

# Compendium

Book One of the Artifacts of Lumin Series

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*For my family, my love, and my pups.*

*Special thanks to Al Watt, Terri  
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feedback in the crafting of this novel.*

*I exist in two places,  
here and where you are.*

—MARGARET ATWOOD

# 1 The Core

## LUMIN CYCLE 9498

“WE CAN NO LONGER IGNORE THIS,” said Minister SainClair, her voice echoing in the massive cavern. Its resonance was dampened by the deeply embedded roots threaded through the foundation of the room.

The encircling vines carried twinkling gourds and night flowers, all of which threw soft light around the chamber. Melia Kannon glanced around. The spectacular romance of the atmosphere contrasted sharply with the tense faces of the assembly. What was filling her with such deep unease? Was it the tension pressing down around her or the moist air? The heat of the chamber, which usually softly enveloped the Central Counsel like a cocoon, nurtur-

ing the growth of a civilization, crackled with energy that bordered on oppressive.

*Are you getting this?*

“Affirmative. I am recording,” said a smooth voice directly into her ear.

*Good, because Minister SainClair wants a full account of the proceeding.*

Melia swallowed hard, her gut a mangled knot. She looked over to the carved elderwood table that arced around the front of the Core’s assembly hall. The ministers sat facing the general delegation.

“Lumin grows weaker by the cycle. We’ve hit a critical degradation threshold. We must act now to immediately implement Gamma Protocol,” said SainClair to the frowning faces.

The delegates erupted into frantic chatter that resonated up through the roots of the Core and into its trunks. No doubt the branches high up in the sky above shook from the force. Melia stifled a small smile from her position at the ministers’ table. Now wasn’t the time.

“Silence!” Minister Draca’s voice thundered through the assembly. He banged the gnarled stick in his hands hard against the stone floor.

Melia flinched, but he struck the staff only once.

“Minister SainClair is speaking, and you’ll let her finish.”

“The ministers already voted, and we’re unanimous,” SainClair said. She stood up and stepped around the table to approach the assembly.

Minister SainClair had aged much over the last ten cycles but still looked regal in her finely woven teal robes. Her whitening blond hair was intricately plaited back with loose tendrils curling around her ears. Her soft clothes and features belied the ice of her almost colorless eyes. Her look of intense determination made Melia proud to serve with the woman. She swallowed hard, her heart thumping against her ribs; it didn't want to be here any more than she did. She glanced to her right. The other ministers sat stony faced, eyes forward.

SainClair folded her hands in her robes. "Lumin is at a crossroads. To continue down our current path will bring doom. We all know this. We've seen the wilt in the Great Forest. Jefferson has shown us the data on projected electrical use."

Minister Jefferson nodded from his seat.

"Gamma Protocol is too extreme!" a voice interjected. Delegate Rosewater stood from his chair to face SainClair. "Why can't we just institute a more stringent ration? A full-scale Network blackout is madness."

Murmurs of agreement rose from the crowd.

Rosewater moved to stand next to Minister SainClair. "And why five hundred years?" he added. "How do we even know it'll work? We're dooming Lumin either way. There'll be no way to restore it, us, anything, if we go forward with Gamma Protocol."

SainClair raised her hand to quell the burgeoning discontent mirrored in Rosewater's words. "The rations aren't working. We need a total reversal. I fear we're almost too late as it is."

“What if we are? You want to throw us into five hundred years of blackout, but if it’s too late, we should be working harder to find a solution, not sitting on our hands.”

“It’s not just about us now,” she said. “It’s about Lumin. The planet needs to rest and regrow. If she doesn’t, it won’t just be us who’ll be doomed. It’ll be all of life. We have a responsibility greater than the Core.”

“So we just burn all our technology?” Rosewater’s face grew dark, and his fists clenched at his side. His spring-leaf-green robes swung behind him as he turned to face the other ministers. “I guess we just torch the Network we’ve spent thousands of cycles building? Fill in the Core with dirt? Is that your proposal?” He glared accusingly at each of the ministers in turn, his eyes flashing. He slammed his hands on the table in front of them.

SainClair suddenly looked very tired. The iron melted from her eyes, and she rested her hands on the table. “Gamma Protocol dictates that we are to cease all use of the Network immediately. The Network will be locked, and access will be revoked for all devices.”

“What about the devices that don’t rely on Network access?” asked a voice from the general assembly.

“What about preservation of information?” asked another.

The floodgate released, and the room again erupted in a clamor of noise and movement. This time Minister SainClair seemed inclined to let the delegates air their grievances and concerns for a bit.

Melia sat at the ministers’ table and took in the spectacle. SainClair nodded to those addressing her and leaned over to speak

to the others. Melia mentally retraced the Protocol again, her brain caught in a loop that played the same steps over and over. Everything was in order, and nothing could stop it now.

She fingered the chain around her neck. The key lay against her chest under her robes. SainClair had given it to her for safekeeping. Ministers Draca and SainClair already had set the switch, with Melia there to witness. They knew this proceeding would be rife with discord, but SainClair was right. They no longer could put off the inevitable. Every week the Network grew hotter, and the trees wilted a little more. The Core itself, once a pleasant enclave, had grown uncomfortably warm over the past couple of cycles. Whether the decision was right or wrong, Melia couldn't say, but it was the only viable option. The brightest minds of Lumin had worked on this problem night and day, and now it was too late to do anything but shut it down and hope for the best.

Still, she hadn't expected such a visceral reaction from Rosewater. He was just as passionate as any minister about protecting Lumin, but all the delegates, minister or otherwise, were in this together. *All of Lumin will be looking to us for guidance, to see them through the dark cycles to come*, she thought. Melia's side twitched at the idea of informing the general populace why they no longer had access to the Network, of explaining that all their equipment was dormant. She knew they'd never understand how close Lumin had come to the brink.

She would miss the beauty of the Core. She frowned when a bounce of light caught her eye. Something had glinted just then, and she shook her head to clear the foggy thoughts. In that brief moment, the disordered chaos devolved into terror.

“No!” she screamed, bolting to her feet. She rushed around the elderwood table just as Minister SainClair crumpled on the floor, with Minister Draca on his knees at her side. “What have you done?” she shouted at Rosewater. “Seize him!”

Rosewater held a curved knife that dripped with blood. At her words, his hand loosened, and it clattered to the floor. “Only what I had to do to stop this madness,” he said, his face menacing. He held his hands out as two delegates emerged from the mass, each taking one arm.

“You’ve done nothing,” SainClair said weakly from the floor. “Gamma Protocol already has been initiated.” Her voice was raspy but gurgled slightly.

Melia shoved past Rosewater and knelt at SainClair’s side. She pulled away the minister’s hands to find a large bloom of blood spreading quickly across the woman’s chest. “Her lung,” she muttered to Minister Draca.

The man nodded, his face ashen and hands shaking. “For your deed, we’ll all suffer,” he told Rosewater. His voice was cold and hard.

Melia focused her attention on SainClair, who was coughing. “You must relax. Coughing will only hasten it.”

“Listen to me,” SainClair said, her voice sounding hollow. “You have to get out of here. The Network is monitoring my vital signs.”

“Hush,” she said. “You must preserve your strength.”

“No. You have to get the key out and to safety. When I’m gone, the Core will go into lockdown. If the key’s here when I die, the dissenters will override the Protocol.”

“I can’t leave you,” Melia said, fear lacing her voice, “any of you. I can’t live with that.”

“You must.”

“But you’ll all be trapped,” she whispered fervently. She glanced over at the general assembly. The delegates’ chairs were in disarray, and the other ministers were trying to calm the delegates.

“There’s no time,” Minister Draca said. “She’s fading.” He held two fingers to SainClair’s wrist.

“Melia,” SainClair whispered. Her skin was tinged with blue.

Melia lowered her head next to the minister’s lips.

“Go now. Get the key to my estate. My son will know what to do with it.”

“You have only moments now,” Draca said through clenched teeth.

“Help me,” Melia said, grimacing. She pulled a pin from her robes and stuck it deeply into the pad of her thumb, where a drop of blood welled up.

Minister Draca nodded and pressed SainClair’s right thumb into the blood that seeped from her chest.

“Quickly,” he said.

Melia pulled a book from her robes and opened it to a random page. She pressed her bleeding thumb into the center of the page while Draca pressed SainClair’s bloody thumb onto it as well.

*End recording and lock all profiles to these samples,* Melia commanded.

“Recording ended and locked,” the smooth voice said into her ear.

*Activate sleep mode.*

“Good-bye,” the voice said.

She barely heard the voice in her head as the lights in the Core dimmed.

“Hurry,” Draca said, and shoved his walking stick into her hand. “Go!”

Partially in shock, Melia staggered to her feet and rushed away from the crush of delegates as well as the more delicate roots that sprouted up from the earth. The yelling voices of the others followed her as the lights began to fail and a deep throbbing vibrated through the roots. The Core was shutting down. If Melia didn’t go now, she would be trapped with the others. In the confusion, Rosewater had broken free from his restraints and was barreling toward her. She swallowed hard, a ball of panic caught in her throat like a bone.

She took a deep breath and yelled, “To the SainClair estate!” then slammed the stick onto the ground twice.

Rosewater’s enraged face disappeared behind the swirling vortex that opened up in front of Melia with an enormous crack. It was the sound of something existing where just moments ago nothing had, and it always unnerved her. Turning her head to the side to shield it from the intense winds, she held her breath and leapt into the vortex.

Her knees buckled as she struck a deep snowdrift on the other side. Her stomach churned, threatening to give back her last meal. *So what?* she thought. Nerves had prevented her from having any appetite the last few days. *I call your bluff! Go ahead and vomit. See what it gets you.*

Traveling by baccillum was never pleasant. Still feeling ill, she struggled to her feet. She looked down at the baccillum and the book. They were both inert now; the tiny veins of blue light that shone intermittently on each were dark. She stowed the book in her robes and trudged toward the giant cluster of hearthtrees in the distance.

AFTER A CHANGE OF CLOTHING, a warm fur draped over her knees, and a cup of ginger tea, Melia finally stopped shaking. She wasn't sure whether the tremors were from the cold, from watching Minister SainClair die, or from the knowledge that she had left the rest of the delegation in the Core to die slow, horrendous deaths. The minister's son, Gerard SainClair, sat silently as Melia struggled through her thick-throated recounting of the day's events.

The house around them was dimly lit. The blackout already had reached the Northlands. The main hearthroot of the large home, an alcove of energy carved from one of the large trees comprising the home's central structure, still emanated heat, but the SainClair family was relying on portable gourds that provided temporary light when agitated rather than the vine-enlaced sconces scattered around the rooms. Those were powered by energy from the Network. It was lucky for them that the Northland trees were so hearty. Melia shivered again as she recalled Minister SainClair's charge to go to Gerard. With the terror of the day's events passed, Melia thought now of her husband and children, trapped on Senegast, a large island many thousands of kilometers to the west. An ocean rolled and jostled between them. She sighed deeply and turned her thoughts back to the matter at hand.

“So Mother is dead,” he said. “And the others are trapped?”

Melia nodded, her eyes fixed on the smoldering hearthroot before her.

“As a fail-safe, your mother coded the Core to enter Gamma Protocol if her vital signs were no longer detectable by the Network.” She stifled a sob with the back of her hand. “We took such precaution, with no real conviction that the situation would get that bad.”

Gerard sighed, and Melia looked over. He was slumped over his knees and rubbing his blond temples with his index fingers.

“I could have predicted Rosewater would be the hothead,” he said, his face stony. “Well, what did Mother say to tell the others? The blackout reached here right before you did, so chaos must be breaking out all over Lumin.”

She winced at the thought. “Yes, well, we anticipated that the delegates would all be returning home to prepare everyone for the changes that would be taking place.”

“That’s admirable, but now we’re looking at total social and economic chaos. Communication is cut off; power is limited; and people’s information is trapped. And you say this is going to last five hundred cycles?”

She nodded. “The projections indicate that Lumin needs that much time to heal itself.”

Gerard shook his head in disbelief then leaned back in his chair and tapped his cheek with a finger. “So it could be less, it could be more?”

“Yes, but the Core won’t reactivate Network access until Lumin is healed.”

Gerard unhooked a carved wooden cuff from his wrist. "So this is kindling now?"

Again Melia nodded. She watched him toss the cuff into the hearthroot. It singed and crackled. She swallowed hard and patted the book at her side. She had to guard it with her life. It was her people's only hope for the future advancement of Lumin, a compendium of all knowledge and the only record of what had happened in the Core today.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

Gerard looked over at Melia, his pale-blue eyes so like his mother's, and she felt a pang of loss.

"Mother left you something," he said, and turned to retrieve a letter from a wooden box sitting by the hearthroot.

"My dearest Melia," she read aloud. "If you are reading this, then our efforts to ease Lumin's transition into blackout failed, and I am dead. We had many cycles to prepare for this day, and in that time, we created the Order of Vis Firmitas. Ministers Draca, myself, and the others have each sent similar letters to our families to be opened upon the blackout. The future of Lumin is now up to those we leave behind. Please protect it. You'll find everything you need in the Compound situated in Willowslip. Your faithful friend, Aris SainClair."

Gerard rubbed his face again, as if reliving a deep pain. "She left me a very similar letter," he said. "I am bound for Willowslip as well."

"Willowslip," Melia said. "That's very far south of here. Without a baccillum, it'll take us at least half a cycle."

“Well,” said Gerard, a wry, sad grin touching his lips, “we have five hundred cycles. We have all the time in the world.”

## 2 Spores

LUMIN CYCLE 10152, A LITTLE MORE THAN 650 CYCLES LATER

MIA JAYNE WAS PALE AS A GHOST BIRCH and dressed in the tropics' garb of gauzy layers. Her wavy auburn hair was plaited down her back, and her bright blue-green eyes reflected the quiet light of the gourds in their gold flecks. She stood outside her hearthwood, the tree house she had called home these past cycles, and stared up at the roiling, colored glow that lit up the night sky. The purples, reds, greens, and oranges showed through the dense forest and formed a vibrant background to the clouds and moon.

A soft woof floated up from the vicinity of her feet. She looked down. Her dog, Hamish, stared intently up at her. His small, foxy face quirked, and a rumble percolated in his barrel chest and through the ruff of his thick neck fur.

“What is it, Hammy? Barking at nothing as usual, are we?”

Thinking about the long hike ahead of her on the morrow, she sighed and opened the door. Hamish scrambled over the threshold ahead of her, almost tripping her. Cursing absently under her breath, Mia entered the warmth of her tree home. The hearthwood was silent inside. She inhaled deeply. *How odd. No supper cooking.* Concerned, she set her foraging basket on the bench by the door.

“Father?” she called. “I know I’m delayed. It was Old Parniff. You know how she gets when she can’t steep tea. There was nothing to be done. It took me forever to locate the proper conduit root.” The roots of Parniff’s hearthwood were damaged badly, and they had sounded like a swarm of bees. It was a tricky job to repair, and Mia’s collection of joints, shunts, and conduits had proved inadequate, necessitating a lengthy foraging expedition midday. She was exhausted.

No response. Hamish headed straight for the kitchen at a stubby gallop, his bushy tail down. He made a low keening noise, and the hairs on the back of Mia’s arms rose.

“Father!” she called again.

When she turned the corner into the nook that contained the cooking hearth, his crumpled form lay prone on the floor as Hamish whined and pawed at his leg. The makings for a nice vegetable stew were spread out on the counter in various stages of preparation.

“Father!”

Mia skidded onto her knees at his side. She turned him onto his back and felt his chest and mouth. *Is he breathing? Please let him*

*be breathing.* She placed her ear to his broad chest. It emitted a garbled wheeze coupled with a very shallow rise and fall. *Father, what have you done? Why didn't you say something?*

Mia's limbs felt wooden from the shock, but she stood facing the counter and picked through the piles of roots and vegetables. She dropped chopped ginger into a bowl and added boiling water from the cook pot. While it steeped, she managed to heave Father up into a sitting position. *This will have to do.* She set the pungent, steaming bowl below his nose and watched him inhale and exhale shallowly. The strong odor tickled Mia's eyes and chest, but she waved it into his nostrils, hoping it would make its way into his struggling lungs. Hamish whined again then sneezed and panted. He lay down by Father and licked his hand.

Approximately ten minutes later, with a hacking cough, Father regained consciousness. A glob of phosphorescent purple phlegm shot out of his mouth and landed with a splat on the floor. His deep-gray eyes rolled back in his head, and he heaved a long, ragged breath. His olive skin was ashen and clammy, and damp black hairs curled around his ears. Mia mopped his brow with a cloth and waved more of the steam under his nose.

"How long have the spores been polluting your lungs, Father?" she asked quietly.

His eyes were still closed, but his face tightened at the sound of her words. Then it softened. He took the cloth from her hand and blotted his mouth. "A month, perhaps longer. I didn't wish to worry you."

"They're purple," she said. Her throat thickened, and the emotions forgotten in the tense moments of ministrations once again

surfaced as tears formed at the corners of her eyes and clung to her lashes. “You know what that means.”

“I do,” he said. His eyes opened, and he looked up at her. He looked so frail and tired and sad. “And so do you.” Father took her hand and squeezed it with a strength that reassured her. He wouldn’t be dying today at least.

“You have nothing to worry about, daughter.” He reached up and rubbed her cheek with his thumb, brushing away the tears. He must have seen the fear in her eyes.

“Come,” she said. “Let’s get you up and somewhere warm.”

Almost plaintive, he tugged the sleeve of her arm. “I’m not long for this world, and I need you to take a message for me.”

These weren’t the words she’d expected. “To whom? Where?”

Father wasn’t a sociable person, and they had no other family than each other.

“We’ll talk more on the morrow. It’ll be a journey, so you’d best get some rest as well.”

LATER THAT NIGHT, Mia sat in the branches of their hearthwood and once again looked out at the night lights as the trees gently hummed around her. Now, however, neither the lights nor sounds comforted her, and fear and sadness usurped her usual awe. Not even the glittering colors in the sky could alleviate the thoughts swirling up from within. She knew no other family. Now, at three and twenty, not a day had passed where the sun didn’t rise and set again without her seeing Father’s face. Theirs was a simple, solitary, relatively nomadic life. They had inhabited their current hearthwood for the longest period Mia could recall, which she

hazarded was about four years. And now the life they had built here was crumbling to dust. How fragile their happiness was. Mia hadn't even realized its frailty. And now Father wanted her to leave him and go on a journey. How could she?

She felt the arms of despair drag her down and swallow her whole. Father was all she had. There was no one else. The thought of being set adrift in the world was hard to bear. She stifled a snuffle against the back of her hand. *But I will not cry. I will not cry.*

When she was about eight, she and Father had been traveling between hammocks. He became, as he occasionally did, restless and decided abruptly that it was time for them to move on. Every move they made took them farther into the outer hammocks. Mia rather liked traveling and likewise didn't mind the dearth of people that resulted.

In this instance, their travels had taken them across a channel narrow enough to accommodate an arboreal bridge. These bridges were and remained wondrous marvels to Mia. Even when she was a child, even this short bridge had been nothing less than a spectacular sight that had caused her to suck in her breath sharply, her eyes growing round and full. Large, thick roots wove themselves in an intricate pattern over the channel, knitting together a solid bridge. In the center of the channel, a structure sat solidly on a platform of roots.

“What is that, Father?” Mia had asked.

Partially open to the channel, the structure had an angled roof of planks and fronds. This tiny shack was the first man-made building Mia ever had seen constructed from boards and other finished materials, rather than naturally grown or carved from living

plants. Only the clump of heavy roots growing upward in a large lump and carved into a hearth saved the structure from seeming completely alien.

“It’s a lodge,” Father replied. “The hammocks on either side of this channel are stalker territory.” He looked over his shoulder at Mia. “You do remember what I said about stalkers, right?”

She nodded but kept looking forward to the off-kilter little box on the bridge. “Who owns the lodge?”

Father smiled. “No one. It’s customary that if we stay a night, we maintain her as payment for her service to us.”

Mia looked appraisingly at the lodge and considered his words. “How do we do that?”

“We repair a broken plant, fix the floor, or mend some roots,” he replied, and they picked their way through the forest toward the bridge.

Even when Mia was a young child, the trees had hummed around her. One of the root channels that led from the nearby arboreals to the bridge was buzzing strangely. She stopped to listen. Father pulled her along by the rope tied around her waist. It kept her from wandering, as she was wont to do.

“But,” she asked, “what about maintaining the other stuff?”

“What other stuff?”

“The stuff that leads to the lodge.” She pointed at the buzzing root. “That one needs help.”

Father shrugged and continued walking. “Sometimes roots get damaged or broken, and the current is interrupted,” he said thoughtfully. “It eventually will grow along another path.”

“But what if you need current now?”

“Well, sometimes you just have to abide.”

Pushing her bright-red hair from her eyes, Mia frowned at that answer. Her cheeks scrunched up as she thought about the silliness of that statement and followed Father onto the bridge.

When they arrived at the entry to the lodge, Father announced them as the Jaynes. The only other travelers were an old couple setting up camp on the left. They nodded and went on about their preparations with slow, deliberate movements. It would soon be dark, and they were cooking the evening meal.

The hearth in the corner was small for the size of the lodge. It must have taken a very long time for a root to grow large enough to support a hearth at all. Mia walked over to it and put out her hands to warm them. The hearth was pleasant, but the heat that emanated from the alcove was weak. By the hearth, she heard the buzzing again.

“Can you hear that?” she asked the others.

The old couple shook their heads.

“Stop playing around,” said Father.

Mia was used to people not understanding. No one seemed to hear broken plants the way she did.

As night fell, the forest and channel dimmed, and the only light around the small group emanated from the hearth, flickery and weak, spilling from gourds growing on vines twined around the ceiling planks and scattered through the forest, and the subtle, pale colors of the night lights of a dark night. Mia and Father ate a meal of dried meat, fruits, and some old crackers. It was meager fare, but she was hungry and tired from the hiking. It wasn't long before she drifted off to sleep to the sound of Father conversing in hushed

tones with the elderly couple. Their discussion of the old days failed to hold Mia's attention.

She woke to the buzzing noise. The others were now sleeping soundly. Father snored softly, and the sound of the old man's regular, wheezy breathing carried to her ears. The buzzing remained steady, though. She climbed from her blankets and crept quietly over to the hearth. She touched it, and a buzz vibrated into her fingers. She moved her hand around until the sensations grew strong. She chased the vibration with her hand down the length of the root toward the floor then out of the lodge. Her conscious mind receded, and her thoughts grew indistinct as she followed the vibration along the root in the direction of the shore. At the shore, she continued to walk along the ground where the root partially protruded. About two feet from a large tree, she still heard the buzzing, but it was faint, and the vibration stopped. When she backtracked, the vibration returned, and the buzzing intensified. She looked down at the root where her hands rested. She realized then that she should have brought a gourd from the camp. Unable to see the root, she felt around for it and found a crack in it.

"Here is where you're broken, my friend," Mia said softly.

*Maybe I can fix it, she thought. Patch it with some root paste.*

Overcome with excitement, she turned back toward the lodge when a twig snapped faintly behind her. Mia realized it too late. The owls that were hooting moments before, the insects that were singing, and the rodents that scuttled along the branches all disappeared into the darkness. The forest about her was silent. Her heart stopped momentarily then quickened in her chest as she gasped for a breath. She slowly turned her head to look behind her. The path

to the forest was pitch-black. It was there. She knew it was there but couldn't see it. *Where is it? I'm going to die. I can't see it.*

Although her eyes had failed her, her ears didn't. Another subtle snap of a twig and a slight rustle. She threw herself to the ground and screamed as loudly as she could. She rolled onto her side, slightly dazed. Silver fur in silhouette glinted as a black shape sailed over her, momentarily inky against the barely visible night lights. Despite the cat's massive size, it landed with deft grace and circled back on her immediately, claws raking the dirt. It was huge, steely silver with glowing yellow eyes—the largest animal Mia had ever seen. The stories had failed to mention the malice and hunger in those glowing eyes. They spoke to her, mostly saying that she had made a terrible mistake venturing from the safety of the lodge and was about to be dinner. She screamed again, a long, drawn-out howl that tore through her body. Her high voice echoed through the forest, a cacophony of children.

The standoff lasted mere ticks, but Mia felt every moment freeze and then shudder through her. The stalker hissed—a sound deep in its thick neck—and swayed slightly from side to side. A roar and a crash sounded from the direction of the lodge, followed by heavy footfalls. A bright light emerged from the darkness, and the stalker hissed again, this time adding an unearthly yowl, and turned its head toward the oncoming light. It was Father carrying a flaming club. He screamed as he charged the stalker. It hesitated for just a moment at losing its easy prey then crouched and leapt at Father's advancing form.

The mass of the cat drove him back onto the ground. He swung the torch up into the stalker's face, and it roared, digging its claws

into his shoulder. Its open mouth displayed an array of large, glistening teeth. The beast snapped its jaws at the flaming stick, breaking it in half. Father whipped the stick's remnants at the cat, aiming for the muzzle, but the beast moved like the wind, and the stick glanced off its temple. The cat shrugged off the blow then raked at Father again, trying to get its face-size paws around his head.

The sounds of struggle ceased suddenly with a howl and a squish. The forest quiet again, Mia looked to see the massive cat slumped over Father, inert. She remained paralyzed with fear as Father, bloody and battered, struggled out from under the cat. When he finally pushed the stalker off himself, Mia saw a thin, supple knife protruding from where the cat's left eye once was. A stream of blood ran down its large head and pooled in the soft dirt floor of the forest. The other yellow eye stared vacantly into the night sky. She whimpered, curled in on herself, and lay there shaking. Bleeding from his shoulder and face, Father rushed to her and wrapped her in his arms. At that moment, Mia felt so very small.

"Are you hurt?" he yelled, then released her from a hug to poke and prod her limbs for injuries. Tongue-tied, she managed to shake her head. He scooped her up and carried her back to the lodge, where the old man was waiting at the entrance. He held a knife, sister to the one lodged in the stalker's eye socket, and was poised to loose it into the darkness. Where he had moved slowly and deliberately before, his movements with the knife were smooth and steady. *How had he even been able to see where to throw it?* Mia shivered again and buried her face into Father's blood-soaked shirt.

“What were you doing out there? Didn’t you hear me earlier? We came here for safety, and you wander out into the night alone! Blast it all!” Father yelled.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I just wanted to help the tree.”

“What in the blazes are you talking about? It’s as if there isn’t a sensible bone in your whole body.”

Father set her on the floor and shook her shoulders. But the rage left his body as quickly as it had come upon him, and he sank onto his bedroll in a heap.

The old woman clucked at him. “Now there, Jayne, ser. We should see to those gashes.”

Father nodded sullenly. Mia watched the old woman tend to Father’s shoulder and face. He winced but remained silent as she packed his shoulder wounds with ground herbs she had mixed with a thick milky liquid and formed into a paste. Mia didn’t recognize it and wanted to ask her what the stuff was and how it worked, but she was still scared, and her timidity won out. Father no longer seemed cross, but his face look haggard and ashy, whereas hours ago it was fierce and tanned.

She’d been so scared that the stalker was going to eat her. And then she was scared it was going to eat Father. It may have too, if the old man hadn’t been quick with the knife.

“Can you teach me to use that?” she asked the old man later, after Father had fallen asleep.

“My child,” the old man said in his raspy voice, “I can show you how to throw a knife, but this one is much too large for you. You’ll have to find a craftsman who can make you a set of your

own, balanced just for you. Then you'll never want for food or protection."

The old man was right, and she convinced Father of the idea after they'd settled into their new home. *I should have asked the old woman how to heal people instead*, she thought.

THE NEXT MORNING, Father was up and about as if he hadn't collapsed at all. Mia wanted to believe it had all been a dream, but she knew otherwise. He whistled softly to himself as he prepared some eggs. She smelled roasting sweet onions, lard, and some of the tangy cheese acquired two days before.

"Father, that cheese cost me a rare shunt. Rare indeed." *Might have even been able to use that at Parniff's*, she thought. Still dressed in her rumpled home clothes, she approached the hearthroot quietly and sat at the table.

Father, on the other hand, was dressed as if he were about to go ranging.

"I rather hoped to save it for a special occasion."

"Every dawn faced with vigor is a special occasion for me just now," he said, giving her a pointed look.

"Indeed you have the right of it," Mia replied, her body sagging slightly. They settled into an awkward silence, uncomfortable thoughts boiling inside her head, each clamoring for her anxious attention.

Her eyes slid around the great room of their hearthwood. She recalled their careful selection of the tree, the effort it took to hollow out the center to form their home, and the years of living that

made it such. Her eyes moved to the lounge, where Father had slept last night. She stood up and walked over to his makeshift bed.

Even in his weakened state, he had managed somehow to pull down one of the heavy furs from the high shelf where they were stored. Those furs had traveled with them to and fro and had remained entirely unused as relics from another time and place. Folks of the tropics had no use for such trappings. The center of the fur retained the shape of a body curled into it. Mia tried not to worry. Perhaps the warm furs were responsible for his current spry state. She couldn't lose hope.

"They remind me of your mother," he used to say when she asked why they burdened themselves with such unnecessary items.

"Tell me more about her," Mia would say.

"She was very beautiful" was all Father would answer to that request.

When she was ten, Father had presented her with a leather bag lined in fur. It was much heavier than the gauzy cloth packs people in Hackberry carried.

"It was your mother's," he said. "I thought you might like it."

It was an aged brown, with scratches and scars here and there marking its adventures. Soft sable-colored fur lined the opening, and the letter *J* was intricately embroidered on the front in soft silk threads of green and blue, matching her eyes. Mia would look at her bag and imagine how it might have gotten a particular mark on its side. Did Mother scale a mountain to look from its peak or traverse an ocean to stand on a foreign shore? Mia had no idea whether she ever had done those things. She must have been a great adventurer, however, to come by these fur items so foreign to the tropics.

Mia carried the bag with her always, even though the few hammockers about her always joked at its heft.

“Mia,” Father called from the hearth, interrupting her musings, “I’ve been thinking very long and hard about what my next words will be. I don’t say them lightly.”

Mia turned back to him. Father had set the table with the morning meal and was taking a seat. She sat across from him, her heart pounding in her chest.

“All right,” she said, encouraging him to continue.

“I need you to carry a message to the Order of Vis Firmitas in Willowslip.”

Mia recoiled at mention of the Order.

“I know what I’ve said these years past, but the clerics there may be able to render assistance in this matter. They have means not available to the hammock folk here in the backwaters. They’re an ancient organization that has retained the ways of old.” A viscous cough punctuated his statement.

“But you’ve always mistrusted their ways,” she replied.

“True as that may be, they may have some remedy for the spores, and I have something they may need.”

*What might he possibly have that Vis Firmitas would want?* Despite her reservations, Mia grimly agreed to make the journey and carefully packed her most sacred belongings into her lapin bag, including a small notebook where she kept her thoughts, along with a lock of blond hair from her mother pressed into it. Her mother’s locket was Mia’s constant talisman, and she placed it into the bag as well. She also packed her collection of the rarer root

blocks, shunts, and conduits kept on hand for repair work. A simple tropics gauze wrap contained her clothing and camping gear.

When Father handed her the missive, it was sealed with his sap mark.

“Don’t break the seal,” he instructed. “We’ll be lost if the letter doesn’t arrive intact.”

Mia thought his request odd, but she obeyed. She was scared for Father and for her own future.

Giving him one last hug and a kiss on the cheek, she leaned close and said, “You’ll look after Hamish, won’t you?”