with angry recrimination. The three horses were drinking deeply of the river water and were still shaking from their fast-paced, extended flight of the morning. The men let their own horses drink just a little, then led them to the sandy beach that lay along the river. Already, the dirt there was drying in the hot sun.

In the meanwhile, Donnie had gotten off Otis and waded to the water's edge, plopping down with a splash into the cooling river current. "Okay, we won't try that again," she wailed miserably, nearing tears. "Me and my bright ideas! I almost got us all crushed to smithereens and, failing that, drowned like rats! As if either of those wouldn't have been bad enough—oh no, I have to go for broke and damn near do both!"

After crawling out of the folds of Donnie's sopping wet sleeping bag, a decidedly bedraggled Sylvester meowed angrily from the saddle atop Otis and demanded with a somewhat hysterical shout, "Someone remove me from Otis immediately before this fluvial viscera poisons me to death!"

Falwaïn hid a grin and lunged through the dreaded water to retrieve the pathetic-looking feline. Thereafter, the cat sulked on the shore under the thick canopy of trees, cleaning and drying his matted, spikey fur in affronted silence.

Donnie continued to castigate herself while her friends astutely ignored her. She slapped the water repeatedly, let loose several long strings of imaginative expletives, and otherwise threw a jolly good tantrum, dark blue arcs of her Fægre power escaping every which way from her fingertips, her eyes fiercely blue with wrath at herself. When she was finished, she got up and joined the others on the river bank, her power restored back inside her and her irises their normal, clear green.

Dripping water everywhere, she asked piteously, "Are you guys really mad at me?"

Warren, who'd transformed into his human form a few minutes before, raised an eyebrow at her and replied, "There would not be much point to that, as you appear angry enough for all of us combined. Calm yourself. We are safe and we've made good time. The Cabel'arik lies well below the marshes, which means we've traveled more than halfway

back to the cottage. We're also out of troll country and should be safe to camp here for a few hours, or even overnight if need be. The horses must rest before we resume our journey, as do I. If you truly wish to atone for your recklessness, we could all use sustenance."

Donnie gulped and blinked back her tears. She looked at her watch and saw that it was a little before one. If they rested for a few hours, they could get more hours traveling time in later, maybe even make it home before morning. They still had at least five, maybe six, hours riding at a brisk—not breakneck, never again at *that* speed, she vowed to herself—pace before they'd be back at the cottage. But first, as Warren had advised, they all needed food.

With a wave of her hand, the dining room table appeared, covered with the usual light fair of a midday meal. Donnie waved her hand again and three small tubs of oats appeared at the water's edge for the horses, whose sides were still heaving. While she was getting all that arranged to her liking, the men unsaddled the horses.

Everyone except Sylvester (who was still far too displeased with Donnie to be anywhere near her) and the horses, of course, sat down at the table and immediately began to eat with gusto.

At the end of the meal, Diego, having gulped down his berry juice in one swig, took a last bite of bread. When he'd swallowed it, he hesitated, but finally ventured, "Did not the storm strike you as misplaced?"

The others looked at him in surprise, then at each other.

"It is just that it seemed very similar to the storm that arose in Banaff Dír when Valledai rescued me," he added thoughtfully.

Donnie threw her napkin down beside her empty plate in disgust and jumped back in her chair. "No wonder I couldn't pause my spell!" she shouted. "I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts that Valley Guy jinxed it for me! He had to've. I mean, think about it, if another spell was laid on top of mine, I couldn't have stopped, let alone controlled, my spell, no matter what I tried! All I could've done was modify his spell—if I'd known about it, that is. Well, the sneaky, rotten bastard!"

Fearing another outpouring of invectives, Falwain interjected hastily, "That must have been what the first lightning strike was for. I noticed that it struck the road before the rain began to fall."

Warren nodded, murmuring slowly, "But how did he know about our road?"

"Or the wording of my spell, how'd he know about that? 'Cause he couldn't have touched it without knowing just how I worded it," Donnie pointed out angrily. "Well, admittedly, if I'd cast it correctly in the first place, he wouldn't have been able to meddle with it, even if he had known the wording. Hey, maybe one of the trolls sent a message to

Valley Guy about us. But no, that still wouldn't explain how he knew exactly the right way to mess up my spell."

Glancing first at Diego, Falwaïn said, "Nor could word have reached him that quickly, unless he used something from the future. Is there such a thing?"

Donnie shrugged. "Well, sure, there's the telephone. But you'd need the infrastructure to go with it in order to make it work, and I haven't seen any telephone poles or cellular towers around here, have you? Or have we finally hit on something you didn't read about the other night?"

Falwaïn gave her his best lopsided grin. "No, as of yet we have not. I just wasn't sure if there was anything besides the telephone that could relay a message almost instantly. Oh, that's right, computers could do it, with the aid of this World Wide Web I read of."

Shaking her head in amazement, Donnie replied, "Yeah, but again, you'd need the infrastructure for it. No, you know what? I think it's something else entirely. Remember the brother snake said that Valley Guy consulted a book when he went to report on my capture? Maybe it's not a Book of Shadows or Light, like I thought. Maybe it's actually about me, or rather, what's happening to all of us! Seriously, you guys, don't look at me like that! Before she left, Catie told Sylvester that the tales of my adventures had been passed down through the generations of the Codlebærn family. What if those tales are in a book and that book is the same one Valley Guy has?"

She gasped in shock, knowing that she had somehow hit upon the truth. "Think about it – that's how he knew I'd freaked out over my powers! Remember when he asked if I'd truly come to terms with them and with possibly living forever? How else could he have known my private thoughts?" she wondered, looking around at the others.

"Then he must know everything we are going to do before we do it," Warren said with concern.

Donnie shook her head slowly, her faced screwed up with doubt. "I don't think so. He told the brother snake that I would do one of three things, all of which were wrong. It sounds to me like the book is writing itself as we go, so it's not always accurate. It may be one step ahead and, then again, it may be a step behind if we manage to do something unpredictable."

"If that is true, then he will soon know we are aware of the existence of this book," Diego put in, again tentative in his manner, clearly aware that his presence was only just being tolerated by the other two men.

"Okay, then let's stop talking about it until I figure out a plan for us!" Donnie exclaimed.

Warren and Falwaïn both stared at her, their eyebrows rising slowly and identical grave expressions on their features. Diego looked from one face to another, his own expression guarded.

After a few, pregnant moments of silence, Falwaïn pointed out in an even tone, "It might be best to wait until we are back at the cottage to discuss our plans, certainly. But I think more than just one person should formulate those plans, don't you?"

Donnie turned red. She studied his and Warren's resolute faces. "Um, you mean, in light of my misguided plan this morning?" she asked.

Warren shook his head. "No, that is not what we mean, Donemere. But we are in this together, and we must remain so. Remember, as you urged me some days ago, if we talk openly and ask questions of one another, we might be able to give each other ideas."

Donnie smacked herself on the forehead. "Duh, what was I thinking? I should be viewing this as a business and in a business what do you need most? Besides capital, I mean. Hellooooo, Donemere Huntley Saunders, you need to build a strong team! Hoo, boy, I wish Liz were here now, she's practically made team-building her life's work."

The men waited patiently for Donnie to finish, while she went on to lecture them about the importance of empowerment, participation, common vision, and communication within their little group. She began by clarifying their goals, that of rescuing her two friends and of defeating Valley Guy. Then she began enumerating what she felt were the most likely inhibitors to those goals.

At one point, Falwaïn turned to Warren and asked in a low voice, "Do you think she really needs us to be here for this?"

Warren shook his head, his voice also low when he answered. "I do not believe so, no. From what Sylvester has told me about her, I gather she can go on like this for hours, whether we remain or not."

Donnie, who'd insisted that the library let her materialize some books on team building, was engaged in writing down lists of potentially restrictive issues on a large pad of paper and was so preoccupied during the men's exchange that, when she looked up from her papers a few minutes later upon hearing Sylvester angrily bellow her name and demand that she come get him at once, was completely surprised to find that she was now alone at the table.

Warren and Falwaïn had moved upriver to fish, signaling to Diego by their manner that he would not be welcome to join them. So Diego, who could not hear the animals talk, but understood that they did and that the others could hear them, had sat next to Sylvester and was trying to make friends with him. He'd picked up the cat and was holding him on his lap, rubbing Sylvester's ears and cooing to him, even though it was obvious

the cat wanted nothing more than to escape. And the cat had apparently picked up Donnie's ability to swear like a drunken sailor on a weekend pass, as he was demonstrating rather impressively at the moment.

Donnie expelled a heavy breath and said, to no one in particular, "That went rather well, didn't it?"

Sighing once more, she got up and went over to extricate Sylvester, pulling him off Diego's lap and depositing him on the sandy riverbank. Diego stared at the ground in front of him, wooden faced.

Donnie dropped down onto the dry dirt next to him and informed him, "I'm going to do you a favor. While you're here, you're going to be classified as a Doctor Pennywell."

Diego gazed at her uncomprehendingly until she waved her hand.

"—nice puss puss, my ass! If he ever says that to me again, I shall scratch his eyes out! I swear I will! Tempestuous terrors abide, what an ungodly nightmare you have subjected me to, Donemere Huntley Saunders, *lately* of the Codlebærn clan! And 'tis barely midday—that must be a record, even for you! First, you begin this shockingly offensive day by carrying me off on the most appalling ride of my life, a savage journey which I was beginning to believe would never end and then, to add insult to injury, you nearly drown us all, forcing me to get soaked from head to bloody, friggin' toe by ordering Otis to leap through that colossal barrier of river blood—without even asking my leave for any of this! And, as if all that were not bad enough, oh, no, you have now let that blasted, psychotic moron pick me up and call me—" The rest was lost on the wind as the furious cat stalked downriver a ways more, shaking his back legs on each and every step, ears plastered to his head and obviously bitching the entire way.

Donnie pursed her lips, shaking her head a little, and counseled Diego seriously, "It's never a good idea to pick Sylvester up unless he asks you to. He's not a pet, you know; he's my familiar. Which means he believes he has dignity." She eyed the receding back end of the cat with a raised eyebrow and observed dryly, "Not that you can tell from that display."

Diego nodded thoughtfully and glanced upriver at the two men.

Noting the quick look, Donnie said, "Don't worry, Warren may have heard it but Falwaïn wouldn't have been able to. And I don't think Warren would tell him. Falwaïn's the one you have to worry about anyway, not Warren."

Diego shook his head slowly and contemplated the far shore. "Why should Warren accept me? I tried to kill his friend Catie."

Donnie nodded in agreement. "So'd he when Valledai first turned him into a werewolf. You just got farther at it than he did. Falwaïn, on the other hand, has never really been touched by darkness. He doesn't know

the temptations that go along with it. But...Falwaïn is true and fair and honest. He'll come around eventually; see if he doesn't. I'll betcha whatever you want, within reason, of course," she offered.

Diego shot a look in her direction. "You seem to very much enjoy wagering," he observed.

"You noticed that already, huh?" Donnie suddenly wore a sunny smile on her lips and a devilish gleam glinted in her eye. "You know, even when I was a little girl I always had this odd penchant for betting, a propensity which has dogged me throughout my life. Although, I feel I should point out that I seldom use money as stakes. As a matter of fact, if I recall correctly, my first real wager was the time I bet Billy Cantrell that I could take his bicycle apart completely and put it back together when he and his friends refused to let me join their stupid boys' club. Um, a bike's a two-wheeled vehicle you pedal with your feet to make it go," she explained, turning to look at Diego, who informed her that he had seen such a contraption in Mexico City.

"Really?" Donnie squeaked with amazement. "I didn't realize bikes had been around that long. Anyway, I got the bike apart all right, but putting it together again was a different story. There was only one screw and a couple of washers left over by the time I was done, but they proved to be somewhat integral to the stability of the bike; something Billy didn't find out until he was flying down Buckhorn Hill on it, which, by the way, is a very steep hill. Oh, he wasn't hurt all that badly," she assured the shocked Diego hastily, even now, all these long years later, still defensive over the mishap. "Besides, Billy's broken arm and leg gave him a certain cachet with the other third-graders that he'd never had before, and probably never would've had on his own. Personally, I think he should've thanked me for his tabloid popularity after it happened. Even the local newspaper got in on it and ran a story with Billy's picture on top. It was all a real nine-day wonder, let me tell you. Yep, Billy was quite the little celebrity for a while. But, man, was I ever vilified by him and his friends for the rest of the summer! No biggie, though, I could always throw a punch harder than any of those squirrely boys ever could. And I was way, way faster than them." Secretly, Donnie had always speculated that this incident and its aftermath was why, at the end of that long-ago summer, her father had moved their family to San Francisco.

Diego stared at Donnie with bemusement for a moment, then, finally beginning to truly relax around her, he gave a small, humorous chuckle, pointing out, "You were a rather terrifying child, were you not?"

“That I was,” she agreed laughingly. She patted him once on the leg, then got up and dusted off the seat of her pants. Grinning down at him, she asked if he’d like to play a game of *Kingdom*.

A few hours later, they enjoyed some trout for dinner, along with wine and rice pilaf. Fat and happy after their delicious meal, the men overruled Donnie’s vigorous protests and decided to spend the night camped there to allow the horses more rest. With as much grace as she could muster, she relented and magically cleaned and dried the rest of their wet gear, also recalling the tent for them to sleep in.

In the morning, they were up early, breakfasted, and gone from the banks of the river by six o’clock. They alternately trotted and galloped home over the next five and a half hours following the same route Donnie’s road spell had taken to the northern edge of her magical lands, where it abruptly stopped. Donnie thanked the gods that the road had passed all that way without demolishing anyone’s homes or fields. The only real harm done was to the Annûar Path and Donnie rectified that quite easily. Nonetheless, she felt so guilty about the carnage made to the land, she used a goodly portion of her magical power to repair the damage the road had caused, restoring the land to at least a semblance of its prior, pristine condition all along the road’s length in seconds. She felt much better after she did this, although she was also concerned that she may have depleted her power reserves so much that it might make it impossible for her and her friends to safely free Liz and Julia from the multitudes guarding the women.

When they arrived at the cottage, Sylvester, who had refused to even look at Donnie since yesterday afternoon, let alone talk to her, bolted off the saddle and disappeared into the forest a minute later. The men unsaddled the horses while Donnie slipped into the stables to greet Diana and the chickens.

Diana cried a tearful hello when she saw her friend burst through the doorway. Donnie ran over to give the cow a long, hard hug. The chickens flocked into the stall too and crowded around Donnie’s feet until Diana yelled at them to stop messing up her reunion with her friend. The men came in leading the horses and Donnie gave the cow a quick kiss on the cheek, saying, “I’ll come talk to you after I’ve had a shower, and we can catch up on things then, okay?”

Since there were only three stalls in the stables, Donnie moved Diana to a smaller one, Otis kept his, and the other two nonmagical horses shared Diana’s old one.

Donnie decided to leave the tent up in the front yard, where she’d sent it this morning when they’d left the Cabel’arík, and moved her camp bed into it, plus some other basic furnishings so that Diego would have some

space that was just his. He went inside to arrange it all to his liking, while the other two slipped away to Falwaïn's room at the back of the stables.

Having announced earlier when they'd reached the valley that she had dibs on the shower, Donnie now sauntered into her bedroom where she stripped off her clothes and stuffed them into the wardrobe for recycling. From there, she hurried into the bathroom, eager to get really clean once again.

She smoothed a cleansing mask on her face and stepped into the shower, after hitting the cistern six times with heat bolts. She took her time, letting the hot water rain onto her body for so long that she had to refill the cistern hastily when the water pressure dropped.

After her shower, for the heck of it, as she told herself, she put on a little mascara and eye liner. She stepped back from the mirror and surveyed her handiwork. Not too bad, she decided. She walked into the bedroom while she combed out her wet hair, still chatting comfortably with the five trees who'd stayed home, finishing the recounting of her recent adventures, leaving out her guilty feelings about Liz and Julia. Even though Brindle had already told them some of it, they were all greatly shocked and commiserated with her over her friends, and declared Valledai a fiend of the most dreadful order. And they promised they would welcome Diego as a true comrade, if that is what Donnie wanted them to do. She said it was, and so they repeated their intentions to make him feel at home.

When she went to the kitchen, the fridge door opened and a wheel of cheddar cheese flew onto the counter. Donnie cut herself a slice. She was still munching on the wedge when she heard raised voices coming from outside. Then she heard what sounded like a fist smashing into a face. She ran to the door and yanked on it before it managed to swing open on its own.

Falwaïn and Diego were engaged in a round of fisticuffs in the front yard. Diego's nose was bloodied and Falwaïn had him on the ground. He was about to land another blow when Donnie screamed at them to, "Stop it right now, both of you!"

Falwaïn pulled back the punch and got up from Diego, breathing hard and very angry. The boombox had appeared on the ledge of the well at the beginning of the fight and had been softly playing Henry Neilson's "The Way It Is." Whereas the others had ignored it, Donnie spared the box a long, comprehending look.

"He is the one who betrayed us to his master with your spell for the road," Falwaïn spat, looking down upon the other man with undisguised disgust.

Diego got one knee up and leaned on it, wiping his bloody nose with the back of his hand, then shook his head. His flashing dark eyes held Falwaïn's gaze steadily. "No, it was not I. I tell you, Valledai is not my master. I am my own man," he ended proudly, and quite nasally. His nose was obviously broken.

Donnie walked up to Falwaïn and demanded in a tight voice, "How do you know this? What makes you so damn sure?"

"I feel it. I know it was he who betrayed us," he insisted stubbornly, the boombox gently reminding them that some prejudices would remain no matter how many laws were passed banning discrimination.

Donnie glanced at the boombox, then she rounded on Falwaïn, nearly screeching, "That's it? You feel it? You know it? With no proof whatsoever? Do you really expect me to believe that's what this is really about? Oh, gods and goddesses of the deep abyss, help me keep my temper this day. One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten. Nope, not enough! Eleven-twelve-thirteen-fourteen-fifteen-sixteen-seventeen-eighteen-nineteen-twenty. Maybe! I'll certainly do my best to *not* explode. Where's Warren, by the way?"

Falwaïn looked about them angrily and said he didn't know just as Warren strode around the corner of the stables. He held the other men's swords in his hands.

"I wanted to make sure these were not used. I thought they would be safer in my care for the time being." Warren shrugged at Donnie, adding, "I was just going to let them fight to get it out of their systems."

She shook her head, still fuming, then turned back to Falwaïn. "Okay, believe it or not, I really am trying not to explode here. Therefore, explain to me just how Diego is supposed to have told Valley Guy about my spell?"

"Valledai must have touched his mind, like you did to me after you were taken by the Great Serpent in the marshes. He has most likely been in communication with Valledai all the while since we left the cavern. Donnie, you should not just disregard the fact that he gladly pledged his honor to Valledai as easily as he did to you. He is not to be trusted!" Falwaïn's jaw jutted out obstinately. He barely noticed the pain in it from a left hook the foreigner had landed squarely upon it because he was so furious, and not just with the Black Rider anymore.

Donnie turned to Diego and asked icily, "Well, has he? Has Valley Guy been talking to you in your head?"

Diego shook his head in confusion. "No, I-I, what do you mean? I do not understand."

"Like this, has Valledai ever done this to you?" Donnie projected her peevish inquiry into his startled mind.

Diego clapped his hands to his ears in shocked disbelief. “¡*Madre de Dios!* How do you do that? Your lips never moved, not once, yet clearly I heard your voice! No, I swear to you, I have never felt anything like what you just did to me. Never!”

Donnie turned to Falwain and asserted haughtily, “I believe him.”

Falwain let out an angry snort and shook his head. “He is lying, of course. His kind never tells the truth.”

Donnie caught her breath, then heaved an outraged snort of her own. “*His kind?* That means the boombox and I are right to doubt your honor, is that it? Well, as far as I’m concerned, you can go to the devil with that kind of thinking! We are all equal here, no matter the color of our skin! You’d best know this now, I will not tolerate that from anyone, ever! That is what tore my country apart long ago and keeps us divided even still. By all that is plain to those with open eyes, Falwain, all you had to do was watch Diego when I touched his mind to know that he’s never experienced anything like it before. But that’s not good enough for you, is it? You are just so hell-bent on hating him, no matter what, simply because he reminds you of the Mehen’Adrium, just like he did the people of Banaff Dír! Well, I guess we’ve finally found your greatest shortcoming and I must say it’s quite ugly!”

She was shaking with indignation; this was all too much for her to handle right now. “You know what? I am done with this shit,” she said, eyeing him acrimoniously. “You smell bad. We all smell bad. Oh, that’s right, not me anymore. Why? Because I did something constructive; I took a shower! I didn’t act out my aggressions on anyone—although I sure as hell would love to—I didn’t start any fights, and I certainly didn’t break any noses.” She pointed toward the house, her eyes blazing green sparks. “I’m asking you now, Falwain, before you say something I find completely unforgivable, to please go take one yourself. You reek of sweat, dirt, and blood, not to mention skyrocketing levels of both testosterone *and* racial intolerance!”

Falwain glared back at her for a moment, his lips pressed tightly together, then he stalked inside wordlessly. Still trembling with fury, Donnie ordered Diego to come to the well with her and sit on its ledge. He meekly acquiesced. After setting the swords on the bench, Warren also followed her and stood on the other side of the injured man, watching Donnie closely but saying nothing.

Materializing some small towels, Donnie had one fly down to the water, soak and wring itself, then fly back to her. She handed the damp towel to Diego and told him to clean his face. He tried to talk to her, but she wouldn’t listen. She just gave him an angry stare until he fell silent. When his face was clean, she put her hand on his nose, concentrated her

power on it, and a moment later they all heard the crackle of bone and cartilage snapping back into place.

"There." She backed away and gave Diego another angry scowl for good measure.

"I did not betray you," he avowed, his dark eyes flashing with conviction.

"I know that." She turned and busied herself with picking up things and dematerializing them, afterward stalking silently into the stables.

Warren raised his eyebrows, then sauntered casually along behind her. He leaned against the doorframe and, after a few moments, said to her stiff back, "Donemere, you must understand the ways of men. It had to happen. It *will* have to happen. You cannot keep them from sorting this out."

She flipped a pair of saddle bags onto the hitching rail before retorting irritably, "They don't have to kill each other while they're about it, do they? Oh, I am so angry, I could spit. Men! I swear, you can't live with 'em and you can't sell 'em for body parts!" She wheeled around to Warren and opined, "You know, I really would've thought Falwaïn was a lot more intelligent than this!"

Warren's eyebrows had raised again when Donnie expressed her opinion on the masculine side of the human race, but his tone when he spoke was gentle. "Are you surprised to find that he is human? He is jealous and wary of Galto. To my mind, that is most understandable. Falwaïn simply wishes to assert himself over his enemy. And you must not forget, Donemere, Galto *branded* Falwaïn." He paused here for effect. "I assure you, Falwaïn has not forgotten that."

After a moment, Donnie looked up from her unpacking and relented. "Okay, I see what you're saying. But fighting amongst ourselves is counterproductive, especially when it's about—oh, hell, maybe I'm wrong about why Falwaïn hates Diego and maybe you're right. I hope so. Regardless, we have to work together. I know you guys got bored hearing this yesterday, but we have to be—"

"A team?" Warren interjected

"Yes, a team," she repeated sternly.

"That is something you cannot force, Donnie," he admonished her. "It will happen or it will not. We shall all work together as well and as long as we can. There may be fractures along the way."

She sighed, then nodded her head in tired agreement. "I guess I'm okay with that as long as there are no more *actual* fractures. One broken nose is enough, as far as I'm concerned. Oh, I better go show Diego how to work the shower. I see Falwaïn's out now."

Donnie hurried to Diego and told him to follow her into the house. As they passed Falwaïn, she asked if the cistern needed more water.

He shook his head once, not looking at either of them, and stalked off to the back of the stables. Most of this was wasted on Donnie because she'd swept huffily into the house, Diego in tow. She went through the instructions on the various bathroom fixtures, ending with an introduction to the walls, and then left Diego alone. Back in the bedroom, she pulled out a new set of clothing just like those she'd duplicated for the other men from Falwaïn's originals, figuring they would help Diego blend in better in case they had to mix with the townspeople again anytime soon. And if that indeed happened, hopefully none of them would recognize him as the "evil dream" Valley Guy had convinced them he was, and once again try to murder him.

Donnie placed the clothes on the bed, called out to Diego to let him know they were there, and then went into her office, sitting at her desk for a few minutes until she heard the shower go off. Slowly she rose and went to a bookshelf. The books and magazines shifted in front of her and she spied the ones she wanted. These she placed on the coffee table in two piles.

When she heard Diego go outside, she went out too, just a few steps behind him. Falwaïn and Warren were sitting by the well. They'd been talking but stopped as soon as Diego came out. He walked toward the tent until Donnie's quiet voice halted him.

"I'd like the three of you to come to my office. Please." She squared her shoulders and looked Falwaïn in the eye. He met her gaze, his look cold and intractable. "Remember when I asked you to trust me about Diego? Well, I want to show you why, if you don't mind."

Reluctantly, the men moved toward the house, following Donnie into the office without a word spoken between them. Once inside the office, she asked them to sit down and they sat, staring at her with either resentment or curiosity, depending on who it was.

"In case you don't realize it yet," she began, encompassing Falwaïn and Diego in her look, "you are both in my library. And I want you to read about each other. You might as well read about Diego too, Warren. Then maybe all of you will finally be convinced that we're on the same side."

With definite trepidation, the men eyed the two large stacks of reading material she'd laid out for them to peruse.

Donnie turned to walk out of the room and hesitated a moment in the doorway, adding, "Just so you know, the doors to this room won't open until you're finished. So, read fast, time is wasting." With this last warning, she closed the door before any of them could reach it, although

all three had instinctively given startled lunges toward her. She held her breath and waited for a few moments, listening to them banging and pulling on this door and, a moment later, on the one at the back of the room, their voices raised in consternation and anger. But at least it was all directed against her this time and not each other.

Donnie went over and stood gazing out the front door, looking at nothing in particular. She decided she was not fit company for anyone right now, so when the thought suddenly popped into her head that perhaps this was the perfect opportunity to visit Catie's salt works, she welcomed the idea.

Taking a canteen of water with her, she left the house and hiked up the bank to the western side of the valley's ridge. The band of forest was much thinner here than elsewhere, only about a hundred feet or so wide. When she came out on the other side, she caught her breath at the majestic scenery that lay before her. The moors rolled away for miles, each one somehow looking bigger than the last, creating an undulating sea of heath that was marred only by several copses of assorted trees and a spider's web of thick, rambling lines of overgrown shrubbery. Far to the south lay a dense forest that spread over several hills, running on into the distance.

The salt works lay directly below Donnie, at the bottom of the moor on which she stood. She carefully made her way down the treacherous slope to the huge evaporation pond, which was nearly filled to capacity with a briny solution. Large mounds of various colors and grain sizes of salt crystals were piled here and there on the edges of the pond, seemingly willy-nilly. She walked over to a grey one close to her and ran her hand down its side, making a faint trail in it with her fingers. Taking a small pinch between her fingers, she placed it on her tongue. It tasted like sea salt, the same as the rest of the salt at the house. Was it truly sea salt or did it taste like that simply because it wasn't processed?

She regarded the pond curiously and mused, "If it is sea salt, I wonder where Catie gets the seawater? Especially since there aren't any oceans or seas around here. And why don't the villagers just come and take however much salt they want, whenever they want it? Hmm, maybe she's charmed this place somehow so they can't take any of it away. But, then too, why don't they just dig salt out of the ground and refine it themselves? Why come all the way here for it? Unless Catie gives them bargain-basement prices, a minimum of twenty-five miles seems like a very long distance to go just for salt, no matter how precious a commodity it is. And how has it stayed dry all winter? Another charm of Catie's?"

Next to the mound of salt she'd tasted stood another one quite close by. Its crystals were brown in color. Donnie tasted a pinch from that mound and found it had a smoky flavor to it. She wondered if that was what the fire pit was for. She'd never heard of smoking salt before, but she liked its taste. She investigated the other mounds. Some were coarsely grained, while others were almost like flakes. She swept a handful of these high into the air and watched with amazement when all the flakes flew back and settled onto the mound. Ah, yes, Catie had definitely charmed the salt works, and quite extensively it seemed.

Looking around, Donnie noticed that the ground between the mounds and all around the evaporation pond was uncommonly clean. She looked upward and could just make out a sort of haze hovering above, a thin protective film that apparently shielded the entire salt works from the elements. Another charm, no doubt. She decided to taste a few of the other salts, so she moved to the next mound, which had a distinct fragrance of lavender emanating from it.

After a while, Donnie found herself wandering around almost as though she was looking for something, but what that could be, she had no clue. It was just a feeling that there was something here she needed, or maybe it was something she'd lost? But that would be impossible since she'd never been here before.

The urgency of the feeling grew.

Whatever it was, she needed to find it, see it, touch it once more. It was something important, of that much she was sure. She spent almost half an hour scrutinizing every bit of Catie's salt operation that she could get to, but to no avail. Nothing caught her eye, there were no "Eureka!" moments anywhere. Puzzled, she finally gave up and trudged back up the moor toward the forest. With the afternoon sun still blazing high in the sky, she slowly approached the line of trees that encircled the valley, lost deeply within the heart-wrenching pain and guilt she just couldn't escape. This burden weighed heavily upon her shoulders constantly now, never truly leaving her, not even for a moment. It edged everything she said, did, and felt with uncompromising bitterness, no matter how hard she tried to force lightheartedness upon herself.

As she passed through the first band of mostly oaks and willows, Donnie stilled her footsteps. An odd image had flitted across her mind. She shook her head and stared at the trees and bushes around her. Their leaves rustled faintly in the light wind that blew through them. Shaking her head once more, she resumed walking. Again the picture flashed through her mind. It was the image of a boy running amongst some trees. Not these trees here, no, but somewhere close by.

She stopped in her tracks and let herself open up to the memory. After a moment, she swung around and walked back the way she'd just come, keeping her eyes on the ground. As she once again exited the forest, she let her gaze admire the rolling heaths for only a second before looking back down upon the grass at her feet. The image came to her, longer this time.

The forest hadn't always stopped where it did now. There had been other trees here before, but they'd all moved on many years ago. Donnie walked a little farther down the hill, knelt down on one knee, and touched the Earth with her hand. There it was, there was the full memory, not just a whisper of it this time.

The boy had been about eight or nine, tow-headed, with strangely sparkling blue eyes full of smiles and mischief. He'd come here to the forest often that long ago summer to climb the trees and play upon their branches. His childish laughter had filled the forest with its music whenever he'd visited. And the trees had enjoyed his company, though they hadn't dared speak to him. While they never knew his name, they considered him their boy.

Donnie felt all this in her heart as she watched the boy skipping about the trees, singing what sounded like a children's rhyme here or swinging on low branches over there. She smiled tenderly as he cavorted throughout the forest, happily playing hide and seek with an imaginary friend in the numerous shafts of sunlight penetrating the dense foliage. The forest had obviously been a haven, a respite to the boy, a place where he could just be a kid. From the roughened calluses on his hands, Donnie could tell his life had already been full of hard work. She figured this must have been his escape from the drudgery of a harsh and exacting life, stealing time in the forest like this just to play.

It was a sweet memory and she was glad to have it within her, although its urgency still puzzled her. She made as if to stand, feeling it was time for her to go back to the farm, when sudden panic squeezed her heart and refused to let go as the image of the boy filled her mind once more. For seemingly out of nowhere, an enormous, deformed black figure appeared behind the oblivious child and caught him by the arm as he was swinging on a willow branch directly above Donnie. It was an *okûn* and, in the blink of an eye, it had turned the boy around so that it could slam its filthy claws into the boy's chest, cruelly ripping out the young child's heart.

Donnie recoiled in shock, falling backward onto the grass to gasp, "Oh! Oh, no!" She felt also the piercing shock of the willow tree as it watched its friend's frightening, violent murder with mounting horror.

The okûn let the stunned and dying boy slump to the ground. Then it ate the boy's ravaged heart with obvious relish. Five more huge okûns came and crowded around to feed upon the boy.

"You fool, you should not have killed him so hastily!" A figure in a white robe came into view, riding a magnificent white horse. The man atop the horse was uncommonly handsome, his thick, long hair raven black in color and swept away from his face by a gold filigreed crown, or perhaps it was more an ornamental helmet, Donnie mused, noting with astoundment its almost ironically delicate beauty, considering the circumstances of the scene being played out in front of her.

The man's glorious countenance, twisted into anger, was also at odds with his raspy and obdurate voice and his soul-deep black eyes. "We might have learned much from the boy!" the man growled.

"I was hungry!" the first okûn snarled back at the man, the boy's heart blood dripping freely down his jaw.

"Yes, well, your hunger has denied us the best opportunity we have had thus far for finding the encampment of the Oälas and their hiding place for the Sôla! Come, we must continue our search! Leave the body!" he commanded, wheeling his horse to the right.

The okûns obeyed with evident reluctance and the entire party moved on through the forest and out of sight, all now conversing in low, heated tones with each other.

Donnie watched, tears spilling unheeded down her face, as the tree finally plucked up the nerve to look down upon the remains of the boy. She felt her heart sicken. The tree's roots were stained deep red with the boy's blood. Utterly heartbroken, Cyllwyn Mérd had picked up what was left of his friend's broken body and cradled him lovingly as the trees all around began a low, moaning lament. They were still sougning their plaintive death song two days later when the boy's people finally found the body and retrieved his remains.

The trees in that grove had grieved for the boy for a very long time, singing their funereal dirge for a thousand years, earning this part of the forest the name Néhanneglæd, or Glade of Sorrow. Many a traveler during the ensuing millennium were greatly surprised to find themselves weeping uncontrollably for what seemed no reason by the time they'd passed through this particular part of the forest.

Each of the trees there stayed until the dirge was complete before slowly moving on to other lands, one by one. None of those who'd witnessed the atrocity remained here, which is why the line of forest had receded so deeply on this one side. The images of the memory finally faded from Donnie's mind and she was left with only the pain of it, a pain echoed in her own heart.

She sat there motionless for a full minute, steeling herself for what she must do next. She'd avoided it since the cavern, but she knew it was now time. Digging into the belt at her waist, she withdrew the parchment from the gods. Yes, the fifth challenge was over. She read its message.

Be pressed beyond what thy heart may endure. Only when thy limits are surpassed, can thy treue mettle rise.

"*Treue* self...pursue *treue* knowledge...my *treue* mettle," she murmured. What was it that struck her about that word *treue*? Why did it continually crop up in her mind anymore whenever she thought about who she was? *Treue...treue*? She shook her head, still unable to grasp its meaning. When she'd first seen it written, she'd thought it simply a misspelling of "true," but now she was not so sure. She had a feeling it meant something else entirely. Well, whatever it was, according to the gods, her *treue* mettle was about to rise, apparently at any moment now.

Cyllwyn Mérd had been *treue*, Donnie realized with a jolt of surprise. She was sure of it. Whereas Brindle was not, nor were any of the others in her band of friends. It was a bond she shared only with Cyllwyn Mérd, of all the beings here in Medregai. There were others who were *treue*, but they lived in different times and places. How she knew this was a mystery to her. But she knew it as well as she knew her own heart. If she was lucky, perhaps Sylvester could tell her what it meant. It was worth a shot to ask him anyway.

Donnie shook her head wearily, put away the paper and gazed out unseeingly at the moors, still lost in her melancholic thoughts. It came to her suddenly that she had indeed found what she'd been looking for at the salt works because the urgency to witness that loss once again had subsided. Yes, she'd found it, but it had not been her loss she'd needed to find. Through the memories he'd downloaded into her mind the other night before giving his life so that others might live, the scene she'd just witnessed had been the loss of Cyllwyn Mérd's innocence.

This was another bond Donnie shared with him. Her own naïve innocence had also been brutally destroyed here in Medregai. Within the depths of Moên Flírbann, this weird adventure had stopped being about going home and had suddenly become viciously personal. She now had a score to settle with Valley Guy.

Liz and Julia's faces flashed before Donnie's eyes yet again, first as in her nightmare that morning and then as they had on the wall in the cavern. Desolate and without hope, the two women had obviously been yearning for a long time for what Falwaïn had called the "comfort of death" to rescue them.

Chapter 2

White Bird

Donnie stood and dried the tears from her eyes, waiting until her vision cleared before turning around to hike back up to the forest. Her strides were deliberate and long as she headed for home, belying her tumultuous thoughts. She needed to find something to occupy herself while the men read up on each other in the library. Until the acrimony between them was settled, Liz and Julia's rescue operation had little chance for success.

But, in the meantime, Donnie was at loose ends, with way too much time on her hands to wallow in the emotional agonies roiling just below the surface of her mind. Ever since the fight at Mâlendian she'd carried within her heart a growing ache that was all-consuming, eating away at her resiliency despite the lessons of the gods. They'd taught her to open her mind to her strengths, to death's transiency, and to love's fortitude. Yet a heaviness had taken root inside her, filling the corners of her heart, mind, and soul with the sorrow resulting from the ceaseless and stunning blows her modern sense of right and wrong had received lately, and from the guilt engendered by her own unwitting and catalytic participation in this new threat to Medregai.

To put it simply, in Donnie's oh-so cosmopolitan world back in San Francisco, scores of living beings just didn't die right in front of her, nor were her friends habitually held hostage and terrorized for six months. And certainly not solely because of her. So many horrific events had occurred so quickly over the last few days, she had been hit relentlessly with one shock after another, that she hadn't yet been able to take it all in, to weave it into the fabric of her triune. She knew though, that if she allowed this pain to overwhelm her, as it threatened to do even at this very moment, she'd be of no use to anyone. And what would happen to them all then? While she certainly needed time to absorb it within her, she couldn't afford to dwell on it to the point of obsession. Nor could she continue to ignore it, bury it deep down inside herself without coming to terms with it in some measure. Donnie sighed deeply, completely aware that she was caught in a hopeless circle of pain and guilt, but unsure how to break away and move on from here.

She desperately needed something positive to happen for their side, something uplifting to remind herself that all was not lost; that she had been given this gift of magic within her fingertips for a creditable purpose; that Valley Guy did not hold all the aces; and that, of course,

she would find the correct path to her destiny so she could right all that he had wronged. And she needed to know that everyone here at the cottage was willing to work together toward the common goal of defeating him.

They *had* to work as a cohesive team to free Liz and Julia, or Donnie would be forced to come up with some way of rescuing them by herself. Which would mean she'd need a plan that would allow her to avoid killing anyone (truthfully, the mere thought of taking someone's life abhorred her anyway, even though she knew that was often the rule here in this ancient world), which, realistically, would be nigh-on impossible given the nature of her foes. It wasn't as if she could just persuade the bad guys to let her friends go by citing articles of the Geneva Conventions, now could she? Nor could she secure the women's release by trying to project love into the hearts of their captors, as she'd already learned with Uncle.

After bowing her head in a silent prayer that her tactics for settling the men's suspicions regarding each other would meet with success, Donnie finally sought out Diana. While she manually unpacked the gear and supplies in the tent and in their saddle bags, with the cow following her around faithfully, she explained to her friend the events of the past few days, stopping several times to run over and bury her tear-stained face in Diana's coat.

By the end of Donnie's account, Diana's eyes were shining with tears too. "Oh, Donnie, that's so...unbelievably diabolical of Valledai!" The cow gave a forlorn sigh and then asked resolutely, "What are we going to do now?"

"We've got to rescue Liz and Julia. We've got to! And we think they're in some Mount Genda-something. You know where I mean, right? Yeah, that place." Donnie looked a little thunderstruck as something new occurred to her. "Thinking about it, I guess we're not exactly sure they're really there, or that they're even in Medregai, are we? What if it's all a lie?" she posited, a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

"Well, can't you make sure?" Diana asked. "I mean, you of all people should be able to, shouldn't you?"

Donnie gaped at her friend. "You know, you're absolutely right! I should've thought of that myself. There's always the possibility that Valley Guy doesn't even really have them! Could I get that lucky? Oh, I hope so. I hope this is all just a nasty mind game he's playing on me. Now, let me see, how can I find out for sure? Hmm, maybe if I listen to the Earth? It's just that there's a lot going on down there, you know? It'll be really hard to filter all that out to hear the one specific thing I'm looking for, especially at this distance."

Diana deliberated about this a few moments, finally suggesting, “Well, can’t you find something, or perhaps someone, to help you?”

“I haven’t been able to so far,” Donnie shrugged helplessly. “If I can’t think of anything else, I guess I could fly there and try listening to the Earth somewhere closer to the mountain.”

“Well, it seems to me you should get started on that right now, don’t you think?” The cow looked at Donnie serenely as she said this, contradicting the almost biting tone of her voice. Donnie raised her head and gave her friend a questioning stare. Diana grimaced and said, “Oh, don’t mind me. Maybe I just need to be milked; you forgot to this morning.”

They returned to the stables, where Donnie proceeded to fill a two-gallon milk jug, afterward sending it to the fridge. Her mind worked furiously the whole time, trying to figure out just how she could listen to what was going on in that faraway mountain from here. She thought about the Earth and what comprised it. Was there something there she could use? Suddenly, Diana’s words came back to her about finding *someone* to help her. When Donnie stood up, she reached over and kissed Diana on the cheek, thanking her before relaying the idea she’d given Donnie about who to ask for help with listening to the Earth. Donnie went back to her unpacking, but this time used magic. She was finished in less than two minutes.

Before she left the stables, she gave Otis a carrot and a few loving pats and ear scratches, then walked down the rise and up the valley to the forest above the house. She greeted several of the trees there, quickly explaining her needs. They agreed her idea would work splendidly, as it was how they themselves got word to trees on other magical lands when necessary. They were sorry they had not suggested it themselves, but the binding spell had not allowed them to do so. Donnie nodded and said that came as no surprise to her.

She sat down cross-legged at the base of a beech tree she’d renamed Mad Hatter months before and closed her eyes. She breathed deeply and started to chant, beginning in English until she unknowingly slipped into Elanéra. “I am the Earth. The Earth is me. I hear its cries of pain and joy. I see what it sees. I know what it knows. *Amai see lugaia. Lugaia set ti. Amai pâtu gô~qarîn lasôlone aht frîeyíasîe. Amai gretéa goeld gretér. Amai kâtan goeld kâtal.*”

She repeated the chant until she felt like she was no longer in her body. She let her mind drift into Mad Hatter and sent it traveling down his roots. Her consciousness went deep into the Earth, listening to the whispers of the lives that dwelt within. She let herself rise closer to the surface so that now she could hear the sounds of those living

aboveground too. The minds of the many magical trees who stood around her body caught up with her and whispered for her to come with them. They encircled Donnie, carrying her through the ground. What she saw looked like some sort of biology film being fast-forwarded. They slid easily through dirt and rock for miles and miles in only a matter of seconds, with roots, insects, and burrowing mammals flipping by as mostly blurs, and the occasional still-frame of those who were directly in her path. And all the while, the trees whispered to her, telling her how to find what she was seeking.

Until her epiphany while milking Diana, Donnie hadn't given much consideration to the fact that all trees and plants actually do have souls, even those that are not magical. But Diana's advice had suddenly reminded her that she'd once read about the existence of these plant devas, or spirits, and she couldn't believe she hadn't thought about using them before now. "No wonder you're supposed to talk to your plants! But then, who knew they'd talk back?" she'd cried to Diana back at the stables.

Donnie now listened to the roots of trees and plants far ahead of her, calling out to the spirits within, and found her bearings through them. Soon, she was gliding through the Earth on her own, and the magical trees dropped back to follow her.

They were nearing Moên Gjendeben, Mad Hatter told her after only a few more moments. She could hear echoes of other voices, harsh voices this time, not the soft, wispy voices of the plants. She slowed her pace when she began to catch snatches of conversations, most of which were ill-tempered and argumentative. The closer she got to her destination, the more numerous became the voices of Valley Guy's henchmen. When she was directly under the mountain, Donnie hung there in confusion. She couldn't identify the types of creatures above her from the deafening cacophony of their voices, so she filtered out all other sounds and listened only to their movements.

Okûns. Thousands and thousands of them.

They had an unmistakable scuttling sound, one that she remembered vividly from the cavern at Moên Flírbann. There were other movements too, some heavier and clumsy, others light and graceful. But mostly, there were okûns. Their souls were full of hatred. This black plague of the soul, as Donnie decided was a sufficiently melodramatic description for it, was far too overwhelming to expose herself to for long.

She listened harder; she listened to heartbeats.

It took her a few minutes, but she finally weeded out the two human hearts she was looking for. She'd recalled that Liz had a heart murmur, and thanked the gods she did. Donnie had focused on finding that extra

heartbeat and finally heard it and another normal human heartbeat nearby. With any luck, that would be Julia.

The heartbeats were coming from straight above Donnie, in the middle of the mountain, but she'd have to get into that chamber before she'd really believe they belonged to her friends. She sent her mind slipping up the walls of the rooms below the one she was seeking until she was inside its stone floor. This cavern was in the very center of the mountain.

From the few, listless movements made while Donnie watched, Liz and Julia appeared to be quite desolate and defeated. They were lying flat upon the couch and mattress, respectively, from Donnie's house in San Francisco. All Donnie could see clearly of the room was that the women were guarded by several okûns. There was also an odd wall of yellowish light surrounding each of the articles of furniture which Donnie figured was a force field of some kind. She wondered whether it was there to keep Liz and Julia in, or the okûns out.

She floated closer to where the women were kept and fancied she heard one of them crying over the loud roar of something that stood beyond them, which Donnie couldn't see from her position in the floor. She stared up intently at the prone women, hoping to catch a glimpse of their faces, but they were both turned away from her now and she could see them in profile only. Her heart heaved with despair once more. She desperately wanted to reach out to her friends, let them know she was there and that she'd get them out in the next day or two, at the very most, but she couldn't because she didn't know if this were true. There were so many of Valley Guy's evil warriors in and around the mountain, she wasn't sure if Liz and Julia could even be rescued that soon without Donnie doing the one thing that would be sure to cause forfeiture of her powers, which would then mean there was no possibility left to rescue her friends.

And besides, what comfort could she possibly bring to the women when she was the reason they were there in the first place! Overcome by self-recrimination, she let herself slide through the walls of the rooms below, slipping swiftly back down into the belly of the Earth. The trees finally caught up with her far below the lowest chambers of the mountain, where they encircled her again, determined not to let her drift down any farther and possibly out of their reach. Too despondent to argue, Donnie allowed them to carry her back to the farm. Not long afterward, she felt her consciousness travel up the roots of Mad Hatter and into her slumped, inert body. She sat with her eyes squeezed shut, the images from the cavern at Flírbann of Liz and Julia's desperate faces shoving all other thought aside.

The boombox materialized on the ground beside her and played John Nick's beautiful lament "Daniel." Donnie moved not one muscle. When the song ended, the music box then slid smoothly into "Rocket Home." Wearily, Donnie sat up straight, leaned her head back against Mad Hatter, and opened her tortured, watery eyes to gaze down at the cottage. Abstractly, she realized that two songs had played by the same artist. So, it was already Tuesday again, was it? Only a week, a mere seven days, had gone by since she'd found Falwaïn. It felt like a lifetime to her.

It took just one chorus for her to begin crying in earnest. Pulling her knees up tightly to her chest and wrapping her arms around them, she allowed the tears to roll down her cheeks unchecked while she choked out, "I think you're right, boombox: it's going to be a very long time before we get home."

Falwaïn had finished reading the last of the books about Diego's (as Galto) adventures. He sat back and studied Diego, who slowly became aware of his regard. They returned each other's gaze without rancor for the first time in their acquaintance.

Falwaïn got up and went over to the bookshelves. He asked for information on how to build successful relationships in Donnie's world because he wasn't at all certain he was doing so well in her eyes. Losing the amulet (even though he realized that Valledai had unfairly, and magically, helped Diego wrest it from him) had rankled because Donnie had entrusted its care to him, yet he'd been unable to safeguard it from the enemy. And his bout of fisticuffs with Diego over the loss had set Donnie's temper afire. Possibly that was not how matters of this kind were settled in her world? If not, what opinion did she hold of him now? Falwaïn hoped that if he learned how the men of her time responded to situations like this, he might discover the kind of behavior he should exhibit to ensure him access to her heart. If he could only establish even a corner of it as his own, he was sure that eventually he could convince her they were meant to be together.

He shook his head and leaned back against the bookshelves behind him, suddenly very amused. Exactly when had he decided he wanted to have that kind of relationship with her? Glancing over at Warren, he recalled his friend's words to him at Bitterbend and asked himself how Warren could've known his feelings before he himself had? Had he indeed wanted Donnie that way, even then?

No, he decided. Not really. But Warren must've been able to see where Falwaïn's attraction for Donnie would lead, and so had made the

leap to love before he himself had gotten there. No, at that point, he'd wanted Donnie, wanted her badly, had wanted to know her, had wanted even to protect her, although he'd since learned she did not need him for that. Truthfully, he'd wanted to extend his time with her because she and her world fascinated him. But love her? Not at that time, no. Donnie was little more than a magnetic, irresistibly mysterious personage then, one whom he'd been drawn to almost hypnotically, but he certainly hadn't *loved* her.

Looking back now, he could see that he'd begun to look at her, really see who she was within her heart, when he and Warren were picking themselves up from the cobblestones in front of the Black Pony. She'd been irresistibly attractive, even with her dirty hair, dirty face, and dirtier clothes. And it had not escaped his notice how very glad he was to see her alive and well. Her green eyes, alternately flashing with concern and mirth, had quickly assessed the situation, and instead of behaving as one would have expected her to, by berating them or spilling her worry for them with a flow of tears in order to make them feel guilty over their foolhardiness, she'd taken it all in as a matter of course.

Granted, she'd been grouchy because she was hungry, but Falwain could tell that if she hadn't had that edge to her, she would have found the situation more than a little entertaining and probably would have teased them mercilessly over the end result of their ill-advised foray into such an overtly unfriendly outpost as the Black Pony Tavern. And later that night, when she told of her adventures in the marshes, the care she'd taken with the Great Serpents had astonished him. Whereas anyone else would have been determined to destroy them, she only hoped to oust the darkness in their hearts. She had steadfastly refused to do any real damage to them because, in her eyes, all life is sacred and is not hers to take, no matter how much magic is bestowed upon her.

Yes, that's when it had truly started, that's when he'd begun to care for Donemere. He'd finally looked beyond her modern persona to see what she carried in her heart; qualities he wished he himself still owned, but which had somehow been lost along the paths he'd chosen to follow. Qualities such as love for all souls, living and dead; the respect and avid curiosity for, and more often than not, the tenderness she exhibited to all, even to those who feared her or were clearly working against her; coupled with a decidedly realistic view of how much her love could penetrate their cold-quenched hearts. Which meant she was no dreamer, nor did she bear any illusions about herself or others, or their shortcomings.

Now that, the sense of realism that Donnie intentionally fostered within herself, he'd liked from the very first time he'd spoken with her

and the animals in the stables, he remembered now, a bemused smile lighting the corners of his mouth. And yet, when working her magic, Donnie also exuded a tranquil air of spirituality, a completeness and strength of will he'd seldom known in save but a few, that made those around her feel as though nothing could touch them unless they themselves allowed it to.

This had not gone unnoticed by Warren. Their second night at Flírbann, after the others had all gone to sleep, Warren had summed Donnie up to Falwaïn this way: "You cannot help but believe in yourself when you are around her because she so obviously believes in you. She fully expects you to do the right and virtuous thing, believing deeply the capacity for that is within you always; yet she is quick to forgive if you fail. The frailty of the heart holds no real surprises for her. Nor do its strengths. I—er—well, I have never met another quite like her." Warren had stopped short there, giving a rueful smile and quick shake of his head.

Yes, that was certainly true. Falwaïn too had never met another quite like Donnie, one so powerful who consciously and deliberately chose not to smite her enemies with the fantastical power in her fingertips simply because she believed that would be wrong. In fact, the esteem she held for this Witches' Rede of hers was not born from fear of losing her magical powers, as one might think. No, she invariably displayed a ferocious sense of fair play when it came to the effects of her magic, no matter what type of spell she was casting. Just look at the sacrifice she'd made to her magical reserves in order to repair the damage done by her road spell. She cared what her magic would do to others and actively sought to leave them unharmed.

Since there was no force here in Medregai who could ever challenge Donnie in a magic fight and hope to win on pure power alone, the only sure way to defeat her would be for her to defeat herself by compelling her to break the Rede, in essence rejecting her most deeply held convictions. But surely that could never happen? It would go completely against the grain for her to cause harm to another being knowingly—unless the gods were to decree it, of course, and it would then be sheer, unlivable agony for her to fulfill a demand of that sort.

Falwaïn's heart grew cold with dread. He realized that if Valledai did indeed possess a book which told the tales of her adventures, then he must already know all of this about Donnie. Yes, it made sense; that was why, so far, the fiend's evil campaign against Donnie had employed mostly psychological weaponry, while his magic he'd saved for others. He'd focused on piercing Donnie's heart and her will to succeed, sending her off-balance and reeling from the pain and guilt she obviously carried

within her now—ever since that day in Málendian, in fact, when both men and okûns had died. She still believed their deaths were a burden that must be laid at her feet. It was a torment that had anchored itself into the very core of her soul. One had only to look into her eyes to see it there, eating away at her. Was she strong enough to see past Valledai's machinations, to not let herself become ensnared in the mire they were creating within her?

Could he himself help her with that? He must. But...how?

Images of Donnie from the last few days flashed through his mind, memories that, to him, were uniquely representative of the ideals and regard she extended to others, beginning with Cyllwyn Mérd's sacrifice and the loathing Donnie had initially felt for herself for seeking from the tree the ultimate gift any soul is blessed to give. Then there was her magic's protection of the "good people of Málendian," as she habitually, and sardonically, called them. To this day, he suspected that Donnie didn't realize just how many of those good people's lives she alone was responsible for saving.

There was the unrestrained release within the cavern of her pain for her friends, a raw manifestation of her deepening self-blame and sorrow that had wrenched his own heart. Next came the memory of her anger at herself in the waters of the Cabel'arík. That had touched him far deeper than he'd let on because he knew instinctively that it was born out of fear of endangering her friends.

And finally there was her anger at him here at the cottage only an hour ago for his misguided fight over the amulet and his questioning of Diego's allegiance. Donnie believed in Diego's valor and therefore had staunchly defended him, exhibiting a fury toward Falwaïn that was as thunderous and steely as his own because of her disappointment in his unwillingness to accept Diego as an equal. It was as though Donnie had looked inside Falwaïn's heart and discerned the contempt and animosity he held for the peoples of the south, out of which his mistrust of Diego was truly born. She'd been right about that, Falwaïn was ashamed to admit. He had been surprised by the intensity of his feelings and wondered when that hatred had been conceived, for he had not always felt this way about the Mehen'Adríum. He cast back through his memory for the answer. It had started sometime around Sémere's death, had it not?

A vague recollection of an elusive, recurring dream began to stir in his mind. Ah, yes, there it was. The night after his wife's death he'd dreamt of a race of dark people who had something he needed to survive, something which they would not share, a people who would not provide sustenance or protection to him. They had rejected him and his family,

all those in his care, leaving them to wither and die bitter, painful deaths. He had dreamed the dream several times since, but he could never remember more than that; he was always left with only these “impressions” when he awoke. And soon after awakening, even what little memory he had of the dream would slip away to the deepest recesses of his mind. But it was a potent experience...so real, so forceful. Although he knew it to be no more than fantasy, it had changed his way of thinking a little more each time it came to him.

It was also then that he'd begun to experience weirdly fleeting blackouts—so quickly did these incidents pass, those around him never noticed. But it was as though, for those few seconds, his consciousness shut down and he would find himself across a room without knowing how he'd gotten there. These fugues mostly occurred within a day or so of one of his dreams and were quite perplexing. The latest one had occurred when he was having dinner with Donnie, the night before they'd left to head north. Falwaïn remembered her telling him about the books that had been written regarding Medregai, and the next thing he knew he was standing in the doorway of her office. He'd come to suddenly, then had gone back to the outer room to get a lighted candle so he could see his way through the darkened room.

He looked over again at Diego, deciding that he must discuss all this with Donnie. Perhaps she could somehow help him discern what was causing these blackouts, for other than the dream, he still had no idea what could possibly be triggering them.

Nevertheless, he would have to find within himself a way to somehow master his dream-induced mistrust for people of dark complexion, for as Donnie had warned him, she would not tolerate his or anyone else's prejudices. And the first step toward that end would be to face it and understand it. He must be careful to guard against it influencing his logic ever again. Therefore, he decided, it would be prudent for him to read of racial concerns and how future civilizations resolved them. As this thought entered his head, the books on the shelf in front of him shifted again to allow room for several more.

Returning to his original train of thought, he asked himself if he was indeed in love with Donnie. Or more specifically, was it truly *love* that he felt for her? He knew love well enough to recognize it, surely? He'd loved Sémere with all the intensity and passion of a first, young love; a love that had matured to include deep friendship and real trust, and finally a spiritual reliance upon each other, all of which had grown daily. This new love, if that's what he felt for Donnie, was entirely different from what he'd felt for Sémere. It had moved stealthily, creeping up within him until it had engulfed him like a second skin, much like the

magical power Donnie had endowed upon him without even being aware she had done so.

He considered that unusual development for a moment. He'd not fully realized that he was to share in her magical gifts until the night he'd spent in the library, when he'd suddenly found he could read and understand any of her books in a matter of seconds; even if its concepts left him scratching his head, searching in vain for the logic or practical application that must certainly lie somewhere therein. He reflected on the various, exciting agricultural improvements her modern books had explained which *had* made sense to him. With them, he could increase Medregai's harvest a hundred-fold, which might go a long way toward ending the winter starvations that plagued many areas.

He grimaced at this and shook his head sadly. Donnie would never let him implement these innovative methods of tending the land because they would change the timeline of the future. Yet, if he was not to be allowed to utilize what he'd learned, why then was this particular gift bestowed upon him?

Falwaïn's own frustrations rose to the surface for a moment and, in a flash of total clarity, he understood why Donnie struggled so with her powers. He had crammed so much information into his brain that it was both wondrous and overwhelming to him. And all of this knowledge had remained within him, incorporating itself into his very makeup, until he no longer felt that he belonged in Medregai any more than Donnie and her friends or Diego did. Surprisingly, Falwaïn's horizons had expanded exponentially with the copious amounts of data he'd acquired from Donnie's library in only that one night.

But did this mean that he belonged in her world now? He again shook his head, unconvinced that argument would make a successful case for him to accompany Donnie when she left Medregai. No, she would be so acutely distressed by her influence over him that, most probably, she would simply alter his memory to make him forget not only her, but also whatever he had learned of her world. Which meant he would have to find another way of persuading her to take him along. Could he argue that, since he was magical too now, he was her responsibility and so she was stuck with him? Hmm, that might be turned into a convincing argument.

He wondered, as he had several times over the past few days, just how Donnie had imbued him with that small particle of her magic. She'd bestowed enough of it within him for it to grow all the while since, occasionally by leaps and bounds, molding itself to his needs and his talents, thereby creating what he felt was his own brand of magic. Perhaps when she'd healed him? Or was it something as mundane as

eating her magically prepared food? Or was it that she'd willed him to have it, and thereby he was gifted it? Or maybe it was that magic begets magic, that it must spread out to those who are collected around it, and so, he too was now magical, perhaps by this osmosis process he'd read of here in the library—and would it then spread to Diego or Donnie's two women friends, once they were here?

He supposed only time would tell on that. It would certainly help them defeat Valledai for them all to have some supernatural talent or another. Falwain recalled how his own magical powers had surged in Mâlendian to supplement his fighting prowess. There, he'd felt it developing further and more quickly in him than he would have thought possible. And he could feel it growing within him still, could feel its strength, its solidness. Was that because of his continued proximity to Donnie? Would it fade if she were no longer here, if she succeeded in sending herself, her friends, and Diego back to their proper times? Or would it always remain in his bones as an aching reminder of her?

Aching reminder? Did he have it that bad for her already? If so, the more time they spent together, his feelings would only intensify, would they not? Did he even want that to happen? Or should he distance himself now, before he fell too deeply in love and then had to endure the torment of bidding farewell to her when she left Medregai?

Was it, in fact, too late for that already?

A quiet voice in his mind answered the question unhesitatingly. Yes, it was too late. He was, by now, most definitely and assuredly, in love with Donnie.

Very well, that was settled. He posed the question of whether she might be in love with him. Not yet, he decided, although she certainly cared for him in a way that she did not for any other. But she didn't trust those feelings. Besides that, she was taken up with too many other worries right now: the plight of her friends, the fate of Medregai, the mystery surrounding the magical gifts imparted to her. And too, he must not let himself forget or ignore the fact that she desperately wanted to go home, for she *would* make it home one day. He knew this as surely as he knew they would rescue her friends tomorrow; simply because they must.

Obviously, he needed to find a very real and persuasive argument for accompanying her when she left, something to make her see that even time should not stand between them. But how was he to convince her? He looked through the line of books and periodicals regarding modern relationships that had appeared on the shelf in front of him and selected the first title that intrigued him. He opened the flyleaf, then let the library turn the pages for him as he read through the book. He took his time with

it, rereading several sections that he felt pertained specifically to his predicament. He then replaced it onto the shelf and walked to the door, his arms loaded with other books and magazines. He needed to find Donnie, tell her he was sorry and that she'd been right about Diego. According to the author of the book he'd just read, and Falwain felt this was truly most excellent advice, he was to take full responsibility for his mistakes. The library door opened for him as he stepped up to it.

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

"No, I agree." Falwain 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.”

Grand Day’s “White Bird” began, the haunting, melancholy melody filling the air with its lonely images of despair of a golden bird all alone in a golden cage and how she must fly free or else she would die.

Donnie’s tears finally subsided and she wiped her face with a tissue she materialized from the bathroom. Neither of them spoke for a while, listening to the song. The boombox’s volume would increase during the chorus so that it would vehemently demand that the bird must fly away, seeming to be a metaphor for how it thought Donnie should handle the pain in her heart.

Falwaïn sat quietly and watched her throughout all this, willing his own heart to fill with her intense sorrow so that he could somehow ease her mind. In a great wave of emotion, he wished for their destinies to be forever entwined in whatever capacity she would accept him as, be it friend, lover, or compatriot. He would stand beside her and never waver in his belief of her. And throughout time, he vowed to himself silently, she would never find his regard for her and her ideals lacking in any measure.

“And so, what you’re saying is that you need to grieve?” he asked sympathetically, not for the first time marveling at how perfectly the music box was able to match moods, especially Donnie’s.

Startled by this unexpected insight, Donnie brought her bruised and teary eyes up to meet Falwaïn’s. “Yeah, maybe that’s it exactly,” she conceded. “I guess I never thought of it that way. I would’ve just said I was wallowing in self-pity, or that I had the blues. But I see now that what I’m feeling is a form of grieving.” She looked back down at the ground forlornly and added, “I guess that’s not surprising; I do seem to have rather a lot to grieve over right now.”

Falwaïn leaned forward, speaking quietly and with conviction. “If I could, I would bear this burden for you, to bring peace to your troubled heart. On my honor, Donemere, I pledge to you that whatever I may do to assist you, you have only to ask it of me, and it shall be yours.”

Her gaze now locked with his. She seemed to be searching for something in particular, something deep within him, and when she found it, her mobile lips curved into a tremulous smile and her eyes regained some of their usual warm sparkle. “Thank you. You do help me, more than you even know. I’m forever indebted to you and the others because you’re all willing to see this through to the end with me, until we’ve defeated Valley Guy and Medregai is once again free. It helps so much just to know I’m not alone.” She leaned forward to fling her arms around

him, laying her head on his shoulder and holding him tightly. She was grateful that he held on to her just as firmly.

Maybe what she'd secretly been fearing was wrong. Maybe, just maybe, their rag-tag group could free Liz and Julia. Just how they were going to effect that rescue, Donnie had no idea. If only they had the element of surprise, but if there indeed was a book being written about this adventure and Valley Guy had it in his possession, then catching him off-guard was an impossibility. He must've read by now of their intention to attempt a rescue and probably was, at this very moment, fortifying Gjendeben even more heavily than it already was. How would they ever get inside the mountain now? She began to fret again about the upcoming mission, but suddenly stopped when she caught a sense of Falwain's supreme confidence in their success. She could feel it in his touch, in the comfort of his embrace, flowing from him into her. And her worries were soothed a little, just enough.

The song ended and the boombox began playing the Farriers' "Wait for Me, Friend." One chorus into it, Donnie lifted her head and looked at Falwain with renewed hope. "Maybe it's time to change to a happier song? Maybe some Bad Blood? They're one of my very favorites. You know, I think Macallum Banks' voice is just so perfect for rock n' roll," she confessed shyly.

"Not to mention, of course, that you also think he's very handsome?" Falwain grinned teasingly at her. "I learned that he was a favorite of yours from Brindle and the other trees, and so I looked at a few photos of him in magazines—yes, this was on our last night here, before we left to travel north. You consider him to be quite hot, from what I was told. That is the proper term to describe what you think of him, is it not?"

Donnie's face turned a light pink. "Well, um, yeah. I've always thought he's kinda hot, ever since I first saw a picture of him back in the nineties. But, nevertheless, he really does have a great voice. And Bad Blood's music always seems to cheer everyone up around here!" she added, a defiant smile on her lips.

In response, Falwain threw back his head and sang out a hearty rendition of the final chorus of the band's famous eponymous song, "They call me Ba-ad Blood and I can't deny it, whoa, no! Whoa, no! I can't deny it."

Donnie laughed with delight. "How do you already know that song?" she asked, smiling even more widely now as she leaned back against Mad Hatter and let her hands leave Falwain's broad shoulders.

Falwain sat back too and grinned sheepishly at her. "I suppose I should admit that when I was recovering from my wounds, I awakened and watched you that day for quite some time before you noticed me.

And that song was clearly a favorite of yours.” He ignored her indignant gasp, giving her an impudent grin. “It was, without doubt, one of the most entertaining afternoons I have ever spent,” he added devilishly, obviously enjoying Donnie’s growing embarrassment, evidenced by the deeper flush rising in her cheeks.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” she gulped, her voice sounding strangled. “Er, just how long were you awake before we realized it?” she asked, hoping against hope that she hadn’t done anything too humiliating.

“Long enough to comprehend that I was in the company of a singularly unusual woman.” Falwaïn stood, then reached down to pull her up beside him. He held her hands a moment more than was necessary and added, “Nor was it the first time I awoke. I must admit that I particularly enjoyed the sponge baths.” And then he winked at her.

Donnie’s cheeks flamed red this time, not just pink. She remembered the way she’d touched him, the longing she’d felt for him. She’d wanted him badly and she saw in his eyes now that he’d known this all along. “Well, your wounds needed to stay clean!” she protested, pulling her hands free and taking a step backward to stare up at him, red-faced but not ashamed. He somehow knew this too.

He leaned back on his hips and roared with laughter.

“Well, just for that, you’re going to have to put up with my choice of song and lump it if you don’t like it! Boombox, play me some Bad Blood!” she commanded. The boombox obediently launched “Young Blood.” Donnie raised an eyebrow at Falwaïn, crossed her arms in front of her, and retorted mock-sternly, “Now, don’t you have something else you can do besides pester me, my good man? Go away and get busy, will ya?”

He nodded through his laughter and turned to go. When he was about halfway to the cottage, he stopped and looked back at her, calling out, “Donnie? You were absolutely correct about Diego. He is very much a worthy man and not a depraved psychopath caught within Valledai’s power, as I first believed of him. I apologize to you for my intolerance of him and his race and for my impugment of his honor, and give you my word that I shall also make amends with him. I agree that he will be a good addition to our ‘team.’ As a matter of fact, an idea just came to me—it might be beneficial to implement some of those team-building exercises you were going on and on about to us yesterday. You and I could start right now, while the others are still engaged in the library. After all, perhaps it’s time I gave you a sponge bath—merely to return the favor, of course!”

Sticking her tongue out at him, Donnie motioned with her hand that he could feel free to move on his merry old way any time now. Even with his back turned to her as he resumed his trek back to the house, she could clearly hear his peals of exultant laughter.

Once at the front stoop, he picked up the stacks of books and magazines he'd placed there earlier and disappeared with them around the corner of the stables a moment later, apparently set on learning more about her world.

Donnie watched his movements with a faint smile haunting her lips. She wasn't quite sure what to make of his blatant come-on. Undeniably there was something growing between them, a bond of attraction and understanding that both astonished and, if truth be told, excited her by its rapid and very real development. He seemed to have achieved a groove with her, whereby he somehow knew exactly what to do or say to lift her spirits, almost as if he could read her heart perfectly. But why had he cultivated this groove? Because he had most assuredly been the one to do that, not her.

It appeared he wanted her to fall in love with him. But why would he want that? He must see that they could never remain together—unless she couldn't get the amulet to work, which was improbable. As far as she was concerned, her agenda was as follows: free her friends, get the amulet back, defeat Valley Guy, and return everyone to their own worlds, all in that particular order. While she dearly hoped that would be the end of her very strange adventures, Donnie recognized that it probably was not.

She also knew that hers was a fate which must be faced almost entirely alone because she refused to further endanger the lives of those not involved directly with her dilemma by dragging them into future predicaments once this one was over. Which meant that only Sylvester and Rex would be her companions on the journey to her ultimate destiny, while all others would have to remain where they belonged. Sylvester must come along since he was already intricately enmeshed in what was being done to Donnie, and Rex simply because he embodied *love* to her and there was no way she could go through all this without him. He gave so much to her, returning her love for him a thousand-fold, and blithely showing her that each and every day had merit, if only you would pause here and there to let life's joy fill you. Far more than anything she'd done to alleviate her depression over the last six months, Donnie knew that the dog had proved to be the most effective tonic for her emotional afflictions. "For who among us can live without love?" she murmured to herself.

But, from this point forward, her energy must be focused primarily on accomplishing the goals she'd set, never once allowing herself to contemplate failure. After all, the gods had already made it clear that she mustn't fail, and if her suspicions were correct about what they intended for her, then she shouldn't get involved long-term with anyone. And since she was almost certain that she really would go away one day, Falwain would have to stay in Medregai so as not to disturb the time continuum, irrespective of what they felt for each other. Therefore, realistically, what would be the point of engaging in a love affair with him?

If he wanted just sex—well, that was definitely a horse of a different color—and that she'd jump at. But he didn't seem like the love 'em and leave 'em type. Nope, Donnie had the feeling that he wanted a whole lot more from her than a roll in the hay. He actually seemed to be falling for her. And he obviously had no problem with letting her know that, which, to her surprise, made her feel a bit rushed. She was unused to men like him allowing their feelings to be seen so plainly by the object of their affection. She realized that perhaps he'd done this simply because he came from this world, where things were done differently and where the sexual mores and behavioral embarrassments of modern society hadn't reared up yet to dampen the heart's urge to pursue its deepest desires.

Donnie considered how this all made her feel. Flattered, of course, because she found Falwain immensely attractive. She liked him; liked his humor, his confidence, his concern for those around him, his curiosity and openness, his intelligence, his willingness to learn and expand his horizons—and to apparently leave behind the confines of racial prejudices probably instilled in him from birth. She also admired his quick-wittedness and courage, coupled with his strength of spirit and his spirituality. And his ability to commit himself to a purpose was both absolute and unwavering, as she'd found for herself when she'd searched his mind a few minutes ago to see just how deeply held his professed conviction to aid her truly was. All of these qualities and more Donnie found herself drawn to in him, not just his incredible body and good looks, as had happened with so many men in her life before coming to this world. Falwain was somehow more real to her than any of those other men had ever been. Which just scared the hell out of her. What if she did fall in love with him and then had to leave him here? How would she ever get over that heartbreak?

"Damn all men to hell, that's what I think! Who needs 'em anyway?" she muttered exasperatedly, then groaned, "Oh, who are you kidding? You do, you idiot! Not every man, no, but I think, my dear, even though you are supposedly the most powerful witch of all time, you are not

going to keep yourself from falling for this particular man, no matter how hard you try. And just what are you going to do then, my girl?"

Abruptly pushing these thoughts away, telling herself it was because they were wasteful and useless and not because she was a coward, she glanced around her. Something Falwaïn had said a minute ago had struck a chord in her. Now, what was it? "Oh, yeah, that's right," she murmured. His comment about Diego being a worthy man and not a psychopath had reminded her that there was something else she ought to do.

Now that she was aware of it, the blue tinge of her magic was evident all around, coloring the land and buildings in the valley and, she knew, the lands far beyond. Exactly twenty-four miles beyond, as a matter of fact, for when she'd pulled her power back within her at Mâlendian, she'd left her own lands alone because she knew that all the magical creatures living within its borders needed her magic to survive. But now there would be nonmagical humans living here. She really didn't need the worthy Diego, or Liz and Julia once they were here (which they were going to be here very soon, she promised herself), going nuts on her magic like the good people of Mâlendian had.

So Donnie sat back down and concentrated on drawing her power inside her, using the same chant she'd used in Mâlendian. A few minutes later, she opened her eyes and surveyed the valley with satisfaction. She'd left a high concentration of power within the cottage to run her electronics and the various charms she'd placed at the farm, but otherwise she'd pulled most of her power back within her. The magic she'd left in the ground and at the farm she'd insulated from nonmagical people by creating a charm that would polarize it once one of these normal humans came within an inch of it. Other than the rise where the cottage and stables were situated, the blue of her power was now only faintly discernible in the valley.

Pleased with her efforts, she grabbed the handle of the boombox and carried it back to the house with her, humming along with its current tune, "Mean Woman Blues" by Cassie Smith. She walked around the building to the back porch and plopped down on one of the rocking chairs there. Sylvester was lying completely still in the other rocker; that is, until the sounds of her movements disturbed him. His gaze had been fixated for some time upon a bluebird that was sitting on the ground about twenty feet from the porch, and who'd been staring back at him just as intently. The bluebird fluttered somewhat drunkenly up into a tree as soon as the cat's concentration was broken by Donnie.

Setting the music box onto the table at her right, its volume turned low, Donnie sat back in her chair, somewhat relieved to have company

that didn't make her heart skip. "I've learned how to listen to the Earth at longer distances now, Sylvester," she began tentatively, wondering if he was still angry with her.

"Oh?" he replied, yawning and stretching as only a cat can. The bluebird, while not magical of course, for Sylvester knew better than to hunt a magical one, was nevertheless a wise old bird who had withstood his stare for some time, returning it measure for measure until it was unclear just who was trying to mesmerize whom. It was, in fact, fortunate that Donemere happened by, or this might have gone on for some while longer, with both the cat and the bird eventually falling into a semi-comatose state that would render each helpless for hours.

He gave a little shudder of disgust. Never again did he wish to provide Rex with another opportunity of "rescuing" him, as the dog had had to do the first time Sylvester's mesmerizing abilities had failed him. Not that Rex had ever seriously held it over his head, Sylvester had to admit. But the cat thought himself far superior to the dog, and it simply would not do to have the Canine Wonder liberating him with a startling lick on the nose every time Sylvester met with an experienced prey and ended up enchanting himself. Thank the gods for Donemere's intrusion this time!

Benevolently deciding that he now had occasion to forgive her for yesterday, Sylvester asked, quite companionably, "And how did you do that, my dear?"

Donnie shot him a suspicious glance before she explained how she'd been able to confirm that Liz and Julia were being held in the middle of Moên Gjendeben. Sylvester gently assured her they would be freed very soon.

"Yeah," Donnie breathed. "Just how we're going to do that is another story entirely. Valley Guy's probably got another massively destructive trap already set up for us by now. I don't know about you, but I can hardly wait to find out what that'll be. Oh, hey, I almost forgot to tell you, I also withdrew most of my power from the lands around here, so none of the villagers will go nuts if they venture near us."

"That was thoughtful of you," the cat commended her sleepily. They remained without conversation for a while, the hot sun making them both drowsy, until Sylvester suddenly remembered that he'd been wanting a word alone with her for days now. He sat up on the chair, shook himself fully awake and settled into his favorite pose of having his tail wrapped around his front legs. He deliberated on just how to begin before enquiring delicately, "Donemere, what made you free the souls of the dead in the cavern?"

Donnie looked down and blinked at him in surprise. “Well, actually,” she admitted, “I had no idea I was freeing them from anything at the time. I merely sent a blessing to them when I felt their pain through the stone wall when I touched it. I mean, who wouldn’t reach out with compassion to that much agony?” she added self-consciously.

Sylvester harrumphed. “You misunderstand my purpose in asking,” he intoned gravely, and with a touch of asperity. “Those souls had been trapped for millennia and their anguish had been magnified and coalesced into an abyss of anger and pain. Although unintended, your magical blessing undid the bonds that shackled them to their tomb of fleshly demise. Now, really, Donemere, you must be more careful with what you do,” the cat remonstrated her urgently, “for you were very fortunate that they turned out not to be creatures who would help your enemy or who would have, at the very least, hindered us, as they had those whose bones we passed on the way into the cavern. Remember them? There were carcasses of hundreds and hundreds of poor creatures, all of whom were drawn into the tunnel through the ages by the desperation of the trapped and their own deathly agonies were then added to the collective sea of despair within that mountain when they found they could no longer move to save themselves. Did you not feel this when we passed through their number as they warred with Valledai’s deadfall spell?”

Donnie bit her lip and sent him a sheepish look. “To be honest, I was a bit busy just then, what with trying to help Rex get us out of that place alive, plus choosing to make the transition to Fægre—ya know, I’m just sayin’,” she said, glancing down again at the cat, “so my attention was elsewhere. But you are absolutely right,” she conceded with a heaving sigh, “I did not even think about what my blessing could do to them or their situation; I just acted out of instinct.”

The cat shrugged diffidently. “Well, you would not be you if you were untrue to your instincts. But I hope you see that I am only trying to impress upon you the gravity of your actions and the impact they could have had. As it was, we were lucky that the trapped souls recognized Valledai as one of those who apparently must have sent them to their deaths and they wanted retribution against him because of it, so they helped us, or more specifically, they helped you.”

Donnie gaped down at her familiar. “Are you serious?” she spluttered. “Did they tell you that?”

Sylvester shook his head. “No, but I felt their enmity toward him, a burning hatred borne for far too long.” The cat’s fur shivered with remembrance at the waves of overwhelming and debilitating emotions he’d been subjected to during their wild escape from the cavern. “I do

not know exactly what it all means, other than Valledai's soul is clearly an ancient one. And it tells me that you were correct in your surmise that he is from Medregai. But exactly who he is, has yet to be discovered. It appears that grudges of long ago just may mean his unmasking, if we encounter more of those who would see him done ill, like the trapped souls of that cavern. And I think once we know who he is, we will know how to defeat him and his army."

Donnie gave a nod to this and added, "Yeah, and maybe then we'll know what the gods want from me."

Sylvester grunted in agreement, wholeheartedly concurring with the frustration expressed in her words. He took a moment to consider how to ask his next question, and then said, "My dear, are you aware that you speak the shared language of the gods?" He watched her reaction closely, leaning forward even to make sure he got a good look at her face, which was unnecessary because Donnie turned to him with a confused frown.

"Shared language of the gods? What's that?" she asked, and the cat thought her expression too genuine to be assumed.

He again grunted, this time with approval. "Catie told me once when I asked her about it that it is the common tongue of all gods, no matter their faith and origin, and it is used whenever they do not wish others to understand their conversation. Its proper name is Elanéra," the cat disclosed in his standard didactic manner. "It is as old as time itself and is known by very few mortals, or so Catie assured me whilst she was studying it. 'Tis also the language you use when you go into your trances, such as the one at Mâlendian."

Still puzzled, Donnie stared at him. "I don't know what you mean by this supposed language of the gods. Any words I say, I say in English," she attested calmly.

"To begin with, yes," Sylvester agreed with impatience, "but after that you slip into Elanéra."

Donnie looked about her distractedly, striving to fathom exactly what he could be talking about. "Are you sure that Catie was right about it being the shared language of the gods? I mean, why would she need to learn something like that? I'm just sayin', you know, 'cause she tended to mislead you a fair amount."

The cat, much taken aback by this question, suddenly blurted, "Why would she lie about it?"

Donnie scoffed and rolled her eyes upward, "Yeah, well, *why* does she lie about so many things? Tell me that, will ya? Her mind is way too twisted to plumb with ease, my friend, as you well know. But all right, for now we'll call it the shared language of the gods. As for how it just so happens I speak it, well, I speak a little French and Spanish and even

some German—oh, and I studied Latin in college, but it's not like anybody speaks that anymore. Maybe one of those is this Elanéra language and I'm just riffing off in it unknowingly."

"I do not know those tongues; they are all foreign to me. But, tell me this, what does—er, forgive me if I do not pronounce this correctly. What does *Amai see raegunumon* mean? Is it in one of the languages you just mentioned?" he asked.

Donnie felt something stir within her. Another memory, but this one was her own, not Cyllwyn Mérd's. "No, it's not any of those, but I do know what you said." She turned to look at the cat again. "It means *I am my power*, doesn't it?"

Sylvester gave her an appreciative nod. "From what you first chanted in English at Málendian, I believe that would be the correct translation. I myself know but a few words of Elanéra, enough only to recognize the language when I hear it spoken. Now, you have stated before that you sometimes know things without knowing how you know them. Could this be one of those...things?"

Shaking her head side to side slowly and thoughtfully, Donnie pondered this new development aloud, occasionally glancing at the cat as she let her thoughts run. "Golly, I don't see how it could be, but...I mean, where the heck would I have learned the shared language of the gods? And why wouldn't I remember learning it? Or for that matter, why wasn't I even aware that I could speak it? Holy jeez, how long have I been able to speak it, I wonder?"

She leaned forward in the chair and hung her hands between her knees, staring up at the sky. "And why can't I think of any words in it right now? I mean, I knew what you were saying when you asked what that sentence meant, but if you were to ask me to recite something like, oh, I don't know, say, *The Ballyrath Bat's Bedtime Battle*, I'd be at a complete loss to do that." She gave a sharp shrug and exclaimed, "Bah! The answers are there somewhere, deep down inside me, but I just can't grasp them."

Sitting back in the rocker once more, she gazed steadily at the cat, her expression inscrutable. "You know, if it weren't for the fact that I've always had this knack for knowing things without knowing how I know them, a kind of prescience almost, I'd say I must have another binding spell on me. But that would mean it's been on me my whole life, long before I came here. Why would the gods, or whoever, do that to me? And, if that's true, then I'm right, there is something weird about me, something that made this whole thing get started in the first place. Do you know, Sylvester? Do I have another binding spell on me?"

The cat gave a pensive shake of his head, peering first at her and then out at the back yard. "Not that I am aware, no. I know only of the one that was placed on us all."

Donnie asked quietly, "Sylvester, what does *treue* mean?"

Greatly surprised, he turned back to her. "In what context?" he inquired.

"As in me," she replied. "I'm *treue*. Cyllwyn Mérd was also *treue*. We're the only two beings here in Medregai who are though."

"Say it again," the cat ordered.

Donnie took a deep breath and pronounced slowly, "Treh—yoo—eh. I think it must be in this shared language of the gods that I apparently know without knowing I know it."

Sylvester considered this for a moment. "I believe you are correct, although I do not know what it means. Might it have something to do with Cyllwyn Mérd giving his soul to you?"

Donnie shook her head negatively, noticing that a fat old bluebird, who appeared to have gone to sleep in one of the trees that rimmed the back yard, was about to fall off his branch. With a wave of her hand, Donnie gave him a lift onto a larger one. "No, I don't think so because I know there are others, sprinkled throughout time. I don't know how I know that either; I just do," she stated flatly. "Ah, well, it'll come to me. It always does eventually. But, obviously, Ceridwen and Cernunnos, and probably the other gods too, know what it means."

Thoroughly nonplussed, Sylvester rasped, "Whatever do you mean by that?"

Donnie pulled out the thick, heavy parchment the gods had given her and showed it to the cat, who read it carefully, taking his time with it.

When he was finished, he observed with satisfaction, "This is why you were finally able to accept what has happened to you and you stopped fighting your destiny. I noted it in Marn Díim, at the inn—the change in you was complete by then."

"Yeah, I think by that point I knew for sure, deep down I mean, that I was indeed this *treue* witch they kept suggesting I was. And, for the first time, my power felt right to me, as though it actually belonged in my bones." Donnie ran her hands over her face and muttered, "Oh, Sylvester, why was I chosen for all this?"

He sent her a compassionate look. "That, I truly do not know, Donemere. As I have told you each time you asked this same question, Catie merely said that you were the only one who responded to her call. Beyond that, I have no knowledge of why you were chosen."

She studied the cat's eyes, finding no deceit in them. "Okay then, maybe you can tell me something else. Is there a reason why I *should*

know the shared language of the gods? Is it something I need for some specific purpose here?"

The cat looked like he was going to say something, then changed his mind, instead replying, "I do not know the answer to that either, Donemere."

Donnie took back the scroll and examined it. Within a few moments, more lines of text appeared below the fifth challenge. "Sylvester, look!" she shoved the parchment back at the cat once she'd read the new text, placing the scroll on the seat in front of him. Sylvester read these new passages aloud:

"Thy path is clear, tho ye remain fretful of its end. Ye must embrace its way, else all shall be consumed by darkness. Once the following two trials are met, ye shall be near enough to feel the power of thy destiny and the truth that lies therein. Ye shall:

Behold the value of all within thy circle as requisite members of the unity.

Secure volition within thy labyrinthine expanse."

Donnie sat back and watched a couple more bluebirds flitting around the back yard. With a short laugh, she mused, "How weird, the trials are getting easier to figure out."

"You know what these mean?" Sylvester inquired, his eyes widening in surprise.

She looked at him and then back at the skittering bluebirds before responding. "Pretty much, yeah. The first one sounds as though it's kind of about team-building, that only together can we defeat Valley Guy, like what I was saying yesterday about valuing every member of your team—no, wait, it's more than that, isn't it?" She surveyed the heavens as if she were seeking clarification from above. "I mean, that's just the high-level explanation, right?" After saying this, Donnie nodded earnestly to herself and exclaimed, "Of course it is, I get it now! See, all along the gods have been trying to teach me about the interconnectedness of the living, and also of the dead, trying to make me see how we rely upon each other in ways we usually can't even comprehend. That there is a very real bond between all living things, between our happiness, our fears and our sorrows. It's a bond that even death can't break and, no matter what, we are not alone." She chuckled, adding, "And that's not a bad thing."

Sylvester stared at her with deepening respect. "If it helps to know this, Donemere," he said warmly, "I believe you are excelling at the lessons the gods have set you."

She beamed a grateful smile at him. "Thank you for that, my friend. But doesn't this next trial seem a bit, oh, I don't know...superfluous? I

mean, it's telling me to value those around me, but that's what I'm doing already, aren't I?"

"Perhaps there will come a day when you will not value us," the cat suggested.

"Perhaps," Donnie crooked an eyebrow at him and added, "but I doubt it. Granted, I sometimes do think about fighting this battle alone, but then I remind myself of how that particular course of action would just not be smart, you know? Valley Guy's henchman play for keeps, and they're all willing to lay down their lives for him—maybe even a little too willing at that." She chewed her lip, deep in thought. "F'r instance, take those Mountain Men at Bitterbend. I mean, when you really think about it, you realize that they had to have known the risk they were taking by rousing the Great Serpents, so why did they do just that? I can't help but wonder if their actions were deliberate, perhaps even controlled by Valley Guy. As a matter of fact, I think they knew right where we were, and I also believe that whole situation was completely set up by my murderous foe, maybe just to get Uncle and me together in the hopes we'd kill each other. After all, who needs a pesky witch and a gargantuan Great Serpent running around loose when you've got an entire world to conquer? And," she observed cynically, "I really think those Mountain Men were darned lucky to get away with only one casualty. If I hadn't done what I did, I'm guessin' one or two more of them would've been Uncle's dessert."

Sylvester snorted his agreement.

Donnie pressed on, her manner becoming more serious. "Now, if I were to go this alone, there's no way I'd be able to avoid killing someone, not if I'm really going to stop Valley Guy. But, on the other hand, if I let the Free Peoples of Medregai join in the battle to protect the life and liberty they've worked so hard and long for, then what happens between them and Valley Guy's forces is more natural, and will probably have only limited consequences for everyone involved. Therefore, it makes good sense to go at this as a team. Besides, I wouldn't think the gods or the boombox would let me do the vigilante thing all by my little lonesome without smacking me upside the head with the truth of the matter. Which is that together we can get a heck of a lot more accomplished than I can by myself, especially since everyone here seems to have various hidden talents that will indubitably help us defeat our resident bad guy."

"Possibly the trial is to be taken merely as a warning," Sylvester theorized. After a moment's pause, he looked up at her and added drolly, "Then again, perhaps the gods have made a mistake with that trial. No god is infallible, after all."

Donnie laughed. “Yeah, but I bet you won’t catch any of them admitting that.”

Sylvester again snorted his agreement, then enquired soberly, “And what of the other trial; have you also an idea of what it means?”

Donnie shrugged her shoulders, replying matter-of-factly, “That one’s even simpler to figure out. It’s all about free will, my friend.”

Chapter 3

Ready for Love

Almost three hours after being sequestered, Warren and Diego walked away from the front of the house and into the late afternoon sunshine. From Donnie's vantage point on the back porch, she watched them slip around the corner of the stables. A few minutes later, all three men came towards the back yard, laughing at some shared, private joke. Falwaïn motioned for her to join them. She did so, with Sylvester tagging along behind her.

They went inside and sat around the dining room table while Donnie got out some biscuits and jams and made some tea, using magic for all of this, of course. Warren and Falwaïn were used to her ways by now and paid no heed to them, but Diego was fascinated.

Falwaïn, catching his eye, chuckled. "In another day or so, it will become commonplace to you, she uses her magic that much."

"Commonplace? No, that I cannot believe," Diego protested, laughing. His whole aspect brightened suddenly and he said, "You know, *mi abuela* would sometimes practice magic, but I do not believe she could do anything such as what Donemere can do. She was one of the few within my mother's tribe who knew how to do any magic at all. She told me once that the Cunning, or the Wise Ones, those like her, I mean, were dying out. She warned that with them would go the old ways of talking to the gods and of walking in time. And then life would be very boring, she said." The corners of his eyes crinkled up as he smiled in remembrance. "I told her life was already very boring for a young boy of thirteen. She knocked me on the head and told me I would never have to worry about being one of the Wise, that was for sure!"

They joked and laughed heartily with each other for a long time, the camaraderie between them feeling right and good. Donnie apologized for her heavy-handed tactics in locking them all in the library, and tried to explain that she just couldn't think of any other way that would convince them of each other's worth that would work half as well as what she'd done. All three men looked at her blandly when she began her admissions of regret, then ignored her and went on with their discussion of each other's adventures. Which just drove Donnie nuts. She finally insisted that they pay attention to her because she really, really, most sincerely, wanted to apologize. They listened to her with resignation and eventually forgave her, but only after sternly extracting a promise from her that she would try *talking* to them first before any locked rooms ever

came into the picture again. She apologized over and over to their set, impassive faces until she realized that each of them was beginning to shake with suppressed mirth. She stopped talking mid-sentence and glared around the table.

Warren was the first to collapse in a fit of laughter. He exclaimed delightedly, "Oh, Donnie, you should've seen your face! We knew you would react this way and, I must say, it's been greatly amusing to watch you fall all over yourself in remorse. A more earnest expression than yours just now I've seldom encountered! Not to fear though, all is forgiven, and we are merry friends once more, yes?"

Donnie shook her head slowly from side to side, conceding, "I can't believe I fell for that one. Man, I am such a rube sometimes! So, yeah...okay, we're all merry meet and welcome once more. I can see that I'll have to really be on my guard around you three if you're going to make a habit of ganging up on me like this!"

They went on to discuss, for a few moments only, their plans for the morrow, simply deciding that they would get an early start since it would take them all day and more to reach Moên Gjendeben. Once at the mountain, they would basically wing it. Until they were close to it though, no plans could be laid or Valledai would read of them and position his forces such that success was an impossibility. No one, not even Diego (who might be forgiven for doing so since he'd come rather late to their side of the game), suggested that Donnie break the Witches' Rede, knowing full well the consequences that would bear. Diego explained that while they had been sequestered in the library, he had voiced curiosity about her, so Warren had apprised him of the constraints laid upon Donnie and the usage of her powers.

The conversation moved on, with the men returning to questions regarding the various adventures each of them had experienced throughout their lives. This sort of talk went on while they enjoyed what Donnie had described to them was a "very English high tea."

Afterwards, she decided to teach the men baseball. They'd been made curious by Donnie's use of the baseball bat in the cavern at Moên Flírbann to deflect the fire ball from Valledai and wanted to know the game from which it came. They were also wondering about the golf umbrella she'd used there too. Donnie told them they'd have to wait a while for her to set up a golf course so she could teach them that sport. Therefore, baseball it was for now. She and Falwain teamed against the other two. While the men caught on to the basics pretty quickly, it wasn't long before the other team started complaining about Donnie's use of magic to catch impossible fly balls that started out zooming in the opposite direction, only to curve round and land solidly within her

baseball glove, or about how she could unerringly connect with any pitch, no matter how hard it was thrown. They called it cheating. She grudgingly admitted they might be right. But did that stop her?

When the complaints finally got too loud and numerous, she set up her ping pong table in the tent and taught them how to play that game. It was easier to play than baseball, given their numbers, and soon they were zinging the ball back and forth over the net. Warren and Diego won, but only after they banded together and told Donnie that was it, she had to quit using magic to beat them or they weren't going to play even one more game with her, ever again. She rolled her eyes and muttered something about sore losers. Nevertheless, she restrained herself and they played three very close, extended games magic-free, with the other side winning two games to one by only the required margin of points.

It was almost dinnertime now so Donnie said she was going to go in and cook up some food for them all while she took another shower. She primly informed the men when they teased her about being so obsessed with smelling pretty, "Cleanliness is next to godliness, don't you know that? Seriously, if you were to ever meet my mother, she'd be more than happy to tell you the same thing—often and quite forcefully. And, honestly, from where I'm standing downwind, I'd have to say you guys could probably profit from another shower yourselves!"

A couple minutes later, Falwain came into the cottage. He walked up to where Donnie stood by the kitchen table reading a cookbook and, from behind his back, presented her with a bouquet of field flowers. The wild lavender and rosemary in the bouquet smelled heavenly. He further surprised her by kissing her lightly on the cheek and declaring, "For you, my lady."

Blushing, Donnie thanked him and asked where the others were, adding, "It's still going to be a few minutes before I even have dinner in the oven, though. Sorry, but I'm having a little trouble deciding what to cook."

"No worries," Falwain assured her as he leaned back against the fridge and crossed his arms in front of him.

Donnie gave him an amused grin, marveling once again at how quickly he'd picked up the language and mannerisms of her modern world.

He grinned back and informed her, "I had a talk with Warren and Diego. They've agreed to eat supper in my room, while you and I have a date here in the cottage."

Donnie did a double-take in surprise, her mouth hanging open for a moment. "And just what do you know about dates?" she finally managed

to eke out, leaving his bouquet suspended in mid-air above the vase she'd made ready for it.

Falwaïn looked up at the ceiling, recalling what he'd gleaned from the magazines he'd read that afternoon. "I know the man usually takes the woman to a restaurant for dinner, then to a movie, or maybe a club for a drink and dancing, something along those lines. Alas, since we have no restaurant, movie theater, or nightclub available, will you settle for a home-cooked meal and a walk in the moonlight?" He leaned forward and smiled his most devastating smile. "And do you think you can conjure up some modern clothing for me to wear? I want you to feel like you're home, at least for tonight. We'll talk about anything you like, and I shall do my best to respond intelligently. Or we can play chess, as long as you promise not to use magic to beat me. I gather from Sylvester that chess is a favorite of yours, but he says you're an awful cheat at it. Which comes as such a surprise," he remarked mildly. "Or we could play some board game called *Kingdom*. There again though, Diego warned I should watch you very closely because you are purportedly quite a shark with it too, magic or no. So, there you have it; whatever you wish to do tonight, my honey woman, we shall do. I am completely at your disposal, eh, ahem, with heartfelt enthusiasm, I might add."

Donnie could only stare at him mutely, not sure whether to laugh or cry. *Honey woman?* she thought to herself incredulously.

"I believe the others have worked up quite a thirst and hunger, and are probably looking forward to their supper. Shall I cook it and take it out to them while you freshen up?" He grabbed the flowers out of the air and let them drop into the vase. Then he began herding Donnie toward the bedroom. "I want you to do whatever you would normally do for a date back in your time. I gather from my reading that a woman likes to paint her face, which if what's meant by that is the color you've added to your eyelids and lips, I am thoroughly enchanted. I also read that a woman usually likes to dress in short dresses. You have no idea how much I've looked forward all afternoon to seeing you in one of those. Now go, my lady, and make yourself ready for our date." And with that, he gently pushed Donnie the last little way into the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Dazed, she floated into the bathroom and took a quick shower. She decided that she liked Falwaïn's nickname for her: *honey woman*. Her hands shaking slightly with excitement, she put a light coat of makeup on in record time. Her lips she left natural with just a gloss. She dried her hair and pulled it back into a chignon, leaving a couple amber-colored tendrils hanging loose to frame her face on both sides. Her fingers dove

eagerly into her jewelry box and got out several of her favorite pieces, laying them in front of her so she could choose which ones to wear.

Stepping back from the vanity to survey her makeup, Donnie realized that the coquette in her had missed the ritualism of getting ready for a date. She'd always loved dating, especially with a particularly handsome man. This weakness for comely paramours, she must admit, had often overpowered her good sense and usually made for rather short-lived romances—especially since, for years, it had been the only criterion she'd used for her selection process of who to date. Donnie knew this was shallow of her, but she'd always been inexplicably drawn to good-looking men, even if they proved to be a few bricks shy of a full load or were so narcissistic they could never pass a mirror without stopping to stare at their own reflections.

As she'd explained to her mother and sister, each of the bazillion times they'd lectured her about, what to them, was her greatest fault, it was simply that she had a hard time thinking of handsome men as anything more than objects of beauty and, as appalling as it may seem, other qualities just didn't matter. After all, she argued in her defense, it wasn't like she felt that way about every man, for heaven's sakes, just the really stunning ones.

"Ah, well, yet another of my bad habits gone by the wayside," she sighed wistfully.

The very sage dating advice given to her by her long-time hairdresser suddenly popped into Donnie's head. Tina, a forbidding woman of fifty-something, warned all of her favorite clients, "Never date a man with hair prettier than your own." Too often, Donnie had not heeded these words, ending up in a long string of disastrous love affairs with men who had each possessed exceedingly good looks and just as exceedingly beautiful locks. Tina, of course, maintained that this was why Donnie had never tied the knot. Crew cuts were best for that, she advised.

Very much amused, Donnie shook her head and chuckled to herself. What a complete nut she was for thinking about Tina and her credo after all this time in Medregai. But hairdressers saw it all, she supposed, and most of them usually had some sort of witticism to apply to practically everything. She wondered what Tina would have to say about her current situation. Was she making a wise choice, agreeing to this date with Falwaïn? (Not that he'd given her much choice, truthfully.) But, if it was the path she should follow, then why hadn't the boombox come to tell her that? Perhaps it thought she was becoming too reliant upon it? Or maybe it felt this was a decision she must make for herself, without any guidance from anyone else? Or perhaps it simply didn't know the proper answer to the question? Strangely shaken by that thought, Donnie

straightened and asked her reflected image, “Is this a good thing for me to be doing?”

And then she laughed again. What was she thinking, getting all serious about this one little date? There was no way she could fall for Falwain after just one evening alone together, right? No, she would not think about things like love tonight, she decided. She would simply enjoy his company, give her mind something to do besides obsess about Liz and Julia. And maybe later she could dream of him when she went to bed. Unless he was there with her and she could do much more than just dream about him!

She hurried into the bedroom and asked the wardrobe to pick what she should wear tonight. Opening its door, Donnie reached in and took out her most special dress. It was of a filmy sea foam green color that almost matched her eyes. The bodice was form-fitting and swept up to narrow, pleated bands that hung on the outsides of her shoulders, leaving her bust line accentuated. The skirt of the dress swung softly around her at mid-thigh length. Overall, the dress revealed plenty of leg, neck, and cleavage, yet still gave her a soft, elegant look. She opened the cedar chest and got out the matching colored pumps she’d bought with the dress. Going back into the bathroom, she adorned herself with some highly polished silver hoop earrings, and a glittering silver chain with a pendant in an abstract design of silver wings that had a brilliant emerald set into its center. She also snapped on the necklace’s matching cuff bracelets. The delicate winged set had once belonged to her maternal grandmother, who had died before Donnie was born.

Putting the rest of her jewelry away, Donnie realized that her long habit of taking less than twelve minutes to shower and dress had now been broken, well and truly. This was the third or fourth time in the past few days where she’d spent much longer than twelve minutes on her ablutions. The next thing she realized, with more than a little astonishment, was that while she was having fun for the moment, dolling herself up like this, she could no longer imagine ever going back to her life in San Francisco!

She thought back to the many careless choices she’d made through the years and how that life now seemed so pointless to her, while this one here had such profundity; it had real purpose now, and good, kind intent. Here, her life meant something, something important. More so than ever before, Donnie felt worthy of the great gift of *life*, a gift that she, like most people, had pretty much taken for granted until she’d arrived in Medregai. Which should make the return to her own time interesting, to say the least, when that day did, in fact, occur. She wondered if she would slip back into her old habits, or had she really changed forever?

When she was finished getting ready, she stood in front of the wrought-iron cheval mirror in the bathroom and studied her image. Sexy was how she'd describe herself. Very sexy. Well, other than the part where the mirror was covered in dog nose-smears. Donnie stood at different angles and on her tippy-toes to see around the fuzzy parts, then finally materialized a towel and a spray bottle filled with water and set them to cleaning the mirror. Ah, that was much better. Yes, she definitely looked sexy. Even Parry and Carly thought so, telling her they had no idea women ever dressed like this. It was certainly provocative, they agreed. And they could hardly wait to see what Falwain would look like when he was dressed in twenty-first century clothing.

Donnie replied with a devilish grin, "Oh, you and me both, my sisters!" She went back out to the bedroom, materialized some scissors and the latest men's fashion magazine, then sat down on the bed and riffled through the advertisement pages until she found the perfect outfit for Falwain. She clipped the image out and thrust it into the wardrobe, closing her eyes and saying in a rush:

"Copy what this model was wearing that day,
In a size tailored exactly to Falwain.
I know it can last only this one night,
For something out of nothing isn't right.
But please hurry up and do it anyway,
'Cause we both need some fun today."

She opened the wardrobe door and pulled out a cobalt blue crew-necked sweater, a crisply ironed cobalt blue dress shirt, dark grey wool trousers that were pleated in the front, a pair of black silk boxer shorts, and some black cashmere socks. The underclothing surprised Donnie because she'd forgotten that Falwain would need it. "Gee thanks, wardrobe. I'm glad someone's thinking clearly!" she chortled before walking over to the cedar chest. When she opened it, she found a pair of black leather dress shoes that matched those in the photo perfectly. "Cool. You really do take care of me, don't you, wardrobe?"

She laid the new clothing out on the bed and placed the shoes on the floor nearby, then opened the door to the outer room. "I'm ready," she breathed softly.

Falwain had been busy. He'd rummaged through both the fridge and larder, and had created a tantalizing spread of citrus fruits, breads, and cheeses, all of which he'd carefully arranged on two platters that were placed near the middle of the kitchen table, along with some red wine vinegar and olive oil mixed together on a plate. He'd opened a bottle of her best chardonnay and had it chilling in the ice bucket. Two candles and the vase with his flowers stood in the center of the table, which had

been laid on either side with a setting of Donnie's best crystal and china. He'd also cleared away all of the chairs except for the two that stood across the table from each other.

He was leaning up against the refrigerator again, waiting for her. Donnie could see his eyes glittering in the flicker of candlelight as she slowly walked into the room. His gaze started at the top and then drifted from her face and hair, over her shoulders and to her bust, lingering on her waist and then her legs, and finally stopping at her slim ankles.

He couldn't speak, his tongue was so thick with desire. He wet his lips and tried again. Nothing. No words would come. He shook his head and smiled. Donnie said the bathroom was his now and that his clothes were on the bed. He nodded and walked to the bedroom, turning at the last moment to let his eyes wander over her once more, before closing the door softly behind him.

Hugging herself, Donnie wondered with growing anticipation just how the evening would progress. When she heard the shower start, she moved over to the counter by the stove. Falwain had set out four eggs and had chopped some red and orange peppers and green onions, shredded some Monterey Jack and some sharp and mild Cheddar cheeses, and mixed together his own special blend of spices in a ramekin. Omelets, she realized. Heavens to Betsy, what hadn't he read about her world the other night? Or was this part of his reading material today?

She sniffed the air appreciatively. He must've used cinnamon in the spices because its soft scent permeated the kitchen area. Hmm, so gourmet cooking could be added to his long list of talents, eh? Well, she was certainly looking forward to tasting his culinary efforts.

The outer door started to open, but Donnie closed it quickly with a wave of her hand. She called out that she was very sorry, but they couldn't come in because she was having a date with Falwain and they didn't want interruptions. With a twist of her hand, she locked all of the outer doors and windows. She then filled both wine glasses and sipped from hers while she walked around the room nervously.

Her mind was still reeling from Falwain's suggestion for this evening. What on earth had possessed him to propose it, she wondered. Whatever it was, this was definitely the perfect way to keep her mind off Liz and Julia.

Shit, now she really felt guilty. Shouldn't she be screaming over into that mountain to break her friends free, even if it meant she had to level the place and kill everyone there except her friends, she asked herself viciously; then stopped short and shook her head to clear it. Where the hell had that come from? She'd never had that kind of thought before in her life, ever! The very idea of it was horrifying.

“Fecking ay, what would I think about myself then?” she hissed aloud. “To take thousands of lives as if they meant nothing? Good lord, I’d never be the same afterward. And I don’t think magic would ever be the same for me again either, even if I was allowed to keep my powers.”

Donnie wondered if Valley Guy had somehow managed to worm his way inside her head to implant that sudden, crazed thought. Honestly though, she hadn’t felt his presence anywhere near her triune, neither here now nor any time since meeting him in the cavern. No, she decided after a minute’s deliberation, that killing desire was not seeded by him, but neither had it been a natural thought. Something else was at work here, but what that was, Donnie had no clue.

“Hey, Sylvester, I’m back.”

“Hello, Rex.” The cat refrained from referring to the obvious superfluity of the dog’s announcement.

“Why ya sittin’ out here watchin’ the door?” Rex sat down beside his friend and stared at the door too. “Is there somethin’ funny goin’ on with it?”

“No.” The cat turned his head and looked up at the dog. “It simply will not open.”

“Well, that’s kinda funny, don’tcha think? It usually opens on its own whenever I go near it. Here, lemme try.” He got up and trotted the few steps to the door.

“It will do no good. Donemere has locked it,” Sylvester informed the dog.

Rex whirled around in surprise. “Hey, it *is* locked. Why’d she do that?”

Sylvester shook his head wearily. “She and Falwaïn are in there alone, having a date. Why they need to lock the door to share a fruit is beyond my ken. Do you know? Is this the way dates are eaten in your world?”

Rex sat down and replied knowingly, “Oh, I get what she’s talkin’ about, but I’ve never seen any fruit involved. Well, sometimes I guess, but that’s usually only when they eat dinner too. A date means they mostly just wrestle.”

Sylvester stared at him, wide-eyed with amazement. “What?” he finally managed to blurt out.

The dog raised an eyebrow, then explained with somewhat exaggerated patience, “You know, they roll around together on the floor, or on the bed, or the couch, or the dining room table or the coffee table.

Well, pretty much any kind of table. Or the bathroom counter, or even the kitchen counter, for that matter. Oh, and in the shower.” Rex cocked his head for a moment, thinking. “Mama’s really good at it ’cause she almost always wins. She’s got lots of names for it, you know. One’s intercourse. And another’s fornah something—oh yeah, fornication, that’s it. But she only says those when Grandma’s around. She calls it a bunch of other things when she’s talkin’ to Auntie Liz or Aunt Emily.”

Sylvester raised an eyebrow at the dog. “You have never coupled with a female dog, have you?...You know, where you make puppies?” he explained in response to the puzzled look on the dog’s face.

“Do you mean have I had sex? Aw, jeez, no! Mama got me tutored a long time ago so I’d know better,” he apprised the cat proudly, going on to add, “She says she’s a responsible dog owner and no boy of hers is gonna go around screwin’ every bitch in heat, gettin’ any number of ’em knocked up. So she got me tutored. She tells everybody that. I don’t remember it all that much though. Seems like all’s I did was go to sleep, and then I woke up, and the next thing I knew, Mama said I was tutored.”

Sylvester considered this for a moment, wondering exactly what Rex could have been tutored in, especially whilst asleep, then decided it would be best to return to the original subject. “Yes,” he drawled. “Tell me, how long do these dates last?”

“Usually all night,” the dog supplied cheerfully.

“They, er, wrestle all night?” Sylvester’s voice was filled with awe.

Rex frowned and said, “Well, I don’t know if they wrestle all night, but the date usually lasts ’til the morning. Honestly, I don’t really know what happens during the night ’cause Mama almost always locks me out of the room after a while, saying she doesn’t need an audience, especially one who barks, thank you very much. But I think they sleep a lot too ’cause they get awfully quiet; well, unless the guy’s a snorer, and then Mama kicks him out. If he stays all night, they usually wrestle again at least once in the morning, if you follow me,” the dog added innocently.

“At quite a distance, but yes, I follow you.” Sylvester gave his canine friend a long, dour look. “I shall contribute only one thing more to this discussion, and that is the fervent wish that we never have another like it!” With this declaration, Sylvester stalked away to the stables, leaving Rex to shrug and follow in his footsteps.

The door to the bedroom opened and Falwain stepped into the kitchen. He smiled down at his new clothes, clearly liking their fabric and cut. With them, he almost looked like a modern man.

Donnie waved her hand and lit a few dozen more candles all at once. Every corner of the room was now lit, even if only dimly. Most of the soft light, naturally, was centered around the kitchen area. She picked up Falwaïn's glass from the table and met him with it. They both took a sip of the divine nectar, enjoying the light, fresh taste of the wine. She found she'd been right, the cobalt blue sweater and shirt picked up the blue of his eyes and intensified it. She felt like melting under the heat of his gaze.

Falwaïn let his eyes travel over her once again. Overcome with emotion, he cleared his throat and asked, "Would you rather I cut my hair or pull it back in a hairstyle appropriate to your time?"

Donnie leaned her head to the side and looked up at him. "No, it's fine like it is. At least it's not prettier than mine."

He raised a questioning eyebrow.

Donnie chuckled, "Never mind. Trust me, you look heart-stoppingly handsome just as you are. I wouldn't change a thing. Well...except perhaps if you were to shave off the beard?" she asked hopefully.

He studied her for a long moment before replying, "I have my limits."

She nodded, a sage look of comprehension on her face. "And shaving your beard off is one of them; is that it?"

"Yes," he admitted. "That I would not do, even for you." He smiled at her then and called out, "Could we have some music, please, boombox? Something we can dance to, if you would," he added when the boombox appeared on the sideboard. It began softly playing Grahaem Burton's "You Look Wonderful Tonight."

Falwaïn took the wineglass out of Donnie's hand and put both glasses on the table. Holding her hands, he swayed in time to the music. Donnie stepped closer and guided his arms around her. Carefully, she taught him how to slow dance. He caught on quickly, so that she soon felt comfortable enough to take her eyes off their feet and laid her head on his shoulder.

At the end of the song, Donnie lifted her head and somehow they were kissing. She felt Falwaïn tremble and knew that she was trembling too. The kiss was entrancing to them both, being deep and hesitant, and yet transmitting their mutual desires in a way that words could not. They parted reluctantly and Donnie felt her whole body shiver. For the final time, she asked herself if she should indeed allow this to happen, for it was clear what was on both their minds. Should they start something that the gods, or whoever it was who controlled Donnie's destiny, might never allow them to finish? She really didn't know the correct answer, but she was sure that right now, for tonight at least, she needed Falwaïn. Tomorrow would have to make its own way.

They agreed they required food, so Donnie sat down and grazed on what Falwaïn had already set out, singing along with the acoustic version of “Got Me on My Knees” as she ate.

Falwaïn put a pan on the stove and the burner turned itself on. Having dealt with the stove before, he was ready for it and immediately began making the omelet. He had a little trouble folding it correctly, so Donnie wiggled a finger behind his back to help him. He wasn’t fooled. Twisting around toward her, he grinned and mouthed, “Thank you!”

She grinned back at him, inclining her head while she softly sang the chorus of the song.

Falwaïn took the pan from the stovetop and cut the omelet into halves, placing one part onto each of their plates. It was delicious, light and fluffy with the perfect amount of cheese and just a hint of cinnamon. While they ate they asked each other countless questions, talking easily about their childhoods, their families, their successes and their failures, their loves, and their dreams.

Near the end of the meal, Falwaïn, ever curious about Donnie’s life before coming to Medregai, said, “You told me you were writing a book when Catie brought you here, a treatise of sorts about an episode in your country’s history called the Junction Uprising.” When Donnie gave a nod of acknowledgement, he then requested, “Tell me about it, if you would, both your book and the event, which I gather changed the course your country was on at that time. Yes?”

Donnie took a sip of wine to wash down the last bite of egg and then replied, “You know, I have not even thought about that book in months, other than when I mentioned it to you the other day.” She was both surprised and pleased that he’d remembered it. “Well, firstly,” she began, “you must understand that the people in my world are vastly different from those here. We’re all human, for one thing, so there are no elves or vinca or trolls or such. Which is probably best seeing as we can’t seem to accept the differences between just us humans, so I can’t imagine us accepting the differences between ourselves and other potentially ruling races.”

She pulled a wry face and admitted, “Perhaps that’s just my cynicism showing through, but our development has been a rough one, I’ll have to say that for it.” She took another drink of wine and eyed him speculatively, and then, almost daring him, added, “How about you tell me what you know of my country’s history?”

He laughed, shooting her an appreciative grin before recounting obligingly, “I gather it began hundreds of years before you were born, when the New World, or rather, America, was discovered and peoples from various European countries began to sail there to find a freedom not

afforded them in their own homelands. In 1776, America's government declared itself free and independent from England, the main country that had ruled America for a long time before that. That was not a peaceful transition and many people lost their lives to establish what was hailed as the first truly free nation in the civilized modern world, although it depended upon who you were as to whether you were actually free within it. That's because it seems that slavery has been a part of human history for ages, both here in my time and apparently even more so in yours, and this new, young country of America was no different, with much of it being built by slave labor. It is rather astounding to note that, even in that newly free and independent nation, slaves were counted as only a partial person, while women were not counted at all, no matter their color. Which is not an issue we've had here, by the way, at least not to my knowledge; our women have made sure of that. Anyway, it would take a lot more lives and decades before every person in the land of America was counted as a whole person and its women were allowed to vote, to own property, to have their own monies and their own titles. A long process which must have made women like you want to eat their hats in fury," he commented as an aside, mugging at her facetiously.

Donnie chuckled in response, her eyes twinkling in the candlelight. "I figured you probably had a pretty good grasp of our history, so I'm not surprised you knew all that. But you are getting a bit ahead of yourself, dear sir. You seem to have left out some very important wars."

Falwain held up his hands in protest and said, "Yes, but I must say, it never occurred to me that a free country would be at war with none other than itself. While this 'Civil War' of yours, which was begun in 1861, aimed at finally and truly freeing all people from slavery, in 1864 the proponents of slavery declared victory because their side was the first to manufacture and employ the repeating rifle. With these weapons, the southern armies massacred the forces of the north, who were the ones fighting for universal freedom, and subsequently the nation's president was shot as a war criminal by the southern government that took over after the war ended. And from there, it was not long before it became ever more fashionable to have as many slaves as a household could economically maintain."

Nodding her head and wearing an almost forlorn expression, Donnie interjected, "And America enslaved millions, mostly people of color, for more than a century longer."

Falwain sent her a commiserating look. "Indeed," he murmured. "And in the first half of the next century, as I recall reading, two World Wars were fought," he continued, "with America forcing its slaves to participate in these wars in dramatically unproportionate numbers, much

to the anger and ridicule of the countries with whom America fought. The one bright spot for civil rights during that time period was women finally winning the right to vote and to own land in 1928. Slowly but steadily, as the years went by, more and more progressive people with liberal ideals, people who did not believe in slavery, migrated west, where slavery was finally abolished in many western states from 1947 to 1952. Most of these states also passed laws to help those caught in slavery, setting them free if possible, or at least legislating stricter limits on the reaches of other states and the federal government regarding slavery and any slaves who made it to the west. The states in the east did the exact opposite and, by the end of the 1950s, they were experiencing terrific and violent slave rebellions, aided and sometimes even funded by groups from the west, which of course had horrible consequences for the entire nation. The states situated in the middle of the country became the new battlegrounds as each side toughened their stances and brought the fight literally back to the streets and fields of America once again and a new long-term, though unofficial civil war began.”

Donnie, looking much impressed by now, took another sip of wine, staying silent but motioning for him to continue.

He did so, eager to show her that he could, in fact, understand her world much better now after having studied it this afternoon. He thought for just a moment before saying, “Spurred on by what was happening in the east and the desire to forge something new for everyone, the folks in the west seem to have become obsessed with developing technology so that, by 1980, every home was completely wired for communication, control, maintenance, safety—you name it, whatever it was, there was a computer program developed to make it happen. You did this to your automobiles, your work places, your shopping malls, pretty much everywhere, all in the hope that progress in all forms would inspire the east to abolish the practice of subjugating others to their collective will. These attempts, admirable though they were, were also unsuccessful. But in 1980, everything changed and the undeclared civil war between you came to a head because of the Junction Uprising in a state called Utah, where the Green and Colorado rivers meet.”

Donnie leaned forward and gave him a dazzling smile. “You are amazing!” she exclaimed warmly. “You already have a better grasp of my world’s history than some who grew up there. By the way, 1980 was the year Liz was born, while I was born two years later. I mention that because one of the effects of the uprising was that it made people afraid, and many sought and found comfort in the opposite sex, whether for reassurance or just plain old affirmation of life and love, and consequently there were a number of babies born later that year.” When

Falwaïn gave a quick grin and nod of concurrence, Donnie considered him a moment, then prodded him by urging, “Go on, tell me what you know about the uprising itself.”

“Well,” he said, taking a few moments to order his thoughts again, “to understand the uprising, one must first know that the American federal government, up to that time, had doggedly continued investing in the outdated petroleum industry because it was an old, established market that could be easily controlled and therefore large sums of money could readily be made from it, at least for the select few controlling the supply; whereas the younger but burgeoning renewable energy market was dynamic and diversified and therefore much more difficult to constrain. After all, anyone could install solar panels on their roofs to produce the energy they needed for themselves, especially as the prices for the technology dropped further and further as the years progressed. And then, in 1978, to the horror of those in the west, the federal government approved a new oil pipeline project that would run parallel for quite some ways to the Green River, then cross near the confluence or junction of it with the Colorado. While nobody out west needed or wanted this project, the feds forced its approval and construction began shortly after it was given the notice to proceed, with protests and sabotage and legal actions and anything at all that could possibly delay or stop the project being fair game for both sides over the next two years.

“Now, one of the main groups oppressed by slavery in America were the First Peoples, which included all of the peoples indigenous to the New World long before the Europeans came to settle it. They were herded onto reservations, mostly in the midwest and southwestern states, onto land areas that were supposed to be their own but which were typically undesirable or infertile areas with little to sustain the poor folk forced to live there and which were always surrounded by fences that were built by the federal government. And the feds continued to rule indigenous affairs—which was quite an overreach, in my opinion, one of many your federal government committed throughout its relatively young history.”

Donnie voiced a low, “Agreed,” but otherwise did not interrupt him.

Falwaïn went on as though she had not spoken. “These two rivers,” he continued, looking up at the rafters, but not really seeing anything other than the text he’d read earlier that day, “meet right in the middle of the Oáye Reservation, which is the largest of the Sioux reservations, with the general region around the two rivers being where the Lakhóta Sioux peoples made their home. The pipeline was to cross under each of the rivers, taking a route that would keep it within the borders of the reservation. Protests against the pipeline and its biased routing were

extreme and violent on the reservation, going on for months, with several injuries and fatalities occurring on both sides. The local authorities sided with the protestors, while the construction company was defended by federal armed forces.” Falwain turned back to Donnie and looked at her with a steady gaze. “By that time in your history,” he said, “weaponry and any related technology had already gotten rather creative and most people were trained to protect themselves at early ages.”

Donnie nodded in agreement with this statement, then noted, “Unless you were a slave in the eastern states, of course, and then it was considered treasonous for any slave to even handle a weapon outside the military.”

“Yes,” he conceded, “but First Peoples on reservations could own basic weapons and many more were smuggled onto the Oáye Reservation, while other, more advanced ones were carried on quite brazenly by the authorities on both sides. One such weapon had been modified by the federal government to release a neurotoxin named Paroxym that would completely and permanently incapacitate anyone exposed to it. When the presence of this weapon and its debilitating toxin was discovered, the protestors went into a frenzy. They almost immediately attacked the federal troops, catching them by surprise, and managed to overpower them, ending up holding fifty-four as hostage. Eight hours later, the feds flew in drones that dropped chemical bombs or sprayed poisons over the reservation, essentially destroying the surrounding land area around the protests for more than twenty miles in all directions and killing every person, plant and animal within that perimeter, including the hostages. At that point, the folks on the west coast hacked into the utility systems for the east and brought the other half of the country to a complete halt. In retaliation, the feds instituted a secret plan they’d developed previously that would release more of their favored poisonous gases and toxins to the west using numerous methodologies, and two days later, parts of Omaha and Denver became veritable wastelands. Not prepared for the hue and cry, not to mention the very real threats that resounded immediately from all around the world, the American president backed off from using these escalating tactics and sat down with the leaders of the west in downtown Denver, where a peace deal was brokered within sight of some of the newly desolated areas of the city. The country would be split in two, it was decided, with America keeping all of the states east of the Rocky Mountains, and the new country of Cascadia comprising the thirteen most western states—that is, until the Dakotas, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska threatened to raise bloody hell unless they were allowed to side with Cascadia. America reluctantly let them go. It took forty years,

until 2020, for relations between the two countries to become anything akin to normalized and the efforts toward that have mostly been pushed by America because of how much they need Cascadia, while the same cannot be said for Cascadia. I gather trade grew steadily after that between the countries, but not especially as regards renewable energies and similar technologies. Mostly, America remains committed to petroleum products, whereas much of the developed world, and Cascadia itself, has moved on to using solar, wind and other renewable resources only. And so a lasting peace has been established between the two countries, and while progress is being made slowly in America, it is indeed being made and slavery is once again an issue of contention within its borders, with much of the ire against slavery being credited to the Junction Uprising and its resulting consequences.”

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.

Falwain 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.”

Falwain grunted, apparently not convinced, but willing to move on, as evidenced by his next question. “What else is different from the official version of events of the Junction Uprising?”

Donnie pondered this, tracing a series of circles with her finger on the table. “Maybe it’ll be easier to outline what I discovered to be a more accurate sequence of events,” she replied after several seconds’ thought. “So, to start, tensions between the Sioux General Council and the federal government had been building for months, mainly, it seems, because there was something on the reservation that the government wanted and routing the pipeline near the confluence of the rivers was designed to give them access to the area they otherwise could not have justified. It’s clear the Lakhóta Sioux elders knew what the government was after, but they’re all long dead and apparently none of them left anything behind with their families to explain the government’s motives, so that became a literal dead end for me. What I did find out was that it had something to do with the Iquakawi. The Iquakawi had gotten associated with the Lakhóta Sioux back in the 1800s, although it’s not clear exactly how that came about. Anyway, the Iquakawi were known to be deeply spiritual leaders and had several artifacts they used to call upon the spirits, or so their legend goes. Some of the current Lakhóta elders I interviewed posited that perhaps one or more of these artifacts was what the government was after. At the time I conducted those interviews, I was more than a little skeptical about that potential motive, but I became convinced that they were right because, although it had been almost forty years since the uprising when I explored the area, I found several old paint marks, faded with age, on rocks in this one part of the reservation and these marks eventually took me to an area that had clearly seen a lot of excavation in the past. When I went back and asked about the dig, the tribal historian confirmed that it was from 1980, less than four months after the uprising. But it was not known if the government found anything there because all Sioux were ordered to stay away that area during the dig. This was at the time that the country was actively splitting and it seems the American government had negotiated this supposed archeological foray onto the reservation as part of the treaty to release Utah to Cascadia.”

Falwain leaned away from her in his chair, inquiring in a sharp voice, “That was part of the negotiated treaty? Were other similar demands made by the federal government as well?”

Donnie gave him a sly grin and shook her head slowly. “Nope, not a one. And none in any of the other states either—nor on any other reservation. Fascinating, huh?” He agreed it was with a nod and Donnie continued, “So, to get back to the events leading to the uprising, it seems

the protestors and the government both refused to sit down to talk, although the government let it be known that, as far as they were concerned, the Iquakawi were no longer welcome on the reservation and it would be in the best interests of the Lakhóta peoples, and all Sioux, for that matter, to turn all Iquakawi over to the government. The Lakhóta and Iquakawi elders met daily during the protest and, from what I have been able to ascertain, at no time did the Lakhóta elders or the Sioux General Council consider complying with the order from the government. What exactly was said or decided at these meetings between the First Peoples, I don't know. Not only were they not recorded in any way, it's nearly impossible to get any of the First Peoples to discuss that sort of thing with an outsider."

"I cannot blame them for that as it seems their history is rife with betrayals, most especially by the federal government," Falwaín pointed out dryly.

"Exactly," allowed Donnie. "The timeframe for all this was late 1979 into early 1980, and on the night of February the third of 1980, it all began to come to a head. That is the date that the rumor about the presence of a QS235 on the reservation was started and on the morning of the fourth, before sunrise, Lakhóta Sioux warriors surrounded the government forces and overpowered them. During the skirmish that ensued over the rest of the morning, one hundred and twenty-seven soldiers and nineteen warriors were killed. That is odd in and of itself considering that the government had more advanced weaponry, but this seemed to account for little in the battle and somehow the Lakhóta Sioux defeated the government forces and took the survivors as hostages. The dead were then gathered up and trucked to the main gate of the reservation and there they were laid out in rows, except for the dead warriors, who were taken to the reservation morgue. The hostages were handed over to the local authorities and other off-rez protestors before all Lakhóta Sioux withdrew to the council meeting hall. And there they stayed until dark, which was about 5 pm, when they were seen to all slip away, presumably to their homes, although I don't think that's where they went. I think they went to the same site the feds would dig up a couple months later. And something happened there or was decided there that affected the Iquakawi, because their community houses, which were located in one corner of the reservation, were deserted the very next day and no sign of any of the former inhabitants has been found since."

Falwaín was silent, letting all this soak in. He finally asked, "What about the drone attack, what time was it?"

"It started at 8:20 pm and was over in thirteen minutes," Donnie replied, "with the full complement of chemicals in the drones having

been discharged over the protest area by then. The drones all landed in a weird, eerie sort of arrow formation pointing west and remained there until the government reclaimed them. Which they did the next morning, when they sent a helicopter to investigate what had happened to the people because they had not been able to communicate with anyone there all night and found the new bodies of protestors and hostages. At eleven o'clock that same morning, Bernal Crowfoot gave an interview in which he informed the world of the rumor regarding the QS235 and the subsequent uprising by what he said were Iquakawi forces on the federal personnel. He said the Iquakawi were taking full credit for the first attack on the feds, but he then went on to condemn the drone attack and disavowed any part in it. The interview lasted seven minutes and then he turned away, got into a brown truck that was waiting for him, and that was the last he was ever seen again. The truck was owned by another Iquakawan, but was driven by a Sioux woman named Theris Red Deer. She also subsequently disappeared, but only after she came to full term with their child, birthed the baby girl, then she and the baby left the reservation and neither ever returned. Her family swear they have not heard from her since the day of the child's birth in late October of 1980 and they have no idea what she did with the child. I don't know what part she might have played in the uprising, but she was obviously quite close to Mr. Crowfoot."

"Hmm," Falwaïn murmured. "Yes, that's quite different from the official version; isn't it?" he noted. "You said there was question as to whether all of the dead bodies at the site were killed by the chemicals in the drones. Why do you think they may have been killed by something else?"

"Mostly because the autopsy reports have not been declassified yet, therefore I have no way of verifying who all was killed there or what their official cause of death was. In addition, there were comments from rescue workers that some of the bodies looked as though they had been cut deeply by something sharp, which, if true, refutes the assumption of death by poison gas."

"Well, yes, quite. Yes, I see that," he agreed. "It seems you have raised some fine questions. It is really too bad you can't get more answers somehow."

"But here's the thing," Donnie said, smiling at him excitedly, "Diego is half-Iquakawan, so maybe I can get him to explain some of their traditions to me. That might at least lead me to some answers on where the missing Iquakawi might have gone. He did say that his grandmother was a time walker, so I wonder if that was meant literally?"

Falwain smiled, then sat back thoughtfully, twirling the stem of his wineglass in his fingers before draining its contents, and then remarked, "That is an intriguing possibility. Well, I believe you will have ample opportunity to interview him, and then one day soon perhaps you can finish your book!" After saying this, he reached forward to pick up the wine bottle and refill their glasses.

Donnie thanked him and took another sip of wine, considering her response. She held her glass by its stem, staring into the clear wine for several moments before saying, "I'm not so sure I even want to finish the book anymore. While I may be able to lay some of my questions about the uprising to rest, that really has no moment for anyone else but me, you know? Especially not here! And now that I'm a witch...well, I tell you, coming here has brought so many things into perspective for me. I mean, take a look at the lives of the average person in Medregai. They get up with the dawn, feed themselves and their animals, and not necessarily in that order, then hit the fields or their smithy or whatever, with their children in tow. The whole family works their tails off all day long. Sounds positively gruesome to a twenty-first century maiden. But, since I've gotten to be around them a little bit, to observe them and their way of life, it struck me just how much time they spend with each other, discovering the world around them.

"Now, you have to understand where I'm coming from here. See, in my world, there are a growing number of people whose only friends are those they make in cyberspace on a gamer's website or in some other social technology. My world has lost the human touch, the ability to communicate face-to-face with our fellow man, maybe because it makes us uncomfortable to discuss life lessons in any forum other than anonymously or in a psychoanalyst's office or in a blog. We so often don't talk to each other, to those sitting right next to us at the dinner table night after night or in the cubicle next to ours day after day, about our emotions, our dreams, our goals, or about life and living, about death even. It's all got to be much more superficial than that for most of us or we shy away like scared rabbits."

Donnie shook her head sadly. "That afternoon in Mälendian, I watched a couple of mothers talking to their daughters about plants and how to tend them properly. Okay, that can happen anywhere, I suppose. But the thing I noticed more was that they were also sharing the wonder of spring and how giving nature is. And the kids were actually listening to their parents with rapt attention! You won't catch that sort of thing happening in my century; not much anyway, and certainly not with most teenagers. I also stopped to listen to one guy who was lecturing some other kids, boys and girls alike, about honesty and integrity, along with

survival skills against okûns. The way he wove it all together was positively masterful! The lessons of the spirit beside those of living life with diabolical creatures who are lying in wait just to eat you, pretty much everywhere you go! All of which, I grant you, makes for a very hard life. But the people here so obviously take time out not just to smell the roses, but to tend and care for them, to nurture the world around them. Their lives are based upon their families and nature, ever hopeful that the future holds promise for everyone. Which, in many ways, makes for much richer living than most of the people in my world ever manage to do.

“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?

After a moment, Falwaïn said slowly, "You know, going back to the beginning of our talk, there are many slaves here in Medregai too. I personally freed all those who were enslaved to my father after his death, but that is not common practice. You were right to question my treatment of Diego, for somehow in the last couple of years my feelings toward peoples of color have indeed changed for the worst, something I am trying to work on and may request your assistance with later, as I believe it is based around a recurring dream I have been having. And I am now unsure that it was a dream borne of anything natural."

"You think it might be because of a spell?" asked Donnie and Falwaïn shrugged.

"I do not know," he replied, "I only know that it is odd, and oddly timed that I should, at this late date in my life, develop a distrust and hatred for people I do not even know and have no reason to dislike when I have consistently argued in the past against this sort of behavior. My friends can and would attest to this, and I fear that if it is because of a magical spell, I may be unable to overcome it fully. I recall you saying that one cannot change another's spell without knowing its exact wording, correct?"

"Yes, that's true," Donnie conceded, "but that doesn't mean we can't do anything. We'll just have to think about it and come up with a smart spell to lay over the first. I can talk to Sylvester about it. I remember him referring to something called the Silver Hand in one of our classes. It's a

method of seeing if spells are woven around a person, but I don't know how to do it. I'll ask him tomorrow."

They finished one bottle of wine and started a second with the berries and cream Falwaïn had also prepared. By the time they were replete and the mood much more mellow, it was past ten o'clock. Donnie waved her hand to clear the table but kept the wine and their glasses, and then materialized one of her compilation CDs marked with an "L" into the boombox. The first song was Paul Heche's "Dream Weaver." Donnie increased its volume with another wave of her hand, stood up and asked Falwaïn to dance. He nodded and came around the table to her, drawing her to the center of the room. He held her very close while they danced.

She raised her head up and lightly kissed his jaw, letting her lips brush down to his neck, kissing the side of it. She then ran her tongue up to his earlobe, which she started gently biting. His arms tightened around her some more and she heard his breathing become rapid.

He dropped his head down to her neck and kissed her the way she had him, marveling at how much her body thrilled him. With a slight shiver, he felt her hands go under his sweater and lift it up so he could take it off. He let it drop to the floor. Her hands ran over his chest, up to his collar. She unbuttoned his shirt slowly, kissing and running her tongue along his neck and down his chest. His skin jumped at her touch and a groan escaped from between his lips.

Suddenly the boombox overrode the CD and began playing Bad Blood's "Ready for Love."

Falwaïn ran his fingertips down Donnie's backbone slowly to her waist, then brought them up and around to cup her breasts. Her breath caught with his movements. He could feel the heat of desire he'd induced in her and he felt his own quickened response to her body's need. His powerful arms engulfed her while her hands and tongue lightly explored his shoulders and chest, sending quivers of excitement shooting through his body.

Donnie felt a lovely, sweet overwhelming ache in her loins and knew that at this moment, she wanted Falwaïn more than she'd ever wanted any man. And, in her heart was echoed the words of the song: it *was* time for this love, irrespective of whether it was a love she could keep.

Their kisses became even more ardent as their hands and mouths explored each other's bodies hungrily. Her dress soon joined the growing pile of clothing, as did his trousers and shoes. He kissed her deeply then, his heart pressing against hers while their nearly naked bodies molded tightly to each other. He closed his eyes and wanted more. So much more. "I would very much like to experience fellatio," he said huskily into her neck.

Donnie leaned back and raised an eyebrow at him. "You and every other man in existence."

He nodded and pulled her to him again, burying his face in the curve of her neck with a smile.

"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 vengery 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!"

Falwaïn 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.

Much later, with dawn still a couple hours away and a ghostly moonlight streaming through the curtains, Donnie awoke and felt her libido rise again. She ran her hands over Falwaïn, making him shiver with desire, and kissed him deeply. When he started to roll onto her, she pushed him back with her hands and climbed on top of him, straddling his hips. From there, their bodies moved in perfect rhythm until their lovemaking ended once more in shared ecstasy. She rolled off him tiredly and straightened her length next to his. He hugged her to him, drawing her into the crook of his arm so that her head nestled into his shoulder. A moment later, he was already asleep.

Donnie closed her eyes, happier than she would've thought possible, given the circumstances. She lay there for a couple of minutes before her

eyes suddenly popped wide open. She'd felt a quickening inside her body. Her instincts told her that despite what her doctor back home had told her was absolutely, unequivocally impossible because her fallopian tubes were useless, she was now pregnant.

"Oh, that's absurd, Donnie; there's no way that could happen without in-vitro," she muttered, yawning into Falwain's chest. "And that takes months and months of preparation where you have to be injected with billions and billions of hormones until you're the biggest bitch on the face of the Earth!"

Falwain moved restlessly and mumbled, "Hmm?" under his breath before promptly sliding back into sleep. Donnie mused about possibly becoming a parent. What kind of mother would she make? What kind of father would Falwain make? If only it were true, and she really was with child, then she'd have a reason to take Falwain with her when she finally was allowed to leave Medregai and she wouldn't have to worry about her heart breaking because then there would be no separation from him.

Unbeknownst to her, the parchment flapped and fluttered a bit in the money belt, and in the space below the sixth trial appeared one new line of text. The trial now read:

Behold the value of all within thy circle as requisite members of the unity.

For even the smallest must attend their destiny, 'though it be met in a distant time and place.

Donnie wondered if Rex was home yet. Forcing the crazy idea of an imaginary pregnancy from her sleep-woozy head, she called to her pup with her mind and he responded sleepily from the stables. Yes, he'd given the message to the king and, yes, he had a reply. Donnie waited for more. She was still waiting a minute later. Sighing, she decided Rex had earned the right to sleep unhindered by her. *Besides, silly girl, she reminded herself acerbically, you can't make any long-term plans right now because of that damnable book.*

Worried that Rex or Sylvester might be cold in the night, Donnie unlocked the outer doors of the cottage. She also sent hers and Falwain's evening clothes to the wardrobe. Yawning tiredly, she settled down deeper into her lover's shoulder and willed herself to join him in slumberland.

Notes from the Author

Please visit my website to learn more information about me and my writing, read my blog, find out who I'm reading, and add your name to my mailing list so you can be one of the first to know when my next project is due out or to maybe earn a little bonus read here and there of parts of my books (or maybe the whole thing). I promise to never send you spam.

My website can be found at:

<https://www.cherylagross.com/>

I want to thank all my readers for their support. Being an indie (independent) author means that I have to do everything myself, from the writing and storyboarding all the way through to book design, sales and marketing. While I'm pretty good at the first parts, I'm still learning the last parts and have a lot of growing to do in that regard. For instance, I am hoping to make my books available at several other venues than just Amazon by the end of 2017. I am also going to be looking to do some book readings and signings, and perhaps one day I will schedule one in your town, so please be sure to let me know who you are by joining my contact list from my website.

Also, if you would take the time to leave a review wherever you purchase my books online, that would be greatly appreciated. Search engines, especially those internal to book sites, display those titles with the highest number of reviews in their first group of results and therefore those titles get seen and purchased the most. More importantly, I just simply appreciate the feedback I get in reviews.

Lastly, I hope you enjoy reading the Donemere's Music series even half as much as I enjoy writing it. It is a positive story and one of empowerment of the mind, heart and soul, not just for the main characters, but also for those on the edges of the story who contribute so much to the telling. May we all strive to bring out the best in ourselves and each other, no matter what happens in our lives.

About the Author

Beginning when she was a very young girl in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, Ms. Gross wrote fictional stories, sharing them with family and friends but never having quite enough confidence to attempt publishing them. By default, she fell into a career of technical writing, earning herself a niche in the technical editing market of mining study reports. She currently resides in the Santa Cruz, California area, although she has lived and traveled to various places throughout the world. Several years ago, she decided to take a hiatus from her professional work and focused on writing novels. The idea for Donemere's Music was born then and Thy Path Begins is the first of the books she wrote during this period. After some reworking, it is finally ready to take flight. The second book in the series was published in August 2017, so be on the lookout for The Cunning Sister Arises.

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Donemere's Music

Thy Path Begins (2016)

The Cunning Sister Arises (2017)