



ALAYA DAWN JOHNSON

The Burning City

• BOOK TWO of THE SPIRIT BINDERS •

“Reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* books...this series could be a stand-out.” – PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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Book Two of *The Spirit Binders*

Alaya Dawn Johnson

A Bolden Book

AGATE

CHICAGO

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To my mother and my Aunt Vanessa,
*the strong women in my life who helped inspire the strong
women in this book.*



Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men...

— John Donne

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

— Dylan Thomas

What came before...

THE MORNING OF HER FIRST BLOOD, thirteen-year-old Lana is at once excited and terrified to perform her first dive alone. If successful, she will be initiated into the elite ranks of those who dive for the jewels created by the sacred mandagah fish. But two unusual jewels, given her by a dying fish, are destined to one day tear her from everything she has ever loved. In the islands, humans are engaged in a constant struggle with their environment—the countless volcanoes, floods, and divine winds that threaten their lives. And so, to control these natural forces and allow human civilization to flourish, a few brave individuals used the power of sacrifice to imprison the spirits of fire, water, and death that govern these acts of nature. Ever since that time, despite the continued worship by humans, these spirits have struggled to break free.

Soon after Lana's initiation, floods devastate the small rural island. Although Leilani, Lana's mother, is reluctant to leave, her father's desire to travel to the city prevails. Lana and Leilani stay in another, smaller city while Lana's father goes ahead to the metropolis of Essel—an urban center in the shadow of the smoking volcano, Nui'ahi, and home to the famed Kulanui, an ancient school.

Returning to the Kulanui is Lana's island teacher and youthful crush, Kohaku. There he is happy to be reunited with his deaf sister, Emea, someone whom he believes is very sheltered from the rest of the world because of her handicap. Unbeknownst to him, however, she is carrying on an affair with Nahe, the head of Kohaku's department at the Kulanui.

Meanwhile, Lana and her mother eke out a meager living in the dockside slums in Okika City. Lana's harsh work at a launderer's eventually makes her desperately ill, and Leilani turns to prostitution in order to pay for her daughter's medicine. A mysterious one-armed witch approaches Leilani and offers her a deal: enough money to travel to Essel and live comfortably with her husband in exchange for Lana's apprenticeship. Lana would learn how to harness the power of the spirits through sacrifice. Leilani must also wear a necklace with a bone charm carved in the shape of a key—the ancient symbol of the death spirit.

Lana generally enjoys her life with the witch Akua—although certain strange events sometimes make her question her mentor's intentions. Lana ignores oblique warnings from Ino, the water sprite who guards the nearby lake. When Lana is eighteen, Akua informs her that her apprenticeship is nearly at an end. As a final lesson, she promises to show Lana a technique that can be used to harness great power. Under Akua's watchful eye, Lana learns how to use the matched jewels she harvested during her initiation to trick another person into an unwitting sacrifice. What Lana doesn't know is that she will slowly kill the other person to whom she gives one of the jewels. She sells it to Pua, an older woman who has spent most of her life in the outer islands raising her nephew Kai, the half-human water guardian. Then, in a ceremony Lana doesn't understand, Akua binds Lana's fate inextricably with her own, tricking Lana into accepting this burden.

Soon after, Leilani collapses. Using her connection with Pua through the linked jewel necklaces, Lana recites a geas that will allow Leilani to live, but only with great sacrifice: Lana is doomed to be hounded by the specter of her own mother's untimely death until she herself dies. Akua, curiously unsurprised at Lana's predicament, gives her a powerful means to survive—a flute made from the hollowed bones of Akua's right arm.

In the days before Lana's fateful sacrifice, Kohaku's sister Emea dies—a victim of her lover's callous treatment after she becomes pregnant. Nahe expels Kohaku from the Kulanui to discredit his

accusations. Destitute and bereft, Kohaku makes the pilgrimage to the inner fire shrine, where hundreds supplicate the fire spirit to become the new ruler of Essel. Kohaku merely intends an honorable death: of those hundreds who vie for rulership, only one succeeds—and the rest are all sacrificed. On the boat to the shrine, however, Kohaku meets Nahoa, a rough-edged but lovely sailor. The unexpected love he feels for her rekindles his desire for both life and revenge, leading him to do the unthinkable. For the price of his left hand, Kohaku deliberately weakens the bindings that hold the fire spirit—and thus becomes ruler of the most powerful city in the islands. He and Nahoa marry, but their happiness is tempered by his bloodthirsty need to avenge his sister—who appears to him as a ghost—and his growing paranoia about Nui’ahi, the great volcano.

While Kohaku becomes Mo’i, Lana spends her days engaged in a desperate battle of wits with the death spirit. She goes on a pilgrimage to the original wind shrine, destroyed five hundred years before, when that spirit broke free of its human-forged bindings. After she endures a three-day vigil, the wind spirit grants Lana its double-edged gift—she grows black wings that can help keep her from the clutches of the death spirit. Lana thus becomes the first “black angel,” an ancient harbinger of destruction, in five hundred years.

Exhausted unto death, Lana flies away and collapses on the doorstep of a well-to-do country inn, wearing a cloak drawn over her shoulders. There, she is taken for a hunchback beggar and is about to be turned away before one of the richest guests demands that she be let in. The guest is in fact Kai, the water guardian, whose otherworldly features inspire more fear than respect. He takes her to his rooms and helps to nurse her back to health. Kai then offers her a gift she never could have hoped to receive: complete protection from the death spirit in his shrine on the outer islands. She accepts and begins a more peaceful existence with Kai in his home. However, despite their growing love for each other, he keeps his distance. Any woman who chooses to sleep with a

guardian will kill him if she sleeps with another. Lana understands the risks, but gives herself to Kai anyway. As he teaches her more about the art of geas and binding, she discovers that Akua has left some vital gaps out of her education. This makes Lana suspicious, but she only fully understands the magnitude of Akua's treachery when Kai tells her of his beloved aunt Pua on the anniversary of her death. Lana immediately realizes that this is the same woman she had used as an unwitting sacrifice a year before. Kai's aunt died of a sudden illness one week after Lana cast the spell that saved her mother. Racked with guilt, Lana leaves the water shrine, determined to confront Akua and demand answers.

But Akua has abandoned the cottage, and the only information Ino can give Lana is a slim, ancient black book. And then, before she can look further, there is an explosion to the west. Nui'ahi, Essel's great volcano, dormant for a thousand years, has finally blown.

Just before the explosion, Akua appears in the city, where she kidnaps Leilani. The two women witness the destruction in silence, both equally shocked.

At that moment, Nahoia is sequestered in the fire shrine, having left Kohaku when she discovered the brutally mangled body of his sister's erstwhile lover. Nahoia gives birth to her and Kohaku's daughter amid the fiery carnage.

Lana arrives in the devastated city to find her parents' home razed. Her father tells her that her mother has gone missing, and the two grieve the only way they can, by playing a lament together in the smoking ashes of the great city.

Glossary

The black book

Characters

Aoi – Narrator of the black book.

Parech – Akane tribesman who served as a Maaram soldier.

Taak – A Maaram soldier.

Tulo – A Kawadiri princess.

Wolop – A Maaram soldier.

Yaela – First of the Great Binders, who bound the water spirit.

Nations/Tribes

Akane – A loosely grouped network of tribes conquered by the Kukichans a generation before.

Essel – The city that has become the dominant cultural and military power.

Kawadiri Archipelago – Home to tribes conquered by the Maaram but still fighting for their independence.

Kukicha – Large island known for its rice farming; the Kukichans are the conquerors of the Akane tribes.

Maaram – The chief rival of the Esselans. Their city is also called Maaram. Centuries later, the island of Maaram becomes known as Okika.

Lana's story

Characters

Ahi (full name *Lei'ahi*) – Nahoa and Kohaku's infant daughter.

Akua – A witch. Lana's former teacher.

Arai – Okikan general.

Edere – Mo'i soldier.

Elemake – Death guardian.

Eliki – Rebel leader.

Ino – Water sprite of the lake near Akua's house on Okika Island.

Kai (full name *Kaleakai*) – Water guardian and Lana's lover.

Kapa – Lana's father.

Kohaku – Mo'i of Essel.

Lana (full name *Iolana*) – The black angel.

Leilani – Lana's mother.

Leipaluka – Rebel soldier.

Lipa – Apothecary for the rebels.

Makaho – Head nun of the fire temple.

Malie – Nahoa's maid.

Nahe (deceased) – Kohaku's former superior at the Kulanui. Tortured in Kohaku's dungeon.

Nahoa – Kohaku's wife.

Pano – Rebel leader.

Sabolu – Stablehand for the fire temple.

Senona Ahi – Fire guardian.

Tope – Rebel soldier.

Uele'a – Stablehand for the fire temple.

Yechtak – Member of the wind tribes and ambassador of the wind spirit.

Landmarks in Essel

Essel has eight districts total, which spiral outward from the city's center.

Sea Street – The north-south road that bifurcates Essel and connects the two bays.

Greater Bay – The main harbor to the south. The Kulanui and the fire temple are both nearby.

Lesser Bay – The old, smaller harbor to the north. This has been in general disuse for centuries.

The Burning City

The Rushes – An ancient farming community on the far west coast of the seventh district.

Nui'ahi – Also known as the “sleeping sentinel,” this is the volcano that has loomed over the great city of Essel for centuries.

Kulanui – The great center for learning in Essel; it has been in the city for nearly a thousand years. It is located in the third district, near the Greater Bay.

Mo'i's House – Another ancient structure, located more centrally in the third district.

Terms

Napulo – A philosophy of spirit binding. In the past, those who called themselves napulo were evenly split on its morality. In the present, only those who dispute the spirit bindings actively retain an association with the philosophy.

Mo'i – The ruler of all Essel, chosen once every fifteen years by the fire spirit itself. In the ceremony at the heart of the fire shrine, many will offer themselves, but only one will be selected—and all the others will die in the great flame.

Kai – An old word for water, used to invoke the water spirit.

Make'lai – An old word for death, used to invoke the death spirit.

Mandagah Fish (and Mandagah Jewels) – A type of fish native to the outer islands, where generations of divers harvest the brightly colored jewels that grow in their mouths. Recently, disasters have greatly reduced their numbers.

Outer Islands – The term for the warm, spirit-heavy islands that scatter the rim of the island world. The guardians of the three major spirits all have shrines in the outer islands.

Inner Islands – The term for the frozen heart of the island world, where the three major spirits remain imprisoned.

Spirit Bindings – The central tenet of island life. The spirits ruling fire, death, and water have been bound by humans for a thousand years, thus protecting humans from environmental extremes. Wind used to be bound, but it broke free five hundred years before Lana's time.

Prologue

THIS HOUSE HELD ANCIENT TREASURES—mats woven with long-extinct dune grass, walls of acacia wood turned burgundy with age, and notes slipped into its nooks and crannies like messages across time to the woman now trapped inside. Leilani could hardly have devised a more fascinating prison. The ocean was a constant presence, beating against a shore a few dozen yards away. Leilani could almost imagine throwing off her clothes and diving beneath the water—if it weren't for the winter cold and the sprites that ever so gently prevented her from exiting the door. She tried twice, and stopped. Leilani knew enough about power to recognize a superior force.

Her daughter was safe. Her husband...she would not think of her husband. Instead, she spent her days hunting for the notes. They were written in an ancient form of Essela and one could sometimes take her hours to struggle through. The words and grammar were largely the same, but the characters slightly, maddeningly different. The content of the notes would have been stiflingly banal in other circumstances, but fascinated her now.

"I would go to the Nui'ahi," read one in large, childish script. And another: "I would feed the big eel fish." She imagined a child a thousand years dead, exuberantly placing his or her wishes in the wall and hoping an indulgent parent would grant them. It reminded her of Lana at that age, though most of Lana's wishes had centered on diving. Some of the notes were in an older hand. "I wish to see Ile ride a wave," and "I would watch Ile dance." She showed these notes to Akua, but the witch would hardly look at

them before going away again. Leilani learned to keep them out of sight if she hoped for conversation. Occasionally, the witch made Leilani sit in the middle of the room while she attempted a geas. It always failed, and given the witch in question, Leilani knew this was astonishing. Other than these eerie, aborted moments, Akua left Leilani largely alone. And Leilani, whose options were either brooding over her fractured family or exploring the ancient house, chose the latter.

But one month after the great eruption, she found a note very different from the others. The handwriting was recognizably that of the parent, but the characters seemed to form nonsense words. A different language? She stared at the brittle parchment. Almost everyone in the islands spoke the same language. They had for centuries. Somehow, she knew that this note would not convey the familiar wishes of a parent to a child. The characters were cramped and hurried. It felt like a confession. Like a secret. Like a hint of what had truly happened in this house centuries before.

Deliberately, she left it in the open and waited for Akua to return. The witch read it as though she could not look away. She bent down and picked it up. Her hand trembled. Leilani realized what should have been obvious from the first: Akua had loves and disappointments just like everyone else. It was her combination of extreme power and emotional detachment that made her seem inhuman.

“Where did you find this?” Akua asked.

“Beneath the mat closest to the door. What does it say?”

Akua was silent for a long time, long enough for Leilani to give up on an answer. Her words, when she spoke, rang with the natural intonation of poetry.

*“Haven’t I always loved you?
And yet you only see her,
Dancing by the fire.”*

The death had grown to know the girl, to feel comfortable in her shadow. It would trail her for hours, then days—a week, once—before recalling its geas. It attempted to kill her the way a master attempts to beat a skilled partner in a shell game, with more interest than conviction. It had been cast off like a splinter from a carving, a death not of death, and it had grown and changed. It recalled the sublime consciousness of the whole, but did not long to return there. The girl was complete and bright with the life it longed to quench. That time in the guardian's shrine, when she had nearly passed beyond the gate, she had tried to bind the death with words alone. She had noted the substance of its key, and it had stilled at the burning, frantic, hope in her eyes as she struggled for more, as she uncovered truth with desperation. "So long as it wields the key," she had said, "the death is bound to petty human emotion."

True. And its emotions were not merely petty. Of late, they had even been transcendent.

Oh, the dying souls it feasted on in the wake of the fires and ash. Oh, the thousand living flames, some as bright as hers, snuffed and snuffed and snuffed until it felt like a glutton at a banquet. The avatar had returned to the center to be subsumed by the ceaseless totality of the death godhead. But it had been forgotten, cast out again fully formed. The self-same splinter, sent to hound the water girl, the angel girl, once more. That had never happened before. The avatars are not of themselves. They are projections of the whole. Yet it seemed to be itself, to be a thing like she was a person, and the sensation stayed its hand, even when the old lady's geas seemed to burn with urgency.

The avatar is the death, but death is not its avatar.

Sixty days left, the geas said. *Fifty-nine days*. And still it trailed her and warmed its burgeoning selfhood with her own. They were much alike in that. New-molded clay being fired in the ashes of Essel's volcano. In the smoke from twenty thousand extinguished flames.

"Do you really think you'll find your mother?" it said to her, on day fifty-two.

Shadows looked like paint beneath her eyes, but she smiled. “Honestly? Probably only if Akua lets me.”

She would not have known that a year or even a few months before. She was finally asking the right questions, at last getting closer to their answers. It wondered how long the old lady could continue her game.

And the lonely avatar, caught between selfhood and godhead? It bided. Day fifty-one, she realized she should visit the fire temple. The old lady’s chosen player was quickly learning the stakes. Forming her own conclusions.

Which is the trouble with avatars, isn’t it?

PART I

...

Fate

THE WOMAN'S HAIR WAS THE FIRST part of her to catch fire—it was long, and streaked with gray, and for a horrified moment, Lana wondered if she'd finally found her mother. Her thin lips mouthed prayers that Lana couldn't hear over the thrumming whispers of the gathered crowd. The woman had wrapped her wrists in yards of sennit braid, the brown of the rough cordage blending with her skin so that from a distance it almost looked like lumping scar tissue. A breeze blew in off the great bay, bringing with it the familiar scent of ash and—far too redolently—burning flesh.

Beside her, an older man averted his head. “Napulo freaks,” he said, almost spitting the words into the pounded ash at their feet.

Lana walked forward. The crowd might have been dense, but it receded like a tide at her approach, as if the splayed edges of her black wings might burn them.

The breeze picked up—the flames traveled down the woman's arms and caught on the sennit braid. Lana winced at the sudden flare. The woman threw her head back and collapsed to her knees. She let out a wordless wail, a high keening that made the skin on Lana's arms prickle and tears sting in her eyes. What possible reason could anyone have to burn herself alive?

“Someone stop her!” Lana shouted.

But two others—also napulo disciples, she guessed, judging by the rough cordage around their arms—stood in her way.

“We cannot let you pass, black angel,” the oldest one said, almost gently.

The other frowned. “The great fire will be free. We know the black angel understands sacrifice.”

Lana could have cursed, but she felt paralyzed with horror. This close, she could see the napulo woman’s blackening skin, her agonized face as she waited for the fire to consume her. How could Lana have failed to recognize this as an exercise in power, however unusual? This fanatic was giving herself up in the ultimate self-sacrifice to her ideals.

The napulo fringe movement had, it was said, grown out of the philosophy of the very first spirit binders a thousand years ago. Even in those desperate times, not everyone had agreed upon the morality of binding the spirits. Some had thought the spirits should be revered and worshiped, and that all bindings were a perversion of the natural order. Lana had thought their kind had all but vanished, but since the great eruption, she had witnessed their growing presence in the city. It felt like an illness—after all that had happened, how could someone want to weaken the great bindings even further?

And yet a woman had set herself on fire in the bustling courtyard mere yards away from the great fire temple of Essel.

The woman pitched forward. If her moans had unnerved Lana, her sudden silence made her want to gag.

“The great fire can hardly use this sacrifice,” the death said, suddenly beside her.

Lana regarded it, grateful to have something else to focus on. She had long ago grown used to the death spirit’s unheralded comings and goings. Sometimes she felt lonely enough that its presence was even a comfort.

“She doesn’t know the geas?” Lana asked.

The two women blocking her path thought she had addressed them. The older one shook her head. “We offer only prayers. *All* bindings are immoral, black angel,” she said.

But the power of binding is also the power of unbinding, Lana thought. She didn't say it. Nui'ahi had erupted in a cataclysm of fire and scalding ash just two months before. Lana suspected that someone had manipulated a geas to weaken the great binding of the fire spirit, because how else could the volcano that had slept for a millennium awaken with such fury? The last thing anyone in this suffering city needed was for some misguided napulo fanatic to learn how to invoke a proper geas. She doubted anyone would survive if the volcano erupted again.

"She's gone," the death said. Lana looked up and saw that the woman had become a pyre. What had looked moments before like a person was rapidly collapsing upon itself, like rotting fruit.

Someone fell against her wings and Lana stumbled forward. The sight of the woman's gruesome death had distracted her from the growing commotion in the crowd behind her. They had watched the woman's self-immolation in relative silence, but now the several hundred gathered men and women were shouting and hurling invective—not at the napulo fanatics, but at the armed guards even now pushing through the crowd. Lana had just a stunned moment to realize that the Mo'i himself had come to witness this gruesome protest before his guards broke through to the front.

"Stop her!" a guard shouted, grabbing one of the two napulo by her arm. She struggled to shake him off.

"It's too late," the other said, and then the guard took a good look at the pile of smoldering char that had once been a woman and relaxed his grip.

"If you zealots have weakened the binding..."

"I think Bloody One-hand's already taken care of that!" someone shouted from the crowd. Lana couldn't quite tell whom.

"Maybe our great Mo'i should just drown himself for penance."

There were a few shouts of agreement. Lana looked for a way to escape. The Mo'i—referred to derisively by most residents of Essel as "Bloody One-hand"—was justifiably famous for his temper and

his penchant for violence. Lana didn't want to be caught in a crowd that might as well have marked themselves for death.

But when the Mo'i finally reached the front of the crowd, Lana's terror vanished, replaced by something closer to awe.

She had known that the Mo'i was called Kohaku, but she had never once suspected that he could be the same person who had been her teacher all those years ago on her home island. *That* Kohaku had been a student at the Kulanui, and had urged her to return with him and learn at the great school. She had refused him; she had become a black angel and a witch. And he...

...he had become Bloody One-hand.

"Lana?" Kohaku said. His voice was hoarse, his face too pale. His shoulders shook.

"Great Kai," she whispered. "It's...Kohaku, how..." She couldn't finish. *How did we come to this place? How did we travel so far off course?*

He shook his head and offered her a rueful smile. Involuntarily, her eyes slipped down to his left arm. It ended just at the wrist. Everyone knew the tale of how the most recent Mo'i had lost his hand when the great fire had chosen him as Essel's next ruler. At first, Esselans had considered it evidence of his unusual devotion to the city. Then Nui'ahi had erupted, and people had other thoughts.

Kohaku took a few jerky steps forward and embraced her. "I'd never thought to see you again," he said. She thought she heard tears in his voice. Lana bit her tongue to stop her own. She had loved him, all those years ago. A childhood devotion, but it had felt powerful enough at the time. It had nearly torn her apart to refuse his offer, but as always her loyalty to her family came first. And now he had come back again, just as the world seemed to be falling apart.

"I'm glad," she said. "I wondered what had happened to you. Mo'i..."

"Black angel."

They regarded each other for a moment, and then smiled. Then he looked beyond her shoulder and frowned.

“Arrest those two,” he said. “And throw the bones in the bay.” He raised his voice. “Hear me: all practices of the napulo heresy are hereby expressly forbidden and punishable by death. This city has suffered enough—”

“Thanks to you!” someone shouted.

Kohaku paused. Lana almost backed away at the senseless fury that twisted his face for a moment. He nodded at one of his guards. The man who had spoken tried to escape, but the crowd blocked his way. He screamed for mercy until a guard smashed a fist into his face.

“The great fire will stay bound,” Kohaku said. His voice was not loud, but it carried. He turned again to Lana. “I must go now. But come visit, Lana. It will be good to talk.”

Lana nodded, torn between remembered affection and immediate horror. She knew what would happen to the prisoners taken today. Kohaku climbed into his palanquin. The crowd dispersed, muttering among themselves, but softly.

Lana took a shaky breath. Bloody One-hand, indeed.

Essel had become a city of the lost. Search parties regularly combed the impromptu shantytowns and the only slightly less ramshackle infirmaries. The Mo’i had installed the latter to help ease the suffering of the countless injured. Lana herself had witnessed many teary reunions—a father finally discovering both of his daughters in a shantytown, two weeks after the disaster; a wife locating her husband in a dockside infirmary, covered in burns but still recognizable. And she’d seen still more bitter disappointments, someone loved and dead, without even a body to mourn her by. Two months after Nui’ahi had erupted in the greatest explosion since the spirit bindings, the hand-lettered missing posters began to fall off the sides of buildings, tattered and forlorn. No one replaced them. The evening after her unexpected meeting with Kohaku, Lana walked past one wall plastered with at least a thousand missing faces. She

wondered if, in twenty years, anyone would be alive to remember these names.

She turned to the death now, which had faded into near-invisibility beside her.

“How long do I have left?” she asked. It turned to her too quickly, as though startled by her question.

“How can I tell you that?” it said, its voice oddly expressionless.

Lana frowned. “I shouldn’t even ask?” she said. “It’s been two months since you tried to take me. I know my mother is still alive, so the geas still holds. Shouldn’t you have tried to kill me by now?”

The corners of its mask-mouth drew up in a smile that had once intimidated her. “Is that an invitation, black angel?”

Lana clamped her lips shut, aware that sometimes what she said to the death went beyond mere conversation. Sometimes even the most casual statement could be rendered as a geas. She shook her head, slowly. “It was when I played ‘Yaela’s Lament’ with my father, wasn’t it? It’s kept you bound all this time.”

It inclined its head. “What else did you think? As for how much longer...we’ll see, won’t we?”

Lana smiled, a little sourly. “So not much longer.”

It fell silent. Lana didn’t press.

A few people had gathered at the other end of the street, staring silently at her. She no longer minded speaking to the death in public. It could hardly draw more attention than her great black wings. They all knew that the black angel had been reborn to witness the destruction of the world. Her companion was the death itself, her benefactor the wild wind spirit.

“Do you really think you’ll find your mother?” the death said to her, observing the crowd of people.

She smiled. “Honestly? Probably only if Akua lets me.”

Lana had learned a great deal in the months since her sacrifice to the wind spirit and her transformation. She had learned to trust no one—except perhaps the death, and only as far as its unchanging desire to kill her. Even from her father she hid her growing

awareness of the tangled plot her mother had sold her into so many years ago in Okika. Leilani had been desperate and alone when a witch had offered her the answer to her prayers. Salvation for a sick daughter, reunion with her destitute husband—and all she had to do was let Lana become the witch's apprentice.

Akua, it turned out, had wanted Lana for far more than that. But how could Lana blame her mother? Even Lana hadn't understood, and she'd had far more access to the truth than Leilani. Yet she couldn't shake the treacherous sentiment that Leilani should have guessed. Had she asked any questions at all when Akua offered a solution to all her problems? Leilani had been the adult, not Lana. Why, out of all the impoverished women in the city, had Akua found Leilani and demanded her daughter? Had her mother ever suspected that Lana was marked by the spirits?

At this point in her thoughts, Lana would shake her head in the manner of a dog frustrated by a persistent flea. Of course Leilani hadn't known. The day of Lana's initiation, when the sacred mandagah fish had given her the red jewel that marked her as one for the spirits, she had hidden it from everyone. And even after the floods came and they'd been forced to flee their beloved island, she had never quite had the nerve to tell her parents about it. Why bother? she'd thought. It was not as though she could become an elder now anyway.

But the payment had merely been deferred: Lana had become the first black angel in half a millennium, a witness to the greatest natural disaster since the wind spirit broke free of its binding.

On far corner of the street, a man draped in ragged barkcloth knelt and bobbed his head. In his fingers he held a length of sennit braid, worn in the manner of the napulo, who used it for prayer. Most of those who passed him by averted their gazes, but Lana paused. She threw a kala at his feet. He didn't pause in his prayers, and she didn't mind. She knew better than to believe a word of the napulo philosophy, but at least those who followed it were attempting, in their misguided way, to help.

Even she, a black angel, couldn't do more than that.

Ahi had cried all night, refusing both Nahoa's breast and the sweet carrot juice she normally loved, and only exhausted herself after dawn. Malie had offered to take her down the hall so Nahoa could rest, but Nahoa still didn't quite trust her maid. Not enough to let her take her daughter. Nahoa had found it useful to pretend a great ignorance of politics. It was easy enough—she emphasized the broad vowels of her sailor's accent, and she stared wide-eyed whenever some messenger from her mad husband, the Mo'i of Es-sel, came to the fire temple. She pretended she didn't understand the nature of her stay here, and the significance of her tiny, fire-birthed baby to the struggles in the streets. The Mo'i had aligned himself with the forces of the fire temple because they had his wife and his child. Nahoa understood that. And for now, she was a willing pawn. Despite everything, Malie and the horrible head nun had helped her when she needed it most. Nahoa might understand more than they gave her credit for, but she was still a novice at the intrigues they played.

She fell asleep with Ahi on the floor by her pallet, and awoke to the sound of her daughter's gurgling laughter. As she struggled against her body's insistent need to sleep more *now*, she became gradually aware of another presence in the room.

A stranger, she thought, peering up through misted eyes in dim light. A man in the street clothes of a laborer, his face grimy. No surprise there—the ash fall had still not stopped a full two months after the eruption. Still, most visitors to the fire temple took great care to appear well attired and respectful.

"Here, I brought something for you," whispered the stranger, and he dangled a bit of ginger candy in Ahi's mouth while she laughed and suckled. His voice tickled a memory in the back of Nahoa's mind, but she couldn't place it. And yet, she felt no alarm at his presence in this chamber. His eyes were warm and kind; they crinkled at the edges, like the eyes of a man used to smiling. His skin was dark, baked like a farmer's or a sailor's. His hands, so close to her baby's head, smelled like just-turned earth, and she finally remembered where she had met this man.

"The pamphlet," she said, her voice a whisper. "That night at the cook's party, you were the one who dropped the pamphlet in my lap. You wanted to chuck out the Mo'i."

He sat back on his heels and looked at her curiously. Then his face broke into a grin. Ahi laughed, too, as though she longed to be in on the joke, and he stroked the sable curls on her forehead.

"Name's Pano," he said. "I didn't think you'd remember that."

"Your hands still smell like dirt." She recalled that his pamphlet had declared the fire spirit powerless, the old traditions mere superstitions. "I guess you were wrong about the fire spirit," Nahoa said, wariness edging into her voice as she considered the implications of this man's presence.

He shrugged. "Wrong, and not wrong. The fire spirit has power. Twenty thousand dead to prove that. But the Mo'i doesn't keep it at bay. Oh no, my lady. Your husband helped make this happen."

Nahoa didn't deny it. She, too, had spent long nights brooding over the implications of Kohaku's missing hand. "You're going to ransom us?"

The man fell silent. Ahi flailed for the half-dissolved candy lying on the edge of her pallet and then began to cry.

"Shh, Lei'ahi," Nahoa said, hauling herself to one elbow. She uncovered her breast and now, finally, Ahi was ready to drink. She rocked Ahi back and forth, whispering to her and growing less and less aware of the man in the room. Pano. She knew she should be afraid, but she couldn't find the energy. He seemed too kind to be cruel.

"No," Pano said firmly, as though coming to a decision. "Not against your will."

Nahoa regarded him impassively, and he met her gaze. Still kind. That was good. Her daughter had proved to be an excellent judge of character.

"My will is to go back to Kukicha, tell my mother she was right and I should've never left. But there you go, that ain't happening, and I have choices to make. What's yours?"

His eyes crinkled, but his lips stayed solemn. An odd expression—it reminded her of an old temple officiant back in her hometown. Something about age and joy and disappointment. He reached into a pocket in his vest and pulled out a folded sheet of paper, soft with overuse. She opened it with the hand not supporting Ahi. A list of names, none of which she recognized.

“Lipa the apothecary, Rololo the carpenter—” She looked up at him. “Who the hell are these people?”

“Men and women your husband has tossed in his dungeons.”

“Couldn’t they have died in the fire?”

“They were known to be alive after the eruption.”

Nahoa put the list down carefully. Maybe this man wasn’t as safe as she’d thought. Ahi smacked Nahoa’s chest, as though wondering what was wrong.

“Well, so what if you’re right? What can I do about it? I’m stuck here, and you know I can’t go back to him.” Just the thought made her throat tight.

Pano shook his head. “Nothing like that, lady. But we know the Mo’i asks you to see him every day. And we know you have always refused. All I ask is that you agree to see him if he agrees to free these people.”

Nahoa stared at him, but it appeared he was deadly serious. “How...why the hell would he agree? If he put them in jail, wouldn’t he want to keep them there?”

His smile reached his mouth now. “I think, lady, that you underestimate how much he wants you.”

Her stomach twisted. “What would you know about it?”

“His cook tells me he orders two meals every night. Just in case you come back.”

“I’m not coming back!”

He shrugged. “He doesn’t know that. Will you help us? Every person on that list is innocent. And you know what might happen to them if they stay.”

Nahoa looked away. He was too polite to rub her face in it, but somehow he had an idea of what she had discovered in her

husband's secret dungeons. She still had nightmares about Nahe's wordless grunts, his panicked signing over and over, begging her to kill him. She could smell the blood, and it wouldn't leave her nostrils until she buried her face in Ahi's hair.

She pulled Ahi from her breast abruptly and set her down on the pallet. She felt nauseous.

"Okay," she said, still avoiding Pano's gaze. "I'll try."

"Thank you," he said, so sincerely that she looked back up at him. He stood.

"How did you get inside?" Nahoa asked, belatedly realizing the unlikeliness of his presence here.

"There's many paths inside the temple," he said, and winked to acknowledge that he had not answered her. He walked to the door and then paused.

"Why weren't you afraid when you first woke up and saw me?"

"Ahi liked you."

He smiled again, and left.

THE NEXT MORNING, in the apartments she now shared with her father—on the coast of the fourth district, far away from Nui’ahi’s carnage—Lana took a knife and a bowl of water and attempted a scrying. Her left wrist was marked with an orderly row of scars and scabs from her previous efforts. She’d taken to wearing long-sleeved shirts after she noticed her father’s bleak, silent appraisal. But he knew she was trying to find her mother, and they both wanted her back too much to comment on the cost.

Her father would still be asleep at this hour. When she was younger, he’d been an early riser. Was it grief over her mother that led him to stay in bed hours past sunup? Or had he slept this late for years, and she had been too distant to know it? It depressed Lana that her life had been so removed from her parents that she didn’t even know these simple details. But then, her father had only just now learned of her red mandagah jewel. They all kept secrets from each other, large and small, and no one could ever completely know another person. Not even Kai. Not even the death.

The death was not allowed over the threshold without an invitation, so it hovered outside the window. It faced the ocean, but she knew it was as carefully aware of her as she was of it. She had performed this ritual in its presence many times now. She lifted the knife above her ridged wrist and looked into the bowl of water.

"I call on the spirits of earth and fire. Show me my mother, Leilani. Show me what has become of her and the witch Akua."

Lana cut her wrist. A sure stroke, just deep enough, with no hesitation. She barely noticed the pain, only the sudden rush of power in the room. Heady, as though she had just smoked a bowl of amant, or spent a minute too long on a dive. She kept her breathing shallow.

The water in the bowl turned cloudy with blood and power. She focused on it, unblinking, willing the glassy smooth surface to reveal what had every other time remained hidden from her.

A ship? Or at least something that creaked in bad weather, with wind and a spray of seawater. She pushed on her arm, dripping a little more blood into the water. The image resolved itself for a moment more: her mother's hair, grayer than she remembered, but unmistakable as it blew in the wind. The turn of her mother's cheek, a curious light in her eye, as though something had just amused her.

"How long ago were you young?" asked Leilani, and Lana's heart seemed to leap into her mouth, so strong was her sudden longing. But to whom did her mother speak?

The image dissolved then, as it had every other time, into a cacophony of fire and bright lights and screaming death. And then, all other senses deadened, Lana heard Akua's voice, dry as tinder: "Your daughter is listening."

Lana seemed to go blind for a moment. The images vanished like a candle flame snuffed. Lana groaned and accidentally knocked over the scrying bowl as she fell. Bloody water puddled around her, and the power leaked from the room as though through a sieve. She shuddered on the floor and gripped her throbbing wrist. She felt as though one spirit had frozen her bones and another had melted her skin. She could hardly move after the effort to push through Akua's barriers. But this time she'd had enough skill, or used enough power, or just—finally—had a stroke of dumb luck. Because this time she had seen Akua. She had finally scryed more than the screaming jumble of impressions that had tormented her

every time before. A smile began to curve her lips, and it quickly spilled into a laugh. Her mother was alive and Akua had taken her. Presumably against her will, though Lana wondered at the hint of easy companionship she had seen in her mother's expression, and in Akua's reply.

Lana shook her head and sat up slowly. So Akua had kidnapped Leilani, but this time Lana had finally discovered a clue. They were somewhere on the water—not very specific, but still, that ruled out the inland towns. More importantly, the geas that guarded Akua from Lana's scrying was clearly fire-born. Strange, since Lana had reason to be familiar with Akua's affinity for the death. She considered that Leilani had vanished just an hour before the great eruption, and that the fire spirit had found a way to break some of its bonds. Akua—whatever her ultimate goal—was clearly meddling with the great spirits.

"Lana, are you..."

Her father stood in the doorway to the sleeping room they shared, his face exhausted and concerned. He glanced at her wrist and then away, pursing his lips.

"It's okay, Papa," she said, hastily rolling down her sleeves. "I just needed a little blood for the scrying. And guess what? I found something this time!"

She stood up hastily, folding her wings behind her with barely a thought. Kapa stayed where he was, but some of the worry left his expression.

"You mean...Leilani?" He almost choked on her name and Lana's heart twisted a little. Her mother would have known whether Kapa liked to wake up early or sleep late. She would have known how to reconcile him to the red jewel around Lana's neck and the wings on her back. But now they only had each other.

She nodded. "I saw her. Just for a moment, but I did see her, Papa. She seems okay. She's with Akua—"

"Don't tell me you still trust that witch!"

Lana winced at her father's emphasis. "Of course not. But Akua doesn't do anything without a purpose. If Mama's still alive, that means Akua has some use for her. And I'm going to find out what it is, I promise."

She walked closer to her father, as though she might embrace him, but he held himself so carefully still that she gave up and went instead to the kitchen.

"I'm going out," she said, taking some leftover spicy red beans and breadfruit mash. "I'll be back by this evening. And you, Papa?"

"They need me at the shelters."

Lana nodded. The shelters for those most affected by the eruption always needed aid, but spending every day tending to the wounded and homeless had worn at Kapa. No wonder he could hardly bear to look at her. If Lana herself heard vicious whispers about her responsibility for the disaster, then what must her father hear? She could barely hope that he didn't believe them.

She bolted down the food and left the apartment quickly. The death appeared by her side the moment her sandals hit the seashell-paved street. "And where do you go today?" it asked, its normally sepulchral voice almost eager.

She smiled. "To the fire temple," she said.

"You've been there twice already. Or do you like the head nun's company?"

Lana grimaced. "She's enough to make me wish the temple hadn't been spared. But my scrying worked this morning. I have some more questions."

The death fell in stride with her. Though the sun had barely cleared the horizon, the streets were still busy with people. Most of them were used to her presence in the neighborhood, and drew back at her passage with a murmured "Ana" and a warding sign. Every once in a great while, someone would stare at the death as though it were a shadow he couldn't quite account for.

She finally understood what Kai must feel like when he ventures from his shrine. The water guardian might not be a creature so

fantastical and terrible as a black angel, but people had good reason to be wary of anyone who had grown too close to the spirits. And Kai looked so alien, with his pale skin, reflective hair, and ever-changing eyes. Lana paused as the road turned away from the docks to watch the red dawn sun rise over the ocean. The citizens of Essel had grown used to violent sunsets and sunrises since the eruption—it had something to do with the haze of ash that even now rained down in bad weather. Where was Kai now? Fighting his own battle with the spirits in the outer water shrine? Or had events forced him to leave, to track down the other guardians, or even travel to the inner temples? Whatever his duty, he obviously had no intention of finding her. It had been two months since she left him. Since he had forced her to leave. And even now she couldn't think of that separation, or the reasons for it, without lingering grief.

Lana had killed Kai's aunt. Or, more accurately, she had trusted Akua when she should have known better, and used Kai's aunt Pua as an unwitting sacrifice. Lana had avoided calling on the power of Pua's matched mandagah necklace until her mother fell deathly ill, but then she had used it to save Leilani's life. Lana had doomed herself to be eternally hounded by her mother's death—and she had taken Pua's life in exchange. She'd been horrified when she learned of what she had done, but she couldn't bring herself to regret it. When Kai asked her if she would do it again—if she would trade his aunt's life for her own mother's, knowing everything she did—she had been forced to answer truthfully:

Yes.

There was not much purchase for love, she supposed, after that sort of betrayal. So she had left, and he must still think he was better off without her. She turned away from the ocean, wiped her eyes, and continued on her way. The fire temple was in the third district, a long enough walk from the eastern edge of the fourth that she should have hired a rickshaw or flown, but she did neither. She was afraid her flight over the city might cause a riot, and she hated the expressions on the faces of those forced to serve her. Better to see the city and breathe its sooty air.

The third and fourth districts were still strictly under the Mo'i's control, but rebels had managed to turn whole neighborhoods of the first district into a battlefield. There were three checkpoints on her walk to the fire temple, manned by stone-faced types from the Mo'i's own personal guard as well as new conscripts drawn from throughout the city. Their uniforms were the bright orange of ground turmeric, which made them easy to identify—and easy targets. Their faces barely flickered as they waved her through, as though she were just another Esselan. She had seen them harass and search the other pedestrians in a way they would never dare with her. There were some benefits to being a black angel.

She came upon the fire temple sooner than she would have liked. Neither of her previous visits had yielded anything more than an abiding frustration with the head nun and a conviction that everyone she spoke with hid secrets from her. Not that these necessarily had anything to do with her mother or Akua, but everything she learned pointed back, in some way, to the fire spirit.

That woman was there again, sitting out front in one of the gardens with her baby, when Lana walked up to the main entrance. The baby gurgled and laughed, but the woman had left her shirt off so the child could find her way back to the breast if she so chose. It was a large, beautiful baby with olive skin and dark red hair—the color of cooling lava, Lana thought unexpectedly, and then nearly made the sign of warding.

The woman caught Lana staring and nodded coolly. Her arms were stiff, as though she were afraid, but she didn't grip the child to her breast or call out.

"What's her name?" Lana asked, just to set the woman at ease.

"Lei'ahi," she said. The baby, apparently sensing its mother's distress, stopped gurgling and looked at Lana. Her expression—curiously, if such a young child could even be said to have an expression—was nearly as quiet and wary as her mother's.

"I'm not sure if she likes you, black angel."

Lana felt a sad smile curving her lips. “And no reason why she should.” That baby couldn’t be much older than the eruption itself.

Lana looked at the woman more closely, startled. Of course. That accent, her constant presence at the fire temple. Her identity should have been obvious, just from the rumors. The Mo’i’s child, it was whispered, had been birthed in the flames of his folly. Lei’ahi. Daughter of fire.

“Good day, Nahoa,” Lana said, and walked into the temple.

Makaho, the head nun, was waiting to greet her. “Ana,” she said, bowing low, so that her breasts lightly smacked against each other. “To what do we owe this honor?”

The woman was old, and her face seemed to have grown crueler with age. Lana could deal with bad temper alone, but Makaho set her teeth on edge with an obsequiousness that barely masked her unscrupulous cunning.

“I’d like to ask you more questions about that woman I’m searching for.”

“But, Ana,” she said, “as I told you before, neither I nor anyone at my temple has ever seen a one-armed woman of that description. You would be the first to know if our paths should ever cross...”

Lana pursed her lips against a sharp reply. “Perhaps you never saw her, but it’s possible someone else at the temple did. I have it on strong authority that Akua did have some contact with the fire temple just before the eruption, and that she might bargain with it still.”

Makaho narrowed her eyes. “On what authority, if I may be so bold?”

“A geas.”

“A witch, too? And I’d taken that for idle gossip.”

Well. Lana could play that game as well. She kept her voice pleasant. “You mean to tell me you have never spilled a little blood for power?”

“It defiles Konani’s sacrifice for his officiants to spill for any other.” Her frown reflected perfect piety.

“Perhaps his other servants are not so dogmatic.”

“Ah, yes. Perhaps not. May I assist you with anything else?”

Lana forcibly stopped herself from gnashing her teeth. This woman! Lana knew that her mother’s trail started here. She knew that Akua and this horrible woman had met. And yet she could prove none of it. What was she to do? Don a disguise and follow her around? That would have been unlikely even before she’d received the wind’s gift, and it was impossible now.

“Yes,” Lana said stiffly. “Perhaps you could show me to your stables? I understand that you wouldn’t sully yourself to speak to your laborers, but they might have seen Akua.”

Lana had the deep satisfaction of seeing the head nun’s eyes widen with the shock of a point scored. But then she was all solicitousness.

“Oh, of course. But perhaps it would be best for me to inquire myself and report back to you? The servants, I’m sure you understand, have less of an understanding than I of your...peculiar situation. They might panic.”

Oh, she was good. She’d barely spoken to Lana, and yet had managed to ferret out her singular vulnerability. Everyone was afraid of her, from the baby in the courtyard to old women in the streets. And she hated to force her presence on people who despised her. But in this case, she would.

“I don’t care if I start a riot,” Lana said. “They’ll speak to me.”

Makaho paused and then inclined her head. The stables were secreted to the side of the temple, hidden by dense foliage and cracking garden walls. The fire temple had four carriages and several mounts—not half as many as a rich family in Okika, but more than enough for the densely populated Essel. The streets were so narrow that if the rich didn’t want to dirty their feet they made better use of rickshaws or palanquins than horses and carriages. A young girl was shoveling manure while another about Lana’s age was on her back in the packed dirt, adjusting an axle. Both of them scrambled to their knees when they saw Lana and Makaho.