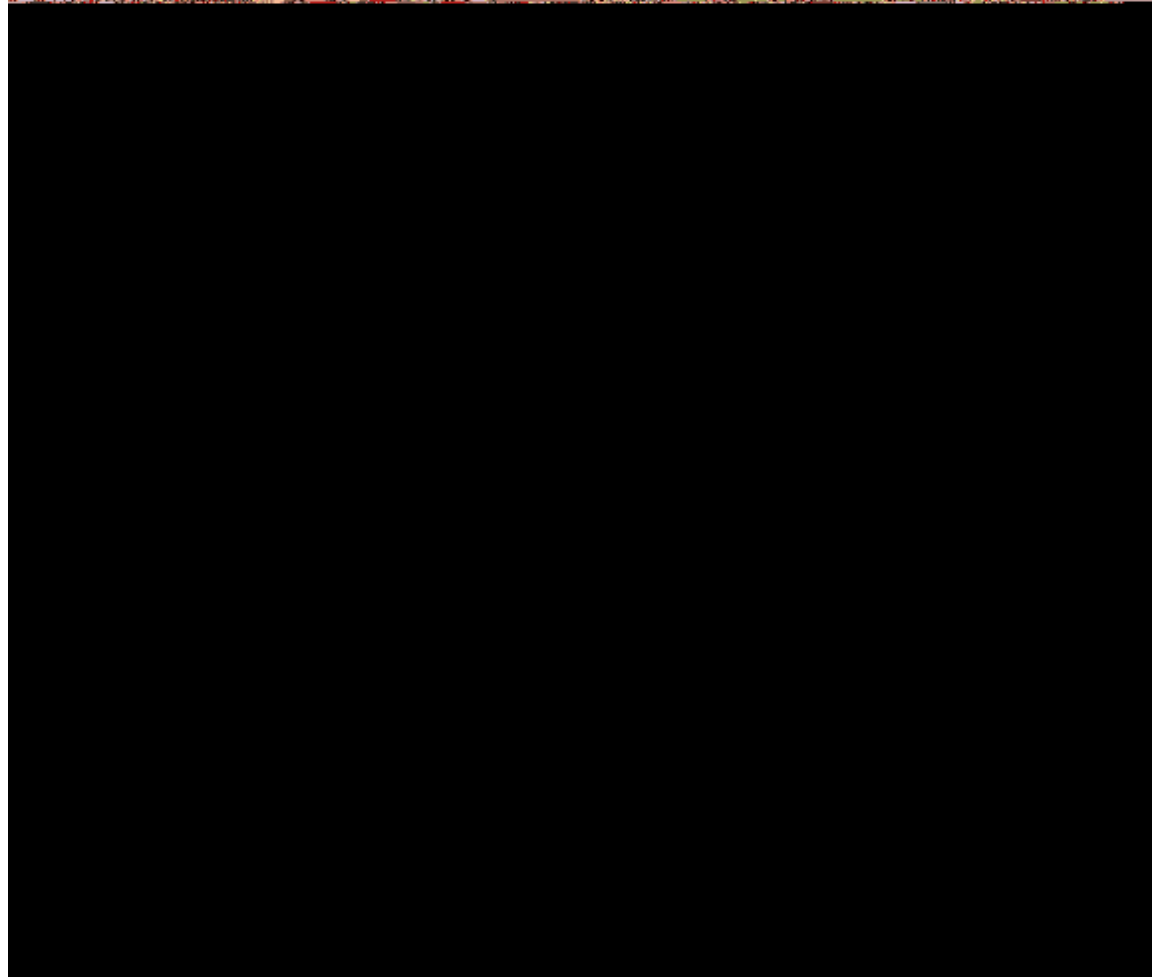


# SUZANNE FRANCIS





**HEART OF HYTHEA**

**SUZANNE FRANCIS**

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

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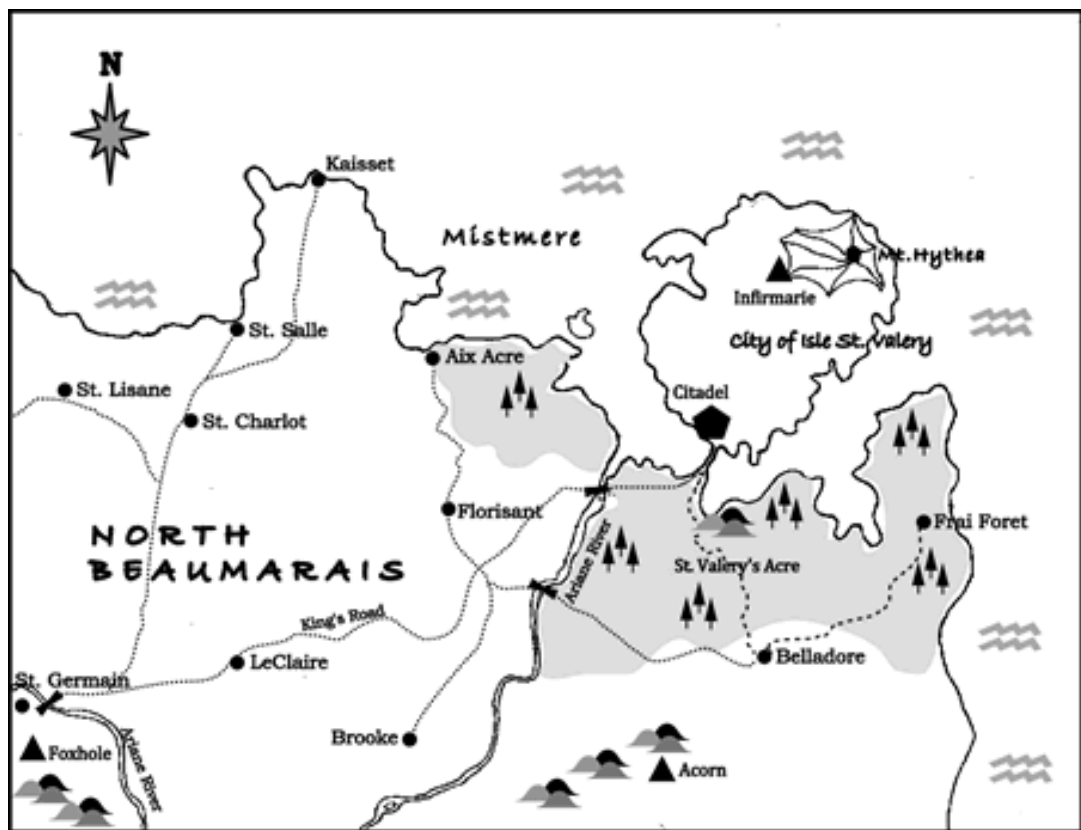
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For my husband Michael,  
And my children  
John, Heather, Fiona and Joel,  
With love



# Chapter One

## The Innocent, Citchet

(The Arkirish Dynasty, Eight)

*Geya sits before her silver mirror, outside of time and space. Carefully, she removes a worn sheaf of circular tokens from a silk wrapping and fans them out on the table in front of her, then selects three at random. After placing the tokens face up, she studies them for a moment.*

*This is what she reveals...”*

*The first token, a blue one, is the tenth from the estate of Naer, Beginning/End, in a standing position. The second, with a green back, is from the Tollyn. Geya sighs. It is Varing — the trackless marsh. The third card has a red back. It is The Innocent, Citchet, from the Arkirish Dynasty.*

\* \* \* \*

The girl was crying and muttering to herself as she walked across the field, lugging a valise much too large

for her small frame. The sun beat down on her chestnut curls, and she stopped for a moment to mop her face with a carefully embroidered handkerchief. Then she shaded her eyes with her hand, and looked this way and that, searching for some familiar landmark. She saw none, and the realization that she was well and truly lost brought a fresh welling of tears to her eyes. After setting the valise down on the ground, between two furrows, she sat down forlornly, and began to sob in earnest, her face buried in her chubby hands.

“Well now, little Miss. And what seems to be the trouble?” The voice seemed to come from nowhere and the girl’s head snapped up in alarm. She had dropped her handkerchief, so she hastily dried her eyes on her pinafore before looking up at the boy who had spoken to her. He seemed very tall, but then she was only six, and small for her age.

Her lip trembled, but she answered bravely enough. “No trouble at all, kind Sir. I am merely a stranger in this land, pausing for a moment’s respite before continuing on my way again.”

The boy regarded her gravely, and did not laugh, as she had feared he might. His gray eyes were thoughtful. “And where are you bound, Traveling Lady?” he asked her. “If you do not mind my asking,” he added politely. The girl studied him for a moment before answering. He had long, very dark brown hair, cut haphazardly, so that it grew in a shaggy mass of curls down his back. His patched clothing and bare feet were worlds removed from the fine frock and sturdy leather boots she wore.

She had half-decided to run from him — after all her mother had warned her many times not to talk to strangers — but then he smiled, and the gap between his front teeth utterly charmed her.

“I am on my way to the country of Ruboralis.” She paused for a moment, uncertainly. Until just now, the girl hadn’t given her destination much thought. “To visit... the King!” she declared, triumphantly. “He has invited me to live in his palace and eat cake all day long.” She glared at the boy, daring him to challenge her, but he just grinned again, good-naturedly going along with her tall tale.

“Well then, you’ll be knowing that the path you are on now leads directly to the worst den of robbers this side of the Bresla River, eh? Did you mean to come this way? You aren’t lost by any chance?” He squatted down beside her and removed an apple from his pocket. Digging his thumbs into the flesh, he tore it in half. The girl looked at him wide-eyed, much impressed by this casual display of strength. He handed her a piece of the apple and she accepted it graciously, trying not to show her hunger. It was well past dinnertime and she had been walking for what felt like many hours.

“I am certainly not lost,” she insisted, when she had devoured her share of the apple. “I mean to fight the robbers before supper and take their booty as a tribute to the King. My weapons are hidden in this valise I am carrying with me,” she added, in case he should think to question her story.

But the boy only nodded sagely. "Indeed. The King will be most impressed with you, Lady Traveler, I can see that. I think I should warn you though — the robbers are all out at the moment and won't be back until well after dark. In the meantime, perhaps you would like to come home with me for awhile? I know it isn't the sort of fancy place a rich lady like you would usually stay, but I happen to know Ma made a fresh seedcake this afternoon and I am sure she would give us some, and a drink of cold water from the well." He stood and offered her his hand. "What do you say?"

The little girl smiled and nodded. "Well, I am just the tiniest bit hungry. Perhaps I could stop, for a while. But then I must get back to my travels," she firmly insisted. Then, remembering her manners, she said, "My name is Katkin. Thank you for your kind invitation, good Sir. Will you tell me your name?"

The boy grinned again. "I am Jacq," he said, pointing to his chest, "and Jacq is me. Will you allow your humble servant to carry this bag for you, my Lady? I am ten years old and very strong for my age, so it would be no trouble at all." Katkin nodded, her eyes shining with admiration. As they walked across the bare, brown field, until recently planted in fodder for the cattlebeasts, Jacq asked her, "Have you traveled far today?"

She nodded tiredly. "I left my home at Tintaren a long time ago. My journey has taken me many miles since then. I expect I have passed through Mardonne and Secuny already. Soon I will reach the ocean, and there I must find a ship to carry me across the Gulf, to

Ruboralis.” Then she looked up at him, her green eyes wide and serious. “Can you keep a secret, Jacq?”

He nodded gravely, and she continued, “I am running away from home. I hate my mother and father!”

Jacq did not have the heart to tell the girl that she hadn’t even left the wide fields of Tintaren yet, so he asked her gently, “Why, Katkin? What have they done?”

“I want a pony, and they say I am not old enough to have one. I am almost seven years old! That is plenty old enough.” To his dismay, her lip began to tremble again, and he quickly took her hand.

“Don’t cry. After we have some cake, I will take you to the barn and show you Nestor. He used to be my father’s horse, but now he is mine. Would you like to ride him? He is very big and can easily bear both of us on his back.” When she smiled, it felt to Jacq as though the sun had come out from behind the clouds again. He put down the valise and did a handstand. After she clapped and cheered delightedly, he impressed her further by taking several wobbly steps forward on his hands.

“Can you show me how to do that?” she wanted to know.

“Well... I could, but it takes a lot of practice. You would have to stop your travels for a good long while, and maybe even go back home. Then we could visit each other and I could teach you all sorts of tricks.”

She shook her head decisively. “Oh, no. I couldn’t do that. It is such a long way. And I don’t...” Katkin did not want to admit she was lost. “Still,” she sighed, “it might be nice to go home again. Willow will miss me when she

comes home from school. And Nurse might get in trouble if I am gone too long.”

Jacq had a sudden inspiration. “After we go to my house, I will show you a magic shortcut back to Tintaren. Even though it took you many days of travel to reach this place, it will carry you home in just a few minutes. But Tintaren is a very big place, so you will have to show me which house you live in.”

“The biggest one of all, up on the hill above the little cottar houses,” Katkin answered, with naive disdain.

Jacq gave her a sharp look. “The Lord’s house? You live in Tintaren Manor?”

She nodded in agreement. “The Lord of Belladore is my father.” Then, because Jacq had dropped her hand abruptly, she asked, “What is wrong? Don’t you want to take me to your house any more?” Her lower lip began to quiver.

He gave her the gap-toothed smile again. “Course I do. You just surprised me, that is all.” He grasped her hand once more, and they set off across the fields towards Jacq’s home. “Did I ever tell you the tale of the pirate named Scallywag Pete, and how I fought him to the death on the shores of Ghiria?”

She laughed. “Of course you haven’t, silly. We just met. But will you tell me now?”

“Indeed I will. It was like this, see...” By the time they reached his cottage, Katkin and Jacq were laughing and talking like old friends, the brief moment of awkwardness between them forgotten. His mother made the

lonely little girl very welcome, as he had known she would.

Now as they sat together, happily munching seed cake on the sagging front porch of the house that he shared with his mother and three brothers, Katkin asked, "Where is your father, Jacq? Does he labor in the fields like mine does every day?"

Jacq's gray eyes flashed at this and he said resentfully, "Your father does no work, except to tell the foremen what to do. And my father is dead. He died in an accident two years ago."

Katkin defended her father loyally. "He does too! Every night he comes home muddy and tired. But he still plays his vielle for me, and sings songs. My father is the best daddy in the world. But I am sorry about your father," she added.

But Jacq would not let it go. "Do his hands look like this?" The boy had huge hands, and they were rough and calloused from field work. "I labor in the fields and so do Ma and Barlow and Nathan. Thad is still too young, but when he is older he will too. We all have to work, Katkin. That is what cottars do. But you don't work, do you?"

She seemed to accept this disparity without question. "No, I have lessons with Nurse in the mornings. In the afternoon I play by myself. I get very lonely sometimes, because Willow has gone away to school in the City. I don't have any friends now. She sighed deeply and took another bite of cake, then carefully brushed the crumbs off her pinafore. After a moment she said thoughtfully,

“Let me see your hands again.” Jacq held out his hands. She stared at them for a few seconds, and then frowned at the open blister weeping on the left palm. “How did you do that?”

He shrugged. “Digging holes for the new vine stock. I don’t have any work gloves.” She looked so distressed at this that he spoke quickly to reassure her. “It is all right. It doesn’t hurt very much.” To his immense surprise she grasped his hand and kissed the palm softly, on the blister, then looked at him, her vivid green eyes luminous with unshed tears.

“There,” she whispered. “Now I have made it all better.”

Later, Jacq Benet would always say it was at this exact moment he fell everlastingly in love with Katrione du Chesne.

After a moment he said quietly, “I will be your friend. If you want me to, that is.” She had smiled at that, through her tears, and said she would be very pleased to have him as her friend.

Later, Jacq walked her home again, carefully avoiding the route that she had used, so she might not feel ashamed of her childish notion that she had passed beyond the borders of Beaumarais.

Katkin said goodbye to him by the kitchen gate. “I will see you again tomorrow, Jacq. Don’t forget, you promised to show me where you saw the robin’s eggs!” She gave him her brightest smile, and then ran through the gardens, her braids flying.

Jacq watched her go, and then walked back through the fields, whistling thoughtfully. He was going to find his mother and tell her he had just met the girl he was going to marry someday.

\* \* \* \*

Later that evening at dinner, her quarrel with them forgotten, Katkin was telling her parents of her adventures that day. Her mother looked horrified when told she had been to one of the cottar houses.

She spoke sharply. "Katrione, such low persons are only our laborers. We do not associate with them as friends. I forbid you..."

Katkin's father Gaspard interrupted her. "Let the girl be, Anwen. I know that family. Jacq is Francois Benet's oldest boy. He is a good lad and a hard worker. Katkin needs someone to look out for her now that Willow is gone." He dropped his voice and the girl had to strain to catch his next words. "Gilles Savoyard told me some of the cottars down south have been raiding storehouses, stealing and looting. The Guard have put down the uprising for now, but who knows when it might start up again? We can't keep an eye on the girl all the time."

His wife replied, not bothering to lower her voice at all. "Then we should send her to the City to school with Willow. She would be safer there *and* less trouble to me." Katkin's eyes went wide with horror.

But Gaspard wouldn't hear of it. "Not a chance, Anwen. She is much too young for that. This place would be a mausoleum without her, anyway. Wouldn't

it, little Kitty Kat?" Her father turned to her, laughing, and ruffled her hair. "But you have to remember, Jacq has a job to do here, and you must not interfere with him when he is working, all right?" Katkin nodded happily. "Now, let's get my vielle. I know a new song."

Father and daughter left the table together arm in arm, leaving Anwen behind, muttering angrily.

\* \* \* \*

As he had promised, Jacq showed Katkin the robin's nest, and where the squirrels kept their nuts and the badger's den, and a thousand other hidden places. Tintaren was a huge maze of vineyards and cellars, for the wealthy Lord of Belladore owned the only expanse of land suitable for viticulture in Beaumarais. Katkin and Jacq explored every inch of it together, and never grew tired of each other's company.

Nevertheless, there did exist one secret place that Jacq was very reluctant to reveal to her. Katkin found out about it quite by chance. One winter's day, after finishing her lessons, she went looking for Jacq out in the wide daisy-studded meadow behind Tintaren Manor. She caught sight of him some distance away, hurrying down a path between two recently ploughed fields. Katkin was about to call out but fell silent as she realized someone else was looking for him too. She saw Jacq's head lift sharply as the foreman shouted his name. Katkin watched in surprise as Jacq stopped abruptly, stepped sideways, and then completely disappeared from sight. She looked around wildly,

refusing to believe the evidence of her own eyes, but it was as if he had ceased to exist.

Katkin jumped when the foreman came up beside her. "Hello, Little Shadow." He had given her this nickname some time ago, after he noticed that everywhere Jacq went she seemed to follow right behind. "Have you seen Jacq?" he asked. "I need him to help me shift some barrels."

Katkin looked up at him and answered uncertainly, "No, Rene. I haven't... seen him, not lately."

"Well if you find him, tell him I am looking for him, will you?" He stalked off and Katkin walked over to the place she had seen Jacq vanish. After a few moments she heard a strange sound, like the puff of displaced air, and Jacq once more stood beside her. He looked surprised and slightly annoyed to see her.

"What are you doing here, Kat?"

"Where did you go just now, when you disappeared?" Katkin asked excitedly.

Jacq tried to pretend ignorance but she would not allow it. Finally, exasperated by her questions, he snapped, "There is a very secret place I can go to. Don't ask me how I do it, because I don't know myself. The first time I went it was an accident, see? I was running from some boys, when I was much smaller than I am now. I tripped and fell sort of sideways, and then I found myself somewhere else, and they weren't behind me any more."

"Take me there, now," Katkin insisted. "I want to go with you. Jacq, please..."

“No. I won’t take you,” he said flatly. “I don’t even know if I can.”

But she had badgered him and sulked for days until finally he gave in.

Katkin skipped along beside Jacq as they crossed the brown fields to a place out of sight of the Manor House and the barn. After checking to make sure they were unobserved, he took her hand firmly in his, closed his eyes for a moment, then stepped forward and a little to the left. Katkin felt such a sickening moment of vertigo, she closed her eyes against it. After she opened them again and looked around, she said with disappointment, “Oh well, you said it might not work.”

Jacq said quietly, “Oh, it worked all right. Look, Katkin.”

He pointed upwards and she saw the dull whiteness of the sky above their heads. It had been a bright, sunny day a moment before. Now there were no clouds, just this uniform lack of color and form, as though the firmament just stopped. Her heart began to pound in fear.

She asked shakily, “Where are we? What is this place?”

He shrugged. “I already told you, I don’t know. Are you ready to go back?”

Katkin did not want Jacq to know she was afraid, so she said carelessly, “No, let’s walk around for a bit. Have you seen any other people?”

Jacq scratched his head. “There are white things here, but I wouldn’t call them people. I don’t think we should explore any further. I tried that a few times when I first

came here, but I always felt as though I didn't belong. Like I was trespassing somewhere very sacred. We should go back."

"Show me one of the things, and then we can go back, I mean it."

He looked at her doubtfully.

"Please, Jacq. You never have to bring me here again."

He sighed. "All right. But you have to promise you won't tell anyone else about it. Swear on the Goddess Lalluna." She crossed her hands over her chest, as she had seen the Daminem [\[1\]](#) of the Unity do once on a visit to the Infirmarie in the City, and solemnly swore an oath. Then he took her hand and led her across the brown field to a ramshackle house.

"I know this place," said Katkin. "It is the old Bell cottage. No one lives here now. The old man died last year."

"Yes," said Jacq. "He did. Come inside, Katkin."

The tiny house was neat as a pin within, as though nothing had been touched since the owner passed away. Katkin stood still, nervously waiting for Jacq to show her the thing that wasn't exactly a person. The silence was so oppressive she thought she could hear her own heart beating. "Back here," he whispered, seemingly as afraid of the stillness as she. He pointed to a curtained alcove that hid the old man's bed. They walked forward together, and Jacq parted the curtains slightly so Katkin could peer within.

As Jacq had promised, something white lay on the bed, on top of the faded blue counterpane. Katkin

suddenly understood what Jacq meant about trespassing.

“Jacq,” she whispered urgently. “Let’s go.”

The creature heard her, and lifted its head. Katkin gave a moan of fear, for it had no face, just a flat whiteness, as blank as the sky outside. She turned and fled, and Jacq followed behind her, shutting the door firmly, in case the terrifying being inside should decide to pursue them.

Once they were well away from old man Bell’s cottage, she begged, “Take me home, right now. Please...”

Jacq took her hand, and stepped sideways again. After the same horrible feeling of dizziness, they stood once more in the living world.

“I told you,” he said simply, “but you wouldn’t listen to me, would you?” But then he had to comfort her frightened tears, and he forgot to be angry with her.

\* \* \* \*

Time passed, and still they remained the best of friends. Jacq was fourteen, and towered over eleven-year-old Katkin. They spent what time they could together, rambling through the fields of Tintaren, with Jacq on Nestor and Katkin on her new pony, Brinna.

But Jacq seldom had time for such adventures. As he grew larger and stronger his work at the vineyard had grown much more demanding, and the foreman less tolerant of interruptions. He often sent Katkin away with a curt admonition, and her busy father just ignored her pleas to lighten Jacq’s workload. Sometimes Jacq

seemed angry, and would go for hours without talking, especially if he saw Katkin reading or writing in one of her schoolbooks. Katkin worried endlessly about his moods and would try hard to coax a smile from him when she thought he was unhappy.

Her mother and father seemed troubled too, and there were whispered conversations about a man named Nicholas Reynard, and something called the Rising. Katkin paid much less attention to this. Her world revolved firmly around Jacq and the endless fields of Tintaren. With a faith borne of childhood innocence, she believed both would be with her forever. She could not have been more wrong.

One late summer day, Katkin waited impatiently behind the barn for Jacq to finish his afternoon work in the fields. They had been planning this ride to the lakeshore for weeks, and now Jacq was very late. As the sun slowly dipped lower in the sky, Katkin felt her own spirits sinking. The grape harvest would begin in just a few days and she knew Jacq would be far too busy then to spend any time with her. As she was about to give up and return to the Manor house she saw him hurrying around the corner of the barn, and she hailed him with a cry of delight.

“At last! I was beginning to think you had forgotten all about me, Jacq Benet!”

He looked tired and a little dispirited as he rinsed his hands and head under the water pump by the horse trough. “Rene was watching me like a hawk. I couldn’t sneak away early. Come on, we’ll have to move if we are

going to make it down to the Mere and cook supper before dark. Did you manage to find us something to eat?"

Katkin grinned and held up a box containing half a dozen eggs and some potatoes, stolen earlier in the day from the kitchen gardens.

"Did you tell your father anything of our plans?"

She shook her head. "I didn't want to chance it. He might have said I couldn't go."

Jacq shrugged and accepted this. "You will catch it if we are late back then. Come on, let's get the horses."

Katkin led Brinna from the barn while Jacq saddled Nestor. They set off together down a well worn path that led to the shores of the Mistmere. Autumn was in full flight and the hills were awash in the yellow leaves of the oaks, with occasional bursts of flame red from maple and sycamore. There was a nip in the air that presaged the coming of winter, but the sun was warm in the brilliantly blue sky. Katkin thought it a perfect afternoon, despite a bank of heavy-looking clouds that were massing to the east.

Once they reached the shores of the lake, where a stony tributary rushed down to meet it from the hills, she lit a small fire with her tinder and flint while Jacq dug a deep hole in the side of the bank. Katkin scrambled down into the river to retrieve some rounded stones, and then tossed them into the fire. Once they were hot enough, Jacq carefully piled them in the makeshift oven along with the food. In the meantime,







picked Katkin up and draped her across the broad back of Nestor. Though he rode as quickly as he could for Tintaren, it still took him over an hour to get there.

By that time her family was in a panic, and Katkin's mother and father both met Jacq at the gates of the main house. Anwen took one look at her daughter and shrieked, "You see, Gaspard! I told you this would happen. What has that lout done to her? Look at her! Look at your daughter..."

Jacq opened his mouth, and tried to explain, but Gaspard du Chesne had already instructed two of his men to get the boy off his horse and into the barn. The last thing he heard, before they dragged him away, was Katkin's voice, crying hysterically, "Jacq! No, I want to stay here with Jacq!" The sound of her screaming his name stayed with him for a long time afterwards.

## Chapter Two

### Hithluel, the rocky shore

(The Tollyn, Six)

They have entered this turn of the Gyre. We must stop them, once and for all. Do you agree, my sisters? *The beautiful, dark-haired woman in the mirror nods. Then she becomes three.*

You are the Moon.

*One face in the mirror changes, becomes even more striking; white wings gleam from behind her shoulders. Moonlight smiles. I am the pretty one — this time.*

And you... Raven. *Raven looks distastefully in the mirror — sees her black, matted hair and sharp rat's teeth.*

Now we must search for the Innocent. She is the key to this turn of the Gyre. Find her, Moonlight.

*Moonlight touches the tokens, still scattered on the table before them, and shakes her head. You can see the*

future without these old luckcast<sup>[2]</sup> tokens, Geya. Why do you bother?

*Geya smiles.* I know it. But such things remind me of what we once were. Now I would draw one more, so I may see what this turn of the Gyre holds for us, my sisters.

*She draws another token from the luckcast. It is the fifteenth card of the estate of Naer, in the Reversed position — Death.*

So, it begins...

\* \* \* \*

Frost still rimed the grass in the late afternoon as Katkin made her way through the forest called St. Valery's Acre. She rode with care, alert to every sound from the undergrowth on each side of the path following the riverbank. Her pony, Brinna, snorted anxiously. Katkin firmly held the reins, afraid the pony would shy at a birdcall or some other small noise. Patting her mane, she said, "Come on, Brin. Settle down now. There is nothing here to be frightened of. I hope..."

The catch in Katkin's voice gave her own fears away. Since the War between the Soldiers of the Rising and the King's Guard began, the forest surrounding the huge inland sea known as the Mistmere had become a haven for brigands and deserters from both sides. She knew the dangers well, yet traveling the forest path remained the quickest way back to the City of Isle St. Valery from the village of Belladore, after spending the day with her sister Willow.

Her sister's husband, Yannick Abelard, had sent a message to the Infirmarie last night, begging for help with the delivery of their first child. Katkin was not a proper healer, not yet, but she was all the poor family could afford. Fortunately, the birth went well, except for a long labor. Her sister had borne a beautiful baby girl, and named her Roseberry after Yannick's mother.

But now Katkin might be late back to the Infirmarie. There would be the devil to pay if the Maitress found out she left the City without an escort.

Katkin stopped before she reached the steepest part of the path, leading up to a bluff by the side of the river. There, the forest fell away to reveal a grassy meadow, studded with daisies and buttercups. The track here was narrow and stony, with high banks on either side. It would be the perfect place for an ambush. "We will take it slow, Brinna. There will be no surprises ahead for us, girl, I can promise you that." Katkin spoke aloud and then smiled, wondering if she was reassuring the pony or herself. She urged Brinna forward and climbed the rocky rise with care. Katkin held herself in readiness, one hand on the reins and one on her bow, an arrow in her bowstring, but nothing disturbed their passage.

When she had reached the meadow safely, she breathed a sigh of relief and stopped to admire the view. From this vantage point, she could see the entire City on its peninsula and the walls and battlements gleamed in the low winter sun. She remembered the first time she had passed this way, as an unhappy eleven-year-old, traveling to boarding school in the City. That had been

before the beginning of the War. Before Nicholas Reynard murdered her parents and utterly destroyed her home.

Katkin looked further down the path and saw a man gazing out over the cliff edge. Immediately, she jumped down from Brinna, bow at the ready. The stranger's back was towards her and she did not think he was aware of her presence. He wore the elaborate uniform of a cuirassier, a horseman, with red epaulets on a jacket of midnight blue. The crested dragoon's helmet on his head bore a long plume of black horsehair that mingled with his own long, straw-colored queue. He carried a broadsword and a flintlock pistol stuck into his belt. Despite these weapons, Katkin found nothing particularly threatening about him, perhaps because she could see he stood with the aid of crutches. It appeared he had no companions, other than a black horse standing nearby, patiently waiting for its master. Perhaps he was merely a traveler, like herself, pausing to admire the view of the City from the top of the sandstone bluff. She decided to approach him, after convincing herself she faced no real danger.

Grasping Brinna's bridle, she walked boldly forward, intending to greet the stranger and continue on her way down to the shores of the Mistmere and into the City. Suddenly she stopped again, and watched in agitation as the soldier removed his crutches and threw them angrily over the edge of the bluff. They clattered down the rocks before finally coming to rest somewhere out of sight.

Katkin began to think she should get back up on Brinna and ride quickly past the distraught soldier. She hoped he would not try to follow her, though it did not seem likely now his crutches lay at the bottom of the cliff. But might this man need her help? After all, as a Juvenile[3] at the Infirmarie she ought to be ready to use her training at any time. She had to approach him cautiously, that much was certain. Frantically she tried to remember what she had learned. Something about remaining calm, and not making any sudden movements, or was that the treatment for shock? Perhaps, if she didn't do something soon, it wasn't going to matter at all.

As she took a few tentative steps towards him, his horse caught wind of her and whinnied. The blond man turned sharply and almost fell. Katkin forgot to be cautious. With a cry of alarm, she broke into a run, with arms outstretched, determined to save him from joining his crutches at the bottom of the cliff. But after a few seconds he regained his balance and regarded her silently as she drew up with him, out of breath and red-cheeked.

His look was dismissive.

She was nothing like the sort of women he usually associated with — neither the spoiled and wealthy daughters of the fellow gentry he called his friends nor the languid courtesans who now and again received his business. On the street he wouldn't have given her a second glance, even though her dark-lashed green eyes were large and luminous, and her chestnut hair curled

fetchingly round her face. Her mouth was far too generous, for one thing, and that ridiculous sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her unremarkable nose made her look like a farmer's daughter. He wondered what on Yrth she was doing in the Acre alone, especially since she was wearing the simple vesture of a cloistered Unity Juvenile — a white long-sleeved shift, ending just below the knee, covered by a blue-striped apron, embroidered with the winged symbol of Lalluna on the bib. A worn fichu, meant to be tucked round the neck and shoulders, had come loose in her hurried advance across the meadow, giving her a disheveled look the stranger found both strangely appealing and somehow oddly familiar.

She blushed and re-tucked it quickly as soon as she saw his appraising glance.

Katkin, normally irrepressible and confident, could think of nothing at all to say. She drew herself up to her full height, but she still felt miserably childlike next to this tall soldier. He seemed to possess the battle-weary air she often saw in the injured Guardsmen at the Infirmary. She took in his ice-blue eyes, and fine, straight nose. His elaborate uniform marked him as a wealthy and probably high-ranking officer of the King's Guard. The man appeared to find her confusion amusing, for his eyes held a spark of merriment and his lips twitched slightly. He did not speak either, but seemed to be waiting to see what mad thing she might do next.

Katkin cleared her throat and said nervously, “Good day, Sir. As I was making my way through the Acre just now, I noticed you...” a pause here while she struggled to find the least threatening phrase, “accidentally dropped your crutches over the edge of the cliff back there. I can fetch them for you, if it would please you.”

“Do not trouble yourself, Miss.” He had a deep voice, obviously accustomed to giving orders. “Miss?”

As she scrambled down the steep path to the river’s edge, Katkin called back up to him, “It is no trouble, I know a way down.” She made her way to the bottom and retrieved the crutches from the bank. Fortunately they looked to be undamaged by their fall. The same could not be said for Katkin’s composure by the time she fought her way back up the cliff face, through many clumps of gorse and blackberry. Once back at the top, she handed over the crutches, and smiled awkwardly at him.

“Thank you for your help,” the man said softly. “You must think it very careless of me to let them... fall like that.” Again, his lips twitched and she knew he mocked her obvious discomfort. Then he removed his helmet, cradling it under his arm as he bowed stiffly.

“Captain Tomas Jean de Vigny at your service, Miss.”

Katkin smoothed down her apron as best she could and wished her knees had not gotten quite so muddy. She finally found her voice. “Katrione du Chesne at yours.” A disturbing sensation of *déjà vu* made her ask, “Have we met somewhere before, Captain?”

He ignored this question and posed one of his own. "May I ask what brings you into the St. Valery Acre's in the evening? You should return to the City. There are many dangers here, Miss."

Despite her now bedraggled appearance, she tried to answer him with adult dignity. "I am on my way to St. Valery now, Captain de Vigny. I have been in Belladore attending a birth, and I must return to the Infirmarie immediately."

"You are a healer?" he asked her, looking skeptically at her torn frock and ripped stockings.

"I am a Juvenie, of the Unity of Lalluna."

"Then you *are* cloistered. Are you not meant to have a chaperone? Why are you out alone?" he asked, raising his eyebrow at her.

Katkin swallowed uncomfortably, surprised at his knowledge of her order's precepts. "A pressing emergency called me away. I had no choice but to go alone." She glared at him defiantly. "Anyway, I can take care of myself. I am armed." She pointed to her bow and quiver lying on the ground next to Brinna.

The Captain shook his head. "So, you stayed longer than you should and had to take this risky path to get back to the city before curfew and the closing of the gates? I think you made a mistake. Your pathetic little bow would be no help against a man such as me. It is fortunate for you I am a gentleman."

Katkin spoke calmly, though his conceit annoyed her. "I will be punished severely for this mistake, as you call it." Despite her efforts to sound untroubled, her voice

faltered as she looked worriedly about her, the stranger's plight almost forgotten. With nightfall imminent, she had little chance of getting back to the Infirmarie undetected. The Maitress would be furious with her. "I will never make it back in time now. I could lose my place with the Unity."

Tomas looked at her sympathetically. "You shall not be punished for stopping to help an injured man in distress. I will accompany you and speak to the Maitress myself."

"You would do that? Why? You don't even know me," she said, a bit surprised by his generosity.

"It is nothing. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to the Infirmarie for treatment when I paused here and, as you observed, dropped my blasted crutches. It is the least I could do after you have put yourself out for me. Now, if you will fetch your faithful steed, we can be on our way." He stood quite still, waiting for her to turn away.

Instinctively, she knew the proud Captain felt shame at his disability and did not want her to see his awkward movements. Dutifully, she turned her back on him and retraced her steps toward Brinna. She heard his deep voice from behind her, saying, "Hold, Pollux. Stand ready." Katkin stole a glance back and saw his agonized expression as he scrambled ungracefully onto the animal. He righted himself on the saddle and carefully composed his appearance before leaning down to collect the crutches on the horse's flank. Katkin, shivering now in the early evening chill, paused to cover herself with

her woolen cloak, and throw the hood over her head. Climbing on to Brinna, she urged the pony forward until she stood close to Tomas' horse. The Captain looked down upon her and said, "Shall we ride together?"

Katkin did not bother to hurry now she had the wounded man in her charge. Reasoning he could very well be her patient once they arrived, she decided to try and find out more about him. She wondered how to bring up the subject of his injured leg and strange behavior on the cliff edge. Not wanting him to feel ill at ease, she decided to take an indirect route.

"You said you were on your way to visit the Infirmary? Do you intend to take the healing waters there?"

"Unfortunately that is so. I do not wish it, but my superiors have ordered me to. I would rather stay at the front than be fussed over by a coterie of goddess-worshipping harpies." His bitterness surprised and offended Katkin. She stared up at him with burning cheeks.

"So am I a 'goddess worshipping harpy' as well? After all, I am a Juvenile, and I have made my Prime Vows. You speak of something of which you obviously know nothing, Captain. We have a fine history of cures among those who believe in the healing powers of Lalluna."

He replied arrogantly, "Take no offence. I know more than you think. You are naïve and I would hardly expect you to understand. When you are older, as I am, you will have no time for such fairy tales."

Katkin snorted in derision — she felt sure he could not be more than a few years older than she. She felt her

temper rising so she decided to change the subject. "Captain, will you tell me of the wound that has caused you to be in such a distressing situation? If it is not too private a matter, I mean?" She knew, as a Juvenile, she should not be asking such questions of a patient.

"It is, as you say, a private matter, yet I feel I owe you some explanation for my strange behavior back there on the bluff. What did you think when you saw me throw these damned crutches over the cliff? Did you think I intended to follow them myself?" He looked at her questioningly, and Katkin nodded her head, realizing to her chagrin he had seen through her act from the very beginning.

"How do you know what I saw? You had your back turned."

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow and answered wryly, "I am a professional soldier, Miss. I would not have been promoted to the rank of Captain without some rudimentary ability to know when I am being crept up on. Also, your quite priceless expression gave you away." At this he smiled mockingly, but his face did lose its pained expression for a brief moment.

"You are making fun of me." Katkin said sullenly. "I truly thought you meant to throw yourself off the cliff after the crutches. I only wanted to help you." She looked up at him, sitting so far above her, resplendent on his steed. "Did you think of jumping, Captain?"

His smile disappeared. "No, I did not. I have seen too much death in my time to wish to add my own life to its number. But I am angry and frustrated and I let my

feelings get the better of me on the cliff top. My utter failure to overcome my injury makes me behave so. I am no good to my country like this. Though I have suffered through the ministrations of many physicians, none has been able to cure me. When my commander ordered me to find the Daminem of Lalluna and endure more treatment, it did not please me — to put it mildly. I have no faith in any healing, and wish to find nothing but an honorable death on the battlefield.” His cold blue eyes, so filled with pain and sadness, pierced her to the core.

She said softly, “I am sorry. There are many who have suffered in this war and the Daminem do what they can to help. Please tell me, if you will, how your leg came to be injured.”

The Captain rode silently for a moment, and then said condescendingly, “If it troubles you to hear of warfare, you will not find this story a pleasant one. Such things are not proper subjects of conversation for young girls.”

Katkin sharply declared, “I am not a child! Have I not told you I am one of the Juvenet of the Unity? Continue, Captain, I have heard many tales from the soldiers in my care. Yours can be no worse.” Katkin sat back on Brinna, hoping she had at last convinced him to treat her with some respect.

“As you wish. About six months ago, my men and I found ourselves trapped in a narrow gully on the west side of the Ariane, held down by musket fire from some of Reynard’s cursed peasant rabble. We were taking heavy losses and I decided to make a break for the head

of the gully and see if I could draw their fire, allowing my men to escape downwards.”

Katkin looked up at him, amazed. Riding out alone against a host of enemies and he made it sound all so mundane. She remarked admiringly, “That was a very heroic thing to do.”

He smiled ruefully. “Heroic, you say? Of course it was. That is a part of my duty, as a Captain in the King’s Guard. But perhaps damned foolish would be a better choice of words. I took a pistol ball directly in the knee and it shattered the joint. I felt such agony, I cannot describe it, and I have not been free of it since that day. The battlefield surgeon wanted to amputate my leg from the knee down but my father prevented him from doing so. He insisted it would have ruined my chances for promotion. But my leg has not healed properly and now I am a cripple. Completely lame! I cannot walk without the aid of crutches, nor can I ride far. I am useless. Truly useless to the war effort or for anything else.”

“Even if you can no longer fight, there are other ways you can help with the conflict, are there not?” Katkin suggested softly. “I cannot wage war either and I have lost much, yet I do what I can. Do you understand? Nicholas Reynard has hurt many people.” Katkin thought she might shake him out of his self-pity with her words, but that was not the case.

Instead, he rounded on her, furiously shouting. “You are just a child. What could you have lost? Some pretty doll house or play toys? How could you understand what it is like to be an officer of the Guard? Do you know

what expectations are placed on my shoulders, and what the price of failure is?”

Katkin drew a shaky breath, and stared at him, surprised at his vehement reaction. She might have told him more of her own catastrophic loss, but she had no intention of provoking him further, given his questionable mental state. Instead, she replied quietly, “I beg pardon, Captain. I have obviously spoken out of turn. Can you forgive me?”

He nodded curtly. “Of course, Miss du Chesne, but I should be apologizing to you instead. I have been a heel. I have only my injury to blame, and therefore myself.”

She smiled up at him reassuringly. “It is nothing, really. I think we are both a little tired, that is all.”

They traversed the last steeply winding section of path and reined their horses at the entrance to the Yoke. Katkin eyed the gate, which was shut and barred. She said, “Oh no! The curfew has already begun. They won’t let us in now. What are we going to do?”

Tomas did not answer her. He rode close to the closed gate on Pollux and pounded loudly on the boards with the hilt of his sword to rouse the keeper within.

A small window opened. Beyond it, a head appeared, clad in the shining steel helmet of a Guardsman. The gatekeeper said, “The gate is closed until morning. You must show a pass.”

Tomas drew himself up straight and barked, “I am Captain Tomas de Vigny of the Fourth Company, King’s Guard. Open the gate and I will show my pass when we are safely inside. I have urgent business within the City.”

He glared at the gatekeeper, who blinked in surprise. Katkin looked at Tomas in dismay. She thought the Captain had spoken very rudely to the Guardsman, who only wanted to carry out his duty to keep the City safe. She wondered if he would refuse, but a moment later she heard the heavy bar drop to the ground and the gate opened wide to admit them.

A cobbled courtyard and a small hut filled the space between the inner and outer gates. A low fire burned in a brazier. Katkin noticed a tin bowl of beans and a chunk of brown bread lying next to a three-legged stool by the fire. Apparently, they disturbed the gatekeeper's evening meal, such as it was. Looking toward the other side of the courtyard, she could see the inner gate, as well reinforced as the outer one, leading to the Yoke.

Without dismounting, Tomas reached into his satchel, pulled out a small rolled parchment, unrolled, and sealed with red wax. He dropped it into the gatekeeper's outstretched hand, saying, "Here is my pass, boy. Now let us proceed immediately."

The young Guardsman unrolled the document and read it laboriously, his lips shaping each word. Tomas looked on with mounting impatience. Finally, the Guardsman said, "I am sorry for the delay, Captain. Your papers are in order and you may cross into the City. But the young lady? Does she have a pass? Otherwise, I must ask her to return tomorrow morning."

Tomas swore explosively at the young Guardsman. "This young woman is my companion and is a resident of the City, who could not return by curfew time

through no fault of her own. She is coming with me now. Do not argue with me further, Private.”

“Sir, I am under strict orders from the Sergeant not to admit anyone who does not have the proper papers. As much as I would like to, I cannot let her pass the Yoke with you.” The young Guardsman looked up at the Captain and swallowed nervously.

Katkin felt very sorry for the lad, who was probably a farm boy from the sunny fields beyond the City, not yet fifteen summers old. He had been called up to fight in an incomprehensible war, taken far from home and left to carry out his duties as gatekeeper on this dark and cold night as best he could. How could the Captain be so unfair? She tried to defuse the tension. “Captain, please, let it rest. I can easily find lodging in one of the houses near the mouth of the Yoke.”

Tomas ignored her plea and jumped down from his horse to confront the Guardsman face to face. Only Katkin knew how much the effort would have cost him. He said angrily, “Call your Sergeant. I would speak with him.” The Private backed away, and walked quickly into the hut.

In a moment, the boy returned with an older man, whose sour expression indicated he did not appreciate the interruption of his evening meal. After wiping his mouth on his uniform sleeve, he said, “Well? What can I do for you, Captain?”

“I wish to travel the Yoke in the company of this young lady, who does not have a pass. She represents no

threat to the City. Will you allow her to cross, or must I call for *your* superior officer?"

The Sergeant scratched his head. "Well now, Captain. Rightly speaking I ought not to."

Tomas swore impatiently and said, "Did you serve with Major General Charles de Vigny in the campaign against the Mardonne?" The Sergeant nodded warily. The Captain continued, "He is now the Lord of Havenwood. A very powerful man. He is also my father. Surely you can trust my judgment in the matter of one small girl?" Katkin colored at this dismissive description, but said nothing.

The Sergeant considered this for a moment then said gruffly, "Very well, I will allow her to proceed in your company. But go carefully — the stones on the Yoke are slick with frost. You should lead your mounts across."

The young gatekeeper produced a ring of large brass keys from his pocket. He opened the inner gates and waved them through. Katkin turned back as they continued on to the Yoke, to see the Guardsman staring after them, shaking his head and muttering before he slammed the inner gate shut.

Katkin paused while Tomas retrieved his crutches from their strap on the saddle. Brinna stamped restively on the narrow Yoke, obviously eager to get back to her stable. Katkin felt the same way, despite the trouble she knew waited for her at the Infirmarie. Though the Captain had promised to plead her case with the Maitress, she decided to leave him and travel the rest of the way alone. Grasping Brinna's bridle, she urged her

pony forward into the darkness and listened for the ringing sound of his horse's iron-shod hooves on the stones to show he followed.

After a moment, Tomas called out tiredly, "Katrione, please. Do not proceed so quickly. I am unable to keep up with you."

Perhaps the sound of Brinna's feet on the cobbles drowned out his voice, for Katkin did not slow her pace, nor did she look back.

\* \* \* \*

Tomas forlornly watched her disappear into the darkness, as he struggled along with a single crutch, gripping the bridle of his horse with his free hand. Despair at the hopelessness of his injury overwhelmed him. His glorious career had effectively ended the moment he took a musket ball in the kneecap, plunging him into a daily grinding battle with pain that he could never win. Alcohol deadened the worst of it, but only for a little while. He began thinking how easy it would be to slip over the edge of the Yoke into the sanctuary of the Mere, away from the agony of his shattered knee and the pity of his comrades. If he could not die in battle, would that not be an honorable end? As Katkin made her way across the Yoke without him, he left the side of his horse and staggered to the edge. He clung to the railing as a wave of nausea left him chilled and sweating.

*"Come to me..."* The water called to him now, in a cold and terrifying voice that froze him to the marrow. *"I will take away the pain for you in no time at all..."*

As he stared down into the blackness of the Mere, Tomas unaccountably began to think about his childhood — winters in the City and golden summers at the country estate, with servants to wait on his every whim. His parents seldom saw him, of course, being always busy with the social whirl of the privileged. Tomas' father, a highly decorated General, took a young, foreign-born bride after his retirement from the King's Guard. His mother, although kind enough, did not seem to want to have much of anything to do with her son and he grew up with a succession of nannies and governesses. The General had a stormy relationship with his beautiful, blond wife, and when a jealous rage overtook him, he would often strike her. When she died suddenly, giving birth to a stillborn son, he had almost gone mad. He drank to excess and lashed out at everyone around him. Tomas grieved deeply, but unobtrusively, and avoided the old man as much as he could. He matured quickly after that, fiercely independent, spoiled by his wealth and neglected by his father. A stint in military school hammered much of the independence out of him, but he gained something much more valuable — a fanatical devotion to the King's Guard that pleased his father immensely. He still spoke proudly of Tomas' field promotion to Captain, after a particularly long and bloody campaign against Reynard's soldiers.

Now, as he felt tears well up and spill over onto his cheeks, Tomas knew just what his old man would say. "Tears are for the women, boy; we men have to show

discipline, keep up the side. Stop this damned self-pity.” But his father didn’t understand him — no one did, really. Tomas could see the hazy form of his father on the bridge now, striding towards him, shouting something. Suddenly he realized that all he had to do was fall forward over the railing and the water would do the rest. His father would no longer be able to see him, would not be able to mock his despondency and pain. Slowly, he removed the dragoon’s helmet from his head and placed it on the railing. As the black horsehair plume stirred in the wind, he let himself pitch head first into the water.

\* \* \* \*

Katkin hurried along the Yoke until she reached the stone-walled bay in the middle. She paused there and listened again for the sound of Pollux’s hooves, but heard only the slapping of the waves on the breakwater. Katkin left Brinna and walked back to look for the Captain, guiltily regretting her angry impulse to leave him behind. She spied the larger, dark form of his horse first, and then, more vaguely, Tomas leaning dangerously far over the railing. Katkin broke into a run, heedless of the icy stones, anxiously calling his name. While she was still some distance away, he fell forward and hit the rocks of the breakwater, then sank, silently, into the inky blackness.

Once she reached the place where his helmet lay, she anxiously scanned the water, praying he would surface, but he did not. Katkin threw off her cloak and climbed

over the railing. She jumped wide to clear the rocks, praying none lurked beneath the surface. The freezing water hit her like a physical blow and drove the breath from her lungs, temporarily disorienting her. She surfaced and began to tread water, trying to decide where to dive down, knowing she had little time to spare. Already her extremities felt almost numb. Doggedly she dived, using her hands to grope blindly in the water for any trace of him. She found nothing.

Katkin went under again and again, without success, until her strength was almost gone. It felt as though the water became thicker with each dive — until it was like syrup she could barely push her way through. As she kicked furiously to try and bring some feeling back into her frozen legs, her foot struck something in the water. Steeling herself, she plunged down and cast about for the thing she had touched. She found the Captain! Wrapping her arms around his middle, she tried to raise him to the surface, but his boot seemed to be caught in something close to the bottom of the lake. Her lungs and heart exploded with pain and she began to see stars swimming in the blackness around her. Katkin realized dizzily she would likely perish if she stayed under much longer. Just as she felt she must to let go and surface again, he floated free. With a reserve she did not know she possessed, Katkin forced her way to the surface with Tomas in tow, exploding from the water and gulping great breaths of air. Her head cleared immediately.

In the almost pitch darkness, Katkin could just make out the vague line of the Yoke in the distance, lit at

intervals by dim lanterns. She felt her strength fading rapidly and called out for help, though she did not believe the gatekeeper would be able to hear her. Tomas felt like a thousand pound weight in her arms. She decided she had better swim for the breakwater, but each time she tried to close the distance it seemed to move further away. The water was growing warmer and now felt so comforting she felt as though she could sleep in its embrace forever.

Katkin called out again, although this time it sounded like a whisper. She sent a desperate prayer to the Goddess Lalluna, and to Ancamma, Goddess of the Mere, and then closed her eyes for a few seconds to rest. She woke with a start when her head slipped under the water. Coughing and choking, she struggled to the surface, but could no longer keep moving her legs. Katkin knew she must be close to death as an unearthly, glowing mist began to dance in front of her eyes. Her conscious thoughts began to glide away from her, like beads from a broken necklace. As her face sank once more below the surface of the Mere, the last thing she saw was the insubstantial figure of a winged woman emerging from the formless mist.

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.  
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## About the author

Suzanne Francis believes the genesis for her inventive Song of the Arkafina series lies in her chronic travel sickness as a child and young adult. While growing up in England and on the Continent, she happily participated in many family and school trips, though riding in the back seat of a car often left her suffering from nausea for hours on end. To help pass the time, she began telling herself stories, serialized over many days and weeks, often featuring the landscapes through which she was traveling. These imaginary adventures, along with a life-long love of reading good books (but only when sitting still) sparked her interest in writing. Since then she has penned many fantasy short stories and sonnets, as well as two novels.

After earning her BA in Geography, Suzanne worked for several years as an urban planner in the USA, before retiring to have children. A series of part-time jobs followed, everything from migrant farm worker to dishwasher, retail manager to massage therapist. Her appetite for voyaging has taken her to such far-flung places as the Cook Islands, Mexico, across the deserts

and Deep South of America and on many adventures through the capitals of Europe. She has drawn on these life experiences to amplify and embellish the unique characters and settings of her novels.

In addition to writing, her passions include neopaganism and playing a perversely difficult musical instrument called the hurdy-gurdy.

She is a member of the Troth, and the Otago Writer's Guild.

Presently, Suzanne lives in rural Dunedin, New Zealand with her husband Michael and four children.