



*In the Shadow  
of the Volcano*

*a short free read by Imogen Howson*

# In the Shadow of the Volcano

Imogen Howson

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*A free read set in the world of Heart of the Volcano and Blood of the Volcano. It takes place four years after the events in Heart of the Volcano, and a year before the start of Blood of the Volcano.*

## **In the Shadow of the Volcano**

It was not yet dawn when Eleria let herself out of her house and began the cold walk towards her death.

As late as last night she'd been fighting against it, trying to make herself believe that she need not do this, that just this one time, just for her, the god would show himself merciful. And eventually she had fallen into the darkness of sleep still clinging to the thought that she'd hidden her gift this long, and she could continue to hide it. Her powers weren't dangerous, she wasn't a shifter or a fire-wielder, she wasn't a danger to anyone, what harm would it do to keep quiet, keep hidden, keep safe?

But when she'd woken, into morning so early it was hardly morning at all, she'd woken sweating and shivering, her choices stark before her.

She could give herself up to the priests, to the god as a willing sacrifice, let her sin—whatever sin it was that had invited this demon-borne power into her body—be burnt away, walk clean into the afterlife.

Or she could run. Leave the walled city that was the only world she'd ever known, flee out across the desert, hoping that somehow, somewhere, she'd find sanctuary. But others had

tried that. Eleria had heard the screams of the maenads as they were set loose to hunt them down. Had, later, sometimes heard other screams, when the fugitives had reached no farther than outside the city walls before the maenads caught up with them. She couldn't do it. If she must die, she could not face the thought of it being at the hands—*the claws*—of the maenad pack.

She could stay and wait to be found out. And when they did find out—*which they will, oh gods they will, there's no escaping the priests*—there would be no mercy for her. There would be only the forced leap into the volcano. Or the cliff edge, the ropes, the weights tied to her ankles. Or, again, the maenads. And they'd never believe that Arach hadn't known. He'd be questioned—her mind shrank away from the many ways in which they'd question him—and if he couldn't satisfy them of his innocence it would be the maenads or the volcano or the cliff for him as well.

For the first time, in nine years of marriage, she was glad they'd had no children.

This early, the streets in their part of the city were chill, quiet and empty. Cutting down the narrow flight of steps that led towards the eastern wall, beyond which the temple—and the volcano—stood, Eleria brushed against the overhang of a star-rose bush and water showered down over her shoulder, each droplet spiky-cold even through her robe, bringing the dew-chilled scent of flowers with it.

Arach had scattered star-rose petals over their bed once. Not for their wedding night, that awkward hour of clumsiness, embarrassment and—on both sides—suppressed fear. But later, on that other night, months later, after the awkwardness had become familiarity, then friendship, then caught fire and turned to something they hadn't known to even hope for.

It hadn't been the first time she'd felt pleasure—that had happened surprisingly soon, belying everything her mother, Arach's mother, three aunts and a cousin had told her. And the gods knew it hadn't been the first time *Arach* had got pleasure from it. But it had been the first time she'd felt more than pleasure, the first time the world had shrunk to contain nothing but him and her. The first time that, afterwards, they'd stayed locked in each other's arms, shaking in an aftermath of emotion neither had expected.

*If my gift had appeared before then, if I'd known before we married, before I came to know him, that I was unclean, would this have been easier?* She'd had little to live for in those days, born into the lowest caste in the city, growing up with the disgrace of being the only family to have shown, in generation after generation, none of the holy gifts. There'd been no marriage offers, and she'd been approaching twenty, nearly too old for any offers to come.

It had changed overnight. She remembered her father pulling her from their burning house, falling onto hard-baked earth, coughing against the smoke that had nearly suffocated her. Then getting to her feet, looking across the blackened ruins to see Aera, her younger sister, half naked in the still-smoking rags of her nightshift, staring down at her hands. Hands that had been full of liquid fire, hands that showed the wakening of the highest of all the gifts: the ability to shift into not just fire but lava, substance of the volcano-god himself.

The next day Aera had gone, fetched by one of the temple high priests, and, still bewildered, shaken by the change that had come upon them, Eleria watched as their family's status soared, as marriage offers flooded in.

Arach's family had made the most valuable of those offers—the bride-price had included an artisan's apprenticeship for both Eleria's brothers—and Eleria had gone to him, not hoping for anything beyond an escape from perpetual maidenhood, and the children for whom she'd longed.

Even then...oh, it wasn't that she thought it would have been easy to leave those hopes, to walk towards death by fire. But now, walking not just from her own life, but from Arach, from everything they'd built over nine years of shared passion, love, hope, disappointment and grief over those longed-for children that, after all, had never come... *Ah gods, anything would be easier than this.*

Eleria jerked her robe up over mouth and nose, cutting off the faint sweet scent of the roses. Harder or not, she had to do it. Should have had the courage to do it three years ago when the gift first showed itself, instead of waiting, endangering Arach as well as herself, making their household an unholy place, opening both of them to the vengeance of the god.

She left the steps behind her, turning into the long spiral of the street that would lead her to the next short-cut. The houses rose into shadows high above her, every slit window—built narrow to protect against the sand storms that swept regularly across the desert lands—dark and sleeping. In just her lifetime, nearly every family in the whole city had sent someone to the temple. Those who, whether by birth-blemish or gift, found themselves marked as priest, servant or sacrifice.

Even through the cold fear enveloping her, shame breathed its sweaty breath down her neck. Everyone else performed their duty, paid their price. Was this, the cowardice that had made her shrink for three years from what she knew she must do, a sign that, despite the god's favour that had come eventually to her family, she was still nothing but trash from the city slums? Unholy gift or not, she should welcome the chance to do the god's will, to give him the gift of a willing sacrifice.

*My family gave him Aera! We gave him Aera, and she died of it. Is that not enough?*

They'd been permitted to see Aera twice a year during her five years of training, but even the first time, when they were directed into the cold, sparse antechamber where she received them, Aera had become already not a fifteen-year-old sister, but a legend, a fire- maiden in training to become the first fire-priestess in ten years. The time after that she was a stranger, a still-faced novice priestess whose hands and arms showed the scars of the lethal power she was learning to control. Someone of whom it seemed sacrilegious to speak, the way they would have done if she'd married and moved away, or even if she'd died. They'd never found the right way to talk about her after that, so eventually they did not speak of her at all, and the next year, when the time came to pay the permitted visit, Eleria's mother was the only one to go.

Then, four years ago, at what they knew was the end of her training, when she should have passed her final tests and become the fire-priestess, the message had come that she'd failed. At the last moment, shut in the labyrinth with the sluice-gate open and the lava thundering towards her, she hadn't been able to summon her gift that she'd trained for five years to learn. She'd died, burned to death in the lava flow, the volcano-god taking her as a sacrifice in place of the priestess he'd been promised.

The whole city mourned, hysterical people sobbing in the streets, the Prince himself making a public speech of sorrow and comfort. Eleria had mourned too, but she'd known that she was, like the rest of the city, mourning the fire-priestess, symbol of the god on earth. Not the little sister whom she'd walked to school, whose bloody nose she'd mopped up when she ran into the corner of a wall, let creep into bed with her when she had a bad dream. That little sister had gone a long time ago.

*Gone to—taken by—the god. Is that not enough? Why must he have me too?*

The question was blasphemy, but blasphemy hardly seemed to matter any more. Her gift already made her a blasphemer. The worst kind of blasphemer, whose gift was an affront to the god himself.

The thought came, an additional cold horror: *If Aera had not died it would have been she to whom they delivered me for execution.*

Despite the rebellious boiling of her thoughts, Eleria's feet had kept moving, automatically taking her along the route to the east. Now she came to a flight of steps that opened onto one of the many courtyards within the city. Closed-up stalls stood around it, awnings pulled down and fastened tight, sheltering not only the goods but the stall-holders who slept under their stalls. Eleria went softly across the middle of the courtyard to the

entrance of the street at the other side, afraid to wake anyone. It was no time for a respectable woman to be out alone. And she could not bear the shame of telling anyone what she was doing.

So afraid was she of waking them that, when a sound behind her betrayed someone else's presence, she jumped and jerked around, hands going up to pull her robe farther over her face.

But the man who stood behind her knew her hands as well as he would know her face, knew the way she walked, knew her eyes, her toes, the tilt of her head. The robe was no disguise.

His name left Eleria's lips in a horrified gasp. "*Arach.*"

"That's right." He took two strides forward, seized her arm in a hard grasp and pulled her into the shadow of an overhanging building. His fingers bit through the sleeve of her robe into her flesh. Outside their bed, outside passion, he'd never touched her that way. And what she felt in his grip was a long way from passion. He was angry. As angry as she'd ever seen him.

She hadn't thought of what to tell him if he found her leaving, hadn't prepared the lie that would keep him safe, keep him out of the way until it was over.

She fumbled for it now, needing some form of words to reply to the question she knew was coming. *Where are you going, Eleria? What are you doing?*

But it wasn't that question he asked at all. Instead, eyes blazing into hers, voice hard even though he spoke quietly, he said, "How *dare* you do this without telling me."

She stared up at him, shaken by the anger she'd hardly ever seen aimed at her. "I— Do what?"

His hand tightened till he was actually hurting her. "Don't lie to me." His voice cracked on the last word, suddenly loud, and alarm jumped through her.

"*Don't.* Arach, don't make a noise—"

"You're telling *me* to keep it a secret? Am I the one determined on getting myself killed?"

*How can he know? How can he possibly know?*

"Arach, I—"

He pulled her farther away from the courtyard, farther into the shadows of the sleeping street, then stooped over her so his voice would not be heard more than two feet beyond where they stood. "You're going to the temple to give yourself up. To let them kill you. Gods,

Eleria—" his voice cracked again, and she realised the hand that held her was shaking, "— how could you do that without telling me?"

Nothing was making any sense, but that sound in his voice got through to her as nothing else could have. "I'm *protecting* you," she said. "Arach, if they thought you knew—"

He wasn't listening. "You were going to let me find out when it was over. When they'd killed you. You were going to let me wake up not knowing where you were, not knowing what had happened till they sent word you'd been burned or drowned or—" The crack went through his voice again, broke it into pieces. After a moment he stopped trying to speak.

She put her free hand up to his face. "Arach, please, listen. If they thought you knew, if they thought you'd concealed it, you know what they'd do to you. I couldn't warn you. I *couldn't*. I had to protect you."

"You want to protect me? You want to save me pain?" He took hold of her with his other hand, pulling her around so they stood breast to breast, inches apart. "You've concealed this for three years, Eleria. Did you never think—" anger leapt through his voice, "—did you never think of just *keeping* it concealed?"

But that was too much. She could no longer make sense of anything he was saying. *Three years? He knew? All along, he's known?*

While she stood, bewildered beyond comprehension, even the ground under her feet unsteady, he let go of her with one hand, pulled the robe back over her face, and turned her to face the entrance to the courtyard. "I'm taking you back home."

She pulled back. "*No*. I have to go. You have to let me. Arach, please, don't make me have to do this again."

"You're not doing it again."

"I *have* to. *Arach*, you're not listening to me."

"You've had three years for me to listen." He spoke through his teeth, towing her back across the courtyard. She stopped struggling, still terribly aware of the sleeping stall-holders all around them. Foolishly, despite having mere hours to live, she did not want them to wake to see her being fetched home this way, an errant wife and a righteously angry husband. They'd never done this, she and Arach, never had public arguments, never raised their voices loud enough so their neighbours would hear.

They reached the flight of steps at the far side of the courtyard, and Eleria pulled back again, grasping onto the single railing with her free hand. "*Arach*."

He swung round on her. "I'll listen to you at home. We're not talking about this out here."

Despair weakened her and she didn't manage to resist as he towed her up the steps. "Ah, *gods*. Arach, all you're doing is forcing me to do this again. It took me three years to get enough courage to do it this time."

"Good." He slanted a look back at her, and for the first time she saw the anger lift, saw his faint smile glint out briefly. "If I only have to do this every three years that's not so bad."

He was *laughing* at her? "How dare you?" she flashed. "How dare you laugh at me? I'm trying to protect you, I'm trying to do what I should have done years ago, and I'm so afraid, and I'm leaving you and I can't bear it and I'm so *afraid*—"

They'd just reached the head of the steps. He stopped dead, and when he turned to face her there was no longer any laughter in his face. He dropped her arm, but only to put both his around her. "Dear girl, I know. That's why I won't let you do it."

He smelled of sweat, of the warmth of their bed, of the spices she used to scent the sheets, of everything that had meant safety and love for the last nine years. Despite herself, she turned her face into the crook of his neck and shoulder, breathing him in, feeling the smooth warmth of his skin. When she tried to speak her voice broke on the first word.

"Home," he said, his voice gentle in her ear, brushing against her hair. "We'll talk. I'll listen, I promise."

She went with him. When they passed the star-roses, the dew-laden scent drifted around them again and Eleria's body seemed to contract in longing. If only she'd never discovered her demon-gift. If only she'd never committed whatever sin it was that had allowed it to take hold in her body.

*I don't even know what I did.* How could you avoid the touch of the demons if you didn't even know what you'd done to grant them access?

Arach lifted the latch of their door and pushed it open onto the faintly fire-lit downstairs room, onto the clean, warm smell of the herbs she'd hung to dry over the bed by the far window. When she'd walked in, he swung the door shut, turned the key to lock it then slid the key next to the knife in his belt-sheath.

"You don't trust me?" Her voice was so tight it didn't sound like hers, and the warmth of the fire did not reach her body.

He glanced at her, but his face was lost in shadow and she couldn't read his expression. "I did trust you. I trusted you to tell me if you were ever going to do something so damned stupid as this."

"And if I had told you? You'd have let me go?"

He gave a half laugh, but there was little mirth in it. "To your death? No, Eleria." He paused a moment. "Despite the vows you had to make on our marriage, you know I've never tried to stop you doing anything you wanted. I've never thought it right to treat you like my property. But when it comes to letting you walk to your death—how can you think I'd let you do that?"

All the strength seemed to have left her body. She sank down onto the bench by the table where she prepared food. "Ah gods, Arach, all you're doing is condemning yourself as well. They'll find out. They always find out."

"Do they?"

She hardly heard the different note in his voice. She spread her hands, helpless. "You know they do. Anyone who tries to conceal it...you know what happens to them. Shifters, water-workers... You remember Coram?"

"Your sister's friend. Yes."

"You remember what happened to him? He and his father—they were the most devout people I ever knew. When the demon-gift came on him...I still can't imagine what he, of all people, could have done to let the demons in. And his father knew, and concealed it, they said, for so long..." She shrugged, letting her shoulders slump. Her robe slid open over the dress she wore beneath and she couldn't spare the energy to pull it back up. "But the priests found out. They took him to be executed. So, later, when this—this thing happened to me—"

"You knew there was no point hoping for mercy."

She shrugged again, the movement easier than opening her mouth to agree, then lifted her head to look at him. "You accuse me of not keeping it concealed for longer. I did it for three years, Arach. Because I was afraid—for myself, and of hurting you. I can't do it any longer. They'll find it out, I know they will. And I..." she dropped her gaze again, "...I don't have the courage to wait—or to bear what they'll do to me when they find out I knew and didn't give myself up."

He crossed the room, just a shadow amongst shadows, and came to sit next to her.

"What makes you so sure you'll be found out?"

"Oh, *Arach*." Exhaustion and misery made her voice slump as her body had slumped.

"They always find out. Always. Aera, Coram, that boy who was a cat-shifter and who tried to hide it—"

He leaned forward, taking her hand and turning her so she had to look into his face.

"Come on, now. Aera burned your whole house down. They could hardly have missed it. Not

all the gifts are so hard to conceal. Are you telling me yours is as difficult to hide as Aera's was?"

For an instant memory glowed against the shadows, bright as the last embers of the fire. Their house in flames. Aera like a beacon in the night. The almost-tangible wave of awe that had rippled through the crowd of people who'd come to help.

"I— No. But that shifter boy—"

"They found him out, yes. He was, what, thirteen? He never had a chance to learn to hide it. You have. You've managed it for three years. No one knows. No one has to know."

"*You* know."

"I know you've been hiding something, I know you're afraid. And tonight I knew you were giving yourself up. But I don't know what the gift is."

For the first time the question came to her, piercing the fatigue, bringing her head up to stare at him. "How can you know all that and not know what it is? How did you find out? How—"

She stopped. *Not all the gifts are so hard to conceal*, he'd said. She'd been thinking only of the wholly physical ones, but there were others too. Gifts of the mind. The power to move things without touching them. The power to read thoughts.

His eyes held hers, his gaze steady, waiting for her to speak. She didn't finish the question she'd been going to ask. Instead, on a breath of dawning horror, she said, "What can you do?"

"I see the future," her husband said.

"*Oh gods.*" The horror swept over her. A horror that was instinct-driven, that she'd grown up with, horror of the demon-borne gifts and the sin that brought them upon people. *That's not permitted. What he can do—the god forbids it.* Her very skin shrank from where it touched his, and as if he sensed the shrinking, he let her hand go.

She was on her feet without noticing how she'd got there, both hands up against the neckline of her dress, cold skin against cold skin, trying to breathe, her thoughts fragmenting. *Unclean. Unholy. Did he know when we married? Did he know?*

"How long?"

"I can't tell."

"*Arach.*"

"I mean it. I can't tell. I'm not sure. The visions—they come in dreams. For years I had no way of telling them from others, from dreams that were only dreams. Sometimes something would happen and it seemed to me I'd dreamt of it before. But it's easy to forget a

dream, easy to dismiss it as nothing. Especially when that's what you want it to be." He looked up at her. "I never *asked* for this, Eleria."

There was a plea in his eyes, but she couldn't acknowledge it, couldn't respond. Her husband, the man she'd lived with, lain with, he'd let himself become unclean, done something so bad it had let the demons inhabit him long enough to leave their power behind.

She forced the question out, not wanting to hear the answer but having to know, needing the truth. "What did you do? What did you do to let it happen?"

"Nothing."

"You *know* that's not true! Don't lie to me—"

"I don't lie to you." The words fell heavily between them. It was the truth, and she knew it. He'd never lied to her.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice a whisper. "But Arach, there must be something. There *must* be."

"As there is for you?"

His voice was a challenge. He expected her to say, as he had said, that she'd done nothing. He really believed that. Despite everything they'd known their whole lives, everything the priests said, he believed that the demon-gifts had come upon them from nowhere, that they had done nothing to deserve it.

But she could not believe that. What she believed lay like a weight upon her, bowing her head. "Yes."

"What? Gods, Eleria, what do you think *you've* done to bring this upon yourself?"

She didn't look up. She spoke to the floor, unable to look into his eyes as she did so. "I come from bad stock. I, myself, I don't know what I've done. But my family..."

"*What?* What are you talking about?"

"I don't know what I did. But I must have done something. And all I can think..." She spread her hands, a helpless gesture. "All I can think is that I'm just bad all through. My family, for years we gave nothing to the god. None of us showed any of the holy gifts, none of us became temple servants or even sacrifices. Aera was the only one in generations, and we thought that was enough, we thought that would make us holy. But she...she was just one, the only one, and even she failed in the end. And all the rest of us..."

"Eleria—"

She still couldn't look up at him, speaking from the accumulated shame of years. "Your father paid so much for me. I was supposed to give you children. And still, just *nothing*, after

all these years. And now, one of the demon-gifts. You got a bad bargain, from a worthless family. No children. No holy gifts. Just this, the—the *worst*—"

"Stop this." The anger was back in his voice. "Have I ever given you reason to think I reproached you for our childlessness? Do you think I blame you for something neither of us can help?"

"I blame myself—"

"You always did. I know. And for more than our childlessness." He paused a moment. "I know what things were like for you before Aera's gift came on her, I know you've carried that shame all your life. You think you deserve misfortune—"

"The demon-gifts aren't just *misfortune*—"

His voice rose over hers. "Stop. Think. What if they *are*? What if they *are* just misfortune?" He stood in one swift movement and came to her, putting his hand under her chin to raise her face to his. "Eleria, I swear to you, I've done nothing to bring this upon myself. And you and I both, we've spent our lives obeying the temple, giving money, sacrifices. You gave up your own sister. I saw my sister taken as a maenad. I don't believe I deserve this. I don't believe you do either."

His words seemed to unlock something in her head, and for an instant it was as if shutters were tilting within her, showing the world from another side. A side where maybe the gifts—*all* the gifts—were nothing but chance, nothing to do with sin, nothing to do with what you'd done wrong, what penalty you deserved.

She'd thought it—briefly—of Coram. But as swiftly as the thought had come she'd dismissed it, terrified of falling into the trap of blasphemy.

But what Arach was saying... It didn't sound like blasphemy. It sounded like truth.

She looked into his eyes, and for the first time the thought came to her, clear and strong, impossible to dismiss. *I can believe it of him. I can believe he did nothing to deserve the demon-gifts.* Reading the future...what harm did it do, after all? And Arach would never use it for an ill purpose.

*But for me...* Her gift rose up in her mind's eye, and a shudder went through her so hard that she felt Arach's body jolt as it reached him.

"Dear girl, what is it?"

"You don't know," she said. "You haven't seen my gift. You don't know." The shudder took her again, turning her stomach over with fear, fear of *herself*, and disgust that was harder to bear than the fear.

"Then show me."

She should have known that was coming. Would have known, if she'd stopped to think. But it came like a blow all the same. She stared up at him, aghast.

"Arach, I can't."

"You can't? Why not?"

"I mean I— Don't make me. I can't bear you to see. It's not like your gift. Not like any of the gifts."

"So?"

"I'm ashamed." It came out as a whisper. "Ashamed for you to see it. You—if you do..."

"You've never understood, have you?" His face was grim, and the words were an accusation.

"Understood what?"

"That I love you." That came out like an accusation, too. His eyes as they stared down into hers were hard. "Beyond what you think you're supposed to give me—a willing bed-partner, a quiverful of sons. Beyond what your family were, beyond the childlessness, beyond whatever this damned gift is that nearly took you from me. There's nothing, Eleria, *nothing* about you that could disgust me. Why can't you hear that?"

She couldn't answer him. The words were lovely, and he spoke them with enough force that she knew he believed them, but at the same time... *He thinks they're true, but they're not, not for me. All this time he's loved something I'm not. If I show him what I really am—it'll be over, then. I'll see the horror in his face as he saw it in mine. But his horror won't go, not when he sees the gift I wield, and I can't bear it, I can't bear to kill his love for me...*

But then it came to her, with a cold insistence that chilled her all the way through to her bones. He wouldn't let her go, putting himself in danger, because he loved her.

*If he loves me no longer...*

She moved through the cold, through the dread, to draw away from him, then stood and moved to the table, took a taper from the bunch they kept in a small clay pot and bent to light it at the fire. When she touched it to the lamp on the table the oil lit with a splutter and a glow spread, lighting Arach's face.

She moved to the clear space at the centre of the room, her limbs heavy, forcing herself to do this the way she'd forced herself to leave the house earlier that morning. "Here." Her voice was leaden. "Look at my gift and tell me nothing I could do could ever disgust you."

She'd never tried to summon the gift, but it came easily all the same, as if it were a true part of her, a power that had lain dormant all her life. A shiver started at the back of her neck,

chased up over her scalp, raising each hair in a fast prickling wave, then sped down her spine to drive goose bumps out all over her skin.

Her jaw locked, spiking pain into her ears, forcing her throat closed. Her fingers splayed out, stiffer than she could make them by herself, as stiff as if the bones in her hands were turning to tiny rods of steel.

And the cold came. Waves of it, colder than stone, colder than the dead hours of the night, colder than the deepest ocean wave. As cold as if it were not just the absence of warmth but a force in itself, as actively frigid as the fire that burned in the hearth was actively hot. Cold that couldn't come from anything human. Cold that could only be demon-borne.

Her fingernails went white. A hard, translucent white, like wave-polished glass. She knew her eyes were changing too—she'd seen it happen once before as she watched, caught motionless by terror, in the tiny hand-mirror Arach had bought her for her name-day. They'd be white as well, not quite opaque but expressionless, horrible. For an instant she felt the bite of cold at the back of her eye sockets before it crept out over her face, up into her hairline, down over her throat.

Whiteness, as hard as stone, spreading cold as the lamp spread light, climbed up her fingers, up her arms, clutched her heart, her lungs, making each part of her body stop in an moment that felt like death before it, too, changed, and the cold moved on.

In the hearth the last flicker of the fire dwindled, the glow of the embers sinking away into blackness. Even the light of the oil lamp shrank as the cold swept out from her body, filling the room.

"Stone..." said Arach, the hesitation in his voice showing that even as he said it he knew it wasn't true, then, "No, it's not. Is it? It's..."

"I don't know." She'd never spoken in this form before, and she cringed at the thin whistle her voice made, issuing from lips so stiff it seemed impossible they could still move. "I don't know what it is. But..." She tried to swallow but all the moisture in her body had disappeared, and all that happened was that her throat made a creaking, wheezy sound like something breaking. "It's like Aera's power, but *opposite*." She couldn't look at his face. Couldn't look at him as disgust and horror replaced the love she'd never deserved. "It...it must be the worst power. The worst ever. The most unclean, the most evil." She tried to swallow again, felt her throat close instead. "Do you see now, Arach, why I dare not let them think you knew?"

"I do see."

His voice sounded as stiff, as inhuman, as hers. Whether that was because her ears could not hear properly in this form, or whether it was because of another reason she did not know. There was a shaking inside her now, so deep inside her body that it didn't show on the outside. This was the end. In a moment, when she could bear to, she would look up at his face. Then, when she turned to leave, to give herself up, this time he would not stop her.

She looked up.

Arach was watching her. No expression showed on his face. Within her, the shaking grew so much she thought it must penetrate even this form, wondered for a moment if it would spread all through her, shake her into merciful pieces, break her apart before the priests could do it.

He took two steps forward, and his hands came up to grip her arms, warm against her cold-beyond-cold flesh. It wasn't a gentle gesture, and his voice was not gentle either, so for a moment she could hear only his tone, not his words, hear the anger, the disgust that would save his life and break her heart. Her decision was bitter within her. It was worth it, but it was bitter.

"You stupid girl," said Arach. "Why in the names of all the gods do you think this changes anything?"

She stared into his face, not understanding, her mind as stiff, as slow-moving as her limbs. Then she saw the tears in his eyes.

"Arach?"

"You think this will stop me loving you? You think I care what you can turn into?"

Against all likelihood, warmth seemed to spread into her body, stilling the shaking. "You—don't care? When it's—when I'm like *this*?"

"I don't care. And *yes*, I mean when you're like this."

"I..." She put her hands up between them, saw their dead, cold whiteness, like glass, like bone. "But I look—I'm...I'm *awful*."

Anger leapt again through his voice. "Like I said, you've never understood, have you?"

Anger, but not, after all, disgust.

She took her hands down, spreading them out. Their bone-pale colour made her want to shudder. But Arach was watching her, his eyes steady. He wasn't shuddering, he wasn't looking away. He'd seen the very worst she could show him and he had not turned from her.

"I—" she started, and her voice shook with what, had she not been so cold, might have been tears. "All right. I think I'm starting to understand."

"About damned time." The words sounded rough, but when she met his eyes they were full of tenderness. "Gods, Eleria, all these years, have you not understood what I mean when I say I love you? If I'd known this was what you thought, I'd have made you tell me years ago."

A half laugh caught at her breath. "If I'd known you'd see it like this I might have told you of my own accord. When it first happened I thought—oh, I was afraid *for* you, but I was afraid as well of the way you'd look at me if you saw..."

"I'm looking at you now. Can you see anything to be afraid of?"

She shook her head. "I— No. But, Arach, why did you never tell me you already knew?"

A flush that was not to do with the firelight rose in his face. "Because of *how* I knew. You're not the only one who was afraid."

"You thought *I'd*—?"

He lifted one shoulder in an uncomfortable shrug. "I... Well, *I* never thought it—my gift—was unclean. But you—when I told you, earlier..."

"I know. I'm *sorry*, I don't deserve that you should—"

His arms came round her, close against her hard, unyielding form. "It doesn't matter."

"I'm sorry," she said, muffled against his shoulder, seeking comfort to which she had no right. He would forgive her without question, wouldn't ask for reassurance, she knew. But when she looked back up at him, she saw a trace of fear still in his face.

"You changed my mind," she said.

"What I said?"

"Yes. But, Arach, listen." She looked into his eyes. "What you said changed my mind. But if you *hadn't* said it, if you'd given me more time, I would have changed my mind anyway."

"Because?"

"Because it's you."

For a moment his face was naked with relief. His hands relaxed against her arms, and it was only as they did that she realised the cold was leaving her body, evaporating as water evaporates under the heat of the sun. For a moment it left a skin of damp behind, making her clothes and hair stick to her, then that too evaporated and she was fully human again.

The glow of the oil lamp swelled, and in the fireplace edges of flame quivered, then leapt up between the coals. Warmth flowed back into the room.

She looked into Arach's eyes and realisation struck, a shock like huge hands descending onto her. "Ah gods, Arach, I was going to give myself up. If you hadn't stopped me—"

"Yes. Hence the anger." His arms were steady around her, and so was his voice, but too steady, as if he was having to hold them under control to stop them shaking.

"I'm *sorry*," she said. "I— Arach, I never wanted to leave you. I could only just bear to because I told myself it was for your sake—"

She reached up to try to comfort him, but as her arms went round his neck the after-effects of fear and relief swept over them, instant, electric. Heat kindled, as swift as the returning flames in the hearth.

"Eleria." His voice shook on her name, his control evaporating as the cold had done, into nothing but a shimmer of water vapour, a haze that blotted out the world. When he drew her against him, so close they might have been one person, she felt his hands shaking too.

They made it to the bed, but only because it was in the same room.

Much later, Eleria floated up through sleep like dark water, and woke to find herself still close within the circle of his arms. She turned her head so her face brushed his skin, so she could breathe in his scent—sweat and warmth, and the spices she used to fragrance the sheets—the scent that for the last nine years had meant safety and love, everything in the world that mattered.

She had steeled herself to walk away from it once. She knew, with a sudden leaden sinking in her belly, that she would not be able to do so again. Not now he knew, not now he'd shown he loved her still.

"What are we going to do?" she asked him. "Both of us, with gifts they'd kill us for?"

His voice was slow, heavy with the aftermath of pleasure and with sleep. "Must we do anything?"

"Ah gods, Arach, how can we keep it concealed forever? The priests, they'll find out—"

"They don't always. We've lived undiscovered."

"Yes, but..." She pushed herself up on her elbow to look at him, and her breath caught as she saw the beloved lines of his face, jaw and mouth and cheekbone, outlined against the fire. As, too, she thought of all the years of concealment ahead of them, thought of how she would have to live again with the fear—not, this time, just for herself, but for him. "What if it's just *so far*? We've stayed undiscovered so far? What if we're already running out of time? What if we can't keep hiding it? And, oh, Arach, the thought of living this way, in fear all the rest of our lives..."

"Maybe..."

"What?"

He turned his head a little to look straight into her eyes. "Maybe we won't have to hide it forever."

"What do you mean? How could there ever be a time—"

"I have dreams, remember." His voice was all at once distant, the way she'd never heard it before, and although he did not move, his eyes were no longer focused on hers, but on some imaginary point far beyond the room and the bed where they lay. "Sometimes I dream of something coming. Of the world changing. Of an end..."

A shiver ran over Eleria's skin, starting at the hairline at the back of her neck, chasing down between her shoulder blades, goose-bumping the soft skin over her hip bones. A shiver not of cold, nor of fear, but of awe.

And, maybe, hope.

"Something that will change the world for *us*—for shifters?" She said the word, applying it to herself for the first time. *I'm a shifter. Like Coram, like that cat-boy. And like Aera too. Except my gift will not take me to the temple to die as she died, stupidly, pointlessly, before she'd even lived.*

"Yes," said Arach. "For us." His gaze came back to focus on her, his eyes, that earlier that morning had been dark with anger, fear, love, now showing nothing but a deep certainty, a calm that seemed to hold her, as warm and secure as the feel of his arms. "And the dreams...they've been coming for a long while, but more often over just this last month. Whatever's coming, it's closer. It's on its way. You've lived in this fear, under this shadow, for three years, Eleria. I don't think it will last another three. If we wait, just a little while, a little while longer..."

"What is it, though? You're saying *something*. What's going to happen?"

Arach smiled at her, holding her close. "The shadow is going to lift," he said.

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## **About the Author**

When Imogen Howson was a child, she loved reading so much she not only read in bed, at the table and in the bath, but in the shower and—not so successfully—on her bicycle. She enjoyed books in a slightly unorthodox way, too—many of her childhood books still have ragged edges where she tore paper from the margins in order to eat it.

Imogen writes romantic fantasy and science fiction for young adults and adults. She lives near Sherwood Forest in England, with her partner and their two daughters. She still reads in most places, but nowadays she prefers Cheddar cheese and endless cups of coffee to paper.

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