*Waking Was Hard takes place about fourteen months after the start of Arts of Sekhmet, but several months before the end of that story.*

Waking was hard, climbing slowly out of a deep, dark pit. There were half seen shapes hovering around, watching, waiting. She banished them, and most of them moved back. *Who am I and where am I?* She thought. *And what has happened?*

“You have been drugged and kidnapped.” That was a light, masculine voice in impeccable BBC English. *One of the nebulous shapes hovering around*, she thought. *I won’t panic, but this is not good.* If only she could remember something, anything.

“In your current life you are Elanor Johnson.” the Voice told her. “To remember you must summon your memories.”

Elanor did so. Floating icebergs assembled around her, shards of a shattered mirror with many pieces missing. There were many lives there, but one was central. *Yes, I am Elanor. I remember my life, my children, my husband dead twenty seven years, and I remember Luke. Where am I? That’s silly,* she realised *- my body has been kidnapped, I’ve been drugged and this is my dreaming body, but it looks strange.*

“That is only partly correct.” said the guide’s voice. The guide was one type of spirit she had encountered in dreaming, friendly and knowledgeable about that realm, but oddly blind about the physical realm, and with their own agenda and reason for helping spirits they encountered. “This is your third attention, not your second. You must reintegrate with your second and then you can seek your physical body.”

*Does Luke know what has happened?*

“He is aware. He will come for you. He has instructed me to assist you.”

*Ah*, she thought, *if Luke isn’t here yet then something very powerful and supernatural is involved.*

“Precisely. Now there is a fibre from your hara that links to your dreaming body. Follow that.”

Exactly what she did next couldn’t be put into words. In some way she followed that fibre, changed vibration to a lower level, and the dreaming realm coalesced around her. In many ways it resembled waking. Now she had the long limbed body of a twenty five year old African woman, the guide was a dark metallic pillar about three meters tall, and they were in a garden with manicured paths and a profusion of huge multicoloured flowers.

“I trust this is sufficiently soothing?” the guide asked.

“Everything is superbly detailed, far more so than the waking realm.” Elanor replied. The guides were at home in the dreaming, and this one had constructed everything around.”But shouldn’t we locate my physical body?”

“Follow your silver cord, but do not merge.”

“I do not intend to. I wish to see the situation.”

Elanor touched the silvery fibre extending from just below her navel. The scenery blurred around her, and then she was floating near her physical body. The general surroundings had an effervescent quality as if made from bubbling soft drink - a strong indication that this was the physical realm seen from the dreaming or second attention.

There was a circle of translucent dolmens that might have been outdoors, if you accepted a green and red wood grain pattern as sky. Outside of the circle of dolmens were lumps of shadow that might be rocks except that the lines of power swirling around them indicated some form of spirit embedded in matter. Between the dolmens was an intricate web of lines of light and a second skin of light that enclosed the space within the circle.

Inside the circle was a vortex of power. Her body was stretched naked on a slab of mottled red and green. She eyed her body disapprovingly - it was tied spread eagled - possibly on a sacrificial altar. A hooded figure hunched over her, holding what appeared to be a knife with a green crystal blade in a misshapen purple hand.

Elanor eyed the lines of power with misgivings as they swirled about the figure. “What is it?”

“A sorcerer. It will notice us in a moment.”

“Can I fight it?”

“Possibly, but the dolmens isolate you from your power sources.”

“Oh great!” Elanor didn’t stop to ask why, she focused on fighting free, or fighting for her life. The questions would come later.

At that moment the figure lifted its head and stared at her and the guide. It pointed the crystal blade at the guide. “Begone! I banish you!” A stream of greenish energy flowed from the blade to the guide, surrounding it in a pale green halo.

Nothing seemed to happen, and then the energy shut off. “Thank you.” said the guide’s calm voice. “Would you like to do that again? That was rather enjoyable.”

The figure made a noise of displeasure. Elanor saw other guides appearing around the circle of dolmens, as if the sorcerer’s display had attracted them. “You have no power over me!” It countered. A clawed hand beckoned. “Female! Return to your flesh! I command you!”

“Not if I have any say.” A decorative chop stick appeared in her hand. *Stun!* She thought. The energy was shimmery silver, but it had no apparent effect.

The hooded figure shot back some green energy that she shrugged off. Luke and Sienna had taught her well. They duelled fruitlessly for about ten minutes, before the hooded figure managed to slap her physical body. There was a sense of falling and she was back in her body. The bonds were tight, her joints were aching from being stretched on the cold stone, and she had a splitting headache. She looked around wildly.

The hooded figure was standing beside her. “That’s better. Now summon your master.” He moved out of her line of sight.

*Master?* Elanor thought. *He probably means Luke. He will be here in good time.* She spent some time trying to remove her bonds by transforming them into sand, and when that didn’t work, trying to untie them. Nothing worked. The fact that she felt woozy and disoriented wasn’t helping.

There was a shimmer and Luke appeared at her feet. He was wearing a suit of yellow linen and a lavender cotton shirt, and carrying a clarinet. *It’s a trap!* Elanor tried to scream, but no sounds came out. “I take a dim view of this!” Luke said to the air around. He played three notes on the clarinet, and Elanor’s bonds turned to dust. She was about to sit up when Luke’s voice said softly “Stay down.”

A moment later something whooshed over her and slammed into Luke. A shimmering web of light formed about him, connected back to the dolmens, and then the dolmens began to spin in a circle about him, winding him tighter and tighter with webs and nets of light. Very soon he resembled something caught by a spider.

The hooded figure came back into view. “Now I have you.” Elanor kicked him, but she might have been kicking a boulder for all the effect. The figure stabbed his crystal blade into Luke’s chest. “With your blood I take your power.” He threw back his hood, revealing a toad like head. He withdrew the blade, causing a fountain of bright blood to spray over him and Elanor.

Elanor, struggling to feel more like her old self, found the whole sequence dreamlike. The figure opened its wide mouth and began drinking Luke’s blood. The air around Luke shimmered silver, and the concealing webs of energy vanished. He began playing a melody on his clarinet, while blood continued to fountain from his chest. How bizarre, Elanor thought.

The toad man started to scream, clawing at the blood as if it were a snake. “It hurts! It hurts! Make it stop!”

Elanor sat up swiftly, about to vomit. The urge passed, when she looked again the toad man was burning with silver flame, writhing and screaming soundlessly. The blood had vanished, as had the wound, but Luke continued to play the clarinet. The melody was mournful, filled with loneliness and longing. The figure shrivelled and vanished.

Elanor spied its spirit, a smaller toad like form that remained writhing in the silver fire.

Luke stopped playing, the fire vanished. The spirit of the toad man glared at Luke.

“My powers are not for mortals.” Luke admonished. “Your punishment is the loss of all you strived for over three millennia. Find yourself a suitable body for rebirth.” He turned and signalled one of the hovering guides. “Conduct him to his afterlife.”

The guide moved to the spirit, which looked around. “Thank you.” then it and the guide faded.

Luke placed his hand on Elanor’s shoulder, sending a surge of healing through her body. “Are you all right?”

She nuzzled his hand. There was a wealth of thoughts and emotions flooding through her, and she thought she might cry. She settled on relief and happiness, and with a great sigh replied “I’m all right now, I’ll be fine in another minute. I don’t feel like throwing up any more, but I’m still a bit dizzy. What happened?”

“That’s the drugs, they’re gone from your system now. The guides told me you’d been kidnapped, I came straight away.” He grinned, waving the clarinet. “I was playing a gig at one of the local cafés.”

Elanor smiled back. Luke helped her to her feet, she stretched luxuriously like a cat. “I feel good now. What was that toad like thing? What did he want? I mean I know he wanted your power, but drinking your blood?”

Luke shook his head. “He was a sorcerer from the primal shadow - they are as powerful as mortals can become. A sorcerer can steal power from another, the ritual usually involves vampirism. That isn’t necessary of course. There’s a persistent myth that a sorcerer can steal power from a magical being the same way. Sorcerers try and die.”

“He died too. Why did he say thank you when you told the guide to take him to the afterlife?”

Luke spun in a slow circle, and each dolmen winked out of existence as he faced it. “He considers he got off lightly. He believes I could have consigned him to some hell for eternity. He was gambling on god like powers or eternal damnation. What I want to know is who put him up to attacking you.”

“So do I! But you let him go?”

Luke chuckled. “He’s only dead, I can find his soul easily. I will question him, but for now I will have guardians for you.” He took her hand, pulled her away from the altar block. A moment later it vanished. “I have been dismantling the spells and traps he set here. You should be able to see that most of the lines of power have vanished.”

As Elanor watched the remaining lines and swirls disappeared. Luke pivoted again. “It’s clean. Now for some clothes...”

Elanor stopped him, hugging him fiercely. “Just hold me. I feel safe in your arms.” She was taller than him, but he stood on tip toe to kiss her, holding her firmly. She could feel her excitement rising.

It was some time before they were on their way. “Shall I take you home, or would you like to go to the café so I can finish the jazz evening. You are welcome to stay, as you know.”

Elanor linked her arm through his, grinning. “Now I’m decent, I feel like some music. And I think I’d like to stay a few days. There’s nothing pressing at home or work. I can call them from your place.”

They set off across the red grass, and vanished in a rainbow swirl.