

Ursula's Quest

Ursula's Quest

Book Two of The Witchcraft Wars

Tracey Alley

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Dedication

This book is dedicated with love and thanks to two of the nicest, most genuine women it has ever been my pleasure to know....

Cynthia Old, more than a sister but a true and loyal friend – for all the good times and whose never-ending support, encouragement, advice, assistance, and love has meant more to me than words could ever convey.

And for my dear friend, Liz Moore for decades of loving friendship, late night conversations, fun, laughter, and always being there for each other through the good times and the bad. Very special thanks for a late night Kindle email.

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The Message

The tangy smell of autumn pricked at Ursula's nose and all around her she could smell the tang of the Eastern Sea in the chilly early morning air. As she walked along the parapet of the castle walls towards the massive Horned Gate in the west, the rising sun was behind her casting long, eerie shadows across her path, elongating her form beyond recognition.

In the distance she could see the squat, shining headquarters of The Tears of Ilmater. It was a sight she normally found reassuring but somehow, on this particular early morning, she felt as though the building were some kind of omen or reproach although she could not say why she felt that way.

A slight breeze caused her thin linen nightdress to curl sensuously around her body as she walked but Ursula ignored it. She also ignored the tiny prick of wondering in the back of her mind as to why she was out walking the palace walls so early in the morning wearing nothing but her sleeping attire.

Approaching the Horned Gate, she could feel the steady thrum of the approaching dragon's beating wings stirring the chill autumn air long before she heard the regular thwack of its massive wings. Turning slightly to face the huge black dragon as it approached she wondered at herself; that she felt no fear, only a surge of love so powerful it took her breath away. Ursula knew this dragon. In a way she could not even begin to explain to herself or to anyone else, she knew this huge beast to her very soul. When the dragon's huge mouth opened wide she was hardly surprised to hear the great creature call her own name, "Ursula, Ursula." Somehow it had been exactly what she had expected. The enormous black dragon was searching for her, just as she, in some indefinable way, had been searching for the dragon.

When the sudden darkness and deep chill descended upon her position on the Horned Gate she knew it had nothing to do with the majestic beast still flying slowly towards her. With great reluctance Ursula turned away from the beauty of the dragon and turned into the darkness, waiting patiently, although what she was waiting for she did not know. Soon enough her beloved father's voice filled the darkened air, calling her name just as the dragon had done.

"Ursula, delight of my old age, my child, help me. I am lost, The Kingdoms are in danger. You must help me, my child. Find the key. Search the ruins, walk the labyrinth, find the key. Look not for me. Find the key and I shall be found, The Kingdoms saved but you must find the key, my child, find the key...." her father's voice trailed away, leaving her alone with the now hovering black dragon. Deep in her heart she knew the importance of her father's message yet still the now hovering black dragon entranced her. Gently she reached up with one dainty hand to touch the magnificent beast; its scales were warm to her touch, pulsating with life. "My love," she breathed the words out and as she did so finally awoke, the dream lingering.

Ursula slowly opened her eyes. Still gripped by the intensity of emotion provoked by the dream, she made no immediate move to rise from her narrow bunk. A quick glance at her surroundings confirmed her initial belief that it was not yet sunrise for the luminescent fungi

Ursula's Quest

that lined the walls and roof of the subterranean cavern she now called home still glowed with their night light. From experience she knew that as dawn approached the fungi's light would gradually fade, becoming little more than a dim glow during the daylight hours, although a glow strong enough to see and work by.

As befitted her station as Vestland royalty Ursula had a small, semi-enclosed cavern to herself, which afforded her some small measure of privacy. The cavern itself was not luxurious, naturally; containing only the narrow bunk she slept on and a small chest for spare clothes. Like everyone else living in the vast network of caverns she used the communal bathroom, ate at the communal dining area and passed her time in a blur of hard work.

Like the many other refugees here at the compound she worked at assisting the Knights of Ilmater and the Monks of the Black Lotus as they prepared for the impending war caused by her older brother, Ulrich's treachery. A war, it was whispered, that neither the Monks nor the Knights were certain could be won, yet a war that would undoubtedly affect the future of all The Kingdoms of Kaynos.

Playing over the strange dream in her mind Ursula became increasingly certain that the dream was both true and important. Somehow, in a manner that defied all known logic and even all known forms of magic, she knew that her father, High King Erich, had communicated with her in the strange dream. Furthermore she was equally convinced that decoding the dreams cryptic message would be, in some manner, vital to the outcome of the impending war.

Ursula suddenly saw clearly that her beloved father's disappearance had actually been the first step on the road to the coming war. In fact, as she lay there, she felt increasingly sure that deciphering the message from her father would mean the difference between winning and losing the war, the difference between slavery and freedom for The Kingdoms.

Ursula gave a deep sigh. If she was right, and she knew in her very soul that she was, then she had no option other than to bring the dream to the attention of the leadership. Since her arrival here a month ago she had studiously avoided her teacher and mentor, Solomon, head of the Black Lotus Monks. It had been an easy enough task given the amount of activity that was occurring within the caverns on a daily basis. Now, however, Ursula knew she must face her mentor and admit to a truth she had desperately been trying to deny.

Without conscious thought her hands drifted down and clasped gently over her small yet distinctly swollen belly, lightly caressing the unborn child within. A child that Ursula's vow of chastity, made in order to become a Monk of the Black Lotus, meant was expressly forbidden. Even worse than breaking her vow it was a child conceived without the benefit of a temple wedding, and furthermore to a man of no status. It was a child who should have been a prince but instead would be an outcast in her native Vestland. An unborn baby that never should have been. A child that was the product of a love she could never have denied. It was a baby that Ursula found she already loved with a fierce protectiveness that shocked her.

Once her pregnancy was revealed she would immediately forfeit her role as a Monk of the Black Lotus. She would be forced to abdicate her position as Princess of the Blood of Vestland and would become a virtual pariah amongst her own people. As she stood there contemplating her fate, and that of her unborn baby, Ursula began to tremble. Her own downfall she could face, she had known the risks she took each time she lay with him, but the

Ursula's Quest

fate of her child was almost unbearable. What exactly she had intended to do regarding her unexpected pregnancy she had not been clear about. Then her forced flight from her older brother Ulrich's murderous rage and the subsequent preparations for war in these subterranean caverns had rendered any and all half-formed plans redundant anyway.

She was still trembling slightly, but with the proud blood of seventeen generations of Vestland royalty running through her veins, Ursula began to dress and prepared to confront Solomon and Lord Michael. Whatever her fears for herself or her child she could not and would not ignore the message of the dream and its importance. The fate of The Kingdoms, her beloved father and her country likely lay in following the dreams cryptic instructions. If she and her unborn baby had to be the sacrifice that saved The Kingdoms then she knew that she would make that sacrifice, regardless of how much it pained her.

Dressed simply in loose linen trousers tucked into soft leather boots and a flowing linen overshirt Ursula's pregnancy was scarcely noticeable. There was only a tiny hint of her slightly swelling belly showing through the loose shirt. But Solomon knew her well; he had known her since she herself was a babe in arms. Her mentor could not fail to instantly recognize her condition and she dreaded to see the look of disappointment she was certain would cross his careworn face.

Sitting on the edge of her narrow stone bunk, padded only with soft furs, Ursula began to plait her long, white blonde hair. She prayed silently, for courage, for forgiveness, while she tried to prepare herself mentally for the coming confrontation with her mentor. In her heart she knew her sin had caught up with her, but she also knew that her sin was her own. She would not condemn The Kingdoms to save herself or her unborn child.

An Early Morning Meeting

Ursula's small chamber, like all the other private accommodations within the cavern, was set high in the walls overlooking the central area beneath. There were several of these caverns dotted around the edge of the cavern, reserved for those in positions of leadership or given to those few families that had managed to escape intact from Ulrich's ever increasing tyranny.

The floor below of the subterranean complex was divided into several sections. The central and by far largest section of the complex housed rows and rows of hastily constructed cots where the Knights of Ilmater and the monks of the Black Lotus slept side by side with the other Vestland refugees. Behind the large sleeping area was a short tunnel which led to a wide, open space with access to some of the many underground springs that ran through the complex. The floor there was dotted with several small pools in the rock making it ideal for bathing even if it was slightly lacking in privacy. It was not an easy life in the caverns yet Ursula thanked the gods daily for providing such bounty.

Beyond the sleeping area, through another short tunnel, was a large work area divided into two sections. The larger of the two sections was used by the monks and knights to continue their training and daily exercises, an essential precaution given the current state of The Kingdoms. The smaller part contained a small medical facility and a hastily constructed altar to Ilmater. Nearby, accessed through yet more tunnels were other areas set aside for the preparation of food, study of the scrolls both ancient and new, and other essentials of daily life in the caverns.

Clever use of the cavern's natural curves had created storage areas where food, weapons, blankets, and medicinals were stored for communal use. The well stocked subterranean caverns were a tribute to the farsightedness of the Black Lotus monks and Solomon's leadership. They had seen, far in advance of anyone else, the need for a place of refuge and had spent much time in secret preparation.

Further back in the caverns was another short tunnel that led to a more private work space. It was towards this area that Ursula now turned, knowing that was where she would find not only Solomon but also Lord Michael Strong. It was these two men who had assumed leadership of the refugees. Somehow she would have to convince them of the validity of her dream. Should they accept her conviction of the dreams truth they may even have the answer to the some of the dreams cryptic instructions.

Although Ursula was already certain she knew at least part of the answer, the location of the key her father had spoken of in the dream. In the dream her father had instructed her to 'walk the labyrinth' and 'search the ruins'. There was only one place in all The Kingdoms that could possibly fit that particular description. It must refer to the great Temple of Life that was said to be hidden somewhere in the deserted bleak and rocky terrain of Kemet's outer desert.

As she approached the inner work area Ursula could feel herself trembling again. Not with fear but from a deep sense of self-doubt. Lord Michael and Solomon were two of the most powerful men in all The Kingdoms. The fate of the world lay in their hands and she,

Ursula's Quest

princess though she may be, was still only a girl of barely twenty-two summers, unfinished in her training as a monk and now never to finish. Ursula forced herself to slow down and breathe deeply. The information she had was of value and would not be rejected.

The inner sanctum was, in comparison with the rest of the vast cavern, quite small. To one side of the room stood Solomon and Lord Michael, talking quietly as they examined the large map of The Kingdoms spread out before them. Although dawn was still yet far off it was apparent both men been awake and working for some time. Hesitantly, even a little shyly, with her head bowed as was proper before her mentor and teacher, Ursula approached.

She need not have worried about the reception she would receive. Both Solomon and Lord Michael listened closely to her as she related the dream, first without interruptions and then asked her to repeat the dream for a second time, this time asking pointed questions. Neither man questioned Ursula regarding her conviction of the dreams importance.

"Your Highness," Lord Michael Strong spoke in his usual soft manner but she sensed the very real urgency in his voice, "you believe you know what this dream means do you not?"

"Yes Lord Michael I do or at least I believe I understand where my father wanted me to go. I think he was speaking of the Temple of Life," she spoke quietly with complete conviction.

"The Temple of Life," Lord Michael looked questioningly at Solomon who was nodding his head slowly in silent agreement with Ursula's statement. All three of them looked down at the ornate map spread before them, eyes fixed on the outer desert of Kemet. At that moment they were interrupted by Ming, Solomon's most trusted aide and the second ranking monk of the Black Lotus.

"My lords, I hope I am not intruding," Ming began, her low voice almost musical, "but I have brought some food for you to break your fast."

Ming was a stunningly beautiful woman, long straight blue-black hair framing an almost impossibly perfect face. Her smooth skin was the color of burnished bronze with large dark eyes and a full-lipped mouth. Dainty and delicate in appearance Ming was nonetheless a highly skilled and deadly warrior as addition to being a learned scholar and lore master. Although she was not much older than Ursula herself there was no doubt that Ming had earned her high position within the Black Lotus.

Ursula smiled at Ming; they had after all been childhood playmates and were still friends, although their relationship had become slightly strained after Ming had elected to join the Black Lotus monastery instead of marrying her older brother Einreich, who preferred to be known only as Slade. No one apart from Ursula herself, not even their beloved father, knew that the true reason Slade had left Vestland was his heartbreak over Ming's decision. At the time, although her heart had ached for her brother she had still understood Ming's choice; after all it had been a choice that Ursula herself had always believed she would also make.

"Thank you Ming," Solomon spoke gravely, "but leave the food for the moment, Princess Ursula has had a disturbing revelation. Something I think you need to be aware of," so saying Solomon quickly and succinctly recounted Ursula's dream and then waited to hear what his beautiful chief aide would say on the matter.

"The Temple of Life," Ming said thoughtfully when Solomon had finished speaking, "that can be the only possible location but I do not understand the reference to the key?"

Ursula's Quest

“There I believe I may be able to assist,” Solomon answered, “although we are dealing here in the realm of myth, legend and fable. According to the sages, clerics and priests of Kemet the Temple of Life was designed and built by all the gods working together for the first and only time in their existence. According to the ancient scrolls the reason the gods worked so harmoniously together was out of a sense of self-preservation. Legend says that the site of the Temple is actually the gateway from this world to the world of the gods, thus the Temple was constructed to protect that gateway. Inside the Temple's heart lies an elaborate labyrinth, a labyrinth designed by the gods themselves, at the centre is supposed to be a key. The ancient scrolls all say that the key will open the gateway and allow mortals full access to the land of the gods and needless to say allow the gods full access to our world also.”

While Solomon was speaking Lord Michael had brought over chairs for all of them to sit comfortably. He then turned his attention to the fresh bread, fruit and cheese that Ming had brought. Holding an apple in one hand the Grand Knight of Ilmater scratched at his chin idly with the other.

“Solomon, I too have heard the legends and stories about the Temple and the key but the real problem is that scrolls also say that the Temple of Life is completely destroyed...”

“Exactly,” Ursula forgot herself enough in her excitement to interrupt Lord Michael, “that is why my father instructed me to 'search the ruins'. If the Temple is destroyed then all that would remain is ruins.”

“Yes Your Highness,” Lord Michael did not appear even slightly annoyed at Ursula's interruption, “but if all that is left is ruins then what chance exists that any key, even if such a key had existed, would still be found?” Michael paused, allowing all of them time to consider his words before he began speaking again, “I do not disagree with your conclusions, Ursula my question is simply whether or not there is any truth to the whole tale. Nor do I doubt that High King Erich has communicated with you, by some manner that we have no knowledge of, but recent events have shown me that there is still a lot I know nothing about. So, we accept as given that somehow, in some way, High King Erich has managed to deliver a message to you in your dreams but can we simply accept that the message itself is accurate?” A slightly stunned silence settled over the group as they each considered Lord Michael's words.

“That is true enough, Michael, but can we take the risk of ignoring the message?” Solomon finally broke the silence. Lord Michael gave a deep sigh and ran his hand through his heavy mane of silvery white hair. Ulrich had moved so quickly against the knighthood, so brutally against the populace that there had been little time for introspection. When Lord Michael had first returned from Glantri it had been to find all of Vestland under Ulrich's complete control, the knights and monks expelled and refugees poring out of Noorvix city on a daily basis. Since that day Michael had worked tirelessly with Solomon as well as senior members of the knighthood and the monastery but that had left him with no real time to think and plan beyond the obvious impending war.

Ursula may well have been given a key to the witch Shallendara's ultimate motives but for the first time Michael recognized that he felt quite simply overwhelmed with the immediate task of preparing his men and the people under his care for the coming war. Michael thought back to his recent meeting in Glantri with the mage, Lord Nexus. Nexus had been convinced that uncovering the real truth behind Shallendara's motivation for stirring up

Ursula's Quest

the war was of more paramount importance than the war itself. The Knight sighed heavily once again.

"Solomon," Michael spoke slowly, "from the first moment I began to hear the rumors over two full years ago now, I have worked to try and change the outcome, worked to prevent a war. Now we all know that is impossible, Ulrich and his allies are gathering their troops; the very face of The Kingdoms is changing. Since my return from Glantri I have been completely devoted to preparing our people, seeking out possible alliances, essentially the mechanics of warfare. It seems to me that in doing so I have lost sight of Shallendara and what she is really after."

"Yet Michael, ask yourself, could you have done any different? Without you to lead us the war will be lost before it begins. It is my suggestion that we send a small team to investigate whatever truth there may be to this message while we continue our efforts here."

"I dislike scattering our people Solomon. With troops mustering in several locations travel is not a simple matter any more. We know that Ulrich has a large portion of his forces searching for us in an attempt to cripple us before the war even begins."

"True, but can we ignore the possibility or the hope that this message may offer?"

"Lord Michael, Master Solomon, if I may interrupt," Ming said softly, "I agree with you both but I also feel very strongly that the message is of great importance. For that reason I would like to volunteer to explore the ruins of the Temple of Life. I truly do understand your concerns Lord Michael but I believe a small force may be able to slip through the lines in order to explore the Temple."

"And I would like to go also," Ursula interjected before the Knight had a chance to reply, "I do not know how it is that my father communicated with me but I know that he did and I know in my heart that the message may well be vital. Ming and I could travel together, we are both skilled enough to make this journey alone and if we leave immediately we may even be able to return before full summer. Perhaps the war can still be prevented."

"Then go with my blessing," Michael said eventually.