

THE LAST SCABBARD

A NOVEL BY

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DEDICATION

To my partner, Stuart Littlejohn

And to Aaron

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INTRODUCTION

The Latin word for scabbard is *vagina*, which reflects one of the great mysteries of Magical swords and that is that its power is enclosed and held by women. 'Scabbard' is a novel in three parts or 'books' that take us through some of the magical mysteries of ancient to present day Britain, told through the story of the magical sword of Britain, the magical stone of destiny, and the story of the scabbard, or women who join their fate with the sword.

It is often the actions of ordinary people who do extraordinary things that determine the fate of a land and a nation. This tale takes us through the complex weaves of fate that pull us closer to the sacred land and how our actions and reactions to extreme circumstances can dictate not only our own future, but the future of all those around us.

It is a tale of death and rebirth, the complexities of reincarnation, and the intricate tapestry that is wound between humanity, the powers of nature and the incarnations of deities. Woven within the tale are magical mysteries that bring us closer to the ancient powers of the land and to ourselves.

It is not the destination, but the journey that nourishes us.

PREFACE

*Extract from the Chronicles of Cuchulainn: XXI
The Brigante Kingdom of Elmet*

The early sun played over Little Hound's face, and the warmth mixed with his exhaustion finally pulled the youngster to slumber, down into the world of darkness. He lay, regenerating in that darkness until a voice pierced his silence and dragged him into a dream. But it was no ordinary dream. A young warrior woman appeared, walking around and around him, checking him up and down.

I can train you; I can turn you into the greatest warrior the world has ever known. But you need a weapon. You must go and find a weapon, one that befits the greatest warrior. When you have found such a weapon, return to me and I will train you.

Little Hound awoke with a start. He could still smell her. The woman who had visited his dreams hung around him, taunting him and daring him to become her student. He shook his head to try and awaken some more. She must be the great warrior woman Scathach, the one whom the warrior women all follow and are vowed to. She was calling him; he was to become a favourite of Scathach! But he must have a weapon worthy of such honor. Where would he get such a weapon?

The spring of the Smithy on the holy hill! That was where a magical sword had recently been buried... thrust deep in the body of the High Priestess of the Isle of Apples. But he couldn't take that sword! That would be the greatest blasphemy against the Goddess. And yet, hadn't a goddess of sorts come to him in his dreams and told him to get a magical sword? Maybe the goddess didn't want it to be buried in a woman's body deep in the earth, maybe he was meant to take the sword back to Eire, to his home, where he could become the greatest warrior ever!

As the sun went down, Little Hound gathered up Ailbhe, his

white horse, and set off to the holy hill which held the sacred burial. Travelling by moonlight, Hound followed the river until the first beginnings of dawn shed its weak and beautiful light on holy hill of the Smithies, a steep almost clifflike hill with springs tumbling down it and pooling by the thin river. This was where the ancient order of Brigante Warrior women forged the magical swords for the warriors of Albion.

Little Hound climbed the sacred hill and arrived at the clearing: the earth was still soft where the priestess was buried. He knelt and touched the earth reverently. Casting around, he found a flat stone and began to work, the sweat quickly flowing from his exposed back and limbs. His heart beat like a madman, not from the effort of digging, but from fear of the magic that was crackling in the air all around him. Every few minutes he would pause and wipe the sweat from his eyes, his ears pricked for the sounds of distant voices: the echoes of angered ancestors.

Within an hour he had exposed the priestess' head. He carefully cleared away the earth until he could grasp the hilt of the sword. The hilt was blackened, as was the priestess' head, from a lightning bolt that had struck her.

It took much tugging and leaning to release the sword from the body, but eventually it slid free, an audible sigh issuing from the priestess' body as she finally relinquished the sword. Hound stood upon the rich earth, the sacred sword blessed by the moon held high, and vowed upon that spot that he would become the greatest warrior ever known. The sun frowned down upon him and the earth breathed a terrible sigh as this young man desecrated the most sacred burial on the Holy Isle of Albion.

That night he dreamed many wild dreams. The oak trees sneered at him; strange little creatures nipped him and hissed at him. The whole forest hated him. Hound was distraught. Hadn't he done what he had been bidden to do? But in this dream Hound could not hide from himself. He could not talk himself into believing that what he had done was right. He

fought against the dream, refusing to accept he had done anything wrong. They were all just jealous. He was to become the greatest warrior of all time and they didn't like that.

He tossed and turned in his dreams until a woman appeared. He lay ridged with fear. The priestess keeper of the sword appeared before him, her face blackened from the lightning and her eyes flashing with anger.

You do not understand what you have done, foolish boy. Return the sword and be at peace.

"And if I don't?" asked Hound.

Then you will become the greatest warrior ever known to man. But you will pay a heavy price.

"Well, whatever the price is, I am ready to pay it," said the young man arrogantly.

So be it. Then you should carry a name that befits a warrior. You shall be known as Cuchulainn, the Hound of the Smithy. Your fate and that of the Smithy grove are now bound for eternity. The sword will give you limitless power in battle, but without the scabbard, you will have no protection. Your spirit will be damned for many lives, and you will have to endure the hatred of the Goddess.

A few years later...

Cuchulainn lay dying, his sword barely hanging in his hand. A raven sat near by watching him bleed slowly to death, and beyond the raven stood the spirit of the High Priestess of the Isle of Oracles. She watched impassive as he slumped, his hand still grasping the sword. He called out to the man who had mortally wounded him, Lugaid.

"Lugaid," he whispered, "You have taken the life of the greatest warrior, and I give you honor for being a better warrior than I. And I ask you in return to grant me a favour."

Lugaid looked down on Cuchulainn, the greatest warrior Eire had ever known. He bent down on one knee to be close to the dying warrior and nodded his head.

“I will grant you a favour,” said Lugaid.

“Do you honor the Goddess with all your heart?” asked Cuchulainn.

Lugaid nodded.

“Then I wish you to go on a quest of the Goddess that will be difficult and dangerous. She was wronged a long time ago and that wrong must be set right. You have taken my life before I could complete that task, so you must do it now.”

Lugaid bent nearer; this sounded interesting.

“Over the sea, to Albion, the Isle of Oracles, you must go. There you will seek a place called Bendigaid-Ffynnon-ar-Banc. At the top of the hill you will find a cairn surrounded by an oak grove on a bank above a spring. Remove the stones of the cairn and dig to the grave below. There you will find a sleeping maiden with a hole in her neck. Plunge my sword back into her body through her neck, for she is the sacred scabbard for this sword. I only saw this for myself when the raven looked upon me with eyes of death.

“I wronged the Great Goddess, and now I am dying it is to you to right this wrong. Do not waver and do not be seduced by the power of this sword. The price the land will pay will be terrible. My horse Ailbhe will take you to the place; he is a magical horse who is a servant of the Goddess. Treat him well.”

He breathed out his last breath and his eyes turned to the priestess who watched him as he faced the Great Goddess, who stood waiting on the threshold of death.

Lugaid bent over Cuchulainn’s body and took the powerful sword into his hands. On touching the sword he realized the magic within it. Ailbhe came trotting over the battlefield, his wild mane swirling about him as he tossed his head back and forth. He trotted straight up to Lugaid and stared at the warrior who would now carry the sword back to its resting place. Once this quest was complete he would be free to gallop the hills and plains of the Holy Isle once more, no longer caught in the service of men.

Lugaid looked at the powerful horse and weighed the power within the magical sword. He would take this magical horse and sword, and return to Ulster to become the most powerful leader the land had ever known. He would use the power of the sword to achieve his claim to power, and then, he thought, he would return the sword when he didn't need it anymore.

Time passed, and the sword went from hand to hand, from warrior to king, from priest to knight, its secret whispered from ear to ear as the holder stood before death. For centuries the sword yearned for the resting place within its sacred scabbard. For centuries it brought death and destruction as its power was wielded without understanding or knowledge.

More than a thousand years later, a man finally succeeded in returning the sword—a man who had never wielded the sword in battle; a man who had never drawn another man's blood in anger. That man carried the symbol of the Goddess around his neck and upon his clothing. That man was a priest who knelt at the foot of the Miriam day after day, praying for her favour and doing her bidding.

When he died, his followers buried his body close to the cairn so that he might watch over the sleeping maiden and protect her in his endless sleep. Years later, many a peasant had seen the priest kneeling before the cairn by the spring, a sword piercing the stone cairn like a crucifix. The people took this haunting to be a Templar praying to Jesus Christ before setting off to the Holy Land. But some of the old women of the forest knew better. They knew the story of the priestess of the Smithy and of the young man who guarded her with his whole heart and soul. They protected him with their silence and they fed him with their gifts of bread and mead.

THE BOOK OF THE SWORD

CHAPTER ONE

Bradford, Yorkshire; December, 1887

Margaret stared straight ahead at the wall, her sight not wavering in any way. The symbols on the wall opposite her were barely visible under the white paint that attempted to cover them.

“Do you see?” said Pollard.

“Yes, I see” she replied, her eyes still fixed upon the wall.

“What do you see?” his voice was becoming urgent.

“I see a sword, inserted into the earth, into the hill. The hill is screaming. But it is not a frightening scream. There is a man in a white robe that has a red cross on it. He is saying something about a...a...sword.” Margaret’s voice was thin and raspy.

“A Templar!”.... The words rolled around Pollard’s mouth as if trying not to escape. “Does he have the cup, the grail?” he asked.

Margaret closed her eyes. “No,” she replied, her shoulders sagging.

The woman suddenly sat down on a chair behind her, her body struggling under an invisible weight. The small room was becoming hot but Margaret was deathly cold. Her face was white, her eyes red, and her hands rolled the blue silk fabric that she clutched in a single obsessive movement. The room was waiting. The high ceilings and elaborate plasterwork were almost obscured by the Victorian obsession with clutter. Large aspidistras splashed their violent green around each corner of the room, their leaves reaching out to touch any who passed them by.

The whitewashed wall was waiting for colour. The whitewashed wall hid a magical pattern, drawn in frenzy with red paint, by a man who should have had more sense. His genius for magical stupidity had excelled his reputation when he had stayed in this room. On a dark night, he had attempted to draw upon the spirits of the nearby cemetery using ritual patterns

painted with red ink. Pollard did not like the vandalism inflicted upon his beloved house.

But he was curious. He wanted to know what Illingworth had achieved if anything and Margaret was the perfect priestess to do that job. Nothing to do with spirits had emerged however, only a persistent and repeated vision that insisted upon being replayed, would surface each time they tried any contact with the spirit world. Pollard's shoulders slumped. He did not understand the vision, only that it was important. He looked at Margaret, her exhausted body struggling to stay upright in her chair. Her tired face, framed with beautiful dark hair, reflected the same feelings of frustration.

"The sword is here, it has been here a long while. And the stone is coming," her voice seemed distracted, without emotional tone.

Pollard frowned. "What do you mean?" he asked.

The woman looked at him in question. "What? I don't understand."

He repeated the question. She just stared at him.

"What you just said now, about the sword being here and the stone coming, what does that mean?"

Pollard was tired and it was beginning to show in his voice. Margaret frowned. She didn't understand what was happening.

"I never said that. I didn't say anything," she replied.

His eyebrows rose. She did not know she had spoken. She had allowed something, someone, to talk through her without realizing it. Pollard was thrilled. He knew she was a natural psychic, but this was the first time such talent had become visible. Pollard strode from the room, the words hanging in his brain like wet washing. *The sword is already here, and the stone is coming...*

Now he has left, I lift my hands to the wall that holds a thousand secrets, none of which I can penetrate. I can feel the magic beyond the paint, hurriedly splashed in an attempt to hide one man's stupidity. Another voice gets in the way, pushing and taunting me over and over, until I am too tired to think. I want to leave this house and never come back. I want to leave his loveless sexing of my mind and body, his cold touch that demands I open to him while his eyes are lost in a dream far away. My magic brought me here, and my magic has trapped me forever in a dance of taking. I have no more to give.

But yes you do, says a voice from outside of me yet it springs from a well deep in my heart. Something, someone weaves their spirit around me, whispering, coaxing me towards a path I cannot comprehend. *We want you, we need you, the sword needs you; the sword needs his scabbard*. I push the voice away: I want stillness, I crave silence, I crave a love that I know I will never have. My feet take me to the door, and beyond it lay a demand for my body and spirit, that it may furnish the desires of a man who does not see me.

CHAPTER TWO

The maid stood in the drawing room; her crisply starched collar was becoming uncomfortable as she waited for the master to read his letter. Her eyes wandered around the drawing room, searching out the little scarlet spiders that the master had painted in tiny hidden sections of the beautiful silk damask wallpaper.

His face settled into a deep thoughtful frown. He made a strange noise, which brought the young maid back to attention. He had placed the letter carefully on his desk and sat looking at his hands. Finally, after what felt like hours, he looked up at the maid and studied her face.

“No reply, you may go Betty.”

The maid curtsied and silently left the room.

Pollard opened the letter again and looked at the delicate writing, penned with a beautiful and elaborate flourish. If he didn't know better, he would have thought it was a woman's hand. It simply said: *It is time. I will be coming back from Paris, arriving on the Friday train, 5pm Bradford Station.* This was the moment he had been waiting for. Years had been spent planning, building, preparing. And now that time was here. Magic had been his whole life. And it was for magic that he had sacrificed so much. He could have been in France, spending the last few years of his life living in a gentle climate and walking the nightly promenade with his gentle and honourable wife.

But he knew that he could not do that. It had to be Bradford, and this obsession had driven his wife to their French retreat, her parting curse was that she would never set foot again in this godless city. He needed to clear his head. He needed to talk. He needed to talk to Her.

His carriage rattled over the deep cobbles of Ivegate, pulling to a stop outside the tavern. His driver was concerned to have his master frequenting such a wild and dangerous place, but Pollard had no such fears. He knew each soul who frequented

this place and each soul owed him their loyalty for one favour or another. As he marched boldly into the tavern, men tipped their hat at the local Lord, their eyes admiring a gentleman who did not hold himself above frequenting a working man's tavern. Pollard marched straight for the back of the tavern, to a hooded older woman who sat close to the fire, drinking a tankard of ale.

The men smiled as they watched their lord reaching out to a woman of the street, or at least a woman who was not a lady and not his wife. They nudged and winked at each other; he was a man of the people, just like them, not one of the self-righteous pompous aristocrats who bound the local children into virtual slavery in one of the many wool mills that dotted the soot-filled city.

Pollard raised an eyebrow at the lady who sat deep in the shadows.

"My dear, do we really have to meet in such a place? You should not be here."

His concern showed in his low voice. The woman looked deeply into his eyes and instantly filled him with stillness. He sat down silently, wishing he didn't feel like a little boy in the presence of this quiet powerful woman. She looked at him for a full minute before she spoke.

"This is what you have asked for and waited for. The time is here but it will not be as you think. There are many mysteries that will be revealed to you and you have to be willing to accept them without question. Strange things will happen, and you will be called upon to be forthright, honest and good. This is to be your test. Are you ready?" The woman's voice was soft and lyrical, with a strange hint of accent from far away: a hint of oceans and islands.

Pollard nodded. He knew Selene well enough to know that whatever she said was true and would happen. She had first stood before him when he was a young boy playing out on the new cemetery land. She had towered over him then, her still eyes boring into his head, daring him to awaken. And now,

she'd hardly aged a day, her beauty and power emanated out to those who had the sight to see it. No one knew where she lived, or even who she was, only that she was Selene, seemingly of good birth and education, and was a member of the 'Order'. Selene passed from one world to the next with the ease of someone crossing the road. But she worked to her own laws and agenda, and not that of any man.

Pollard had tried many times to draw her into his magical work, work that she herself had initiated within him. But she had refused, introducing him instead to Margaret. And now Selene sat before him, knowing something that he wanted to know and not being willing to just tell him. It was as though she wanted to make him squirm and struggle. He resented this holding back, as though he was still a child. And his resentment began to show upon his face.

Selene smiled and took his hand in hers. "Geoffrey, you must be patient. If I tell you too much, you will not find things for yourself that are important. You cannot undergo a test if I give you all the answers."

Geoffrey blinked his eyes in frustration and nervously fiddled with his hair, running his fingers through it and trying to take on a more dominant look. It didn't work.

"What I can tell you though, is something about what you are looking for. It is in the hill beyond the cathedral where it has rested since the dawn of time. It was placed there by a woman and must be drawn by a woman. But it is what comes after the drawing, the second gift that can crown your dreams, or destroy you and everyone around you.

"What you do with these gifts will determine a great deal of the future. You can do it right and true, or you can waste the power to feed the ego of yourself and your companions. It will be up to you. This is a time of crossroads and the inner worlds watch to see which path you will take. Make sure you walk with truth and strength. Whatever you do, the truth and destiny of the gifts will be as it should be, what you decide is how men will come to this destiny...by peace or by death. What

you are drawn to do is not a game, take care that you are not played.”

Selene’s musical voice drifted no further than the table where they sat. Lord Geoffrey Pollard sat back, unsure what to say. He knew what she was saying was powerful and true, and yet he felt like he was drowning in a river with no life raft, and no way out. He knew he was stepping into something big, but he just didn’t know what. He had agreed to the building of a magical temple because it seemed to be the next logical phase, and all the people needed for such a project seemed to just gravitate together. And now the time had come.

His numerous meetings in London and Bristol had expanded him beyond all expectations, and had introduced him to many people who thought as he did. Geoffrey was very excited. And yet he could not shake the feeling that something was getting away from him. . . . Something much bigger than he had bargained for. He felt like he was being hijacked by an invisible force with a secret agenda, and all of his senses told him to run and never look back. But he was not about to throw twenty years work down the drain just because of a ‘feeling.’ He knew he was destined to do this and as Selene said, it was up to him which way it would go.

On the way home, Geoffrey absently tapped the head of his cane on the carriage door. He could feel the powers gathering around him, but try as he might he could not penetrate their secrets or even their identity. He was caught in a whirlpool of fate and was being dragged under. He did not like that feeling. He did not like it at all, and he liked even less the fact that the only ones around him who seemed to have any insight into what really was happening, were women. Margaret. At the thought of her name he tapped his cane harder. She would be easier to manipulate than Selene, she would do as she was told and she would tell him everything. And yet it seemed that she could not grasp the subtleties of what was happening, rather she offered snatches that simply frustrated him. His hand gripped his cane hard, his knuckles turning white as he chan-

nelled all of his rising anger and helplessness into his fingers.

By the time he reached his home, the frustration at life had travelled into his groin and was crying for release. He waved away his servant without a look as he barrelled through the grandiose front door, dumped his hat, cane and cloak on the floor and took the steps two at a time. Margaret was staying over in the guest suite: he had seen the lamp burning in the window, a habit she had to keep the night and ghosts away. He knew he should not do this, he had told himself he would stop using her in this way. With each step the violent need within him rose and the nagging voice of his conscience battled with his desire. The desire won.

He did not knock; he simple strode into the room, his erection leaning expectantly upon the inside of his rather fine silk and woollen trousers. The room was in partial shade, a low glow from the oil lamp in the window cast shadows around the over decorated and rather tired room. She was asleep, or rather she was feigning sleep, he thought. She was too still, too quiet and had not reacted to his entering of her space and her dreams.

The shadows cast curves and valleys upon her body as she lay beneath a single white sheet; his breath quickened. She did not stir as he fumbled with his numerous buttons, nor did she sigh as he slid, cold, under the sheet that had failed to protect her. His anger at her lack of response pushed his erection harder to the front of his mind, and pulled the voice of reason to a quiet and very dark corner. He touched her hair and sniffed. It was the wrong scent, but it would do. He turned her body towards him and her eyes opened a sadness to him that almost stopped him in his tracks. He feigned love in his face; he voiced passion with words that fell emptily around the room without regard. His hands searched not to give pleasure, but to demand satiety in a world that had turned its back upon him.

He kept his eyes closed as he pushed into her, over and over, seeing the faces of other women, seeing the faces of those whom he should not see but wished to be near. The body

beneath him hardly moved and when he was filled with a crescendo of sensations the stillness beneath him seemed to rob him of his pleasure. It was she who was doing this to him. She could see what he could not. She whom he needed to complete his work, she was luring him to a loveless lust only to lie dead beneath him while his resolve crumbled. He hated her at times and this was one of those times.

And yet he needed her in so many ways. Geoffrey rolled off Margaret with a grunt and lay with his right arm bent over his face. He did not want to look at her, but he loved the feeling of a body next to him as he revelled in the aftermath of sexing a woman.

He flopped his hand to her body in a gesture designed to build bridges where there were none. His hand fell to her pubic hair which was smeared with the juice of his hating and the lubrication of a soul unloved. He removed his hand as if stung. He found such fluids as distasteful as he found himself. Not a word had been spoken, not a lip had been kissed. Only a tear moisturised the sterility of what had passed, and even that tear went unnoticed. He did not move as she turned away; his mind tumbling into deep sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

February 1888

The men convened the meeting as honoured guests at the Manor House. Pollard could hardly contain himself as he looked around at the collection of esotericists, masons and financiers. Illingworth stood smoking a cigar in the corner, his head tilted towards Dr Wild as they spoke in hushed tones. Dr Wild preened his beard as he listened and nodded to Illingworth.

A young footman patiently stood by the door, surveying the collection of moneyed, titled and privileged men, fixing their faces and names in his head. There would be a half crown for each name and description he delivered to the bishop; he could not believe his luck.

A small group of foreigners sat in the deep leather armchairs, sipping port. Pollard strode over to introduce himself, his hand going out to a handsome young man who was dressed in a most unusual way.

“Good evening gentlemen. My name is Pollard.”

Before Pollard could get another word out, Illingworth appeared at his side, placing a hand upon Pollard’s shoulder.

“Pollard, my friend; let me introduce you to my good brothers. May I present Erik Satie and Gerard Encausse from Paris, your second home. Strange you haven’t all met before”

Pollard looked at the men, one who looked as if he was starving and the other who looked like he should still be at home with his mother. He bowed his head slightly and smiled a curious polite smile. The men both nodded back, Satie looking at Pollard with a tight raised brow. Illingworth then took Pollard’s elbow and steered him to the next set of seats. The group of men were deep in animated conversation, and Illingworth waited a short while until the men fell silent.

“Gentlemen, may I present Lord Pollard, sponsor and the fulcrum of our future work.”

The men stood to shake hands and be introduced. One man in particular looked deeply at Pollard as if looking for something.

“Let me start here with my greatest friend, Pattinson,” said Illingworth.

Pollard frowned in thought. “Yes Lord Pollard, we have met before,” said Pattinson. “Remember the watch with the diamond drop I made for your father?”

Recognition dawned on Pollard’s face; he smiled and shook hands firmly with this master craftsman.

“And yes, and we have Dr. Edwards, Edmund Knight, and Mr. Holdsworth” said Illingworth. Pollard shook hands with the men, noting the ecclesiastical amethyst on Mr. Knight’s hand and wondering why Illingworth had not titled the man as Mister or Doctor or Sir when he introduced him. He looked at Illingworth questioningly, but Illingworth quickly shifted Pollard’s focus.

“Dr Woodman, our Pater and most senior adept. Dr Woodman, let me introduce you to Lord Pollard.” Pollard bowed. He had heard much about this powerful man and felt honoured to finally meet him.

“And of course here is our favourite rascal Charles France, the genius who built my house.”

France grinned widely, his wild hair escaping and falling across his brow. He nodded at Pollard whom he had met a few times before at Masonic functions around the city.

“And finally, may I present Mr. Firth of Sheffield.”

Pollard held out a hand to the man sitting in a deep chair, resting his head as if exhausted. He could see that the man was ill and he had heard the reputation of this man who fought tirelessly for the people of Sheffield.

“It is an honor to meet you, sir,” declared Pollard, holding the hand of this obviously dying man. The man nodded and coughed deeply. Pollard was curious as to why this poor sick man had been dragged out on this cold, early February night.

Surely there was someone else who could fill his shoes in the ritual?

Pollard turned to look at Illingworth in question. Illingworth steered him away from the man after the usual polite introductions and took him to the corner near the door.

“Wynn couldn’t be here tonight so I asked Dr Wild to stand in, he is very capable. But you wonder about Firth? Yes, Firth must be here. Wynn was very insistent that the contacts wanted him here.” Illingworth talked in as low voice as he could, his eyes never leaving the men who sat waiting for the final piece in the chess game.

Up to this point Pollard had not realized that the footman was hovering. He was so used to servants being still that he often forgot their presence. But he realized what a mistake it would be to have ears wagging in this meeting. He dismissed the footman who bowed without expression and left the room.

Without any further delay, Illingworth tapped his glass with the back of his Masonic ring, drawing the conversation to a close and waiting for everyone’s attention. When all was quiet he cleared his throat.

“Gentlemen, we are gathered here to put all the years of planning behind us and to finally execute what our forebears have worked upon for so many years. The year 1888 is finally here, the year of infinity, the year of magic!

“Lord Pollard, by the grace of God, has donated a space for the temple and will act as the father of the house.” The collected men mumbled their appreciation and nodded to each other.

“I have a letter from Mathers that I shall read out to you in a moment, regarding the Society of Eight, our most esteemed brothers. I am also informed that the cipher manuscript is almost complete in its translation and copies will be with us in plenty of time. Mathers and Westcott will bring copies with them when the time comes for the building to commence.”

The men clinked their port glasses with their rings in response to the announcements.

Before he could say anything else, the door swung open and

a woman wearing a deep blue cloak with a large hood swept into the room. She brought in the night and the winter as the cold air clung all around her. Swirling towards the large open fire, the leaves riding upon her hem scattered themselves like children around her feet. The room fell silent as all the men looked at her. Pulling back her hood, Margaret revealed her dark hair and deep brown eyes. She looked around the room as the men got to their feet to bow to this tiny goddess of the night who had appeared before them.

“Gentlemen, may I present Margaret Ellison, our seeress and sister.” Geoffrey announced her formally for the benefit of the newcomers to the magical gathering.

The twelve men stood after their bow and looked at this vision of the Goddess before them. Geoffrey noticed that she avoided his eyes as she seated herself in the largest chair by the fire and accepted a glass of port.

He watched her silently as he pretended to listen to Illingworth who was continuing his preamble to the evening’s forthcoming work. She looked anywhere but at him, which dug deep nails into his sense of shame at how he had treated her the night before. He had to do something to take the edge off of her. He could feel it assaulting him in waves from across the room and nothing must interfere with the evening’s work. He worked his way around the room and stood behind her chair.

When Illingworth had finished his rather long and aimless speech, the rise in background chatter gave him the chance to smooth down the rather painful air that surrounded Margaret. He bent towards her ear and whispered as quietly as he could. “My dear, I am so deeply sorry about last night, there is a deep sadness within me, I don’t know where it comes from, and you are the only woman in the world to whom I can drop any façade and be true with. It is paining me to know that I hurt you, please, please forgive me.”

He whispered the last few words in a slightly broken voice which gave the effect of a heart that was breaking. It was not

intentional; the cigar he had just enjoyed had burned at his throat along with the words he knew to be untrue.

But it worked. He watched her shoulders visibly relax which in turn eased the stress caught in his throat. Her body attracted him but he was repelled by his own weaknesses that insisted upon ruling his life. He sighed. Would he ever escape the pains that women descended upon him? Margaret turned and looked up at him, her eyes still holding an innocence long gone. She reddened and looked away, embarrassed perhaps? Geoffrey stood and arched his back in a long stretch, clear that his endeavour to alleviate the tension in his seeress had worked, which meant he could get back to more the serious issues of the day.

Later that evening, Margaret watched as the men moved noiselessly around the room, their robes flowing across the ancient stone floor in a beautiful ballet of power. They had been building the room for hours. The full moon shone hard through the large stately glass window of the main banquet hall, casting shadows across the faces of the men as they moved from direction to direction.

Once the pattern had been established magically, the men, one by one, seated themselves. Each man held an implement that related to the direction in which he was seated. Each man showed the strain of holding power, as if a silent unseen battle raged within each of them.

Margaret was still, her mind in a deep, almost sensuous peace. The events of the last twenty four hours finally faded from her mind along with the crushing emotional pain in her heart. She had to focus, she had to push Geoffrey and his antics out of her mind and dive deep into the waters of the magical realms. This was where she felt safe. This was where she felt whole, untouchable, a free spirit with her own sovereignty and power. Her eyes glowed with power as she plugged deeper and

deeper into the ancient roots of a magic long gone from this world. The voices clamoured around her, whispering to her, telling her of their need for her.

She was seated with her back to a flame that was positioned in the east, her body clothed in a thin blue robe that did nothing to keep out the cold draughts. Her eyes were focused upon the centre of the room, just as Illingworth had instructed her. And yet it felt wrong. Something was not right. She wanted to tell the group, but her words hung useless upon her lips. Was it the use of a flame? That was not their normal working practice, but the contacts had insisted.

The sense of peace began to shift. She could not move. She could not even think straight. Power was building up all around her, pushing up against her like an ocean slamming into a dam. The struggle to keep the power contained within the structure of the room was becoming too much. It was not right; it did not feel as it should feel. She could do nothing but surrender and go with the power. For a second she closed her eyes and forgot the structure that was being built by the men.

Instantly she was transported into a deep stillness that allowed the power around her to flow naturally. In that stillness, the ritual was meaningless, the patterns were meaningless; all that made sense was the stillness and the power. Out of that stillness appeared a face: a woman's face. The face was sleeping. Margaret tried to look further to see more. The woman was sleeping standing up, her arms outstretched like a cross. Margaret looked deeper. The woman had a beautiful quality about her, a perfection that she had never seen before. Her body was lit from within and her hair seemed to flow in many directions, touching everything in its path.

Margaret felt beautiful, she felt sensuous, and she felt whole. She drew closer to the woman, trying to touch her, trying to be nearer, ever nearer. The movement of the hair and the touch of that deep inner light pulled Margaret ever closer until she was within the woman; she was the woman. Her hair could feel the land around her. She recognized this land as somewhere near

by. Her eyes seemed to look through the earth and she saw streets, people, places she knew. She was in the earth, of the earth and around the earth.

She had seen this before, from a different perspective. She remembered this: the sword, in the hill. Now she understood. The woman she was within and the sword that she had seen in the hill were one and the same. Somehow, deep in this vision, it all made sense. The woman turned within her, moving through Margaret's mind. Margaret became aware of voices, and of herself. She became aware of the men around her and of her position before the altar. And yet the woman was still with her, or she was still within the woman.

"I sleep within the land until it is time for my awakening. The sword will sleep with me until that time, then the sword will lie upon the hands of men and they will choose. Through their touch they will choose their own fate, to wield the sword and be destroyed, or to honor the sword and build with the stone. Those who build will be blessed by the power of the stone, and will be reunited with the Mother as she returns in her wholeness."

Another voice boomed into her mind. "What do you see," asked the voice. Margaret answered without pause. "I see a sword in the hill. I see a woman"

"Where is the hill," said the voice.

Margaret looked around in her vision. "The hill is the ecclesiastical hill before which sits the bank of the spring. Look for the sacred bank."

The men murmured in reaction to the answer that the seeress had given. They began to move around the directions, each man weaving and building lines of connection to create an inner temple as they invoked names of power.

As they worked, Margaret drifted deeper into the stillness. Through the stillness she found herself in a grove of oak trees and within the grove moved a group of women. Some of the women were heavily tattooed, their hair braided like snakes, and they had muscles like men. They were heavily armed with knives and they searched the grove as though looking for

something. Some of the women wore heavy woollen robes, their hair falling free to their knees and strange tattoos on their faces. They circled around a woman who was hooded, her face obscured from the full moon. She held a sword up high and Margaret watched in fascination, as the deep strange chants of this priestess seemed to have a strange affect upon the sword. The sounds changed into shapes and burned themselves onto the blade as she chanted over the bright sharp metal.

She moved in closer to watch. The oldest woman, one who bent over with age and burden walked up to the hooded priestess. She took the sword from her and held it up high, hilt up, blade down. The priestess dropped her hooded robe, standing proud and naked in the moonlight, her tattoos stark blue against her frail skin of white. Margaret gasped. She recognised the face of the priestess from her visions. The priestess looked straight at Margaret and smiled a smile full of love and compassion as she knelt before the old woman.

Margaret was about to smile back when the elder priestess, without uttering a word, plunged the sword into the neck of the priestess, pushing the sword straight down through her body into the ground. A bolt of lightning shot up from the Underworld and a bolt came down from the stars meeting together in a spectacular display of light and sparks as they fused together in the sword within the priestess.

Margaret wanted to scream, but no noise left her lips. A sob of despair rose to her throat and the other women in the grove turned to look at her. She knew them, from somewhere, from sometime. She knew each face and loved each one. A sense of longing and homesickness washed over her and she sobbed for the priestess and for her own breaking heart.

She felt a hand upon her shoulder, and someone shook her. The vision vanished and Lord Geoffrey Pollard stood before her, his face full of concern. Margaret looked up wearily. The men had finished their ritual session, and were all seated and staring at her.

The gathered men filed out of the ritual room one by one

and Geoffrey helped Margaret to her feet. They convened in the drawing room, pouring themselves a drink and waiting for the seeress to tell them what she had seen. Margaret was distraught. The emotions that washed over her in the vision still lingered, and she also felt that she had failed. Every time she tried to reach the inner contacts that the men needed to build the temple, she was pushed instead into a vision that she did not want: the vision of the sword, and the women of the grove.

Margaret hung her head until Geoffrey came and sat on the chair arm beside her. He placed a friendly arm upon her shoulder,

“Come on, old girl, you can do it. Tell us what you saw.”

His voice was light, minimizing the seriousness of the situation they found themselves in. This was the building of the foundations for the three temples. Margaret was a key to the inner worlds; she was the only one who could act as a window between the inner magical orders and the outer. They needed to make contacts to help them secure the inner patterns of magic to allow the power to flow through the temples. The temples would not be temples without inner contacts.

Margaret took a mouthful of Port and cleared her throat.

“I did not see builders of the inner temple. I did not see the ranks of the inner orders; I did not see a contact for the temple. What I did see was a sword in a woman and I saw an oak grove. There were women there who were very powerful: I knew them all in the vision. That is all.”

The men mumbled among themselves. This was not what they wanted or needed. They wanted a contact. It was seemingly a weak vision and she gave no details apart from odd ramblings. But she had seen one of the four magical implements, the magical sword, so maybe that would be the inner contact link that they needed. They had laid the foundations of the ritual temples, weaving the powers back and forth and building them in a form that would reach to the stars to pull down the power of above. They were all master builders of one sort or another, and their skills were being put to a powerful

test as they sought to re-create the temple of the Golden City here in this old and beautiful manor house. Margaret excused herself, and left to go lie down.

The image of the women in the grove haunted her, as did the woman with the sword. Somehow she knew that this sword was a pivotal power for the temple, which was probably why it kept appearing, but she didn't understand where it would fit. A gentle knock at the door told her that Geoffrey lurked outside wanting to be admitted.

She turned her face to her pillow as the door noiselessly slid open and clicked shut. She did not want his intrusion in to her thoughts. She did not want his intrusion in to her body. But hers was not the choice to make. She relied on his favor as much as he relied on her sight. They were bound together in an unhealthy dance that neither of them could escape from.

That night, as she lay in his arms, his body deep in the hand of sleep, she looked at the moonlight trying to intrude through the heavy curtains. A small parting of the dark fabric allowed a thin sliver of moonlight to sneak into the room and tease Margaret. The moonlight held those faces that she recognized and missed terribly. The moonlight held the powerful secret that the twelve men were desperate to find, but were not willing to see. She gazed at the moonlight until it moved on in an unending dance across the night sky, leaving her alone and cold beside a man she did not love.

And when sleep finally found her, a face peered out of the darkness at her. A woman's face covered in tattoos, and with eyes of ice.

"Who are you?" Margaret asked in her dream.

I am the keeper of the sword, the High Priestess of the Apple Isles, and servant of the Goddess Sul..

"What do you want?"

You.

CHAPTER FOUR

Margaret awoke suddenly, her body tangled in the bed sheets. She was alone. Geoffrey had sneaked out before dawn so as not to be caught. She lay for a moment, trying to make sense of the voices that insisted upon being heard. The voices wanted her, they were connected to sword, and their pleas for her were becoming more and more desperate. It had awoken a feeling deep within her that begged for release: she was needed, and it was magical. A sense of purpose, of an ancient waiting to be useful welled up within her along with memories she did not recognise. There was a job to do, and she just wished she knew what it was.

Breakfast was a high affair and Margaret tried hard to swallow the kedgeree that stuck in her throat. Geoffrey watched her, knowing that she was shutting him out from something, but he could not figure out what. His face was puzzled, curious, and almost hostile as he watched every move that she made. She was unaware of him, her thoughts swam with the experience of the night before, the voice in the moonlight.

Her dream haunted her every moment. The eyes of the priestess bored into her being and stayed with her as she tried to eat. The voice repeated over and over in her mind as she tried to summon the will to partake of the small talk that would be required at the breakfast table.

Some of the men drifted into the breakfast room, gathering in small groups as they grounded themselves with a hearty English breakfast. Dr Woodman, the oldest man of the group of Brothers motioned to Geoffrey to excuse himself from the table. The doctor waited until Geoffrey had gone before looking at Margaret in earnest.

“My dear, I know there is much that is troubling you, and there is much that you saw that you do not share. Can I be of assistance in helping you make sense of the information you

were given? I do have an admirable wealth of experience in such matters.”

Margaret scrutinized the old man as he cast a kindly eye to her troubled state. His dignified bearing was made all the more imposing by his grand beard and regal demeanour. His knowledge of esoteric secrets was legendary and many considered him to be the corner stone of the new magical order they were building, and the great structure that would become the three temples.

She twirled her fork in her food, not knowing where to start. Her nanny’s voice stung her thoughts as she reprimanded herself for playing with her food. Sighing many times, she finally put down her fork. The old doctor waited patiently for her to speak.

“No matter what I try to see, I see only the same thing over and over. A sword buried in a hill near here. And a face, a face that guards the sword. That face...”

Her words trailed as she looked out of the window, searching for traces of snow as if the cold would balm her soul. Well, it always had before. The doctor smiled at her gently and put a kind hand upon her cold white tense fingers.

“Tell me about the face. Who is the face?” His voice was calm and measured.

He did not wish her to close down on him and he could see she was struggling with a power she did not understand. Her eyes wandered a little before coming back to his face, which displayed none of the emotions that were raging beneath. He knew she was a strong seeress, but she had fragile mind and seemed an emotional mess. He suspected that Geoffrey had a lot to do with that, but he was not sure and it was not something he really wanted to know. Such things were best left unsaid. He knew she had made an important and powerful contact. He also knew that she did not know this and was frightened, but of what?

“She told me she was the High Priestess of the Isle of Apples,

and that she was the keeper of the sword. Where are the Apple Isles? And why did she tell me that she wanted me?"

Margaret averted her eyes so that she did not have to look at the doctor. She was sure that he would be disappointed. This contact was not the one that Geoffrey had told her they had to reach.

"I think you have done well, young lady, there is much for us to work with. This evening, would you be prepared to reach for that contact again?"

Dr Woodman's voice was hopeful and confident. She looked up at him in surprise. "Really? I didn't fail, you can use this contact?"

The doctor smiled a good smile. "You did not fail, not at all. It was as magic usually is. You want one thing, but something better comes along. Have a restful day and we will all convene this evening before dinner. My dear, I am proud of you. Now run along and do what ladies do on a late winter day such as this."

The relief was evident as she rose from the table with a sense of belonging and hope. She wanted to succeed; she wanted to be the confident woman that people thought she was. And she wanted to be confident enough to turn her back to Geoffrey and not be played with like a spoilt child's toy.

Dr Woodman called a meeting of the men in the drawing room, issuing orders to the servants that they were not to be disturbed under any circumstances. They were also ordered to keep Miss Ellison occupied. The men waited patiently while the Doctor filled his pipe and sat back wearily in a large leather chair by the fire. He looked around at the gathered men and realized that his task was going to be much harder than he thought. Although all of these men were brilliant in their own field and were all considered to be masons of the highest order, they were also lacking in experience, the wisdom that comes from bitter experience and open-mindedness.

They needed more years under their belts if they were going to achieve what they wanted to achieve. And yet there was no

time to wait. This was the time it had to happen and he would have to make the best of the men he was given.

“Our young seeress has made a very powerful contact that will be a deciding factor in the success of our endeavours. It is not the contact we were expecting and may not be a contact that will be agreeable to our plans. But it is a powerful contact none the less.”

His voice was commanding and the men listened with full attention.

“She has made connection with the Lady of Avalon, and with the sword Caliburn. The contact claims that the sword is hidden nearby. I am sure you are all aware of the implications of this. Miss Ellison has no idea of the importance of her contact; she is also unaware of who and what this contact is.”

The men murmured in excitement. A couple of the men seemed to not accept what was being said. Dr Edwards rose and strode around the room, his hands behind his back. He turned on his heel and looked at Dr Woodman.

“Good doctor, are you truly asking us to believe that Excalibur is here in Bradford? I mean, good god, man, how ridiculous can this get? We need another seeress. This one is obviously lost in her own little fantasy world. Really Lord Pollard, couldn't you find someone who wasn't going to turn this into a circus?”

Geoffrey stood in challenge to Dr Edwards who was looking around the room and laughing at the ridiculous tale that was emerging. Dr Woodman intervened by raising his hand and telling the young men to sit down. He knew this was going to happen. There was too much that these inexperienced men did not understand.

“Margaret is unaware of who it was she made contact with. The contact called herself the High Priestess of the Apple Isles, a name with which Margaret is unfamiliar. And the mention of the sword means nothing to her; she is confused and upset. She thinks she has failed. Gentlemen, you have to understand what is happening here. We are being given a great opportuni-

ty to secure the greatest and most powerful magical implement known to man.

“And be aware that Caliburn is not Excalibur, Caliburn was the original magical sword of the land. If, as she says, the sword is buried here, then we must find it. It will be pivotal in the building of the structure. I vote that we have another session tonight with the seeress and try to pinpoint the location of this so-called sword. And then, if it is not there, we know that we have failed.”

Charles, who up to now had been very quiet, raised his hand to speak.

“For what it is worth, there is an old legend I came across not too long ago. I was looking at land to build a house at the top of church bank, very close to Pollard’s property actually. When we investigated the plot, which is a few acres, mainly rough land with a spring, we found some locals who had many things to say about the land. They said that it was haunted by a knight of the Templars, who was seen many times in his white cassock with the rosy cross. It was said that he was seen praying before an old cairn by a spring. He would put a sword in the cairn and then leave.

“There is also a local legend that the hill was where the Irish warrior Cuchulainn found his magical weapon: don’t forget this area was the ancient kingdom of Elmet, home to the Brigante warrior women who guarded the ancient sacred spaces across the land.

“Some of the locals call that hill King’s Hill, because it is said that the ancient Kings were granted their crown there by three women who guarded a sword. There are many tales of ghosts and strange happenings upon that hill. It is also the hill where the great Bradford boar lived before it was slain.”

Geoffrey was getting excited. Now it made sense what Margaret had said that night in his house while staring at the wall. The sword in Ecclesiastical hill: Church Bank, of course! How could he have been so stupid!! And the fact it was called Ecclesiastical Hill told them that this was a hill or bank that

had been held sacred by the Celtic peoples. It was known that the early Christians built their major churches on the ancient power sites. And a church had been built there nearly a thousand years ago; Church Bank.

He was so excited that he stumbled over his words as he retold the events of that night in his house when they tried to tap into the work that Illingworth had done. Illingworth frowned as he listened to Geoffrey who in turn avoided his icy stare. The gathered men listened to Pollard as he told them of Margaret's vision. Then they all sat in silence, each man pondering the implications of what they were hearing. If this was true, if this was truly a contact, then the implications were so far reaching that none of the men could possibly comprehend the outcome of such a find.

And the local legend of a ghostly templar was just too tempting to pass up. This was Bradford; there was little connection in this town that they knew of to the Knights Templar. So to have such a legend at a local farming level must have something that triggered it. Geoffrey recounted Margaret's comment regarding the stone being soon to appear. The stone. Could it be the Stone of Destiny?

One by one the men agreed to look further into this. Gerard stood and paced towards the fire. He thought for a moment and then turned to the men,

"Do we tell her of what she is seeing? I, for one, think that would be a folly. It is best that she stay ignorant so that we can be sure of the purity of the contact. Do you agree gentlemen?"

The men nodded in turn. Only Dr Woodman looked to the fire. This would be difficult for the young woman, and he felt that she would be offended, deeply offended when she eventually found out that they had deliberately kept the truth from her. But that was going to be a small price to pay for the prize that was within their grasp: the sword Caliburn, and possibly the Stone of Destiny. In his lifetime, he would see the grandeur of his life work blossom before him.

The magical temples of Brotherhood that he was planning to

build upon the inner and outer planes would be of a power unheard of: with two of the four magical implements to back up the inner construction; the original implements that had midwived magic into the world.

That night, they gathered once again in the banquet hall, the oldest part of the Manor House. The grand and ancient stained glass windows filtered the dying moonlight as the men, robed and silent, drifted around the directions before they settled themselves in a semicircle. Before them were two pillars, one black and one white, and beyond the pillars sat Margaret.

She was entranced, sitting deathly still as her spirit walked the inner worlds in search of the High Priestess of the Apple Isles. She wandered through the mists, calling out for the lady and the sword. The lady was waiting for her.

You are in great danger

The high priestess stood in the mists, her face barely visible.

There are many powers at work. Some are good and some are not. There are those who wish the sword to once again be wielded in the world by men, to ensure that the power of the Goddess stays unbalanced.

Margaret was confused. Why would people wish such destruction upon the world?

If the sword is exposed to the greed of men, then the power of the sacrificial king remains, and we are doomed to darkness. Only if the sword is wielded by a woman to whom it is connected, who knows the power of the sword, a woman who will be the scabbard until such time as the sacred stone appears, only then will the true power of the Goddess flow once more in our world. And that time is nearly upon us.

My daughter, it is up to you now, you shall guard the sword for she who is to come. She will reunite the sword with the stone and a new era of greatness will be upon the land. It is for you to become the next keeper of the sword. My power has gone and my connection with the sword was broken many years ago. You hold the ancient blood that runs so thinly through the veins of men. You have the ancient blood of the stones. You are the new scabbard in which

the sword must now rest. Be warned, many will try to stop you. Trust none.

The contact vanished as quickly as she had appeared. Margaret sat rigid in her chair. Now she knew what she must do, she just wasn't that sure how she would do it.

At the end of the ritual, the men once more watched her and waited for her to speak.

"The sword is in the hill and must be extracted, that much we know. What more can you tell us Margaret?"

Geoffrey was waiting expectantly. Margaret eyed the men carefully. She was not sure how she could lie to them; she knew only that she was to protect the sword the best she could.

"The rest of the contacts, and the temple builders, will complete their task once the sword is retrieved." Margaret's voice was cold and focused.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pollard, along with Charles France, secured the land in a swift and secret deal. Much money passed hands, farmers were silenced and the men awaited the return of their fellow brothers from London, Bristol and Paris.

A full month had passed before the men convened once more at the Manor. They planned, the following night, at the full moon, to dig the area outlined in Margaret's vision and find the sword. Margaret held her stomach as it churned in fear. Geoffrey tried hard to shut out Selene's warning to him that night in the tavern. He knew now that she had been referring to this event and that he would have to tread carefully.

So the following night, Margaret and the men, except for old Doctor Woodman and poor sick Mr. Firth, journeyed to the top of the hill that held the ancient cairn. As they entered the wooded area that skirted the farmland, Margaret became uncomfortable. Faces appeared and vanished, warning her to turn around and go back. The closer they got to the cairn, the stronger the feeling became until she was ready to run back to the carriage and hide herself among the blankets they had brought with them.

It took a while for them to find the exact location, and it was Margaret who finally realized that she was standing in the centre of a ring of ancient oak trees. The trees themselves told her that they were descendants of the ancient oaks that had watched over the sword. She called the men, who started digging. Margaret sat on a fallen tree trunk as the men struggled with the damp soggy earth and poor light. It was dawn before she heard a cry. Margaret was deeply asleep by the campfire when the voice rang out, saying that he had found something.

She struggled to emerge from her dreams, but something kept a tight hold on her mind as she tried to surface from the depths of unconsciousness. The voices echoed in the back-

ground but she could not respond. Something was close to her, brushing past her and trying to talk to her.

Are you willing to give me your life?

Margaret fought hard against the voice that whispered within her head.

Are you willing to become a part of me?

Again she fought to open her eyes, but instead found herself pulled deeper and deeper into the darkness.

Someone shook her but she could not respond. Voices were all around her, some she recognized and some she did not. A woman with many tattoos on her face cupped Margaret's head in her hands. She put her lips to Margaret's lips and began to blow. Power surged into Margaret's body, coursing through her lungs like fire. The power took on shapes, strange shapes that twisted themselves around Margaret's brain until she felt like she was going to burst. The shapes burned themselves to her flesh: meshing with her breath as they buried themselves close to her heart.

Margaret was convinced she was about to die. Her body buckled under the strain and fell into a deep warm darkness that wrapped itself all around her. Someone placed a blanket around her and picked her up. The grove of the trees touched her as she passed, their thoughts mingling with hers. Whispers wove all around her, seeping out of the forest and filling her mind with memories that were not hers.

The voices whispered around and within her, pleading, tempting, urging her forward into what she knew would be death. The faces of beautiful women, their skin adorned with tattoos and their hair painted with blood, loomed at her through the mists of her mind. One of them picked up her hand and placed it upon the hilt of a sword.

Geoffrey sat back on his haunches to rest a little. They had hit something, he did not know what. Illingworth had called to him that Margaret was having a strange episode and would not wake up. He was going to take her back to the manor for Dr Woodman to take a look at her.

Geoffrey hardly acknowledged Illingworth as he strode off back to the carriage carrying an unconscious Margaret in his arms: he was too focused. Every part of his being told him that what Margaret had said in the rituals was true. He felt it here: a power of such immensity that it was beyond his understanding. They had been digging for hours and they were all exhausted. Dawn had arrived and just as they all began to think that it was all nonsense, Gerard hit something that made a noise.

Below the mud, moss, and soft earth that soaked up the mineral rich spring water were rocks. That was nothing unusual. Until Gerard realized he had hit a pile of stones, obviously placed by human hands. It was pretty deep below the surface and he was standing in a hole that swallowed him as he worked.

The men came to help, widening the hole to allow two men to work side by side. The earth was soft and moved easily, allowing them to clear a large area. The stones were piled in a cairn shape, which excited Pattinson. He had seen this many times as he had travelled the country in search of the burial mounds that fascinated him so.

The men formed a line to clear the stones one by one until a sizable pile was behind them and an excited Gerard made way for Geoffrey to jump into the hole and examine what lay beneath the rocks. Gerard pointed to what looked like the top of a large smooth round stone. He raised an eyebrow to indicate he wanted Geoffrey's opinion.

Geoffrey ran his hand over the exposed dome of a smooth rock. Except it was not a rock. He withdrew his hand quickly and wiped it on a handkerchief, looking up to the men in

shock. He could not speak; he could only look at Edwards and Knight with a face that made them afraid. Dr Wild squatted at the edge of the pit and encouraged Geoffrey to speak.

“Come on, man, tell us what it is?”

Geoffrey shook his head. He was not taken to fright easily, but something stopped him from talking. He climbed out, breaking the spell upon him and indicated for Wild to go look for himself. Wild jumped down into the hole and ran his fingers over what obviously felt like a skull. It was black, looked like rock, but wasn't. He carefully used his fingers to pry away the earth and small rocks to expose the top of a skull to the eye sockets. He was fascinated.

Slowly and with care, he cleared the skull and exposed something else: the tip of a bone handle that was exquisitely carved. It was packed all around with peat, and it was obvious that the peat had preserved it. But it was very frail. Wild sat back for a moment and then looked up at the men.

“It's a skull and the skull is next to something that has a handle. It is delicate and may fall apart as soon as it is removed. We need to dig around it and we need to find a way to preserve it. And we need rest and food.”

The men nodded in agreement. Geoffrey sat staring into space; he could not focus at all. Wild took charge, seeing that Geoffrey was lost in exhaustion or something else.

“Pattinson, go with France and bring back food, blankets, a small hand brush, and one of the wooden gun boxes from the hunting room. Holdsworth, go with them, they might need an extra pair of hands.”

The undertaker nodded and followed the men into the trees as they made their way back to the carriages.

“Eric, come here. You have fine fingers for your piano; let's put them to good use. I need you to carefully sift the peat away from this 'whatever it is' while we dig around and clear the earth away from the burial.

“Edmund my good fellow, I need you to pray that we are protected. There is something here that is powerful and we are

disturbing it. Chances are there is much magic here and we need to tread carefully.”

Knight nodded and crossed himself as he knelt before the gaping pit and began to pray for the repose of the soul that was about to be unearthed.

Wild began digging while Eric used his musical nimble fingers to carefully peel away the peat that was layered against the skull and the handle. Wild, Edwards, and Gerard dug around Eric as he worked, clearing a large space around him. Geoffrey sat by the edge of the hole, fiddling nervously with his hair and sighing loudly.

By the time Pattinson and the others had returned, the working men were exhausted. They ate in silence, each looking at the strange termite-looking mound that had been left in the center of the hole. Pollard paced around the hole until Wild told him to sit and eat.

Illingworth returned and reported that Margaret had still not awoken properly and was being attended to by Dr Woodman. He agreed to watch while the men wrapped themselves in blankets and took a nap. They did not want to leave the burial site unattended and they did not wish anyone else to know what was happening. Geoffrey was looking more and more drawn, not from exhaustion, but something else. Something was troubling him and Wild, knowing that Geoffrey was not a strong man, suggested that he go back to the manor and keep an eye on Margaret.

Geoffrey nodded thankfully. The power in this grove was too much for his system and he could feel himself slowly losing control. He set off, stumbling through the forest towards the carriage and safety. A loud ringing in his ears followed him, boring into his brain and filling his mind with pain.

The men awoke cold and stiff. They drew closer to the fire that Illingworth had kept going, and they drank the strong milky tea he had brewed for them. Illingworth loved milky tea, a favourite he had discovered in India when he was in the army. He thought back to the days of spices and heat, as he sat cold and tired among the rotting tree stumps and mossy earth.

As the men sorted themselves out, Illingworth jumped down into the hole and carefully examined the small thick column of earth and small stones that had been exposed. Pattinson dragged over the long wooden gun box as soon as Illingworth called out to him. Skilfully working his hands around the column, he loosened the earth and grasped the bone handle. This had all been too careful he thought; now it was time to take action. He planted his feet on either side of the column and pulled carefully on the handle. Nothing happened. Illingworth wiped his hands and moved the skull out of the way. He tried again, more forcefully this time.

In one determined pull, the handle, and its attachment came away in one long movement: out came a frail rusted blade. The men all stopped what they were doing and looked at Illingworth as he stood, sword in hand, too aghast to say anything.

The column of earth collapsed and hid the bones of the Priestess beneath a pile of rubble. In his excitement Illingworth ignored the skull that had been so carelessly tossed to one side. He did not see the gathering of spirits that had convened in the grove, nor did he hear the voices that cried out in curses all around him. Owls hooted to each other as the tide of death was released once more into the landscape, a tide that would not stop until it had consumed a life.

The guardian of the sword wept as he watched the men destroy the secret that the earth had struggled for so long to hide. He looked down at the blood cross upon his white cassock and realized that he could no longer protect the sword as it awaited the stone. The knight of the blood-cross knelt before the High Priestess and asked for for-

givenness in his failure to protect her. She kissed his forehead and placed her hand upon his brow.

The power of the Goddess flowed into him, joining him with the deep mysteries of the Mother. The line of the Miriam connected to him and he became one with the many who stood in the succession of the Goddess.

The priestess released him from his vigil and requested that he flow back into life to resume his duty as guardian, but this time he would guard the stone. She watched as he walked into the death vision, preparing to be born once more as a knight of the Goddess and protector of her mysteries.

CHAPTER FIVE

Back at the manor, the men stood around the table in the dining room and looked without comment at the ancient sword. The blade had a series of sigils or patterns that ran down both sides and vanished into the rust that had eaten up the end of the blade. Pattinson was painstakingly copying the images on to paper, just in case the sword disintegrated. Margaret, now recovered, hovered in the background. Dr Woodman spoke to break the silence.

“Well, it cannot be the sword Caliburn that’s for sure.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Illingworth.

“It has a cross hilt. That would put it any time from the crusades upwards. And yet it is meteoric iron by the look of it. The hilt is bone, possibly human.”

Woodman looked around and was about to speak again when a woman’s voice spoke from the back of the room.

“It is old, very old. I see people around it, people from a time before the crusades, from a time before the Romans.”

Margaret’s voice was strange, as if she was thinking out loud to herself. Her face took on a dream like quality as she walked over to the sword and touched it. The power within it responded to her female form and waves of life flowed through her from its blade. Faces appeared and vanished around her, voices clamoured to be heard, fighting for her attention until she had to struggle to hear what they were saying.

“Be the scabbard daughter, you are the next scabbard.”

She picked up the sword and held it out before her, blade pointing up. The voices became louder, chanting, urging her to take the sword into herself and to be one with it.

The people in the room around her faded away, leaving her stood in a mist out of which loomed faces and voices, all focussed upon her, all calling for her to be the scabbard. The voices became unbearable and her grip upon the sword got tighter and tighter. Her knees began to sag under the pressure

and she was about to sink to her knees when a hand upon her shoulder broke the spell: she was in silence and Geoffrey was holding on to her.

He gently took the sword from her hands and placed it back on the table. She looked around in confusion at the concerned faces that were watching her.

“Everything all right my dear?”

Said Geoffrey, his voice soothing and yet tight from concern. Margaret nodded and flushed red. She had made herself look an idiot again; she hated it when she did that but she was determined she would not show her weakness to the collection of men stood around her.

Holding the sword had somehow connected her to it. She ‘knew’ it, she knew how it thought, what it felt, and what it was capable of. She also knew it was about to collapse into a heap of rust.

“You must make a new form for the sword, this form is about to fall apart.”

As soon as she began to speak, she felt a shift within her, as though someone had filled her up with power. She felt confident, strong, and she knew what needed to be done.

She looked around at the gathered men who all looked puzzled.

“This sword cannot be used to build the temples, it is too frail. But the physical substance is not what makes the sword powerful. It is the power that flows within it and that power is modified by the sigils. You must transfer the power from one sword to another, so that it may continue to live and travel through time.”

She paced around the men, her eyes flashing with a strange power as she spoke. Something had changed within Margaret; something had opened up and blossomed.

“It must be done before the full moon begins its wane, so that means tonight. Geoffrey, organize for us to have a cross-hilted sword with a clean virgin blade. Illingworth, we need a

triangular shaped flat stone for the sword to sleep upon. It will also accustom the sword to the triangle of the three temples.”

Her voice was clear, precise and authoritative.

Woodman gasped. No one had told her of the plan Macgregor Mathers, the magical high priest, had drawn up for the three temples, a design that had been passed down secretly through the Masonic Order. She had been purposely kept in the dark. They had told her that they were building a foundation for a temple here in Bradford; that was all. Margaret smiled as the men looked to each other in confusion.

“My dear Dr Woodman, I am a seeress and I hear. The sword speaks if you listen to it.”

Woodman was not only shocked by her knowledge, but by the power with which she spoke. He opened his mouth to speak, and thought the better of it. He needed her to work on the sword, and then he would dismiss her. She was not a part of the building; she was the hired help. He swore to himself at that point never to have a weak link like this again.

That evening, the group convened in the banquet hall once more. The servants had been dismissed for the night and the room was set up once more with the two pillars and the altar. Margaret also insisted upon having a small altar in the centre upon which rested a candle, a triangular stone and the new sword. But the sword was not cross-hilted.

Margaret looked to Pollard who shrugged his shoulders. He had looked everywhere that day for a virgin cross-hilted sword and could not find one. So he had donated one from his own collection: a North African sword from the desert people with a snakeskin handle and a clean unused blade.

Unusually, Margaret asked that her chair be taken away; she would have to stand for this vision. The men completed their ritual movements and seated themselves in the directions to which they had been assigned. One of them ritually called upon the seeress to enter the temple space and Margaret entered from behind Pollard, entering from the west.

She stood before the two pillars and looked at the altar

beyond. On the altar lay the old sword, its blade already degenerating from exposure to light and air. Between her and the pillars lay the extra altar in the centre of the room that she had requested, and the new sword. Margaret carefully made her way around the central altar and paused before passing through the pillars in the east. Woodman was reciting in Hebrew in the background and the droning voice grated upon Margaret as she approached the main altar.

Standing before the altar she paused for a second before closing her eyes. She had no idea what she was about to do or what would happen. Quietly closing her eyes, she reached out for the inner contacts. The face of the woman in the hill floated before her.

So you have come to take my place. Blessings upon you, priestess of the Goddess, may your sleep be deep and your heart be still.

The woman touched Margaret upon the forehead. The touch burned and needed cooling. Instinctively, without thought, Margaret placed her forehead to the sword, and rested her head upon the blade.

Many voices crowded into her mind, telling her of their suffering with the sword, warning her not to steal the sword from its scabbard. The voices dulled with the reappearance of the woman's face. She smiled and then began to blow into Margaret's mouth. Margaret tried to catch her breath as the woman forced more and more air into her mouth. Margaret convulsed as more than air began to be passed into her. The power of the sword that had passed into her in the grove was awakened and began to stir within her. The sigils came alive and were demanding to be released.

The face of the ancient Goddess of the land, a woman half human with the face of a lioness swam before her, all terrifying, all beautiful, and all compassionate. She felt the Goddess all around her and within her. There was no time, no space, just power: and she was holding that power.

The Goddess turned to face the central altar. She moved within Margaret's body, step by step to the central flame and to

the blade that was laid upon the altar. The Goddess picked up the sword and looked at it. It did not have her shape: the cruciform with a head. She was angry, but she had to use this vessel until another one came along. The sigils had to be released before this scabbard died, otherwise the sword would be lost forever.

The Goddess, using Margaret's body, picked up the sword and put her lips to the blade. She breathed out the sigils which placed themselves one by one upon the blade, nestling into the cold steel that would now house them.

The seeress' breath passed over the blade and completed the transfer of the power. She bent over to the candle, blew it out and dripped the molten wax off of the top. Then, pulling at her own hair, she ripped out strands of her hair and tied the candle across the hilt of the sword to make a cross-hilt.

Gripping the sword by the blade, Margaret held up the sword in its cruciform shape and called upon the Goddess to bless the next journey of her power. Many beings, many priests and priestesses circled around the central altar, hailing the priestess who carried the sword of the ancient Goddess of Albion.

Margaret became the central flame: the flame that burned at the centre of all things. The priests and priestesses that had convened out of time to witness the transfer of power circled around her, blessing her with their thoughts and words as they went. Each one gave her some of their power to help her carry the burden of the sword through time.

She burned like a flame fed by the power, her inner light getting brighter and brighter until she could no longer see. She was consumed by the flames, by the light, and she drifted within the brightness, finding peace and stillness. Something dropped from her: a skin that was no longer needed was shed; the skin that defined her humanity crumbled and she drifted without anchor in the never-ending sea of inner power.

Instead of holding the power within, she flowed with the waves that washed over her, allowing the power to move her

instinctively. The voice of the Goddess called in the distance for her to stay her hand, hold the power and bide her time: the moon was not quite at its zenith of power. But Margaret was too far gone; the power deafened her, pulling at her until she no longer knew who she was or what she was doing.

The assembled men watched in horror as their seeress held the sword above herself, the candle clumsily tied to the hilt to create a cross shape. It was then, at that second, that Woodman remembered Margaret's request that the sword was to be sharpened to the extreme. Blood ran down her arms as her hands bled from grasping the blade.

Geoffrey was about to stand up to stop the ritual but Woodman placed an arm on him to stop him. Something powerful was happening and it had to just happen. They could also not afford to sever the inner connections and break the ritual at this critical point. They needed that sword and they needed its power to be complete.

Geoffrey sat back and resumed his meditation just in time to see Margaret throw her head back and plunge the sword downward into her body at the neck, and fall to her knees. The sword went in almost to the hilt in a seemingly impossible move. Margaret knelt before the altar, her arms outstretched in a cruciform and smiled before falling to the floor.

A faint sound of weeping could be heard in the distance as the priestesses of the Moon realized that the scabbard would not hold the sword: the men would take it from her and once again it would trigger destruction and chaos.

CHAPTER SIX

The men sat around the large table in the dining room and pondered over what should be done. Margaret's dead body was in the ritual room, still with the sword in her body. The shock was terrible for the younger men who were gathered, and Woodman knew that he had to bring the men back to focus otherwise all of their hard work would be dashed to pieces.

"It is terrible, but to be expected. As I am sure you all know, every temple that is built has its death by sacrifice or accident. Margaret gave of her life so that we could build the temples and continue with the growth of the work. We have to keep focused."

"I propose that we remove the sword and then take Margaret's body and give her a suitable interment somewhere."

Woodman spoke with the authority of the eldest and most knowledgeable man present. "We could bury her in the hole left from the excavation of the sword. The ground is still soft and will be easily redistributed."

Gerard remarked that such action made the most sense and the men agreed. Only Geoffrey sat silently with his head in his hands. He listened while the men discussed how she would not be missed, her father had recently died and she had no husband. A message to her neighbours could be given that she was going to take the sea air for a few months.

Geoffrey began to smoke furiously, drinking glass after glass of Port until someone finally took the glass from his hand and led him to his room. Dr Edwards gave Geoffrey some powders to help him sleep and returned to the waiting men.

"While you sort yourselves out, I am going to retrieve the sword," said Gerard.

"No wait," called Woodman.

"We all need to be there. There is great power in that sword

and it should be removed properly so that it is not contaminated any more by that woman.”

They filed into the room one by one and circled Margaret's body, slumped between the two pillars. Two men, Pattinson and France, pulled her upright and back onto her knees so that Woodman could get a proper grasp of the hilt. With one pull, Woodman pulled the sword from the body and Margaret made a sighing noise. The two men dropped her in shock and looked at Woodman.

“Oh, it's the body releasing gasses; we need to get her buried quickly.” said Woodman.

Woodman looked down at the sword while the men picked up the bloodied body of Margaret and took her to the boot room. He stopped and looked closer at the sword. He held it up to the candlelight and called upon Edwards to look too. Edwards looked at the sword, and then at Woodman. With one swift movement he gathered up an altar cloth and wrapped it around the blade, pulling off the candle that had been tied to the hilt.

He and Woodman retired immediately to Woodman's room, issuing orders before they left for the remaining men to take Margaret's body to the excavation site and bury it.

Once alone, Woodman and Edwards uncovered the sword once more and looked at the blade. Faint but visible sigils were etched down the blade: sigils similar to Angelic script. Edwards took out a piece of paper from the nearby writing desk and copied the sigils onto paper. They were the exact copy of the sigils in the original sword.

The implications of what happened during the ritual suddenly got a lot more serious. This evening's performance was not just the dramatic suicide of a hysterical spinster. It looked like something really magical worked in that room and the seeress had mediated some unknown power from the old sword to the new.

“This cannot get out to the others. You do understand that don't you?”

Woodman was very clear that he was not asking a question; he was issuing an order. Edwards nodded. He looked around the room as if missing something and then turned to face Woodman.

“We need to find something that would etch the sigils deeper on this sword, so that it looked like we etched them, rather than they just appeared out of nowhere.”

Woodman nodded, and he knew just who would have the tools for such a job: Pattinson the watchmaker.

“I will keep the sword in my room until Pattinson gives you the tools. No one must see this sword until it has been etched. Come along, let’s go compare this drawing with the old sword. I think it is the same, but I want to check.”

They both went down to the banquet room. The blood was still in a pool between the pillars. This was going to take some money to pay the groundsman to clear this up. He had already been sent for and could be trusted to be discreet. No explanation would be offered and none would be sought. It was already known that the manor house was a place where strange things happened. But as long as money flowed there, no one bothered to investigate or ask questions. Aristocracy was well known for its strangeness.

The two men looked at the original ancient sword and then at the written sigils. They were exact. Woodman, a man of many years experience of the occult was at a loss to explain what had happened, or how it had happened. All he knew was that somehow, the seeress had managed to transfer the power from one sword to another, and in that process she had managed to affect the substance of the sword so that the sigils appeared.

Edwards looked closely at the sigils. He knew most of the magical scripts, some of which dated back hundreds of years. But although this one looked like a magical script, it was in fact something else, something unknown. He ran his hands over the sigils as if to try and penetrate their meanings by touching them. Later, the two men took the old sword and threw it into

the river that passed by the Manor. They then withdrew to their respective rooms to ponder what to do next.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pattinson blanched as they entered the grove with Margaret's body. Some atmosphere, some presence hung heavily in the old oak circle as once more the gathered men set to work. Their rolled sleeves were soon covered in mud and their brows full of the perspiration of fear and effort. This time the operation was much quicker and easier—the men sat back beside the restored cairn and looked at each other in dismay and horror.

They had gotten themselves into something dangerous that could ruin all of their careers. It was that fear that spurred them to dispose of Margaret quietly and quickly, without any further drama. Much wanted to be said among this group of frightened young men, but no word was spoken, and it never would be. This secret would lie still throughout their respective careers, and would follow them to the grave.

None could see the priestesses silently watching the men as they each assessed their future in magic. Till then it had been, for most of the young ones, a thrill, an intellectual challenge and chance for the dramatic. But none of them had bargained for what they had seen.

Eric, usually the silent observing one, stood up finally and announced he was finished with the whole deal and was going back to Paris. Gerard nodded in agreement. Eric looked around at the collected group and realized for the first time that Edmund was missing.

“Did he stay behind with the old men?” asked Eric.

The gathered men looked at each other. They realized at that point that everyone was going to start bailing. No one answered Eric's question, but all stood up and prepared to return to the Manor.

The gathered spirits of the priestesses watched as the men left the grove one by one. Margaret stood beside the three priestesses, waiting and watching.

Woodman called a meeting in the dining room once the men had cleaned themselves up. Much Port was drunk but little was said for a while. He eyed the men one by one, mentally making a note of which ones were weak and which ones were not. Edmund Knight had already bolted back to Salisbury, and Geoffrey was still in his room.

“Gentlemen, I suggest we disband this group for a while and reconvene after summer, let a little water pass under the bridge. It is time I returned to London anyway to begin the foundations of the Isis temple. Pattinson and Edwards, would you be willing to join me in London?”

Both men nodded.

“Then I suggest the rest of you go back about your business and I will contact you before September. The work we have already done has laid the foundations, and....”

Pattinson interrupted Woodman.

“I would like to propose that we stay here one more night and finish the foundation building for the pyramid. We still have the three elements, the three men, here that we need.”

The men looked at each other and then nodded. Woodman raised his eyebrows and then nodded his approval. Pattinson raised his hand to speak.

“I agree on the condition that Geoffrey does not participate. He is weak emotionally and magically. I do not know what effect the work might have on him. Dr Edwards, might I be so bold as to suggest a sleeping draught from him to settle his nerves and help him rest?” Dr Edwards nodded. The gathered men agreed; it was settled. The men dispersed to their own quarters and Edwards went to visit Geoffrey in his room.

Later that night in the banquet hall, the men gathered for the last time. Each one was placed specifically, designated a position and a purpose. The altar to the East was still and beautiful, with a plain white altar cloth and a single flame. No magi-

cal patterns would be used in this ritual: only the old lodge implements were out, placed in magical order so that they could do their job.

The sword was still back in Woodman's room waiting to be etched, and there was no seeress. They would have to work in vision as well as ritual. This was the first time that many of them had worked with vision and they were nervous. Edward's voice began to drone as he led the ritual. Each man was to be a foundation in the form of a bolt, a rivet, a screw, a beam, a pole, a plank. The first half of the work consisted of spoken ritual, the men moving from position to position while reciting the ancient texts of the architects of the temple of Solomon.

They had updated it to include the use of metal and modern engineering. Once the ritual pattern had been established by movement, the men seated themselves to begin the vision. Each man worked in silence, guided by a previously thought out plan of action to put the various sections of the building together. Each man also worked secretly, their actions only known to Woodman who had assigned them their tasks. This way the structure of the foundation could never be interfered with: if no one knew exactly how it was put together, then no one could tear it apart.

They built the first section of a three-part structure; the rest was to be completed in the two other temple sites. Their structure was a wonder of industrial science mixed with esoteric wisdom. None of the men saw or heard Margaret as she tried to warn them of their folly. None of the men saw her turn and leave in despair as she realized that nothing could be done to reach them: they would have to figure it out for themselves.

The land reacted against a strange unnatural structure that was being built. The inner worlds contracted against the folly that could not sustain itself. Its manmade form, its industrial power clashed directly with the natural flow of the land. The power that was building behind this structure was an unbalanced power: a power tainted with arrogance and pride.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Great Queens St, London, March 1888

Woodman, Mathers and Westcott sat opposing each other, forming a triangle. In the centre was an altar upon which rested three magical implements: a silver cup, an oak staff and the Bradford sword.

Beyond the triangle of three sat twelve people including Pattinson, Edwards, Wild and Illingworth. Four people from London and four people from Bristol/Weston joined the Bradfordians. Together they sat in a circle of guardianship as the three men began the building of the temple of Isis Urania.

The triangles were complete: the three masters, the ring of the twelve watchers from the three cities, and the three magical implements from the three cities. The Sword from Bradford, the wand from London and the Cup from Bristol Cathedral filled with seawater from Weston, came together to forge the first of the three temples that would form a triangle across the country. From this pattern would flow the greatest magical temple and college the world would ever know, or so they thought.

Within the circle, unseen, were the sisters of the sword. The three high priestesses and Margaret watched silent and helpless as the three men conducted the ritual founding of a temple they did not know how to build safely. They had no idea of the power they wielded in the sword, and they had no idea of its true purpose in the human world.

Mathers, floating dramatically in robes, picked up the sword and began to walk around the inner space while reciting in Hebrew. The power of the sword struggled against the ritual, and when Mathers held up the sword in a wide sweep to ritually cut the binds and open the gates, he felt a breeze against his face. He smiled secretly: it was working; he really didn't think it would.

And yes it worked all right. The sword, used in an unbalanced way, without the scabbard and without a woman to temper its power, unleashed all boundaries and cut down all barriers between the inner and outer worlds. Its power was unfettered and unimaginable. Power flooded into the structure that they had built on the inner planes, finding all its weak spots, unhealthy angles and unwatched doors. Beings passed from the inner worlds to the outer worlds, passing through the doorway created by the sword. But the doorways were not filtered by careful magic, and terrible powers passed into the room before flowing out in to the world.

One of the twelve watchers had the sight and she saw. Terrible dark beings passed into the room and out of the door to the outside world. She muffled a cry and looked away, unable to do anything to stem the flow of spirits and parasites. The other gathered watchers seemed oblivious to what was happening, and the three men in their grand robes paraded around the centre of the room unknowing of what was really happening. The sword expressed its power through the man-made magical structure. Such a structure could not hold such a natural and powerful force as the will of the Goddess, so the structure began to buckle under the strain.

The men finished their ritual, turned to the twelve guardians and pronounced that it was done. The foundations were complete and the first temple had been consecrated. The two other temples of the pyramid pattern would be completed before the year was out and their organization would birth and blossom, bringing esoteric wisdom and knowledge to the world at large. The sisters of the sword stood and watched the celebrations. Wine was drunk, bread was shared and promises were made.

In the temple room, the gates of the inner worlds that were opened by the power of the sword stayed open, wide open. There was no filter, there were no guardians; no one was taking notice as the greatest disaster of modern time was secretly and quietly unfolding.

Out of the gates of the temple streamed powers, spirits and

demons, their freedom granted by the indiscriminate use of the sword. They passed out into the world, their destructive power flowing with them, slipping into whatever host they could find.

Soon Europe would be huddled in fear as these powers manifested themselves through humanity in the form of world wars, sadistic serial killers, vicious pandemics and untold greed. It was a man who released them, so it would be men who would host them. First would come the horrors of brutal murders cascading throughout London, and then the influence would spread wider, leaving a trail of hatred, arrogance and world war.

1888 would be a year that everyone would remember as the year that first London, and then Britain lost its innocence.

CHAPTER NINE

Bradford 1906

Pattinson looked around him as he walked down Adolpus Street towards the wholesale market. The sword was in its new leather scabbard and was heavily wrapped in a blanket. This was the only way, he thought, that he could stop his daughter's dreams.

She had begun dreaming, just before Christmas, that the sword was going to bring about a terrible disaster. She saw men killing each other in a terrible war and she saw her city destroyed around her. Night after night, her screams had woven their way through Pattinson's heart and they were destroying him. Margaret's face had recently emerged in his dreams, urging him to do the right thing. Except he didn't know what the right thing was until his daughter finally told him about her nightmares.

The sword had always brought disaster to all of them. Ever since they found that damn thing it had brought unrest, arguments, and battles. It was time for it to go back to the ground where it belonged. And it must never be found by anyone again.

He had gone back to Margaret's burial site after he had started dreaming of her, but the grove was no longer there. The oaks had been cut down and three lovely houses now graced the top of the hill, with rows of new terrace houses surrounding them. He could not return the sword to where it had come from, and there was so much development happening in the city that anywhere he buried the damn thing, it was very likely to turn back up soon enough.

Then he had an idea. He had a friend who owned a large building, the St James Wholesale Market. It was a strong 'built to last' building that would go on forever. And when they got

to the end of forever, the foundations would probably be used for the next building. Perfect! He would put the sword in the foundations!

As he neared the market, he began to have doubts as to his ability to complete the task. His coat tails blew with the wind as he struggled towards the sleepy market, the shutters closed for the Sunday rest. He had no key and no idea of what the foundations were like or even if he could get to them, but he did remember that his friend was currently building and extending the cellars to provide better storage. That might provide an opportunity.

He finally got into the building through the loading bay and found his way to the cellar, clutching the sword under his arm. He was so glad to be rid of this terrible influence. The seeress of the temple had told him that the sword wanted to be in the scabbard, so he had a scabbard made of the finest leather. But it had made no difference. This was the final and only option.

Climbing down into the cellar frightened him. He was scared of the dark and had brought only one candle. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he slowly walked around the old cellar and looked for a way to the foundations. There did not seem to be any access deeper than the cellar. He peered through the darkness to the areas where builders were adjusting the walls and spacing. The outer support wall, which was in fact two walls with an air gap between them, was deep, strong and solid. It also was being partially re-bricked and Pattinson saw his opportunity.

The inner layer of bricks on the east wall was in the process of being redone and it was almost complete. A hole large enough to put an arm through had been left, probably for an air grate to be fitted. It was high up and Pattinson looked around for something to stand on. He was not as fit as he used to be and his heart was pounding from fear, stress and illness.

He found a stepladder and placed it against the wall. The sisters of the sword looked on as Pattinson prepared to bury the sword as near to the earth as he could. The outer wall of stone

and inner wall of brick left just enough space to hide a sword. With an awkward movement, Pattinson managed to feed the sword through the hole and drop it deep down into the wall cavity. It vanished into the dark and Pattinson heaved a sigh of relief.

THE BOOK OF THE STONE

CHAPTER ONE

The nail had all but been bitten away when Lumis began chewing on her finger end. She hunched over in the back of the taxi as it crawled its way through the London streets towards the museum. There was going to be a scene, but she had resigned herself to her fate; whatever will be, will be. The previous night had been an orgy of all the excuses that she could muster and present to avoid her possible dismissal or at least serious demotion, but in the poor cloudy light of day she was left with one thing; she had screwed up and she had to pay and be seen to pay.

The harsh clipping of her heels on the polished floor echoed around the executive suite and created an air of aggression. The closer to the executive office she got, the angrier she became—how dare they stand in judgement of her! But as her hand reached out to grasp the handle of the door, she paused. She had done a bad thing and she knew it. Worse, the public had witnessed her, so there was no slinking out of it. She sighed and pushed the door open.

A furtive conversation came to a sudden end as she walked into the office; looks were passed, papers shuffled out of the way and drawers were quietly closed.

“Lumis. Thank you for coming in early this morning. Please sit down.”

The director of Antiquities left a casual hand on his abdomen, as if to keep it all in. He was tall, lean, tanned and ready to be screwed, thought Lumis as she noted his cashmere suit with a god-awful tie. She could never have an appropriate thought under stress and today was a wondrous example of her coping mechanism. Her Head of Department sat to one side of the director, his head cocked with an eyebrow raised in triumph.

The office was untidy, large and cluttered with photographs for a planned exhibit. 3000 years of Judaism was going to be paraded for the London tourists. She was surprised when her Head of Department had pronounced it last year; it was no secret that Dr E. Nicholescu was a rabid racist particularly towards Gypsies and Jews. He often voiced his opinion that all Jews should be run out of Jerusalem so that the sacred city would be cleansed once more. He also believed that the concentration camps were faked to discredit the wondrous German race. All he needed was the blond hair. But Nicholescu, like a lot of Romanians, was dark.

Dr Nicholescu looked at Lumis with a fake kindness and smiled. Lumis squirmed: this man always fascinated and horrified her all at the same time. The Director stayed silent and let Nicholescu wield the axe that she knew was coming.

“I know your field is Near Eastern but I have a Celtic task for you. I will be honest with you Lumis, if it wasn't for your skill level, I would have to fire you. But right now I need you on staff but I also need you out of the way for a week or so until this entire hullabaloo settles down. Officially you are suspended with pay for two weeks pending retraining and you are never ever allowed to speak to the press again is that clear?”

Lumis nodded as she reddened.

“You will also write a letter of apology to Lord Southampton, retracting all of your accusations and insults. And it will be published in the *Times*.”

Lumis looked at her bitten finger ends, trying not to bare her teeth. Southampton was a grave robber, plain and simple; he deserved to be exposed. He was a nasty vicious racist pig, and was involved in some weird occult sect that had been using the museum to their own ends. Lumis had blown the whistle, very loudly. She was shocked when the management did not back her. What the hell was wrong with these people?

“And you will go to the highlands for two weeks to investigate and return with a Celtic artefact that we have acquired. Go to Mavis and she will give you a cash budget to cover your

expenses. Oh, and on the way, swing by Bradford Arts and Museums office. The director called me; apparently they have a sword that they want looking at by our science team. Give them a receipt for it and try not to lose it. It has no value, but they thought I might find it interesting for some reason.”

Lumis' eyebrows rose for a second until she saw Nicholescu's face. Everything was always done with the museum credit card, always. Mavis would rant if they ever tried to pay for it themselves and get refunded or if they paid cash and brought a receipt. It was only ever the card or nothing at all. Something was fishy but she was not in a position to question in any way.

The phone rang and she was dismissed. That was it? No shouting? No threats? Lumis was confused. She became even more confused when she looked into the large envelope that Mavis had briskly put in her hand as she was hurried out of the offices.

She sat in the back of a taxi as it took her home and stared at the wad of fifty pound notes in her hand. There must be at least a couple thousand here! Another envelope, a smaller heavily sealed but rather bulky one with an address on it, was the only other clue to what she was supposed to do. It was an address on the Isle of Skye. She didn't even know where Skye was.

Later that night, as she stood looking at herself in the mirror, she wondered what it was about Nicholescu that would always draw her in, and what it was about her that always seemed to irritate him. She turned her face to the side to look at her profile. Her jaw jutted out too much, her cheekbones were too high and her freckles were, well, all over her.

Her mother had always called her big-boned, but her brother just called her Dobbin, after the local Clydesdale horse at the brewery. Clydesdales were heavy, clumsy and large. Lumis wanted to be delicate, fine-boned and feminine, like a movie star.

Her arm caught the opened bottle of herbal moisturiser as she turned back to face the mirror. It crashed to floor, spilling its contents all over her freshly washed bathroom floor. Lumis sighed heavily, as she often did. Instead of cleaning it up, she stepped over the mess and went back into the tiny cluttered bedroom.

It was past midnight but her indignation and curiosity kept her awake. By the time the clock had crawled its way to 2am she got out of bed. She may as well set off now, she thought; avoid the traffic and her own thoughts.

She pulled on her comfortable sweatpants, an old sweater and her rotting but deeply comfortable trainers. Her frizzy ginger hair pulled back into a nondescript pony tail looked like a Viking explosion waiting to happen. She was 39 and didn't care anymore. Her life had brought her to a place that she never thought would exist for her: single, scruffy and living in a matchbox. It was time to leave, in more ways than one.

She arrived in front of the tattered and aging Cartwright Hall museum building in Bradford at 8am, startling the caretaker who was having a quick smoke outside the door. She didn't want to wait until 10am which was apparently when the staff deigned to show their faces. She badgered the caretaker, flashing her British Museum ID and tried to sound terribly important as she told him she could not wait and had to have the sword now.

He vanished into the management offices and found the sword, waiting in the to-go pile with Lumis' details taped to it. It was a rusty heap of junk, so he was sure it would not be a big issue to give it to her. He grabbed the envelope that was with it and handed them both over to Lumis as he shared a cigarette with her. She told him about her trip to Skye and he agreed that she needed to get back on the road: it was a long journey ahead of her and the traffic around Bradford was just about to get bad. The caretaker stubbed out his cigarette, pulled his collar up to his chin as he looked at the dark clouds

barrelling in from the north and vanished back into the gloomy crumbling building.

Lumis gave the sword it a quick look over. Besides the odd markings on it, it was a piece of old junk. What the hell were Bradford Museum's staff thinking? She held it in both hands as she looked up at the sky, which was indeed turning black very quickly. A storm was galloping in from the north and a cold blast of wind slapped her upon the face with its icy hand.

She was about to toss the sword into the boot of her car and take off before the storm broke when something stopped her moving. Suddenly her focus was on the rusty sword laid across her hands. The wind, the buildings and the urgency to get on the road fell away from her consciousness and all that remained was the sword. Its power pulsed in her hands, drawing her attention deeper and deeper into it. She pulled it closer to herself: voices whispered around her, the sounds weaving with the wind in a free-form poem.

The voices became urgent and clearer: *be the scabbard, you must protect the sword. Join with us sister and guard this most ancient and beautiful power, you must be the last scabbard, you must....*

The voices faded with the wind and something broke the spell that gripped her like a desperate rejected lover. She threw the sword into the boot of the car with a feeling of horror and confusion. Did that just happen? She asked herself. She got into the car and fumbled among the piles of sweet wrappers, papers, empty coffee cups and maps. Her hand found the lighter as she dug out the packet of cigarettes with the other hand. She lit and took a long hard draw. Slowly releasing the smoke from her nose, she pulled down the vanity mirror and looked at her eyes.

"You need more sleep girl" she said to herself as she started the engine up and pulled out of Bradford, leaving the strange voices lingering on the steps of Cartwright Hall.

She got back on the road, singing along with the cd player and thinking about how many ways she could justify blowing

as much of the expenses as possible. She wanted, no, needed a holiday, and this would be it; at Nicholescu's expense. That thought made her smile widely. She was under too much stress and had been for far too long. The little episode in Bradford had highlighted that very clearly to her. She was going to have a holiday and she was going to enjoy it!

CHAPTER TWO

Nothing had prepared her for the scene that lay before her as she got out of her car to view the Isle across the bridge at the Kyle of Lochalsh. Glasgow and Perth had been mildly interesting as she had passed through while singing Simon and Garfunkle's 'Sounds of Silence' for the umpteenth time. But this place was different; it was like God had lain down upon the earth to have a rest. It was raw power and beauty.

Driving in to Broadford completed her sense of total disconnect with the outside world. She had come to Brigadoon, she thought to herself with a smile. Everyone was wandering about in wellies, heavy jumpers, woolly hats and rough jeans; Lumis was in heaven. The harsh wind felt good against her face after the insipid pollution of London. March was a wild time to be in the Isles, she thought, but it felt good; the cold, wind and rain cleansed her bones of the city and her life there.

Unsure what to do next, she headed for the local hotel bar to see if there would be any available late lunch: she was ready to eat half a cow single-handed. The bar had a wonderful view across the water and Lumis stood soaking in the view silently until a strange voice echoed from somewhere around her. She was unable to understand what was said but she gathered that the old man leaning on the beer pump watching her had asked her if she wanted anything.

40 minutes later she tore at a bloody steak washed down with a wondrous beer with an equally interesting name. She turned the bottle to read the label as she chewed the Scottish bull that filled her veins with life. 'Black Cullin'. Hmm, she thought, very Gaelic, nice name.

Fortified, it was time for adventure. She looked at the address where she was supposed to pick up the artefact and got out her map of the isle. The old bartender tried to look over her shoulder as she peered with strained eyes to find the road that was, of course, not listed on the map.

“Th dunno whi you be waning to gho thir,” said the old man.

Lumis sat back and looked at him. She had absolutely no idea what he had just said.

“Tae Lochlise hoos, ach dae ya no understan mih ? Ai Jimmi, hey ho Jim...”

The old man called to the empty doorway.

A gentle looking man in his 30’s, olive skin, beautiful wavy black hair and soft blue doe-like eyes emerged out of the kitchen wiping his hands on his apron. His looks were striking, thought Lumis, and his colouring Turkish, but his profile was most defiantly Arab. He motioned a question with a jerk of his chin and a raise of his left eyebrow. The old man said something totally unintelligible to ‘Jim’ and then looked at Lumis.

Lumis flushed bright red as she always did and then cursed her flame skin that was probably by now blending in with her hair. She motioned with her hands before she spoke and then realised she was waving her badly bitten fingers with their red ends that matched her now very red face and ginger hair.

“I am looking for Lochlise House on Lochlise Lane but the road doesn’t seem to be on the map.”

She motioned towards the map and knocked her beer bottle over. The old man clicked his teeth and tottered off to the bar to get a rag.

“Its not far from here, just a mile up the road. There is not really a Lochlise Lane; it’s just the name of the driveway. The owner is a bit, well, is he a friend of yours?”

His voice was soft, understandable and faintly not Scottish. He sounded very ‘old school British’ with a strange type of lilt. Hmm, Egyptian perhaps, thought Lumis.

He was obviously perceptive as well as mildly handsome. He raised his left eyebrow again and smiled showing wonderful white teeth.

“My name is Seth but Tam here calls me Jim—well actually, he calls everyone Jim.”

That confused her even more and did not seem to make any

sense to her. Her confusion swept across her face, and he smiled wider as he watched Lumis trying to process everything that was passing her by.

“Old Tam is from Glasgow, that’s why no one can understand him,” said Seth laughing as he talked.

Lumis tried to think of something to say but couldn’t think of anything, so she just nodded for a moment.

“Oh, sorry, you asked me a question. Um, no I don’t know the owner of Lochlise House. I am just picking something up to take back to London.”

Seth gave her a funny look.

Oh my God, she thought, he thinks I’m smuggling drugs or something.

“I’m just picking up an artefact for the British Museum. We, I, thought it best to come and collect it personally”

Her voice portrayed her dismay at being banished. She flushed a deeper red as she realised he was scrutinising her and his clear blue eyes seemed to find and lay naked her sadness and deep discontent. She shifted her weight, looking down at the table as if she was searching for something. He was one of those men who could see straight into you, she thought. Great. He is gorgeous, has x-ray vision and could probably see that her underwear was as old and as washed out as she was.

He asked her what she did at the museum and Lumis sighed audibly as she realised he had picked up on her distress and was trying to make friendly small talk. She began to ramble about her work at the British Museum and deftly sidestepped her rather ceremonious wrist-slapping she had been subjected to by Nicholescu.

* * *

Seth’s thoughts darted back and forth across endless possibilities as he listened to Lumis chatter about her work. What if this was the challenge, the one that had been prophesised? What if he wasn’t successful? He had waited on this island for

15 years, taking over from the last man who had died at a good age. He took a deep breath. He needed to calm down, it could be something and nothing. There were not many artefacts on the island and he would need to find out her field of speciality, that way he would really know.

“It must be very exciting, working at the British Museum. What is your speciality?” Seth fought to keep his voice light.

His eyebrow no longer cocked up in a sexy way, it stayed deeply furrowed in his face as his fears began to climb to the surface.

“I specialise in Mesopotamian, Sumerian and early Levant artefacts,” her voice hung as Seth’s face grew more and more serious.

He was deeply troubled. This was not sounding good at all. And yet what if she was the woman in the prophecy? Could it be fulfilled this way? She chattered on and he struggled to keep an open look on his face, but it was getting harder and harder. She had a good face: he was very good at reading people’s personalities by their faces, and her face was clear, truthful and honourable. At least that was a start. His mind wandered around all the possible outcomes to this situation and realised that he was not listening to her. He stopped the chaotic panic that was gripping his throat and tried to focus instead on what she was saying. Maybe it would all prove to be nothing.

“I didn’t start in Near Eastern department though; I did my original post grad studies and cut my teeth on Renaissance magical texts. When he took over the department, my boss that is, he just shuffled everyone around the department. I was working in Near Eastern artefacts as a temporary thing; the head of that department was on maternity leave and I wanted a chance to work more in that area. I ended up being stuck there. Typical isn’t it!”

Her voice was light and airy, like her eyes. But it was her words that wrapped a cloak of despair and panic around him. Seth could feel the blood draining from his face. Lumis prattled on. He needed to calm down. It could all be innocent and

she could just go get her whatever it was and go, and all would be well. But then, thought Seth, if it was a British artefact, why was someone from Near Eastern artefacts here?

He watched her face as she talked and talked, her hand waving around madly and her wild ginger hair escaping the confines of the ponytail with each turn of her head. She was a true honest person. She was bright, with a bright soul. So why were all the alarm bells ringing? He needed to stop panicking and do something that would help the situation.

“You are a very interesting person, and we don’t get many of those here very often, particularly in March. Once you have picked up your ‘whatever it is’, would you fancy maybe a pint or a dinner before you go? How long are you here for?”

He tried to sound as casual as possible. He watched her face, looking for something—what, he was not quite sure. Her reply came as a relief, particularly with its arm-waving delivery and her wide smile.

“Well, I thought of staying here for a few days and seeing something of the Island. I have never been to Scotland before, let alone the Isles. It’s beautiful here and I love the moody weather.”

Seth felt himself relaxing. She did not seem to be a fire-spitting demon, but he instantly warned himself not to drop his guard nor let his watchfulness slip. She could be a part of the prophecy, or she could be part of the problem. He felt one of those spur of the moment decisions bubbling up in his throat and it was out before he could think carefully about it.

“Hey, would you like your own personal guide? I have a few days off and I could show you around some of the very interesting archaeological sites. It would be fun for me; I am usually bored senseless on my days off.”

He watched her face as she mulled over the possibilities and consequences. He was glad to see that she had not tried to flirt with him, or that it had even occurred to her. This did not need to get complicated, he just needed to know if she was ‘The One’ mentioned in the prophecy, and in the process, maybe

make a new friend. He refocused his attention to her as she answered.

“That would be very kind of you, if you didn’t mind. I will be going to collect the artefact tomorrow as I am too tired right now. I drove up through the night and I think that beer just finished me off. Will you be here tomorrow after lunch?”

Seth nodded without speaking.

“Well,” she said as she got up to go, “I will see you tomorrow.”

He was a little taken aback at the sudden departure, but he could also see the strain on her face from the long ride, and from something else. He watched her go and took a note of her car type and plate number, just in case. Her walk was interesting; he had never seen that in a woman before: she walked like a man, but with an odd power and grace. She was a curious person and unlike anything else he had ever come across. The way she just, well, almost dismissed him and vanished, it rattled him.

It was 10 am before she finally woke to hear lots of pots banging in the kitchen below. She had decided not to stay in the Hotel, just on a hunch. But the area was littered with tiny B&B’s that were nothing more than little family cottages with an extra room. She liked the sense of staying in a home rather than a hotel which can often feel so much like an institution.

She hadn’t meant to sleep that long but the long drive and strange hours finally took their toll on her and she had fallen into a deep death-like sleep. Swinging her legs around off the bed, she pondered for a moment as to whether it would be bad manners to stagger downstairs in her pyjamas. After a few seconds, she decided it would be too much for the rather stiff couple who ran the B&B to be greeted by her penguin covered pyjamas and sleep-wild hair.

20 minutes later she emerged showered and ready for

action. The lady of the house sniffed with visible disdain as she asked Lumis if she would like breakfast or an early lunch. Lumis reddened deeply and apologised to the rather weather-worn, thin woman in an apron. Breakfast was served and eaten in an uncomfortable silence. She decided that it would not be a good idea to come back to this particular establishment for a second evening and she made a mental note to herself to ask Seth where she should stay.

It took her a while to find Lochlise House but as she drove up to the modern-built McMansion which looked totally out of place in the wild Celtic setting, she felt a strong sense of something, she was not sure what. It was not danger *per se*, but something close to that. The man who bounded down the steps to greet her made her even more uncomfortable. He looked like a cheesy East London used car salesman: tan, gold chains and flicked hair, and definitely not Celtic. He looked Eastern European if anything, maybe Polish or Romanian.

Once he spoke to her, she smiled inwardly. Good Guess: he was Romanian. He motioned for her to stay by her car as he squeezed past many boxes and containers that clogged up the hallway. She wanted to ask him what was in them, but then thought the better of it. Probably best not to ask. He did not offer his name, and she knew better than to ask that either. Most people who offered artefacts to museums and dealt in cash were usually smugglers. He seemed to make a point of not offering the usually Celtic hospitality, nor of indulging in chitchat. He asked Lumis to open the boot of her car and told her he would be back in a minute. She quickly tried to tidy up all the crap that littered the boot of her car, pushing the rusty sword right to the back and laying a tarp over everything so that it would not contaminate the artefact, whatever it was.

He emerged a few minutes later carrying in his arms a heavy something wrapped in a bin liner and covered with a blanket. The blanket was beautiful: embroidered with peacocks and flowers. Lumis thought for a moment if it would be rude to ask if she could keep the blanket. He placed the object with the

blanket in the boot of the car, waved briefly while saying thank you for the sealed envelope, and vanished back into the house before she could ask what it was, where he had found it and if it had already been looked at. There were many of the usual questions she wanted to ask that would give the museum a great deal of information that would be useful. But she was dismissed and left standing in the drizzle as Stalin (she had named him after his demeanour or lack thereof) had scuttled back into his bizarre palace on the edge of the hills.

On the way back into Broadford, she felt something shift deep inside her. She couldn't explain it and began to rationalise that the stress of the last few days was finally unwinding out her body. She began to cry as she drove. The tears came thick and fast, but didn't seem linked in her heart or mind to any one thing. Just that she needed to cry from some deep and primitive part of her.

It had also started to rain hard, the large raindrops bouncing off the bonnet of the car to create a wall of water that she couldn't see past. It became so severe that she pulled the car over at the side of the road and waited. She prayed that another car didn't come up behind her and hit her as she sat waiting the storm out. The more it rained, the more she cried and the more she seemed to drift away from the reality of who she was. It was as if something had wiped out everything that had happened in this life, all of her identity, everything. She was left only with her tears.

After what seemed an age, the rain abated and the tears slowed. She thought it interesting that the rain and tears lessened together, and slowly her life came back to her. She put the car in gear and set off once more for Broadford.

CHAPTER THREE

Seth turned a pen back and forth between his fingers as he waited for Lumis to return from her trip to pick up the ‘artefact’. He had not slept and his focus kept wandering so badly while he was prepping veggies in the hotel kitchen, that Tam told him to start his long break early. He was due some time off and Tam’s sister was in town to help her obnoxious older brother run his rambling rotting hotel. She had stood over him as he chopped vegetables, the knife wandering along with his distracted mind until her voice, which was only a shade more terrible than Tam’s, shrieked unintelligibly in his ear as she motioned for him to get out of the kitchen.

He left with a grin: he missed being bossed by older women; it had always made him feel safe and loved. He curled up in the window seat of the main bar and watched the road. Lumis’ car emerged out from the lingering mist that had accompanied the downpour and vanished around the back of the hotel.

As she came into the hotel bar Seth knew that his greatest fear had come home to roost. He also realised, from her face that she had been crying for a while. That eased his fears a little: if she was pure of heart, then the stone would create tears. If she was pure of heart, then she might be able to see reason, and he might be able to divert a disaster of terrible proportions.

He placed a beer in front of her and waited for her to speak. His eyebrow cocked up in question as he tried to be casual regarding the artefact.

“So then, what was it?”

Lumis shrugged her shoulders. “Dunno yet, I haven’t opened it. I need to find another place to stay, the place I stayed in last night was dreadful.”

Seth laughed; he had seen her drive across the way to Molly McGregor’s house—a terrible B&B.

“Don’t worry; there are a few places that I could recommend.”

His face grew serious again; he wanted to know for sure if the artefact was indeed what he thought it was.

“How about I order you a steak? You look like you could do with one, and I will also eat. While it is cooking, we can bring your ‘whatever it is’ in and open it in the privacy of the staff lounge. What do you think?”

He dared not breathe: would she go for his suggestion? He watched her face as she weighed up invisible options and bit her lip in indecision.

“Technically artefacts should not be exposed, touched or messed with by members of the public, in case of contamination or damage. But to hell with it,” she said in a sudden bout of decisiveness.

Seth breathed out with relief. He could see she was curious about the artefact and an air of excitement was building between them. She raised one eyebrow at him as she held out her car keys. The single, almost-missed action was the sexiest thing he had ever seen. It was as if in that one tiny movement, she had offered him body, soul and limitless power over her. The feeling took him off guard and he coloured. He was not used to this.

As a member of the Order, he was celibate, and as a long time resident on the island, he had long ago given up on ever connecting with a woman who was the right match for him. But suddenly, out of nowhere, she had flicked a switch in his heart and it burned like hell. He just stood there. He didn’t take the keys and go get the bundle out of the car for her, he just stood there like an idiot, gazing at her.

“Ok” she said, “I’ll do it”

She vanished to her car before he could say ‘no, let me’. He pulled himself together and went off into the kitchen to order the steaks, and then went around the back to guide her to the staff room. She could not lift the bundle so Seth reached into the boot of the car and gathered up the blanketed curiosity: its power jolted through him in one sharp lightning strike, fully confirming his fears. Now there was no question: the secret

had been discovered and the prophecy was unfolding before him. They both stood in front of the bundle, silent in their own thoughts.

“Nice blanket,” was all Seth could think to say.

He watched her as she nodded, pulled the blanket off and began to cut away the bin liner with a pen knife. The object was heavy and about a foot long. Under the bin liner was an old oilskin that stank to high heaven. They both screwed up their noses and looked carefully at the oil skin: it was old.

“I’m going to have to do this carefully” she said to herself.

Seth was shifting his weight from foot to foot; he wanted to see it and he wanted to see it now. She looked around the room and spied some thin rubber food server gloves. Putting them on, they both paused and looked at the rancid oil skin. It was not terribly old, but they wanted to be careful just in case. It looked very similar to ones used in storage a hundred years ago, thought Seth. He recognised the smell from his childhood: it made him shiver and the power that was building up was teasing the hair on the back of his neck to stand up.

Lumis seemed to be taking forever to carefully peel back the oil skin and Seth began biting his lip. The last layer of oilskin was finally peeled back and before them lay something wrapped in brittle papyrus. That got their attention quickly and Lumis sat back in the chair behind her, staring at the bundle.

“Shit. This is not British, nor is it trivial; I should be doing this in the lab.”

Seth looked from the bundle to her and back at the bundle. He knew what was in there, and he knew exactly how old it was, but he knew he could not say anything. He needed to keep his mouth shut until he was absolutely sure about her.

He watched as she got out her digital camera and she carefully took pictures from all angles. He searched out large ziplock freezer bags as requested and then they both stood for a long time staring at the implications of what was before them.

This was obviously something that was not found on the Isle: there was no papyrus here in the wilds of Scotland.

This was a smuggled piece and now they were both involved and both implicated. Whatever it was, judging by the age, type and weave pattern of the papyrus, it was old, possibly of Egyptian or at least North African origin.

“I wonder why Nicholescu sent me and not Barry; he is the current head of Egyptian Antiquities.”

Seth frowned as she spoke; it was also becoming obvious to him that this reconnaissance from the museum was probably not a legal one.

They both fell silent as Lumis carefully peeled the layers of papyrus back and as they broke away from the bundle, she dropped them carefully into the freezer bags to be looked at later. Once she got down to the last layer and dropped it into the last freezer bag, they both stood and stared at the object for a full minute without speaking. Then Lumis sat down. Seth had closed his eyes in prayer, asking for forgiveness for the intrusion, and praying that this would all end the right way and not the wrong way.

The large lump of worn black stone stared at Seth accusingly. Lumis bent over the stone to look closely at the ancient pictograms that had fragments of gold still in the grooves. Seth wanted her to stand back, to be more respectful; he struggled to contain the emotions that would expose him and his quest. Instead he tried to offer suggestions that would guide in her the right direction.

“Don’t we need to protect it somehow, maybe wrap it back up or something?”

He watched her face as she mumbled over the images, pointing out that the sigils were similar to early Pictish forms, but mixed in with them were proto Egyptian pictographs. She pointed to the deeply imbedded gold tinged glyphs and began to read them out loud.

“I don’t understand some of these, some I have never seen before, but here are three that I understand.”

She waved her finger over some of the Egyptian glyphs and Seth winced each time she came close to actually touching the stone.

“Water.... Kingship.....Knowledge.”

The knuckles on Seth’s hands were going white from tension but he didn’t notice, he was too busy trying to distract Lumis by gathering up the ziplock bags, but it was hopeless. She sat back in a chair and looked at him full in the face.

“It is saying that this stone confers the power of Kingship and Knowledge, a power that comes from water.”

She was shaking, and Seth realised this was not good, he put out a hand to steady her but she got back out of the chair and began to pace the room, tripping over the edge of the rug which almost sent her flying across the table.

“Ah shit,” she said as she rubbed her ankle,

“The Stone of Scone? The *real* Stone of Scone, not the sandstone fake?” Seth asked. “Oh Jeez, you have got to be kidding me.” He felt his heart disintegrate and fall into little lumps that blocked his throat, his eyes and his thoughts. There was no going back. It was here, she was here, and the whole thing was going to be a bloody mess, unless he could get control of the situation and make sure Lumis walked down the right road and not the wrong road.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Do you think she suspects? I mean, is she going to be a problem?”

Sir Harold Whiting, Director of Antiquities at the British Museum was worried. They could not afford for anything to go wrong now. This was a last ditched attempt to get the stone off the island and if they failed this time, it would probably be too late. He picked up a pile of random papers off his large ornate oak desk and put them down again distractedly. He paced, looking at Nicholescu with raised eyebrows.

“Do not worry director, she is an idiot of the most stupid kind. Yes she is good at her job, and it would have been foolish to fire her and attract attention. You did the right thing. She will have no idea what it is she has, and she is not the inquisitive type. Her type is dowdy, invisible; she will come and go from the island without raising any alarms. I know this. Once we have it, then we can get rid of her. She is nothing, well, she is a woman. Ha”

Nicholescu’s heavily accented voice rose and fell as he smiled, more to himself than to his director: he amazed himself with his cleverness and soon he would have his greatness recognised. He was sure of this. He wiped his hand down his silk tie and then across the side of his hair. Life was good, he thought, and it was soon about to get much better.

The director looked at Nicholescu with mild distaste. He was a necessary evil in this complex plan and his links with the Romanian crime families had proved indispensable. He just wished the man would keep his mouth shut and stop wearing the bloody awful aftershave he seemed to douse himself in on a regular basis.

He dangled Nicholescu on a tight chain. His promise of membership into the Lodge kept him lean and hungry, and willing to do whatever was needed. Harold had no intention of

allowing this foreign peasant access to the greatest and most powerful magical lodge in British history, but he did need his cooperation if the Great Work was to succeed. And for that to happen, he needed links into shady worlds; desperate measures for desperate times.

“Send some of our boys, the ‘Saviours’, up there to keep an eye on her and make sure it leaves the island safely. I do not want anything left to chance. And for gods sake tell them to keep a low profile. We don’t want any dramas, clear?”

He raised an eyebrow at Nicholescu as he spoke. Nicholescu nodded and opened his phone. Harold waved a hand at Nicholescu in dismissal. Nicholescu chafed at the action; he was this man’s equal, he was not a dog to be dismissed in such an underhand manner. But he knew better than to create a fuss. Things were coming together nicely so now was not the time to stand his ground. That could wait. He clicked his phone shut, turned on his heel and left the office muttering to himself in Romanian.

He stood in the antiquated elevator and watched the lights flick on and off as he descended. They were so close, so very close. Once in the safety of his office, he flicked open his phone and dialled a number in Constanta, a town on the Black Sea. The voice on the other end screeched in Romanian and Nicholescu answered. Orders were given, details were checked and money was promised. The contact would call and activate the ‘Saviours’ into action from their base in Edinburgh and none of it could be traced back to the source.

He had told them to do whatever was necessary. He clicked the phone shut and revelled in the idea that Lumis might be harmed. He didn’t know why he hated her, only that he did. He turned his eyes to the sky as if beseeching god and licked his lips like a snake tasting the wind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lumis had moved into the front bedroom of the Hotel and Seth had carefully carried the stone up the ancient and rickety staircase for her, placing it carefully upon the large oak dresser that seemed to take up half the room. It was once again wrapped into its colourful blanket and the fragments of papyrus were stored out of light, heat and air's way in sealed plastic bags and placed in the dresser where it was dark and dry.

She had wrapped the oilskins around the papyrus to keep them in their own environment: she was probably already going to be bawled out by the boss for unwrapping it in such a manner. The least she could do is try some form of damage limitation and preserve the wrappings for analysis. She carefully stored the packaging at the bottom of the dresser and pondered on how Nicholescu was going to deal with her over this latest crime of hers.

It was at that point when she stood back up and caught sight of herself in the mirror that she realised she was dirty, wild-haired and very red from the wind whipping her face. Lumis groaned inwardly: why did god do this to her? Make her look a mess and then put her in the path of a handsome and very mysterious male. Whenever she looked her best she was always surrounded by nerds, old men and little boys.

"Oh well," she said out loud as she tripped over her travel bag on the way to the bathroom.

The cascade of hot water on her face felt wonderful as she stood in the shower and wondered about her life. Would she always be trapped under the evil eye of Nicholescu or someone like him? Would she always be dobbin? Did she really care about that or was it just the grinding constant dehumanising field of energy that surrounded her courtesy of the Romanian Gestapo officer: he ground her confidence down to dust at

every opportunity and those opportunities came thick and fast in her world.

After one last blast of hot water, Lumis switched off the shower and turned to climb out of the glass cubicle. She turned right into the face of an old man staring at her with sharp, intense, and very troubled eyes. The scream escaped her without thought or conscious action and the face vanished into the hot mist that surrounded her. Frozen to the spot, panting with fear, she stood immobile, dripping, until a loud knock at the door broke the silence and called her back to her senses. Dripping and frightened, she opened the door a crack to see Seth hovering and obviously concerned: he had heard the scream from his room close by and ran down the corridor, unsure of what he was going to find. "I'm sorry; I just slipped in the shower."

She shut the door on him, dismissing him in the usual Lumis way before he could say anything else. Lumis stood with her back to the door, not daring to move until the cold draught moved into her wet hair and dripping wet towel. She was too frightened to go back into the bathroom, so she dressed quickly, her eyes scanning the small and uneven room with its low roof and many little dark corners.

It was an hour before she remerged in the bar to see Seth deep in whispered discussions with Tam. They both stopped talking abruptly as she emerged from the darkened hall, no trace of the bathroom incident on her face. Their sudden silence poked at Lumis' paranoia and she flushed at the thought of Seth telling old Tam what had happened.

"You ok?" Seth said, his eyebrows raised in concern.

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?"

Her tone told Seth that discussion was out of the question and she turned immediately to Tam and ordered food without looking at Seth again. She prayed that her red face was slowly returning to normal flesh colour, her face averted until the heat and embarrassment drained as it always did. Seth also ordered some food and wandered over to her table by the window and

plopped himself down in the armchair opposite her. He didn't say anything and Lumis didn't trust herself to speak without fear creeping into her voice.

So many strange things were happening, she felt caught in a tv drama without a remote and no way to change channels. She sighed heavily as she looked out over the sea. She could feel Seth squirming in the seat beside her but at this point in time she really didn't care about how anyone else felt: she was tired and she was scared. The scariest thing was she didn't know what it was she was scared of.

Seth broke the silence. "Would you like to come out and see a little of the island? There are some magnificent views here, and such peace away from everyone. My favourite places are to the south east of the island, by the sea with the Cuillins in the distance."

She didn't answer immediately. Maybe a trip would get her back into her normal humdrum life, the one she was trying to escape from only yesterday. Maybe it was time she had fun, maybe she was depressed? She nodded at Seth without turning her head. She heard him breathe a big sign of relief. Why, she questioned? Why was he so focussed on her and why was he trying so hard to be nice to her? Her face hardened as she watched fishing boats navigate their way into the harbour: she was ugly and clumsy, he was handsome and not clumsy, ergo he is after something? Tomorrow will tell, she thought.

CHAPTER SIX

The breeze caught her hair as they wove in and out of the tiny country lanes, window down, wind howling all around them. Seth's little car seemed to know its own way as he seemed to spend more time looking at Lumis than looking where he was going. When Lumis was nervous, she chattered; endless, meaningless chatter, in an attempt to fill the uncomfortable void, not between her and the stranger beside her, but between her and herself.

She rattled on about her work, her non-existent family and her brittle knowledge of what lay before her. He nodded, smiled at her and seemed to genuinely like her. Lumis dropped her guard and began to open more, which in turn steered the conversation away from chatter and to more focussed questions. She wanted to know more about him.

She stopped talking and was looking at him. Seth had not realised she had asked a question and was waiting patiently for an answer. He flushed, apologised and asked her to repeat the question.

“So where do you come from, I mean originally?”

The minute she asked the question she realised it was intrusive. She flushed red and tried to fiddle with the car window to create a chance to change the subject. Before he had chance to comment she asked him where they were going. He screwed his eyes up and looked out beyond the windscreen to the dark brooding hills beyond. She watched as his face creased from thought. He was very good-looking, she thought, his profile was high-boned and proud, a hooked Arab style nose and dark wavy collar length hair: feelings began to stir within her, something she had not felt for a very long time. She flushed red once more and tried to feign interest in the hills he was looking at.

“There,” he pointed.

She followed his finger which pointed to a large hill with outcrops of jagged rock, and a small flat area at its top. The clouds gathered around the top of the hill and mist drifted in waves around its breach. There seemed to be nothing nearby except a small crofter's cottage with a few lazy sheep dotted about the land surrounding it.

He pulled the car over into the rough driveway of the cottage and got out. He leaned on the top of the car, watching her as she got out. His intense blue eyes, screwed up against the light looked at her, straight, as if in challenge.

"Beersheba," he said, with nothing else to qualify it.

"Pardon?" said Lumis, looking at him in confusion and, to her horror, lust.

"Originally, I was born in Beersheba, and moved to England as a young man. I went to school in England and then moved here fifteen years ago."

Lumis nodded, taking in the information and storing it without thought, as she always did. "Come on; let's go for a walk and I will show you some standing stones," he said, arm extended in invitation.

Lumis trudged through the mud and cold wind, regretting agreeing to a 'hearty walk.' This was not hearty—it was bloody cold, wet and damn hard work. Her boots were leaking and her jeans were soaked around the ankles. She struggled up and down the slopes as they seemed to be walking to the ends of the earth. Actually it was only probably about two miles but her usual level of exercise was walking to the bathroom and to the car. She was cold, wet, red faced and out of breath.

Seth turned around to wait for her to catch up. Looking up at him, she caught his struggle to suppress the smile that rose to his lips as he watched her sliding around in the mud, cursing and flailing around like a stranded albatross. She began to laugh as she waved her arms about in a futile attempt at balance and Seth abandoned his forced straight face and laughed with her. By the time they reached the top, both were giggling and more relaxed than either of them had been in years.

The stone circle was small but impressive enough for it to have been worth the struggle: Lumis stood at the centre of the circle and looked up to the sky above. It felt amazing. It also awoke something deep within her, something she knew had always been there, but had never been able to actually put her finger on it. She could feel the stones, she could see the brightness of the stones, and she could also see the spirits of people within the stones, guardians who had sacrificed their lives to work with and look after the ancient alignments.

She closed her eyes, feeling into the spirits around her, gathering, watching, waiting. For once she didn't feel like a klutz, she felt rooted, strong, and sharp. She talked to the spirits in her mind, thanking them for allowing her in to the circle: it seemed like a well-mannered thing to do. Her father had taught her to talk to the wind with her mind, and to talk to God in the same way. She drifted in her thoughts, listening to the wind, smelling the damp moss and feeling the power all around her, like a huge blanket.

A breath touched her face and she opened her eyes. The old man, the one who appeared when she got out of the shower stood immediately before her, his fierce eyes piercing hers in urgency.

His voice hissed something bizarre at her; "the last scabbard." She screamed and jumped back, the scream bringing Seth running, who had been outside the circle looking out towards the sacred mountain, deep in thought.

The man vanished almost as soon as he had appeared, and left Lumis hyperventilating. Seth ran to her and grasped her by her forearms.

"What? What is it?"

Lumis looked around her, realising nothing was there and began to feel like a tired cold idiot.

"I thought I saw, well, I'm not sure. I'm sorry, it was nothing. I must have stumbled." Lumis pulled away from Seth and began to walk back down the hill away from the circle and

towards the car. She felt like an idiot, well, like a cold wet idiot and she was sick of embarrassing herself.

Seth ran to catch up with her and placed a gentle hand upon her arm, bringing her to a stop and turning her to face him.

“I’m sorry if something startled you; the circle is strong and can play tricks on you. It has a wee bit of a local reputation, I should have warned you. And you are soaked through and shivering, I guess I have not done a good job of looking after you, huh.”

He smiled the smile that he knew always disarmed people, and it worked this time also. She visibly relaxed and tried to muster a smile.

“That’s better. Look, the cottage at the bottom of the trail, well, that is mine. Let me light you a fire and get you a warm drink, it’s the least I could do to make up for getting you into such a mess.”

He raised his eyebrows hopefully, willing her to say yes. Lumis was so cold, tired and in need of vast quantities of caffeine that she nodded without needing time to think over the possible consequences, which was her usual train of thought. At the moment, she really did not care if he was a mass murderer or rapist—she needed a fire, a coffee and a toilet, and she was willing to kill if need be to get it. She lumbered down the hill, tripping occasionally over tree roots and rock outcrops, her language colouring the air as she went.

The cottage seemed like it took an age to reach, and she felt dead on her feet. It felt like she had been out on the hills for days, but in reality it was a few hours, a few hours too long she thought as she splashed through yet more mud. She had given up trying to look feminine, or even female, now she just wanted warmth and really didn’t give a shit what he thought she looked like. He walked purposefully behind her, helping her as she struggled with the landscape, the mud and the rain.

Lumis bolted through the door, following the direction to the toilet and not noticing that she left a trail of mud upon the

stone floor and muddy handprints along the wall from the doorway, through the hall and into the bathroom.

As she emerged, Seth was lighting the woodstove in the living area which served as a kitchen and living space. She stopped in the doorway and looked around at the small Spartan space which housed a large stone fireplace and wood stove with a beautifully woven deep red rug before it, a small kitchenette space to one side and two old drooping and heavily blanketed sofas. The thick cob walls gave way to two deeply-set windows, each with a wooden window seat and the heavy oak door which she was currently leaning against, unconsciously wiping mud down it. Beyond the doorway was the bathroom, and then a door which she presumed went to the bedroom. Tiny, but cute in a sort of rugged country way, she thought.

The woodstove had sprung to life and was already beginning to warm the space up. He looked at her, dripping in mud, cold and obviously not very happy.

“How about I run you a bath and get you some dry clothes. Would that be good?”

She looked into his face to see what lay behind that question, but she only saw concern for her well-being and she relaxed, breathing a large sigh as she nodded. He motioned for her to go sit by the fire as he ran the hot water into the tub for her and also put on the kettle. She curled on the rug before the stove, watching the flames and thinking how nice it was to have someone take over and care for her. That had not happened to her for a very long time, and it felt good.

He had laid out some clean clothing for her; a pair of jogging bottoms, a T-shirt, woolly socks and an oversized wool sweater. She drew her clean wet hair back into a bun as she finally stepped out of the hot bath and put on the clothes he had provided for her. Her footsteps padded to the living room and she stopped in the doorway, embarrassed and also overtaken by the smell of warm bread. Seth smiled and motioned

her to sit by the warmth as he handed her a hot mug of coffee. She sat on the floor by the fire and sipped the warmth as he placed a platter of warm unleavened bread, olives, and olive oil before her, and a dish of feta cheese in oil with chopped cilantro. It was an interesting combination of foods and it intrigued her. He tore a bit of bread, dipped it in the oil and then scooped up some cheese and cilantro and popped it into his mouth. She smiled and copied, her eyes widening with pleasure as the tastes revealed themselves to her.

“That tastes wonderful!” she exclaimed, smiling with an openness that totally disarmed him.

He smiled widely, his face relaxing from the strain that seemed to Lumis to have hung there since she met him. She was very impressed with herself that she managed to eat and drink without knocking anything over or dripping it all down her front. This relaxed her more which in turn opened Seth up who chattered away about his homeland, his studies in England and his life here on Skye.

The more he talked, the more she realised she was heavily attracted to him. She watched how his eyes moved lazily, sexily from one view to another, how he eased himself from one sitting position to another with all the lightheartedness of a sleepy tomcat. She wished she was not dressed in oversized joggers and a tent of a sweater, she also wished she did not have frizzy red hair, freckles and limbs that had a mind of their own. At this moment in time she desperately wanted to be anyone other than who she was. He could not possibly be attracted to her, she thought.

As the light began to fade outside, Seth produced a bottle of port and suggested a toast, to wet mud, rainy hills and archaeological discoveries. They toasted again, to the Isle of Skye and its wonderful ancient history, and then once more to obnoxious Romanian museum directors. The doors were beginning to open and she was beginning to talk.

The more Lumis chattered, the more Seth seemed to relax and become himself. She told him all about her suspension,

the real reason, and her banishment to Skye of two weeks. She talked about her early work with Renaissance texts, and the more she told him, the more he seemed to warm to her.

He had moved himself closer to her, his pupils were growing wider and Lumis felt attractive for the first time in ages. They finished the bottle of port and realised that neither of them could possibly drive.

“You could stay here, you will be perfectly safe. I could make a bed up on the couch for you if you like.”

Lumis accepted that she was there for the night and nodded, smiling sleepily. She ran her fingers through her hair, getting them stuck on a frizzy knot. Thankfully Seth did not notice and got up to get blankets and pillows for her. Her fingers struggled with the knot with exploded into a pile of frizz, causing Lumis to despair at herself.

She got up, went to the bathroom and attempted to untangle the monstrosity that framed her head. When she came out, Seth had lit a night candle for her and wished her good dreams.

‘Don’t want good dreams,’ she thought playfully, ‘I would prefer something else’.

That thought made her smile until she realised he was looking at her as if he had read her thoughts and was shocked. She reddened instantly and mumbled thanks before curling up on the couch, throwing the blankets over herself and wishing she could be swallowed up by the earth itself.

She tossed and turned, her feet sticking out of the blankets and instantly freezing. Her brain would not switch off and all she could think about was the line of his jaw, the contractions of the muscles in his arms when he moved, and the wide pupils that called her to his bed. After what seemed an eternity, she threw the blankets off of her body and lay looking at the low heavily beamed ceiling. Well, she thought, I can go to sleep, or I can make a complete fool of myself, which is it to be? She weighed up the consequences of it going terribly wrong, and shrugged to herself.

She was leaving the island in the not too distant future, never to return again, so who cares? That thought gave her the courage to tiptoe down the hall, clutching the dripping candle, and through his bedroom door that was conveniently left ajar. She could only just make out his shape in the bed, but she could hear from his breathing that he, like her, was not asleep. She paused for a moment, about to chicken out, when without turning over he pulled back the quilt to let her in.

Her body was cold, even wrapped up as she was; she climbed into the warm nest of quilts and snuggled up to his back. Her breathing was fast, and the more she tried to control it and appear calm, the faster it got.

Her mind whirled in chaos as he lay beside her, his back turned away and his breathing steady. Not sure what to do next, she lay a finger upon his arm, and very lightly touched him, tracing the line of his muscle. It was only at that point she realised he was naked, which in turn told her that this was not only really embarrassing, but it was probably going to take an interesting turn.

He still had not said anything, nor responded in any way to her, other than pulling the quilt back to let her in the bed. Maybe he did not think the same way as her, maybe he was just being kind because it was cold.

‘Oh god,’ she thought—what if he is gay and she didn’t pick up on it? She would feel such an idiot. At least it was dark enough for him not to see that she was beetroot red and that her hair was responding to her stress by becoming wilder, frizzier and completely out of control.

Common sense took control and she turned over, pulling the soft pillow under her head, sweeping her crazy hair from her face and breathing a long sigh of relief. That was the best way, she thought, turn over and go to sleep, then the morning will be that much less embarrassing. There was silence and stillness for a minute, but it actually felt like an hour, before he moved, turned over and put his arm around her, drawing her to him. His erection piercing her back told her in very loud

terms that actually he was not quite as priestly as he would have liked to have been, and he was definitely not gay. She smiled in the darkness before turning over to face him.

His touch was firm, decisive and expertly driven. He traced her face with his finger, her throat and then her breasts as if mapping out her body in his mind. His tongue probed her mouth, before tasting her flesh and her thighs, unhurried and thoughtful. His body moved like a cat, sure and sensuous as he explored every part of her, kissing, licking and touching.

She curled around him as he explored, touching, sniffing, licking his skin, his hair, his ears, anywhere she could reach. When he climbed on top of her and entered her with a large sigh, it did occur to her that neither of them had experienced any sex in rather a long while, so this might be a very short; sweet, but short and to the point.

He looked deeply into her eyes as he thrust into her, as though searching her soul—for her part Lumis was just glad he could not read her thoughts as she was weighing up the possibilities of staying in bed for the next two weeks and just having a long almighty shagathon. She hated it when her mind did this; at the most inopportune moments she would lapse into strange threads of thought which took her away from what was actually happening, usually triggered by stress. When he orgasmed, he called out something in Hebrew, which Lumis found very sexy, and he clung to her as if his life depended upon it.

He lay for a moment, exhausted and Lumis revelled in the feeling of having a body upon hers. When he finally opened his eyes, he gently stroked her face before moving off her and lying beside her. Lumis turned onto her side to look at him in the darkness, his profile hiding the turmoil that was chewing away at his thoughts. Still no words had been said, and she did not want to break the spell by opening her mouth and instantly putting her foot in it which was her usual mode of operation.

He turned his head to look at her, his face distraught, and yet something hard had vanished from him, leaving him

exposed. She pulled him to her, placing his head upon her breast and wrapped her arms around him.

“Its ok,” was all she could muster to say.

He lay like a child in the arms of his mother, listening to her breathing and looking out into the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A muffled voice called to Lumis and she struggled to open her eyes, but they refused. At the same time, she fought with the quilt to pull it off her face. For a moment she forgot about where she was and who she was with, lazily forcing both eyes to unstick at the same time.

Then she remembered with a big, 'oh shit' thought. The quilt had wrapped itself around her, forcing her to struggle like a tied hog while the fact dawned upon her that her hair was probably completely out of control, along with her eyeliner that was by now probably framing half her face. 'Shit shit' was the mantra running through her head as she finally focussed upon him stood over her with a steaming cup of coffee in his hands.

Of course, he looked wonderful; bare chested with beautifully formed muscles, and a series of curious snake tattoos wrapped around his arms. His jeans sat fashionably just on his hips, and he looked just about ready for a photo shoot of the world's sexiest men.

That she blushed red went without saying. She sat up, looking like a tornado had just rammed into her, and smiled weakly. He handed her the coffee and beamed a big truthful and happy smile—he was in love and it was printed in large letters all over his face. "Why?" was all she could ask herself.

He handed her the coffee which she immediately tipped over herself and the bedding as she tried to pull the pillow up behind her.

"Ah shit, I'm so sorry," she said as she tried to mop up the puddles of coffee while keeping her modesty under some sort of control. Seth just laughed, he didn't care about anything today.

"Tell you what, you get yourself up and I will have more ready in front of the fire."

He took the cups out and left Lumis to gather herself, much to her relief. She flopped back on the bed for a second, looking at the ceiling and trying to figure out what had happened over the last twenty four hours, and what was she going to say to him when she got out of bed?

He was busy at the cooker when she went into the living room so she went and sat by the fire. Her fears of uncomfortable silences and awkward comments were unfounded; he chatted away to her as she warmed herself, and seemed a lot more open and relaxed than she had seen him before. He brought coffee and toast, sitting down beside her in front of the woodstove and preparing a breakfast picnic on the floor.

“Lumis, we need to have a serious talk. After last night, I have to be up front with you. It’s the only way.”

She cringed at the seriousness of his face; he was going to tell her he was married, or he had a girlfriend, or he was going to make some elaborate excuse as to why they could not be together. She braced herself for the excuses and pulled her knees up under her chin in defence. She picked at toast as he searched for a place to start. She watched him struggle to find words to express what he wanted to say, and she realised her heart was plummeting at the prospect of not seeing him again. He was handsome but serious, but there was something else she noticed: he had no idiosyncrasies, no little individual ‘somethings’ that make a person who they are.

He struggled with himself for a few minutes and then gave up with a large sigh. This was not going to work. He opened his mouth and closed it again without saying a word. Lumis was getting very worried. What the hell was he going to say? In the end, he stood up, swept his hair back and held it in his hands, tightly, behind his head.

“Look, I’m connected to the stone that you have been given and there are some things you need to know about it. I cannot begin to explain like this, I have to just show you something, and then it will be easier to understand.”

With that, he did not wait for a response but went to dress himself for the day and put his boots on.

“Would you be willing to come with me so I can show you something?”

Lumis released various sighs of relief: he was not gay, married, nor did he have a girlfriend. Those were the biggies that she had fretted over. He did not think she was ugly, stupid or dorky, in fact he seemed, strangely enough, to like her. She was intrigued with his comment regarding the stone: maybe it was stolen and it belonged to him, or maybe he was part of the smuggling ring and did not want to get her into trouble. That would be quite romantic she thought, hanging out with a handsome windswept smuggler on a remote Scottish island—how cool is that?

As she drifted in an orgy of romance, something popped into her brain that had been nagging away silently in the background. Of course! The strange symbols on the stone had been bugging her. She knew she had seen them somewhere, but she could not quite put her finger on where she had seen them. Now she remembered: the rusty old sword in the boot of her car.

“Oh my god,” she said out loud to herself.

Seth looked up in surprise. “What?” he asked.

She was about to tell him when a phone rang. He got up to answer the phone, mumbled in low tones and then shot her a worried glance. He clicked the phone shut and grabbed his coat.

“Come on, quick, I will explain along the way. We will have to take my wheels”

He vanished through the front door and ran to the barn behind the building. Lumis slammed the door behind her, confused, and trotted off after him. She didn't want to leave the hire car here in the middle of nowhere, but he was already firing up a battered-looking truck and shouted for her to get in. She went to the car and got the sword out of the boot: she could not figure out why, but it was important that she did not

leave it. She would tell him about the symbols on the way to wherever the hell they were going. She put the sword on the floor behind the truck seats and climbed in.

“What’s that?” asked Seth as he put the truck in gear.

“Oh, something interesting, I will tell you when we get going.”

He shot out from the barn at full speed, throwing her around a bit before she had chance to get her seatbelt on.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she shouted, trying to be heard over the rattling and the engine noise.

Once he was on the road and driving like a lunatic, he began talking, well, shouting actually, while keeping his eyes on the road.

“Three men have turned up at the hotel looking for you, and they are not nice men. Who knows about the stone? Who else knows that you are here?”

Lumis was now really confused. What the hell was going on? It was just a simple artefact pick-up and now everything seemed to be forming into a badly-written Bond movie. And yet she knew, and had known since setting out on this journey, that there was something that was not quite right about this whole thing: Nicholescu was up to something and it was not legal, whatever it was.

Suddenly she felt frightened. She had heard horror stories in the past from archaeologists and museum staff who had become targets for criminals working for underground dealers. She knew the stone was important, what she did not understand was why. It would obviously have massive worth as a piece of history but it had no value to the usual dealers as they would never be able to sell it to anyone.

Seth kept looking at her and back at the road, as if waiting for an answer. Her mind flicked back to the day in Nicholescu’s office; she doubted if he had told anyone else about this trip as it was becoming very obvious that this was not an aboveboard transaction.

“Umm, I dunno really, the museum secretary and Nicholescu?”

Seth frowned at her and Lumis felt herself begin to really panic.

“I need to know more about this museum boss and find out what the hell he is up to. It looks to me as if you have been set up, so expect things to get a wee bit bumpy over the next few days,” he shouted over the growl of the engine.

“We need to get the stone somewhere safe, and we need to get *you* somewhere safe.”

He put his foot down harder and the truck leapt forward, the engine screaming as it struggled to reach the speeds the driver demanded.

“Seth, what the hell is going on?”

Lumis was now very scared and clung to the roof handle in the truck as if it would save her life. Seth did not answer straight away; he looked out at the road, as if looking beyond the road for answers.

“You have stepped into a whole bag of ‘nasty’, and I will explain later. But for now, we need to get somewhere safe.”

Without further explanation, and without taking his eyes from the road, he rummaged for his phone and flipped it open. He left a message on someone’s voice mail saying he was coming with a guest and would be there soon.

As they bounced around in the truck, Lumis told him about the strange symbols on the sword and where she had got it from as they pulled up at the back of the hotel in Broadford. He wanted to look at it to see if it was the mythical sword he had heard about, the guardian of the stone, but there was no time. He was frightened and excited, but he knew he had to focus as they were in real danger.

He told her to get into the space behind the front seats.

“Get on the floor and pull the old tarp over yourself. Please Lumis, don’t argue, just do it and stay quiet no matter what.”

Before she could answer he got out of the truck and vanished through the back door of the hotel kitchen. Lumis clam-

bered over the seat, getting her foot stuck on the gear stick and fell head first into the space behind the seats. She mumbled expletives as she pulled the tarp over her head and rubbed her sore ankle. It was cold, wet and stinking in the back of the truck, and she was cramped, confused and frightened. The sword dug into her leg as if to remind her where it was, and she struggled to move out of its way.

Seth darted through the kitchen and into the back office room. He picked up the hotel internal phone that was placed there and called the front desk. Tam answered in his usual intelligible language and Seth instructed him to keep the visitors busy in the bar while he got stuff out of Lumis' room.

He told Tam that the guys were debt collectors after Lumis: Tam hated debt collectors more than he hated anything else. Tam would go all out to be helpful to Seth and downright obnoxious to the ever-increasingly agitated gang of men hanging around the hotel bar waiting for Lumis to return.

Seth sprinted up the back stairway used only by the staff to go up to Lumis' room. He waited around the corner to make sure the corridor was clear before bolting to the bedroom door, opening it and then locking it quietly behind him. He stood for a minute and surveyed the room which was scattered with towels, discarded clothing, bags and chocolate bar wrappers. He smiled; she was a chocolate junkie, a woman after his own heart.

He grabbed a large backpack left on the floor and threw her clothes in it. He emptied the drawers which held the papyrus and oilskin and carefully placed them on top of the clothes. It looked like she had not brought much with her, which was going to make life a lot easier. It also told him volumes about Lumis: she was a 'get up and go' kind of girl and did not seem to need the masses of clothes and toiletries that so many women hauled around with them.

He found a larger bag that had been left on the floor and carefully pulled the stone, still wrapped in the blanket, and tried to fit it into the second bag. It would not fit. "Shit," he said out loud under his breath.

He cast a quick glance around and could not see anything else he could put it in. The blanket was unusual enough for it to stand out and it he did not want to be caught in the hotel with it under his arm. He then saw a pile of towels she had dumped by the bathroom door and gathered them up. He wrapped the stone in the large bath towel, slung the backpack on his back, and then gathered the towels together with the stone in the middle and picked it up. It was heavy and was going to have to make it look like it was a light bundle of towels if he bumped into anyone.

He opened the door slightly to see if anyone was outside the door, but the corridor was clear. He could hear Tam's voice all the way up the stairs, talking loudly about nothing to the guys in the lobby below. Tam had obviously cornered the guys and begun to ramble nonsense which was his favourite 'annoy the tourists' torture. Seth smiled to himself, 'thank god for old Tam'.

He managed to get back out of the hotel without being seen, and threw the stone and bag into the back of the truck. He got in and started the engine, turning the truck around without giving Lumis a chance to climb out of the hole she was stuck in. He set off down the main road and then veered off suddenly, taking a rough donkey track that bounced the truck around like a ping pong ball. Lumis swore like a trooper as she tried to untangle herself from the tarp and climb into the passenger seat.

She fell forward, banging her head on the dashboard and getting her leg stuck underneath her. More colourful language spilled from her lips, her hair stood out in all directions from the indignity of her predicament, and her clothes twisted around her, trapping her in an orgy of discomfort as she finally fell back into the seat and put her seatbelt on.

“Are you ok” was all that Seth could muster as he looked at the frazzled and crumpled mess in the seat beside him.

“Oh sure, never felt better” spat Lumis as she glowered at him. “Where are we going”?

Seth pointed up to a small farm on a hill just on the horizon. “Ted McDonald’s place. He will let us hunker down there for a wee while.”

Lumis sat back in the seat and stared out of the window. It was pointless trying to talk as the engine noise was just too loud, so they sat in noisy silence for the rest of the journey. Seth parked the truck around the back of the farm, hidden out of sight in the old barn.

Once pipes and cigarettes were lit, Lumis demanded to know exactly what the hell was going on and what the hell it had to do with her?

Ted looked at Seth.

“She has a right to know you know,” he said, frowning at Seth.

“Yes, I know, I was just trying to find the right time to tell her.”

The look she gave him could have frozen boiling water in seconds.

“Ok, ok, I get the look Lumis. Ted, make another cuppa. You know how long this story is.”

“It’s all about the stone. Now stay with me on this one, as it can get a wee bit complex in parts, but with your archaeology background it should ring a few bells with you. Back in prehistory, the Stone was said to have been the heart of an ancient goddess. It was also said to hold the power to consecrate sacred queens. The queen would then bring prosperity and abundance to the land and the people. The Stone originated in a British valley surrounded by seven hills, and had a sacred spring watched over by a giant boar.”

Lumis rolled her eyes at the silly story that was being paraded before her. She was about to say something when Seth

frowned at her in such a stern way that she closed her mouth without saying a word.

“I asked you to stay with me on this one. Please.”

It was not a request, but a demand. He continued.

“Legend tells us it was stolen and taken to Egypt where it was held in an early shrine that was a cave with water flowing through it. A large Lion was carved out of the rock to guard it, and it was venerated as the heart of the goddess of moisture, Tefnut.”

Lumis finished his sentence with him.

“I remembered a discussion a few years back at the museum about the age of the sphinx and the idea that the area surrounding it was lush and moist. There was also an argument that once raged in the staffroom about the rough cave beneath the Giza pyramid: some thought it was hewn out when the pyramid was constructed; others thought it was ancient sacred cave that had been built-upon in later times.”

Seth watched her face as certain parts of a puzzle were assembling themselves in her head.

He continued. “From there it went to Ethiopia and then to Shechem. It was stolen and taken to Jerusalem and we do not know if those who took it understood its powers, but the magic within it only fully blossoms in a valley that is surrounded by seven hills and that has water running through the valley. But we do know it was used to consecrate some kings during that time. From there Nebuchadnezzar was said to have taken it when he invaded, and it sent him mad, so it was handed to priestesses in Pessinus, Phrygia.

“From there it went to Rome but was stolen once more in a power grab and eventually turned up at Ka’aba in Mecca. It was found there by the Order and they stole it, switched it for a fake which they handed back in 952AD. It finally came back to the British Isles in 940 AD and became what you would know as the Stone of Scone.

“It was whisked away to safety in 1296 when Edward the 1st tried to steal it to gain the sacred kingship, but the monks gave

him a fake. The real stone was taken to Iona by Angus Og of Islay, wrapped in the faery flag which had guarded it for generations. He had it buried with him when he died. The Order tracked it down, dug it up and brought the stone and flag here to Skye. The flag was given as a gift to the Macleod family in return for their protection of the stone. It has been here ever since hidden away and waiting until it vanished 15 years ago.

“I was sent to find it and guard it, taking over from the last guardian of the Order when he died. I knew it was still on the island, I could feel it. But I could not find it. It was prophesied many generations ago that it would be stolen once more, and when it was found, it would be found by a woman of pure heart. The prophecy stated that the woman would be of the blood of the first-ever guardians of the Stone, and she would either bring about its destruction, or she would unite it with the Magical Sword of Britain.

“If she did reunite the sword and the stone, then the power of the most ancient Goddess would flow through Britain once more, bringing great power back to the land and the people. What happens after that depends upon what the woman does with the power. She can use it to restore balance and power to the land, but if she misuses it for her own greed, then Britain will be plunged into everlasting poverty, war and destruction.”

Seth stopped to take a long drink of his coffee and Lumis ran her finger across the rim of the cup, her face set hard in thought.

“So what is this Order you keep mentioning? And where do you fit in to all this?”

Lumis asked the question with a cold cynical edge to her voice. Seth gritted his teeth at her tone and breathed deeply, he wanted to bite back but he knew that it would shatter everything if he got into a fight with her. He calmed himself and carried on.

“It is just known as the Order and I was born into it as was my father and grandfather. It is essentially a Pagan Solar order that was founded in ancient times to watch over the stone and

return it to its source. We believe that if the Stone and Sword are in their rightful place, it will bring balance and natural order to the Northern hemisphere. The stone most certainly does affect the weather, and it does seem to affect people around it very powerfully indeed.

“It became a focus of interest to the British Lodge, a group of esoteric masons some hundreds of years ago and they have hunted it down to use it for the establishment of a sacred kingship to bring Solomonic rule to Britain. But they are essentially a bunch of power greedy racist nutters. They want Britain to be white, with an underclass they can rule and the power to tap into the ancient magic trapped in the land here. With that they can do anything they wish.

“We think it was them who stole it and they have probably tried to take it from the island many times and failed: a power within the stone protects it to an extent; it can only be moved across water by a woman. I think you were a last-ditch attempt to get it off the island unnoticed, but obviously something somewhere went wrong, or they somehow found out that you and I had connected. They watch the Order as closely as we watch them.

“I can see from your face that you think we are just nuts, but regardless of what you believe, these guys are serious and would not hesitate to kill you if you got in the way. I have asked some members of the Order on the mainland to look into your boss Nicholescu to see if he is connected with them, which I very much suspect he is.”

Lumis sat with her mouth open, as she often did when she was thinking and suddenly the lights went on in her head.

“Southampton, the grave robbing lord, is close friends with Nicholescu; and Southampton is well known for being an occultist, and a racist, which was one of the reasons I hated him so much.”

Seth watched her face as things began to drop into place and that she realised her life was indeed in danger.

“Ok, so, if what you say is true, what do we do with the stone? I mean, I am supposed to take it back to London because if I don’t I will be fired and probably imprisoned for theft. But you are saying that if I do that, I will be taking a sacred object and putting it into the hands of baddies. Geez, great predicament.

“And then there are those thugs in the hotel. What do you suggest I do? And what does it mean to be the last scabbard?”

She put out the last comment as a casual throw-away but it stopped Seth in his tracks. He did not remember ever mentioning the title of the woman who would protect the stone and the sword. He narrowed his eyes and looked at her closely. Where the hell did she pick that title up from?

“The last scabbard will be linked by spirit to the sword, and her spirit will protect the sword. My job is to protect the stone, protect the last scabbard and to find the sword. We, well, the Order lost track of the sword way back in history but the prophecy does state that when the woman appears with the stone, she will become the last scabbard. We need to get that sword out of the truck so that I can look at it properly. By what you told me of the sigils upon it, it is the one and yet it sounds like it is the wrong shape. Where did you get the title of the last scabbard from?”

She blushed deep red and looked at Seth and Ted with a mixture of fear and embarrassment. She told them about the man who had appeared to her in the shower and then the stone circle. Now it made sense, Seth thought, the scream in her room and then out on the hills. She must have the sight to have been able to see the last guardian of the stone.

The old man was obviously trying to reach her, to warn her. Seth frowned deeply, his face betraying the deep thought and anguish that was tearing at him. That the last guardian had been attempting to make contact with her told him one thing—she was in terrible danger, as was the stone. As if picking up on his thoughts, Lumis wrapped her arms around herself and curled into a ball in the deep armchair. She looked at the two men.

“Am I in real danger?”

Old Ted and Seth looked at each other. It was a look tinged with real fear and that truly unsettled Lumis.

“Yes my dear, I’m so sorry, but I think you are. These men are obviously from the British Lodge, probably from the spin-off group known as the ‘Saviours’. The Saviours are hardened ex-soldiers from Eastern Europe who volunteer their time to uphold the tenets of the British Lodge, and basically to do their dirty work. They will happily kill anyone who gets in their way. If you are in their way, they will sweep you aside like a piece of dust.

“But that is nothing compared to what will happen if they get the sword and the stone together. They will need you also, if you are the ‘last scabbard’ as you will be needed to trigger the stone into its full power. It is activated by a drop of your blood falling on the stone and the sword at the same time. If they control you, they control everything and can destroy everything.

“We just have to hope that they do not think you are the last scabbard, or there is even an outside chance that they do not know about the scabbard. Their magical knowledge comes from a different line than the Order and we are not sure what they know and what they don’t know. We can only hope they are as stupid as they look.” Ted’s voice trailed off as he looked at Lumis with deep sympathy.

Lumis looked at Seth, her eyes cascading with confusion mixed with cold fear, a look that pulled deeply at his heart and groin. He wanted to gather her to him and protect her. But her fear was quickly masked and the hard face that he had come to recognise as her stone-like determination replaced the vulnerability which tugged upon him.

She got up to put the kettle on again, her face still frowning at the downright ridiculousness of the situation she had found herself in. She managed to trip over the rag rug on the floor and a cup flew out of her hand, shattering into pieces on the stone-flagged floor. Seth could not hide his smile, a smile that

was not unkind, but rather a smile of affection at the complete klutz he had fallen in love with.

She muttered apologies at Ted who was fussing over her, telling her not to worry, and Seth got up to put the kettle on. He was about to tell Lumis to get the sword out of the truck so they could look at it, but stopped dead in front of the farmhouse window. The car that the ‘thugs’ had been using at the hotel was slowly cruising by at a snail’s pace as they looked at each building they passed. How the hell had they found them?

“Shit, the guys from the hotel are hovering outside on the road. Lumis, do you have a mobile phone somewhere?”

The urgency in Seth’s voice stopped her in her tracks and made her look up sharply. “Well, yes, but it does not get reception here so I have not bothered to use it. It will be no good out here,” she said with a note of question in her voice.

“I don’t need to use it; they have tracked you here via the gps device in your phone. Give it to me, it could help us.”

Lumis dug into her bottomless backpack that served her as a general purse/handbag, waded through sweet wrappers, cigarette packs, matches and crumpled bits of paper: she held up the phone in triumph. Seth snatched it out of her hand and looked at Ted.

“OK Ted, I need a bit more help if you are willing,” said Seth.

Ted nodded. He had been a support for the Order since he was a little boy, as his father had been.

“If you take the phone and head off towards Broadford, we will go over the back hill behind the farm, where they will not be able to see, and I will take her to the cave. Throw Lumis’ coat over the passenger seat in case they look in your car, and here take this.” Seth handed him the large wooden bread bin that was on the table and wrapped it in the table cloth.

“Looks about the right size huh?”

It took a moment for both Ted and Lumis to figure out what he meant. It did look like the stone wrapped in a table cloth and Lumis began to nod her head.

“Once you are at the hotel, make out to Tam that you are

delivering this for Lumis and want it put in her room, play it a bit cloak and dagger, to get their attention. Then leave the phone in her room. Tell Tam loudly that you had borrowed her phone and that she was due back anytime in the next hour for dinner. Then get out quick before they can stop you to ask questions. Meet us at the cave tomorrow while we decide what to do next.”

Ted nodded and took off out of the door with the disguised bread bin and phone, and Seth watched from behind the curtain as the ‘Saviours’ spotted Ted holding something big and they turned their car around to follow him.

“Come on you,” said Seth.

He shoved her bag into her arms and took off out the back side door which opened straight into the old barn. He fired the truck up and they took off over the field at the back of the farm, heading for the narrow strip of land that passed between two hills. Once again Lumis was bouncing around in the truck and wishing she was instead lounging in front of a TV or doing something less bouncy and dramatic. She was tired, hungry and also very frightened.

“Got anything to eat?” she asked.

Seth shook his head and lit a cigarette.

“There is a bit to eat where we are going, it will not be long.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

It seemed to take hours to get to where they were going, and the road twisted and turned to the point where Lumis was beginning to get car sick on top of the hunger. They drew near Elgol, a tiny fishing village by the sea at the lower east part of the island, a small community gripping the side of the sea while the dark and brooding hills behind them loomed like monsters. It was beautiful in its harshness; a barren windswept land that faced off the sea in a constant battle for survival.

Before they hit Elgol, Seth turned the truck off the road and headed up on a rough track up towards the hills just as the clouds were descending. The sky took on a menacing mood, its darkness gathering and swirling with the winds as large plump raindrops began to assault the windscreen. They both looked up at the sky and Seth smiled: heavy rain meant no tracks.

The truck twisted around until the road they had left behind vanished behind a hill, and just before them was a fallen-down stone cottage that looked as if it had been abandoned hundreds of years before. Seth got out and slung the biggest of the bags over his shoulder before picking up the stone and kicking the truck door shut. Lumis got the other bags and the sword, and trundled after Seth as he climbed over the small rocks to get to the cottage.

“You have got to be joking Seth, it doesn’t even have a roof and it’s pissing down with rain.”

Seth did not answer nor did he turn around, he just kept walking until he reached the front door, or space where a front door used to be, and vanished into the cottage. Lumis struggled to keep up, frequently catching her feet on rocks and falling to her knees, only to swear and struggle back upright, glowering at Seth through the mass of tangled hair that was falling over her face. She tripped over the threshold and half

ran into the cottage, which was basically a space with four stone walls and no roof. It was wet, cold and smelled really bad.

But Seth was not here. She looked around but there was only one room, quite long, which was not apparent from the road, as it went back quite far and seemed dug into the hill. She called his name and his head immediately appeared from what seemed to be straight through back wall. She was astonished!

The back of the cottage was dug into the hill, so it was actually underground, and the far wall was staggered: it was not a straight wall, but two overlapping walls that hid a very small space between that a human could just about squeeze through. With wonderment, she examined the space, which was not only hidden by the illusion of the back wall, but also because there was no light at the back of the cottage. Even with the roof off, it was dark and shadowy. "Very clever," she mumbled under her breath.

Seth had put on a small hat torch on elastic around his head and told her to stay close. He struggled with the bags and the stone as the passageway, which looked natural rather than manmade, was very narrow. Lumis stayed very close, as the light did not cast more than a few inches from Seth's body and she was essentially walking in total darkness.

After what seemed an age, Seth told her to stand still and not move. He walked away from her, vanishing into the darkness and she was left able to see nothing at all, not even a hand before her face. She began to sing to herself to settle her fear and Seth smiled to himself as 'ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall' drifted around the cave. He fumbled for a short while and then found the oil lamp. It was full and with matches beside it. "Thank god for the guardians," he said out loud. Ted, like others on the island, kept certain secret and sacred areas maintained to ensure the success of the work of The Order.

Light flooded one area of the cavern and soon four strong oil lamps lit the space and Lumis looked around in wonder. It was

a fairly large cavern space probably twenty feet by thirty feet with a reasonably high roof and a level dirt floor. It was obvious from looking at it that some work had been done over the years to even things out and make the space more workable.

It was furnished simply with wooden and metal shelving, four wooden armchairs with cushions, some sleeping palettes, a gas stove, a solid-looking old oak table and five large metal cupboards. Being a practical kind of girl, she looked around for a toilet and was dismayed to not see much that resembled anything to do with hygiene. Seth saw her look and whistled to her. He gave her a head lamp from the first cupboard, which seemed to be filled with lamps, batteries, first aid, tools and tarps. He pointed to a crack at the back of the cave which opened out into a tunnel.

Approximately a hundred feet away, there was the sound of running water. The tunnel ended in a small round space with a waterfall descending into a small pool that then seemed to vanish down another crack into the darkness.

“This is the bathroom and drinking water. You take drinking water from the fall, wash in the pool, and pour your toilet waste down the crack. Look, there is a bucket, you half-fill with water, do what you need to do and then pour it away. It goes from here straight into the sea so you are not contaminating anyone’s drinking water.”

Lumis looked around. It was primitive but workable. And she needed him to leave her alone for a moment so that she could pee. Seth wandered off to make food as Lumis attended to her ‘just about to burst’ bladder. Upon emptying her bucket, she was about go back in the main cave when a shadow moved by the waterfall. The hair on the back of her neck stood firmly to attention as she peered into the darkness. A face peered back; the face of the old man who had called her the Last Scabbard. This time she did not scream, and this time his face was full of concern, not anger.

“What must I do?”

Lumis whispered to the ghost of the last guardian, her

breathless voice betraying her terror at speaking to a ghost. The old man was about to speak but then he vanished as quickly as he appeared, and Lumis, scared witless, scrambled back to Seth, panting and wheezing from fear.

He looked at her with concern and held a hand out to her.

“What is it?”

Lumis slowed her breathing down and recounted the visit from the last guardian. He frowned which made Lumis even more unsettled.

“He is obviously trying to tell you something, but cannot bridge his spirit to you strongly enough to be able to speak. Look, you need to de-stress. You will not be able to be strong and deal with these thugs if you are exhausted. You need to eat, then you need to sleep, ok?”

Lumis nodded. Not only was she starving, she was also feeling very drawn and tired from all the drama.

Seth cooked up something unnameable but it tasted like the most wonderful food that she had ever eaten. After they had cleared away, Lumis went to the stone and slowly unwrapped it. She did the same with the sword and laid them side by side. She stood and stared at them, trying to figure out if the story could possibly be true. The markings were remarkably similar in places but the stone was most obviously far older than the sword. She picked up the sword and turned it this way and that, trying to look closely in the dim light.

“Hmm, definitely 18th- or 19th-century North Africa,” she mumbled to herself.

Absentmindedly, she ran her fingers very carefully over the carved inscriptions that marked the stone. Something flashed past her, something so vague that she did not know if she saw it with her eyes or in her mind. There it was again! She closed her eyes and once more ran her fingers over the stone, turning her head to one side as if listening to a far-off song.

Seth came to her side and asked her what the matter was. She told him what was happening and he stared at her with a frown.

“Place your hands upon the stone and close you eyes. Now, what do you see?”

She closed her eyes and saw nothing—well, she saw the usual light show she always saw when she closed her eyes.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Be still, quiet, and wait,” he said.

She did. Seth took a small badge from his lapel, opened the pin and jabbed it hard into her thumb.

“Oww, what the hell ..?”

Ignoring her, Seth grabbed her thumb and squeezed, allowing small drops of blood to fall upon the stone and the sword. Lumis was about to release a torrent of abuse at Seth when she heard something. It was subtle at first, barely a whisper, a shadow. Then it grew stronger.

An eye emerged out of the darkness and looked at her, unblinking and threatening. It roared a loud lion roar and Lumis stepped back with a frightened cry. Seth put his hand to her back and pushed her forward again.

“Don’t be afraid, you will not be harmed. Look again.”

She did. It took a minute or two, but slowly the mists began to part and she saw a large temple, so large she could not see the roof. At the end was a huge statue of what looked like a strange form of Sekhmet; a lion-headed goddess, all black and with fierce eyes of red. Lumis could feel a terrible power which caused her to break out in a sweat. Then the statue moved, which really terrified Lumis. It was not a statue—whatever it was, it was alive.

She wanted to take a step back but Seth was behind her, his hands upon her shoulders.

“Keep your eyes shut,” he hissed at her.

Lumis did as she was told and she looked up in fear at the lioness.

Do not be afraid my daughter, you hold my heart within your hands. You are my last scabbard, she who will return the stone and sword to its true home and unleash my power back into the world. You are the lightning and he, my guardian, is the sun. Together you

will create a storm that will carry my tears as rain, which will fall upon the barren hearts of men. Those who drink of my tears shall live and flourish. Those who avoid my blessing will be destroyed by my roar. Hold fast, child, the time is at hand.

“Lumis!”

Lumis opened her eyes to find Seth shaking her.

“What, what is the matter, why are you shaking me. Oh god I feel like shit.”

She passed out and Seth was just in time to catch her. He laid her out on one of the sleeping palettes he had prepared for the night and covered her with a thick blanket: she was frozen to the bone.

She came around within a minute or two and Seth lay down beside her, gazing deeply into her eyes in concern.

“Are you ok?” he whispered to her.

She nodded. “What happened? I seemed to have some sort of dream and then you were shouting at me”

“You stood for nearly an hour just holding the stone, as if in a trance. What was your dream?”

Seth was looking worried and he put a protective arm around her, drawing her to her and wrapping her with his arms and the blanket. She snuggled into his arms, finally relaxing. Since last night he had not touched her nor shown any sort of affection toward her. But then, she thought, it *has* all been rather busy.

“I saw a really big lioness human type statue that was alive. She told me that the stone was her heart and that I was to return it somewhere. Then she said something about a storm. What is she and what does she want?”

Seth propped himself up on his elbow and brushed the hair from her face. She glowed. The stone had awoken her and her soul shone like the sun. She could feel his need for her. The experience had somehow heightened her senses and she could

feel what he felt. He wanted to kiss her face, her body; he wanted to make love to her more than anything else.

“She is the Great and Most Ancient Goddess of this land and most other lands in the northern Hemisphere. She is far older than we understand, and her power is about ready to re-emerge. She is the goddess of moisture; a form of Tefnut who reaches well beyond Egypt.”

“She is the Goddess of the stone, which is her heart. The Stone needs to be with the Sword, its guardian, and in its true resting place, which is in Yorkshire. Our legends tell us of a valley with seven hills in Yorkshire that is guarded by dragons, and the valley holds a very sacred spring. The spring was said to be guarded by an ancient sect of warrior smithies who made the weapons of the Goddess, and they made the sword.”

Lumis looked blank at him.

“Yorkshire? You are shitting me. Of all the down-at-heel places? But there is no valley with seven hills that I know of. Wait, ah shit, Bradford. It has seven hills, and that is where I picked the sword up from. Here.”

She scrambled off the makeshift bed and got the sword, placing it carefully in his hands. They both looked at the old rusty sword, with sigils marked down the blade, the same sigils that were on the stone. Seth touched it reverently: The Magical Sword of Britain, here in front of him. At last, it was all coming together, in his lifetime.

“In the chaos, I had forgotten about the sword and its possible importance. Our myths tell us that the last scabbard is the bridge between the two. Let us see what happens. Put the stone of the floor, and the sword on the table. Good, now, place your foot on the stone and pick up the sword, and then tell me if anything happens.”

Lumis did as she was told and carefully placed the stone on the floor. She gently rested one foot upon the stone and picked up the sword with both hands, the blade pointing upwards. She closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. Nothing happened. She waited, trying hard to be still and silent. Nothing.

Something, some very faint thought or voice had her turn the sword so the blade was pointing downwards to the stone.

She was about to open her eyes when suddenly she was swept up in a vortex that seemed to spin her around and pull her down. The spinning became so violent she thought she was going to vomit. She could not let go of the sword and she could not move her foot from the stone no matter how much she struggled. She wanted to scream but the vortex had caught her throat and was squeezing the life breath out of her.

Sounds and voices rushed past her, the smell of lions was all around her and out of the vortex emerged a large pair of eyes, the lioness eyes that bored right into her and broke her to pieces. She was trapped, and felt like she was being destroyed. Something, some power moved through her and worked her mind and body without her consent or intent.

An anger burned in her, a righteous long-festering anger. It should have a cross hilt, she mouthed, it is the wrong shape, how dare they! Her hand squeezed the blade until it began to cut into her hands. She had an overwhelming desire to plunge the blade into herself. The desire gripped her like a venomous lover, licking her mind and drawing her ever nearer to death. She felt blood begin to run down her hands but she gripped harder still. The blade needed to be within her, it needed to penetrate her, deep and sensuous, thrusting its power into her.

A tiny voice whispered in her mind—*hold fast my sister, your spirit must hold the blade, not your flesh. You are the last scabbard, behold the power of the mystery, drink the power of the mystery and then choose wisely. You are our last hope.*

The voice reached Lumis deep in the vortex of power. Her hand relaxed its grip slightly on the blade and she tried with all her strength to resist the urge to take the blade into herself. Just when she thought she could resist no more, something snapped, like a fine thread of silk that held the weight of the world. The vortex stopped, the urges stopped and a high pitched whine replaced the silence.

Open you eyes and survey your power, said the voice.

Lumis opened her eyes, her mind vibrating at the frequency of the sound that filled her head. She saw the rock of the cave, but she also saw its life power. She saw through the rock to the land beyond. She saw the powers of the land disintegrate around the town. She saw people, their life force and their balances and imbalances. She turned and looked at Seth and saw his life force bright and beautiful. She saw the power of the wind all around him, she saw his life blood flowing through his body and she saw his virility as a fire that burned steady with the life of generations.

She saw his weaknesses, his vulnerabilities and she saw how to kill him. Her mind felt into his mind and she knew she could control his thoughts, his actions and his emotions. She had total power over everything and everyone. She was all powerful, she was the Goddess. The flow of power nearly caught her in its fast-flowing river but somewhere, deep in the ancestors of her blood, a voice cried out of caution.

You are not the Goddess, our daughter, you are only her vessel. Do not shame us, but serve us.

Desperate voices of her ancestors, those who were of her blood and body, reached into her power-drunken mind and pulled her back from the abyss. With one strong and determined movement, she pulled her foot off the stone and dropped the sword.

She fell backwards, reeling from the sudden release of power and lay panting on the floor. Seth was stood over her, his eyes full of sheer terror. She lay for a moment, allowing her senses to return before offering him her hand for assistance. He pulled her up off the floor and she instantly pressed herself against him in a fear-fuelled hug. They stood, joined together in fear and confusion.

He looked down at her, his hands framing her face in concern.

“What happened, are you ok, are you back?”

She looked into his eyes. He was afraid of her!

“Why are you so scared, what did I do? I had the weirdest

experience and I think I now know why the British Lodge are after this stone. This is way too powerful for them to get their hands on; they could destroy everyone and everything with this. Its awful.”

Seth steered her to the bed and sat her down, his hands stroking her, trying to calm her and calm himself. She recounted to him what had happened and described the awesome power that had run through her and given her ultimate power over everything around her. She told him about the rush of power madness that had nearly consumed her and how she now knew how to kill him.

The fear that was in his eyes as she spoke tore at her heart and she held on to him, sobbing

“I don’t want to hurt you; I don’t want to hurt anybody. I don’t ever want to touch those two things again, please don’t make me ever do that again,” she sobbed and clung to him.

He wrapped his arms around her and felt her hair trickling like water through his fingers. He wound the hair around his hand and gripped her to him.

“I will protect you, always. I will never let anything happen to you. But you will have to learn how to handle and work with the sword and the stone. It is what you were born for. Only you can do this. I will help you and support you but you have to step back into this and work with the power, you are the last scabbard and you have to wield this power for the land. Don’t be afraid of it, conquer it and be strong. You can do it, you know you can. You survived the first bridging of the power; it will get easier from now on.”

She was not convinced by what he said, but she was relieved to see the fear begin to fade from his eyes. She brushed the hair from his face and kissed him lightly on the lips. The power that had burned through her left a residue that was now transforming into a deep undercurrent of sexual awakening. Her pupils grew and her face flushed. She wanted him. She wanted him within her and all around her. His scent wove its way to her

senses and she groaned as she buried her face in his hair.

He wrapped his arms around Lumis and hugged her, spreading kisses all over her face.

“We will do this together. You realise we are living the prophecy? We will take the stone and sword back to where it belongs and guard it or do whatever it is we are supposed to do with it .”

Lumis wrinkled her nose at him.

“Live in Bradford? You have got to be joking! No way! It’s the pits... no, worse than the pits... it’s a hellhole.”

Seth laughed and hugged her tightly.

“We could live on the moors, on the outskirts and still do our job.”

He looked at her, seriousness in his eyes. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her forehead.

“Would you live with me? Would you be a guardian with me?”

Lumis looked at him, the enormity of what he was asking her was just sinking in. She would leave her job, vanish and live in the wilds of the Yorkshire moors with a man she had known for less than a week and guard a lump of rock and a rusty sword.

“Sure,” was all she said.

Seth looked at her for a moment, and then nearly crushed her as he hugged her. He picked her up and laid her down on the bed, pausing to kiss her throat and nibble her ear. He climbed on top of her and held himself over her with his arms locked on the bed. She smiled as he pretended to dive for her, biting her neck and covering her face in kisses. They rolled like puppies, releasing the tension from the day until suddenly it turned urgent. He stopped and looked at her, then slowly, deliberately, undressed her and himself. As they made love, the power of the Stone flowed through them, melding them into one being. Later, they fell asleep, his fingers entwined in her hair, her hands holding onto his arm.

CHAPTER NINE

The noise of Ted crashing into the cave woke Seth instantly, while Lumis lay sprawled across the bed, the covers wrapped around her middle with her legs and wild hair exposed. She was still deeply asleep and did not stir when Ted came into the cave. He looked at Seth with raised eyebrows and in different circumstances would have cracked a rude Scots joke, but today his face was haggard and fearful.

Seth shook Lumis and whispered in her ear that Ted was here. Seth took Ted back out into the passageway to the cottage so that Lumis could get dressed and Ted could tell him what the matter was.

Lumis was disorientated: she had woken far too fast and had no clue as to where she was or what was happening. The events of the day before had shaken her deeply, and although their lovemaking had settled her heart, a deep uneasiness had settled over her and refused to budge. She pulled her clothes on too fast and got stuck in her sweater. Swearing to herself about her moronic life skills, she untangled herself and called to the guys that they could come in.

Seth came in and grabbed his backpack and told her they had to leave quickly: the Saviours had gotten Tam into the back room of the hotel and beaten him half to death in return for information as to where Lumis was. They had then gone to Ted's house and turned it over before taking off to god knows where. Seth placed the stone, wrapped in its blanket and covered with a bin liner, in a large crack in the wall of the shower cave. He pushed the sword in alongside the stone and they instantly vanished from plain sight, which was enough for Lumis to let it go and think about getting to Tam.

Neither of them spoke as they were jolted around in the truck, their grim faces betraying their fears for the old man, for the stone and for their own lives. Seth had voiced the concern

that the Saviours would stop at literally nothing to get what they wanted, and they wanted the Stone.

Lumis, Ted and Seth were in the way and were easily dispensable. The true level of danger that they were in was slowly dawning on them both. For Lumis, it had gone from being a bit of an odd adventure to a harsh reality: she was scared and somewhere, deep inside her, she knew that a major junction in her fate was coming. The residue of power left in her from the stone and the sword had heightened her instincts and hunches, which were pretty good to start with. She knew something was about to happen, something that could potentially destroy her, she just did not know what it actually was. The feeling of unease ate away at her as they sped down the road towards Broadford and the hotel.

Seth pulled the truck up at the back of the hotel, after having crept it as quietly as he could over the back farm track to avoid being seen from the road. An ambulance was stood out the front of the hotel with its lights flashing, and a small crowd of Broadford folk had turned out for the most exciting thing that had happened in years.

Seth had told Lumis to stay in the truck as he and Ted went to find out what was going to happen to Tam, and to secure the hotel for him. Lumis closed her eyes and laid her head back on the head rest as she waited. She needed calm, she needed to think carefully about what she had become tangled up in and she needed to be aware that she was jumping headlong into a relationship and life situation that seemed unreal and overly dramatic.

A loud crack and a bright flash cut short the dreamy memory and Lumis was cast into darkness. She never saw it coming, she didn't hear a thing. She was in nothing and was nowhere. The spirit of the last guardian, his face distraught, stood by the truck looking at Lumis, her body collapsed over the dashboard, blood streaming from a large wound in her head.

A shadowy figure vanished around the back of the truck

where he quickly rummaged through the bed of the truck, looking for something. His hand tossed to one side the short iron bar that he used to crack open her skull before he cleverly vanished into the growing crowd of people that were thronging around the hotel car park.

Lumis did not hear Seth screaming frantically, nor feel her body being tugged out of the truck and onto the ground. She did not see the ambulance men dragged around the corner by Ted in an attempt to save her. She did not feel the tears hitting her face and body as Seth wept, while the ambulance crew tried to bring her back.

Seth briefly looked up, his eyes wildly casting around to see where the attacker had come from. All he saw was the spirit of the last Guardian of the stone stood looking at Seth with compassion in his eyes.

THE BOOK OF JUDGEMENT

CHAPTER ONE

Aaron awoke panting, waving his arms around and muttering at spirits, cursing their intrusion into his dreams. He quickly fell back asleep only to be woken again, more aggressively this time. Some warning bell sounded deep in the recess of his mind, telling him this was no ordinary taunting by a land spirit or ghost.

He was fully awake and sitting up. The room was silent. He muttered a short prayer, lit a candle, and lay back down, curious. The warm embrace of sleep beckoned him and he fell gratefully once more into the arms of a deep dream. He was walking, and yet still. There was mist, but he could see his room. It formed before and above him, a dark, morphing featureless shape with a head, arms and legs. It was as if a human had broken through the fabric of existence and left a hole in the universe where their body had passed. It was the darkness of nothing. Its power was terrifying.

He tried to wake himself but he was trapped, held by the throat as the demonic power stood and observed him. His lips formed the words 'Elohim Gibor', and the demon moved back a little. Aaron was frozen in his dream, unable to move, his nose smelling the strange scent of death. His deeper training kicked in and he stretched himself forward to reach out of the dream. The demon smiled. It was then that Aaron noticed a pair of human eyes looking out of the demon's eyes, watching with amused curiosity as Aaron squirmed against the demon's grip on his life force.

The shock of the eyes registered somewhere in his conscious brain and kicked in his ancient training. Aaron scattered. His spirit moved at high speed, shooting out in all directions at once, becoming one with the buildings, the trees, the birds, everything that was around him. He was in void and yet in all substance: he was all beings. The demon looked shocked for a second and then vanished.

It took a while for Aaron to fully awaken, forcing his mind to come back from the cave it had retreated into. When he finally opened his eyes, his hand reached to the cluttered bedside table, sweeping away an overflowing ashtray, papers, tobacco and a pile of receipts. His hand found the pen and notebook that lay on top of the chaos, and he quickly scribbled down what had just happened. Then he reached for the phone. He counted his breaths as he waited for an answer. A click was followed by a very disorientated voice still heavy with sleep.

“Stefan, get here, I need you early.”

Aaron didn't wait for his apprentice to protest; he just replaced the receiver and hauled his tired body into the shower. The hot water crashed at high pressure onto the top of his head, drumming sense and stillness into a man who had thought his term of 'hard labor' had finished many years ago. He muttered his prayers as the water steamed and danced around him, dripping off the edge of his beard, his head and upper body rocking slightly in a recitation beat that had stayed with him since he was a small child.

The front door clicked quietly as a very tired and crumpled Stefan let himself into the building and dropped the post on to the heavy ornate Jacobean monstrosity that took up half of the hallway. The smell of frankincense wafted towards Stefan and he frowned. He was supposed to be dealing with today's guest, so the preparations and cleansing was his responsibility.

Then he smelled another resin, riding subtly below the frankincense, a smell he had not smelled for twenty years, when he first started to train under Aaron. The hairs on the back of his neck stood firmly to attention in response to that smell. It was the resin that prepared for the confrontation with powers of the highest order. His stomach flipped his eggs and toast around, and Stefan instinctively put a protective hand to his stomach. He walked around the corridor, through the dining kitchen and into the library.

Aaron lived in a disused church that was built in a most unusual manner and probably of consequence of that, was dis-

carded with the rise of Protestantism. The building was structured around a pattern of mystical measures that placed the main church as an octagonal sanctuary buried in the centre of the building. Beyond the octagonal sanctuary was a layer of rooms that consisted of the living quarters and the library, the combination of which turned the octagonal shape into a large circle. The circular pattern of rooms was in turn surrounded on all sides by a corridor that turned the outer walls of the building into a square. The corridors were full of cupboards, closets and large stained glass windows that reflected myriads of light onto the stone flagged floors.

The end part of the outer corridor was blocked by a thick wall that hid a room accessed through a concealed door in the library, and was nicknamed the prison by Stefan. This room held secure objects of power that had no business in the human world and Stefan was very rarely allowed access to this holding pen. The last time he had sneaked in without permission, many years ago, he had wreaked havoc by innocently opening a large ornate pot covered in magical sigils, and peering into it. The power released from the pot flowed willingly into Stefan and almost destroyed him. Since that day the room stayed under lock and key, with the key securely wrapped on a knotted string and hung around Aaron's neck.

There was only one entrance to the sanctuary, which was accessed by walking through the living quarters into the library and then through what appeared to be a wood panelled wall that held a cleverly hidden door. The wood panels of the door were removable and behind the wood panels hid a heavy oak door covered in magical sigils. It was here where Aaron was working. The door was open and volumes of bitter smoke drifted into the library, creeping around the wood floor before wrapping itself like a sea tide against the first shelves of the floor to balcony bookshelves.

Stefan peered through the door and saw Aaron stood in the centre of the sanctuary, his hair washed and pulled back into a tight braid, his beard bound and his body wrapped in a thobe.

His eyes were open but unseeing, staring out through the library door, past Stefan and out into the world. The apprentice suddenly became very afraid. The old man was wrapping wave upon wave of power around him and his usually crazy hair, matted beard and tired face were now clean, bright, groomed and full of power. Stefan felt the glow of admiration for this old man rise in his throat: he never failed to surprise. He quietly backed out of the library and padded into the kitchen to put the coffee on.

The clunk of the heavy sanctuary door told Stefan that Aaron was now back in the library and would probably want gallons of coffee. He took in a tray of coffee, three cups for Aaron, one for himself, a couple of bagels and a small cup of honey.

“Eat” Stefan gestured with his hands to Aaron.

“You get more like my mother every day.”

Aaron smiled as he reached for a bagel and smeared it with the rich honey that came from sacred bees. Stefan sat quietly and waited for an explanation. The suspense was killing him. He was fearful, excited and a little confused. The woman that Aaron had agreed to see and hand over to Stefan did not seem like a major job. In fact, Aaron had more or less been retired as an exorcist for quite a while and spent most of his time guiding Stefan through his long training. They had taken on jobs here and there, with Stefan taking on the practicalities of the job and Aaron guiding him, and sometimes mopping up the mess afterwards.

After an agonizing wait while Aaron ate, drank cup after cup of coffee and smoked far too many cigarettes in too short a time, Stefan finally sat back.

“Well?”

The conversations between Aaron and Stefan were often short bursts of words, and sometimes a single word. Their conversations, unless Aaron was teaching Stefan something, or Stefan was recounting his latest disaster, tended to consist of single words, grunts and nods. The full conversation often

went unsaid, communing in thoughts that they both picked up and understood.

Stefan listened enthralled as Aaron recounted the previous night's visitation and was dismayed to see the fear in the old man's eyes. Aaron had never shown fear in the face of any being that Stefan could recall and to see fear in Aaron was akin to a child discovering fear in a parent for the first time. His world suddenly felt insecure and threatened. Aaron saw the fear in Stefan.

"It is good to be afraid, brother, very good. It will keep you alive. What is coming is a job that is of a size I never thought I would witness in this life, and something of a power that I had hoped you would never encounter. We must tread methodically and Stefan, do not act on any impulse, not any at all, no matter what. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

Aaron's gravity underlined the seriousness in a way that Stefan had never seen Aaron express before. Stefan nodded, and sat in silence.

"We could pass this over, you know."

The statement from Aaron was important: it had to be voiced. Stefan had to agree from his own free will to take up this service and all that it may possibly entail.

"I know," said Stefan, "but I also know, somewhere inside me that this is a major test, a threshold for me, whatever it is."

The words came out without thought, travelling from a deep place and voicing a commitment to confront something, to resolve something he had agreed to before he came into life. Aaron nodded and smiled.

"It lightens my heart brother, to hear you speak those words. You understand I had to voice that option, don't you?" Stefan nodded without speaking.

Stefan was highly psychic and yet suffered terribly from the sensitivity that went with such sight. His mind scattered like naughty children at the slightest breeze, and yet his sight could pierce any darkness. Aaron had taken him under his wing,

knowing that Stefan needed serious guidance. They both knew that Stefan had 'Reason', a fate that could not be denied, but neither of them was quite sure what that fate was. Now Stefan knew. Before the woman came to the door, before Aaron devoured the honeyed bagels, before he saw the power of G-D in Aaron's face as he stood in the sanctuary, he knew. He knew the minute the acrid resin smoke eased its way around the frankincense and beckoned him to service, he knew. He just didn't know how or why.

The heavy bell that hung by the outside entrance to the building clanged loudly. Aaron nodded for Stefan to go and answer. Aaron whispered quietly under his breath, the recitation of Divine Being and closed his eyes briefly to prepare his inner sight. The library fell silent from its usual magical chatter as if all the books waited with bated breath to see who was about to enter.

The heavy sanctuary door had been closed, its presence vanishing into the wood panels that punctuated the many bookcases that lined the room. A candle was lit, the cd player clicked into action as Aaron put on some very quiet Syriac Liturgy that would whisper away in the background, ensuring that conversations would not be accessed by inner ears pressed against the world of the living. The library, snuggled within the confines of the cubic building, drifted unseen by the inner worlds, becoming a place of knowledge, refuge and wisdom.

'We are ready,' thought Aaron to himself and the room.

Stefan opened the door and was instantly knocked off guard. He had prepared himself for god knows what, for demons, wafts of evil, his overactive imagination grinding into overdrive as it often did under pressure. But as he opened the door his mind immediately went into focussed work mode unbidden; it was as if his spirit knew even if his mind didn't.

He knew her. He had never met her, but he knew her. Some deep dark place hidden away in the recesses of his spirit jumped to life at the sight of her face and he wanted to cry. The woman looked back at him, her face instantly becoming

uncomfortable from the burning stare of Stefan's eyes. He continued to stare and the woman blushed deeply with embarrassment. Something in his head poked him back to consciousness and he blinked rapidly, apologizing for being rude and welcomed her into the house. He led her around the strange corridor and through the jumble of rooms to the library.

Aaron rose from his deep armchair to greet her and put out his hand. The minute he took her hand into his, some of the immensity of her problem became apparent. She was surrounded by whirlwinds of power: an ancient power that was driving her, protecting her, and an ancient power that was trying to destroy her.

The room kept them in some form of check, but even the powers of the threshold guardians at the door, the keepers of the sanctuary and ancient talismans around the directions could not fully block the powers that trailed this poor woman. 'Grimwald the fire eater', a demonic spirit housed in a large granite Griffin that sat near the sanctuary door began to growl quietly. Stefan heard the inner voice and looked to Aaron alarmed. Aaron shot a glance at Stefan to be steady, to hold fast.

The woman was slight, around five feet tall with long red hair and high boned features that were accentuated by her frailness. She was too thin, both physically and spiritually. Stefan went towards the kitchen to get coffee and quickly looked back at her through narrowed eyes, using his inner sight to look at her. Her spirit was frail, grey and dying. And yet something within him told him that was not true.

Aaron was talking in low tones to the woman, sitting on the edge of his chair and leaning into the chair that was closely set next to his. He took her hand again and the minute Aaron's spirit touched hers, a bright light shone out of the woman, a flash of brilliance the like of which he had never seen in a human before. It vanished the minute it appeared and Aaron looked at Stefan briefly as if to say, 'see, do not always trust your first sight'. Aaron had reached into the woman's spirit

through his touch and given her enough strength in a brief moment for her true self to be known.

When Stefan finally returned from the kitchen, Aaron's face was grave and he was slowly pulling on his beard in deep thought. The woman was weeping quietly and turned her face away from Stefan in embarrassment. She shook out a cream woollen shawl she had been carrying and wrapped it tightly around herself, its lightness contrasting to the dark blue skirts and sweaters she was wearing. The shawl seemed luminous; surrounding her in peace as she struggled to contain whatever it was that had triggered her sadness.

After handing out coffee, Stefan waited for Aaron to roll himself a cigarette and take a long deep inhalation of the plant leaves that created a space for truthful talking. The woman stared into her coffee while Aaron thought hard and deep. After a moment's thought, he looked at the woman and spoke very carefully.

"The problem you are describing is much more than it appears, do you understand that?" The woman nodded. She was obviously drained and it was also becoming quickly apparent that she was heavily steeped in magic. Not as a dabbler, rather her inner spirit glowed with patterns of magical complexity that had taken Aaron aback, causing him to rethink what could possibly be going on in her life.

She had come to him because she felt she was in mortal danger. After last night's visitation, he knew it was far more than a usual magical problem, and after spending a few minutes with her, he began to realize that she was at the centre of something very powerful, very old and very dangerous. He needed to tread carefully, to assume nothing, and to win her trust. She was playing her cards very close to her chest and obviously trusted no one. She had found her way to Aaron through a very unusual route, which should have alerted him had he not been too wrapped up in the joys of translating some ancient texts that had come his way.

Grimwald began to growl a little louder in the corner and the woman sat up, alert, looking around for the source of the noise. Stefan flashed a look at Aaron: she had the inner sight too. She had not told either of them her name and Aaron didn't push: he knew the importance of names, particularly in times of danger. Her eyes, of the deepest clearest blue he had ever seen, reflected a clear spirit in its depths, so that was enough for him. Names would come later. For now, in his head, he called her bluebell. Grimwald began straining against his inner leash, desperate to get at some of the beings who were tied to the unfortunate woman and Aaron knew he would break free at any point soon and create havoc.

"Listen my dear, this is obviously very hard for you, particularly with a strange old engine like me."

He smiled wonderfully, his face collapsing into a frenzy of laughter lines and the creases of wisdom in old age.

"What I want to do is have you come back tomorrow, and if you will agree, let me hypnotise you so that I can talk to the deeper part of you. I understand your fears, but I also know you can see into me and see that I am here only to protect and help you."

Aaron had dropped his guard so that she could see into him once he realized she was sighted, and she had immediately seen him as the eternal priest that he truly was. She nodded with relief and began to cry again.

"I had better go before your dog eats me," she said with a weak smile.

Aaron's eyebrows raised with a smile. Knowing she had that level of sight ability, while under such a magical burden was going to be of great help. His curiosity was also overwhelmed now and he fought hard to stop himself asking her a mountain of questions.

Instead, he got up slowly, his hip clicking like an old gate as he stood before her and reached into his pocket.

"If I may," he said politely, "I would like you to wear this tonight, it will protect you."

He pulled out something wrapped in blue silk and tied with a red ribbon. Opening it up he pulled out an old silver chain that held a tiny silver sword that had miniscule writing on it: a line of Hebrew so small it would take a magnifying glass to read it. It was old, beautiful and very powerful. She touched it reverently, feeling its power flow into her. Her eyes looked up at Aaron in gratitude, as if she had finally realized that she was in the presence of someone who was going to be able to help her.

She was not alone. And she would endure. As the old man slipped the sword around her neck, a mantle of peace descended upon her and the constant chattering that had followed her around for so long suddenly went quiet and then stopped. The intake of relieved breath she took was audible around the room.

“It will not work for too long, just enough to get you back here tomorrow and then we will recharge it a little. It is only used for extreme circumstances, and you my dear, are in an extreme circumstance. And this is very valuable, so you will have to come back” Aaron declared in triumph with a big smile.

His eyes looked upon her as a father would look upon a beloved child as he rested his hand upon her shoulder.

“Walk in safe peace, with stillness within you and all around you. May blessings descend upon you, strength rise to greet you, wisdom to your left, compassion to your right, may the most powerful and greatest of all greatness, Elohim Gibor, warrior of all angels and men, walk aside you as you are surely blessed upon this earth, Amen Amen Selah.”

The world around the three of them went still, Grimwald fell silent and the Sanctuary, hidden deep within the building vibrated like an ancient bell that sounded throughout the worlds. It was at that point, as Stefan stood behind the woman and watched Aaron give his blessing that he realized for some unexplainable reason that he was in love with her. He didn't know who she was, what her name was, how old she was,

other than she was older than him. He didn't know if she was married, though he had not seen a ring, at which he had heaved a sigh of relief. All he knew was that he knew her, and he loved her.

The following morning, Stefan opened the door to the woman who stood waiting in the entrance. The difference in her demeanour and appearance shocked him. She had colour in her cheeks, her eyes shone and her spirit radiated a little beyond her in a wonderful sparking explosion of brightness that was mirrored in her face. She saw his surprise and smiled.

"I had a normal night's sleep, the first time in a very long while. I feel like I have been reborn!"

Stefan frowned almost immediately, for he knew the effects of the sword would not last long. As though she read his mind, she patted his arm as she stepped into the hall. "I know... temporary reprieve and all that. But I am still grateful, even for this small window of life as it should be."

She stopped and turned to Stefan who was a few steps behind her as she walked towards the library.

"By the way, I'm Lumis."

She held out her hand for a formal handshake. Stefan looked confused for a moment as she glanced expectantly into his face.

"My name, its Lumis, and no it's nothing to do with light. I was named after the little village I was born in. Parents didn't have much imagination, obviously!"

She turned and looked at the strange corridor that formed the first layer of the building from the outside in. The building itself was a little like a geometry puzzle and it appealed to her sense of oddness. She hadn't noticed on her visit yesterday that the walls were beautifully painted with interlocking patterns that ran along the curved inner side of the corridor. The patterns wove complex figures that took on the appearance of Celtic-looking dragons, birds and people.

She had never seen anything quite so beautiful before. The vibrant reds, yellows and blues were lit by the large external

windows, which cast columns of light like spotlights upon the creatures. They came alive under the touch of the sun and Lumis was entranced.

“Why did I not see this yesterday? This is a work of art beyond anything I have seen in a museum or art gallery.”

She touched the wall reverently, feeling power in the patterns, a power which made her draw her hand back as if burned. She looked at Stefan with a raised eyebrow. Stefan said nothing, but held out a hand for her to continue walking. She studied him briefly, taking in his tall stature, proud fine-boned face and long thick hair, which fell across his shoulders in a dramatic cascade.

“I know you, you know,” she said enigmatically.

“Yes, I know,” said Stefan.

He didn’t know what else to say; he had gotten so used to single word conversations with Aaron, he had almost forgotten how to talk.

Lumis broke the spell and turned back to the library door.

“In here?” she said in a matter of fact tone.

“Umm, yes, sorry, how rude of me,” stammered Stefan.

He was trying very hard to shut his sight down a little, make small talk and see where he was going all at once. Never one for multitasking, he stepped forward and knocked over a small table with a candle stick that stood by the door of the library, which thankfully was not lit. Lumis pretended not to see and walked into the smoky, leathery, musty book-smelling room. She loved it.

Aaron too was shocked by the transformation.

“Well, if that’s what a nights sleep does for you, imagine what you would look and feel like if we get this nasty business untangled eh?”

She smiled and padded over the many threadbare Persian rugs that linked the stone-flagged floors.

“Good morning Mr Cohen, my name is Lumis, and I am so sorry I did not introduce myself properly yesterday. I wasn’t sure, you know.”

She looked slightly embarrassed, realizing what a mess she must have presented to them both yesterday.

“Ah Lumis, beautiful name. Please Lumis, call me Aaron.”

He gestured for her to sit on the comfortable worn leather couch that was covered in beautiful embroidered throws. She ran her hand over the embroidery, always touching and feeling; it was her way of seeing.

“Yes, mother made those, when she was a young girl living in Syria. I love having her around.”

The old man’s eyes misted ever so slightly, but not enough to cause concern. He loved his memories which he surrounded himself with. Stefan came in with the coffee and the three sat in silence, deep in their own thoughts while sipping coffee.

“So Lumis, I just need to ask you a few details, just background stuff, and then Stefan if you have any questions? I will explain what we are going to do and how it will affect you. By the way, I am a qualified doctor just in case you were worried that I didn’t know what I was doing!”

Aaron smiled and patted her hand as he spoke, using the contact to have a look around her spirit while she was talking, to see if anything else was listening. Grimwald had been given his orders and he sat, still as the stone he was, specifically looking out for fire magic, which was his specialty.

Lumis settled herself into the depths of the couch and one of the embroidered shawls slid off the back of the couch and on to her shoulders. Aaron smiled and nodded his head at the mother, whose shadow hovered around the back of the couch, watching her child with a pride that had almost burst her heart. She often visited her son when danger was around him. Lumis began to apologise for displacing the shawl and Aaron put his hand up for silence.

“Nothing happens from coincidence, not in this house. The shawl will be one more layer of protection for you, besides, it comes alive on a woman’s shoulders. So Lumis, let’s get to work. I need to know of any major serious illness up to ten years before you felt you were first attacked, and what year that

was. Then I need to know when you first became aware of being in danger. Then I need to know about any childhood serious illness, and finally about your birth.”

She put the fingertips of her right hand into her mouth and chewed on one of the nails while she thought. Her face frozen in concentration; she was not aware of the wind outside the building picking up, nor was she aware that Grimwald’s ears had pricked up as he listened to the room.

“Before all of this, I was never really ill much. I had scarlet fever five years before I began to have...”

Her voice trailed away as she fought to bring memories to the surface that refused to be unlocked.

“I was pretty ill then.”

Lumis frowned in deep thought as Aaron scribbled details down. He looked at his notes for a few seconds and then back at Lumis.

“So tell me, what were you doing immediately before you got the scarlet fever?”

She bit the bottom of her lip, deciding how much to reveal and how much not to. This had always been the struggle, how to keep silent and yet how to get help when truly needed. Her thoughts darted back and forth until she finally gave in and decided to just be as open as she could. She needed help, badly.

She pulled the shawl around her closer and hunched her knees up to her chin. Stefan leaned forward in his chair expectantly. She had almost forgotten about him as he had sat quietly, watching and listening. She shot him a quick smile and then looked back at her feet.

“It was a long time ago, and I was working on an archaeological dig in Kashmir. I got the scarlet fever about 2 days after I finished.”

Aaron didn’t comment but just scribbled away, and Stefan looked thoughtfully into the distance.

“I only really had one childhood illness, which was a bad bout of appendicitis when I was 11. My birth, well that’s a story

in itself. There was a terrible snowstorm when I was born, the winter of December 1962, lightning, high winds and deep snow. There was sickness in the maternity ward so my father bundled my mother and me up, and took us home.”

“The lightning blew out the electricity so there was no heating. The only fireplace that worked was in the attic so my father and brother took us both up there and my dad lit a fire. The fire fell out of the fireplace and set fire to the carpet and it spread quickly. My father grabbed me and took me out, but fell down the stairs with me in his arms. Then I was terribly sick with a fever and covered in a red rash...all within my first two weeks of life!”

Lumis twitched her nose in humour and reached for her coffee. She was amazed that she did not manage to knock it over. She then realised that she was not being her usual klutzy self: she was intrigued.

Aaron was deep in thought. The fragments of information were gathering pace but he needed the structure to hang it on. Something was the key to all of this and he was most certainly determined he was going to find out what it was. Her birth was one of fire and ice, a sure sign that she was a spirit with purpose: she was birthed among power and the power of weather may be a key, thought Aaron.

Stefan took Aaron’s silent cue and began preparing for the regression. Aaron studied the notes and Lumis sat quietly sipping her coffee, looking around the room for the first time at the row after row of bookshelves, stacked to the ceiling with books, papers, scrolls and icons. She found the presence of the icons a little strange, particularly as Aaron was Jewish. She was about to ask him why he had icons when he stood up abruptly and took the coffee cup from her hand.

“Its time to get to work,” said Aaron.

She still wasn’t quite used to Aaron’s abruptness, but his sense of purpose and action gave her a feeling of safety: someone was holding the reins. He told her to lie down on the couch, and then covered her in a blanket. Stefan sat at her feet

and Aaron pulled up a chair beside her. On the table near the couch sat a small tape recorder and a candle.

“So, I am going to gently take you back to these points in time to see what comes out. You will be relaxed and you will be fully aware at all times as to what is happening. You will not lose consciousness at any point. Stefan is going to hold your feet gently. He is a seer and will be able to look and see some of what you are seeing, if that is ok with you.”

Lumis nodded and Stefan smiled, his brown eyes lighting with power in preparation for work. The familiar feeling of him flooded her once more and she quickly looked away without trying to show she was embarrassed.

“Oh,” said Aaron, “I forgot to tell you, we will record all of this so that you have a copy. You can stop this at any time that you wish to; you will not be held under any hypnotic spell. If you wish to stop at any point, put your middle finger to your nose as a signal if your mind is too relaxed to speak. Now, are you ready?”

Aaron raised his eyebrows in question and hung onto his beard as he spoke to her. She looked at his hand on his beard and then shut her eyes, wriggling herself down into the sagging couch, getting comfortable.

Aaron spoke in a gentle rocking voice that slowly lowered in tone and depth. His words lulled Lumis, taking her to a very still place where her body was completely relaxed and her mind open. After a few minutes he asked her about her last birthday to begin slowly tracking back through her life. Lumis described various trivial events, smiling as she remembered happy times. He then took her to the time when she became ill with the scarlet fever.

“Tell me about how you feel,” said Aaron gently.

Lumis was silent for a moment, and then began to talk as if she had a very sore throat.

“It’s all red, all around me is red, it’s fire, it’s trying to burn me. The fire has eyes and it has seen me.”

Grimwald had begun to growl quietly in the background and Aaron put out a hand to signal silence to the being. Stefan breathed and tried to relax as he fought to see through the fog that was seemingly clouding his vision. Lumis began to look uncomfortable so Aaron pressed on, talking calmly in a deep resonant voice.

“Now go back a few days. You were working on a dig. Tell me about it.”

Her voice cleared and became more animated.

“I’m slowly uncovering a beautiful and very primal painting of Kali on the rock face of a cave.”

“Go on,” said Aaron.

“It’s very hard, something is happening to me as I rub. Her eyes are looking into mine. I know how to do it, how to drink Kali-Ma into myself; I just don’t know how, but I know. And she is flowing into of my hands from the picture, it is my service to bring her into the world, I don’t know why.”

Lumis was beginning to frown and at the same time, Stefan, his eyes shut in deep concentration, had begun to breathe quickly as if running. Aaron flicked a look at him and then back to Lumis. Something was happening and he wanted to know what.

“Go on, tell me what you see,” said Aaron.

Lumis frowned deeply.

“She is here, I can feel her all around me. I feel her clarity, her power to break away things that need breaking away. She cleans. But there is something else here, something I can’t see. But it has seen me, and it has been looking for me for a long time. Something I can feel...”

The shout that came from Stefan was totally unexpected and shocked both Lumis and Aaron out of the stillness. Lumis was disorientated and Aaron focused upon her to calm her as Stefan tried to contain himself.

He was hyperventilating and his eyes flew around the room searching in every corner for something. Grimwald was going insane, straining at his inner collar that had been put on him

to protect Lumis. Stefan slowly contained himself, breathing deeply and focusing on the inner stillness. He looked meaningfully at Aaron, trying to mentally tell him he wasn't sure if he should say what frightened him in front of Lumis. Aaron picked up the thought and nodded to himself. He sat in silence for a moment in contemplation and then turned to Lumis.

"How much of this do you want to know. Do you want to be fixed so that you can walk off into the sunshine, or do you want to know it all so that you can take an active part in your own path and learn to be of service?"

The question was focused and to the point. The time for dancing around was now over and choices were needed.

"I want to know all and be the clearer of my own path as much as I can. What is beyond me is what I ask for help with."

She was clear and very direct as she answered Aaron. All three of them were aware that she had just made an inner declaration to take responsibility for herself, and that would affect her path for many years to come, hopefully for the better.

Aaron looked at Stefan who was sat with his eyes closed. Sensing Aaron's eyes, he opened his and looked directly at Aaron.

"There was much fog around her, much distraction. I pushed and pushed. I then came face to face with something that was looking for her. It saw her as she connected with Kali. It went for her and then it saw me."

He paused, his eyes full of fear. Aaron frowned. Was this the same being that visited him two nights ago?

"Describe it to me," said Aaron.

"Red large eyes. Powerful eyes, with human eyes looking through them. It was searching and there were many, many powerful beings behind it, all searching."

He stopped speaking and stared into space.

"Stefan, focus. Was it formless or did it have any form?"

Aaron's voice was steady, trying to keep Stefan's inner sight and outer mind on the same tracks.

“Oh it had form all right. It was very formed. It was a demon of the highest order, bound in service and hunting for her spirit to try and stop her from doing something.”

Lumis drained of all colour while nodding her head. She knew in her bones, and had known for years, that she had been hunted.

“Time for a little break methinks, and you young lady, I think it might be a good idea if you move into the spare room for a few days. Going into the outside world at the moment while all this is opening up is just too dangerous. Would you agree to stay?”

Lumis nodded, opening her eyes but too shocked to speak. Aaron pattered off into the kitchen as if nothing had happened and Stefan stood in front of Lumis not quite sure what to do. His instinct was to pull her to him and enfold her in his arms protectively. He settled for offering to show her the spare room and she nodded, following silently.

CHAPTER TWO

Aaron is sitting hunched like a crab over his texts and Stefan has gone for the evening. I feel at a loss as to where to be and why I am here. The living quarters curl like an ancient sleeping cat inside a cube box and I am wandering from room to room looking, sniffing and listening.

Aaron seems content to let me wander, his keen eyes flickering away from his texts every time I enter the library. The internal wall of my bedroom vibrates at such a high frequency that I lay my forehead against the wall and breathe. Maybe that is what the men praying at the wailing wall are actually doing in Jerusalem, they are feeling the vibration reach into their brain like a rat's fingers searching for dinner.

I want to know what lies beyond that vibrating wall, but whenever I ask Aaron he just shrugs and smiles. I'm infuriated, I want to know; I feel I have the right to know, even though I do not. I refuse to listen to myself and continue to badger Aaron until he puts down his glasses and tells me that there are some things in other people's lives that are best left a mystery. I want to state that it is only a building, but somehow, deep inside me, I know that the building and Aaron are the same: they are a part of one another and to probe one, I end up probing the other. So I leave well enough alone with a mumbled apology and I walk back through the jumble of rooms to my bedroom. I put my forehead once more to the vibrating wall and breathe in.

Its peace fills me and spills from my body into the room. I have forgotten all that has gone before me and the rage that has burned inside me, a rage against injustice, hatred and hardship spills also from me; it is flowing onto the floor before vanishing into the Underworld below me. Letting go of the emotion lets go of myself and my whole world becomes a vibrating wall. I want to stay here forever in this embrace. But practicalities

soon intrude and my legs scream for mercy as the vision of the worlds within the walls vanishes.

That night, my dreams come thick and fast and I fight them with the intensity of a troubled teenager. Faces appear, accusing me and I brush them away. An early love, a scent of warmth, sleep and sensuality weaves its way around my slumber; my arms reaching out into darkness and meeting with a still nothing. I lay entangled in stained sheets that are full of regret, staring at the unlit lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. My heart is bursting from torn love and abandonment but I have no idea who I was torn from and who abandoned me.

There are no windows in this tomb room and only the clock tells me if it is day or night. Its ticking sticks pins into my brain, giving my thoughts metronomic order as they line up one by one to torture me. I am lost. Maybe tomorrow Aaron will find me and I will know why I am, and I can go back to feeling like I belong in the world. Maybe Stefan will call my name and remind me that I am whole. Maybe he will engulf me in his arms and make love to me. Maybe.

“So young lady, how are we this morning?”

Aaron’s voice was jovial and full of coffee.

Lumis reminded him in a curt answer that she is past 40 and has had no coffee. Stefan immediately appeared with a strong hot coffee in his hand and Lumis thanked him by drinking the whole thing in one go as Aaron grinned at the younger man.

“Even Lilith must have her fix before tearing into world,” he said with his eyebrows reaching desperately for his hairline, which was pretty well receded.

When all three hapless companions were fully caffeinated and ready for work, Lumis lay once more on the sagging couch with Stefan at her feet and Aaron sat hovering at her side.

“So Lumis, I am going to take you back beyond this life, using an inner beacon, to find out what is the larger pattern

behind all of this. The being that Stefan and I have seen is not something attached simply to a curse, it has been following you through life and we need to know why. Are you ready?"

Lumis nodded and closed her eyes, drifting softly on the edge of Aaron's voice as he took her deeper into stillness and then further back into her past. She floated in a warm silence as Aaron searched for the beacon. When he found it she felt it, and her mind followed his voice as he opened a porthole into another time for her.

"Tell me what you see" said Aaron's voice.

I see dust and rocks beneath my feet as I am dragged by the hair up a steep path towards a large white building. The stones are cutting my feet but my lips do not stop the constant recitation that has kept my spirit calm and within my body. The mountains all around me stare with the glare of white, and the yellow and maroon around me drips with a slime of contagious greed and power lust.

It is dusted with an air of sanctity and holiness that sticks in my throat, threatening to block my prayers as I am dragged, now on my back, up the hill towards the temple. My body leaves gifts of skin upon the rocks so that the Mother, even within her imprisonment, will know that I have honored her with my blood.

Upon reaching the temple doorways, three monks stand and point at me, the words launched from their fingers intend to subdue my soul ready for imprisonment. I am determined that will not happen and my eyes dart around the scene to plan my escape. I am dragged into a room within the temple, which stinks of acid, rotting flesh and bitter herbs.

The monks stand in a semi circle with a large jar before them. They grin like idiots, relishing the point that one more dove will be imprisoned and their power will go unchallenged. They will bind my soul to my body and then kill me, trapping me within myself. Then they will preserve my body in the jar and hide it deep within the mountain caves, trapping my soul forever from the beautiful cycle of Dharma. I have one chance and I take it. The Goddess speaks within my head, urging me forward, urging me to avoid her fate of

entrapment, urging me to die into life so that I may be her servant.

I break away violently from the two monks holding me: my strength is much greater than theirs and the roar of the snow lion is coursing through my veins. I crash straight through the gathering, taking the monks by surprise. The idiots are so used to cowering fools that it never occurs to them that I may not accept their false witness.

I run past them towards the large open window and jump through it out into the cool spring air. I spread my arms out like an eagle, my long black hair streaming behind me like prayer flags, reaching out into the four winds for witness. I call to the Lord of Future Knowledge to accept my death. I see the ground come to me, jagged, sharp, my body heavy from the momentum of a high fall. The temple wall passes me as I join with my Mother the Earth, her sharp prickles of stone entering my body with a will of love and a power of union. I make love to her as our bodies touch and I enter her with the thrust of passion that blinds me with stars. I am out in the stars. I am the stars. I am free.

Lumis answered Aaron's questions in short bursts, her mind struggling to voice the memories that were parading themselves before her. Aaron questioned as Stefan's closed eyes darted back and forth, seeing into a vanished universe in Lumis' world.

"Tell me why, tell me what you can. Are you a monk?"

Lumis shook her head. No.

"Why did they punish you?" he asked.

There was a moment's silence. Lumis sighed deeply. "Because I hold the thunderbolts and refuse them access. They are corrupt and want to trap the power for their own use. I will not give it to them. Therefore I have to die."

Aaron scribbled down Lumis' words and checked that the tape recorder was still going.

"Would you tell us, please tell us, about what is happening and why?"

Lumis squirmed a little on the couch as though wanting to

stretch and wake up. Aaron spoke once again in a very soothing voice, telling Lumis to go deeper and deeper into peace and stillness.

“Now, tell us what happened,” said Aaron.

The voice that came out of Lumis was not Lumis. It was not English. The voice was heavier, as though she was using a different part of her throat and lungs. The language was rounded, her lips and cheeks working to create the sounds in ways that were obviously not a part of the Lumis they knew. Aaron didn't recognize the language and he shot a look at Stefan to see if he knew, but Stefan's eyes were tightly shut, his eyes busy under the lids as they peered back deep into the far past.

“I am one of the white ones, we are of the land, wild like the wind and we sing the voice of the snow lion. Our breath keeps the winds of death flowing in and out of the valleys. We dance with demons, we make love to the land and we buy sickness for the price of butter.”

“Our oracles are not trapped spirits, we call the Lord of Future Knowledge and he tells us what we need to know. But there are those who organize themselves into monasteries, pretending that they honor all beings while trapping and controlling them. They are arrogant and cruel. They are bringing unhealthy destruction down upon this land, a land that keeps the world circling. They want us wiped out forever, wiped out of the minds of the people. They will kill and bind us all until none are left.”

Lumis began to bare her teeth and hiss loudly. She panted and hissed until her face became red. Aaron began to talk softly, speaking of stillness and relaxation. The hissing stopped and Lumis fell silent.

“Breathe deeply and remember what you have seen. You will remember everything you saw and you will retain all memories within you from that time. Now, breathing in and out, feel yourself slowly climbing, following my voice.”

Aaron continued talking to Lumis until she was slowly waking up, stretching and opening her eyes. Stefan sat like a stone, his eyes tightly shut.

After a moment of quiet, Lumis looked at Aaron and Stefan opened his eyes.

“I saw you,” said Stefan. “I saw you as I see you now, clearly. You are, were, a man with long hair struggling against a terrible dark force. It still follows you, you are still in danger.”

The words came out despite Stefan’s struggle to contain them.

Lumis nodded. “I know now. I remember, I remember it all.” Aaron leaned into Lumis and put a soft hand upon her arm.

“Lumis, you spoke in a language we do not recognize. I know someone who might, and he may shed light as to where you were and where you came from at that time. Please, while it is fresh, tell us what you remember.”

Lumis closed her eyes as if to watch some internal screen that would unfold her memories.

“I saw that I was a man, a lone practitioner in a line of power that was very old and that was at odds with the sovereignty that ruled the land. It is a land of mountains, of snow and very ancient powers. I was protecting a pattern, made from colours and hidden deep in a cave somewhere. While ever the pattern existed, the balance of the powers of nature worked with and alongside the people. The people had no real control over nature and her powers, but instead worked with them and honored the Mother of the Land as the Mother of all. But the power structure within the society seemed to have changed and men wanted to grasp power and control it for themselves.

“They learned how to trap deities, demons, angels, all sorts of powers and make them do what they wanted them to do. The monasteries controlled the flows of nature and blocked anyone who tried to stop them. My job was to undo their work, to unpin what they had pinned and to allow all the powers to flow through the land, keeping all the beings in balance. I had released some souls trapped within a cave, and released the snow lion. I was supposed to learn about freeing the land for a reason, so I could take that knowledge into another life,

to another land, a land where I came from originally. But I was caught and was about to be ritually killed by having silk with magical incantations written upon it rammed down my throat. I am a threat to the trapping of power so they want to trap me.”

Lumis stopped speaking and stared off into space.

Aaron nodded and sat thoughtfully. He looked at Stefan with raised eyebrows. “Stefan, what did you see?”

Stefan frowned in thought.

“It’s difficult to describe really, I saw her as a man with long black hair and white clothing that was in layers. He, or she, was dancing, spinning and the layers formed a series of circles around him. There were lots of threads with tassels and mirrors. It was very striking and quite odd-looking. His hair was bound up in a bun, which was covered partially with a white cloth that had threads and tassels hanging down which spread out as he spun. But it was the power that was the most interesting part. It was like this spinning, bright white person was calling up lightning that would strike things. It was quite scary. I didn’t recognize what it was I was looking at and still don’t fully understand what it is we are up against. Aaron, have you got any ideas?”

The older man was already out of his seat and reaching for the phone.

“No, I don’t have any ideas, but I think we need to call the academic cavalry in for a bit of help. Stefan, would you make coffee? I think Lumis could do with a shot of wake juice—I know I could.”

Stefan nodded and once more put on the coat of coffee wallah as he shuffled into the kitchen, still disorientated from the experience. Aaron spoke in hushed tones on the phone so Lumis took herself into the kitchen to give him some privacy.

She watched Stefan as he padded around the kitchen, his regular movements helped to bring her thoughts back to present day and sanity. The more they delved into this, the more confused she was becoming—she just wanted the whole thing to stop so that she could get on with her life.

Stefan's body was lithe, considered and moved with a singular purpose that made everything around him seem disordered. His long hair called to her fingers and she imagined what it would be like to wind her fingers into his hair and bury herself into his body. She blushed at her outrageous thoughts and right on cue, he looked up from the kettle and caught her flame-red face watching him. He turned his body away from her, pretending to look for cups as his manhood began to strain against his jeans, fighting to be joined with her piercing eyes and bright power. Aaron came into the kitchen, humming in his own tuneless way, and broke the spell.

"So, the cavalry is on the ball. I was expecting Benjamin to need a few days to sort out time to come and listen to the tape. He is on his way. If he could have climbed down the phone line he would have."

He looked to Lumis and Stefan in triumph. Lumis looked completely blank at both of them. Stefan laughed.

"Benjamin is an old friend of Aaron's and is a university professor who specializes in ancient religions and languages."

Lumis became excited and beamed at them both; perhaps they were getting somewhere and would unravel this tangle that seemed to grip the life out of her.

"He will be here in a couple of hours. Lumis, do you need food? Anything?"

Aaron suddenly realized he was expecting her to fall into the lifestyle of the two oddballs, which meant random eating times and long periods of fevered studying. She shook her head, suddenly feeling very tired.

"I would like to go and sleep for an hour if that is ok."

She looked at them both, wanting to stay and converse about what had just happened, but her eyes were refusing to stay open.

"Go rest, I will knock on your door in an hour."

Stefan looked at the clock and made a mental note of when to wake her.

* * *

Sleep can be such a delicious thing when it wraps unbidden around your ankles and pulls upon you like a suckling child. I am falling quickly and deeply into a soft darkness that smells familiar, pulling me away from the world and into some strange existence where everything makes absolute sense, no matter how bizarre.

I hear clashes of cymbals, deep resonant drums, and ringing bells. Horns sound and rattle my bones, dragging me to dance wildly, spinning and stamping. Power is flowing through me from the sky to the ground and from the ground to the sky. I feel the storms rushing over me, whispering their intent as they pass onwards and I dance for the storm, intriguing it, entertaining it.

“What do you want?” I ask the storm.

“Safe passage” says the storm.

“Done,” say I.

And I dance a path through the land, waking up Mother who washes her dust and stones in the heavy rain. The flowers turn their face from the storm, the animals seek the shelter of caves and the humans watch in wonder as the light flashes angry power from mountain to mountain. Behold the power of all in its dance of refreshing, I say, as I pass over with the storm.

A hand upon my shoulder pulls me out of the sky and back to a windowless prison where there is no wind and no rain. I open my eyes to see Stefan looking at me with concern. He says he has been knocking but I did not answer. I look at him without speaking. I reach up to him and pull his hair so that he leans into me. I kiss him, alarmed, upon his moist lips.

I send the lightning of refreshing through his body, and his eyes sparkle. He kisses me back, reaching into me like a lover starved of pleasure for a thousand years. When he stops kissing me, I hold his face between my two hands and look into him. We look at each other in silence for a moment and then I

look away. There is too much magic in his eyes and too much confused power between us. I look away and the wall of convention silently slips back into place.

* * *

Benjamin was sitting in the library, sipping tea and listening to the tape. His head was nodding with the sounds, marking out the words with his eyebrows, and the confusion by biting his upper lip thoughtfully.

He and Aaron talked in low tones and Aaron kept shaking his head, pushing his reading glasses up onto his forehead and rubbing his eyes with his hands. Lumis and Stefan hovered in the kitchen while Aaron talked alone with Benjamin for a few minutes: he had requested this little window of privacy just before Benjamin had arrived.

Stefan and Lumis shuffled around the kitchen trying to look busy and trying not to knock into each other, which would mean that they would touch. The idea horrified and fascinated them both. Lumis was not really embarrassed, but Stefan was. He was all fingers, and arms, and knocked something over every time he moved. The more self-conscious he got, the more damage he did. Lumis smiled into her coffee; for once someone else was the klutz. She turned to look into the library, just in time to see Aaron wave them both in.

Benjamin was a neatly dressed man in his sixties, with heavy eyebrows, wild hair, a huge nose and very happy eyes. He was tall, and spoke with wild gestures that used his arms, hands, eyes and hair. Lumis took to him straight away after he nearly tried to shake her hand off. She sat on the couch, her eyes full of expectancy and Stefan sat beside her, relinquishing the second armchair to Benjamin. Stefan sat back and let his arm curl protectively over the back of the couch behind Lumis. The action did not go unnoticed and Aaron frowned quietly to himself. He might not have Stefan's astounding sight capabilities, but he recognized a storm brewing when he saw one.

Benjamin sat and looked at Lumis with a smile on his face and his eyebrows raised high. Lumis waited.

“So!” declared Benjamin in a voice that was probably a little too high for his height and weight.

It took Lumis off-guard for a second which caused her to smile back like an idiot.

His voice was high-pitched and musical, his rises and falls betraying the fact he was a Yiddish speaker. She listened intently, losing herself in the cadence of the accent while he gave her a little background on who he was and where he had come from. She missed most of what he said, concentrating instead on his wonderful tones and warm brown eyes. He was like watching a favorite classic movie in old comfy slippers.

When he realized that she was not really taking in much of what he was saying, he cleared his throat quickly, raised his eyes to the ceiling and lifted his left index finger, which was crooked, and wagged it meaningfully in the air.

She would learn eventually that this was Benjamin’s signal for ‘important fact coming’.

“The tape was very interesting, very, very interesting.”

He paused. Lumis nodded and waited. His eyes were still on the ceiling. Everything fell silent and the room waited with held breath.

“Ben, get on with it,” said Aaron laughing.

“Oh yes yes,” Said Benjamin, “so sorry.”

He beamed a big smile and then frowned, putting his important wagging finger to his pursed lips.

“It was a very interesting tape, Tibetan, mostly.”

Ben raised his eyebrows to his audience to see the effect of the information. Lumis looked blank and Stefan began to smile and nod. It made more sense to him now what he had been seeing. Ben continued.

“And not just Tibetan, it was a spoken form that dates to around 600AD, Classical, only come across now in texts. Your use of words, fascinating, and the pronunciation... oy vey, my

grad students would put you in a goldfish bowl forever if they could.”

He smiled widely at Lumis.

Lumis was confused. She had never felt any connection with Tibet, no interest, nothing. Just the nightmares of falling out of a window and the terrible smell, both of which she had been haunted by since childhood. Aaron cut in to ask a question.

“Ben, you said it was mostly Tibetan?”

Ben nodded, “Yes, yes.”

Aaron waited.

When Ben did not expand but just sat looking blankly at Aaron, Aaron asked him. “So what else was in there besides Tibetan?”

“Oh, Oh, sorry,” smiled Benjamin. “It’s fascinating actually. She used a title in an old form of Aramaic, very interesting. It’s a Jewish name of G-D but in Aramaic, not Hebrew. This is all very very interesting. Here let me translate the tape for you.”

Benjamin went on to translate what Lumis had said about being one of the ‘white ones’, and to point to the Aramaic name, Lord of Future Knowledge.

“Play the tape back again, Ben, I want to hear that. I didn’t hear it as she was speaking and I am very surprised I didn’t pick up on it the first time around” said Aaron.

Benjamin nodded and rewound the tape.

“Don’t forget Brother, it is common to miss a word or two in a language you know when it is buried deep within a language that you do not know. Besides, her accenting of the words is very archaic, so you may not have recognized it. This is all so, so exciting.”

As the tape rewound, Stefan patted Lumis’ back as she looked on confused and amused. She was trying to figure out how many words Benjamin could repeat twice and get away with it. Benjamin paused the tape and replayed. Lumis stiffened as she heard her own voice speaking in a tongue she had no recollection of knowing. Even her voice sounded foreign,

her mouth forming sounds that she did not know she was capable of.

“There,” said Benjamin, “listen.”

Lumis’ voice rose and fell with the strangeness of the Tibetan tongue, and as Benjamin turned up the tape, they heard her voice say, “Elah Shemaiya.”

“I’m confused,” said Lumis.

“Why would I be talking two completely different languages from cultures that have no connection?”

Benjamin frowned as he put a finger to his lip.

“Well, it’s not too far-fetched. We would have to have Aaron put you under again so that I can ask you questions that you could not possibly answer unless you had been alive in a different time in Tibet, or had access to manuscripts and transcripts that only four people in the world have access to. On the tape you describe yourself as ‘Hon’, which is a lone practitioner of the ancient Bon magic. Using that pronunciation puts you in a certain place at a certain time. I don’t want to say more than that at this point, but there may be something very interesting emerging here.”

Lumis was bursting with curiosity. Inside, she was bouncing up and down saying, ‘do it again, do it again’. Outwardly she fought to stay calm and looked from Aaron to Benjamin. It was 5pm.

“Can we do another session this evening?” asked Lumis.

Normally Aaron would have said no, but with having Benjamin here, it would be a great opportunity to really move forward with this. Aaron raised an eyebrow to Benjamin, who in turn nodded and looked to Stefan. Stefan nodded; he had sat quietly in the background completely enthralled with the proceedings. With his eyes and Benjamin’s ears, they may truly get a good idea of what this strange mixed-up story was about.

“Ok, then. Let’s take a break and gather back in an hour if that’s ok with you Benjamin?”

Benjamin nodded to Aaron that he was willing to stay and become involved. He was truly fascinated, but his professor

head told him to tread carefully, record everything, and keep a cynical head on his shoulders. He did not think that Lumis was creating a fantasy drama; rather, the words, accenting and hand gestures she used betrayed an ancient soul trying to communicate. He must find a way to let that soul flower so that he could validate his deepest suspicions: that the soul talking on the tape was one of the legendary original White Hats of Tibet.

CHAPTER THREE

Aaron's calm and wonderfully musical voice walked me once more down a path that terrified and yet fascinated me. Something inside of me told me that it was very important that I remember, review and learn, but I did not understand why. What could be gained from dredging up such pain? I submit to his voice as I fall deeper and deeper into myself, reaching beyond the woman I was to the soul that I am. I land at the feet of a new life, and I look at this new life with a strange dispassion and a new understanding.

It had taken longer in this life to remember who I was and why I was there. I had always had a sense of urgency, of a job that needed doing, but I did not know what it was or why I needed to do it. I aroused a great deal of interest in the village where I was born with my strange abilities whereby I seemed to know how to do things that I had not been taught. It was assumed I was a reincarnated Lama and my father had contacted the monastery to discuss my strange skills with an elder monk.

The elder monk came to visit our house one day in early summer while my brothers were out with the yaks in the summer grazing. My mother was pounding seeds as she always pounded seeds, with the vehemence of a suppressed anger. My mother was strong, passionate and intelligent, whereas my father was weak, stupid and arrogant. She was told to be meek, but her eyes flashed with the power of the dark mother when my father would spit in her face. The old man smiled gently as he registered the undercurrents in household, and looked at my mother as if to say, 'this is your lot because this is what your fate has decided. Your karma put you here, endure with stillness.' My mother picked up the look and the thought, and returned a look to the monk that would have shrivelled trees from a mile away.

My father presented me like a new toy and I looked calmly

into the eyes of the monk. Something registered in his energy that I recognized, and my instincts told me it was not good. That was the first time in my life so far that I remembered a feeling from the past. It was like a very brief blink into another world, the image gone before it could be processed in my mind. The monk asked me a variety of questions which I ignored and sat silently looking at him with my inner eyes. I call them my inner eyes because they are sort of inside me and cannot be seen by people. With them, I can see into people's hearts and minds, and I can also see their health, their crimes and their future.

Seeing the death of the child in the belly of my aunt and telling my mother had finally alerted my father to the fact that I might be a ticket to a fuller stomach for him. When the child died 3 days after it was born, dying on the day I had predicted, my father announced to my brothers that I was special and should be looked after rather than kicked as was my usual lot.

When the monk stopped asking stupid questions, I asked him why he did not attend to the blood that seeped from his bowels. The monk looked at me aghast and with fear. I told him that a spirit had attached itself to him many years ago when he had done a bad thing to another monk and caused the other monk to suffer terribly, and that spirit caused the illness. The old man coloured, opened his mouth and then closed it again, his eyes darting from the floor to me and then to my father.

I told the monk I could rid him of the spirit if he wanted. Did he want that? The monk was interested, not only to get himself healed, but to see if there really was anything besides party tricks and the second sight in this arrogant 7 year old child. The monk nodded and I told my father to bring a chicken to me and then leave the room. We sat in silence, waiting for my father to pick a bird, which he did, entering with a flurry of feathers and indignant squawks. I took the chicken from him and told him to leave the room. He faltered for a moment, unsure what to do. He was curious, and also did not like to be

told what to do by his youngest son. The monk nodded to him to leave, which my father did with a sharp click of his teeth, a noise he always made when he was beaten at something.

I held the chicken and told it to be quiet. The chicken fell silent. I then whispered to the chicken that I was going to sacrifice its body, so it would be better now for its spirit to leave if it wanted to. The spirit told me that it wanted to stay and go through what was about to happen so that it could use the energy to rebalance something within itself. Fair enough I thought.

I stood by the monk and looked into him with my inner eyes. A being nestled in the spine of the man looked back at me. I acknowledged it and the being acknowledged me. I knew that the only way I could put the being back where it belonged was through the shedding of blood. I was better to shed the blood of the chicken than the old man.

I asked the being if it was happy residing in the old man. The being told me that it was not happy as the old man did nothing interesting, had little energy to draw upon and it was constantly trapped in the spine of the old man by his prayers and practices. He could not operate the old man but he could not leave either. He did not know how to get out, so he had lived within the old man, drawing upon the life power which was slowly degenerating them both.

Somehow I knew how to bridge the being from the old man into the chicken, and I also knew that the only way it could return to its own realm was through the death of another being. The release of energy at the death gave it the fuel to return home. Holding the chicken, I placed my other small hand upon the bald head of the old man. In my mind, I reached into the old man and pulled upon the being, releasing it from the old man's body and allowing it to pass into the chicken.

As soon as the transfer was complete, I slit the chicken's throat. The being turned within the chicken and vanished back into the abyss where it came from. The old man had slumped

to the ground; the exiting of the being had exhausted him. I called my mother, who ran to the old man, her thin voice calling for my father to help her. I stood with the headless chicken in my hand, blood running between my fingers, eyes silently watching the scene as my parents picked up the surprisingly heavy monk and placed him upon the bed.

My mother reached for the valuable chicken but I refused to let go. I clung to its warmth, my eyes warning her that this was no meat for a human: it had been touched by a demon and as such needed to be destroyed. As they fussed over the monk, I took the lifeless warm bundle and carefully laid it upon a fire in the yard. It fuelled the fire that warmed the village water and balance was once more restored.

Later it was discussed and agreed upon that I would not join the monastery, but would be trained by the local Hon, the shamans who practiced the ancient arts of this land, arts that had been in place beyond memory before the Lord Buddha came to our mountains.

* * *

A voice is reaching out to me, touching my thoughts and walking through my memories with me. I am walking in the snow, I am sitting in a cave, I am laughing into the eyes of a woman I love so deeply it hurts me to look away.

What do you see? says the voice, and I look.

I see caves with spirit beings painted upon the walls, I see ice, I see jars with people's bodies crammed into them, their spirit trapped within the mummified corpse, I see danger and I see degeneration. I am smashing the jars and releasing the spirits from the bodies. Quick, soon there will be footsteps and a light appears behind me in the tunnel. I feel that I will be discovered. No matter, this is what my life was for, this moment, now in the ice cave beneath the sacred mountain.

I turn my focus back to the jars. I know that these people are powerful ancient souls, trapped because they, like me, came

into life to try and stop the control. I must release them. I must. I smash more and more, the acrid dust coating my lips with the remains of hundreds of years of misery. Empty eye sockets stare at me as I reach into the mouth to take out the binding cloth from their throats. The bodies emit a breath as the spirit leaves.

I cast around the cave looking for more and I walk around, looking in corners and cracks, something pushing me on to keep searching. I light a new butter lamp and leave my other behind so that I can explore a little more and the lamp lightens an area set back into the cave wall, a little like a grotto. I had not noticed it before, as it was well hidden. I creep forward, holding the light before me. Something is calling me and my skin prickles with danger. The hair on my neck stands firmly to attention and whispers begin to seep through the still darkness, warning me and yet calling me.

In the grotto, hidden almost into the wall is a body, its beauty still shining through its desiccated flesh, and it is covered in the ritual tattoos of an age long gone. Long hair, the color of the blazing sun, frames a face with eyes of blue—two polished stones of lapis have replaced her eyes. I realize this body has been here for a very long time and she, it is obviously a woman, was someone who was of great importance to the priesthood. Her body is bound in a way that is used to keep deities in, and the silver decorations upon her body have not been taken away. I crouch on my haunches to look into her face. I am shocked to see her spirit using the Lapis eyes to try and communicate with me.

The spirit trapped within this body is straining to be released, but from the markings upon her face I know she is a carrier of great power and her burden must always be in the world of humanity. Her burden of power must be passed from priest to priest and never allowed to fall into the wrong hands. I realize that is precisely what has happened and she is locked here to keep the power she carries under control and away from the world.

I nod my head to her to let her know I understand and I call upon the Goddess Yeshe Walmo to help me, she who protects the Hon, the goddess of magic and magicians who has watched over me since I was born. My lips form the words that she loves so much.

Om a bhi ya nak po be so so ha.

I repeat it over and over as I begin to work upon the trapped form before me.

I carefully sit before her shrivelled body and I use my spirit vision to see where her body has been sealed. It is in the throat, the same as the other ones. I have to think carefully. This is not just a release, this is a burden I have to be willing to take on and no one must ever know. While ever the priesthood thinks this power is trapped, they will relax. If they know she has gone, they will hunt me down throughout time and throughout my lives until the power and I are destroyed forever.

I go still, trying to shut out the chaos of spirits around me releasing, and the damp cold echoes of the caves. In the silence, the knowledge bubbles up quietly into my brain. First I place a hand on the dried body and allow some energy to flow into her to feed her spirit. My fingers begin to weave in the air around her, slowly, gently, flowing back and forth. The rhythmic action attracts the attention of the spirits whose job it is to keep her bindings in place.

My hands continue to weave the air, and the attention of the beings is fully focused upon what is happening before them. Now I have them all, my hands suddenly, without warning, strike out a pushing action using the heels of my hands. The spirits, taken unawares, are projected from around the woman and into the nearby stone.

I tenderly, carefully, while chanting the song of unravelling, pull the threads from her throat and I move closer ready for the breath to bridge. And so it does. As the last bit of thread is pulled, a tiny whisper of breath is released and my mouth is open and ready. Her spirit moves into my body and along with

her spirit travels a power that is so immense it throws me on my back as it passes into me. The action causes me to roll away from her body and my feet knock over one of the lamps that I am using to illuminate the cave. The corner where the lady sits is cast once more into darkness and the fold of the cave wall vanishes into shadows so that her little grotto is hidden from all but the most perceptive sight.

I lie for a moment, my body reeling from the impact of the power now nestled within me. I feel her spirit and I feel the power. She talks to me, her voice cutting through my thoughts.

Thank you brave one, now you must carry this burden. In return I give you a gift of knowledge: you are destined for a land far from here, destined to protect the magical heart of the Great Goddess in the form of a stone. Here, I give you my wisdom. Here, I give you my knowledge, a knowledge that is older than mankind. Here, I give you love to fuel the darkness that is about to strike you. Here, I give you my spirit which will stay with you throughout time, and when you wield the sword I will be there with you, at your shoulder, to guide you. Now, breathe out so that my passing is complete.

I breathe out and I lie on my back in the near darkness as She joins with me, allowing my body to become accustomed to the weight of the power. As I lay, my understanding of the power within me deepens and I begin to realize with dread that the power now nestled within me is that of Guhyakali. I acknowledge her greatness and offer her sanctuary within my heart.

I hear a noise behind me and feel a breath upon my neck. A hand grasps my hair from behind and jerks my neck back, almost snapping it. Someone shouts an order to not kill, that I am to be taken back to the monastery. A foot makes contact with my right kidney and I collapse in a red haze of agony, my head still pulled back as eyes come close to mine, spitting hatred into my face. The breath is soured, the eyes are cold and the power of demons looks out of the Abbot and prods me.

“I see you” says the power. “I can do whatever I like with you, I will trap you forever.”

I do not blink or flinch. I do not rise to the threat, I stay calm, swimming in a pain I grasp on to as I send my mind into the void. My thoughts spread out, passing through the rock, the air and the buildings. I am everywhere, and I am freedom. I am pulled on my back, pulled over rocks by my arms, pulled out of the belly of the Mother like a baby born to the world. I am dragged out of the cave into the bright sunlight, its brilliance reflecting off the snow in a chorus of beauty. I smile. The sun watches and I close my eyes in honor.

“Lumis, can you hear me? Tell me what is happening to you.”

Aaron’s voice echoes around the snow and I am confused. Why is Aaron here? I listen to his words and focus on what is happening. They are dragging me by the hair, up the rocky path, which is tearing into my bare feet. My hands are tied and the monks are attempting to use magic to stop my spirit crying out. But they do not realize that I am now the vessel of Guhyakali, so their magic will not work upon me. Her power mingles with mine and her eyes use my eyes to watch what is happening.

The monks of this land, the ones who brought the wisdom of Buddha to these powerful mountains are the same monks who trapped Guhyakali, the Great Mother of rebalancing. With the Great Mother trapped, they could manipulate the world to their own ends without fear of her destructive wrath. They are arrogant: revelling in their own power, unaware of what is happening and what is about to happen.

We are near the entrance to the monastery and I no longer feel pain, I no longer feel anything. I swim in my own blood, leaving a red path in my wake, and the silence of my pain echoes around the peaks of snow. They bear silent witness to my capture and imminent death. Mother whispers within me and her voice trails like smoke around my torn feet, applying soothing balm to the ripped flesh and exposed bone.

Be steady my son, we are almost there. Understand that you must die by your own hand. Do not let them kill you or we will be trapped together for eternity and the corruption of the Great Garden will be

complete. Be vigilant and be brave. I am with you and within you, I am all around you. We are as one, you and I. I will watch over you until I am reunited with my heart, and then you, my beloved child, will birth me back to where I belong, so that my power will reign once more upon this earth.

Her voice drifts around my head as I am pulled into a hall by the temple. A semi circle of monks sit and chant, their eyes do not lift as I enter. I am thrown before a monk who waits, his robe is rich, his eyes are strong and my heart lurches. I know him! Somewhere in my mind I know him and have loved him once.

I am confused. The monk speaks.

“You are Hon are you not?”

I nod in reply; there is no law against practicing shamanism, no matter how much it is held in distaste by the monasteries. The Mother’s voice rises in my head.

Be ready, your death is imminent. Look to the window.

I look beyond the monk, down a narrow corridor and see wide openings with no shutters. They are large windows that open out to the mountains, and to the rocky land many feet below.

The monk has realized also that he knows me from another time and he is probing my mind for answers. The Mother hides herself, vanishing into my flesh unseen. He pauses for a second and then speaks once more.

“You know the patterns of the Great Work, do you not?”

My eyes reach his in terror. I know him. A memory from another time, somewhere, locked in my history. A man I once looked up to when I was a priestess of the Great Work. That memory fills me with regret and fear.

I remember from somewhere, this man slitting my throat so that I would not interfere with his corrupt power. The monk watches me as I stared at the ground in fear. *Ready, it is time.*

The Mother’s voice gives me strength. The monk begins to pace as he realizes who I was once: someone who had witnessed his corruption and had refused to partake of it.

As the monk paces away from me for a moment, I break free of the monks who are not expecting me to give any resistance. I run, my torn feet feeling nothing as I aim for the large opening; the ceremonial windows that look out over the mountains. I turn briefly and look back before letting my body fall.

Guhyakali looks out at Kasper, I remember his name from long ago and the demon in union with Kasper looks back. The stare is locked in challenge for a brief moment and the shock registers on Kasper's face as he realizes the Great Mother resides within me. I know at that moment that the demon in Kasper will search throughout time for me to destroy me and imprison the Goddess once more.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aaron's voice asks me to reach back further. How much further, I ask? His voice settles into the background and another voice begins to speak to me. It speaks in a tongue that tugs at my heart and pulls away the layers of linen that hide my reflection from myself. I am falling, deeper and deeper through time and through myself. My hands reach out to grasp at anything, everything to stop the falling and to feel where I am and who I am. Scenes visit me and leave. Smells and sounds ring true in my head but they leave before I can focus to understand.

Tell me your story, says the voice. Which story, say I. The whole story says the voice. And so I do. I reach back, further and further until the scent of Dhaniya leaf upon my lips assaults my thoughts and brings a solid single flash of world to me. There I am, I say to him and to myself.

The sun watched over me as I lay in the grass, listening to the sheep and chewing on the Dhaniya I had picked from outside my mother's house. It was spring, the dreaded wind had ceased for a moment and I revelled in my joy at living. I was too old now for childhood chores and I enjoyed my new status as a woman. The blood that had arrived without warning one afternoon had trickled quietly and without fanfare down my leg and pooled without fuss at my feet.

I was astonished and excited, and scared. I had always known, as I often did about things, that I would not marry, would not sit outside a cool house on a hot day picking stones from a bowl of beans and watching my children grow. From as long ago as I can remember, I had watched my mother weave, spin, cook, chastise and sleep, with a sense of my own longing for a simplicity that I knew would never come to me.

My sisters already acted like they were married, carrying my cousins around on their hips, spinning and chatting, grinding flour and preparing dough for my mother to throw on the hot

stones. They knew who they were and what was coming. I did not.

Nothing had ever been said to indicate that such domestic contentment would not be mine, but the birds told me and the sun warned me as my youngest brother was born, that I would not enjoy the same ability to bear a child. It had set me apart in my own mind and I refused to join in childhood games of domesticity, limiting myself to the chores that I must do for my mother and nothing more. Instead I practiced talking to the wind and calling the rain when the land was too dry. My sisters cast me aside and my mother cried whenever she looked at me.

The sun told me the time was at hand and I stretched out upon the grass along side the sheep as if filling myself with their scent for the very last time. I knew. So when I heard the voices, I was not surprised. First my sister called, and then my mother. They could not see me in the grass and I paused for a moment, playing hide games with them for my own amusement. But then a voice rang out in the still afternoon that I did not recognize but used words that my heart remembered.

I sat up immediately to see a woman who stood a good three hand lengths taller than my mother, her body wrapped in layers of white cloth that flowed around her like a river around a stone. Her hair was unbound down to her waist, and upon her arms she bore the marks of the priesthood. I had seen them once before, when the men of the temple had passed through on their way south. I had burned those images into my head, knowing they were of importance, I just didn't know why until now.

I stood immediately, intensely aware of my tangled hair, stained shift and bare feet. The goats stopped chewing and stared also, looking with me at the priestess who stood with my mother. Maybe they recognized her too, I thought with a smile, before suddenly thinking that she might be able to read my thoughts and would think I was rude. A voice pierced my thoughts, telling me to approach. I nodded and began to walk

towards my mother. It did not seem unusual that the woman could talk to me with her mind and I could hear her. It seemed the most natural thing in the world.

My mother was given 5 goats and the promise of as much grain as the family needed for as long as it was needed. I had been sold and I could not have been happier. I was told it was a great honor to be chosen to serve the old ones, my mother trying to allay her own sense of guilt at having traded me. She need not have felt such emotions as I had waited since I was born for this moment. I nodded silently and put my hand out to the woman in white linen. I left with nothing, but my heart was filled with everything.

I will not bore you with the details of my training other than to say it was thorough and gruelling. I was trained first in physical strength, mental agility and emotional discipline. The temple of training was far from my home in Parsa, a journey of three cycles of the moon, and was nestled high up on a heavily wooded mountain to the south of my birth home. Beyond the mountains were a hot plain and a delta where a great river spread her legs to greet the sea.

I was taken in my first winter to greet the sea in all her glory and three years later I was taken once more to honor the black lioness whose power straddled the sea and the river. When she accepted my honor, it was decided that it was time for me to go to the place of the old ones and begin my spirit training, where I would learn to develop my gifts. If I survived the training and tests, I would join the old ones as a servant of the Great Work.

I did survive and looking back on that time, it was the happiest time that I can remember. I was challenged in every way possible and I rose to each challenge with a fierceness that filled my heart with peace and completion. Of course, as with all young people, I constantly wanted to move on, grow up, get wiser, stronger and learn faster than any other aspirant in the temple.

Looking back there were many things I missed in my urge

for the horizon, and now, in the depths of conflict I often chastise myself for wasting such beauty and wonder of youth. But you cannot put wisdom into the bones of the young, and I more than anyone I knew fought hard against all those who tried to wisely advise me. The drive within me was great and my youthful ignorance pushed me beyond all reasonable limits.

Standing before the great Oracle brought that horizon to me quicker than I had ever imagined possible. Once I had finished my training, I was taken before the Woman of Snakes, so that the spirits could speak through her to my elders. The elders would be told if I had a path in service, what that path would be and what my name was.

Although I had a birth name, as a returning spirit, I had a true name that transcended all time and all lives. Accepting my true name would connect me back into my memories and secure my path for the future. I gave a drop of my blood as requested and then sat as requested among the snakes in the dark cave which was filled with the smoke of the seeing herb. The oracle droned. I sat and waited. The snakes did not bother me: I did not know that these hooded kings of the desert could kill me with one strike. What bothered me was the question of who I am and who I was, and who I will be.

I don't know why, not even to this day why I held such fear upon hearing my name. It was a deep, instinctive fear and it told me that my name was filled with danger. The oracle saw fire all around me. She saw me in a future battle with a demon, an old adversary, a powerful underworld serpent who was also a dark storm god.

She saw me in the land of the Golden Ones, fighting corruption. She saw that I was a bridge, one who served the ancient Dark Goddess bringing her deep ancient power out into the world.

And my name? Immaru: light—the light that flowed from the darkness, the light that was of the earth, the flash of light that brings the rain and the wind, she who once breathed

across the desert bringing life and death, she who would breathe the voice of the Goddess upon a blade, she who was charged with service to an island sacred to the Goddess and to all oracles throughout time.

The oracle droned on.

“She will learn skills in this life that will put her on a path to her destiny upon the Isle of Oracles, an isle called Albion. There she will fight the serpent once more, but I cannot say if she will succeed or fail. There is great danger around her and she will be shadowed by the greatest of evils. And yet the destroying power of the Great Goddess will one day sleep within her”

A danger immediately flooded me with its familiar flavour. I could never escape it now. I nodded and accepted the fate with the hopeless oblivion of youth.

The long journey north to the temple of the Mother Goddess where I would work gave me time to remember, time to reflect and to put into practice the skills I had learned as a student. To be successful in my work, I would need to remember and the practice of the technique of remembering was to be my first task.

At the beginning of the journey I was full of enthusiasm to learn what was behind me, what was stored as memories deep within me. The landscape that we journeyed through was unseen as my thoughts directed inwards once more in an urgent quest to learn. How many beautiful rivers, forests and mountains did I not look at? How many experiences did I miss in my arrogant assumption that they were of no consequence? But the more I turned inwards, the more afraid I became of what lay before me.

Now I began to understand why danger had wound itself around me at my naming. My memories were full of oppression, intrigue, fear, conflict with dark power and a final painful death. I saw the same angry fascinating eyes following me, searching, returning again and again in the faces of different

men, all of whom craved power they could not have.

I did not know at that time whether I would be strong enough to take up the mantle that I was walking towards. The doubt within me was strong and consumed my young heart with a sense of being trapped without choice. But I had a choice. I had always had a choice, and that choice was one I made before I was born. As one of my teachers said to me many times when I would collapse in despair, feeling overwhelmed: you are never given a burden you cannot in truth carry.

The time of travelling was good for my soul. I was able to absorb memories from the past, and think about the future. I knew that once I arrived at the temple, I would take a final vow that would tie me for generations to a line of power without escape. I had to be very clear about what lay before me and whether I was willing to walk that path, which would include service over many lives. And yet, I knew deep inside my thoughts, that I had already made that commitment in another life and all that was happening now was a time of remembering and a resumption of work.

That awareness was deepened as I stood, three moons later, before the priestess of the doorway, ready to take the final step of vowing service. Her eyes were distant, not seeing. They reflected the lamp light around us in the depths of the temple, and no spirit looked out of those eyes save the power that flowed through all living things. She was literally a doorway, nothing more.

The desolation of her service struck me deeply with a sense of fear and injustice. And yet, it was a role she willingly committed to in full knowledge. Realizing that filled me with a sense of awe, that the human spirit could offer such selfless service and sacrifice for the better of the world around us. I felt ashamed of my own fears, as I knew that the lives before me would be filled with great wonder and adventure as well as danger and struggle. I looked away from her eyes in shame at

my own weakness and she quietly, firmly, placed a hand upon my shoulder.

When I was ready to look up, she placed her hand before my lips to catch the breath of my words. Was I willing to vow a series of lives in the service of the Great Work?

“Yes” I said.

The question was asked of me thrice. My acceptance was caught in her hand and weighed. It had to be an acceptance with full knowledge and the weight of the words must reflect that knowledge. Upon weighing the breath, she placed her hand, still holding my words, upon my head. A power immediately shot through me from her hand and bounced through me like lightning. It hit the ground under my feet before returning to my head. The lightning formed static in my hands that sparked in the darkness and convulsed my brain. I fell to the floor, my body dancing to the tuneless rhythm of power.

The universe rushed through my thoughts, the expanse of creation opened before me and I saw the face of Power. The face of Power burned me and the voice of Power vibrated through me until my bones shook. The name of lightning was imprinted within my thoughts and would follow me through many lives.

The priestess of the Doorway helped me to my feet and handed me a cup filled with spring water. I took the cup and before I drank she stopped me by placing a hand over the cup.

“The cup is for you to carry. It will be the vessel that your power flows through for good and bad. It is not a vessel that you can drink from, as its power cannot be tasted by those who carry its burden. The inner power of the lightning that resides within you is the power you will take out into the world and the cup is the expression through which the power will be mediated.”

With that she held the cup to my pelvis. Before I could express my shock, she pushed the cup into my womb; it became my womb. It vanished from its outer form and nestled itself deep in my centre. The world spun around me as I fell

into darkness. I drifted in the void where there is no sound, no movement, no time. The drifting brought solace and peace to my heart, allowing me to breathe and take breath.

As I began to awake, a burning pain seared my right arm. I struggled to open my eyes, pulling myself against the weight of peace that my soul had hidden in. Hands touched my arm and my forehead, singing drifted around me and the deep-toned voice of clearing echoed around and within me.

My name was called and I looked, first with my inner sight and then with my eyes. A man stood over me smiling and welcoming me back to life. Through the confusion, my arm demanded attention to rid it of pain and I put my other hand over my forearm, but something brushed me away. A cup was held to my lips and bitter juice awoke my thoughts and cleared my eyes of the darkness so that I could see.

Upon my arm was a bolt of lightning, painted into my skin where it would stay with me for this life. I looked up at the man in question as I struggled to sit up.

“It is an access route to your power and creates a protection that you will surely need. Now drink more.”

The cup of bitter was held once more and I sipped, lying back and dreaming of the trees we had journeyed through.

According to Kasper, my new mentor and teacher, I had slept for a whole cycle of the moon as I walked between life and death, learning how to be with the cup whilst in life. My clothing hung around me as I stood, my flesh having sustained me on my long journey through the worlds. Kasper took me from the chamber where I had slept alone in silence, and led me to a hall of stone and wood, which had an altar in the centre. The hall was circular and had four doors of carved wood. I was instructed to close my eyes and feel about the room for the direction I was supposed to be working in.

I reached out with my mind, exploring the space around me, and experiencing the power that flowed through this inner sanctum. Something familiar caught my attention. It was an

emotion, deep, painful and beautiful. I reached out to try and understand what it was that I perceived.

A man appeared in my thoughts, his face familiar yet I struggled to understand who it was and what my connection to him was. I opened my eyes and walked towards a door that was partially hidden in the wall of the sanctuary. The feeling within me got stronger. I placed my hands upon the door and felt his heartbeat on the other side. I was in turmoil. I knew him, somehow, and I knew that he was also a key factor in my work.

I opened the door and he was stood waiting for me to find him. His eyes were as familiar as my own hands. His scent was the dreams of thousands of sleeping years and his outstretched hands called to my soul.

I wept, stone-footed, unable to move as the emotion lapped around my heart and filled the cup within me. He put a hand upon my arm and I saw his face looking down upon me, a face that had looked into mine many times with the hazy sleepy relaxation of long time lovers. He enfolded me in a wordless embrace, breathing in my hair, filling his lungs with a scent of lost love.

“I have waited a long time for you to awaken from your slumber and step into life. Here is my heart, it has beaten throughout time in memory of you.”

He stood with his hands cupped before me and I lightly kissed them. His name rose to meet my thoughts and with the remembrance of his name came the memory of life in search of him: Belseth, ‘he who walks across the desert with the sun in his eyes’. His hand reached out to my chin and lifted my eyes to his. His voice wove memories of long lost pain as he spoke.

“I have drifted like a spring seed in the wind, unable to take root without you. You are the earth out of which I flourish and I am the sun that will nourish you. Stand fast my beloved, for I will find you, wherever you are.”

His words formed with power, moving beyond the poetry of love and flowing into the recitation of service. We were of each other as priest and priestess, a braiding of power that

passed through time. I held on to him, something deep within me telling me he would be ripped once more from me. I opened my eyes to look at him once more, but the eyes of Belseth were gone, torn once more and replaced by a priest of the temple.

Kaspe looked down on me and my heart broke into 7 jagged pieces.

“It is time to work young priestess”

His voice was full of excitement for the future, but his eyes spoke a different tone and my feet chilled against the hard stone floor.

CHAPTER FIVE

It took two short years for me to understand the power that I needed to work with. I worked day and night, Kasper pushing me to the very limit of my ability in his urgency to train my skills so that I could go to work. Time was running short and as each moon passed, the work intensified.

When the time came for the allocation of service I was ready with both heart and soul to journey north, far beyond the horizon, to a far Isle of Oracles, the Isle of Albion, where I would work in service to the Great Lioness Goddess who resided there. She was the bringer of weather and I was a child of the wind and lightning: I was to take my place as a crafter and guardian of the weather on the most sacred isle in the world.

It was a place, I was told, of forests, bogs and mists, of a cold I could not even imagine, of metal crafters, women warriors and magicians whose skills were rivalled only by those in the great city of Arghilas.

Kasper and I walked aside the other priests as we began our long journey northwest to Isle of Oracles, a journey that would take years. The winter closed upon us early and we stopped in the land of the 'pig eaters' to wait until the spring brought a clearing to our path. This winter rest, which seemed so straightforward, would be the undoing of myself, Kasper and the lines of magic that flowed out of the great temple that we had just left. In retrospect, could we have survived the journey across the distant mountains in winter? I doubt it. Maybe the Great Power had this fate envisioned for us long before we were born. Who were we to question the greater pattern that lay before us?

Two weeks after we had settled in to wait out the snow, three travellers arrived at our camp and asked if they could join us as they waited out the winter snow. They hailed from the Isle of Oracles and with them they carried stories of a strange magical stone that held the power to make a man into a god. They

were priests of the Oracle and had been charged with finding the stone, which had been stolen from the sacred isle, and returning it to its proper home. They had failed, having only tales of its whereabouts. Kasper was intrigued: I watched his face as it changed from curiosity, to yearning, to planning. I grew afraid.

That night, I tossed and turned, fighting within my dreams, remembering, shouting and then surrendering to what needed to come. Upon awakening, I did as I had been trained to do. I walked away from the tents where we had encamped for the winter and walked down the hill a little to a lake which spread out beyond the hill where we had settled.

I sat by the water, listening to the gentle lapping of waves and stilled my mind. Images emerged from my memory, slowly at first, and then releasing in a crescendo of memories and emotions. It felt strange to not only remember, but to retrieve the feeling of whom I was in that life. The feeling of a different personality that was me felt strange, but I let the old personality wash around my present being, absorbing the ancient into the new.

I saw a strange valley surrounded by seven hills, and the valley was guarded by dragons. In the centre of the valley was a small stream which was fed by sacred springs. Upon the hill I saw women, magical women, guarding an ancient stone, the power of which pulsed throughout the land, bringing harmony, moisture, and fertility. I saw myself as one of those women.

Then came a dark storm, and with the storm came men of greed and evil, their faces tattooed with serpents. They took the stone and began killing the women, who fought back hard and viciously. I saw myself fighting with weapons, and using magic. Some of the men were magicians and one of them battled with me fiercely, but could not kill me.

We injured each other badly and as he lay upon the ground looking up at me, another pair of eyes looked out of his and hissed at me.

“I curse you, woman of the dragon land,” he said.

I plunged my spear into his throat so that he could curse no more. The eyes of Kasper looked out of the eyes of the man dying at my feet. He wanted the knowledge, he wanted power, and he wanted to be a god. And his face now swam fully before me in my dream: a warning that I must pass on. I awoke panting with fear, my cover wrapped between my legs as I clung to it like a frightened lover.

My warnings were brushed aside as our temple priests on this quest gathered together to discuss the stone and its power. All the men were drawn to it, only I and the only other female priest, Mina, could see the danger—it was as if the men had been blinded by some mysterious force that cast them upon a road of self-undoing. For four turns of the moon the travellers talked and plotted with our priests while Mina and I worked hard to keep the doors of silence and stillness open.

Mina and I talked by the lake, we took delight in the fall of snow; we sat among the great ancient trees and learned of the wisdom that they stored in their silent branches. I did not know what to do. I knew that they were planning to band together and find the stone, and they would no longer be able to work in the task that had been assigned to us. Looking back, my cowardice enabled terrible things to be unleashed around the world but I was too young to realize just how destructive the stone could be in the wrong hands.

Our priests at least did not divulge our secrets of power to the travellers, giving them instead tricks and minor magic to satisfy their curiosity. They saw us as primitive and naive, which probably saved our lives as they saw us as too weak to be a threat. But had Mina and I had enough courage and wisdom, we would have killed our four priests and the travellers, and gone on alone. My awe and respect for Kasper however was too strong and I was too young, filled with the ardour of youth and the wash of admiration that gripped the young and stupid.

As the spring approached, my fear for the future grew. The priests were preparing for the journey to the land eastwards, where the stone was said to be hidden by a greedy and stupid

king. I dared not confront them, not even Kasper. Mina and I stole quietly away down to the edge of the lake so that we could think and talk. We sat under an overhanging rock to shelter from the spring rain and decided what we would do for the future. Mina was a small young woman, her eyes deep wells of blackness that shone amid the white of her face. She was quick-thinking, open-hearted and her ability as a priestess of the forest was unrivalled. Her job on our mission was to establish communication with the land, rivers, forest and herbs and learn their secrets.

Her quick mind darted here and there as we tried to find a solution to the vast problems that lay ahead of us. The combination of powers held by our priests was too much and they were already becoming arrogant and enamoured of their potential for godlike ability. They would walk into the land eastwards and become kings, forgetting the Great Work and allowing the world to fragment and flood once more. I could not and would not let that happen.

I spoke that determination out loud and looked at Mina who had not responded to my words. Her face held a stone-like stare. The horror on her face as she looked into my eyes was the last thing I could focus on before my head began to explode with stars and flashes of lightning. I heard voices, felt warmth trickle down my neck and chest, I could not draw breath.

I awoke in the void and saw a path before me. I then understood what had happened. Someone had killed me, and probably Mina too. I had to focus as my path now was very defined and I had to tread carefully. I had been trained for a long time regarding the secrets of how to control the transition of death, and in the stillness of the void, that training came back to me like a tide washing back upon the shores of my mind.

I became very still and I focused upon the last thing I remembered and the place under the rock where I had sat. Instantly I was there, watching as Kasper stood over my body and apologized to me for slitting my throat. He told me I

would understand, because nothing should stand in the way of their obtaining the magical stone. His heart did not shine with love or service. As I looked at a person without flesh, I saw a heart that was cold, calculating and full of its own need for power. I felt a presence stood beside me watching.

“Harken to the true heart of man who loves nothing but himself, for he shall be the downfall of all that is beautiful in this world.”

I saw the wisdom in her words and realized that she spoke of more than Kaspe, she spoke of a lust of power that could potentially destroy this beautiful garden of life that we lived in.

“You must stop this from happening.”

I looked on helplessly, unable to do anything that would stop them obtaining the stone.

“You must go back into life, so that you can continue your work. You have yet to learn the skills that you need, so you must return to life again and again until you are complete. You cannot stop them obtaining the stone, but you can affect the future and stop the flow of power. Focus your intent on continuing your work, focus your intent on returning at a crucial point to be able to bring about change and balance, focus your intent upon breaking up the pattern of this new hybrid of kingly greed. And most importantly, focus intent upon ensuring that the stone returns to its resting place and is guarded by the sword.”

I turned my attention inwards away from the scene of two broken and bloodied shells that were once women, and from the swirls of greedy power that emanated from the priests.

Already, beings from the deep Abyss were beginning to assemble, called by the act of murder by a priest of power. I went into stillness, bathing in the silence and being at one with the timelessness. I waited for the call, which came quickly. My name echoed around me and I began to walk. I walked through nothing until I emerged out of the void and was walking in the desert towards the river of death.

Two companions walked on either side of me, their long hair trailing in the sand behind them, erasing their footsteps as they walked. The sun beat down upon me in the desert, its power

reaching into my brain and causing me to burn with a terrible thirst.

But I had been trained for this and I knew this feeling well. I had been through this desert before and welcomed its fierceness, which I knew was testing and preparing me. I reached the river of death and ignored the urge to drink but instead washed my face lightly, so that I would not hold to this image of myself. The two companions and I crossed the great bridge of death and upon reaching the other side of the river we all paused and looked back across the water. I could still see my body, laid now by the river upon a pyre that danced with fire. I watched the empty tears of a corrupt priest and allowed any remaining emotion in my body to fall away from me.

The two companions each placed a hand upon my head, and reached to the stars with their other hands. They began to sing in a beautiful harmony that lit my soul, and a response of harmonies descended from the stars. The sounds from the stars and the sounds from the companions began to come together to create a song that was beyond all earthly beauty and defied description.

The four priests stood and watched the bodies of the two female priests burn. Once they were sure that every morsel of their once physical form was gone, they began their journey eastward to the land of the two rivers, the land that was the centre of power for the world: the land that hid the stone.

I am swimming in the silence and the stillness, and my heart sings with joy at being back where I belong. This eternal flow of power that my consciousness washes in and out of is my refuge, the place where I am truly in balance. My thoughts spread across time and space, all existence is one, all knowledge is one, all creations are one. I am, nothing more. *“Lumis, can you tell me where you are and what you are doing? Describe for us what you are seeing.”*

The voice of Aaron drifted into the story and jarred a soul deep in peace. A familiar and yet strange voice calls to me and

asks me what I see, what I feel. What I see is all of creation and what I feel is the stillness of power. But there are no words to express the experience, so I stay silent within the silence, wrapping its beautiful ecstasy around my thoughts.

“Are you in a life Lumis?”

I shake my head. “No. I am home, where I belong in the nothing.”

A pause, the voice is silent for a moment.

I am turning in on myself, as if turning on a wheel and falling. I am falling and the silence around me is intruded upon by sound and density. Everything is becoming dense, everything is becoming dark.

CHAPTER SIX

“Lumis, gently, open your eyes and be aware of your surroundings.”

Aaron’s voice was soft and tempered. Its lilt found its way into Lumis’ mind and drew her back to the library and to the faces that surrounded her.

She opened her eyes, disorientated, and looked around as if lost. Aaron was lighting a cigarette, his eyes focused upon the flame and Benjamin was sat, his face focused intently upon Lumis. Stefan was clattering around in the kitchen and the library was still there, just as she had left it. But the last time she had seen the library felt like lifetimes ago. Her heart lurched in confusion, her thoughts disorientated. She was heartbroken. She was back in this life, one she had feared even before she was born. She knew that now. Her beloved mountains were not here, the snow that curled itself around her like a loving mother was not here. This is not where she belonged, she thought in a panic.

Stefan wove his way through the piles of papers, books and boxes that created an assault course from the kitchen to the library, his hands expertly balancing a tray laden with coffees and cookies. He was not prepared for the shocked look on Lumis’ face as he steered towards the sofas. Her face echoed thoughts of terror, kinship and confusion all rolled into one. His senses picked up upon her deep thoughts, waves of them assaulting him as he carefully placed the refreshments on the low ash-covered table. What was it she saw in him? She was asking herself the same question when Benjamin asked her a question. She answered positively, “well yes,” words that drew a sharp intake of breath from Stefan and a frown from Aaron.

Once more she was confused. She had answered while still looking at Stefan, her thoughts jumbled as she struggled to contain herself in the here and now.

“What?”

She asked the question sharply as she looked from Stefan to Aaron. Benjamin had asked her a question in a regional Tibetan tongue and she had answered in the same language. What had made Aaron frown was not the language, but the question and her answer.

Benjamin had asked if the Mother was still within her, in this life. She had answered yes. Benjamin's voice was slow and thoughtful. His crooked finger waved around once more as he thought of the best way to pose the next question.

"Do you remember what I just asked you. The question, do you remember it?"

Lumis smiled. One day, she thought, Benjamin will say something only once.

She thought for a moment with a vacant smile, which quickly faded as she remembered what he had asked her. It was then that she also realized he had not asked her in English. Suddenly she was afraid. For the first time in this life, she felt another presence around her; a presence she realized had always been there with her, a presence that held urgency, a need for action.

And for the first time in her life she also now knew why she had spent her childhood dreaming that she was falling out of a window. She remembered everything. The story that had emerged in the earlier session, a story that placed her in Tibet had still felt like only a story when they had started the latest regression. But now, at 1am in the morning, her head bursting with memories, sounds, smells and strange words, she knew it was not a story. This was real and it was still haunting her. She remembered Tibet and another place that called itself Parsa, a place where she had been a little girl. She put her head into her hands and wept.

Aaron shuffled to her side, sat down beside her and placed a fatherly arm around her. He began to pray quietly, his Hebrew braiding silent balms that eased the enormity of what faced her. He also acknowledged the burden she carried within her and prayed that she would have the strength to do what-

ever had been ordained for her to do within this lifetime. It was all beginning to make sense to him, the demonic attacks, the immense powers that swirled around her and the brightness that shone from her. He felt her life force ebbing from the strain of the regression and he motioned Stefan to light the fire in the spare room. She was going to need to sleep and recoup before they could talk further.

Stefan lit a fire in the small decorative old fireplace and also lit a couple of candles around the room. He paused briefly, tuning in the candles to bring peace and stillness to the room. He wished desperately for peace and stillness within himself. A fire raged within him, filling him with a sensual power he had never known existed within him. He had steered himself away from women for many years now, scoffing at the struggles some priests claimed to have with their celibacy. But something about Lumis stirred something very deep and old within him, a primal force that he knew he could not contain.

He touched her discarded clothing and a hurriedly prepared overnight bag that she had pulled together at Aaron's request. The room smelled faintly of perfume and he stood, eyes closed, and sniffed. He drifted for only a moment before Aaron's voice cut through the feral musk that was beginning to rise around him. His body was scenting like a wild animal in heat and beads of sweat formed around his hairline as he struggled to appear normal and go back into the library.

Her face was drawn and white by the time he announced a lit fire and a room ready for slumber. Lumis rose unsteadily to her feet, her eyes trying to track a path between the chaos and the door to the living quarters, her mind a jumble of confusion and questions.

"Sleep, young lady, have a good sleep and we will talk when you are ready."

She could not even answer Aaron. She nodded as she walked away, her mind already falling into a darkness that she could not escape.

My dreams weave my emotions in and out of a strange dark place. Longing, regret and a strange curiosity tinged with excitement colour the stories that my mind flickers around, like the flames of a struggling fire. Faces come and go, too fast for me to grasp and recognize, faint snatches of conversation and then the eyes, those longing eyes focus before me and reach out to me in sleep.

My body burns with an unknown desire, a union uncompleted, a scale unbalanced. My instincts have full rein in my slumber, unable to process thought or logic, my body strains like a wild animal against the life that I have chosen. Somewhere an echo from a time long past flits and dances before me like feathers discarded to the wind.

Emotions; love, desire, fear, all take their turns in standing before me with a face I know and yet do not. "I know you," I cry out, "I know you." A name, Belseth, is remembered somewhere and I call the name. It is a name bound to my very blood, to the threads who make me who I am and who remind me of who I have been.

The scent is something I notice within my dream, a scent of the forest, of musk and of unquenched desire. A breath passes over the skin on my naked shoulder and a soft careful hand rests upon my thigh. I turned sleepily, still dreaming, still drifting in the warmth of a soft bed. I gravitate to the heat that has lain beside me, responding to the moistness that searches out my tongue.

That moistness anoints my lips, my neck, my breasts and my belly, and I unfurl from the coldness that holds my heart in place. Hands celebrate my contours with a delicious softness, brushing against me like soft grass. Hair falls across my face and a strength brushes against me, its hardness contrasting with the gentle touch and half-held breath. Silently, the strength seeks out my warmth and enters me, is upon and within me, calling me from the depths of the darkness, to be

there with him. I open dreamily to the southern wind that searches for my soul, my legs falling away, allowing access to the most sacred vessel within all women.

Sleepily I open my eyes as the slow defined thrusts call to my spirit, and the Mother stirs within me. His eyes are wide, confused, and his feral drive grips him as he searches deeper and deeper within me for that power which he craves, and yet fears. The cup within me, placed there in the far past by an ancient priestess of the Great Power, spills its contents upon him in his lust and burns the skin that protects his soul. His soul laid bare, the agony of madness seeps into his veins but the urge of his passion dulls his pain as he digs deeper and deeper into me.

The Mother looks back at him as she accepts his seed, his throat battling to contain the cry that demands release. He is poised, held on his arms over me, his spirit reaching for the Goddess of all destruction. As his pleasure fades I fully awaken and pull my skin from his skin, my limbs from his limbs.

My sight is clear and strong in this safe place and I see his quest, his urgency to connect with the destroying power that nestles sleepily within me. Many faces parade before me but the eyes, always the eyes stay the same: eyes of greed, corruption, guilt, and the wish to reach for forgiveness. I see his weakness, his enthrallment with a power that will destroy him and I begin to weep.

The tears of many lives fall, tears of growing up, of realizations, the tearing of veils and the facing of myself. I sob, my body shaking, as if trying to shake off a skin no longer valid. He reaches out a hand to me and I jump as if electrocuted. In his spent passion, he stands naked, confused and disorientated, as if awoken from a long and troublesome dream.

The door opens, flooding the bedroom with light and a second of silence is followed by a sharp intake of breath. I look up, my tears washing the strands of hair that flow down my face. The bed sheet is pulled around my nakedness and my soul is spilling onto the floor in desperation.

Aaron had stood outside the spare bedroom door and waited for a few seconds, listening to the sobbing and deciding whether to intrude or not. After a moment's indecision, he could not bear to listen to her pain anymore.

Today had been a terrible strain upon her and his heart lurched with a protectiveness and honor. He could not leave her to suffer this way. He tapped lightly upon the door but the sound fell unheard in the room beyond. He opened the door slowly and peered into the darkness while calling her name. He was not prepared to see Stefan, who was stood transfixed and naked in the centre of the room, staring helplessly at the figure draped in a bed sheet, her hair as wild as her eyes. Aaron was torn between the wish to protect Lumis and the rage he felt towards Stefan. Benjamin was close behind him, woken by the noise and confusion. The two men stood in the doorway, unable to speak for a moment, taking in the scene with a sense of utter disbelief.

Benjamin moved first. He grasped Stefan by the arm and pulled him bodily out of the room and away from Lumis. Aaron stood for a moment in shock before he pulled himself together and sat beside Lumis on the bed. Her sobs had not abated and Aaron searched for her in the wildness of the eyes that cast around the room. She was not there.

And yet all of her, all of the many lives were there in those eyes, all at once. Whatever had happened here had triggered something and had cast her back through her lives, as if she was in all of them at once. Aaron gathered her up into his arms and began to pray as he placed a hand quietly and firmly upon her head. The prayers broke through the wall of despair and slowed the sobbing to a stop. Her eyes closed and her head lolled forwards. Aaron took her pulse. Her breathing was shallow; she was deep in a hypnotic trance. Something had triggered her; something had pulled her deep into caves of her mind where no one could reach her.

Aaron wrapped the sheet around her body, his aging muscles screaming with strain as he walked out of the bedroom with Lumis in his arms, the sheet trailing behind him. He took her into the sanctuary, his mind blocking out everything except what he had to do. She lay gently like a sleeping child upon the floor in the centre of the octagonal sanctuary which shook as the heavy oak door sealed the room against everything.

With a slow deliberate walk, he went around the directions, lighting the flames in the four directions and praying quietly, filling the room with the names of G-D, weaving the power around her as he went. The sanctuary began to vibrate like a drum, its frequencies reaching throughout the worlds as the sacred space tuned itself to the highest sound of Divinity.

Lumis lay silent and sleeping, her hair trickling around her and seeping out onto the ancient oak floor. Aaron knelt beside her, praying over a small silver bowl filled with consecrated oil. Carefully and deliberately, he blessed her, placing his hand upon her head and calling upon the angelic powers of the directions to be with her in this hour of need. His finger dipped slowly into the oil, and with a single thoughtful movement, he brushed her hair from her brow and consecrated her upon her forehead, reiterating and strengthening the mantle of the eternal priestess that she was. Taking a deep breath, he gently moved the sheet to one side, exposing her cool white skin. His finger marked the sigil of consecration upon her heart, his lips forming the prayer of blessing and protection.

The sheet fell further back from her sleeping form, exposing her belly, hips and thighs as he gently shaped a protective sigil in oil upon her abdomen: blessing her womb, the vessel of the Goddess. With the care of a loving parent, his hands carefully lowered the sheet back over her still form, restoring her sleeping modesty. In a final act of blessing, his fingers traced the sigil of consecration upon the soles of her feet, his breath whispering the ancient prayers which asked the sacred companions to walk in her footsteps, guiding and protecting her in the darkest hour of need.

He stood stiffly, arching his back and looking at the sleeping maiden at his feet before once more kneeling beside her. His hands slipped under her head, searching for the vertebrae that was most pronounced at the base of her neck: one of the points of entry and exit for life force. The flat of his hand rested calmly upon her neck and his low tender voice began to recite a long and detailed prayer in Hebrew, sealing and protecting this most vulnerable point in her body. Aaron grunted to himself as he felt the result of an impact already there: his prayers dug out any residue from that impact before sending it out to the four directions.

Once finished, he sat with her head in his lap and felt into her spirit with his. He needed to find where she had hidden herself and what had happened in that room to send her spirit fleeing. He had already guessed that Stefan had made love to her and his face creased in anger at the younger man's stupidity. Did he not realize how vulnerable she was? But he knew Stefan well, and knew that the man would have only seen the power that hid itself within her—he would have become obsessed with connecting with and becoming part of that power. Stefan would not have meant to hurt her, but he could be such an idiot sometimes and this time he had gone too far.

The electrical charge that had run between Stefan and Lumis had slowly become obvious to Aaron, and he had guessed that fate had brought her to this door because they were all somehow, somewhere in time, interconnected. He had meant to address this with Stefan, and forgotten in the midst of everything else that was happening.

Aaron turned his thoughts away from Stefan and instead focused once more upon Lumis. Reaching within her he was immediately confronted by the hot breath of the Dark Goddess upon his face. Aaron gently touched his forehead in great respect to the ancient Mother and she in turn acknowledged his presence. Aaron stretched deeper into the inner landscape of the woman who lay sleeping, her head lying softly across his legs. He pushed against a membrane of protection and was just

about to give up when he broke through into the space that was Lumis at her deepest and most ancient part.

* * *

I see him, a shadow emerging from the mists that trap and taunt me. I am unable to run to him or to call to him. I stand, holding open my heart, which bleeds a slow waterfall to my feet. To my right the Goddess stands, her hands holding onto my life force, keeping me within the life I so dearly wish to escape. To my left is the ancient serpent who is a storm god: he too pulls at my life force, wishing to trap it and hold it forever from the cycle of life. Within me is exhaustion. Within me is a pain so profound I call it God.

The man walks towards me with his arms outstretched, calling me to seek refuge in his embrace. I pull back in fear. Every man who has looked into my naked eyes and touched my electric skin has the eyes of the human who peers through the eyes of the demon. How can they all be the same man?

They are not, says the Mother, but they are of the same lineage. They are sent unknowing to you, and the priests of the volcanic fire temple, the underworld temple of the serpent looks through them as they seek you out. That is why you were put into my path, to carry me. You are a threat to them, but they cannot destroy you while ever I sleep within you.

That one comment lifts a veil of confusion and desperation that has haunted me from my childhood. Things begin to make sense.

The man comes closer and I see clarity in his eyes and honesty in his heart. I relax. There is something about this man that is like no other man. He has the eyes of an angel and the songs that follow him sing of peace and balance. He reaches out and envelops me in an embrace of peace, with a love filling his heart. He stands back and looks at me, reviewing my soul and the patterns that surround me.

I watch his face as he circles me, looking at the threads that

fall away from me into the mists of time, all of my lives that interplay around my soul, they are all here and I wear them like a dress. The man frowns. One thread has been caught in something and he moves to release it. The Mother within stops him.

She must release it, says the Mother, in the light of day and in the waking mind of her life, she has to awaken in full knowledge to wield the sword.

She lets him look at the thread, browse around it and touch it like a ball of silk trapped to me by invisible pins. As he touches it, a deep understanding settles upon his face and I see a decision made.

The man leaves no footprints as his feet carry him off into the mist, his hand beckoning me to follow. I am tired and wish to stay and rest here, but he urges me on, deeper and deeper into the mists that separate me from the life that I hide from.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Lumis awoke, Aaron was still dozing in a chair, his body awkwardly twisted into pretzels as his eyelids fluttered from unseen adventures.

She sat up and looked around. She was confused and disorientated: her eyes cast around a large room that she did not recognize, but was obviously still in Aaron's house. Sunlight cascaded down upon her from above through a four-sided glass pyramid that was the pinnacle of the sanctuary roof.

The room was octagonal with a small balcony running all the way around it. The balcony had been built so that it was circular within the octagonal room and the walls of the sanctuary went from eight sides to a roof of four equal sides as it formed a vaulted Maltese cross. The square in the centre of the roof was the base of a glass pyramid that stuck up into the sky and brought a beautiful pattern of sunlight to her feet. Lumis was amazed; she had never seen anything like this before.

Something pulled at her to lie down in the pool of sunlight and bathe in its strength. The sun warmed her and danced around her. It pulled her eyes closed once more and filled her mind with light. The room vibrated like a drum. Now she recognized the room; this was the room behind the wall in the spare room where she would rest her forehead. Its vibration grew stronger and louder in her head as her mind sought refuge in its pulsing rhythm. She remembered what had happened the night before, when Stefan had come to her in dreams and body. She coloured as she remembered and yet even now, as then, she knew it was something that had to happen, for a reason. What reason?

Aaron, Lumis and Benjamin sat in the library holding steaming cups of very strong coffee and looking at each other. Stefan had rambled like a maniac about a sword before bolting out of

the front door an hour earlier. Lumis wanted to climb inside the sofa and never come out.

She tried to speak, to voice what had happened. She opened her mouth and Aaron put up his hand.

“It’s ok, I know there were deeper things going on that neither of you could possibly understand. The regression has triggered many things in all of us and I have the feeling we three are linked in some way, yes?”

Lumis nodded, her eyes not moving from the coffee table piled with papers, ashtrays and candles.

“Lumis, we need to move on and keep going, there are many powerful forces gathering and they will not wait for us. Can you continue.”

Lumis nodded and looked to Benjamin whose eyebrows were clinging to each other in a thinking embrace.

“What about Stefan, will he be ok?”

Lumis was worried, ashamed and angry with herself for behaving like an idiot.

“He will be fine, I have called a companion who will see to him.”

Lumis nodded miserably.

“I’m so sorry all this has happened Aaron, I truly am.”

Aaron shook his head.

“When you start digging around power and ancient threads, these things do surface and we just deal with them the best we can. Are you ready to start again in a minute?”

Lumis nodded and finished her coffee.

“Ready for action then?” asked Benjamin.

Aaron nodded and Lumis once again lay down on the couch, pulling the shawl over her legs. It felt strange not having Stefan at her feet but her mind was soon pulled by Aaron’s voice and the quiet click of the tape recorder. Aaron’s voice pulled her deeper and deeper into the mists, her arms pushing it back as it tried to block her path. The gentle voice directed her, telling her to peer deeper and deeper into the mists.

She felt like she was falling through nothing, turning and

turning as she fell through voices, sensations and scents. The voice that pulled her into peace vanished into the distance as her understanding of who she was and where she was faded to nothing. Her spirit tumbled through a mist of silence, at peace and yet aware. A light ahead of her gave her focus and she aimed for the light that grew brighter.

She felt her connection to life pull very thin and was about to try and wake herself out of the trance when something bumped her from behind. She turned and faced a lion that looked at her calmly, with eyes of peace and power. She recognized the lion: something deep inside her cried with relief, a reuniting with a long lost friend. The lion watched her for a moment, his calm powerful eyes taking everything in and missing nothing.

The lion, Arael, paced around her in a circle, his ears twitching and his nostrils searching the air for danger as he nudged her to follow him. Together they wove a path through the nothing, pushing deeper and deeper into the dark mist until she began to hear voices. The darkness became damp, and smelled of a strange smell that Lumis recognized but could not understand. Arael hung back, his tail swishing and his head shaking back and forth: he would go no further; she had to make this step alone. That realisation terrified her. Letting go of his mane she took one more step forward and held her hand before her in the darkness, groping for what lay beyond.

My feet weave a path to the top of a hill where a group of female Smiths are waiting, their fires burning in a small clearing. As I reach the top of the hill, I stop to catch my breath and look around. The hill falls away steeply before me, levelling out at the sacred bank that holds a spring, and then falls again sharply to the valley floor.

The top of the hill is ringed with oak trees and in the centre is a large deep hole that has been dug. My feet sink into the soft

ground and I realize that a natural spring also surfaces here and feeds the soft moss in the clearing. The gathered Smiths hold torches high, lighting the way for me, their faces silent with expectation.

Efail, the old Smith, holds a cup high towards the night sky. The cup is an opaque white goblet which shines in the light of the moon. I am offered the cup from which I drink bitter herbs; they line my throat as I drink the draught of death. A rumble of thunder in the distance welcomes me and I look to the sky to see the clouds of a storm gathering. The rain will soon come.

I feel the power in the grove build to almost breaking point. This was what I had been born to do; my whole life was one beautiful intricate weave that had brought me to this point. I stumble, my body struggling with the power as it builds and builds within me, leaving no room for my life breath. Efail brings the sword before me. It is beautiful. The blade is long and smooth with no grooves on it at all. The hilt has a strange shape, most unlike the half moons or small swirls I was used to.

The hilt is a straight bar made of bone carved to look like arms decorated with snakes and swirls. The handle was the most beautiful part: long and carved on the end with the round head of an owl woman. I instinctively reach out for the sword and place the hilt before my mouth, take a deep breath and close my eyes. My feet are deep in the earth, and my head high in the stars. Stillness descends upon me and silence rises to meet me.

Something stirs within me, something old and powerful; a language, a script of magic that holds the deepest secrets from all but those who could read the signs of the ancient Goddess. It fills my lungs, it fills my heart and it screams for release. Thousands of years of waiting have come to an end. Thousands of voices from deep within the belly of the land speak of a longing for justice. Thousands of tears left unshed now fill my

lips and my mouth opens to set free a secret that could one day save my beloved garden, this earth.

With a noise that sends a shiver down the back of all assembled and hidden, I open my mouth wider in a convulsive movement and breathe a breath down the blade of the sword. The breath comes with an unearthly groaning noise that echoes around the grove, striking fear into the assembled group.

The moonlight becomes much brighter and seems to fall upon the sword with a reflected flash as my breath touches the cold metal. Moonlight hits the sword and strange markings begin to appear down the blade, etched by some mysterious force that dances across the strange cold metal. Thunder rumbles once more, louder this time, with a force that shakes the ground upon which I stand. My breath pushes the last sigil out and on to the sword. The sigils glow with the light of the moon which seems to dance upon the magical blade as the last breath vanishes and all is silent.

I fall to my knees as my legs no longer serve to hold me. My last breath, the breath of life, has been expelled in the service of the Goddess. A small trail of blood weaves its way from my lips to my chin as I look up at Efail and my eyes say goodbye; no breath would ever dwell in my lungs again.

Two of the Smiths catch my dying body as I slump to the ground, I can still hear, still smell, and my sight is that of a bird, looking down upon the women gathered around me in service. They run their fingers through my hair as they begin to sing the song of passage.

My spirit is woven into the life of the sword and will dwell there for as long as the sword exists. My body, the scabbard of the sword, will be buried in the oak grove as I begin my sleep in the deep rich earth. And yet a great heaviness bleeds in my heart. I know that something will break the spell, something would un-weave the magic so carefully woven by these magical women: I do not know why I know, but I feel it all around me. That knowing fills my heart with sadness.

Efail stands firm and proud as she holds the sword high by

its blade, so that its cruciform shape flashes before all who are gathered. The Smiths begin to chant, calling down the Goddess of the Moon to be with them. They gather my body and place me, stood upright, arms outstretched in a hole dug to accept my body.

Moonlight flows into the sword and as the sword shines with the life of the Goddess, Efail plunges the sword into me. The blade enters at my throat, passes straight down through my body, rooting me to the soft ancient earth. My sightless eyes stare at the moonlight and a sense of completion reigns within me. It is done.

Lightning flashes through the clouds as the women prepare to fill the hole. Efail tells them to step back while she begins her magical recitations to the moon and the lightning. Her silent footsteps pace around the hole, her voice calling out to the powers to seal this burial, and to charge the sword with light.

With her arms held outstretched to the sky, the old woman screams and the sky answers. A bolt of lightning comes down from the sky and up from the earth; the powers collide in the sword and send sparks flying in all directions. The sword has been tempered; the quest is complete.

A single voice dances through the trees like the wind, reciting poems of the Moon while the younger women fill the hole that holds my lifeless body. My spirit weeps as I look out across time, through death and beyond. I can see now that this sacred burial, for which my spirit had worked so hard, will be so easily defiled by those who choose a greed for power. My soul will have to return again and again to this world, drinking from the shores of life as I attempt to right a terrible wrong.

Lumis, tell me, what do you see?

A voice intrudes once more into the darkness where my soul weeps. How do I voice the despair that I am trapped in? I stay silent, sleeping out of time.

Lumis, step forward, step through the mist and tell me what you see.

I do not wish to be enveloped by the mists of time, but I know I cannot stay here. I step forward, reaching back as far as I can reach, stretching out across the Abyss of worlds to find my roots, to find the beginning, to go home. I step into a desert that is the same as my soul, barren, a wasteland burned to nothing by an unloving sun and a bitter wind. Is this what I am? An abandoned desert?

The companion, Arael, walks in circles around me and then sits, leaning his strong loving head against my shoulder. Even his silent friendship cannot break this burden that I carry. And yet the lion seems happy, looking out over the distance with a sense of satisfaction. I follow his gaze. Out of the haze comes a shape, walking towards me. With him comes the wind, cooler, but sharper, like his voice.

As he gets closer, I cannot control my tears. They fall around me as witnesses to my pain, my relief, my joy and my uncertainty. My tears form an oasis in this bitter desert and his wind carries the moisture of my tears to the mountains of truth that tower around us. The mountains awaken, their wisdom dawning once more which shines like a brittle beacon for those who can see. Trees grow where my tears have fallen and the scent of jasmine fills the air around and beyond me. The land beneath my feet shakes with delight.

Lumis, can you hear me?

I nod absently, entranced with a stillness that has settled upon me, like a hand steadying a nervous creature.

Lumis, answer me, can you hear me.

I am confused. The figure that walks towards me is familiar, and I hear a voice within my head, and yet his lips do not move. His sharp eyes, the eyes of a falcon, piercing, loving, watch me as he walks closer.

My emotions fade into the sand, my thoughts focus upon the approaching figure who is the bright sun that brings life to the desert. Behind him rages a wind that drives sand into flesh: it is trapped by his passing, limited in its anger as the sun casts

a lightness that the storm cannot comprehend. Behind him is a trail of broken threads, torn by his passing.

A voice pulls upon my soul as the figure draws near. I fight the call to return, I fight the voice that will once again break the pathway to my everlasting, to a scent that birthed with me from my mother's womb.

Lumis open your eyes, says the voice.

I lift my eyelids and am immediately plunged into a heavy darkness, far from the sun and the scent of the desert. I turn my face to the wall in defeat.

Aaron looked at the broken face of Lumis as she stared into the distance beyond him. Benjamin got up quietly to put the kettle on as he was at a loss as to what else to do.

The face of Lumis haunted him and he felt unable to break the spell in the room that bound Aaron to Lumis, and Lumis to the face of death. Aaron reached out to touch Lumis, to reach her in the darkness that shrouded her eyes and her soul. He began to pray quietly, calling upon the angels to be with her, to protect her and to lift her from the dark place that he, meddler that he was, had placed her.

She did not respond, her soul trapped somewhere beyond his understanding. Something that she had just experienced had stripped something from her and left her exposed to the harsh reality of life manifest.

He turned off the recorder, noting that little had been actually said even though Benjamin and he had watched her battle something, someone, deep in the distant recesses of a lost time. He knew, somewhere within him that he held a responsibility to her but he did not know why.

Aaron was not used to being in a place of not knowing, he was used to being able to hold a situation, to manipulate it, to bring about change, and that was what he had always felt his life was about. But somehow Lumis had fallen through his

grasp and had wandered into a time and place beyond his reasoning and understanding. He looked at his hands, knowing that there was something he had to accomplish within Lumis and within himself. The loss of knowing gripped him like the hand of a troubled adult to a child and he thrashed against himself, against his ignorance and against his own sense of control.

Benjamin returned from the kitchen to see two broken people, falling down an Abyss he could not see nor comprehend. It was late. It was a darkness of night that had crept up unawares and taken the light from the eyes of these two people before him.

He realised there was only one thing that could be accomplished at this time and that was for everyone to withdraw and digest what had happened and what was happening to each person. Benjamin put down the cups, realizing that making a drink had been a futile gesture and the only thing he could do was to put them both to bed and get some rest himself.

He picked up Lumis, her eyes still blank and held her in his arms as he carried her to her room and placed her ever so gently upon the bed. Removing her shoes, she uttered not a sound, made no movement other than to pull the cover over herself and close her eyes, plunging herself into a darkness she would never understand.

* * *

I see his face, faint against the sun that burns my eyes, but his look, his gesture, enlivens my soul as it searches to drink in a barren wasteland.

“Find me” he calls. “Reach out and find me, I am here always and I will always wait for you, however long it takes.”

His scent invades me, his touch enlivens me. I struggle against a darkness that pins me down and will not release me no matter how much I plead and pray.

“Hold on to me, here feel me, I am here, always.”

His face is golden against a swath of black storm. His power shines around him, the patterns of the desert flowing from his lips as he speaks. His eyes talk of love, lost and yet not lost.

I lose track of his touch and I fall once more into a well of memories, snatched and incomprehensible. How many times will I fight this darkness that surrounds me. How many times will I call and call without being heard. How many times will I lose you and therefore lose myself.

The dark shape with human eyes of red watches me from the corner of the room. He cannot get closer, but he knows where I am and his hands ache to grasp the breath out of my throat. My spirit turns to sleep as I am no longer afraid. I surrender my spirit to the arms of The Mother and she holds me, not too closely, but with compassion. I am at rest.

* * *

The sun watched the lightning with awe: she was beautiful as she cast her light and moisture all around her, bringing life to the desert. The sun reached out to her, offering a hand of love.

"I have the breath of rain," says the lightning.

"And my strike brings death to the young of those who turn their faces from me, but my tears bring forests, rivers and fruitfulness."

"And I have the warmth that gives life," says the sun. "I burn those who seek to ignore me, but I hold up those who seek the sun with a pure heart. Together we can dance the forests, the lakes and the rivers into being. We can cast deep rich silt upon the land to grow food for the earth's children. And if those children turn their faces from us, we will wipe them away, casting them from the forest and condemning them to the life of the desert. Will you join me, lightning, in our service to the Divine?"

"I will" said the lightning.

Together they cleaned the face of the earth, nourished the rivers and forests, and kept the creatures and Man in check. But Man grew clever: he called a great ancient serpent that lived deep in the fiery underworld, which rose up in the form of a dark storm. The serpent

taught Man how to worship him, how to bind the power of the stars, and how to control the angels.

The serpent was jealous of the sun and wanted the lightning for himself. The lightning was the most beautiful thing he had seen, a light to light the deepest darkness, a power that was vast, and quick, a power that he must have. So he tried to seduce the lightning. But she loved the sun. He tried to bargain with the lightning, but the serpent had nothing she desired. The serpent became angry and wanted revenge.

The lightning unfurled wings of an eagle and flew across a great city from which rose the voices of those crying in confusion. The lightning searched for that which needed to be balanced by her power, but the great serpent rose from the sands of the desert, spitting its venom at the lightning as she flew.

The sun raged in anger at the serpent, protecting his beloved lightning and a great battle was fought. All the angels of the heaven descended and all the demons of the Abyss rose but none could slay the serpent that tried to strike the lightning. The lightning ignored the serpent, refusing to turn her face to his and his fury was the fury of a thousand gods. The serpent used fire magic to bind the lightning, to hold her in his grasp.

The serpent and the sun battled, while the earth enclosed itself around the lightning to protect her. The lightning lay hidden deep within the belly of the earth, a place of hiding where the serpent could not see, but the binds of magic grew tighter and tighter around the lightning, squeezing the life force from her. As the binds around the lightning got tighter, so the sun was bound also: as they were of one another, male and female of one power. The power of the sun and the lightning could no longer stop the power of the serpent as he fashioned himself into a storm god.

Our Mother, the Earth, held to the serpent, who struggled against the will of the desert. The God of the Stars watched this dance in silence. The Mother Earth cried out to the God of the Stars for help, and the stars responded.

“I shall fashion the lightning and sun into a woman and a man. I shall scatter their fate across many lives, so that they may find a

way to be free of the bindings that trap them so. But to do this, I must keep the scales balanced, I must fashion also a body for the serpent. Their battle will rage upon the earth, through the blood of Man, just as the war will rage in the heavens: as above so below. By their actions I will judge them; by their actions they will gain freedom or destruction through Judgement. This I will do.

The Mother looked upon her daughter the lightning and saw the terrible battles that were to come. She also saw what a terrible curse, disguised as help, the stars had cast upon the sun and the lightning. In response, for she could not undo the magic of the Star Father, she cast a thread of magic to modify the curse.

“I cast my heart out onto the earth as a black stone; it holds my secrets, my power and my knowledge. Whoever finds it can choose to return it to me, or to use it for their own power. If they return it to me, they will be stripped of any curse, any karma, and will walk free upon my beautiful skin, the earth. If they use it for their own ends, it will give them great power, but at a terrible cost.

I will also cast a sword out into the world to guard the stone. It will hang over the heads of humans who have the stone. If they are wise with the stone, it will guard them. If they are unwise with the stone, it will destroy them and all who are of them. It is the sword of Judgement that I cast out into the world to guard my most precious heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Aaron dreamt of battles and of heaven. He dreamt of winds blowing death across the beloved land of Jerusalem, and he dreamed of a woman weeping in the wilderness. Her face was the face of Lumis, and yet it was a face of no woman. Behind her stretched wings of an eagle and watching over her stood the Sandalphon, unable to stop her suffering but preventing the angel of death, who also stood silently beside her, from taking her life. His order of death was not of the will of God, but of the will of man, a man who served the serpent storm god, therefore the order could not be fulfilled. But the suffering continued and Aaron wept as his hands were held bound beside him.

He woke with a start, his head swathed in sweat and pain. The darkness of night was giving way to a sliver of morning that reached the foot of his bed and gently nudged him. He lay silent watching the light as it strengthened, his thoughts mindful of the ever-ticking clock beside him, nagging him to start the day.

Something bothered him. Something deep within him bothered him and pulled upon far distant memories that he could smell, but could not properly reach. There was a process happening, a powerful process in which he was a major player, but still he could not understand it.

His thoughts drifted to Lumis and the events of the last few days. The sessions had been powerful and the information had been far beyond what he thought would have come out. But none of it added up, none of it actually made any sense, and that made him uneasy. He liked to know exactly what was happening and why. But for the first time in his life, order evaded him and he did not like that. The more they delved into her soul, the more complex and confusing it became. There seemed to be no end and no answer, just more and more questions.

The next session started early and awkwardly. Benjamin looked as if he had had no sleep and Lumis still had a haunted look that frightened Aaron. And for the first time, many beings had arrived to witness the next session, beings that were allowed access to the sanctuary: the angelic beings of weaving and destiny. Aaron was surprised: these beings usually only turned up at birth and death situations, or worked deeply in the inner worlds, creating and destroying patterns of the fate of nations and civilizations. They crowded around, blocking out all other power in the sanctuary and the inner sanctum began to hum like a million bees.

Lumis picked up upon the presence and shot an alarmed look at Aaron. Benjamin placed a calming hand upon the shoulder of Lumis and paused in a Benjamin way to offer his wisdom. His finger poised in the air, ready to waggle with knowledge, Benjamin drew in a deep breath. They waited. Benjamin's eyes looked up at the ceiling, as if to examine in depth the cracks, water stains and peeling paint that swirled in lovely patterns around the ornate and heavily gothic brass chandelier. Both Aaron and Lumis cast their eyes to the ceiling too, as if to join in the search for words. The finger wagged—words of importance were coming.

“This session will be conducted in the inner sanctum, Aaron, not here in the library. And we need the voice of prayer as we work. I think we take turns in praying as the other works with Lumis.”

Benjamin, his finger still poised in the air, did not wait for a reply but immediately got up to go to the inner sanctum, but not before helping himself to a honey bagel, Aaron's favourite and only breakfast, which he crammed into his mouth. He was hungry, hungry enough to eat a whole oven-load of bagels, but he controlled himself and left the rest on the plate. Aaron and Lumis looked at each other as Benjamin first said a prayer at the threshold of the inner sanctum and then carefully swung open the heavy sanctuary doors.

The sanctuary hummed and vibrated like a tight drum, the

frequency changing as Benjamin asked Aaron to light the sanctuary lights. They took cushions and rugs, laying them on the floor in the centre of the sanctuary and made themselves comfortable—well, as comfortable as two aging and creaky Jewish men could make themselves.

Lumis lay down in the centre on a soft deep red rug. A woollen blanket was lain across her and Aaron softly brushed his hand across her brow, closing her eyes and sending her deep down a well of time and space. His voice distanced itself almost immediately and the click of the recorder barely registered itself.

* * *

His face looms out of the whirlwind of sand around him, the sun shining still in the face of a desert storm filled with rage. I stand unable to move or speak.

It is not a love of lovers, nor a love of blood that tears at my heart, but a love that is indefinable, a love that transcends all others. It is a love of two elements that are of one another, the one divided into two, a separation that leaves two souls wandering in the desert trying to find meaning from the mountain of confusion and pain that they find themselves in. And yet I know my completion is alone, within myself, wrapped within Divinity at the edge of the void.

I step forward, my lips sealed against the tide of emotion that laps around my feet, but my way is blocked by a serpent rising from within the sand storm, its red eyes pinning my soul in a constant circle of birth and death as I struggle against its grip.

I retreat, afraid, alone, unable to move forward. I cry out in the wilderness for the Gods to have mercy upon me and I surrender my soul, finally, to the will of Divine Being. The wind stops, the sand lies still and listening. He has gone, and the serpent has gone also. All that remains is an angel, waiting and watching. He is waiting for something, but I do not know what.

I look around me, surveying the desert that seems to stretch endlessly in all directions. It is empty, as am I. I sit down to wait, for there is nothing left within me. The sand shifts around my body as if to comfort me; I place my hand to the Earth and thank her for keeping vigil.

CHAPTER NINE

Raigmore General Hospital Intensive care unit

Seth looked at his watch for what seemed like the umpteenth time; he did not need to know the time, he knew it was half past ten. The constant click, wheeze and blow of the respirator, the bleep of the monitors and the clean efficient walk of the nurses were really beginning to irritate him.

His life was crashing down around his ears and no one raised a voice, everyone talked in matter of fact terms and the body that lay on the bed beside him was too still, too silent. He entwined her fingers with his absently, as if that tiny loving gesture would wake her up and she would stretch in her way, like a clumsy lioness before rolling over and looking into his eyes.

But nothing moved except her chest rising and falling in a dance with the life support. He knew she was still in there somewhere, he could feel her. But they had said she may not come back. They said they would review her, as if she was a badly written magazine, at midday and they would make their decisions regarding her long term care, if she lived, after that review.

He could feel her fighting somewhere, but the battle that raged was in the heavens, and her soul seemed to have forgotten that it had a body to take care of also. In the early days of her coma he had read to her, brought in her music from her car, her favourite smell of fresh coffee and kissed every inch of skin he could reach. Nothing. Not even a twitch. The days dragged on, still nothing.

Now he sat in despair, not knowing what to do, where to turn to: Lumis had so quickly become the centre of his life. Her clumsy klutzy ways had driven him up the wall sometimes, but now he floundered like the lost soul that he was. He buried his face into the sterile bedding and wept. The angel stood behind him, waiting impassively. A nurse placed a cold hand upon his

shoulder as it shook, her eyes of defeat betraying her understanding that the woman upon the bed would probably never wake up.

Until now his life had a defined path in service to the Order. Then Lumis had tumbled into his life like the puppy she was. She was entwined around his destiny, with his service to the stone, and suddenly she had made everything make sense.

Seth sobbed, and for the first time since he was a little boy at the feet of his grandfather, he began to pray. He promised many things, he sobbed of his inability to love without her, and he finally, and with true humility, asked God to save her, to wake her, to restore her.

“She will live and awaken only by the will of the most high, Be’ezrat haShem.”

His voice echoed around the lonely hospital room.

Upon the utterance, the angel nodded and smiled. The angel closed the book that it had been holding in its hands, waiting for the time of ‘reading the plains of death,’ but now no longer needed. It had been asked, and the Utterance will reply. The angel turned and vanished, but not before touching the head of Seth lightly, without emotion. The monitors continued to bleep, two red lights that watched constantly over the body upon the bed.

CHAPTER TEN

Aaron listened attentively as Lumis recounted what she had seen in the desert, and all the emotions that had flooded into her, her sense of loss and her fear of the serpent. As she spoke, another voice, praying softly while sobbing drifted into the sanctuary, causing the flames to flicker slightly. Benjamin looked up and looked around for the source of the sound, and then looked in confusion to Aaron. Lumis had not heard it, but the men had. They were all drained and exhausted from the session, so Aaron decided to announce that they must eat, and that he must cook. Benjamin's eyes lit up immediately: he loved food and most of all he loved Aaron's cooking, which was legendary.

I eat as if I have not eaten in years. The food is the most delicious, and unfolds its flavours upon my tongue with a childish delight. I watch the two older men deep in conversation which flicks from English to Yiddish to something else I do not understand, and then back to English as they sheepishly realize they are talking in a tongue that my brain cannot decipher.

Benjamin, his eyes alight with knowledge and his finger ensuring with its poise that we all know that the words being spoken are of great importance, dances from subject to subject and back again as the two men delight in each other's company. I watch enthralled, wishing I had their learning, and their friendship.

My plate emptied and my legs in need of a stretch, I motion that I am going to wander and Aaron waves a hand of freedom, the permission to roam where I will. My hunger sated and my mind feeling relaxed for the first time in a long time, I wander from room to room, my fingers trailing the books of the library, revelling in the hand-bound volumes with gilt edges and strange symbols.

Then I come to a door I had not noticed before with a key in the lock, carelessly discarded from its usual place around Aaron's neck. The door is ornate, with many magical symbols drawn most beautifully in gold ink, with the words Gevurah inscribed into the wood, and the inscription filled with gold. I turn the key expectantly and push the door open. A small room greets me, its walls covered from floor to ceiling in shelving. The shelving contains many ancient-looking pots, each inscribed with magical symbols, and sealed with what looks like lead. I run my fingers across the pots and I hear screams, cries and admonishments. I withdraw my hand as if stung and look closer.

I back away, too terrified to turn my back upon these prisons, for prisons they are. I back out of the room itself and shut the door, fumbling as I struggle to lock the door once more. The hair on my arms stands neatly to attention and I look at the closed door with a deep and lasting fear. I need air. I need to drink the cool whispers of the breeze to clear my mind and gather my thoughts back into an order I can understand.

Wandering through the building I find myself gravitating to the main door, passing by the beautiful works of art upon the walls of the hall, depictions and patterns that seem to be a part of me and to tell my story. How strange that they should be so familiar to me, so like me, and so of me.

Something has settled within me and I can feel the end of the tunnel. I truly thank heaven for Aaron, for giving me a chance to find help, to find sanctuary from the battle that rages within and all around me. I know I will have to gather myself at some point and leave this wondrous sanctuary, but it feels like it has become my home, my life and my whole reality: how much can change in the course of a few days.

I open the door to greet the afternoon sun and feel his warm winds upon my face. But the door stands open and before me is mist, nothing but a thick silent and empty fog that obscures the nothing beyond it. My heart freezes in terror: I know, in a deep ancient magical knowing, that there is nothing beyond

the door. The world beyond has gone and has no place for me, no meaning, no path and no future. Fear holds my throat fast, like a noose, pulled hard. I close the door, not in defeat but with a grim determination. I do not register the building, nor its beautiful art as I pound the floor back to the library.

The door to the sanctuary is still open from the last brief session. The lights are still lit and the smoke of frankincense weaves and curls out of the sanctuary door. I step into the sacred room and I am shocked by what I see.

I am laid upon rugs on the floor. To one side of me sits an angel who holds a sword, the blade pointing upwards. Upon the tip of the sword are scales and one side of the scales holds a white feather. Another angel is stood to one side, quietly praying. The angel of Judgement, for that is who holds the scales, asks me a question. I listen intently.

“Now you have the stone, what are you going to do with it?” asks the angel.

My eyes are closed as if sleeping, but my lips form words distinctly and carefully.

“I will return it to its source and do whatever service I am asked,” I reply.

“Do you not wish to partake of its power?” asks the angel.

“No” I reply, “for it is not mine to take.”

The angel nods and looks past the me who is sleeping and sees the me stood in the doorway. I am told to enter, which I do, confused and afraid.

Once in the sanctuary, the door slams shut. Grimwald lumbers over and sits in the south. He motions for Benjamin to stand in the north, for Aaron to stand in the east and for me to stand in the west. We move like sleepers in a deep dream, realizing with each step we take, that nothing around us is real, nothing is as it seems. All of our reality has faded and now there is only the sanctuary, out of time and out of existence.

Grimwald’s voice booms around the sanctuary.

“Children of Divinity, know thyself,” the voice declares.

I already know that I am in a place of death, that nothing

around me is real in a living sense. I knew that the minute I had opened the front door and seen the mists. I was somewhere, but not in life. But what of Aaron and Benjamin? I look to Aaron, an angel who shines like the stars, and Benjamin who seems to have the power of a mountain as he stands, solid and silent. Grimwald, who now appears as a part man, part lion, with wings of fire, turns and speaks to Aaron, whose eyes are casting around the room in confusion and horror.

“Aaron, behold thou art the angel of Judgement, he who walks with the dead and reviews their lives before God. For an angel to hold the Sword of Justice before a human, that angel must also walk within the footsteps of Humanity. Mourn the fact that you are not human. Mourn the fact that the feelings and thoughts you relish will soon vanish now that your job is done. God hath put a great burden upon you and yet you did not falter.”

The voice of Grimwald echoes around the room like a trumpet, vibrating the doors and walls with power. Aaron falls to his knees and weeps.

“Why? Why did I not know?”

His hands cover his face to hide the shame of ignorance.

“Because you needed to have the compassion of humanity within your heart as you took this child through her lives. To do that, you had to be of humanity.”

Benjamin utters the words softly, only truly understanding the situation as he forms the words.

“I am of the Sandalphon, the walkers of the desert, the companions, is that not so?”

Grimwald nodded without speaking.

“And I am the stepping stone of the Abyss, a fragment of the bridge, the angel that links God to Man.” Benjamin’s voice trailed off, leaving the room in silence.

With that understanding, there was no need for a building, for human form, for the pattern that would allow me to face myself while on the threshold of death. The four of us stood before a flame, the walls around us vanish and we are deep in

the inner sanctum of Humanity. Aaron looks through the flame at me and now I can see it. His eyes are endless stars, eyes that see everything and speak of the beauty of souls. He draws a breath and holds a hand out over the sacred flame towards me.

“There is one more journey that you must take Lumis, then you must choose. And I cannot tell you what it is that you must choose. Or you can walk with me now into death. Are you ready to face one more journey into your pattern, or do you walk into death to be renewed?”

I looked into the eyes of Aaron and spoke.

“Life. I know I have something to finish.”

We link hands and I fall through the stars, through time, through lives and through the turning of the planet. I land in soft sand, in the middle of the desert, with a storm on the horizon. Before me lies the Abyss, the crack through all the worlds beyond which lie the mystery of Divinity.

I kneel before the Abyss, looking into the mists of the great Mystery beyond. A voice whispers around me.

“Are ready to be judged, to be weighed? Do you wish to close a door that can never again be opened?”

I answer; a single word that seals my fate, not just for this life, but for all of my lives. “Yes.”

Out of the Abyss rises a great being, the Keeper who watches over the mysteries of the Abyss, and the deeper mysteries of the mists that lie beyond. He places a hand before me and tells me to step upon it. In silence, a stillness so deep that I feel I would dissolve into nothing, the angel lifts his hand far above his head, far into the darkness of the skies. Another hand comes down to meet me and I step onto that hand. Again I am lifted up high until I am greeted by another hand, which in turn lifts me once more into the darkness.

The hand comes to a stop and I am held before a presence that cannot be seen, but whose power feels like it could destroy me with a single thought. Out of the darkness looms a great eye. One eye, its size beyond comprehension, looking at me

and then looking into me. A thought comes into my mind, a voice, searching, questioning.

“What do you seek child?”

“Balance,” say I.

A single word that issues from my lips without thought, a request that comes from a place so deep within me I did not know it existed until now. I feel the sun beside me, within me, and the serpent also, stood to my right, his red eyes searing my soul. We three, bound through time in a struggle of life and love, awaited Judgement.

“Done,” said the eye.

A sword falls out of the darkness above me, striking me upon the shoulder and drawing blood. I feel the sword rise and strike once more, falling down upon the serpent. As we are bound in fate, so we are judged together.

I fall to my knees from the impact, but realise it could have killed me. The scales had been balanced and I am released from the hand and left to fall down and down, falling through darkness until I once again land in the desert. All around me is horizon, nothing to be seen except for a bright blast of sunlight that dazzles my eyes.

A man is walking towards me from the sunlight, his head shaven in the manner of the priesthood, his body clothed only with a white linen breechcloth. The storms rage behind him and the power of the wind, the desert and the thunder hovered around me as I watch. As he reaches me, lightning flashes around me and the wind grows stronger with each breath I exhale. We stand a few feet apart looking at each other, the storms raging all around us. Aside us stand Benjamin, the Sandalphon, and the lion, content at last.

“Whom and what do you choose Lumis?” says Benjamin.

I turn to face the angel, whose face holds the light of all humanity, and a voice from beyond time utters from my lips.

“I am alone before Divinity. I choose to serve, always. But I also choose union with the sun, my priest to whom I am priestess. But within that union I am alone and I serve. I am the

lightning to the thunder, the rain warmed by the sunlight, the wind that carries the wisdom across the land. We dance together yet we are two souls apart side by side. I am the scabbard for the sword of the Mother. I am the guardian of her stone until it is time. And when the time comes, my life is hers to do with as She wishes.”

I realise that this life is a chance to rebalance something that has waited for millennia, clearing a space for what is to come. I also know that to stay in life, with balance, meant service of the most difficult and terrifying kind.

I step forward and hold out a hand to the man standing before me. Once we were as one. Now we are two, side by side, working together for one cause. His arms full of love and the scent of morning draw me to him and he holds me as if he would never again let me go. My eyes, fearful, cast around, looking for the red eyes of he who has plagued me throughout time. But he is not here in this desert space.

The sun shines, rain clouds gather, lightning strikes the ground and the wind blows the dust which in turn is nourished by the rain that is starting to fall. We make love in the desert, raging against and within each other, bringing fertility and life back to a place that has stood barren for thousands of years. And at the culmination of my pleasure, the world begins to spin around me violently. I am pulled hard, turning and twisting against a force that casts me out to fall.

The face of Aaron appears before me smiling as I fall.

“You have chosen well Lumis, and my blessings are upon you.”

His face fades as I fall down a deep vortex that seems never ending. Somewhere in the wind, in the dark and confusion, a voice I recognize calls my name over and over. It is the voice of he who has loved me in the desert, calling me to him, desperate, full of fear. I turn and turn, trying to fall towards the voice that calls to me, that clings to my soul, demanding that I return.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A voice pulls at me, distant, but constant in its demands. I recognize a scent, which gives me comfort in this dark falling. I have been falling for ever, always turning but never arriving. But the voice insists I stop and emerge.

I push against the darkness, like a face pushing through a membrane. Voices flit back and forth through my mind, echoes, calls, chatter. I feel a touch upon my body and I am shocked to remember that I have a body, that I have a face, hands, skin. Someone strokes my hair and the falling stops long enough for me to try and turn my face to their hand. I recognize the scent of the hand and the scent pulls me more into myself.

I love the source of that scent, a source that reminds me of sunshine and thunder. I try with all my might to push through the veil that keeps me hidden, to reach out to the sun and to kiss the sun. A voice sounds excited, calls my name and it is clearer this time.

My eyes struggle to open; it takes all of my might to focus upon that one small act, the moving of flesh with only the will of the spirit. But they do open, slowly, carefully, letting in a dull light with moving shapes, a light so dull it pains my soul. I am drawn back to the brightness of the light I am bathing in, but the voice calls me back to the dullness and I respond.

I see his face before me, hazy but recognizable. My heart leaps and I draw a deep breath as if to speak. I see Aaron also, standing beside me, and I see him clearer than all others. He smiles and places a hand upon my head and a hand upon the head of the man stooping over me, calling me. Aaron blesses us and drops something into my hand, before turning and leaving. I open my hand, a motion that takes all my strength—a small white feather unfurls in my palm.

The man standing over me calls me again and I try to focus upon his face. I cannot remember his name but I remember the

love my body and spirit has for him and I try to smile. Someone sticks a needle in my arm and I try to speak. Something is blocking my mouth and I suddenly feel like I am choking. I panic, my eyes opening wider, beseeching, pleading for release. Something, a long tube is pulled from my throat and I cough; a long deep cough that expels all my fears, all my burdens and all my past. I am renewed; I draw my first breath reborn. I am alive!

The man draws me to him and hugs me. I remember my priest in the desert, and our love making; I begin to cry with relief. The darkness pulls once more upon me, but this time it is the darkness of sleep which envelops me and I fall into rest, smiling.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was Seth who noticed her eyes flicker, just briefly, but enough movement to tell him that she was still in there. And there it was again, she was trying to open her eyes. He called her name over and over, getting more and more excited.

It was 15 minutes before the doctors were due to talk about moving her to a long term ward, so that she would lie forever in stillness, and here she was, her wild red hair and freckled face striving to wake up. He called again and leaned into her to look closely. Her eyes opened slowly, taking a while to focus upon him, but focus she did. The ventilator tube stopped her from breathing alone and from speaking, her eyes opened wider in panic as she tried to draw breath. Seth screamed for a nurse to come and take it out as the more she awoke, the more she panicked.

The nurse was astounded. When people did come out of comas, it was always very slowly, not with such a dramatic awakening. The tube was taken out and Seth cupped his hands around her face to look into her eyes. He had been told that even when people did wake up, they often had terrible brain injuries and never really recovered. He looked deep into her eyes, and a very sleepy, but very sharp intelligent spirit looked back at him.

She unfurled her hand, exposing a white feather in it. The old guardian of the stone, the spirit who had stood quietly beside her body throughout her battle with death, smiled at Seth.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The journey to Bradford was long and difficult, as if every power in the universe conspired to stop them first leaving the island, and then getting to Bradford itself. The sword and stone, wrapped and hidden in the boot of their car, were finally taking the journey that opened their destiny and the weaving of fates was finally, after thousands of years, coming together.

Both of their spirits fell as they drove into the city centre, to the area that was the birthplace of the sword, the sacred spring and ancient settlement. Before them was a bombed-out town centre populated by grey people bowed over with terrible burdens. Before the area of the Church Bank was a massive hole that took up the whole square and the surrounding buildings stood desolate in their disrepair.

Lumis looked into the eyes of the people as they passed and the suffering of a cursed people looked back at her. She was shocked and horrified. Since her close experience with death, her inner sight, her feeling of 'knowing' was so much stronger and clearer—what she saw made her want to turn around and run.

Seth broke the spell by asking her to read out the directions that the Order had sent them. They were to stay in a safe house that was very close to the original home of the sword and stone, and they would remain there until longer-term arrangements could be made for them.

As they circled a detour around the hole in the ground, it became apparent to Lumis that the destruction and degeneration in the land was amplified here, at the place where it all began and where it would hopefully end.

They drove up the Church Bank, passing numerous empty shells of housing blocks, littered with empty-faced children and feral dogs. Lumis closed her eyes, she could not look at this profound sadness anymore.

They passed an old and impressive Victorian cemetery before finally turning into an overgrown and leafy driveway set back from the road. They pulled up outside Pollard House, a safe house owned by the Order and both of them leaned forward to look at the impressive building before them. This beautiful Victorian house had been built by an occultist named Charles France for his friend Lord Pollard. Upon his death, Pollard had bequeathed the house to the Order saying in his will that he had so many apologies to make, such a terrible debt owed, and that hopefully this gesture would partially make amends. Seth relayed this story to Lumis as she gathered herself to meet the keeper of the house. The names rang a bell somewhere deep in her mind, but it was a memory elusive, much like her memory of life before she was injured.

Lumis gathered the stone into her arms, struggling under its weight, but determined to follow a deep instinct that told her she had to bridge the stone back to its home. It hummed beneath her touch, lying in her arms and nestling close to her soul. She felt the land beneath her feet react to the stone, she felt the trees around her watching and she felt her spirit jump for joy as she returned to a long lost home. She had not felt any connection as she had driven through the city centre. But here, up on the hill, above the sacred spring, the land overwhelmed her in its joyous greeting.

Once they had settled in, Frank Holdsworth, the keeper of the safe house took them to visit the sacred spring that had birthed the sword. The Boars Well as it was now known, still kept some of its ancient stories he explained to them as they parked up, but it was in a sorry state. He had not taken any action to clean up the site, as the spring was sleeping and its anonymity was probably best left undisturbed.

Both Seth and Lumis began to cry as they reached the spring. It was on a small patch of grassland on the side of the hill and was littered with trash, syringes, and dog shit. The place that had birthed such power, such magic was now nothing more than a hangout place for drug addicts. It had no

magic, no connection to either of them.

She had brought the sword with her on instinct, and now she was beginning to regret it. When they reached the spring, they looked around briefly and were just about to quickly leave when Lumis heard a whisper. She stopped and strained to hear what she thought was a woman's voice. The hairs on her arms were beginning to stand firmly to attention and the air around her began to sing with power.

Something moved her arms, something was guiding her carefully and with an action of love. She stood before the vulva shaped outlet that the underground spring water gushed from and allowing the invisible force around her to guide her, she plunged the sword into the opening of the spring.

They both felt the land convulse beneath them and the air around them shift with voices full of expectation. A face swam before Lumis, her eyes boring into Lumis' and her face glowing with happiness. The ancient priestess of the sword reached out and touched Lumis upon the forehead, a touch that breathed power into her body and awoke her mind from the semi-sleep it had been in since her recovery.

Do you see now, my daughter, do you see what must be done?

A voice swam around her head, a voice she had known for a thousand years.

Now your work begins. Take the sword and the stone, and breathe new life into the land. As you were resurrected, so shall you resurrect the sacred land and hold the gates open for my return. Together we will wipe clean the land.