

Chapter 4

The Great Outdoors

The sun has barely breached the horizon when we set out. Romeo, the two labradors and I, on our camping adventure. The air is crisp and clean, filled with the promise of sunshine and a light breeze. The dogs run at Romeo's feet, careful to stay far enough away so that they do not get kicked or stepped upon. They do laps about us when we walk, and run beside us when we trot. They bark at birds and disappear into the scrub randomly following the scent of some unknown creature. Every so often they bound back towards us, I think just to check that we haven't left them behind, and then they're off again into the thicket. Romeo is frisky this morning, as if he knows we are off on an adventure. He carries not only me, but also my swag and other camping essentials; enough rattle and clang that he sounds like a reindeer all decked up for Christmas. He prances forward with the anticipation of the open field that he knows lies ahead and beyond that the thick vegetation of a tropical rainforest before we find ourselves at the edge of Australia with only the deep blue South Pacific Ocean between us and Rapa Nui. We are destined for a tiny little secluded beach owned by our neighbour.

Valerie is a kindly woman in her mid forties. She runs a bed and breakfast tourist-type place with treks available into the relatively safe wilderness of her property. Sometimes I lend myself to her: extra horse and guide, and in return, sometimes she gives me exclusive rights to her beach. This means that I can bring the dogs without leashes and let my horse frolic unfettered. We don't come up here often, but this is not the first time and both the dogs and Romeo are excited for the visit.

At the edge of the field Romeo pulls his head forward against the reins. He wants to pick up the pace. I can feel his desires in his tensing muscles and tightening steps. The dogs too, want to gallop across the field with him. Clearly outnumbered, I concede defeat and loosen the reins. I sit back in the saddle and squeeze with knees.

“Okay then,” I say to them, “let’s go.”

Romeo shoots off as though he was corralled within race gates waiting to be released. At first his ears go back as he outpaces the dogs with a gallop, but once he has left them suitably in his dust, he slows to a canter and we lope our way to the opposite side of the field. In true

gentlemanly form, he stops and waits for the dogs who are still running at full speed behind us, before we cross into the forest.

Although it is well shaded, the heat of the day is rising upon us and within the depths of the wooded area, it is muggy. The heat and humidity is tempered with the scent of eucalyptus as the trees cast their oils into the atmosphere. It is like being in a giant humidifier. I take a deep breath, breathing in the lung-opening concoction and know without doubt that this is Australia. In Paris, even in summer, the heat was not like this Australian summer. Here, I know that the equator is not that far away; the tropics just a few hundred kilometres north of my position. Cicadas chirrup in the distance and fall silent as we approach; the choir master in tight control of his insect choir. Birds flit from tree to tree collecting the sugary homes of sap-sucking insects from the leaves of the gum trees. As the canopy thickens above us, and the moisture intensifies, the temperature begins to drop a little, but the air is so thick now that I find it oppressive. Still, this trek through the apparent wilderness has a fine reward at its end.

It is mid-morning by the time we arrive. That first step out of the forest onto the white sand, the blue ocean opening out before you, is always breathtaking. Each time I arrive, it is as though I have never been before. I automatically take a deep breath and taste the salt as the clear, fresh ocean air is forced into my lungs. The sunlight reflects brightly off the sand; a dazzling Australian scene for the tourism pamphlets. Valerie has certainly capitalised on her little piece of paradise, upgrading her bed and breakfast in recent months with the funds from the adventures she runs here.

I take the saddle and equipment from Romeo and let him and the dogs explore the beach for all the new sights and smells that have changed since last we visited. I go looking for firewood. We may be in Queensland, but that doesn't mean that it's always warm here and on the clear nights when it seems you can see every star in the Milky Way, it is cold enough to warrant a fire here on the coast.

I search the vegetation at the edge of the beach first and manage only a couple of pieces of drift wood washed up during a very high tide and a few fallen twigs. I will need to go further into the bush to find anything substantial, but first I take my existing haul back to the campsite and create several small piles of the different sized wood.

The dogs and Romeo are playing their particular version of tag, up and down the beach. The dogs bark at Romeo and then run away from him, he chases them for a few metres, then turns and runs the other direction, of course the dogs are unable to resist and chase him until he turns on them again and stomps at the sand. They seem to understand each other and have

been playing this version of the game since the dogs were pups. Romeo's ears point forwards and the dogs' tails wag excitedly. In these moments, he seems more like a boy playing with his dogs than a show horse.

Wood is hard to find and I am forced further into the forest than I was expecting before I have found enough to last me through the night. This lack of firewood is a consequence of Valerie's success, as so many people want the 'authentic' Australian experience that involves the campfire on the beach, that it is in short supply. Conveniently, I also find a mango tree and a banana in fruit, neither of which are native to the area, but give the tourists a tickle when they come across them on one of Valerie's 'adventure tours'. At one end of the beach she also has an 'ancient' fish trap set in the rocks. At high tide the fish come in and then as the tide retreats some of them venture to swim down through an ever narrowing enclosure. At the end they get trapped. Any fish not caught are released again during the next high tide when the water rises above the rock barrier. Today I am able to collect two reasonable sized flatheads that will serve me and the dogs for dinner. I leave them in the water for the time being. Romeo will be happy with the chaff, apples and carrots I have brought for him. I dig a hole in the trickle of a freshwater creek that runs down the beach into the ocean, allowing a pool of fresh water to collect there on a small piece of tarp for the animals and myself to use as needed. Now that the basic essentials are taken care of I can get to work on readying the fire for tonight.

If I use my Guardian skills, fire-lighting is a breeze, and to be honest it is not much more difficult without them, with a box of matches of course, the use of flint is a little *Bear Grylls* for me. This time I remembered to bring some newspaper. Last time I had come camping I had entirely forgotten the paper and had to scratch around for some very dry leaves and tinder, no such problem this time. I dig a little hollow in the sand and stack the paper in a pile suspended on a raft of twigs that cross the hollow. Some shredded old palm leaf next, then a pyramid of twigs gradually increasing in thickness until I get to two of the shorter logs I managed to gather in the forest. I wait until dusk to light the fire, filling in the afternoon with a bit of exploration in the rock pools and several games of tag with the dogs and Romeo.

As the drift wood burns, its flames flicker in coloured plumes against the darkness of night from the array of metal salts that have saturated it during its life in the sea. Sodium gives an orange flame, potassium lilac and my favourite, green from copper. Occasionally, there is a flicker of red indicating that either calcium or strontium was also present. Watching the wood burn against the inky blackness of the ocean background, it's easy to see how ancient man may have seen magic in the flames. Like so many previously unexplainable events, this is not magic, just science. The real magic is there still, surrounding us and hidden in all that we perceive and

touch, but it is far less tangible than these coloured flames. The real magic is in the connections between atoms and light; between sub-atomic particles and energy; knowing how to access those energies and make them manifest in a way which serves your purpose – like telekinesis or gem magic...it is those fragments of energy that the Guardians possess and modify that are the real magics of our world: having the skills to access the elements and move them according to your will; being able to manipulate the very path of an atom or even a neutron within the nucleus of the atom, that is where the magic comes from. I reach out for the fire and it reaches back for me. I can collect a ball of it and keep it burning suspended above my hand. The flame twists and dances as my mind directs, becoming a spinning ballerina or flying bird. I can release it from my hand but not my mind and make it hover above the dogs or travel down the beach. I can even, if I concentrate well enough, submerge that ball of flame beneath the water; trapped in a bubble of air, it burns brightly beneath the waves, attracting all manner of fish and squid. I can keep it there until the flame runs out of oxygen and then I must yield to science and allow the flame to disappear from existence – unless of course, I pull the oxygen out of the water for my own needs. Magic, like all other forces in the natural world are monitored, controlled and regulated by science. Science sets the limitations and expectations; binding us with gravity, chemistry and physics; allowing extrapolation and evolution within the realm of biology but not yet beyond it. I am what I am because nature and those forces of science allowed it to be so; each of us is what we are capable of being governed and guided by the principles of physics and biology. Yes, there is evolution at a population level, but the individual is all that it can be according to the regulations of science from conception. From conception, my genes were encoded with the almost unique set of features I would need to survive and once I have survived, I can pass those genes on to my offspring creating a genetic legacy that is bound entirely by the rules and restrictions of science. Most people are unique, but I have Charlotte, equally blessed with the same set of genes; the same code.

Romeo snuffles beside me, nudging me for another piece of carrot. The dogs compete with each other for a stick; one at each end in a never ending game of tug-o-war. I rub Romeo's nose; his white star barely visible against his dapple grey coat. He is magnificent, an excellent set of genes; well worth keeping in the gene-pool. I should find him a mare; allow him the opportunity of passing his seed on. His warm breath against my ear, suggests another piece of carrot is required.

“What do you think boy? Shall we find you a nice mare to breed with?”

Silence, but warm breath against my neck again.

“Charlotte’s busy with someone,” I said to him, “I can feel it you know.”

I could. I could sense her enjoyment and almost her arousal; thankfully the talisman that I had worn since a child protected me from such over intimate links to a degree. It would be hard for me to save myself for my ally if I was constantly suffering from second-hand arousal!

“You know Romeo, he’s out there somewhere, looking for me at this very moment.”

I received another snuffle and soft horse lips flicking against my hand searching for more carrot. I stood up and walked away from the fire just above the water line where the sand was firm but not saturated. At the other end of the beach, without the interruption of the firelight, I could see the stars spreading out across the sky. I looked up at the Southern Cross and wondered if he could see it too. It was entirely possible he was looking up at the same stars as me, wondering where I was and how he could find me. I’m assuming my ally is male, I hadn’t considered that it might be female...that would be interesting, but if what Gabrielle and Peter have described as the bond between allies applies to all of us, then it won’t matter – I will love eternally the person that is my ally regardless of sex or species. Romeo, having followed me along the beach, stood behind me. I leant back against his shoulder and wrapped an arm up beside his neck.

“He’s out there somewhere,” I whispered to the stars.

Another snuffle and a flick of his tail, was the only reply I received.