



The
Gateway

K. L. KRANES

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THE GATEWAY

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Chapter 1

Marc

The word fluttered by. ‘Prophecy’.

“Found you,” I muttered.

The thick letters blurred, bristling at being caught. The word jumped to the right, twisting around a picture of an old woman holding an apple before punching through a Wiccan symbol for water.

“Guess you’re more of a fire fan? Or wind, maybe?” I briefly wondered why I was having a one-way conversation with a mostly inanimate object. I blamed lack of sleep.

I dodged the debris and ignored my headache. Weaving through the multimedia experience of the *Occolta Atheneum* took patience and strength. After hours chasing a word the way a fox chases a rabbit, I had little of both.

The magical Aradnian library was nothing like a normal library. It was more a video game in my head. One where someone took every story, idea, image and sensation and shoved them into a blender. Winning meant finding a single piece of information in the whirling chaos.

‘Prophecy’ dove into an area thick with data. I clenched my teeth and stayed close behind, ignoring the tug of magic at my back.

New, forbidden text and images flashed and throbbed. Part of me wanted to give up my pursuit and suck up as much information as possible.

Binding Spell Enhancements. A diagram of dragon’s breath. The Secret History of the Great Schism.

I’d never gotten this deep before. My other visits to the *Occolta Atheneum* contained teasers, the free version of the video game. To reach the next levels I had to pay to play and payment came in the form of becoming an official Aradnian.

Although I was born into the tribe and received my powers when I turned seventeen, to be a member I had to join the Aradnian Church. Not likely to happen. I wasn’t homicidal enough.

The library quaked, rattling and bucking, trying to kick me out. Magical barriers pressed against the edges of my mind, slowing me down. ‘Prophecy’ sped further into the thicket.

“You’re not getting away. I need to know the truth.”

My invisible fingers thrust out in one last attempt to grab it. The word bent inward, slanting into italics to avoid me. I latched onto the letter Y. It broke off and a shriek pierced my ears.

‘Prophec’ disappeared into the darkness.

I held onto to ‘Y’.

A story rocketed into my brain, a sledgehammer that severed my grip on the library but not my grip on the information.

I fell off my chair, landing with a thump on my bedroom floor.

The ache in my head morphed into a sharp pain. I squeezed my eyes shut, holding onto the invisible broken chunk of the word the way people hold onto old memories.

The script from an ancient book, written by hand on leathery paper, scrolled across the backs of my eyelids and sunk into my brain.

6000 years ago...

Chapter 2

Dagny

Thick soil sucked at my feet, slowing me down. My legs felt heavier than stone.

Nearby the river rumbled. Behind me a sea of grain stalks ended where the blue sky met the brown walls of the city. A distant scream echoed through the air.

Shaking my head, I kept moving. The delicate barley turned into thick, towering palm trees. As I stumbled toward the river, the air snapped. The earth trembled. The sun found me through the canopy. The four pillars of magic reached out to me.

Ahead where the trees melted into the water, I saw the wisp of a figure. My breath filled with hope. Stepping into a ray of light, the figure formed into a man with the head of a black animal. He lifted his hand, calling me.

Relief loosened my muscles. Now he would take me in his arms and we would disappear into the waves. Suddenly, pain ripped through my back. My knees buckled. My head smashed into the earth. Something sharp plunged into the space between my shoulder blades.

Crying out, my fingertips reached for the man, begging for help. I clawed at the air as if I could, somehow, drag him to me. A hand yanked my arm to the side and the pain exploded, reaching up to my eyes and blurring the world around me. A hot finger touched the rune inked on my wrist.

“His symbol won’t save you,” a soft voice whispered.

No, not her. I didn’t want to die.

The object sank further into my back until its point came through the front of my chest. I screamed. I reached out for him again, squinting through the pain. The break in the trees where he once stood was empty.

Calling on the wind, the earth, the water, the fire, I pleaded for them to rise up and help me but the elements abandoned me. I flailed until my arms and legs became numb. My body shuddered. The hot sun set as the red-tinged moon rose. Then I closed my eyes and let the pain take me away.

My eyes shot open. I threw my arm out trying to reach my back. It caught my bedside lamp, which crashed to the floor.

It's fine. You're fine, I said to myself. *Where am I? Who am I?*

I took a deep breath. A branch rapped at my window making the sound of a small bird pecking. The vent hummed. I knew these sounds.

I am Dagny Bennet, 16 years old, of Falls City, Virginia.

I needed to repeat that again.

I am Dagny Bennet, 16 years old, of Falls City, Virginia.

That one felt real.

This still happened. Sometimes I woke up and forgot not only where I was but who I was. Traveling from body to body does that to a person. It took years before I didn't startle when I looked at my reflection. My heart continued to pound, still stuck in the dream.

Just a dream, I reminded myself. *A normal dream of being chased. Completely, 100 percent normal.*

My heart slowed. Moonlight stretched across the room creating a spotlight for the overturned lamp on the floor. I couldn't leave it there. Ava would kill me. Cursing my big sister, I kicked off the comforter. Goosebumps sprung up under my nightgown. I placed the lamp back on the bedside table and tested the chain. The light popped on. In the yellow glow, I noticed the lamp leaned to the side. One of its little feet had broken off. Honestly, it was an improvement. I mean the thing had a fringed lampshade and weird naked babies carved on the base.

A bolt of worry gripped me. Ava spent months carefully choosing this lamp, as she did with every other piece of furniture in our house. If I bumped or scratched anything, she took it personally. I considered using my power to fuse the foot back onto the lamp but Ava would notice and complain about my magical patch job.

With a sigh, I rummaged through the overflowing drawers of my desk and found a packet of notecards with small pink roses, also chosen by Ava.

Dear Ava, I am sorry I broke the lamp. I will try to be more careful next time. –Dagny.

I propped the note up against the base of the lamp just as a chill thrummed at the back of my neck. Like those tiny birds that can sense tornados, my power was telling me he was awake.

My not-so-smart flip phone, which I was lucky to have, lay next to the hobbled lamp. "Technology is a burden, not a necessity," Ava liked to say, while my dad and my brother, Jason, nodded along. Of course, Ava also

bought weird baby lamps. I wasn't sure she was the best judge of modern necessities.

Marc answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, why are you up?" I whispered.

"What self-respecting boyfriend wouldn't be awake at 3 o'clock in the morning waiting for his girlfriend's call?"

"Ha. Why really?"

"You know, normal stuff, obsessions with the home shopping network, stress, homework, *Occolta Atheneum*."

"You're still playing with the weird Aradnian library thingy? When are you going to believe me? We fulfilled the 'Prophecy' when we killed Dionus," I whined, more than intended.

"It's not a belief thing," Marc turned on his serious voice. He flipped from carefree to serious and back to carefree quickly, a constant competition between his two halves. "I need to know it's over and I think the answer might be in the *Occolta Atheneum*."

"Really? You haven't found anything in weeks."

"I did tonight."

"Really?" Skepticism hung in my voice.

"I found a story about the god and goddess and how they created Wiccans."

"What did it say?" I asked, moved by a primal, curious part of me.

"Around 6000 years ago Ena and Aeo, the goddess and god, decided humans were finally worthy and came to earth to bring magic. They built a city and had seventeen children, who created the first race of Wiccans. The city thrived for centuries until magic itself became unstable. The gods realized they were the cause and returned to their own realm to keep the balance. Before they did, they created a spell to resurrect their power every 2000 years in case they needed to restore order."

"It doesn't say anything about the 'Prophecy'," I muttered, defiantly, even as the

primal part of me bucked and writhed with questions.

"No, but there was something else you're not going to like."

The darkness of my room crept up around me. Blackness was everywhere, except for two strange eyes glowing bright and fierce near the window.

Fear gripped my heart again. With the phone pressed to my ear, I jumped back into my bed and ducked under the covers.

“Dagny?” Marc said. “Are you OK? Did you hear me?”

Feeling silly, I poked out my head. The animal eyes were gone.

“I’m sorry.” I blinked again to be sure I imagined it. “What did you say? I wasn’t going to like something?”

“We can talk about it some other time. What’s going on?”

“Nothing, I’m having dream flashbacks.”

“What dream?” He sounded worried, for good reason. Sometimes my dreams weren’t dreams but connections to the spirit realm filled with ominous warnings.

“I was being chased while searching for this guy with the body of a man and the head of an animal.”

“A dream about being chased is one of the top ten most common types of dreams,” Marc said.

Usually, a pang of jealousy needled me when Marc flexed his superhuman memory muscles. Watching another person succeed where you constantly failed always hurt but, right now, I was grateful. His encyclopedic brain confirmed my dream was normal.

“That’s a relief. I guess I can go back to sleep now. I didn’t realize how much the dream bothered me.”

“Before you go to bed, reach under your pillow.”

“Why?” I said, as my fingers searched under my pink, ruffled pillow, also chosen by Ava. They landed on a hard object. A small, red jewelry box. “What’s this?”

“Just open it,” Marc responded, slyly.

The lid creaked as I flipped it open. A ring in the shape of a snake arched out of the tiny cushion. At the top, its mouth swallowed a disc with an engraving of a sun under a crescent moon.

“My ring,” I exclaimed. “I thought I’d lost it.”

“You lent it to me for a spell, remember?”

“I remember. I don’t forget everything. You know, I actually felt a little off without it.”

“I’ve never known a girl to get so excited by a piece of junk she found on the floor of a bus station. For our next anniversary, we’ll go dumpster diving.”

“One man’s trash.” A laugh bubbled inside me. “Why didn’t you give it back before?”

“I was a little distracted by the whole battling ‘The First Traveler’ thing,” he said. “Next time I’ll remember returning my girlfriend’s snake ring is more important than saving the world from an evil Wiccan.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Actually, I wanted to give it to you on your birthday but I know you don’t like birthday presents. So...Happy random day of the week.”

“You’re giving me back my own ring as a present?”

There must be more. With Marc, there was always more.

“Look closer at the engraving on the inside.”

“A date?” I examined the numbers.

“The date we met.”

A warm happiness spread through my stomach. I sucked in a breath and my room disappeared. The leftover sensation of being stretched out over space tingled in my body.

“Well, hello there.” Marc looked up from his desk, the phone still on his ear.

What did I do?

Chapter 3

Marc

Dagny cocked her head to the side as if she didn't expect to find me in my own room. I grinned and pulled her into my arms.

"I didn't mean to teleport here," she explained, pressing her cheek into my chest.

"Subconscious teleporting." Chuckling, I kissed the top of her head. "I guess that means you like my non-gift."

Dagny flinched and unhooked her arms from my waist.

"This isn't funny. I didn't even try to come here," she stammered. "When you gave me the ring, I just thought about how I wanted to see you then I was here."

Dagny held out her hand. The snake ring rested in the center of her open palm.

"Dagny, relax, you only teleported."

"Only?" Her sunflower colored eyes turned up to meet mine. The petals ringing her dark iris glowed with worry. "Will it ever stop? Every day we do something new or faster and now, without trying."

"Think of it as being a superhero," I suggested, as I slipped the ring on her index finger. "Thanks to our growing powers, we foiled the first Traveler's diabolical plot to steal our magic and resurrect his dead wife."

"This isn't a comic book," she murmured, "and I don't want to be a superhero." Sighing, Dagny rolled her eyes over to the mirror on the back of my door. She froze.

"What's up?" I asked.

She tugged at her long, pink nightgown. "This is embarrassing. Aren't girlfriends supposed to sneak into their boyfriends' rooms wearing sexy outfits and not old lady pajamas?"

Channeling my inner tango dancer, I spun Dagny around and hooked my arm behind her back.

"I like older women." I tipped her chin back and gave her a long, deep kiss.

"Hey," she said, playfully batting me away. "I'm not really older. Well, technically, I am. You know what I mean."

I did but I still loved to tease her. As a Traveler, Dagny could move her soul from body to body and never grow old.

“I know. You’re sixteen in body and mind. Maybe I should write your family a thank you note for making you lose all your memories or else this whole relationship might be a little weird.”

“Very funny.” She tapped the tip of my nose with her finger and I leaned forward again, greedy for the feel of her lips.

Breathless, Dagny slowly drew away. “I should get back home before my family finds out I’m gone.”

I combed my fingers through her tangled hair.

“See you tomorrow,” I whispered in her ear, “and, please, don’t forget your coat.”

“Why?”

“Jamestown, the field trip? Did you forget to turn in your permission slip?”

“I didn’t forget, exactly. I’ll turn it in tomorrow morning.”

“You’d better. Wouldn’t want you to miss the excitement of churning butter and making horseshoes.”

“That would be a tragedy.”

The last thing I saw was the blush of her cheeks before she disappeared into the night. Her voice echoed back, reaching across the magical bridge.

It sounded as if she said, “Oh crap.”

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