

# The Last Witch Of Sumer

by

Venu G. Joshi

## Prologue

### A Silent Darkness

At a certain time and space, the world of man co-existed with the worlds of others. Different races interacted, in secret and in open, in harmony and in conflict, to civilize these worlds around them. But soon as his supremacy among the races became evident, man moved further away from the other worlds and deeper into his own. And as a result the bridges connecting these worlds began to crumble.

One of the last such world was Del Tores. Cloaked in the ether of existence, the metropolis oscillated in and out of the man's reality; like a distant mirage on a scorching desert. The city of Del Tores was quiet on the night the initial event of this narrative began. Quieter in some place than others.

The quietest place arguably that night was one of the most prominent building of the metropolis. The massive structure loomed over a shadowed city. Into the grey sky, like ominous fingers of the devil, its high towers reached out to claw at the heavens. Spread over a vast stretch of land the structure was an irreplaceable cog in the city's corrupt machinery.

Giant copper gates creaked open to let the approaching vehicle enter. A long onyx automobile quietly crept into the driveway. Its tires rolled against the gravel with a low growl so as to not disturb the blanketing silence over the neighborhood.

The driver's unblinking eyes stared at the paved road as he made slow turns around the gardens, heading towards the grim structure that towered ahead. An unconscious woman in the back of the car groaned in her drug induced sleep.

The man behind the wheel snapped out of his dark dreams for a moment before quickly sinking back in them. He wasn't in control. Neither of himself nor the operation.

No. The one in charge of the kidnapping was the man who sat beside him. His stone face too stared onto the pavement, yellowed momentarily by the car's headlights. But unlike his once friend next to him, he still thought his own thoughts. He thought with a shred of doubt.

Rommel pulled a deep breath of the stale lavender scented air as the car rolled down the ramps of the parking basement. Continuing a rhythm of long breathes to calm his racing heart, he turned to ascertain the completion of his task.

On the back seat two unblinking bald men, held up the unconscious woman between them. Her head hung back and rocked with the motions of the car. Her bound hands sat in her lap unmoving, as did the unbound ones of the men walling her sides sat in theirs.

Rommel turned forward in his seat and with stoic movements smoothed the creases in his pinstripe suit. As he quietly filled his lungs with stale lavender air, he noticed his heart was beating in the usual irregular fashion. The car stopped between two of countless indistinct white pillars that spread out in all directions.

Rommel brought up his hand to shield his eyes from the brightness when he stepped out of the car. The persistent buzzing of the roof-lamps caused the light to burn even more, Rommel felt. He moved away before the man who sat behind him stiffly stepped out of the car.

Unblinking. Unaffected by the blinding brightness, his puppet movements made Rommel uncomfortable as the bald man marched to the car's trunk and pulled out a folded wheel chair. The metallic sounds of the chair hinging into form gave Rommel a break from the incessant buzzing of the lights.

Dressed in a similar black pinstripe suit the man placed the wheelchair on the ground and marched to the back seat. The electrical buzzing returned to Rommel's ears as did the lump in his throat.

'Careful with her,' Rommel gave an unneeded command to the men who carefully carried the unconscious woman out of the car. One man held her upper body while the other legs as they gingerly lowered her into the wheel chair.

The woman in red with her head hung over her shoulder would have reddened the cheeks of any warm blooded man; but not Rommel. Not today. What he wished for as he stared at an elite of Del Tores was, only, to get over with tonight.

Before he turned and started walking, Rommel motioned the man who held onto the wheel-chair to follow him. Without any form of acknowledgement of Rommel's order the man pushed the wheel chair forward keeping a constant pace. Buzzing lights shone off the man's bald head which he kept unmoving, unfocused eyes looking straight.

When Rommel gazed to the distance on either side and found the countless white pillars fading into an uneasy brightness, he too forced his eyes on the shiny panels, on the wall in front of him.

Their rippling reflections grew in the mirror like elevator doors. Shining against the white wall the doors dinged automatically when Rommel arrived in front of them. The button on the wall did not require pressing.

The wheelchair stopped beside him as the reflective panels slowly slid into the wall. Light immediately washed inside the dim lit elevator, revealing its black walls and carpet. Strips of soft blue light ran along its edges, from floor to roof and wall to wall.

Rommel nudged his chin forward ordering the tall man to push the wheelchair into the spacious elevator. Once inside, the man turned the wheelchair such that both the unconscious lady and he faced Rommel; though neither looked at him.

After performing one last hurried scan of the infinitely bright, everlasting parking Rommel stepped into the elevator. He turned to the vertical panel on his right and lit the button third from the top and fifth from left. The doors slowly shut out the light from the parking and Rommel found himself in blinding darkness.

His eyes began to slowly adjust as he saw shapes of the man and the wheel chair in the faint blue light. The small screen on top of the doorway displaying the floor number came to life as soon as the elevator doors sealed.

‘Going up.’ A pleasant female voice announced. ‘Destination. Floor. 32.’

The small screen read P3 before the elevator began to ascend. Then it changed to P2 and soon P1.

Rommel felt a slight chill rise from the floor as he saw his breath condense in the faint light. He looked over his shoulder and could almost see the unconscious woman and the man's, now blue, bald head. Rommel turned back to the changing numbers above the doors. 6.

The elevator grew colder causing Rommel to instinctively rub his palms. The motion helped his thoughts relax and unwittingly wander. 9.

Scenes from a few hours back ran in Rommel's head, too fast for him to notice. He remembered hiding in the enormous gardens of the manor waiting for their target to be alone. The woman entered the tall maze in an inebriated stumble as she murmured incoherently to herself. Rommel's associates snuck into the maze shortly after. 16.

Rubbing his palms now rather furiously and staring at the changing numbers Rommel unwillingly played the event in his head.

Two tall men carried out the woman, struggling in their arms and groaning through a muffled mouth. The bald men held the woman steady while she thoroughly resisted her captors. 24.

Rommel's throat choked mimicking what had happened when he had pulled out a tranquilizer gun to sedate the woman. He remembered the woman's eyes glow white with rage and felt a rough hand grabbing his wind pipe. The knuckles scraped against the inside of his throat as the hand tried to tighten its grip. Before falling to his knees in shock and pain Rommel somehow managed to fire two shots into the woman's bare thigh. 32.

The doors' ding pulled Rommel out of his head and he drew a loud breath like he had earlier that night. Still heaving he turned to the man beside him before the shiny doors slid open. Cold drops of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

‘I’ll take her from here.’ To Rommel’s surprise his voice didn’t crack.

The man stepped away from the wheelchair and Rommel took his place. With a slight push he rolled the wheelchair out of the dimly lit elevator into the barely lit lobby. Similar strips of faint blue lights ran along the length of the corridor, across from him. Two on the floors and two on the ceiling, illuminating the darkness with a nauseating shade of azure.

The doors closed behind him as Rommel crossed the lobby and began down the corridor. Waist high tables topped with antiques lined the walls on both sides. Rommel made out the shape of a katana on his left. A tall vase on its side reflected the bluish hue off its smooth curves. His eyes ran along the table’s top until they fell on a frail shape leaning on the wall.

The old man’s unkempt beard and ghostly white hair shone blue like lazy sparks of electricity, while his oversized lab coat was white enough to be almost reflective. He cranked his head up when he heard the muffled sound of wheels on the carpeted floor.

Hunched over and rubbing his wet looking hands the old man walked up to Rommel who stopped immediately.

‘She wasn’t much trouble I hope.’ The scrawny man bent down, pressed his nose against the woman’s throat and pulled a long, loud inhale.

‘Almost got choked to death,’ Rommel took a couple moments to find his voice, ‘other than that it wasn’t much trouble.’

‘You’d always risk death,’ with his left hand the old man squeezed the woman’s thigh while he bit her exposed collarbones along their length, careful not to break skin. Rommel watched the

man pull out a long wire from his lab coat, his other hand now wringing the woman's reddening thigh.

'Open her mouth,' with a silver marble at one end, the long wire seemed like a pendulum to Rommel who quickly stepped forward and straightened the woman's limp head holding her jaws open.

With narrowed eyes and a wrinkled forehead the man lowered the marble into the woman's throat. He stopped when about an arm's length of wire had descended inside the woman.

'Five, four, three,' he counted under his breath, 'and that should be long enough.' The man carefully pulled out the wire.

The sizzling sounded before the glowing, red-hot marble emerged out of the woman's mouth. Rommel had a sudden urge to pull back his hands, but he stopped himself in time. The old man brought the hissing marble up to his face. The redness lit his wrinkles faintly for a few moments before the hissing began to fade followed by the glow. A sooty smoke rose from the charred, black marble.

Nodding to himself, the old man rubbed his grizzly chin and hemmed with satisfaction as he dropped the pendulum in his pocket.

'What was that, Dr. Kaiser?' Rommel's question made the hunched man look up at him.

'Ask Mastersir that,' Kaiser smiled and he started down the corridor toward the elevator.

Rommel took a moment to catch himself before he wheeled the woman around and followed the man into the lobby. The doors dinged and slid open when Kaiser neared them.

Rommel turned the wheelchair and backed into the elevator. He reached out to press the button on the grid's top right corner when Kaiser tsked.

'He's on the recreational floor.'

Rommel nodded to himself and punched the button below it.

'Going up. Destination. Floor. 43.' the doors slid shut and the elevator began its smooth ascent. A low ruffling sound made Rommel look down.

Dr. Kaiser was crouched in front of the wheelchair with the side of his face pressed into the woman's crotch. He groaned and like a dog rubbed his face against the woman. Rommel noticed Kaiser's arms disappear under the red dress before he pulled his eyes to the numbers on top of the doors. 36.

Rommel stared straight up though he still cringed at the sounds of the man palms brushing against the unconscious woman's legs. The continuous groaning didn't help him relax either.

The elevator's ding seemed to startle Dr. Kaiser who jumped up and spun towards the opening doors. Rommel saw the man wipe drool from his beard with the back of his white sleeve before stepping out into the circular hallway.

Flooded with a warm yellow glow the spacious lobby encircled the elevator shaft. Pushing the woman in front of him Rommel fell beside the old man who trudged in the middle of the carpeted walk.

'He'll probably be in the cold study,' Dr. Kaiser displayed rows of sharp yellowing teeth in a smile that chilled Rommel's back.

‘Yes doctor,’ he nodded, ‘should I-’

‘Yes,’ the old man cut him off, ‘before that take her to the Lechery.’

Rommel reflexively shot him a look.

‘Don’t misunderstand,’ the doctor laughed, ‘there are chains and handcuffs there already, is what I meant.

‘I’m sure Mastersir would like her to be placed in a secure location after he has had a chat with her,’ Kaiser gently held up the woman’s head with her chin and made wet kissing sounds at her. ‘Take her to the Lechery, cuff her hands, feet, neck, everything,’ he let her head fall back on her shoulder, ‘I don’t have to tell you to be careful.’

‘No, doctor,’ Rommel replied before pacing the wheelchair ahead. He circled the curving wall for several meters, then turned into the first corridor that led outwards.

Both the walls of the corridor were lined with long waist-high tables decorated with antiques. Rommel noticed ancient writings on several plates and vases, which he had come to recognize as Sumerian.

He always found himself captivated by the thirteenth century portrait of a woman who he presumed was some queen or noble. Rommel had stood in front of her fair face several times while he waited for Mastersir to finish his business in the Lechery.

As a creature of habit, Rommel’s body straightened while his pace became brisk, but measured, when he turned down the hallway to his left. Black mahogany doors spread across the wall in front of him. Though no one waited behind them Rommel’s heart began to race, regardless.

He parked the wheelchair a few feet away from the doors before he ran to open them. Holding down the heavy handles Rommel pushed the two doors inwards bringing in view the Lechery.

Lit by spherical lamps hanging from the high ceiling, the room's insides were a lavish assortment of couches, furs, carpets and beds in a massive space.

Rommel raced back and wheeled the woman into the room. Driving the chair gently he snaked around the furniture spread across the floor to the glass wall at the opposite end. Spreading to both his sides the wall was a giant window overlooking the sleeping city below him.

Covered in a thick fog that glowed with the colors of the city lights, Del Tores spread further than Rommel could see. There were only a few structures in the metropolis that rivaled the grandeur of the one he stood in, though none could be sighted from here. The tallest skyscraper in his view wasn't half as tall as the tower he was in.

Rommel felt uneasy. The dark and silent city seemed to have manifested as a lump in his throat.

Pushing his rising anxiety back down Rommel began to walk across the room from beds to couches to contraptions he had no idea what purpose they served. *Something sexual*, he assumed.

The room's walls and roof had numerous ornate mirrors decorating them, forwarding the interior's already unconventional appearance. Standing anywhere one could see themselves as at least four different reflections, in mirrors which Rommel knew had rooms behind them.

Keyholes, was the cheeky name given to these small rooms that lined the walls and roof of the Lechery. Once inside a keyhole, windows, disguised as the ornate mirrors in the lechery, enabled the elite voyeurs to observe the activities taking place on the other side.

Nauseating images of what the place might look like, during one of its events, floated in Rommel's head, until his eyes fell upon what he was searching for. The large oak chair was heavy and, after a few efforts to push it he noticed, bolted to the floor. Two metal cuffs hung from the chair's wooden arm rest and two rested on its foot rest.

A metal arc stuck out from the back of the chair which Rommel assumed was used to secure the person's neck. Upon fiddling with the chair Rommel noticed two more similar but differently sized arcs for the waist and forehead. He blindly groped under the chair till he found a bunch of small keys taped to the bottom.

Satisfied with himself Rommel pocketed the keys and walked back to the woman in the wheelchair. Once again he looked out the massive window. Once again the sprawling metropolis made him sad.

Snaking around the furniture, Rommel pushed the woman to the oak chair. He produced a folding knife from his pocket and used it to undo the zip-ties restraining the woman's hands.

Throughout the time he sawed the restraints, Rommel stared at the woman's unconscious face waiting for her to wake up with ivory white eyes and burn him away. He knew the irrationality of his fears, though something in him stopped him from dismissing them.

Rommel reached under the woman's arms and lifted her from the shoulders. He made a surprised noise to find the woman much heavier than he had expected.

Wobbling with the limp woman sinking in his arms, Rommel dragged her to the oak chair and slowly lowered her in it.

He bent down and took off the woman's black heels before cuffing her ankles on the footrest.

Rommel found his fingertips tracing the shape of her calf when the thought crossed his mind, almost freezing him in place. Was he being watched?

Rommel's eyes darted from one mirror to the other, from the oval one to the large hexagonal tessellation, from the walls to the roof and back to the walls again. All the mirrors looked completely normal and Rommel knew there was no way he'd ever find out if there was someone behind them. He anyway decided to go with the assumption that he was being watched but tried not to show that he knew.

Still sitting Rommel groped around the woman's waist until his hand found the metal latch. He pulled on the latch to bring out a steel strip that arced around the woman's waist. Rommel pressed the latch into a socket on the other side, securing the woman's abdomen against the wooden backrest.

One by one he placed and cuffed the woman's wrists on the armrest before latching the steel arcs around her neck and forehead. The three metal braces kept the woman's head and body upright.

Rommel got to his feet and rechecked the locks and latches before he let out a sigh of a man relieved. Pulling a deep breath he took a final look at the constrained woman before he paced out of the room, leaving the large mahogany doors gaping. He retraced his steps, passing the queen's portrait, the saucers and vases, until he found himself in the wide circular lobby.

The elevator shaft was the massive structure at the center around which Rommel walked for a while. The ochre yellow carpet in the lobby felt thick under his shoes before he turned into a narrow corridor on his left.

Narrower than the others, there were no high tables displaying antiques, nor were there any paintings on the walls. Gray and similar shades flavored the corridor's carpet, walls and ceiling with a sense of dreary, in the soft yellow light.

After walking for a while and making several turns in the gray corridors, Rommel found himself standing in front of a towering steel wall. It didn't take him long to find the glass panel on the handle-less door.

He placed it palm against the panel causing it to chime softly. With a slow whirring the tall door began to retract rightward into the wall. A blast of freezing cold air and a mixture of foul smells met Rommel at the door.

Clasping his arm over his mouth and nose he entered the cold study. The room was dark, other than the observation lamps that lit Mastersir's projects.

Rommel squirmed at the sights of the half-finished projects sprinkled across the dark tables under cones of bright light. The smell of flesh, long dead and cold, hung heavy in the freezing air.

A bull's head sliced and pried open from the middle was mounted on a stand on his right. Nerves and ligaments dangled from the skull's inside. A dozen electrodes punctured the bull's wet brain their wires disappearing into the darkness.

Piles of intestines, severed limbs and skinned furs of animals greeted Rommel as he made his way through. But he found that pleasant compared to what he knew he'd see. And soon enough he spotted them.

A flayed human hand was held between two rods under the white light. Bloody tools, vials of liquids and test-tubes with darkening blood spread across the table.

Not far from the hand was a woman's head mounted on a stand with one half of the face missing. Cut cleanly down the middle the head was dried out and preserved for study.

Pointed at the head's cross-section, the lamp lit the brain, the spine and the inside of the woman's mouth and nose. The red stained notepad next to the lamp detailed the nature of the project.

Rommel spotted several flayed limbs and one corpse sliced open from pelvis to throat, it's still bleeding insides pulled out and placed next to it, before he spotted Dr. Kaiser and Mastersir bent over a table across the room.

Their voices became audible as Rommel paced in their direction.

'...if we severed this one.' He heard Mastersir's calm voice. 'And attached it inversely...'

'That would sustain the portal longer?' Dr. Kaiser asked.

'If it doesn't I am confident it'll slow down the collapse.'

'We can try that, until we find the key,' the old doctor agreed.

Rommel saw Dr. Kaiser nod and rub his chin. He stopped a few feet behind the two men's back and spoke, loud enough to get their attention.

'The woman has been secured in the Lechery, Mastersir.' Rommel said folding his hands behind him.

The two men turned at the sound of his voice.

Mastersir wore a blue pinstripe suit under his blood stained lab coat and long gloves. His hair were slicked back making his lean shaven face appear young.

‘What do you think of her?’ Mastersir pulled off his gloves.

‘Sir?’ Rommel didn’t understand the question.

‘What do you *think* of her?’ The short man repeated the question this time staring Rommel straight into his eyes. He then, without waiting for him to answer, began to take off his lab coat.

‘She’s scary, Mastersir.’ Rommel replied after a moment and the answer seemed to please his boss who smiled at Dr. Kaiser before he started pacing away.

Surprised by his immediate departure, both Dr. Kaiser and Rommel fell beside the short man.

‘Didn’t I say he was special, doctor?’ Mastersir let out a polite laugh.

‘He indeed is, Mastersir.’ Kaiser agreed.

Rommel walked behind the two men who were now making their way through the gray featureless corridors.

‘Mastersir, could I ask something?’ He spoke up timidly as they entered the circular lobby.

‘About the glowing pendulum?’ Mastersir didn’t turn or slow his pace.

‘Yes, Mastersir.’

‘Simply put the woman you got here today,’ Mastersir said, ‘isn’t human.’

‘Isn’t human?’ Rommel repeated the words under his breath. They turned right into a hallway, exiting the circular lobby. ‘What is she Mastersir?’

The short man stopped abruptly causing Kaiser to head back; he turned to Rommel and stared into his face. ‘She’s a witch.’

Rommel heard the words and felt Mastersir’s gaze on him and nodded. Satisfied by his response the man turned around and continued down the corridor.

‘A witch, Mastersir?’ Rommel was surprised at his audacity and confidence.

‘A witch, sorceress, enchantress, whatever you want to call them.’ Mastersir turned left followed by Kaiser with Rommel right behind them. His thoughts tried to make sense of Mastersir’s words as they entered the Lechery. Since he was young he had heard about the existence of such beings in their city, about happenings people swore by but couldn’t confirm, but had always dismissed them as tales that bored men told each other.

‘Where is she?’ Dr. Kaiser’s voice pulled him out of his head.

‘Over there doctor,’ Rommel pointed at the woman secured on the chair across the room.

Kaiser clapped when he spotted the woman and led Mastersir to her. Rommel followed close behind.

The short man with his arms crossed in front of him calmly observed the woman. ‘Give him the coin.’

Dr. Kaiser quickly reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black box. He opened it and thrust the open box at Rommel.

Inside the box on a red pillow sat a big silver coin with a cuneiform marking on it that he didn't understand but could've guessed. Rommel reached out and plucked the coin from the box and held it in front of his face, examining it.

‘Stick it between her legs.’ Kaiser ordered.

A surprised Rommel jerked his head towards him.

Dr. Kaiser tilted his head and slowly repeated, ‘stick it, between her, legs.’

Rommel looked at the doctor, then Mastersir then back at the doctor and gave him a stiff nod. He kneeled in front of the woman and lifted her red dress to the side, revealing her legs.

He let his left hand advance between the thighs till his fingers hit a dead end. Fondling the netted cloth gently Rommel found the seam of the woman’s underwear and hooked them with his fingers. He pulled them sideways uncovering the woman’s privates.

Rommel brought his right hand, holding the coin, forwards and carefully thrust the coin in the opening, laterally.

He thought his ears were ringing when he heard a soft sizzling sound but immediately jerked his hands back when the coin burnt his fingertips. Deafening screams escaped the woman’s mouth startling Rommel into falling hard backwards.

The woman continued to scream as the sizzling from the coin inside her grew louder. The chair’s metal braces clanked against her wrist, neck and ankles as she fought the restraints. Rommel turned to Mastersir and Dr. Kaiser who both observed the woman with plain faces.

The woman's screams died out along with the sizzling sound from the coin and she was left drenched in sweat, panting. She opened her eyes and focused them on the short man that stood in front of her.

'You fucker,' her voice was raspy from the screaming, 'I should have known.'

Mastersir cracked a bone chilling smile at the woman's words.

'You are in violation of the treaty, fucker,' the woman spat, 'you can't just kidnap anyone.'

Mastersir spoke through his smile, 'I don't care about the treaty anymore sweetheart.' His calm voice was heavy with authority, 'tell me where the key is.'

'Ha!' The woman shouted, 'did you really get me here to ask that?' Her face was twisted in confusion, 'you're not that dumb.'

'No, I'm not,' Mastersir replied, 'but I still thought I'd ask.'

The woman let out another dismissive laugh.

'See a couple weeks back,' Mastersir started, 'my men picked up this man that goes by the name of the Blackspider of the slums.'

Shock bled onto the woman's face upon the mention of the name which widened Mastersir's smile.

'Despite all the tortures I tried, this man wouldn't break,' Mastersir sighed, 'it wasn't until I flayed his thighs and chest, sliced them open and filled them with flesh eating roaches, that he told me something.'

The wide eyed woman was scared. Mastersir spotted the fear in her eyes and knew the validity of his information.

‘So we found out about a daughter that lives in the human world,’ Mastersir stared into the woman’s eyes, ‘soon she will receive a word about her missing mother and would have...’

‘You fucker,’ the woman screamed, ‘I will kill you,’ she struggled against her restraints but only managed to rattle the locks.

‘Should I knock her out Mastersir?’ Kaiser asked impatiently.

‘No,’ the short man waived him away, ‘I’ll do it.’

Mastersir bent in front of the struggling woman’s face who froze at the look of the man’s eyes which had sunken back leaving only gaping dark sockets in their stead. He opened his mouth and a thick red tongue snaked out. At least a foot long, the tongue sloppily licked the disgusted woman’s cringing face and neck leaving her skin covered in a slimy saliva.

‘I have always hated the...’ Mastersir’s tongue dove down her throat preventing her from finishing the sentence.

The woman gagged on the thick muscle as it tickled her stomach from the inside before her eyes rolled to the back of her head and her consciousness faded away.

Mastersir straightened up and slurped his tongue back from the woman’s mouth. He pulled on his coat and wiped away the few drops of saliva that had fallen on it.

‘Take her to one of the soundproof rooms and bind her,’ Mastersir ordered. ‘Blindfold her, plug her ears, wrap her hands in a fist.

‘Dr. Kaiser will accompany you.’

‘Yes Mastersir,’ Rommel sunk into an involuntary bow.

Mastersir smiled heartily at the man. ‘You did good today, son.’

## Chapter 1

### Returning Home

Rain pattered against the yellow stained glass window of the rickety bus as Anja stared out at the rapidly thickening forest. The humidity had grown almost suffocating in the past half hour and the empty bus added to Anja's anxiety along with the fact that she was going home after over a decade. Thirteen years to be exact.

Water poured from the canopy in continuous streams, descending along the vines and branches, and down the trunks before pooling on the ground. There was no wildlife to be seen among the bushes. Not even birds sat in the trees. One would have reasoned that was because of the rain but Anja knew the truth.

The rhythm of the rain and the dampness of the air had an almost hypnotic effect on the girl who found herself remembering the last time she had travelled in this bus. Though she had headed in the opposite direction then, on a different route, in a different country; but the bus was the same.

She recognized the faded blue paint on its outside, the broken chairs and cracked windows and the hunching old driver who she was surprised to find behind the wheel, still. Unaged.

The bus lurched onwards eliciting a groan from the only other passenger, a hooded man, who sat several rows behind Anja. His clothes were tattered and old and dirty, and Anja doubted if he had even paid the fare, before returning to her reminiscing.

The last time she had travelled in this bus she was ten. Her mother had ushered her to her seat, given her a written set of instructions, an envelope of money and a thick leather-bound book. The same book sat in her lap right now.

*Del Tores: A telling for the elites.* Anja mindlessly riffled through the pages her thoughts still with her mother on the day she had seen her last. ‘I am right behind you,’ she had told her before the bus had started to move and she had to hurriedly disembark.

Anja thought for a long time that her mom had meant that she’d be coming to get her soon. But she didn’t. Days turned to weeks, weeks to months and months to years. It wasn’t until five years later that she realized the meaning behind her mother’s words.

When she was in high-school Anja was already looking like a beautiful, full bodied lady. She lived in a rough area of the city, seemingly alone; with no family or friends checking up on her. Anja noticed that during her walks home from school she had begun to attract the attention of several neighborhood delinquents, who saw her as a vulnerable girl with no protection.

These men started to bother her on a routinely basis. Sometimes they called out lewd things to her, other times one of them would smack her backside as she walked by them or grab her wrist only to let it go laughing when she’d scream.

Most of these encounters lasted not more than several seconds and a fifteen year old Anja thought better to ignore the undesired advances rather than confront these notorious elements; unsure of what might come of it.

Several weeks of this behavior emboldened the men and on one especially quiet afternoon they pounced on the girl from around a corner and dragged her into a deserted alley. Before she could

react there was a sweaty hand clasping down on her mouth and a cold knife poking her ribs.

Anja's eyes darted from one face to the other and they all were wild with the same look of what she realized was murderous intent.

As the men moved onto the now weeping girl, a dark and familiar shape rose out of her shadow. Within seconds the rippling darkness sprouted black tendrils that snaked into the men's mouths, noses, ears and eyes.

The men made muted choking noises for several minutes before the shadowed figure disappeared like morning mist. Anja still clearly remembered the four limp bodies that lay on the muddy gravel around her, their white faces drained of blood, mouths gaping and hands clawing at their bleeding throats. Their lifeless eyes were wide and full of terror as they looked out to the grey sky.

Anja returned home that evening knowing that her mother was never coming to get her. That was the first night she started educating herself in the workings of sorcery and witchcraft.

*Necromancers. The book's old pages appeared older in the yellow light from the bus's stained window. Reclusive and religious, these outcasts are known to command the forces of death and fear and the dead themselves. They are the only elites not represented at the Great House and have always expressed the firm desire to stay at the society's fringes. Necromancers can be spotted in the city's north-eastern temple district. In other parts of the city their rare appearances are accompanied by stares and hushed whispers.*

When the bus exited the forest, Anja closed the book with an audible thump at the sight of the first house on the side of the road. Along the far horizon on either side bluish mountains rose to the sky.

The road now twice as wide cut through massive green farms and fenced orchards as far as the eye could see. The scent of wet dirt hung heavy in the damp air as farmers and hands moved lazily through the fields. Stone and wooden houses, large and small stood scattered, surrounded by plantations in every direction.

Anja stuffed the heavy book in her bag and pulled out her phone. The bus sped up, now that it was driving up a paved asphalt road instead of the rocky one in the forest. Fields became infrequent and were replaced by nearly identical suburban residences.

The bluish mountains appeared to have crept towards the road since they stood much bigger and closer. A few kilometers ahead the road tunneled through a range of blue hills branching from the mountains' foothills.

The bus plunged into darkness when it entered the giant tunnel, the loud rumbling of its engine echoing against the stone walls. An irritated groan from several seats behind jolted Anja into almost dropping her phone. At the end of the tunnel, the bright exit grew bigger and light poured instantly into the bus as it exited through it.

Pretty houses with green lawns upfront lined the wide road on both sides marking the suburbs of Del Tores. From the swings hanging from trees and inflatable pools in the lawns one could tell the neighborhood to be mostly occupied by families. The afternoon sun hung high in the now clear sky and the smell of fresh cut grass seeped into the bus.

Cars appeared on the road as they moved deeper into Del Tores. Sooner than she expected Anja could see the city's rapidly approaching skyline.

The bus slowed down when the traffic on the road became denser. The honking and smoking cars helped the city girl relax who had been unnerved throughout the ride, though she wouldn't have admitted that.

Anja looked behind to see the, now awake, man rub his face under his jacket's hood and stare out the window on his left, yawning loudly. She turned forward and pulled up the email she had received several days back.

*My lovely flower,*

*As I write this I am still debating if it is the right thing to do. Zenit will hate me for it, but if I don't you will never forgive me, so here I am. Rock and hard place, right?*

*Zenit has been missing for a week now. The police suspects kidnapping but they lack any evidence. It is kidnapping and I think I am certain as to who is behind it.*

*The Restoration Congregation or the Redcons are a militant group that appeared in Del Tores a few years ago. They have been involved in several minor crimes against the elites but none of the members have been convicted or even recognized. I am certain Zenit knew some things, well kept secrets that she was tasked with hiding and I believe that's what the Redcons are after.*

*Let me be truthful here. Your mother is most probably being tortured right now. If you come to Del Tores the same will be your fate. You will most likely not leave this place, neither will you grow any older.*

*Do not come to Del Tores my flower. That is what your mother would want. That is what I plead you to do. It was my duty to pass on the news and that is what this is.*

*Listen to me like you always have and do not come here.*

*We love you always. Your life is our salvation.*

*Love,*

*Symone Hellbi.*

Anja smiled at the transparent workings of her aunt's innocent mind. On one hand she desperately pleaded her to not come to Del Tores and the desperation came from the fact that she gave her the reason to come to Del Tores herself.

Anja remembered Symone being the same when she was a child. While the other grown-ups around her would give her sweet lies, because that's what you do to a child, Symone didn't. Instead she first gave her the hard truth, then her advice followed by the freedom to make her own choice. And Anja had made that choice.

The bus headed westward through the outer highways of the Administrative District to avoid the massive traffic the place was known for. Pale bluish mountains rose, encircling the cities northern and eastern limits, meeting the sea along the city's western and southern borders.

Anja stared out unsure of what she was going to do or how she was going to look for her mother. She figured she'd know what to do once she was here. But now that she was in Del Tores, her mind still sat blank. Or rather numb.

Searching for thoughts in her hazy mind Anja stared at the city running by her. The bus climbed atop a high flyover providing her with a great view of the city she was born in. *This one is new too.* Anja thought to herself as she tried to remember if the roads and building she passed were there thirteen years ago. Like any other metropolis would have, Del Tores had changed a lot in a decade.

Flyovers leaped over each other, rising from and falling into a maze of busy roads. Tall skyscrapers, all metal and glass stood in all directions and shone with a pride that came from being new and admired.

Anja could also make out the older constructions. The Great House's dome peaked above the tallest towers around it. The Courthouse too was the most prominent building in its vicinity. They stood with a stability that came from being old and essential.

Anja picked out the structures that seemed familiar to her as the bus entered what she recognized was the Business District; also known as The Industry.

At the far end of the skyline, in front of the bluish peaks, towering chimneys pumped out thick black smoke into the sky. Multi-storey shopping complexes stood along with banks and depressing high-rise offices at the outer edge of The Industry.

The distinctive smells of wood-works and foundries rose and fell in the air at constant intervals. Far off noises of metallic clanking along with the mechanical rumble of motors and generators sounded as the background music of the Business District.

The thick pollution in the air filtered away most of the sunlight colored the neighborhood in sad shades of gray making it appear appropriately dreary.

The bus slowed down before it pulled into the large paved lot behind a long single-storey structure that Anja assumed must be the bus station. The old brakes screeched as the rattling bus came to a halt in one of the many empty parking spots, this one numbered 43.

As soon as the bus stopped Anja got up with the urgency of a salaryman late for work. She slung her handbag over one shoulder and pulled out her small trolley bag from the over-head rack dragging it behind her as she stepped down from the bus.

She took one last look at the homeless man sitting by his window who didn't seem in much of a hurry to leave.

Once outside Anja wanted to pull a deep breath, as one does when they visit their birthplace after a long time. But she held back on account of the sharp chemical smells and chocking smoke that hung in the air around her.

With her heels clicking against the pavement in a rhythmic tapping Anja turned onto the sidewalk. She wore her black hair in a loose top knot and a white sheer top with camo shorts.

It didn't take her long to attract attention and before she knew it she felt several eyes on her. Without turning her head or breaking her pace, from the corner of her eyes, Anja noticed half a dozen men, up, down and across the street, stop what they were doing and freeze, like deer caught in headlights.

The men stood motionless ogling mindlessly at the tall shapely woman striding down the sidewalk. Anja felt their gazes burn sweetly on her body, akin to warm sunlight.

She counted three on her legs, two on her backside and three more on her chest. Soon their eyes began to move about her body and almost simultaneously landed on the amethyst bangle on her left wrist.

Streams of invisible energy spiraled out of the crowns of the men's heads, rising to the sky before arcing towards Anja. The energy spirals fed into the now pulsating purple crystal on her wrist.

Out of instinct Anja pulled in a deep breath, which she immediately regretted, as thick pollution filled her lungs. The peculiar warmth spread out from the amethyst bangle first numbing and then slowly exciting her muscles before seeping into her bones.

Anja felt revitalized while the men compulsively leaned on nearby walls and cars from sudden exhaustion, though still hungrily eying the shapely stranger; their minds captured by lewd thoughts and images of a faceless naked goddess.

Once she felt full Anja waved the first taxi that she saw and got in, pulling her small trolley bag behind her.

Immediately after she was out of sight the men snapped awake, heaving. Confused and aroused they wearily got back to their duties, their minds still brewing fantasies of the strange woman as they loaded trucks and tallied the supplies.

‘Bluestar Range,’ Anja called to the cab driver.

‘Yes, mam,’ the lady replied in an accent Anja couldn’t place. ‘A model from outta town, eh?’ She asked almost immediately.

‘No, not a model,’ Anja answered staring out of the window, ‘and I *was* born here. Though I had left for a while.’

‘Really?’ The driver sounded baffled, ‘I would never even think about leaving this city.’

‘I know you wouldn’t.,’ Anja blurted under her breath soft enough to go unheard.

‘I really love this place,’ the driver continued.

‘Of course,’ Anja faked a smile in the rear view mirror. ‘Who wouldn’t? It’s a beautiful city.’

The smile died as quickly as it had appeared and Anja stared out the window as the taxi weaved through the traffic heading southward.

## Chapter 2

### Nevrym, The Insane

The darkness surrounding Anja breathed in long raspy wheezes. It expanded away from her and contracted onto her pushing down against her body.

With her hand held above her head to prevent the darkness from blinding her Anja sluggishly made her way forward. She couldn't see what lay ahead but despite how much effort she put she couldn't remember the spell to summon a light orb.

Now that she thought about it she didn't remember any spells.

The darkness grew heavier making it difficult for Anja to breathe. Black claws reached out from the nothingness and groped at her before dissolving back into the dark. Anja tried to push the claws away but her hands couldn't reach them.

Something held her hair from behind and pulled them hard causing her spine to bend into a painful arc. She screamed but the dark absorbed the voice before it came out.

Slimy snakes rose from the dark ground and coiled up her legs. They moved up to her waist trailing slime along her unnaturally arched back and wrapped around her chest and shoulders.

The coils tightened sometimes slipping on its slime and began to pull her down.

A hard tug on her hair brought Anja to the ground in a shattering thud. White hot pain flashed across her body leaving a warm throb in its stead.

Her legs were pulled apart and hands were restrained to the side as the darkness pushed against her chest suffocating her into near unconsciousness. Smaller snakes that felt like warm tongues wriggled up her inner thighs.

‘...the key.’ The voice was a piercing shriek like cold iron nails in her ear.

Anja gasped for air as her vision of the blackness began to wobble. Barbed snakes pricked her thighs drawing streams of blood while another one tightened around her throat.

‘Where is the key?’ The voice was a freezing wail like ice burning against her neck.

The barbed tongues began to enter Anja making her convulse in agony. The limb moved up inside her stabbing her organs with a dozen thorns with every movement. Warm tears streamed down her twisting face.

‘Where is the key, witch?’ The voice was a blazing bellow like flames engulfing her.

Anja felt the thorned tendrils tear up her innards as they moved further up inside her making their way to her heart. She lost her will to resist and her body went limp. Her eyes began to slowly close into a painful sleep when she heard a deafening screech at a distance.

Strong gusts of wind accompanied by loud flapping sounds blew at the darkness, pushing it off of her.

The deafening screech sounded again this time right above her.

A jet of purple flames shot down at her melting away the dark snakes. Warmth and comfort began to spread through her body as Anja felt a smile come on her face.

‘...here.’ The lady’s voice was faint.

‘We are here, mam.’ The voice was louder this time.

Anja opened her eyes and looked around in daze. The warm afternoon sun burned against her skin through the window of the cab.

‘Ah, sorry...’ she mumbled, ‘I fell asleep.’ Anja laughed nervously.

‘Don’t blame you, mam,’ the driver smiled at her in the rear-view mirror, ‘it was a two-hour ride almost. Lots’ a traffic.’

Anja nodded. She recognized the red brick wall they were parked beside. ‘The entry gate is up front?’

‘Y-yes, mam,’ the driver replied.

‘Let’s go then,’ Anja let a little impatience creep into her voice.

The driver hesitated for a moment before she kicked the car into gear and they began to roll down the wide road. They turned along the red wall towards the massive iron gates. Two large Bs and Rs adorned the two gates.

The cab pulled up to the guard booth inside which a fat balding man in uniform watched a small TV on his desk. He looked up when he spotted the cab from his window.

Anja rolled down her window.

‘N-19, Aimes,’ she stated as she handed the man her driver’s license.

The guard took her license with evident irritation, ‘No one’s home at N-19 girl,’ he squinted at the license, ‘and you can’t get it without the key card.’

Then suddenly the color drained from his face and amazement replaced the irritation. He looked up from the license and stared at Anja with old expectant eyes.

‘Oh my, it *is* you,’ the guard muttered in disbelief, ‘you remember me... Tony-baloney?’ The man pointed his finger at his chest and cracked a goofy smile.

Anja cocked her head. She didn’t remember the fat balding man in front of her but a young guard who was in-charge of the patrols of N block. Every day during his time of patrol a young Anja waited in her front lawn with a plate of cookies for her uniformed friend.

‘Tony-baloney,’ Anja reflected the old man’s smile, ‘still loving those cookies?’ She laughed.

‘You know it,’ the man replied caressing his paunch.

In the next moment as realization poured into him Tony’s smile disappeared and his face grew grim. ‘I’m sorry about your mother,’ he said, ‘I bet they’ll find her any day now.’

‘Thank you, Tony,’ Anja’s voice was sincere.

‘You need anything,’ Tony pressed a button on his desk sounding a loud buzz, ‘any sort of help, you ring my desk. It’s star-extension-619.’ The metal wheels under the massive gates began to roll along the arced rails, slowly opening the gates.

‘I will, Tony.’ Anja promised as she waved him goodbye and her cab proceeded inside.

‘M-mam,’ the driver stammered, ‘a-are you a relative of Zenit Aimes?’

‘Yes,’ Anja gazed out the window at the gardens and the mansions that passed by, ‘I’m her daughter.’

The lady seemed to freeze and stared at Anja with wide eyes in the rear-view mirror for long enough to almost run the cab in an approaching garden. She quickly corrected her trajectory but throughout the remaining way kept stealing glances at Anja; who stared at the familiar scenery of her childhood neighborhood, taking it in with the warmth of nostalgia.

‘This is it,’ Anja tapped the driver’s shoulder who in turn brought the cab to a halt.

Pulling her trolley bag behind her, with her handbag on her shoulder Anja got out of the cab.

She admired the white mansion that stood across from her.

The building rose on green grounds, surrounded by massive old trees. Numerous flowering vines climbed the walls of the mansion framing the windows and door with contrasting colors.

‘E-eighty two fifty mam,’ the lady avoided looking directly in Anja’s eyes.

‘Here,’ Anja rooted around her handbag and pulled out a hundred, ‘keep the change.’

‘M-mam?’ The driver hesitantly reached for the bill. ‘I have never seen an elite’s house mam,’ she said as she got ready to leave.

‘I hope they find your mother, mam,’ she added, ‘I am a huge fan and I have seen everything she’s been in. We are praying for her every day.’

‘Thank you,’ Anja said, ‘I never caught your name...’

‘It’s Peggy, mam.’

‘Take care, Peggy,’ Anja said, ‘and head straight out. If a patrol guard catches you taking a joy ride you’d end up in trouble.’

‘Yes mam,’ Peggy nodded. ‘It was an honor meeting you mam,’ she declared before driving away.

Anja watched the back of the cab for a few moments before stepping onto the driveway. A paved brick path across the garden led to the stairs at the entrance. With her trolley bag rolling behind her Anja crossed the grounds, taking her time looking around, enjoying her reveries.

Wide semicircular steps ascended to the porch which preceded the tall oak doors. The porch roof was held up by monolithic marble pillars, giving the entry way an imposing, almost royal, appearance.

Only when Anja began to climb the steps to the porch did she noticed a figure in the porch-roof’s shadow.

The figure with its hood pulled over its face sat on the floor leaning against one of the marble pillars. Anja stopped on the steps when the figure began to shuffle and stand.

The man pulled his hood back and revealed a face that felt familiar but Anja found difficult to place. His jeans were torn and dirty same as his sweatshirt. His beard was long and unruly similar to his hair.

‘You are the homeless man from the bus,’ Anja narrowed her eyes.

‘I am homeless, yes, Miss Aimes but I am no man.’

‘What are you then? A skinchanger? Necromancer?’ Anja felt a sudden anger rising. On her right hand she bent her index and middle finger while forming a circle with her ring finger, pinky and thumb. ‘And why did you follow me?’

‘I was here before you,’ the man smiled wide, ‘so I didn’t follow you. Not today at least.’ The man pointed at her hand gesture, ‘you don’t want to bind me, Miss Aimes.’

‘That’s for me to decide,’ Anja replied, ‘and patience is not my virtue. So tell me who you are and what do you want before I burn you where you stand.’

The man’s face grew serious at her tone. He stepped back and sunk in a deep bow. ‘My name is Nevrym Violetflame and I am your familiar, Miss Aimes.’

‘I don’t have a familiar,’ Anja replied, her hand still stiff, ready to cast the spell.

‘You think so Miss?’ The man asked, ‘how do you explain your incredible spell casting abilities and the strength of your hexes? You learnt spirit manipulation and potion making just from reading books. These arts need to be taught you know.’

‘I-I’m a natural?’ Anja knew how foolish that reply was as soon as it came out of her mouth. But surprisingly the man didn’t laugh at that. Instead he cracked a small smile.

‘That you are Miss.’

‘Wait!’ Anja nearly shrieked, ‘Nevrym Violetflame. As in Nevrym, the insane?’

The man’s smile grew wider. ‘Yes, miss, the same Nevrym.’

‘Prove it.’

‘M-miss?’

‘Prove it you are Nevrym,’ Anja challenged, ‘prove it that you are my familiar.’

‘You know it miss,’ the man said, ‘search your memories, there might be some new ones.’

And there were.

Anja as a child sat on the back of this massive creature as he soared above the clouds. She giggled with joy clutching on to the shiny purple scales. Anja remembered how her mother scolded both her and Nevy when they returned and made her promise to never go flying without her supervision again.

Anja was a child and she was finger painting with a gecko. The gecko walked all over her paper, each of his foot leaving a different colored print. Later she slept in her bed and wrapped around her slept Nevy as a serpent. His dark scale glimmered purple when the light hit them just right.

‘W-where did you go Nevy?’ Tears began brimming her eyes, ‘I was so alone Nevy. Why did you leave me?’ She felt her legs go weak under her as a cry began to rise in her throat.

‘I never left you, Miss Aimes,’ Nevrym assured, ‘I had to maintain my distance, stay hidden. But Miss Aimes I was always close.’

‘W-why?’ Anja found herself at a loss of words.

‘I was instructed to do that by your mother, Miss Aimes.’

‘My mother?’

‘Yes,’ the man stepped forward to console the girl but she had already steadied her emotions. ‘When I questioned her decision she told me that it was essential to keep you hidden. She said there are no beings with auras like ours in the outside world and if we stayed linked it would be very easy for anyone who wished to find you to find you and hurt you.’ Nevrym’s calm voice grew serious, ‘so your mother instructed me to not reestablish our link unless I deemed it absolutely necessary.’

Silence hung between the two for several moments before Anja broke it. ‘Wow Nevy! I don’t know what to make of that,’ she spoke rubbing her forehead. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and pulled a long breath, ‘but first can you change your appearance? I can’t concentrate if you look like a crazy homeless man.’

‘Of course Miss Aimes,’ Nevrym laughed, ‘what would you like?’

‘Gecko,’ Anja blurted immediately.

‘Sure,’ Nevrym smiled before disappearing. His empty clothes slumped to the floor and a purple gecko crawled out of the tattered sweatshirt’s sleeve.

The small lizard scurried to Anja who bent down and let him get on her palm which she then brought near her shoulder. The gecko jumped on her shoulder and after walking back and forth from shoulder to shoulder, settled on the right one.

‘What made you reestablish the link now?’ Anja asked as she approached the door. She reached around the handle and grazed her finger tips along its back. A small static zap tingled her skin followed by the clicks of multiple locks opening.

‘They tried to get you through your dreams,’ Nevrym said in a small voice next to her ear. ‘Since they had already found you and were bold enough to come to you within hours of you entering the city, I figured there was no reason to stay hidden any longer.’

Anja pushed the tall teak doors which opened with a silent, controlled swing. ‘Makes sense,’ she said, ‘who are they?’

‘Only three beings can access the dream realm to reach other beings,’ Nevy said, ‘you and I are two of them, and I think you already know the third.’

‘Necromancers.’

‘Necromancers,’ Nevrym spoke at the same time, ‘though they were not alone. They had somehow smuggled parts of some twisted entity with them. An evil entity.’

Anja strode into the hall. Across the marble floor a set of two great stairs rose to the upper level. To her right the massive sitting area was lavishly furnished with a corridor on the far end and to her left was a smaller sitting area arranged in front of a fully stocked bar. A corridor beside the bar area led away to the left side of the mansion.

‘What kind of entity?’ Anja asked.

‘None I have seen before,’ Nevrym cheeped, ‘that’s what disconcerted me the most. All I could sense was they were strong, evil and hungry.’

‘Hungry?’ Anja walked across a circular carpet to approach the left staircase. ‘Hungry for what?’

‘I don’t know, Miss Aimes,’ Nevrym said, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s alright, Nevy,’ Anja tucked her index fingers under the bases of the thumbs. She kneeled to the floor and pressed her palms against the ground, ‘we will find out what is going on here, together.’

She closed her eyes as her amethyst bangle began to pulse and under her breath Anja spoke the incantation.

‘*Ostende mihi qui ambulavit.*

‘*Ostende mihi faciem viri.*

‘*Ostende mihi verba.*

*Ostende mihi manes.*’

Thick blue smoke spiraled around Anja’s arm before boring into the marble floor like a corkscrew. The next moment tall waves of blue smoke emanated outwards from Anja, changing the world around her in their wake.

The light grew dim while the colors grew brighter and glittery, the stones and marbles emitted a hue of their own and the air began to blink as if made of a million tiny fireflies.

Anja stood up and focused on her surroundings. She walked over to various objects and pieces of furniture, picking some up, grazing her fingers against the surface of the others.

Anja hemmed to herself as she moved in the room, ‘I don’t see anything of consequence.’

Nevrym quietly nodded then spoke with a start, ‘what’s that thread over there?’

‘What thread?’ Anja followed the gecko’s sight to the balusters of the right staircase, ‘I don’t see any... oh!’ She bent down and examined the underside of the handrail. A transparent thread of white light ran up the handrail.

‘Amazing,’ Anja whispered, ‘so Aunt Symone was counting on me coming here with you,’ she turned to look at Nevrym.

‘She always made accurate predictions,’ he added.

Anja nodded as she ascended the stairs. ‘Hey!’ She stopped in her steps, ‘didn’t you and Aunt Symone used to have a thing?’

‘W-what thing? No. Nothing. Symone is just a friend.’

Anja didn’t know how but she could tell the gecko look embarrassed. ‘We’ll put a pin on that for later.’

‘There is nothing to put a pin on.’ Nerym spoke in his loudest gecko voice which still sounded similar to a small bird’s chirp.

‘Alright. Alright.’

Anja followed the thread to the first floor gallery, where it descended along a baluster to the marble floor. The thread ran across the floor into a corridor on the right. Anja trailed behind the thread that led her into one of the spare bedroom, at the far end of the corridor, where it climbed a bedside table and ended on a greeting card.

Anja reached for the card which shone in varying glittery colors. The card read *Happy Birthday* on the front and inside in a cursive script it read: *To my friend and sister, May you always shine brighter than the sun as does my love for you.* The card was signed at the bottom with *Love, Symone Hellbi.*

Anja brought the card in front of her face. Close enough for her nose to touch the crease.

‘*Arcana revelant,*’ she whispered into the card. The spell cocooned by her breath spread across the card’s surface. Words slowly appeared on the blank face of the card.

*Go to the daughter of Sanguines in K-5.*

*Her name is Ellie.*

*Tell her I sent you.*

*Don’t speak your name in this city under any circumstances.*

*I will see you soon.*

‘I love how she knew for sure I’d come,’ Anja smiled at the gecko on her shoulder.

‘Why even tell me not to come,’ she laughed loudly.

