

## VOYAGER 15

### SNEAK PREVIEW

## PATH OF THE STRAY

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### Gaela

*The Northern Continent*

### Chapter 1

Jarrold discovered the source of the haunting call the moment he entered the woods. It wasn't wind whistling through a hollow canyon or skimming across the mountain lake. It wasn't the swaying trees or a murder of crows shooting like black arrows into the sky. It was a beautiful young witch with honey red hair. The call came from her.

He watched her walk through the heart of the woods unafraid. Never had Jarrold seen such a contrast — her hair red against the trees. Opposites on the spectrum, it made the tone of the woods seem even more vivid. *Hunter green!* He'd heard about it in Corsanon. Bards wove it into their songs, those who had travelled here and seen it first-hand, and what they said was true — the hunter green of Vesper would catch you, seduce you, and it did. And so did the young witch.

He tied his hair back from his face. Appearances were important and he thought it best to check his. At first the Tulpa-body had been something that housed him — like a pack to put down whenever he could. Sure he'd learned some of the finer aspects of sensuality — taste, aroma, touch — but they still hadn't seemed real. Rather, they were

like experiences in a story — one that didn't belong to him. The girl approached and his heart beat faster. That was real enough!

Janis had said he looked like Loni's father. He wondered if that were still true — tall and muscular, mahogany skin, dark eyes, curly brown hair, strong jaw and a smile to light up the many-worlds. He'd have to get a look in the mirror and see if his thoughts had kept his features aligned. Image was important on Gaela and on Earth. People responded to physicality and body language more than words. He was certainly responding to hers.

They were near the temple, not close enough to hear music or the buzz of conversation, but there was the bellow of grunnies in distant paddocks and a glimpse of copper coloured rooftops through the trees. A donkey brayed, or was that a mule? He wondered what the girl was doing alone in the fog and drizzle. Was it a ritual walk? Was she foraging for herbs? By herself? It was not a custom practised in Corsanon. Young females, witch or no, were usually accompanied, those attached to the temple anyway. Corsanon had a barbaric side — some of the citizens less than civil — but perhaps the practices were different in Vesper, and the people less violent. That was a refreshing thought. No one on Earth, male or female of any age, was ever keen to walk alone.

*She's not alone*, he corrected himself as the girl neared. She was in the company of dogs — two sight hounds, their brown sugar and cream coloured coats a blur as they ran. Perhaps it was morning exercise. It didn't look like a hunt. She wasn't dressed for it, not in a long skirt and heavy winter coat. No visible weapon, though a witch was never unarmed. He smiled at the thought. The dogs spotted him and made a beeline.

'Cajun! Reed! To me!' she called. There was no response. They had Jarrod in their sights and were not about to deviate. Her sweet, high-pitched voice was lost on the wind — but not the hum, the call that had drawn him. It was loud and clear.

The dogs skidded to a halt at his feet. Sniffing, jumping, barking. *Friend? Friend? Friend!*

*A friend, yes, it's true,* Jarrod answered with his thoughts. He patted their backs and gripped their ruffs. 'Why not introduce me to your mistress, lads?' he said. 'Then we can all be friends.'

Jarrod hadn't had much experience with canines — he hadn't had much experience with anything on Gaela yet — but he liked the dogs he'd met in Corsanon. They were keen, sharp eared and communicative. They talked to him all the time, mind to mind, in their simple, direct voices. Not everyone appeared to hear their thoughts, so Jarrod didn't let on. Perhaps only certain people understood the speech of animals. He wanted to make sure those 'certain people' were respected (not shunned, hunted or persecuted) before making the skill public knowledge. His references on Earth had taught him that 'different' and 'accepted' were not the same thing.

'Easy, boys,' he said when they jumped up. One planted his paws on Jarrod's chest and licked his face. 'I'm just passing through, doing no harm.' As he spoke to the dogs his attention went to the girl. She was beaming a smile.

She stopped in front of him, quite close, her long hair falling forward as she grabbed the dogs by their collars. 'Hello,' she said to Jarrod. Both her voice and stance were strong. 'I'm Bree Savine. Who are you?'

'Call me Jarrod.' He didn't think he'd ever smiled so wide.

Bree Savine was not only confident, she was beautiful. Round and sunny, her freckled face engaged him; her eyes — darker green than the forest and just as enchanting — made him want to follow wherever she led. There was a lightness of being about her, a flirtation, and something else. It was the call he'd been following ever since he awoke from months of meditation above the Corsanon Gorge. Jarrod patted the

dogs and Bree's hand touched his. Sparks. Electricity. Not directly from her, but from something she wore? Something in her pocket? Around her wrist? *Where was it coming from?* She carried an energy signature over the top of her own. It was old, very old. Long travelled. His spine tingled. It wasn't human but oh so familiar.

'Jarrod? Just Jarrod?' She said the name like it was candy in her mouth.

He laughed. 'Jarrod will do.' He'd learned in Corsanon to keep everything about himself as simple as possible. *Don't give too much away.* Simple was tolerated, befriended even. Complex was questioned, scrutinised, doubted.

'What are you doing in my woods?' Her hands went to her hips and the dogs barked.

'Your woods?'

She blushed. Seductive. 'Not mine really, but I'm walking the High Priestess' boys, Reed and Cajun, so I ask on her behalf.'

Jarrod stepped closer. She didn't back away. The dogs suddenly lost interest, signalling to her he was no threat. They sniffed about, picking up another scent. Bree didn't call them back. Instead she took his hand. 'Are you going to tell me what you're doing here?'

He felt like telling her anything she asked. 'I'm on a journey,' he said. Too vague, he knew.

But journeying was a common pursuit, he'd discovered, especially for bards. Would he be one? He'd picked up quite a bit of music from his time in Corsanon but decided on a different occupation. If he introduced himself as a bard he'd be asked to play every night and he suddenly thought he'd rather have his nights free while here in Vesper.

'What kind of journey?'

'I'm a farrier's apprentice, learning tricks of the trade from all the temples.'

'All the temples? Really? There are but three.'

'Which three do you acknowledge?'

'Vesper, Timbali and Corsanon.'

'Is that what they teach here?' He tilted his head towards the temple.

'I wouldn't know. I'm a Corsanon apprentice. Just visiting.'

She was beautiful but confusing. Before he could ask more, she let go of his hand and called up the dogs. 'I have to get back.'

'Wait.'

She turned.

'May I accompany you?'

'To Temple Vesper?'

*To anywhere you go.* The energy signature of this girl made him nervous and excited all at once. When she bent over to pat the dogs, he discovered why. She wore a pendant around her neck. It fell forward, escaping the folds of her cloak. He froze, uncertain for a moment whether he could trust his eyes. 'I would like to visit, if I'd be welcome.' He kept the shock out of his voice and forced his shoulders to relax.

'Something might be arranged.' She smiled again.

'Would you, perhaps, speak for me?'

Bree didn't answer immediately. The morning sun came out from behind the clouds while she studied him, the green of the woods turning into a dazzling emerald. Her pendant — a dark blue gem in the shape of a spiral — caught the light. It had a hint of a rainbow, like the mother of pearl, and speckles of transparent gold at the centre. She crossed her arms. 'How good are you?'

All doubt was gone. The spiral pendant could only be one thing, but the

probability was so unlikely that he wanted to whisper *impossible*. Could this girl know what she had? 'Pardon?' he asked. He was finding it hard to concentrate.

'How good are you at horseshoeing?'

'Oh, my trade? Quite accomplished,' he replied. It wasn't a boast. He was as good as he thought he was at anything; all he had to do was put his mind to it. And right now his mind was on the pendant, the energy signature, and a thousand questions about how in all of Gaela it had found its way here, to her, and now to him.

'Come then. There's one beast you can demonstrate on. If you shoe her and live,' she giggled, 'you can stay as long as you like, I promise.'

He laughed, having a pretty good idea of what he was getting into. 'Lead the way.'

Jarrood followed the dogs and the sunny-faced girl with the pendant. *Some jewel you wear.*

Her pendant was the fossilised casing of *his* central processing unit — the qubits of photons that hummed inside him. *How could this be?* What were the probabilities? He followed her to the Temple of Vesper, thinking of little else. She chatted nonstop and he nodded at any hint of an interval.

'Will you be staying long?' she asked.

'Will you?' he answered back. He didn't plan on letting her out of his sight until he discovered how the CPU designed uniquely for him — the JARROD (Juxta-quantum Arranged Rad Ram Operating Determinant) — could be hanging around her neck. He was the only sentient quantum computer ever brought online, as far as he knew, and his CPU was functioning perfectly inside his Tulpa-body. The backup lay in its crystal casing at the bottom of the Corsanon Gorge where Janis had hidden it. All accounted for. But here was this 'other' identical CPU worn as a charm around a witch's neck. He honed in on it. The smooth edges of the spiral indicated it had been floating on the seas of Gaela

for perhaps the last two thousand years. *That would explain the fossilisation ...*

'I'll be returning to Corsanon soon,' she said.

'Me too, Bree Savine. Perhaps we shall travel together.'

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He heard the animal before he saw it. It brayed like a jackass, the jarring *hee-haws* blasting through the temple grounds, drowning out the bards playing near a courtyard garden as well as all conversation in the vicinity. The only thing it didn't blot out was the siren sound of the pendant. Jarrod wondered if these learned temple people could ignore — or miss — the energy signature Bree carried around like a trinket. *Do they not hear it?* The animal brayed again.

'Donkey?' he asked.

'Mule.'

'Ah.'

A priestess came storming down the steps of a large temple building made of logs. The architecture of Vesper was designed to blend with the surrounding trees and it did so beautifully; some buildings were actual tree houses nesting high in the redwoods. Others, like the temple in front of them, were made of logs and appeared to be growing live from the ground up. He didn't have time to take in much more. The priestess faced him, hands on hips, her long auburn hair flowing in ripples down her back.

'Mistress Satee,' Bree said. 'I've found a farrier who claims he can shoe Besty. His name is Jarrod.' She opened her arm as a way of introduction.

The dogs ran up to the priestess and sat at her feet. No jumping but much tail wagging. 'Found? Where?' She eyed Jarrod up and down. Her features were sharp but not unattractive.

'In the forest.'

‘Did you appear from the mist, Jarrod, or do you have a place of origin?’

‘Corsanon,’ Bree answered before he spoke.

Mistress Satee smiled. ‘If you can shoe her, be about it quick,’ she said. ‘The noise is deafening!’ She snapped her fingers at a man coming from the stables. ‘Put a calming spell on that beast!’

‘It’s been done, Mistress. Several times.’

Satee huffed and trotted back up the steps to the main temple. Bree led the way to the stables but it was no mystery how to get there — all he had to do was follow the braying. When they reached the long, low building, an L shape of box stalls covered by a single breezeway, he spotted the beast. ‘That’s some big mule,’ he said under his breath.

A mule was like a horse but not exactly. He checked his databanks to be certain. *Mule: a genetic mutation produced by crossing a male donkey with a mare.* The offspring, the mules, were strong, smart, sterile and, apparently, ‘difficult’ if mishandled. His boots crunched on the path to the stables but he couldn’t hear the sound. All was subsumed by the braying. ‘It seems Besty isn’t pleased with the prospect of being shod.’

‘Besty isn’t pleased with the prospect of anything but being left alone,’ Bree said, cupping her hand to her mouth.

The animal was cross-tied near the forge. Her head was extended, mouth open, sound trumpeting from her lungs. Jarrod ignored her and inspected the tools they offered. The kit for preparing the hoof contained a pick, knife, nippers and rasp. There were no worn shoes to pull off. He wondered if that meant none had ever been successfully nailed on. The tools were sharp and well crafted. The forge was hot and the blacksmithing hammer perfectly weighted. He wished he could say the same for the anvil but it was no more than a block of iron with a smooth face — no horn for shaping, no step, no heel and no pritchel or hardy holes. Room for improvement there. He’d have

to make do.

He strapped on a leather apron, stoked the forge and went to work. Jarrod shaped four shoes to a rough fit, ignoring Besty for the most part. He wanted her to have a chance to get used to his presence. After the spell weavers and horse masters backed away — their efforts useless — he stepped up. *This is part of the problem, isn't it, girl?*

The mule was cross-tied too short, her head forced high and her neck tense. Jarrod unsnapped one rope and led her closer to the rail. On a loose lead, he ran his hand over her rump and down her near hind leg. *Start with the most threatening end first.* Besty took a swipe at him — aiming for his kneecap. With lightning fast reflexes Jarrod caught her hind hoof and moved in close. He hunched there, pressed against her flank, and held onto the toe of her hoof. Besty made a few attempts to kick free, each more half-hearted than the one before. As was the case with horses, a hyper-flexed hoof was at the mercy of the handler. It wasn't painful, it just didn't have leverage. She turned her head around to stare at him, her long fuzzy ears pricked forward.

Jarrod looked back over his shoulder. 'Are we done?' he asked. 'I'd like to shoe you quick and have some breakfast after. Wouldn't you?'

Besty didn't reply but she didn't baulk or bite. Jarrod placed her hoof on the ground and stroked her neck. *This can be easy,* he said directly to her mind. She didn't answer, but she didn't resist. Judging by the chipped and cracked hooves, she was going to enjoy wearing iron shoes. She stood statue still, and the job didn't take long.

Bree giggled. Jarrod was beginning to realise she did this a lot. 'I told you he was good,' she said to the gathering crowd.

'So you did.' The Horse Master nodded. 'Thank you,' he said to Jarrod. 'I didn't think it could be done.'

The crowd applauded — all but one. 'They've switched beasts,' a lad from the

back yelled out. 'It's the only explanation.'

'You think so, Malik?' the Horse Master said. 'Would you like to test that for us?'

The crowd made way and Malik, a young lad with milk white skin and short black hair, stepped forward. He wore pants too short and a shirt too long. His stride was confident but testy. 'Just give me some room.'

Jarrold didn't know what was going on until Bree whispered into his ear. 'The mule has it in for anyone who touches her hooves — anyone but you it seems. Malik tried last. Very embarrassing result.'

'What happened?'

'Besty kicked him clean through the wall.'

Jarrold's eyes went to the newly painted boards. 'I didn't find her hard to handle.'

'No, you didn't.' Bree wasn't giggling now. 'That's the problem.'

'Worried about him?' Jarrold asked.

'He only just recovered.'

Malik went to the mule and ran his hand down her neck. She pinned her ears back, never a good sign in a donkey, horse or mule. The lad tensed up but proceeded anyway. When he bent to lift her front left hoof, Besty reared, picking the lad up with her forelegs as if he was a groomer's rag. She pawed the air — her bright new shoes flashing. Malik gained his feet but as he did, Besty spun and let fly her hind legs, both barrels. Malik sailed through the air, over the crowd and smack into a fence. He landed on his duff in the hard-packed gravel.

The Horse Master made his way to Malik through the parting crowd. 'Still think it's the wrong mule?' he asked.

'No, Master.' Malik got to his feet and glared at Besty then glared harder at Jarrold before limping away.

The Horse Master patted Jarrod on the back. 'Stay as long as you like, young man. There's plenty of work for you here.'

The crowd milled about, the sound of the bards — guitars and flutes — rising up over the conversations. Birds called and Jarrod heard a strange hawk high above. He tipped his nose to the sky, catching a bit of blue between the treetops and a flash of wings.

'Goshawk,' Bree said. 'We don't have them in Corsanon, only the buzzard hawks and eagles.'

'Beautiful,' he said. His eyes fell from the sky, to Bree, to the pendant.

She laughed and twirled off in the direction of the temple.

The energy signature diminished as she walked away but it was still very present in his mind. The Horse Master stopped him when he went to follow.

'There are a few more that need doing.' Apparently the man was going to take advantage of Jarrod while he could.

'Glad to help. I might see to some breakfast first?' Jarrod didn't mind working while he was here, as long as he didn't get stuck. His plan was to stay by Bree's side and find out where the 'pendant' came from.

That night he had to feign an appetite — he'd been so well fed all day. Bree made sure he had plenty on his plate and they chatted through the meal; all the while her pendant caught the light, and his eye. Later, in her guest quarters, there was no question of sleep. Bree had other ideas and she wasn't shy about expressing them.

He didn't reject her offer. Whatever it took to stay close, he was more than willing to do. Once he had ravished her lovely body, she fell asleep in his arms. At last he was able to study the pendant. By candle light, the inner colours were dulled but his visual acumen confirmed again what it was — an encased juxta-quantum arranged CPU.

It was on a medium length gold chain with a double locking clasp. He gazed at it most of the night, contemplating how it could exist at all.

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When she woke, he was still cradling it, the back of his hand resting between her collarbones.

Bree stretched and smiled. 'Do you like it?'

The morning's golden-green rays slanted through the woods, across the manicured temple gardens and into the window of the guest room they shared. The light caught the pendant and the energy danced in the palm of his hand. 'Very much so.' He let it go and kissed her. *There was time*, he told himself.

When they dressed he asked, 'Do you ever take it off?'

'The pendant?' She looked down her nose at it. 'No, not yet. It's still new. A gift from my father.'

A thousand questions burst into his mind. He held them back. 'Your father?'

'He's a fisherman, in Romanon Bay. That's where I grew up.' She stood tall and lifted her chin.

Jarrood was fairly certain she hadn't been 'grown up' for very long. 'It's a magnificent crystal,' he said, baiting, leading, hoping.

'Oh it isn't a crystal.'

*No kidding.* He kept his expression smooth. 'It's not?'

'My father says it's an artefact.' She pronounced it *art-ee-fact*.

'An artefact?' he corrected her. 'From where?'

She blushed. 'You'll laugh.'

'Tell me,' he whispered.

She cupped his ear with her hand. 'The southern seas, Father said. He knows the

currents and can read the signs. It's from the far south, the Southern Continent.'

Jarrood frowned. 'There is no Southern Continent, Bree.'

'Not any more.' She slipped on a black dress with long bell sleeves and lace-up front. 'It sank two thousand years ago.' She put on her boots. 'Come to breakfast. I'm starved.'

He went with her to the dining hall, keeping his queries in check. *There's no rush*, he thought between mouthfuls of porridge. *I have all the time in the world*. He repeated this frequently to keep from snatching the thing from her neck and running out the door with it. There could be much to learn from her and stealing the CPU, the art-ee-fact as she called it, wouldn't make the information any more forthcoming. *Patience. If the spiral really does come from the Southern Continent, it means it was there two thousand years ago*. Rushing forward wasn't going to solve this mystery. On the contrary, he needed a way to the past.

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