

AN EXCERPT FROM FAERIE RISING: THE FIRST BOOK OF BINDING
– A. E. LOWAN

“Eventually, it might even close on its own.” Winter neatly completed the second circle, warming up to her subject. She loved teaching, and Karen seemed to be interested. “See, the rift and the hole aren’t actually connected. This wall could be knocked down, but the rift would remain. Now, the rift caused some of the erosion to the hole, but it isn’t dependent on it... it’s just that the Universe as a rule likes a bit of order, so rifts and gateways will form in conjunction with an existing structure or opening. There are some theories that...”

Karen jumped away so high and far that she landed on the far lip of the ravine. “What’s that?” Fear lent a tremble to her voice.

The world shifted sideways. Winter braced herself against the wall with her one good hand, the chalk grinding against the concrete as she fought the initial wave of disorientation. Something was horribly wrong. Within the rift, power was building up, as if someone had just crimped a running hose.

And she was holding the nozzle.

Nine glyphs in the seal, each unique, complex, and time consuming. Each must be drawn with precision, or the whole seal would fail. Winter had never drawn glyphs so fast in her life, her hand frantically scraping the chalk against the wall in her desperate race against... against what? It felt like a tidal wave, rushing implacably toward her. Somehow, something was affecting the balance of power.

“What’s happening?” Karen’s voice had taken on the plaintive cry of a child. As a preternatural, she could sense the maelstrom building, but had no way of understanding or affecting what was happening.

Winter had no answer for her. She spoke each glyph as she drew it, magic resonating in her voice with each syllable. Six glyphs to go. Its name spoken, the glyph would take on a glow, casting the hole in sharp relief, bringing out each line of exhaustion on Winter’s face.

Highlighting the growing cracks in the cement around the rift.

After the seal went up, the cement became irrelevant. It could be ground to dust and the seal would hold. Before then, however... the seal needed a matrix, something solid to hold the lines she drew with the enspelled chalk. Before then, the seal was all too fragile.

When the surge hit, it would blow the rift wide open. Those two little goblins would only be the beginning... and there would be precious little left of Karen and Winter, and probably the surrounding square acre or so.

Five glyphs.

She wasn’t going to make it. Winter’s shoulders were burning, her hand beginning to cramp and shake, her hurt wrist felt like it was on fire. The glow of the seal began to fade as her magic was drained by pain and panic and exhaustion. She needed more power. She did not have time to ground and pull power from the earth... leaving only one choice. “*Karen!*”

There is power to control in a name. She spoke the name with resonant Command and suddenly the cougar was there, terrified eyes wide on the wizard beside her. Ruthless, she pushed aside the older woman's flimsy natural protections and pulled what power there was into herself. It was wild, and tasted of dark places, pain-filled joy, and kittens warm in the den. This was not a wizard's gift she used but came of her mixed blood. A full-blooded wizard would not have deigned to use the therian like this, would not have been able to pull power like this from outside their body even if they wanted to. The spell flared back to life, and Winter redoubled her efforts.

Four glyphs.

The hole began collapsing inward, little chunks of cement falling into the flame-wreathed darkness.

Three glyphs.

The chunks were getting larger, the cracks creeping closer to her fragile chalk lines.

Two glyphs.

The surge was now audible, a tsunami rushing toward them.

One glyph.

The ground beneath her knees was quivering with the building pressure.

The seal blazed just as the tidal wave of magic rammed it from the other side, the whole ravine shuddering from the impact, then the lettering settled into the cement, leaving the two women alone in the quiet night. Winter slumped with relief as the seal held, her forehead pressed to the unyielding wall. "Karen, thank—"

The cougar's scream slashed through the calm and Winter snapped her head to the side just in time to see her fur form disappear through the trees, leaving her clothes behind. The stab of remorse cut deep. "I'm sorry," she murmured. But there was no one to hear her.