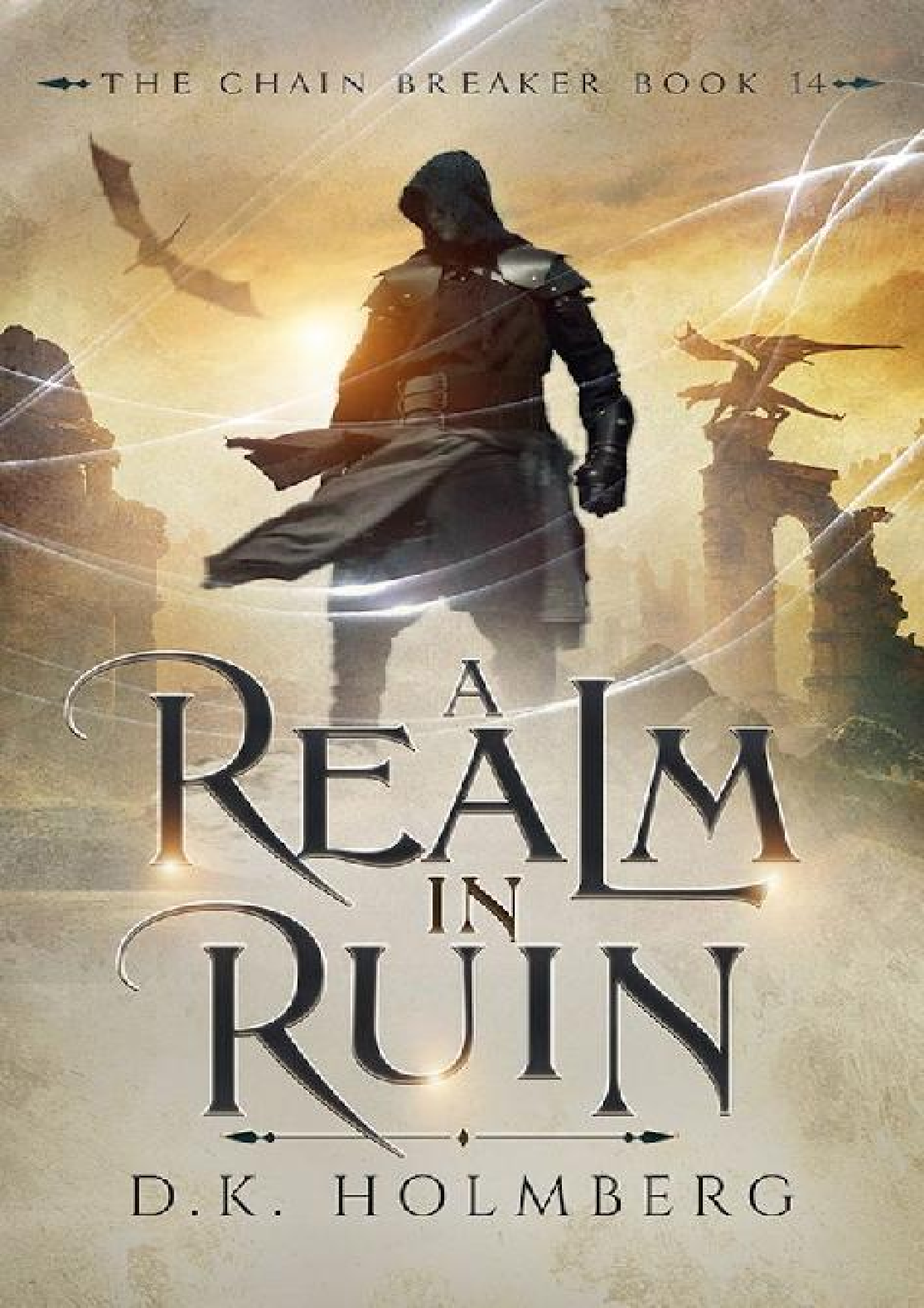


THE CHAIN BREAKER BOOK 14



REALM
IN
RUIIN

D. K. HOLMBERG

A REALM IN RUIN

THE CHAIN BREAKER BOOK 14

D.K. HOLMBERG



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Author's Note

Series by D.K. Holmberg

CHAPTER ONE

The steady wind blew around Gavin Lorren, and he hesitated as he moved forward, looking up as he did. Everything within him had been a little off since he had drawn a new kind of power into himself, and he was still trying to adjust to it and make sense of how that energy worked within him. These days, he wasn't sure how to manipulate that power the way he once had manipulated his core reserves. He was holding on to it inside him, attempting to shift and maneuver that so he could change his size—something he had come to learn he was able to do with this kind of power.

“I can feel something,” Gaspar said through the enchantment that connected Gavin to his team.

Gavin looked around, but he didn't see signs of anything he should be aware of. If anyone would be able to detect something, it would be Gaspar. He had taken to using enchantments that were especially attuned to such things.

“What did you detect?” Imogen asked, her voice also coming through the enchantment and interrupting the silence between them.

“It's just a vibration,” Gaspar said. “And it's building, though I don't know where it's coming from.” He went quiet for a moment. “Seems to be from the north.”

Gavin looked north. Gaspar and Imogen had gone off without him, but they wanted to stay in constant communication with him because of what they were dealing with, and the possibility that what they might encounter would

be dangerous. These days, given the changes Gavin had gone through and how much of him had shifted following the spike creatures' attack—one that he had needed to be healed from—he had struggled with trying to fully master that connection.

He wanted to be able to do more than just use it. Gavin wanted full control over it so that it would be useful to him on the other side. He had been working with that power to try to master it, though he felt more complicated than his core reserves were to use. It wasn't a natural part of him, which made it more difficult to manipulate.

“Just be cautious,” Gavin said.

The others stayed quiet.

He slipped forward, gliding along the ground.

“Did they find something?”

Gavin glanced over to Brandon but said nothing. The El'aras man was now dressed in dappled brown clothing, different than the colors he had been wearing when Gavin first met him. According to Brandon, the colors were traditional, and he had taken to wearing them once again so he could feel more connected to himself and his people.

Gavin didn't know how much of it was tied to what Anna had done and the fact that many of the El'aras felt betrayed by her, which he understood. Anna *had* betrayed them, though he recognized some of her reason for it.

“Are we taking that little dragon of yours?” Brandon asked.

Gavin arched a brow at the comment. “Did you want to?”

Brandon looked up at the sky and focused. Though Gavin couldn't tell what he was doing, he had a sneaking suspicion that Brandon was using some of his El'aras magic to augment his eyesight. He doubted that Brandon would be able to see anything, anyway. The dragon was out there, though it was not anywhere close enough that they would be able to see it. Gavin had a sense of the dragon, but then again, he *always* had a sense of the dragon. Even when they were not in the same place, Gavin knew exactly how to find the dragon because of

the connection between them. He wondered if he would be able to actually speak with the dragon at some point, not just have a connection the way that he did.

“Can’t say that I would complain about riding that creature,” Brandon said. “It is quite impressive, after all.”

Gavin shook his head. “We’re going to travel by the sacred Leier patterns. It’ll be better for you to see those.”

Brandon just flashed a smile in reply.

Gavin tried to understand Brandon’s true reactions. Most of the time, Brandon came off as easygoing, but there were times when he had a darkness within him. Or maybe that was just Gavin’s impression given everything he had been through with the El’aras.

That history was difficult for him to come to terms with. Gavin wished he still trusted the El’aras, especially after all that he’d done for them. With everything he’d been through with them, he found it tough for those very reasons.

“We’re going to use this pattern,” Gavin said, holding out his hands and shifting his body posture just a little. It was not the lightning pattern that he’d traveled with, since so far Brandon had not been able to learn that one.

“I keep trying to get the other one to work with me, but you know how she can be.”

Gavin grunted. He had every reason to believe that Imogen had no interest in teaching Brandon, and for good reason. She wanted to keep the patterns to the Leier.

“Well, if you are willing to devote yourself to the Leier, and everything they teach, and the structure of the patterns, then she might be more willing to work with you,” Gavin said. “But seeing as how you’re just wanting to augment your fighting style and add a bit of this to what you already know, I’m not at all surprised that she has no interest in really working with you.”

Brandon chuckled. “Making excuses for them, are you?”

“Not making excuses. And they can choose to teach whoever they want to teach.”

Brandon went quiet for a moment. “All right, Chain Breaker. Show me the technique.”

Gavin focused, beginning to glide along the ground, which was part of the trick with this pattern. This one was fairly straightforward, and it was one of the primary Leier patterns—or as Imogen liked to call them, the sacred patterns. He still didn’t understand how these patterns pulled on magic, as it didn’t seem as if the magic came from his core reserves or this other power he now had. There was a structure that seemed to draw on something different and deeper.

Patterns were something that he recognized. Figuring out patterns had been part of his training with Tristan and the initial teachings he had gone through, all of it designed to help him identify different fighting styles so he could learn and control those styles in a way that allowed him to become the Chain Breaker. Because of all that, Gavin had grown in his skill, and he hadn’t even realized that it had also essentially been teaching him how to identify magic.

And with everything they were doing and everything he had become, learning how to use the patterns to recognize magic had proven to be one of the more important aspects of everything else he had done.

But the Leier patterns were different.

“The technique is crucial,” Gavin said. “It’s also not as straightforward as some of the other techniques you’ve learned. You have to position yourself in such a way that you allow the pattern to guide you.”

Brandon was a good student, for all his faults. And more than that, he had an interest and an aptitude for the patterns. According to Imogen, the aptitude was crucial because not everybody could be taught the sacred patterns in the same way. And given what he had learned about the Leier, their different levels of training, and the way they approached things in their society, he wasn’t terribly surprised by that.

“I think I have the technique down,” Brandon said. “At least, I feel like I’m getting it down.” He frowned. “I’ve been watching some of the others.”

“Just don’t let them know you’re watching them,” Gavin said.

Brandon let out a small laugh. “Oh, I don’t want them to catch on to that. I’m not ready. Gods, I’m not even ready to spar with you.”

Gavin shifted his posture and noticed a strange trembling, which made him freeze in place. He had been siphoning energy up through himself, drawing power, but it immediately stopped. Some part of that energy began to twist, swirling inside him in a way that left him hesitating.

“Chain Breaker?” Brandon asked.

Gavin didn’t say anything, choosing instead to focus internally, though he didn’t feel anything. Whatever had been there had faded altogether.

“That was weird,” he muttered to himself.

Brandon moved closer to him and looked over, but Gavin ignored him. Instead, he tapped on his enchantment, and he shared with Gaspar and Imogen what he had uncovered.

“We haven’t had signs of any sort of new pressure,” Gaspar said. “Just what the enchantment is doing and where it’s guiding me.”

Gavin adjusted his posture again and switched to a different Leier pose—the tree pattern. As he did, Brandon mimicked him.

Gavin’s tree had started to change over time. When he had first begun to learn about the Leier patterns and his own connection to them, he had always gone into a bralinath tree pattern. For a while, he had borrowed from the seeker trees as well, as that was a different type of tree that allowed him to feel as if he were connecting to some part of himself and some part of the El’aras in ways he needed to maintain, but now he used a different sort of pattern altogether. Gavin wasn’t entirely sure if the one he was drawing on was a real tree.

What he was using was something that added an augmentation to the kind of power he was focusing on and that he could feel. The power that was there seemed as if it came from some of the strange new energy he was attempting to draw on. Some of that added to the bralinath power, making it more potent than it would be otherwise.

Next to him, however, Brandon was working on the bralinath tree. The tree itself was faint, and not nearly as secure as what it would need to be, but he actually did quite a good job with the tree itself.

By shifting the power, Gavin began to feel some part of it building. He wasn't sure what it was, only that some of that tree was starting to shift. And then he felt another tremble.

It was vague, but it was definitely there.

Gavin quickly realized why it was vague: Something masked it.

The only thing he could tell was that it was in the direction that Gaspar and Imogen were traveling.

Gavin looked over to Brandon. "Lesson time is over," he said.

He grabbed the man, and then with the lightning pattern, he burst into the sky.

Brandon stiffened a little. He attempted to add to Gavin's power, but Gavin wrapped him in the tree pattern while he took to the air, and then he shifted into the Petals on the Wind pattern, which allowed him to float and gradually descend toward the ground. He was careful with it, as he didn't want to drop too quickly, but he also didn't want to wait too long. They didn't have to hover for that long before the dragon swooped underneath them. Gavin had been aware that the dragon was nearby, and as he'd shot into the air, he had also sent a summons to the dragon.

He landed on the dragon and released Brandon.

"How many different patterns was that?" Brandon asked as they streaked toward what Gavin had detected.

“I don’t know,” Gavin said.

Brandon snorted. “You do know, Chain Breaker.”

“Several.”

“And the First? How many can she do at one time?”

Gavin didn’t have any idea. All he knew was that Imogen could do more than he could. That was something that annoyed him a little, if he was honest with himself—not the fact that she was better than him, but that he couldn’t figure out how to improve. He was still working.

“More than I can count,” Gavin said.

And with that, they streaked toward danger.

CHAPTER TWO

The energy turned out to be something familiar—and dangerous.

Gavin didn't know why he was disappointed in the fact that they came across it, but he was. He had hoped that the threats from the other realm that had attempted to break through to his side would cease after he had dealt with Anna and her connection to that power, but they had not. Something else was still out there and threatening them.

Wind whipped past them, carrying a foul odor on it. The landscape shifted as they headed toward a mountainous area, far beyond the normal city stretches that they had been patrolling lately. And he was vaguely aware that Imogen was hurtling toward him on Zealar, though he didn't know where Gaspar was. Probably atop another renral, but he didn't know if Gaspar had claimed one for himself or if he was using one of the flying enchantments. Gavin had given him one of the dragons that Alana had made, and Gaspar, being Gaspar, had debated how safe it would be to use it.

“What is that?” Brandon asked, leaning over the side of the dragon.

“That's what we're out here for,” Gavin said.

He began to feel the crackling of power beneath him, and the more he focused, the more he was aware of that energy as it attempted to burst free.

Already the ground had started to shift. From the air, it looked as if the rock were rippling, as if some massive

creature was moving beneath the stone. He could almost imagine a sorcerer, or perhaps several, commanding the stone to shift and writhe the way that it was. But the Society, along with other sorcerers, were all allied with him now.

He didn't have to worry about all the magic in this world the same way he once did. There were still dangerous powers, but given as much power as he had aligned himself with, he didn't have to fear that there would be anything or anyone here that might pose a danger to him or his people. It was part of the reason he had anticipated that this would be an easy patrol. And partly because there had been no sign of any of the dangers in all the time they had been patrolling. There had been a few other cracks, but Gavin had had very little difficulty in sealing all those cracks off.

Until now.

Some part of his new magic shifted inside him.

"You might want to stay up here," Gavin said.

"I'm a fighter, Chain Breaker," Brandon said.

All joking was gone from him at this point. Brandon had come from the family that had been taken in by Anna and her people, and some part of what she had done had made Brandon feel betrayed in a way Gavin still didn't fully understand. He felt as if he probably should try to make sense of it, though, because he was working with Brandon and truly trying to help the El'aras.

"Stay on the dragon, and circle it closer. But do not converge if the ground starts to open," Gavin said.

"You really think the ground is going to open?"

"Yes."

Gavin jumped off the side of the dragon. He never lost sight of the fact that jumping off a dragon that was in the air was a ridiculous thing to do. He was basically flying. He didn't even need the dragon all the time anymore, as he could travel with the lightning pattern, though the dragon did make it easier because he didn't have to sustain any of the sacred patterns as he traveled.

He dropped toward the ground and summoned the bralinath power, forming it into a pair of blades. They were his weapons now. They had shifted the same way his power had, now becoming a pair of stone blades, and they radiated a sort of energy that Gavin still wasn't entirely sure how to describe.

When he landed, he did so with a soft thud. The ground around him rippled, and then it started to move. But that rippling and the way he felt it beneath his boots told him all he needed to know.

Imogen landed next to him, slender blade unsheathed, which was rare these days. Her black hair floated in the wind, and a dark cloak hung on her shoulders. She looked regal, but she also looked ready to fight. She was holding on to her tree pattern. Gavin had never learned what kind of tree she was using, but at this point, he suspected that it didn't make much of a difference, as the tree itself wasn't the key.

Well, it was the key to the person who made the tree, but it wasn't necessarily the key to the power. Any tree would work, though familiarity allowed someone to use one that seemed to be more potent for them.

"What do we have going on here?" Imogen asked. "I'd detected something, and Gasper had been following it, but we had not known that it was moving like this."

"But not moving as openly as it had been before," Gavin said. "And this is different, isn't it?"

Imogen nodded. "It's different in that in the past, when they tried to lunge through, they were using something that would penetrate the stone, piercing and creating a fracture."

Gavin thought that was a good description. It was a fracture he was still trying to make sense of, as the kind of power that was coming through and the way it was coming through would change as it fractured.

"I don't know if this is going to be the same as what we dealt with already," he said.

Imogen looked over. "You understand what that means, then?"

He still didn't know who was responsible for granting Anna power, or who had sent the creatures across before. There had to be someone, though.

"We know there's something on the other side," Gavin said. "Either that, or the order is responsible for it."

"But you haven't studied," Imogen said.

Maybe that was what Gavin needed to be doing. He had hesitated, partly because of the danger to him, and partly because every time they had transitioned back to the other realm, monsters had immediately converged upon them.

He told himself that he wanted mastery over his own power to keep them safe, but it was not only that. It was also the fact that when he went over, Alana wanted to go with him. She seemed to know when he made that transition, and she always challenged him on why he didn't bring her with him. She was still trying to make sense of what had happened to her and the way she herself had started to shift, becoming who she had been before and gradually regaining some of her memories. Because of those changes, he felt as if he needed to bring her with him, but he also felt this strange desire to protect her. It was how he had felt about her from the very beginning.

Yet she was competent with her skill, and more than that, in the other realm she had power that Gavin didn't even understand. He had to find a way to trust that she would be safe.

He breathed out heavily, and then he turned, focusing on the rippling of the ground.

The ground started to shimmer, and he pushed downward using his tree pattern. It was bralinath, but it was bralinath infused with something else. Gavin could feel that rippling beneath him, adding to the energy that was there, but it was taking from the other realm. He began to link with his bralinath tree, and he began to fuse it all together, trying to seal off the danger that was attempting to come through.

The rippling shifted.

Then it stopped.

He hesitated, and he looked over to see Gaspar jumping down from the back of a renral, then hurrying toward them. Brandon followed, diving toward the ground from the dragon and, at the last minute, shifting into Petals on the Wind, and he eventually floated to a stop.

“Well?” Gaspar asked as he approached. “We got something different, but it’s big. I can feel it. And the enchantments”—he held up his wrists, showing a unique metallic band with a giant ring on one and a narrow woven gold band on the other—“are telling me that whatever is here is starting to push again. I can feel it here.”

“We have a couple of options,” Gavin said, looking around at the others. “We can wait until it comes through...” The ground continued to tremble, but it wasn’t trembling quite as much as it had been before, only rumbling in a way that left him feeling that power, making him wonder if there was going to be something there that might try to push inward. “Or we go over and we deal with what it is. This is probably going to be different than what we’ve encountered before, which makes it dangerous.”

“I thought you were the Chain Breaker,” Brandon said. “I thought danger was what you pursued.”

Gavin didn’t have a chance to respond to the comment.

A sudden burst of power crackled under his feet.

He grabbed the others, wrapping them in power, and shifted. It was a quick use of folding, and it hurriedly carried them to the other side. As they emerged, Gavin recognized the power starting to swell, but he didn’t see any sort of spike like he’d seen in the past. In fact, he didn’t see anything other than a bleak gray landscape and...

“What is that?” Gaspar asked.

Something moved toward them—and it was moving quickly. Gavin hesitated for a moment, and then he used his newfound ability to add to his tree. As he did, he could feel some part of it starting to tremble, leaving him with a faint

energy, but it was one he could tell was moving away from him.

“We have a fight coming,” he said. “Not the spike creatures.”

“Then what is it?” Imogen asked.

Gaspar grabbed something out of his pocket, slipped it on his finger, and squinted. It was an enchanted ring, probably one for eyesight.

“Some sort of a bird?” Gaspar glanced over to Imogen. “Looks a little bit like a renral, but not quite the same.”

“Renral?” Gavin said. “They wouldn’t be using renral.”

Gaspar shrugged. “Can’t say I know. All I can tell you is that it’s hurtling toward us.”

Whatever it was, Gavin could feel it heading straight at them.

He summoned the blades, but then he tried something else—he focused on the tree pattern. That allowed him to detect the energy here much more readily. But he had to do more. He had to use the spike energy that was within him, that connected him to this place.

He could feel something.

And then he understood. The creatures exploded power from themselves.

“I do not believe my connection to the sacred patterns is going to be enough to stop them,” Imogen said.

Gaspar had grabbed several other enchantments. Brandon was holding on to his tree pattern, though Gavin didn’t know if he knew how to do it well enough to secure himself. He doubted it, though. And if Imogen wasn’t confident in her skills, that left only Gavin to fight.

The creatures were enormous. They looked somewhat like the renral, he agreed, with long, sharp beaks, but their bodies were wider. Weirder still was the fact that on the back of each was what looked like some sort of vent that burst power

upward. That power was causing the trembling on the other side. That was what was threatening to rupture through to their realm.

Strange that they were moving so quickly. It didn't seem to be moving that quickly on the other side.

Why was he seeing it like that here?

He pushed, and then he felt spikes shooting from his tree.

That was an odd technique. He had never managed to do that.

The energy up ahead shifted.

Gavin pushed. Again, he felt the spikes erupting.

Each time he did it, he began to detect the shifting of energy, and he felt that power as it exploded away from him. The power left him hesitating and focusing on what he could feel, and then the spikes struck the nearest creature, which shrieked.

A gust of wind blasted him. It felt almost as if the vented power had changed to angle toward him and the others with him. But he was prepared, still holding on to his tree pattern. Even so, some of that power had gotten past Gavin's barriers. He could feel it.

At least, he felt it for a moment, until Imogen seemed to fortify her own protections and seal off whatever it was that these creatures were doing. With it, she shielded him and the others from the attack. Thankfully, the attack eventually eased, and he no longer felt the full brunt of it.

Gavin shot outward with his spikes again. They struck the closest creature, and it let out a shriek too. The creature veered off to the side to avoid them, but not in time. One of its long leathery wings clipped Imogen's tree.

Imogen grunted, and then she slid back. It was barely more than a step, but Gavin stared as it happened. He had never seen her staggered by an attack like that. He was surprised that anything could disrupt her tree pattern. She stabilized quickly,

securing herself, but that momentary distraction still startled him.

Then Brandon was there, adding his own tree, and Gavin could practically see the power blooming, the pale white light merging with the energy of Imogen's patterns.

"I can help," Brandon offered.

Together, they continued to hold on to their tree patterns.

Then the creatures screeched again as Gavin sent another burst of power outward.

"We haven't seen those before," Gaspar said. He shifted some of the enchantments on his wrists, almost as if testing whether he needed to grab several more. "Think we have to worry about them?"

"Oh, we have to worry about them," Gavin said, looking over to Imogen, "but I think we scared them away. For now."

"What happens when they return?" Gaspar asked.

Gavin didn't have a good answer. At this point, the only thing he could say was that he still couldn't help but worry about all the different powers that were out there and all the different things they had faced, and yet he also didn't know if there was going to be anything more that they would have to deal with. The strange energy they had encountered seemed like it was beyond anything he had seen before.

And so he didn't say anything.

He gathered the rest of them together and pulled them toward him. And then, with a surge of energy, he folded them back.

CHAPTER THREE

IMOGEN

Imogen Inaratha, First of the Blade, floated.

It was peaceful for her to float like this, feeling as if she was just hovering in the air, using one of the sacred patterns to remain aloft, with no real worries as she surveyed everything below her. She found it to be relaxing most days. There were times when it was not, times when she felt as if there were aspects of the hovering that were less than relaxing because of *what* she saw, but most of the time, she felt a measure of peace and comfort.

Yoran stretched down below. She could feel an energy to the city, something that seemed to emanate all around her. The enchantments and sorcery that had been added to protect the city carried power, but what she was feeling was more than that.

Her people were arranged along the boundary of Yoran. It was unusual for them to be situated that way, especially for the Leier who had once either been nomadic or settled in small villages. None of their people had ever stayed in a place as large as this, but there was also something quite right about it. She felt at home here in a way she once would have been surprised by. This was her place, and she would do whatever it took to protect it.

Her people had stationed themselves in a circle around the city. It was part of the protections she had arranged to ensure that Yoran was as secured as the Leier and the shamans could make it. And they *would* ensure that it was fully secured.

Gavin was aware of how she had positioned her people, but she wondered if he understood just what she intended as she had done it. The placement of her people had created something not that dissimilar to a sacred pattern, tied in a way to the flows of power that came when a sacred pattern was formed. Each person could place the Tree Stands in the Forest pattern, and each person would be able to draw upon considerable power—a power that was so vastly different than other powers that were found in this world. It was not the same as sorcery, though often felt much the same. She thought it provided another measure of protection that wasn't always offered by the sorcerers and enchanters in the city. It was something she found herself drawn to more and more lately, as if with each passing day, having an alternative type of protection granted her something that she would never have imagined she would've needed.

And yet, it *was* needed.

In the distance, Gavin's massive dragon circled. The creature was a marvel of enchanted power. She wasn't entirely sure how such a thing was even possible, but what she did know was that something about that creature had continually changed. She wondered if Gavin was aware of it. These days, based on what she saw of the creature and the way it was able to fly, she thought it seemed to be channeling something beyond what it had in the past. No longer did it seem as if it were tied to the power of the Chain Breaker, though she wasn't *quite* sure how. Attempts to understand what and how had eluded her. The only thing that was clear to Imogen was that it was evolving—like all of them, she supposed.

Why should the enchantment, the creature that had been crafted by Alana herself, be so different than her, or Gavin?

Imogen shifted on Petals on the Wind to circle around the city. She identified several of her people, and she knew that they were also aware of her presence. Almost all of them were attuned to the possible dangers that would be found on the ground and in the air. They stretched their awareness, and together they formed something of a forest around Yoran.

She smiled at that. She never would have considered such a thing even possible. Her people had changed so much, not just her. They were protecting—and protected—in ways they had not before. And she wondered how much of that change was something Benji had anticipated.

At the thought of the Porapeth, she felt a stir deep inside her. She still wasn't so sure about the connection she had to the Porapeth fragment, only that he lingered there within her.

He flowed out from her in faint silvery lines that stretched beyond her. He didn't take any form yet, as if waiting for her permission. "Are you going to let me out, First?"

Imogen debated. There was a way of containing him, which was a simple matter most of the time. All she had to do was focus on the tree pattern and hold him inside. But then again, if she did that, she suspected that she would lose something. Some of it was losing an aspect of what Benji could offer her, but some of it was losing the connection she had with him. And she hadn't used that connection nearly as often as she had before.

She released the internal barricade she was holding. She had control over it, so it was easy to allow those threads of the connection to Benji to flow and for the fragment to emerge.

He formed in front of her. He was still indistinct, but over time, she had found that she could see more details to him. Elements of those details were still fuzzy from time to time, but mostly, he was just Benji. He was no different than he had been in life, perhaps just a little less cantankerous.

"What do you need now?" he asked.

"Need?" Imogen spun in the air, continuing to float. "I'm not so sure there is a need."

She felt as much as she heard his laughter, something that sounded almost musical.

"I suppose that's true enough," he said. "You have taken to becoming more pensive these days."

"Reflective," Imogen said. "Not pensive."

“Aren’t they the same?”

“Not at all.”

Benji hovered. Then again, in his current fragmented form, he could hover regardless of what she did. She didn’t have to use the sacred pattern to hold him in the air, and she doubted that he needed to use any power to stay up either.

She didn’t know what kind of power he had in this form. Still some hint of the Porapeth gifts, she assumed, though she wondered what that might be.

“I like it up here,” Benji said after a moment.

“Because it reminds you of the mountains?”

“That’s why we chose those places,” he said. “At least, that’s what I think. Much of that time is still difficult to remember.”

She glanced over. Benji seemed to have gone a little more hazy than he had been moments before. Some of the silver that had formed his body had faded. He became wispy, almost like a cloud.

“You remember it?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” he said. “I keep wondering why I don’t just leave.”

Leave. He meant leaving *her*. She had wondered when he would decide on that—and honestly, she feared it. She often thought she still needed him.

“I think that you could,” she said.

“I think I could as well,” he said. “I remember what it was like.”

“When you went into the clouds? Or into the sky?”

He laughed, and when he did, there was the Benji of old again. “The ancient warriors depart to look down upon the living, sitting in the night sky as they keep their vigilant guard.” He let out another little laugh. “Such great stories, aren’t they? Our people were so easy to confuse.”

“Why did you want to confuse them?”

“I never wanted to. We wanted to lead, but we couldn’t just share everything that we knew. We couldn’t just share everything that we *were*.”

“Because it would be too much?” Imogen frowned. “I still don’t understand why it took until now for somebody to be able to use your abilities.”

“We have trained your people—my people? I don’t even know anymore—in the sacred patterns for generations,” he said. “You were the first one to have come to understand the purpose behind them, and to have a measure of control over them.”

“Have you ever considered why?”

“Often,” he said.

“Now?” she asked.

Benji seemed to flicker, and there was a strange stir inside her. “I don’t think of it much any longer.”

“What happens when you aren’t here?”

She hadn’t asked these questions before. Maybe she should have. He was there as a part of her, but also *not* as a part of her. She wasn’t sure what that meant for him. Or for her, if she was honest.

There had been a measure of reassurance in having him there. She knew she could always ask him questions. She could learn from him. She could use what he knew, and she had been.

What would happen when she no longer had him to lean on?

“I’m aware,” he said. “And not. Does that make much sense?”

“I suppose it does. Is it like dreaming?”

“I think so. I don’t remember dreaming. Do Porapeth dream?”

Imogen snorted. When she did, she lost a bit of control over the sacred pattern. Not a lot, just enough that she shifted in her position for only a moment. “I don’t know. Do they?”

“I would imagine that all creatures dream. Even those that aren’t...” He trailed off.

Imogen looked over, wondering what he was going to say, and he stopped himself from finishing.

“Even those that what?” she asked.

Benji frowned. His features were barely distinct enough for Imogen to make out.

“I don’t even know,” he said. “Isn’t that a thing?”

She breathed out heavily. Each time that she talked to Benji, he had a harder time remembering. She worried that he was losing some aspect of his fragmented self. She feared that eventually he would lose all of himself, and she would lose the connection to the Porapeth altogether.

Maybe that was why she didn’t reach for him often.

She didn’t know what would happen when he was gone. Would it be a problem? It wasn’t as if she relied on Benji, but she appreciated his insight and his guidance. There weren’t many people in this world who challenged her the way he did. Benji was one-of-a-kind. Without him...

Well, without him, she still had Gavin and Gaspar, but the list beyond that was not very long.

“Did you call me for a reason?” Benji asked.

Imogen sighed, looking down. “I didn’t recall calling you at all, and I think that most of it was just you wanting to come out.”

“Maybe I did.” He fortified his form for a moment. “It gets confining in there with you, First.”

“Does it really?”

“Probably. Not that I know. I don’t remember anything. It’s just all sort of hazy.”

“And hazy is bad?”

“Hazy is just hazy,” he said. “That’s all it is.”

She chuckled. “Our people are safe. I suppose maybe that’s what I was thinking about when I called to you.”

“See? You were calling to me.”

“Well, I was *thinking* about you.”

“Isn’t thinking the same as calling?”

“Not exactly,” Imogen said.

She was staring down below. There was movement, and she could feel an occasional burst of power. Though it was faint, it came steadily, and occasionally with a bit of force.

“It’s a strange thing, isn’t it?” he said. “We live such difficult lives. Or your people do. Mine are gone.”

She laughed again, careful now to make sure she didn’t lose control over the sacred pattern.

“And so many were forced to live such challenging lives in order to find the understanding of the sacred patterns,” Benji said. “That’s what we saw. Challenge strengthens. It hardens. It...” He hesitated, as if he didn’t quite know the answer.

“It was never necessary,” Imogen suggested.

“Maybe it was to change your people,” he said.

“Change them for what purpose?”

Benji was quiet for a while. “I don’t know. Maybe change them so they can find a way to defend others. Having a purpose is its own purpose, isn’t it?”

“You sound pretty circular there,” she said.

“Well, I’m dead, so I suppose I have every right to be circular.”

Imogen snorted. “Dead still doesn’t change you, does it?”

“You’ll be lucky when you’re a fragment. Lucky to stay here and not dispersed into the ether.”

It was the first time Benji had talked about that with her.

“Do you know what it’s like to be dispersed?” Imogen asked.

She was careful with her question, partly because she didn’t have answers to that, and also because she was curious as to how much Benji might know.

Maybe nothing.

Maybe all.

But she still had questions about fragments. Given what the order had done with the fragments and how they had been collecting them, intending to use them for... Well, Imogen still wasn’t entirely sure what they intended to use them for, only that they had been attempting to gather the fragments for some unknown reason. Gavin hadn’t much of an idea either. Neither did that sorcerer friend of his who had her own fragment, which made it all the more challenging for Imogen.

She had never even considered the possibility that all fragments could have been gathered. But then, given her experience with the Sul’toral, she should have. There was no reason that such things could not have been gathered. No reason that such things should not have been.

And more advanced peoples, as Benji had once referred to them, already had a mechanism in place to handle their fragments.

Like the El’aras.

They took their fragments and turned them into trees. It was lovely, but also dangerous. That was something Gavin had struggled with ever since learning about what he was, the connections he had to the past, and how that allowed him to understand the future.

What of others?

The sorcerers were different than the El’aras. All Imogen had to think about was that the sorcerers did not draw enough power through their fragments to need such planning, unless they were as powerful as a Sul’toral.

“There you go again, First,” Benji said. “Getting lost in thought and forgetting about me. Maybe I should just go back into my little hiding place.”

“Maybe you should,” she said, smiling at him. “I imagine it’s warm and cozy in there.”

“You do realize that you’re talking about me going inside you.”

“You’re quite indistinct inside me,” Imogen said.

“And I’m a part of you now.” When he said it, he sounded almost like the old Benji. That wasn’t always there these days.

“Have you always been?” she asked. It was a genuine question, and one that she did not have a real answer to.

“I think...” As he trailed off, she sensed him frowning, though he didn’t actually frown. “I think that there was always something, but I don’t know what that something was. Isn’t that a thing?”

“Isn’t it?” she asked.

They continued to hover. After a while, she sensed something from Benji. Weakness, perhaps. And she knew he couldn’t—and shouldn’t—stay, as there was a danger in him losing all of what remained. Maybe he lost part of him the longer he stayed with her.

“You don’t need me, so I’m going to leave again,” he said.

“Thank you, Benji.”

“Don’t thank me. Just... use me.”

“Use?” That sounded too much like what she’d been thinking.

“You know, the gift I gave you. Use it. Don’t abandon it.”

“I use it,” she said. What she didn’t say, and what she wondered whether she even needed to say, was that she feared using him. Feared that doing so would *drain* him.

He started laughing, and again there was that same musical quality to his voice that he’d always had. “Do you? It seems to

me that you have started to abandon that side of yourself. You've been so focused on honing the sacred patterns so that you can become the fighter you think you need to be, but you ignore the other gift I gave you. And to a certain extent, I think it's the greatest gift I gave you."

She stared at him, and as she did, she tried to find the possibilities that he created. That was what he was going on about, after all. He wanted her to use those possibilities, because what he showed her would give her something she couldn't get any other way.

"I still use it," she said. "But there are limitations."

"Because you place them on yourself."

"I don't."

"You do, and once you see that you do, you will understand that it is not necessary." He let out another laugh. "And don't ask me for the answers. This is not that kind of test."

She snickered. "A test? You're still testing me?"

"Well, I'm still *teaching* you, aren't I? So why shouldn't I still test you?"

She frowned at that. Why shouldn't he?

Benji had taught her much in life. He had taught her much in death too. She wondered what it would be like if she no longer had him with her. Maybe she shouldn't be thinking about that, though. Maybe what she needed to do was to start planning for that inevitability. Each time he came out, some part of him seemed a little different. Perhaps weaker.

Imogen wasn't sure if that was what it was or if there was some other aspect to it that she could find, but whatever it was, when he returned the next time, she sensed the change. It wasn't obvious, just subtle changes. Had she not known Benji as well as she had, she wasn't sure she would have even known.

"I'll start practicing with it," she said, looking for the lines of possibility. Would that use the remaining power of the

fragment? If so, using the gift would spend the gift, and she wasn't sure she was ready to do that.

She stared down at her people positioned below, and a thousand different lines of possibilities became visible to her. That was Benji's influence, she knew. She hadn't attempted to see all that. All of them were silvery strands, thin filaments, and it became almost overwhelming if she stared too long. But then again, she knew that she didn't have to stare. If she let her eyes lose focus, and if she just let her mind wander a bit, she could find those possibilities, and she could see what she was intending to find out. That was the Porapeth technique. At least, that was something she suspected was the Porapeth technique, something she had gained from Benji himself.

And as she stared, she felt... Honestly, Imogen wasn't exactly sure what she felt, only that there was a sense of energy.

"See? You still don't know how to use it as well as you should," he said.

"I know how to use it when it matters," she said.

"You use it when you fight, but that isn't the gift. You need to use it to lead. To guide. To influence."

"And to sneak around, not letting others know what you're doing?"

Benji chuckled. "As if that is so bad. How do you think we managed to survive as long as we did?"

"I still don't even know," she said. "You claim that you were fighting, but we both know that wasn't true."

"We didn't fight openly. You have to fight quietly. You should know that, First."

She stared off into the distance. *Fight*. Her fighting days seemed to be trailing off. The threats had been less and less. At least, the threats in this realm were, to the point where she no longer felt like she had to worry about the dangers that were here. The sorcerers were not quite the danger they once had been. They were an ally more than anything else, and she appreciated that. Some of her people still struggled with the

idea that sorcerers could be an ally at all, especially given the interactions they'd had with magic over the years, but Imogen had made a point of trying to help them see the truth, including what role the sorcerers might be able to have for them. And because the shamans had wanted a rapport with the Society, the relationship between them had grown increasingly simplistic. Her people trusted the shamans, so they permitted the shamans to do what they wanted.

“Lead and guide,” Benji said. “And find how *not* to fight.”

Imogen nodded. “I’ll try, and I will talk with you soon.”

“Don’t make promises you don’t intend to keep.”

He swirled, that silver essence beginning to flow deeper into her. She felt him like a warm energy that moved through her. The sensation was strange. When he was separate from her, she was aware of him as a distinct entity. When he was inside her, it was just a warmth. Occasionally, his voice would pop up in her mind, but that did not happen often these days.

She wondered why that was, and whether there was more he could still show her. And once again, she wondered—and worried—about what would happen when he was gone.

She focused on him, but his sense was vague and faded.

Benji was right. She couldn’t keep that promise. She didn’t intend to. She no longer wanted to risk the possibility of him dwindling. Not until she knew she wouldn’t need his guidance any longer.

But would she ever reach that point?

Imogen was the First. The general. She was expected to know these things. And yet, why was it that she still felt like there were questions? Why was it that she still felt like she was the student and not always the master?

She pushed those thoughts aside, noticing several different lines of possibilities below, all converging. All guiding her. All telling her that there was something she could focus on.

It was time for her to do that, so she would. She would be the First.

And then...

She didn't know what would come next. Maybe Benji would be gone.

Was she ready to lead alone, without the Porapeth's guidance?

Maybe she had to truly be the First—the way Benji wanted her to be.

She only hoped that there would be an opportunity for her to find what she wanted later. And she hoped that Benji would be there when she needed him.

Because she feared that she would definitely need him at least one more time.

CHAPTER FOUR

The inside of the fortress was brightly lit. The energy all around Gavin gave him a sense of relief, as it left him feeling the power that existed. There was something about it that was almost comforting, or at least it should be almost comforting, though he wasn't quite sure why he felt that way. Maybe it was just the fact that everything here was tied to the enchanters, and he had a strong connection to them and everything they had done. Whatever it was, he felt that power as it bloomed around him, and it seemed as if some part of it was trying to comfort him.

He waited until Zella joined him. She was dressed in a green gown, her youthful face a sharp contrast to eyes that flashed briefly as she saw him. She was flanked by two enchanters Gavin didn't know. Both of them were younger, probably in their late teens, which surprised him, though perhaps it shouldn't. He knew that the enchanters and sorcerers had started a school in Yoran to teach enchanting techniques and demonstrate the power that existed in the world. Gavin should not be caught off guard by the fact that Zella had a hand in it, though as far as he had known, she had wanted to fulfill her role on the council and had felt she was going to be too busy to do anything with the school.

She frowned for a moment, then bowed her head to him. "Gavin Lorren. I had not expected to see you so soon."

He snorted. "So soon?"

"Well, maybe it isn't so soon. It's just that there was a time when you didn't visit nearly so often."

“I think that our interests and our needs these days are aligned quite differently,” Gavin said.

Her chuckle sounded almost melodic, but it was definitely controlled, almost regal in a way. Then again, in this place, Zella was the queen.

She flicked her wrist, and the two other enchanters drifted away from her, going to stand near the wall.

“Students?” Gavin asked.

“Upper-level students,” she said, and she leaned close to Gavin. “Apparently I’m supposed to teach them techniques on how to detect the purposes of enchantments. It is something that you’re born with, as I have told you.”

“Of course,” he said.

“They consider it a practical experience.” She shook her head. “As if they can’t get that practical experience at the school themselves.”

“I’m sure they feel there is value in having you teach.” Gavin stifled a smile as he said it, since he had a pretty good idea as to why the students were sent to the fortress, and to Zella in particular.

She may have resisted being part of the school, but she was still a valued enchanter, and she had knowledge and experience that few others had. Not only that, but she had been the reason that the enchanters had survived in Yoran for as long as they had.

“That doesn’t change the fact that I do not care for these games,” Zella said.

Gavin snickered. “I’m sure they don’t see them as games. I’m sure they trust that you will give them every opportunity they need, and that you will ensure they’re treated with the utmost respect.”

She breathed out heavily, and then she shook her head. “I do not need you trying to convince me of what they intend,” she said, waving her hand at him.

“Then I won’t,” he said. “I just wanted to talk to you about enchantments.”

“Oh,” she said, and her expression shifted. Gone was some of the irritation that had been in her eyes, and now there was some of the more familiar curiosity that he was accustomed to with Zella.

“Have you made any headway?” he asked.

“I think we have,” she said.

She motioned for him to follow, and the other students trailed behind them both, though they looked as if they weren’t sure what to make of Gavin or their position with them.

“Would it be easier if I sent them away?” she asked, looking over to him.

“Not for me,” he said.

She let out a deep sigh. “You know, you could just say yes.”

He chuckled. “And then who would we be helping? We need the enchanters and the sorcerers, and now other magic users, to really be equipped to handle what we’re dealing with. This isn’t the same sort of threat as what we faced when we were first trying to protect the city,” he said.

“No,” she said, “I suppose that is true enough. And I know I need to be more tolerant”—she glanced in the direction of the students—“and yet, if they send these new students to me every month, I just find myself...”

She shook her head as she reached a staircase, then glided down.

Gavin found himself amused at Zella’s frustrations, and though he really shouldn’t, he wanted to laugh. Zella was so composed most of the time. Maybe she still was, and all this was some sort of an act, but at this point, he wasn’t going to comment.

By the time he got to the bottom of the stairs, she was waiting for him. “We had to do most of the work down in this level,” she said. “The protections are a little better here.”

“I’m sure they are,” he said.

“I mean, we did place most of these ourselves, though some were residual from when the Captain was here.”

Gavin snorted. He had almost forgotten about the Captain. The man’s influence on Yoran felt like it had been impossibly long ago. In real-world time, it really hadn’t been that long, but in terms of everything that had happened to the city and around Gavin, he couldn’t help but feel as if those events had taken place in another lifetime. He had certainly been a different person then.

“Do you need any help?” he asked.

Zella paused, and then she locked eyes with him. “We have all the help we need. And it’s not just enchanters.”

She motioned to the walls, and Gavin studied them. Sorcery spells were embedded in the walls. He didn’t know the full details of the fortress all that well, but he had walked through it, and he was familiar with some of the structure. He didn’t remember seeing sorcery quite like that. Those spells had not been there before. Metal was mixed into the sorcery, and as he stared, he marveled at the complexity of all of it.

“The sorcerers,” he whispered.

Zella nodded. “Sorcerers, yes, but also the Leier. Or at least their shamans. The Leier are trying to do something, but I’m not sure it’s going to work.”

“What are they trying to do?”

“Well, you know that they have their patterns,” she said. Gavin nodded. “They are working with their shamans to see whether they might be able to use those patterns to modify them, as it were.”

“They’re trying to use the patterns as spells,” he said.

“Something along those lines.”

Gavin didn’t know why he was surprised by that. Imogen was a practical person, and he knew she was attempting to do things no other Leier had done. The Leier had always feared

magic, to the point where they had been hesitant to even use it, but now...

Now he couldn't help but wonder if perhaps the way the Leier were operating was even more different than he had anticipated.

"I'll talk to Imogen about that," he said.

"You should not stop them," Zella said.

"I don't intend to stop them. I intend to offer whatever help I can. I have a different understanding of the Leier patterns than they do."

"Do you think your understanding is better than what they have learned?"

"Not better. Just different," Gavin said. "I learned it through a different technique, and I thought perhaps that would help them."

Zella nodded. "Perhaps that will."

She guided him toward the door, and Gavin expected her to take them into some sort of storeroom, but instead, there was another series of stairs that led them down. As he descended the steps, he had the distinct sense of even more power building around him. There weren't as many enchanted lanterns on the walls, and most of the light illuminating the stairs now seemed to be coming from several different enchantments and sorcery spells embedded into the walls. By the time they reached the bottom landing, he had felt the buildup of power all around him, and a sense of pressure squeezed him.

Zella pushed open another door.

Energy emanated from the other side.

Whatever it was felt secure to him. It was enchanted, sorcery protected, and maybe even something else he wasn't exactly sure of. Could that be El'aras magic?

He would be surprised if Zella was working with any of the El'aras, but then maybe he shouldn't be. Some of the El'aras had returned to Yoran, and given what Anna had done,

many of them wanted to prove themselves and were far more accommodating of the rest of the people in the city.

“This place is where we do most of the work,” she said.

Gavin stepped into the enchanters’ workshop. There had to be a dozen or more people here, and all of them were working on different items. Many of them were focused on their own projects, though some worked in pairs, and one group stood over a large tube that they were placing different enchantments on.

“Everything here is potentially dangerous,” Zella said. “As you instructed us to make.”

“As *I* instructed?” Gavin asked.

She turned to him, and she shrugged slightly. “We will not deny the influence that you have.”

He breathed out. He shouldn’t deny it either. Everything here was dangerous, but it was dangerous for a purpose. They needed different types of protections than they had before. Gavin had been working with the enchanters, trying to help them understand the various techniques they might need to use, yet he also wasn’t even sure that what he showed them and what they could do would make much of a difference with what they were dealing with. He had been focusing on it, and he had been attempting to see if there might be some other way he would add power to make different enchantments, but so far, they hadn’t been able to do anything all that useful. He felt as if there had to be a way for him to do more than what he had done so far.

Zella led him to another doorway. Gavin noticed the markings on the door, and he could feel the pressure against him.

She motioned to the door. “This is where the work is happening that you are particularly interested in. I would open it, but I’m afraid that if I do so, it might disrupt what they’re doing on the other side. I have our most dedicated and most curious enchanters working in there.”

“Thank you,” he said. “But I’m not sure we’ve been able to generate anything of much use.”

She opened a cabinet and rifled through it until she pulled out a curved horn. She handed it to Gavin.

He looked down. “This?”

“It is an early attempt. You said we could be creative, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“Well, this is creative. The horn apparently uses sound waves to augment the kind of power that was already present in that spike. To be honest, I’m not clear on how it works, as we haven’t been willing to test it here.”

Gavin held it up, and then Zella nodded. He slipped the horn into his pocket. “As much as we can, we need to try to understand the power that’s in those spikes.”

“Then we need an additional supply,” she said.

He arched a brow. “You’ve already started to work through all of them?”

“As many as we have. And I think we need more.” She shrugged. “The more you give us, the more opportunities we have to study, and the more we will be able to make sense of the power that’s within them.”

“I will see what I can do,” he said.

She nodded. “Excellent. And that’s not all.”

She reached into the cabinet and grabbed what looked like a small ball of stone or bone. The number of enchantments worked on the surface of it was incredible. The tiny, tidy writing was too fine for him to make much of it until he fortified his eyesight with his core reserves. Once he did, he recognized that the writing encircled the entirety of the object, almost as if it were layered on top of the enchantments.

“This is a particularly dangerous one,” Zella said, “but it should be able to get you out of a precarious situation. At least, that’s what the man who made it promised me.”

“So it’s an explosive.”

“Yes. From what we understand, the power inside allows things to modify or augment. And given the technique used, the maker thought the shrapnel that this produces would allow us to modify that as well.”

As Gavin held on to the ball, he could feel the energy inside it, even though he wasn’t quite sure what it was. He was also nervous about gripping it too tightly. If there was an explosive element to it, it was not the kind of thing he wanted to hold very long in case it was too dangerous for him to.

“May I take this one?” he asked.

“You can take any of these,” she said. “I don’t think most of them would be safe for us to use here.”

“Besides, you have plenty of other enchantments you can use.”

She nodded. “Plenty.”

“I’ll see what I can do about gathering more items.”

“Does that mean that you intend to bring Alana with you?”

He sighed. “I think she needs to go. And to be honest, I don’t know if I can keep her from that place. That’s her home, at least as much as anything is her home.”

Zella was quiet for a moment. “I’ve been troubled about that, Gavin. I haven’t said anything, since I am not entirely sure it’s my place to say anything, but I have been troubled, nonetheless. I understand it is her home, and I understand that she is not what we thought her to be. Even *who* we thought her to be.” From the look on her face, Gavin could tell that this troubled her, and she wasn’t quite sure what to say or how to say it. “But that doesn’t mean she should not be treated with compassion.”

“I intend to treat her with compassion,” he said.

“I know you do. But whatever is there, and whatever exists on the other side, may not.”

Gavin nodded in understanding. “I will ensure that whatever is there is controlled.”

“I hope so,” she said. “Because the girl is powerful. We have seen it. But she’s also still innocent. I have no idea what she experienced, and I have no idea what memories she might have lost and what might need to be unlocked, but it seems to me that it is something that needs to be done carefully, and something that needs to be done compassionately. If she finds information that she is not pleased with...”

Gavin hadn’t even considered that possibility. He had been focusing more on the possibility that Alana was just powerful, so he had not thought about the prospect that what she might find, and who she might find, may not be what she wanted to.

“I know someone who might be able to help with that,” he said.

Eva had lost her memories somehow. She could help Alana, he suspected, though he wondered what she might be able to offer to Alana, if anything. Eva was powerful in her own way, but she wasn’t necessarily empathetic.

He breathed out, and then he looked around. “Do you have anything else I might be able to use?”

“Nothing else is quite as ready as these,” Zella said, “but I have some more standard enchantments. That is, if you would like them.”

“You know me. I’m always interested in different enchantments.”

“Then why don’t we go through them?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Gavin ransacked Zella's entire supply of enchantments. He felt a little guilty, though not completely. There was a part of him that wondered if maybe he should offer some sort of compensation, but he knew that Zella and the other enchanters were not hurting for coin. They could sell many of these enchantments at the market that had started to operate in Yoran, though not any of the dangerous ones.

He made his way out of the enchanters' workshop and found Alana's room. It was still decorated the same way she had it when she was younger, or at least when Gavin had thought she was younger. He was no longer even sure whether to call her young, or whether she was as youthful as he had believed. Then again, that youthfulness still suited her.

The butterflies that flitted around her room were all paper enchantments folded by Alana and then powered by Gavin's additional ability. The same thing had happened with the dragon, to a certain extent. The dragon had started off as one of Alana's enchantments, and through Gavin's modifications, it had become more.

Power from two realms.

Maybe that mattered, or maybe it didn't. It was something to consider, at any rate.

He stood in the doorway of Alana's room and continued watching the butterflies. Someone cleared their throat behind him, and he spun to see Alana standing there with her arms crossed.

She looked more mature than she ever had, but at the same time, she also still had a youthful appearance to her and could have passed for anywhere between twelve and twenty-two. Whenever they folded to the other side, she looked much older than that, though he had never really figured out how old she was. Gavin wasn't even sure if he would be able to. Regardless of her age, the only thing he knew with any real certainty was that she was powerful, and the kind of power she had was so unique compared to what the rest of them could do.

"It's about time you came looking for me," she said.

"I've been making sure there hasn't been any sort of danger threatening us," Gavin said.

"You've been excluding me."

"Not intentionally."

"So unintentionally?"

"I'm not trying to upset you," he said.

She flicked her gaze past him. "Well, if you *aren't* trying to upset me, then maybe you can make me some more of those," she said, motioning toward the butterflies. "Because I quite enjoy them."

"I would be happy to help you with as many of those as you'd like."

"Good. Now, when are we going?"

"Well, we've been having some difficulty. Every time we go over, we're swarmed by monsters."

"Is it because you're chasing down particular types of power?" she asked.

"It's possible."

"And because you're choosing those places to transition? You don't have to. You know that there are other places you can go where you're stronger."

"That might also be right," Gavin said.

"So. The question remains: When are we going? Now?"

There was an eagerness to her, and he wasn't sure if it was the right time, but he also didn't know if she would wait if he tried to delay. Gavin suspected that Alana could fold herself across, though she had yet to do it. If he waited too long, she might go on her own.

"I have some protections that Zella provided me, and..." He thought about Gaspar and Imogen, and how they might react if they knew that he was going without them. But then again, they probably would understand. "We have to let the others know."

"Of course," she said, "and give Gaspar a chance to talk you out of letting me go."

"I'm not going to give him a chance to talk me out of anything," Gavin said.

"I know that he's been partly responsible for it. He's trying to protect me, the same way you're trying to protect me."

She straightened, and it seemed like she grew a little taller, which was possible with Alana given the power she possessed. She had a way of shifting things, the same way that Gavin now had a way of shifting things, and he couldn't help but feel as if she was using that to augment herself, and maybe even change some part of herself so that she could grow and become something more.

She locked eyes with him. "I'm not afraid of what we might face. The only thing I'm really afraid of is not having an opportunity to try to make sense of what's out there. I need to know, Gavin. I need to know who I am and what I am, and I need to know where I come from."

"I understand that. Probably more than you can know."

"More? No," she said, still watching him. "I understand all of that. I've seen you. It's like... Well, it's like a light is turned on inside my mind. I don't have all the memories, but I feel like I can unfold and access them. And the memories of you are still there. I know that you have done what you needed to do to try to keep me safe, and to try to protect me the way you see fit. I know the others have done the same thing, and I am

thankful for it. But I also know there's something else out there for me, and I need to try to make sense of what it is and what it means. And I need to learn about myself so I can understand who I'm supposed to be."

Gavin had the same thought.

He had trained as a fighter from the very first days he had worked with Tristan, becoming something he had never planned for himself. He had not known anything about himself, in fact. It had taken time for him to come to terms with what he was and the kind of power he possessed, and it had also taken time to understand the intention that other people had for him, but it was something he didn't necessarily have for himself. It was something he had been troubled by for a long time, and now would he keep Alana from the same thing?

No. He knew that he wouldn't. She deserved an opportunity to know herself.

"How about we transfer near one of the bralinath trees that connects," he said. They had not really explored the reason for the connection between realms, but there did seem to be some transition of power through the bralinath trees. "That way we—or I—have a connection. If it gets dangerous, then we can return."

"I'm not going to go off on my own. I don't have your ability to fold," Alana said.

"I think that you could."

Given the connection she had and the power she had, Gavin had little difficulty thinking she could figure out how to control and manipulate that kind of folding power. She would have to be able to transition between the realms, though so far she hadn't proven to have any way of knowing what it was or of acting on that.

It wasn't that he didn't trust her. It was just that she was still innocent and she still needed help. She needed somebody with her who could watch over her, who could ensure that she didn't get in any trouble.

But would she always?

Maybe he had to stop thinking like that. Maybe he had to stop thinking that Alana was some delicate flower that needed his protection. He had believed that she was a child, but she wasn't. At least, she wasn't really. In some ways, she might still be young, but she was also finding her way and gaining power.

That was something Gavin had to come to terms with.

It wasn't just him, either. Gaspar was also offering his protection to her, and he tended to act more paternal than anything. Gavin viewed himself as more of a big brother who had an obligation to her. It would be difficult to let go of that, especially given what they had been through.

"All right," he said. "Let's get going."

"Not through the city," she said.

"We aren't folding out of here," he said. With the protections that Zella had begun to place around the fortress, Gavin wasn't even sure they could.

Alana shook her head. "I don't intend to fold out here, but I do think we shouldn't let others have an opportunity to disrupt us."

He chuckled. "Fine."

Gavin let her guide him. She knew her way around the fortress, and she led them to a hidden doorway that he hadn't even known existed. It was heavily protected with enchantments and sealed off so that nobody could just sneak inside.

By the time they stepped outside, the day was a little darker. Maybe the timing wasn't quite right.

Alana led him through the city, weaving through darkened sections that Gavin had not explored, until they reached the western edge with the forest just beyond the border.

"Seems like you've been sneaking around for quite a while," he said.

“I learned how to move around,” she said. “Besides, I’ve been watching for a bit.”

“Have you?”

She grinned. “Of course I have.”

He chuckled at that, and about all the different enchantments she had access to that were meant for observation, or at least could be used in that way. The butterflies could even be used to spy. Then again, she had made him ravens, and she had made him dragons, and she had made him other types of folded enchantments, all of them alive in a certain sense, and all of them allowing her to watch over things. So why should he be surprised that she was using them to observe and figure out a way to navigate around the city?

He motioned for her to follow, and they moved past a pair of constables, neither of them paying him any mind. Then they passed beyond the boundary of the city, and made it out to the forest.

Once there, Gavin hesitated. He tapped on his enchantment and alerted his team that he was leaving. There was no reply from Imogen or Gaspar. Wrenlow questioned where he was going, and Gavin said that he was going to explore, which wasn’t terribly uncommon.

Gavin turned to Alana. “Ready?”

“Are we taking the dragon?”

“We can if you would prefer, but we don’t need to.”

She frowned at him, and then he grabbed her around the waist, used the Lightning Strikes pattern, and shot upward. The burst carried them high in the air.

Alana stiffened at first, but Gavin used the tree pattern to hold on to her. They streaked toward the distant sense of the ancient bralinath tree that connected this realm to the other. It didn’t seem as if power was diminished in that process, only changed, somehow. He was aware of the bralinath tree and its power as he floated toward it.

Once they landed, she looked at him. “That was interesting. I think I prefer the dragon.”

Gavin snorted. “Sometimes I do too, but sometimes this is easier. And we don’t have to worry about anybody following us like we do if we take the dragon.”

“You aren’t worried about that, are you?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “But this doesn’t raise quite as many questions.”

As he connected to the power of this place, some part of it reacted differently than it had in the past. He suspected that was because of his new connection to power, though he wasn’t entirely sure.

“What is it?” she asked him.

“I haven’t visited these places all that often. I can access the power, though I don’t need to come here. But there’s still something to be said about coming here, and feeling the power, and feeling the way it reacts to me.”

She traced her hand along the boundary of the tree and began to focus outward, but Gavin wasn’t sure what she was doing. He could only feel that something was happening with her.

“I think I could fold this power,” she said, looking over at him, “but I don’t know if I should.”

Gavin shook his head. “I don’t think that you should, either. We want to better understand the kinds of powers we’re manipulating before we use them.”

She turned in place. “I can feel something here.”

“Good. I’m glad you feel it. Now be careful with it when we cross over.”

He reached for her, and then with a burst of energy, Gavin folded them. The power constricted them downward, and as it did, he became aware of a shifting magic. The sensation was not painful the way it had been before, and the traveling felt almost natural.

When he emerged from the folding, he immediately readied for the possibility of an attack, enhancing his eyesight and looking around for any oncoming danger. There was nothing. The power of the bralinath tree radiated outward, creating something of a barrier to shield them. It felt like it was some sort of natural protection for this transition.

“I should’ve been doing this before,” Gavin muttered.

He glanced over to Alana, who had already changed a little. She was taller, looked more mature, and there was a different air about her than there was on the other side. It was almost as if she unfolded here, in a strange way that was unlike what happened in their realm.

Gavin had also changed a bit, partly because he was unable to control the kind of power inside him on this side. Every time he came to this realm, he felt that power, though he struggled to maintain control over it.

“I thought you would’ve used these places from the beginning,” she said. “It’s safer, you know.”

“I think I’ve just been focusing on chasing dangers rather than exploring, which is probably a mistake.”

Gavin and Alana moved away from the tree, but he paused, turned back to the tree, and focused on the energy crackling around. He held it inside himself, wanting to keep it trapped close to him. This was the kind of power he was drawn to, the kind of power that he should have within himself. As he focused on it, he was able to hold on to it and keep it inside him.

“What is it?” she asked him.

“There’s something here. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s tied to the bralinath power. It feels like...” Gavin wasn’t entirely sure what it felt like, but he knew there was some aspect of power within it.

“I can feel the tree,” she said. “The power there seems to have some flexibility, if that makes sense. At least here. I don’t think I can fold it on this side.”

“But you think you could on the other side?” Even asking a question like that seemed odd to Gavin. How would she be able to fold the power of a bralinath?

“Everything seems to be a little easier on the other side. On this side, it doesn’t seem to work quite as effectively.”

He walked farther from the tree. The ground here was all fairly flat, with grasses that looked as if they had grown recently, though they were brown and they crunched underneath his boots. By the time he moved completely away from the tree, the landscape had dropped off to a rolling hillside. He couldn’t help but feel as if there was something out there, but he didn’t know what it was.

“Do we go back?” Alana asked.

He could sense the disappointment in her voice, and he could tell that she didn’t want to return to their realm. “We can explore a little bit. I can get to the tree pretty quickly.”

“Because of your lightning?”

“Well, that’s part of it. But the tree itself gives me strength,” Gavin said. “I don’t even know if it’s bralinath anymore, but I can still draw on it.”

He wasn’t sure why that should be, or why that power was the way it was.

He focused on the energy around him, and they just walked. It didn’t seem as if they were traveling significant distances, but after a while, he realized that he was drawing on his core reserves, and Alana was doing something as well. He hadn’t paid any attention to what she was doing, but she seemed as if she were shifting her steps and moving in a blur.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

She stopped, solidifying again. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just that I can see you... blurring. Are you aware that you’re even doing it?”

“I don’t think I’m blurring so much as I’m just traveling in this place. Maybe folding?” Alana shrugged. “I can feel something here.”

Gavin should've known better. But then, he was doing something as well, using his core reserves. He had to be in order to keep up with her.

They reached the remains of a massive creature late in the day. At least, what seemed to be late. Time felt odd in this place. Day and night seemed different in this realm than in theirs.

As he stopped and looked at the creature, Gavin found himself marveling at the sheer size of it. It had to be at least thirty feet in length, all purplish black, with strange horns on its enormous, boxy skull and thick, stubby legs. It would have towered over them in life.

If something like this were to attempt to break through to their side, what would happen? They had seen just how dangerous it was for some of these creatures to try to push through.

Alana walked around it. "It looks like this has been cut down with a sword." She motioned to the creature's belly.

"Somebody cut *this* down?" he asked, mostly to himself.

Who or what could have done that? The idea that anything here could have done that left him a little uncomfortable.

"Do you want to collect anything here?"

Gavin shook his head. "I don't think so. We don't know what it would do, and I don't know how we would carry it with us."

"You could just send it back and then return."

"Maybe, but let's just keep wandering a bit."

She didn't argue with him, so they kept moving, the speed still surprising to him. It was comfortable, though. He hadn't realized it before, but he had been holding himself back when traveling with others. He didn't have to do that with Alana.

They found a cluster of five creatures that all looked like some sort of giant wolf, but with broader shoulders and larger heads. They were brightly colored, vibrant orange and red streaks along their backs. They didn't seem that terrifying in

death, but the colossal fangs and long claws on their legs made them look as though they had been quite dangerous. Like the other creature, these had been cut down.

Who had come through?

“We didn’t do this,” he said, “which means that somebody else is here.”

Alana just nodded, and neither of them said anything else.

As they kept moving, Gavin started to wonder. Leier could cross over to this realm, and they certainly had the right kind of power to bring down creatures. Could Imogen have been sending her soldiers over here to test themselves?

No. She would’ve told him.

So who else could have been coming over? The order? But they weren’t fighters. The Society?

It wouldn’t have been Anna. Despite what he had gone through with her, this was not the kind of thing she would’ve done.

When he heard a strange cry, he froze.

“It seems like we aren’t alone any longer,” Alana said.

“No. And I wonder who the aggressor was.”

CHAPTER SIX

Gavin debated whether to bring Alana back to their side. Between the scream and the question of who was responsible for slaughtering these creatures, he wasn't sure if it was going to be safe for her to stay here.

"You look like you want to see what's making that sound," she said.

She watched him with a more mature intensity in her gaze than he was accustomed to from her. It was times like these when Gavin was acutely aware of how much she had changed. She still resembled the girl he had first met what seemed like an eternity ago, but she also was nothing like her. It was her posture and demeanor that had changed the most.

"I do," he said, "but I'm concerned it might be a trap."

"A trap?"

"I'm going to have to work on making you a little more skeptical. With what we've seen here, it's dangerous for us, especially if somebody is trying to draw us someplace."

"I'm not helpless, Gavin."

"No?"

"No," she said, beaming at him. She withdrew an item from her pocket. It was a small satchel that had different markings around the outside.

"What is it?"

“It’s sort of like an expanding bag,” she said. “I had to work with two people to make it, but it allows me to store many different enchantments.”

“Expanding how?” Gavin asked, getting close to the satchel and trying to make sense of the markings on it.

“Well,” she began, and she offered a hint of a shrug, “it’s possibly reaching into this realm.” When his eyes widened, she shook her head. “I don’t know, though. It doesn’t work quite as well on our side. I just sort of assumed it would work well on this side.”

Gavin breathed out. “Interesting. So you can just reach through?”

“I can. And…”

She pulled out a long cylinder that looked like a club with different runes etched on it, which made the entire thing glow. There was no way that would fit inside the satchel, so her being able to reach inside and pull it out left him impressed.

“I guess we could’ve harvested some of the things we came across and put them in your little satchel,” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“I wasn’t sure how you’d react,” she said.

Gavin grunted. “Don’t worry about upsetting me. You’re your own person, and you can do whatever you think you need to do. But it’s helpful for us to both know what you have so we can be on the same page, depending on what sort of enchantments you have with you. That’s what I ask of anybody on my team.”

He needed to notify the others of what was going on. They might be able to work from the other side and help.

He hurriedly tapped on his enchantment. “Gaspar. Imogen. I’m in the other realm with Alana.”

He filled them in on what they had uncovered and the danger he feared they might encounter. He waited for a moment for a response, and finally one came from Imogen.

“We will monitor,” she said.

“Good.”

“Just monitor?” Alana asked.

“They wouldn’t have any way of transferring over,” Gavin said. “Not easily, anyway. There are different enchantments”—he nodded to her satchel—“but none of them are particularly effective, at least not yet.”

Maybe somebody had already found a way, though.

“We should get moving,” he said.

It wasn’t long before he saw movement.

He froze in place, and he motioned for Alana to stop.

The landscape here was mostly grasslands, or what would have passed as grasslands. The grass was dried, and the blades were sharp, which forced him to use his stone skin fortification. Thankfully, Alana had seemed to recognize the same thing and used an enchantment to ensure she would not be harmed, but he was still concerned about what was in the distance.

“I’m feeling something here,” Gavin said.

Alana grabbed another enchantment out of her satchel. It didn’t glow the same way the club did. Instead, she held it out, pointing it and sweeping it around. Maybe it was some sort of explosive?

An enormous creature bounded toward them. It looked like a squirrel, right down to the bushy tail, ears, and bright eyes. The only difference was that it had massive sharp fangs that could rip through him.

Gavin immediately formed a spike bolt and shot it at the creature. It went straight into the creature’s mouth, and the thing dropped. Two more converged, but before he had an opportunity to react, Alana pointed her enchantment at them. A blast of green light shot out of it, slicing through one creature. It caught the leg of the other, which shrieked and hobbled away.

“What’s that enchantment?” he asked.

Alana held it up to show him. "It's a lantern. I knew something would change here, but I didn't expect it to be like that."

"Maybe don't point it at me," he said.

They kept moving but found no other creatures, just the furry ones they had left behind. As they walked, Gavin started to question whether he had been mistaken. Maybe what they had heard had been one of these creatures. Could that be all it was?

When he said as much to Alana, she frowned, and then he noticed a sense from her. It was almost as if some part of her unfolded again, flowing down toward the ground.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm testing," she said.

"How do you know how to do that?"

"I..." She frowned again, and then she looked over. "I don't know."

He still marveled at her and her power. If she could come to understand it, maybe she could even help teach him how to use his.

"There," she said, pointing toward a small hillside. "I feel something. I... Well, I don't know what it is, but it feels different than any other place."

Gavin shifted to the bralinath tree pattern, then looked up at the sky. The air shimmered, and he was able to make out three of the same strange birdlike creatures that they had seen earlier, all of them shooting power upward. He hadn't seen them until they were close, almost as if they had been invisible.

"Gavin," Gaspar said in his ear, "we need you back here. Something is happening."

"Let me guess," he said. "Another attempt to get through?"

"Right. There's a mountain this time, and this one's big. Really big."

“Well, I’m already there on this side,” Gavin said. “To be honest, I have no idea what it is that I’m seeing. This whole thing is weird. And there are three of those creatures you thought looked like renral.”

“You can’t take on three,” Gaspar said.

“I don’t plan on it.”

“Just be careful with her.”

“I will,” Gavin said, and the enchantment went silent. He looked over to Alana. “I think we should go—”

Before he had an opportunity to say that he thought they should go back, there was another scream. This one was loud, but it wasn’t a scream of fear. It was a scream of defiance. Gavin couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was coming from, but something about it felt familiar.

He turned to Alana. “Well?”

“We should investigate,” she urged. “We need to find out what that is, right?”

He hesitated. “Yes, but there’s potential danger, especially for you.”

“Do you think it’s not dangerous for you?”

Gavin shrugged. “It could be. Given recent threats I’ve faced, I can’t gauge just how dangerous this might be for me, especially considering the immense power we’ve been contending with. It’s just...”

“You’re unsure about risking my safety.”

“Exactly.”

Alana shook her head. “We have to proceed.”

Gavin sighed heavily. “All right. Gather your enchantments. Ensure you’re fully prepared for... whatever awaits.”

She nodded, reaching into her satchel to retrieve various enchantments. As she did, she shared a silent, meaningful glance with Gavin.

Together, they moved forward. The mysterious birds continued to circle overhead. Their expansive wings stretched wide, catching the light and hinting at a leathery texture rather than the expected feathery spread. Their bodies, while streamlined like birds, bore scales that shimmered with an iridescence similar to that of his dragon. Serpentine tails trailed behind them, and their sharp, elongated beaks held a hint of malevolence, suggesting a predatory nature. Their eyes glinted with an intelligence as they scanned the land below.

Gavin contemplated possible strategies. He considered employing certain spikes, but the creatures might overwhelm him. Moreover, he was uncertain about the nature and magnitude of power he'd need to summon to be successful. As these thoughts swirled, a sudden burst of light erupted near him.

It was similar to the lantern Alana had just used, only this one was a blue beam that blasted out from her. The energy struck the nearest of the circling birds. The creature screeched and peeled off from the group, revealing a gaping hole in its side.

She shot at the other two and struck the next bird. Like the last one, it shrieked and then flew away.

That left only one.

"I didn't realize they would be so easy to scare away," Gavin said.

"I don't know how many shots I have left," Alana said, sounding tired.

It was then that Gavin realized that she was using some part of herself. Maybe that was why her bolts were so powerful.

He pulled her toward him as soon as he saw more movement. His attention was drawn by a blazing blade that glowed with a white light. As he stared, his mind tried to process what he was seeing.

"Anna?" he whispered.

She was fighting to push away several creatures that had her surrounded, similar to the way the birds had surrounded everything. These were more like the wolflike creatures. But that wasn't all.

A dozen figures stood not far from Anna, waiting to grab her.

One of the creatures lunged toward her, and she dropped, driving her blade up. She cut it down, but then the rest of the creatures pounced. Gavin half expected Anna to use some of the power she had stolen from this realm to fight them off, but the creatures held her down.

She didn't get up.

One of the men stepped forward. He had short black hair, and from a distance, Gavin could sense that he blazed with energy, though Gavin couldn't tell what kind of energy it was. Maybe it was the power of this place, or perhaps it was something else. Either way, the man strode forward, and the creatures parted to give him safe passage. He reached Anna, grabbed her off the ground, and hauled her toward the others.

She didn't cry out. She didn't fight. She didn't move.

Gavin didn't know if she still lived.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gavin struggled with what he should do. He couldn't help but feel as if he needed to go after Anna, but he also wasn't exactly sure what had happened to her. He found himself pulled in her direction, yet he hesitated, feeling for the power he had been picking up on and wondering if it was going to be dangerous to try to pursue her.

A strange energy bloomed all around him, and it left him feeling a sense of it, along with something that suggested there was even more power present here.

Alana rested her hand on his arm, and she forced him to turn to look at her. "Just relax," she said.

"I'm not *not* relaxed," he said.

"I know that you're thinking about whether you need to go after her. I'm not telling you that you shouldn't, I'm just telling you that you need to relax for a moment and try to decide on the right strategy."

Gavin continued to grapple with what he needed to do. There was a real danger here. If he did go chasing after Anna, then given what they had encountered, there was a possibility that they would face down some sort of creature much like they had already seen. But it was more than just the creatures. It was whoever was sending them.

He breathed out heavily, and he turned to Alana. "I knew that there were other creatures here, and I suspected that people had come through here, but I didn't know that anybody actually lived here."

“Are we sure they live here, or are they just traveling through?”

Gavin didn't have a good answer.

“We can't stay,” she said.

“You're right. I should probably try to figure out what happened to her and see—”

Alana tapped on his arm and pointed to the sky. Gavin forced his attention upward to the birds that had started circling around again. He thought about how Alana had used her lantern, augmented with her own natural power. If nothing else, she would be able to attack it again, but there was also the possibility that if she were to do that, then somebody here might realize that they were here and come for them.

“I just wish I could track her somehow,” he said.

“Don't you have something? Didn't you have some sort of enchantment?”

“I had one, but that isn't likely to be effective. And besides, I don't even know if Anna has kept that enchantment with her.”

He was going to need the El'aras to help. He wouldn't be able to track Anna down without having others with him, because doing so would be far too dangerous for him. And more than anything, he wasn't going to do any of that with Alana with him.

After taking her hand, he used the Lightning Strikes pattern to streak into the air. They avoided the birdlike creatures that flew toward them, but only barely. Gavin was moving as quickly as he could to stay ahead of them. As they went crashing toward the rock, he felt the power surging behind him. Gavin was able to add even more power, and he guided them toward the bralinath tree. He took a moment to focus, and then they folded back to their side.

Alana pulled one of her enchantments out of her pocket and handed it to Gavin. “Go on,” she said.

Often, he was able to identify her enchantments and figure out what they were for, but not always. She had given him so many different ones over the time they had known each other that he had stopped knowing exactly what all of them could do. This one looked similar to the ravens she had made for him, but something about it seemed blockier than those.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s an owl. I believe with the right touch, you might be able to harness its energies. And if done correctly, he should be able to harness them as well. That’s your aim, right?”

Gavin nodded. Given his recent experiences, he was eager to discover where these energies originated.

Gaspar and Imogen had spoken of the rippling, hinting at its proximity. Now, Gavin’s challenge was to discern its location.

They began their journey back to Yoran. After a short distance, Gavin felt a pull, an allure he couldn’t resist. He halted, looking skyward, half expecting the source to be above. However, he quickly realized that the pull emanated from somewhere deeper, somewhere intimately connected to him—a connection he should’ve recognized by now.

Could it be Anna’s power?

It was undeniable that he had some type of bond with her. He might even be able to trace her through it, but did he need to cross back over to the other realm to do so?

Such an idea intrigued him. Gavin had no clear understanding of the workings or the pathways between realms.

“You feel her, don’t you?” Alana asked.

“I feel something,” he said. “I’m not sure what it is. Every so often, I feel a bit of a pulling sensation, almost as if there’s something trying to link to me and draw me forward.”

“Just follow it, then.”

He looked over to Alana and debated how much he wanted to share with her. On this side, she didn’t have the same

maturity as she did in the other realm. At least, she didn't have the same *outward* appearance of maturity. The moment they had transitioned back over here, she had folded—as he tended to think of it—and become more of a girl and less of a woman. Still, there was maturity in the way she was looking at him. Something in her eyes screamed knowledge and understanding, suggesting to him that she knew things that she wouldn't have otherwise known.

“You can do it. I can go with you,” she said. “The others are already searching, so there's nothing to be concerned about with them.”

Maybe she was right.

He focused on the dragon. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't far from him, and he carried them upward to it on a streak of lightning. The dragon actually fluttered its wings almost excitedly, as if having Alana on its back was a great treat.

“Wonderful,” Gavin muttered, and then he glanced back at her. “Seems like the dragon is pretty excited that you're here with me.”

“Well, I'm pretty excited to be here with the dragon,” she said, patting it on the back.

The wind was thinner and colder in the sky. As the dragon circled, Gavin tried to focus on what he could of Anna. They had something of a link, and for a while he had thought it was an attraction, but that had faded. Now she was just Anna—someone who had been a friend. Gavin didn't have enough of those to abandon.

As he concentrated on what he could of her, he was distinctly aware of how he was able to feel something through the bralinath tree connection and the way it was connecting and linking him to something more significant. It was as if the bralinath trees wanted him to be aware of her. It was a strange awareness, though.

The bralinath trees in this place had changed over time, partly because of how he had shifted some of the energy, but partly because of an awakening of sorts. And through it all,

Gavin was also aware that they had gifted the energy of the Shard to Anna. That power was ancient, and designed to help protect the people.

Alana tapped on him, shaking him from his reverie. “I feel something,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Something moving.”

Gavin didn’t see anything. He felt something, however. “Are you sure you’re seeing it here?” he asked.

She frowned at him. “Do you think I could see across the realms?”

“I guess I wasn’t implying that you could see it, but more that you could feel it.”

“I don’t know if it works quite like that,” she said.

She pulled out her satchel and reached in, seeming to have to be more careful doing so than she did on the other side. That didn’t surprise him, either. He suspected it was much smaller on this side, though there still seemed to be some sort of a portal aspect to it. She shuffled the contents around for a moment, and when she finally brought her hand out, she produced a large ring that was too big for her hand. Alana slid the giant ring around her thumb, and then the ring started to constrict downward until it fit her thumb perfectly.

“How much of that was you?” Gavin asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how much of modifying the ring to fit you was you, and how much of that was the enchantment?”

She frowned at him again, and then she held her thumb out. “I never even thought about it that way before.”

“It seems like your power has been increasing.”

“Why would that be the case? That’s not how power works.”

Gavin snorted and then nodded. As they continued to circle on the dragon, he looked around, feeling a bit of a pulsation, a bit of a drawing sensation, but it was growing weaker and fainter the longer he searched for it. Either he was losing that connection, or he was getting tired, or they were somehow managing to hide Anna's location from him. Any of those were possible, especially given how he had been exerting himself, and all the distance they had been traveling. But it was also possible that it didn't even matter. If Alana had a way of piercing the veil by looking across it, then it may not even matter.

"It seems we keep learning more about power than we knew before," he said. "And your power and mine keep changing. We needed to change and be more powerful, especially if we want to go to the other side, where you are connected."

"You are also connected," she said.

Gavin focused on that sense of energy. All he did with it these days was keep from unfurling that power, knowing that if he were to release too much of it, some part of him would shift outward and he would expand and change. Maybe that wouldn't be the worst thing for him to do. Perhaps he could even use that power to track Anna.

She was connected to that power now, the same way she was connected to the bralinath trees.

Gavin let out a deep breath. "I think it's time to get the others involved and regroup to figure out our next step."

"Ours?"

He smiled at her. "I'm not doing anything without your help."

"Are you sure?"

"Considering what I saw you do with those enchantments and how you modified them, I can't imagine returning without your aid. You might be the one person to help us survive what we might have to face."

She smiled back at him, though a bit of sadness lingered in her eyes.

“What is it?” Gavin asked.

“I guess... Well, I guess I’m just concerned about what I might be required to do, but it’s more than that. I’m concerned about what it means for me.”

“You aren’t going to look for answers on your own. Others who care about you and want to see you safe will go with you.”

Tears began to well in her eyes.

He would not let anything happen to her. She needed for him to be the Chain Breaker, and for Alana, he would stay strong. He would find that part of himself. And he would master it so that he could make sure she was going to be as safe as possible, because Gavin was going to ensure that nothing bad happened to her.

That would be his vow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The dragon dropped them off at the edge of Yoran. Gavin hurriedly hopped off its back, and he and Alana made their way into the city. The moment he crossed over the edge, he felt a wash of cold, and the enchantments protecting the city began to envelop him.

Alana looked over. "It's always so refreshing coming back here," she said. "But every time I cross over with you, I start to feel as if maybe it shouldn't be so refreshing."

"You always have a place here," he said. "When I first came to the city, I felt as if this was never going to be my home. And in so many ways, I never had a home before. I was always wandering, looking for the next job, and the next, and never staying in one place for any given period of time. But here..." Gavin looked around the city. Yoran was a strange place for him to call home, especially because he didn't really have one. But it was a place that had come to represent comfort and peace, and everything that he wanted in his life.

"But I feel like I need to know more about myself, and that means I'm going to have to push myself beyond comfort," she said.

"That's how you grow and change," Gavin said. "Unfortunately, that's one of the lessons I learned the hard way."

"I don't want to learn like that."

"I don't think everyone needs to learn quite like that," he said. "In fact, I don't encourage anybody to have that same

experience because, to be honest, I don't think it's the best way to learn, though it did serve its purpose with me. I think I would prefer you to have a more controlled experience where you can learn your power without being destroyed in the process."

"Maybe," she said softly.

He didn't push. Maybe he didn't even need to.

She was a different person here. She was more withdrawn, more timid even. When she was on the other side, it was as if some part of her opened up, but then again, that made complete sense given everything he had experienced with her power and the way he had seen it work.

And maybe there were experiences she wasn't sharing with Gavin, memories that came to her that she was trying to forget about.

That was something he was going to be careful with. He didn't want to push her, and he didn't want her to go through anything that would be problematic for her. He wanted nothing more than to ensure that Alana was safe.

And so Gavin knew that he was going to have to try to help her.

"Go ahead," he said. "I need to talk to the El'aras."

"I can go with you," she offered.

He smiled. "You could. I'm not trying to keep you from the El'aras, but in this case, I think I need to have the conversation with them alone so I can share what I experienced. Then I'm going to see if they are willing to be part of the rescue."

"Do you think that they will?" Alana asked.

That was something Gavin had been struggling with. He had no idea whether the El'aras would want to go after Anna, especially considering how they felt about her after the way she had reacted and behaved the last time she had been here. There was a possibility that the El'aras would be disappointed, or even think that she deserved the fate she had gotten. Gavin

didn't necessarily feel that way, but he also would understand it if some of the El'aras did.

She had been the Shard. More than that, she had led them. He couldn't help but feel as if many of the El'aras would at least want to help her and offer her any sort of protection they could. That might not involve sacrificing themselves, though.

And there was the possibility that there may not be anything they could do, nothing they could help her with, as Anna had already gone off on her own and possibly claimed her own fate.

Alana slipped ahead.

Gavin waited for a moment, and then he started into the city. He didn't have to go far before he realized that somebody was shadowing him. He focused on his core reserves, and rather than reacting the way he once would have, he instead opened himself to that power and allowed it to sweep out from him. It was his way of detecting what was there, if anything. He wasn't at all surprised that it was one of the constables.

He stopped near one of the bells trees, and he even leaned on it, ignoring the pain of its sharp leaves that would normally have bothered him. He had a way of fortifying his skin, even if he hadn't had the power that allowed him some measure of stone skin naturally.

Davel Chan strode over to him, and he frowned at Gavin for a long moment. "Figured you would come back, but I didn't expect you to have come this way."

"There's something that needs to be dealt with," Gavin said.

Davel flicked his gaze in the direction that Gavin was going, and his eyes narrowed slightly. "More trouble with *them*?"

"Have they been causing trouble since they returned?"

There were quite a few El'aras like Brandon who were hoping to learn the sword forms from the Leier because they wanted to feel a different connection to power. Having seen what the Leier were able to do and having seen how they were

all connected to that energy, Gavin understood it, but it was also the fact that he had embraced that power. For so long, Gavin had been seen as something of an outsider to the El'aras, but ever since he had helped save and protect them when Anna had betrayed them, he had been viewed differently.

Even as the Champion, he hadn't been viewed this way. Now he was seen as... Well, Gavin had to admit that he was probably seen as something of a Champion even now.

"Call to them," Davel said, "but you know how it can be. Old grudges and all."

"Seems like you've been through that a few times, so I would expect that if anybody could get past some old grudges, it would be you."

"You would like to think so, but sometimes old grudges die slowly, Lorren."

Gavin understood that, yet in this case, given the fact that these people were all part of his city, he wanted to make sure that everybody here had the same purpose and that they were all working toward the same goal. He had thought they were working that way, but then again, he had thought that before, until the El'aras had suddenly departed, leaving the city less protected.

"I found her," Gavin said. "It seems like she's in trouble."

Davel nodded. "The Shard. They talk about her, you know. Some of them still think they shouldn't have returned here, and some of them think they should be looking for her and trying to figure out what happened to her..." He gave a slight shrug. "Some even want to return to their traditional homes."

"This city *is* one of their traditional homes," Gavin said.

Davel snorted. "You know, you're probably right."

"There's no 'probably' about it. Yoran is one of their traditional homes, even if they have not been spending all that much time here lately."

"So what do you plan?"

“I’ll probably have to go after her, though I am concerned about what happens to the others if I do.”

“Do you think we have to worry about the order?” Davel asked.

Gavin hesitated. For a long time, that had been his concern, though increasingly he didn’t think that was the case anymore. Not with everything that had been done here. There was cooperation between all different kinds of power that was so much more than they ever had before.

The Society no longer battled with the enchanters, having replaced the Fates with a council. There was the fact that not only did the Society work well with the enchanters, but they were also aligning themselves with some of the Leier’s shamans, along with other magical users.

More and more, Gavin had started to hear more about other magical users who had been hiding their presence. Over time, they had begun to creep out of the shadows, feeling as if they were no longer suppressed the way they had once been.

All of that was a good thing—at least he thought so. Places where people were finding power that had not been there before. Places where people had once feared the Leier, or the El’aras, but had begun to shift their mindset. It was better now that various powers were aligning.

And because of that, he couldn’t help but feel as if all those aligned powers, everything he had been dealing with, left them with a measure of protection, and a measure of safety, that they wouldn’t have otherwise. It meant that the order would not be able to return, at least in the form it had been before. Gavin and his allies would be able to provide safety and stability to the people of Yoran.

“Not the order,” he said, “but something else is out there. I don’t know what it is, but we are going to look.”

“We?” Davel asked.

“Well, not you, but ‘we’ as in me and anybody who wants to go with me.”

“Like the El’aras.”

“Maybe,” Gavin said. “But even with them, it’s possible that they won’t want to go. Some of them were hurt by her.”

“Well, just make sure that the city is protected when you go.”

“The city is always protected.”

“Not always,” Davel said. “Yet I don’t feel like we’re the target any longer, so I suppose that’s good. Just don’t do anything foolish and change that for us.”

Gavin smiled and walked away. Davel must have detected Gavin’s return and come to talk with him specifically about that. He wasn’t terribly surprised, given what he knew about Davel and how he had a strong drive to protect the city. If there was anybody who would do whatever it took to ensure the safety of Yoran and its people, it was going to be Davel and his constables. But of all the people who had been part of the city and what had been here before, Davel had changed as much as anyone.

Gavin kept moving, and by the time he got to the El’aras section, he had relaxed, which was probably a mistake. The moment he reached it, a tingling sensation washed over him.

The El’aras had been busy.

When they had lived in Yoran before, the city had allowed them to retake their old homes and buildings. They had started to rework the stone, rebuild many of the structures, and fortify them. Now there was something about what he detected with the power that was here that left Gavin feeling as if they might be doing more.

He didn’t feel any of the strange energy that he had been detecting when he had found another settlement, but he also didn’t detect the traditional bralinath power. Gavin focused on his core reserves and let the power wash out through him.

He stepped forward, and three El’aras appeared in front of him.

The suddenness of their presence startled Gavin.

They hadn't been there. He was certain of it. And then they were.

He frowned, and he noticed the air rippling around where they had emerged. Two of them had swords unsheathed, and the third held a long cylindrical object that reminded him of what Alana had used on the other side. It was some sort of enchantment, and Gavin could feel the power inside it. The El'aras had it leveled right at him, as if ready to fire on him in case he were to do something dangerous.

He held his hands up and then waited, but they didn't move.

"I just needed to talk to whoever has taken the lead here," Gavin said.

"It's the Champion," one of the El'aras said.

Gavin didn't recognize the man, who had dark hair, green eyes, and a solid build. He held his blade outward, which was glowing ever so slightly with power. It was different than the old El'aras blades that Gavin had once known. This blade was an enchantment, not made with the delicate craftsmanship he had seen in the past. He wondered if the El'aras even had anybody capable of making such weapons any longer.

"I just need to talk to whoever is next in your leadership structure," Gavin said.

"The leadership structure?" the man asked. He stepped forward, lowering his weapon.

All of them had, in fact. When the rod dropped to the ground, sparks trailed from it. Gavin wondered what would've happened had they fired the rod at him, and whether he would have been able to defend against it. He thought he was powerful enough to resist an enchantment, but at close range, maybe he wouldn't have been able to withstand it all that well. It might have been more dangerous than he had anticipated, which was something to at least consider.

"After the Shard, somebody has to lead here, don't they?" Gavin asked.

“Why, of course,” said the El’aras who had been holding the long rod.

“Then who is it?”

“It’s you.”

CHAPTER NINE

The inside of the Dragon was warm and inviting.

After going to the El'aras section of the city, Gavin had instructed them to send three of their senior El'aras to the Dragon because he wanted to talk with them. He didn't have time to try to coordinate with the El'aras or have a conversation with them about what they saw as his role among them, but if they did view him as some sort of a leader, then he might have to serve in that capacity, at least until he settled it. But leading the El'aras was not something he wanted, or something he thought he was going to be any good at, even.

He found Gaspar seated at his usual table, working with an enchantment that was around his wrist. These days, Gaspar tended to wear many different enchantments and was constantly fidgeting with them, either adjusting them or just trying to get comfortable with the fact that they were on him.

Wrenlow was seated across from him, with Olivia seated next to Wrenlow, as she often was. Wrenlow had a book out and was flipping through the pages, making notes periodically. So far, there were no others from the council around.

As he made his way into the tavern, Jessica cleared her throat behind him. He turned to her and tipped his head politely. Her chestnut hair was growing long, bound back with a pale yellow ribbon, and her apron was dusted with flour and a bit of dark grease.

“Good to see you, Gavin,” she said. “I take it you aren't going to give us any trouble tonight?”

“Well, no promises,” he said.

“Council business?”

“Sort of.”

“Good. I don’t need any additional difficulty.”

He shrugged. “Well, not trying to cause any difficulty, but there are certain things that need to happen, and I’m trying to make sure that everybody, including the people in the city, is ready for them, especially given what we’ve been dealing with. There’s the possibility that there are dangers we aren’t even fully familiar with.”

“What sort of dangers?”

“The same kind we’ve been running into,” he said with a sigh.

“Well, let me get you something to eat and drink while you puzzle it over with Gaspar.”

He smiled as she headed off to the kitchen.

He sank down at the table next to Gaspar and pushed the man over, who grunted and made a big show of being irritated.

“So,” Gaspar said, and glanced at Gavin for a moment before turning his attention to Wrenlow. “We were talking about what you described, and trying to figure out if there’s anything that can explain what’s been pushing through.”

“I can give more details about the creatures if you’d like,” Gavin said to Wrenlow, “or I could take you over there so you can see them yourself, but I get the feeling that you aren’t terribly thrilled with that idea.” He chuckled.

“I think I’m going to have to go at some point,” Wrenlow said. “There’s only so much that I can learn from the library.”

“It’s quite different than the library, kid,” Gaspar said.

Wrenlow rolled his eyes. “Well, if there are other things we need to study, another connection that we need to make, then I think it would be useful. Besides, there are several sorcerer scholars that could come with me. We could work together. We would be safe. And I’m sure that Imogen could

send some of her Leier to ensure we have the natural protection that we need.”

Gavin nodded slowly. “It’s not a bad idea. If we can get enchantments to ease the transition, we can configure them if something were to happen.”

“Assuming that the Leier are willing to fight on behalf of our scholars,” Gaspar muttered.

“And why wouldn’t they be?” said a voice.

Gavin looked up to see Imogen striding over. She grabbed a chair from a nearby table, dragged it over, and dropped down into it. Two Leier followed her, but they didn’t join them. They simply stood back, watching as if trying to decide if they should get more involved.

He knew one of them, as Jorend was always with Imogen, but the man had proven to be a difficult person to get to know. He was a skilled Leier swordsman, and Imogen often referred to him as her second-in-command, which meant that whenever she was gone for any extended duration, he ended up taking over as leader of the Leier. At one point, Gavin had asked her whether she trusted Jorend explicitly to do the right thing, and she had answered with simply a yes.

“Why?” Imogen asked again.

Gaspar grunted. “Well, I’m guessing that the boy here wants to go after Anna, and—”

Gavin shook his head. “It’s not about going after her. Not entirely. It’s about figuring out what’s going on over there. Someone is responsible for those creatures.”

He described what he had followed, along with what he had seen of the slaughtered creatures and how it was possible that Anna was the cause.

“You know how difficult it is any time we go over there,” Gaspar said. “We get lucky. I know you don’t think that, but you very nearly died, boy, and there are quite a few people who don’t know what they would do if you were to die.”

“I’m pretty sure everybody would be fine,” Gavin said, trying to be flippant about it, but he knew better than that. “But I don’t intend to die.”

“Ah, good,” Gaspar murmured, accepting the drink Jessica offered him. He quickly drained the ale and set the mug back on the table. “Here I was, thinking you had a death wish, trying to complicate things for the rest of us. We don’t need extra messes to clean up.”

“We need to understand the activity outside,” Gavin said. “We need to figure out the other realm and what’s happening there. If we don’t, this power will continue to plague us.”

He had grappled with this dilemma for a while now. Deciphering their next move had become increasingly challenging.

Gaspar exhaled deeply, a mix of frustration and exhaustion. “I understand the gravity. But honestly, I’m tired of it all. She made her choice, boy.”

“I’m aware,” Gavin replied. “It’s not just about her, though. If we don’t do this, we might be in trouble. I don’t know what’s happening on the other side, but *someone* is pushing through. We need to act while we still have something of a secret weapon.”

“Secret weapon?”

Gavin looked over to the door just as Alana and Zella came in. Mekel was with them as well, and he had several different golems in hand, which he settled on the table in front of Gavin. One of them looked like the flying bird they had dealt with in the other realm, which left him unsettled. Another resembled the spiked creature he had battled.

Gavin arched a brow at him.

“Alana described what you faced,” Mekel said. “She drew them for me. Not only that, but she folded them.”

Alana patted her pocket as if to say she carried enchantments that looked just like those, which was all horrifying to Gavin, especially because of what he had been through with those same creatures. He feared the possibility

that they might be able to attack again, but having enchantments that were just as powerful as what they had faced... He couldn't help but feel as if that might be beneficial. If they were to have something along those lines and draw on that kind of power, what would they be able to do?

"You were saying," Gaspar said.

Gavin nodded to the others, who sat down at their table.

He held Alana's gaze. "Alana has a way of modifying enchantments on the other side. I don't think she can do it here," he said, and Alana shook her head, "but when we're over there, what she's able to do with those enchantments and how she's able to adjust them is different and more powerful than anything we've seen. She took down a couple of those"—he pointed to the golem that resembled the birdlike creature—"and she did so faster than I would've been able to."

"She did?" Imogen asked.

Gavin nodded. "She did. And it took something out of her, so it's not something she can do easily, but if we can figure out how to control the amount of power she draws on and make sure she's not expending herself too much, I do think there's a very real possibility that we'll be able to use what she can do and the amount of power she has in order for us to... well, in order for us to have a secret weapon."

Gaspar breathed out. "So we use her and attack. But you're telling me that there are limits to how many times we can attack."

"I think I can adjust how much I'm putting into them," Alana said. "I'm sort of using them without really knowing what I'm doing."

"Dangerous," Zella said.

Alana glanced at her. "I know it's dangerous, and if there were any other choices, I wouldn't do it that way, but I also realized it's something that's necessary for us to do, and if I wouldn't have done it, I—"

Zella raised her hand, and she shook her head. “I’m not saying that you shouldn’t have done it.”

Gavin watched her and was a little surprised by her reply, as this was a side of Zella that he wasn’t accustomed to. This was a side of her that seemed to recognize that Alana was growing and changing and becoming her own person, a side that suggested to Gavin that they were going to have to be much more aware of her responsibilities.

“We can work with you,” Zella said to Alana. “We have been trying to help you guide your enchantments to understand the kind of power you have, but we have not attempted to help you adjust the level of power within them. That is something Mekel had to learn, and you can see his level of control now.”

“It was hard for me, but it’s probably going to be easy for you,” Mekel said, smiling at Alana. “You are different.”

Zella frowned at him. “Nobody is different, at least when it comes to our kind of power. The enchantment connection is just about technique. Learn how to control it, and we can continue to adjust the amount of energy that we allow ourselves to express.”

“Actually,” Gavin said, “I think that’s going to be a matter of experience. The one way someone can get some experience with that is to just go over to the other realm and try to work with that power. She needs to find out if she’s going to be able to do anything with it, to test herself and find out how much she’s able to put into it and how much effort she needs.”

“That’s dangerous,” Zella said. “But probably necessary.”

Gavin was thankful that she wasn’t going to argue.

“And,” Zella continued, “I suspect that if we are going to do this—”

“We?” Gavin asked.

“We are not letting her go and do this on her own. I am not letting *you* go and do this on your own.” Zella fixed him with a stare. “I think that was our mistake before. If you intend to travel and find out what happened to this El’aras, then you are going to have those with you who can ensure your success. If

it involves us making more enchantments over there, then so be it. Perhaps those enchantments will be better, stronger, or perhaps they will not. We have already figured out how to maximize the return,” she went on, glancing over to Wrenlow, “and we have a way of making those quickly. It is a simple enchantment, and with sorcery involvement, we can even speed that along a little bit.”

Gavin let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

He wasn’t exactly sure what else to say, but he was appreciative of the fact that they were all willing to go. He looked over to Gaspar, who just nodded. He knew that Imogen was going to come, and he doubted that there was any real discussion about it, but given what she had said about the other Leier being willing to protect them, he was appreciative of that as well.

“So we start to send real expeditions,” Gavin said. “Make preparations. Maybe start with some of the ruins and set up a base camp to travel back and forth between.” He blinked slowly as he talked, his mind trying to work through different possibilities.

Gaspar reached across the table and squeezed his arm. Gavin looked up at him.

“We got this, boy. You need to rest.”

“I don’t.”

“How long have you been patrolling?”

Gavin had gone through this with them before, and he had tried to explain that he didn’t need nearly as much sleep as they did, and that he could exist on quite a bit less, and that it was not as difficult for him as it was for them, but any time he argued with them, they forced him to get some rest.

“I don’t know,” he finally said. “But I do know that if we’re going to make this plan, we—”

“We need you in full form,” Gaspar said. “And if that involves you doing whatever it takes for you to get through this, then go get some sleep. We won’t bother you.”

Gavin looked at the others, and nobody said anything to challenge Gaspar.

Of course they wouldn't. Nobody was going to speak up against Gaspar, and he was pretty much the only person who would go against Gavin. Well, Imogen would too, but only when she felt the fighting style he had chosen was wrong.

Gavin got to his feet, and then he looked around. "Fine," he said dramatically. "It sounds like I'm not wanted."

He went upstairs and settled in the room Jessica had given him, and he drifted off to sleep.

At least, he started to drift. He didn't know how long he'd been out before a voice woke him. Jarring, sharp, crackling.

It took a moment to realize why he was hearing it and where it came from—the enchantment resting near his bed. He grabbed it.

"Gavin," a voice said.

Not just a voice. *Anna's* voice.

"Help. Please."

"We're coming," he said.

The voice went silent. There was a faint pop, and then the enchantment crumbled.

Somebody had known. Not only that, but they had been able to affect the enchantment from across realms? He didn't think such a thing would even be possible, but it must be.

He lay there trying to sleep, trying to get his mind to settle, but he couldn't. All he could think about was Anna calling for him, and how little he could do until they made the proper preparations.

Sleep was a long time coming to him that night.

CHAPTER TEN

IMOGEN

“You need to come and see this,” Jorend said, sliding over to her inside the tavern.

Imogen had come to feel like the Dragon was a place of comfort for her. It was unique, at least for her, as she wasn't much of a drinker normally. But ever since coming to Yoran, she had always found this tavern to be cozy and comfortable, and now it was something more. Now it was a place where the city leaders met and organized, making their plans for what needed to happen to defend the city. Most of that came from what Gavin had done, but it was almost as much what she had done because she had taken up a position of leadership among the council.

She had just finished meeting with the El'aras liaison, though she wasn't even sure if they were truly in charge. She had a feeling that Gavin had a greater role among the El'aras than he knew about, or perhaps a greater role than he had admitted to her. Whatever it was, the El'aras deferred to him and made it clear that they would continue to do so. The thought made her smile, as she could easily imagine how he felt about the expectations being put on him. They were obvious to her, especially since the Shard was now gone.

“What is it?” Imogen said, pointing to a chair across the table.

In the corner of the tavern, Gaspar was visiting quietly with Wrenlow and Olivia, though every so often, Gaspar would glance in her direction. Scheming again, she suspected. She didn't really know what kinds of things Gaspar was

getting involved in, nor did she know what Gaspar was going to include her in, just that he often looked at her as if he were planning to use her in some way.

“You just need to see this,” Jorend said.

She groaned. “That’s never good.”

“It’s not necessarily bad. It’s just... You just need to see this. Normally I would not bother you with such things, but I think this is something for the general.”

Imogen was tempted to use her Porapeth potential, but thoughts about what that did to Benji kept her from doing so. If she were to use it, she believed she would *see* something, but there was a possibility that even if she had those visions, she still wouldn’t see what was needed to guide her.

“Where should I meet you?” she asked him.

“Northern part of the city.”

“Leier encampment?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Go. I will meet you when I am finished here.”

He nodded and then saluted, of all things, which she found to be a bit ridiculous. She had known Jorend a long time, and they had once had something of an antagonistic relationship, though those days were long gone. Now she viewed him as essentially an equal. Still, she assumed that he saluted not so much for her benefit but for the benefit of others. Perhaps not even for the benefit of the Leier that were here. They didn’t necessarily care if she was saluted. She may be the general, but that didn’t always matter to her people.

No. Rather, it was for the occasional El’aras that would come into the tavern. The sorcerers. The enchanters. And her friends. For whatever reason, the Leier felt as if they needed to raise her up in everyone else’s eyes, as if to elevate her standing, though she was not terribly concerned about such things, especially with her friends.

But now she had questions. Not just about what Jorend had come into the tavern for, but why Gaspar was sitting and

scheming. Something was happening, but then, something was always happening.

She waited until Gaspar looked in her direction, and she got to her feet.

“You’re leaving,” he said, walking over to her table. “Did you get enough to eat?”

“I don’t know if I could eat any more,” she said. “If there’s one thing that happens here, it’s that I eat well.”

He chuckled. “I think she tries to mother us.” He looked toward the kitchen where Jessica was working. The sounds of her labor drifted out to the main room of the tavern, as did the savory smells.

Imogen arched a brow at him.

“You know what I mean,” he said.

“I said nothing.”

“You’re acting more like him.”

“I know how old you are,” she said. “And that is all I’m acting like.”

He shook his head, watching for a moment. “Do you need company?”

She hesitated. Gaspar had become such a close friend ever since she had come to Yoran. He had seen her through so many changes, and he had never passed any sort of judgment. Even when she had still had her uncertainty about magic and its role in the world, she had never felt anything but support from him.

It was what drew her to him.

She needed to make sure Gaspar understood that, though she doubted that there was any way he did not. There were times when she wasn’t quite sure how to tell Gaspar her feelings. Then again, when it came to expressing herself, she found it easier to do while fighting.

“If you don’t think it is too much,” she said.

“I don’t,” he said. “Besides, we have time. The boy is sleeping, thank the gods, as it took an act of the gods to coax him into resting. And preparations are underway.”

She nodded. “They are.”

“Why do I get the feeling that something isn’t quite right for you, then?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s not that there’s something wrong, it’s just...”

“It’s just what?”

She wasn’t sure how much to share with him. It was a difficult thought, partly because she wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about what she was doing. She was actively trying to watch for the possibilities, doing what she had promised Benji. And as she did it, she couldn’t shake the feeling that he was pleased with her and with what she did, because she couldn’t shake the feeling that Benji wanted her to use that ability. But even though he did, there was a part of her that wondered if perhaps he saw something that she did not.

“It’s difficult,” she said, waving for him to join her outside the tavern.

Once they were in the darkness of night, it felt a little better having a conversation about these things. There was something that you simply did not talk about around others.

But as she looked at Gaspar, she saw the swirling possibilities for him. The silvery lines opened up, and yet...

Imogen hesitated to embrace those possibilities. She didn’t know what she might see if she were to look too closely at him. She told herself that it was because she didn’t want to drain the potential, even though she knew that was unlikely to happen rapidly.

“You’re holding something back,” Gaspar said. “When the boy does it, it’s usually about some plan he’s going to make, typically involving running off without us. I’ve at least gotten him to stop doing that, but you, on the other hand, don’t generally do that. So I’m trying to figure out what it is that this expression is implying.”

She smiled at him. “It’s just a Porapeth thing.”

“Well, that’s not terribly surprising. I was watching your eyes in the tavern. They keep flashing silver, and you obviously were using some of your Porapeth ability. Does that mean you’re watching for dangers?”

She smiled again. Had her eyes been changing? That might mean she was *using* the ability. Draining it, possibly.

There had been a time when she had not thought much about doing so, but the more that Benji had been changing, the more she started to think that might be a mistake.

“I think so,” Imogen said. “And I think I’m supposed to be watching for dangers. Benji warned me that I had been a little careless with this ability.”

Gaspar snickered.

“What?” she asked.

“I just find it amusing that a fragment is telling you that you have been careless.”

“I think the fragment is disappointed that I have not been using him to the fullest extent that he would like.”

“So what do you need to do?”

“Well, I believe I need to be monitoring the different fragments to see if there’s something I have overlooked.”

He nodded.

“Anyway, the preparations.”

“The preparations,” Gaspar said. “I don’t know what we might encounter on the other side. We’re going to need sorcerers and enchanters, and your Leier, along with—”

“The El’aras.”

Gaspar frowned.

“They aren’t all like her,” she said. “And I really have struggled to try to understand why you have the issues that you have with them.”

“It’s not the El’aras in general.”

“Is it *her*?”

Imogen had never gotten a clear answer from Gaspar on what bothered him about Anna. Something obviously did.

Not that she wanted to pry too much. If he was bothered by her, then so be it. She didn't like everybody that she came across either, but she did recognize when people could be useful. And the El'aras could most certainly be useful. Ignoring that possibility did not change that.

“It's not even her. It's...” He grunted. “Do you remember me telling you what it was like in the city before all this?” He spread his hands out to either side of him, gesturing to the buildings around them.

“I remember you talking about the lack of magic and your role as a constable and some of that.” Gaspar had never *really* wanted to share all that much about what he'd experienced here before magic had returned. She hadn't needed him to, though.

“Yes. That. I was a young constable. And a little hotheaded.”

She arched a brow, a smile spreading on her face.

“Anyway,” he went on, “there was a time when a trio of El'aras came into the city. Now, we may have banished other sorts of magic, but we had a hard time banishing the El'aras. They *were* magic, as Gavin likes to say. And it made it difficult.”

“What made it difficult?”

“The fact that we struggled with their kind of power. When they arrived, and when they moved, I was one of the constables assigned to follow.” He shook his head. “A whole lot of good that did. I couldn't follow them. I know now that my other constables were doing it as something of a game, intending to torment me a bit, but at the time, like I said, I was a little hotheaded.”

“Where is this going, Gaspar?”

“Let's just say they made a point of embarrassing me.”

She waited, thinking that he might expand.

“How?” she asked when he didn’t say anything more. It was important for him to admit what had happened, she suspected. She needed him to open up, even if he was going to struggle with it. She had questions about Gaspar, about his past, about who he had been. She had questions about why he no longer was with Desarra, despite how happy he had been after they had reconnected. She had questions about how he felt about her.

Imogen was the general of the Leier, and yet there were some questions that were easier to think than to ask.

“They sent one of their women at me,” he said, looking down at the ground. “And you know the El’aras. You know how they can be. You know how they tend to try to use their —”

“She seduced you?”

“Let’s just say she tried,” Gaspar said. “I realized it was a game to her after it got a little out of hand.”

Imogen recognized the difficulty he was having with telling her, and she did not laugh, though under other circumstances she might have. Gaspar was opening up. He shouldn’t be faulted for that.

“Thank you for sharing,” she said.

“Yes, well...”

“So you’re concerned that something similar happened to Gavin.”

“I really don’t think it did,” he said, shaking his head and sounding increasingly frustrated. “To be honest, I know I need to let go of it, and I need to stop thinking about her as a—”

“A woman?” Imogen said.

“Maybe.”

“You can think about her however you want. And however you need.”

“I understand.” He sighed. “I’m just thinking I need to do better.”

“Are you worried that he’s chasing her because he’s interested in her?”

Gaspar snorted. “You know, there was a time when I do think the boy was interested in her. That’s changed. She changed, and so did he. And now he’s got that sorcerer. He’s not going to say it, but I see the way he looks at her.” Gaspar laughed softly, shaking his head. “It’s good for him. That woman would be good for him. If he was ever able to open his eyes.”

“Oh?” Imogen asked.

“Well, sometimes you’re oblivious to what you have right in front of you.”

“I suppose.”

A silence fell between them.

“Are you going to show me what your people wanted you to know?” Gaspar eventually asked.

“I think that would be a good idea,” she said. “Let’s get moving. It’s just to the north side of town.”

She didn’t know what Jorend wanted her to see, but whatever it was might be a challenge, she suspected.

So, she focused. Imogen had taken to using her sacred patterns as often as possible. When she had first mastered them, she had used them only while fighting. Then, as she had progressed as a sacred sword master, she had started using them more often. Now she was almost constantly embracing one of the sacred patterns, letting the power carry her. She could feel the way the energy flowed, and she allowed this one to help her glide. It was a pleasant way of moving. And to his credit, Gaspar never seemed to mind the fact that she was not walking so much as she was gliding on a sacred pattern.

An idea came to her. “Have you ever been interested in training with the Leier?”

“Training with you? I don’t think so.”

The quick dismissal surprised her. “Not at all?”

He shrugged. “I was never much of a sword fighter, Imogen. You have to know your strengths, and that’s not mine. Now, daggers”—he whipped his pair of daggers out from hidden sheaths and twisted them in a quick flourish—“are another matter altogether. And now that I have my enchantments and I wear them openly, it’s less of an issue for me.”

“I suppose,” she said.

“Why do you ask?”

“I just thought it would be an opportunity for you.”

“That’s not to say that I wouldn’t want to spar with you, if that’s what you’re offering,” Gaspar said.

She smiled. “You don’t have to train with me.”

“It sounds like you want me to.”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to it. I want you to do what you want,” she said.

She felt as if she were picking her words far too carefully now.

He looked over at her. “Does the Porapeth tell you that you need to train me? Is there something I could know, and could see, that would benefit from your training?”

“I think everybody could benefit from that kind of training,” Imogen said. “The sacred patterns can offer you much. You just have to be open to it, and to understand the power that’s within it.”

Gaspar grunted. “I see. So you think I need to learn how to fight?”

“You do better than I would expect in a fight.”

“That’s some damning praise,” he muttered.

“Still, it’s praise,” she said, shrugging.

He snorted. “I suppose. Anyway, what brought that up?”

“I was just thinking that it would be nice to be able to work with you.”

“Is that the only way we can work together?”

She sensed a little hesitation from him. She stopped moving, though still held on to the sacred pattern, and she stood before him. Not as the general. Not as the First. She stood before him as Imogen Inaratha. She stood before him as herself.

“Gaspar,” she began.

He looked into her eyes. “I know,” he said. “I’m not much. I’m just a grumpy old thief, too old to be of much use, at least according to the boy.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

“Yeah, I know it’s not true. And I know that I’m probably being a bit unreasonable with what I’m thinking.”

“And what are you thinking?” she asked.

He regarded her for a long moment. “You don’t know?”

“I can’t read your mind, Gaspar. I’m a sacred sword master, and that’s it.”

“We both know that’s not true, either.”

She chuckled in the way that he had. “I suppose so.”

They stood in silence. It was strange. Both of them were so confident and competent in other aspects of their life, but in this... Well, neither of them were all that confident. Neither of them were all that *competent*. In this, she felt as if she were a child. She felt inexperienced. She felt lost.

Imogen wasn’t sure what she wanted to tell him, only that there were so many things that she needed to say to Gaspar. Things she wished she could have said before. Then again, had she said them before, she wouldn’t have been ready. How could she have? She hadn’t known who she was, and she hadn’t known *what* she was, until recently. Now that she knew what she was, and now that she was comfortable with it, she felt a very different sense about it all.

“I wish...” She stopped, and she frowned. “I suppose I wish it was easier.”

“It certainly can be,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be difficult.”

“Everything is difficult. There’s just varying degrees of difficulty.”

“Well, I think some parts of it can be easy for us,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, gradually moving closer to her. “Other parts can be hard. And the more that we work on us, the more we can find what we need and what we should do, but also, the more I wonder if maybe we have overcomplicated things.”

“Maybe,” she said.

They stood there, neither of them talking. And then when she heard a shout, she breathed out. The moment was gone.

She was no longer just Imogen Inaratha. Now she had to be the First. Now she had to be the general.

Gaspar grabbed her hand the moment she started to walk away from him. “Just because we were interrupted doesn’t mean we should stop talking,” he said.

“I know,” she said, feeling as if maybe she didn’t actually know.

“And just because we are focused on the present doesn’t mean we can’t look for the future.”

She found herself amused by that comment. It was the kind of thing Benji would have once told her. Only, Benji would’ve done it with a little more snark, and with Gaspar, there was none of that.

She smiled at him. “Thank you,” she said. “Now, let’s go see what we need to do.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IMOGEN

Imogen approached the edge of the city. Everything was quiet here, and the Leier had set up camp, having established a perimeter in a way that would ensure that her people were completely safe. She wasn't at all concerned about what might be here, as it was unlikely to be anything significant.

Still, Jorend had called her out here.

As she flowed this way, she paused periodically to test with the Tree Stands in the Forest technique, feeling her tree flourishing as she did, allowing herself an opportunity to detect whether there was anything else she might find. So far, there had been nothing.

Imogen felt that to be a good thing. She suspected that she wasn't going to have to worry about any additional dangers, especially here at the edge of Yoran and with how the protections here were in place.

The campsite was well established, and her people had certainly placed enough of a perimeter that she trusted they would be safe. More permanent structures had replaced the tents and were set up in a traditional Leier fashion. Perhaps it was arrogance, but she had not expected that there would be anything to worry about in this part of the city.

"Is he up there by the shamans?" Gaspar asked.

Imogen frowned. "Perhaps he is. Interesting."

"It's interesting that he is with the shamans?"

“It would be unusual for him.”

“Why?”

“Jorend has struggled with some of the traditional values,” she said. “He has gotten better, but he still finds it a bit of a challenge to overlook old beliefs.”

Gaspar stayed close to her. “How have you managed to do it so well?”

“I wouldn’t call it anything that I have done well,” she said. “I have tried to keep an open mind. I have found that doing so permits me the opportunity, and the ability, to see things the way they are, not the way I once believed them to be.”

“And yet, you haven’t been able to see the way that they *could* be,” he said.

Gaspar watched her intently. Maybe she had been wrong about him as well. Perhaps he was better at *that* than she realized.

She was quiet for a moment. “I’m getting better.”

She strode forward and found Jorend outside his tent. His was almost palatial, at least in terms of what the Leier considered their homes. It had been set with a bit more prominence now than there had been, and he had several different enchantments placed around it, all likely designed to trigger an alert, an alarm of sorts if there was a threat to him.

She could feel those different enchantments as she neared him, and was aware of how they felt through her connection to the sacred pattern. As she approached, he bowed his head slightly.

“First,” he said. “Thank you for coming.”

Gaspar glanced over to her, before watching Jorend. He didn’t say anything, though she doubted that Gaspar was going to say much of anything here.

“You said that there was something out here I needed to see,” she said.

“There is. Not here exactly so much as near here.”

“Is it something we need to get others involved in?”

“Possibly,” he said.

“Anything that we need to get *him* involved in?”

Jorend frowned. “I do not think so.”

Her people didn't need her to specify. They knew and understood exactly what it was that she was asking. Gavin liked to get involved in everything that happened around the city, though increasingly, Imogen started to think that they needed to offer him protection from himself—and from his desire to get involved in everything that happened. There were times when he simply needed to let others take the lead.

Or maybe that was just Gaspar's influence on her.

“Then guide me,” she said.

She strode forward, still flowing, and followed Jorend as he meandered through the camp. She cast an occasional nod to some of her people, making a point of looking at all those who were with them, wanting to establish a presence here. She may not always stay out here with her people, but she wanted them to know that she was still one of them.

And Imogen tried to think that she was, but there was a part of her that didn't feel like she was a part of her people anymore. She had abandoned them once already, so it was not a great leap to think that she would feel compelled to leave them again. Some of that came from how much time she spent in other parts of the city, even as she had to lead.

They reached the outskirts of the Leier encampment, and from there, everything was quiet. Imogen frowned as she felt something pressing against her Tree Stands in the Forest technique.

“There has been an intrusion attempt here,” she said, her voice soft.

“There has,” Jorend said.

She looked over to him. He didn't have a sword unsheathed, though he wouldn't. He, like her, was a sacred sword master. Imogen herself had done most of his training, at least in the sacred patterns, and Jorend had proven himself to be a capable, skilled student.

"Why didn't you warn anybody before now?" she asked.

"Because it has been dealt with, First."

She nodded. Dealt with. Of course it had been. Her people wouldn't wait for her guidance to know what to do. That was something she had made certain of.

"Very well. Show me what you have uncovered."

She wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to show her, nor why he had come out here to do so. He could have simply told her that there was an incursion.

She looked around, not seeing anything obvious, but she had a suspicion about what was here and what she might feel, and was increasingly concerned about what he was going to show her.

"Well?" she asked.

"I *am* showing you," he said.

She chuckled. "Not yet, you aren't."

"You're right. It is just that this place is a little challenging."

"What is it?" Gaspar asked, coming to stand next to her.

"He's struggling with trying to use the sacred patterns in the way he thinks he needs to in order to show me what he wants me to see."

"Wait. He's going to show you through your patterns?"

"If he can make them work for him," she said with a bit of a smile. "But I have a feeling that he is not as effective as he would like to be."

Jorend remained motionless. It was just for a moment, but then he began to form Tree Stands in the Forest. She could feel

the energy taking hold, and she was pleased that it wasn't a single tree.

That was a lesson that had taken Jorend a while to learn. He had always been very stubborn about embracing the fact that a single tree may not be enough. When they wanted to be a forest, they needed to be a forest. He created a ring of trees, and they surrounded something.

Imogen felt it, but that was all she could do. It pressed on her, an awareness of some power that was here, but nothing more than that. She wasn't entirely sure what it was that she was detecting.

She didn't attempt to replicate his tree pattern. She didn't need to. She had her own forest and could feel what he was doing. Hers was much larger than his, though perhaps that didn't make a difference here. The breadth of the forest wasn't essential.

"So there was an attempt to pass through the perimeter here," she said.

"There was, though I don't know what it was. It has not made it through, but this isn't the only place."

Imogen's heart skipped a beat. "The fact that you are only telling me this now suggests that it was not successful."

"It was not."

"Do you know what it is?"

"I suspect it's coming from the other side, but I can't confirm it. There isn't much that would push through like what we have detected."

She strode along the edge of the city, feeling for the various incursion points. There had been no sign of a breach since they had been here, other than the various influences they had occasionally detected. Nothing that had come through had been of much significance.

With a bit of reluctance, she focused on the ability to *see*. The lines of silvery power flowed around her. They were faint,

and there wasn't anything obvious to them, regardless of how much she strained to find the pattern.

Gaspar walked alongside her as she went.

"Do your enchantments tell you anything?" she asked him.

With his enchantments, it was possible that he was able to pick up on things she was not able to, but she doubted that he was finding or feeling anything much different than she was.

"Not particularly," he said. "But that's not what you're asking, is it?"

"I don't see anything, though I have looked."

"Should you have?"

"It is possible," she said. "I have been attempting to use that aspect of my gift, but it has not been all that fruitful. And I have not detected anything dangerous here."

"But there still could be something dangerous," Gaspar said.

"Just because I do not see a thing does not take away the challenge that it poses. It's always possible for there to be something dangerous that I cannot see."

"What do you intend to do?"

"We must trace the incursions," she said. "If they have influenced the city—"

"They have not, First," Jorend said, staying behind her.

She glanced back, and he flicked his gaze up to the sky.

Overhead were the darkened shapes of the renral. A dozen of them circled, crisscrossing above them. Imogen hadn't noticed them, but perhaps it was because they hadn't wanted her to notice them. Zealar was not among them, but that was not terribly uncommon. As one of the largest renral that she had ever encountered, Zealar could be an imposing creature. He was out there somewhere, and all it would take for her to connect to Zealar would be to reach some part of her through the sacred pattern that bonded them, and then she could summon him.

It wasn't too different from how the Chain Breaker used his dragon, though Zealar was no enchantment. At least, she did not think he was. Perhaps he was not that dissimilar to the dragon—and how it had been created.

“So the renral have told you that they have not crossed over?” she asked Jorend.

“The renral have detected no sign of a full incursion,” he said.

“Very well.”

“That's it?” Gaspar said. “He says that the renral haven't detected anything, and you believe that?”

“If the renral had detected something, they would have alerted us. More than that, they would've neutralized it.”

“What happens if there are kinds of power that the renral cannot neutralize?”

“Oh, I'm almost certain that there are,” she said, “but have we seen anything?”

Gaspar frowned at her. “I don't know. Probably not. I'm guessing no, otherwise you would have said that.”

“Nothing so far,” she said. “But that is not to say that there will not be anything that's difficult. It's just that so far, the renral have not encountered it.” She extended her ring of trees, creating even more of a forest around the city. As she did so, she noticed faint dimples in the ground. It was a strange sensation. It wasn't even on the perimeter of the city the way she would've expected. This was something subtle. Soft. As if something had scratched beneath the surface.

Something had tried to come through, but the protections of the city had prevented it.

That was good.

She sighed. “I suppose we should let Gavin know,” she said, looking over to Gaspar, “so we can—”

“We don't need to let the boy know about this unless you think there is a threat.”

“He needs to know that an attempt was made to break through,” she said. There were many things she would protect Gavin from, but in this case, she didn’t think keeping him from knowing about the dangers was a good idea. There might be things that Gavin could do that the rest of them wouldn’t be able to.

“He can know there was an attempt, but what’s it going to do?” Gaspar said. “It’s just going to distract him, and he’s going to go out looking for other sorts of danger. And for all we know, he’s going to keep digging and thinking he’s going to have to find... well, find something.”

“What do you think he’s going to find?” Imogen asked.

“I do not know.” Gaspar stared for a moment before continuing. “The boy has enough on his plate. I’d like to take some away from him. He tries to burden himself with everything, and in this case, I’m not so sure that the burden is a necessary one. I’m not so sure that he needs to be a part of this. Unless we find something, why don’t we investigate on our own? The city is not only his to protect.”

Imogen breathed out slowly. That wasn’t exactly the worst plan, but it made her more than a bit uncomfortable. Perhaps if she were to see the different possibilities, she might be able to know ahead of time whether that would be a problem.

But not now.

“Perhaps it is not,” she said. “Perhaps you are right in this. That doesn’t mean that I like it, Gaspar.”

“He’s distracted. It’s all about this woman.”

“You’re keeping it from him because of the El’aras now?”

“He needs to deal with this. One way or another, it has to be resolved.”

“Then it’s not about Gavin?” she asked.

Gaspar turned away, looking back toward the city, and said nothing.

“What are you afraid of with her?”

Imogen didn't have to specify that she meant Alana. She understood that Gaspar felt protective of the girl, but she was no longer even certain it was necessary, considering what she had seen of her. When they had been in the other realm, Alana believed that she was fully capable of protecting herself. She just didn't know how. Yet.

That was something Imogen thought she could handle. All it would take would be a few lessons on what she could do and how to do it, and she had a strong suspicion that it would make Alana into a potent weapon.

Though maybe that was Gaspar's real fear. He didn't want the girl to be a weapon.

"She deserves a chance to choose," he said.

"That's what you're worried about?"

"Yes." He looked over to Imogen, defiance shining in his eyes. "She deserves a chance to choose. I don't know what happened. I don't know how she ended up here. I don't even know if this is her home or not. All I can say is that she deserves that opportunity. The same one you got to take."

She smiled. Leave it to Gaspar to know just the right way to twist the knife.

But she could do the same.

"I will do whatever we need to do to protect her," she said.

"Why do I get the feeling that involves something else?" Gaspar asked.

"I don't know what you mean."

"We both know that's not true."

"Fine," Imogen said. "If she gets to choose, then we will give her *all* the choices that she might need."

"Which includes training with the Leier."

She nodded. "You weren't interested."

"Maybe I am now," he said. Imogen arched a brow, and Gaspar shrugged. "Well, if you're going to train her, I might as

well go along with those trainings.”

“So when it comes to the girl, you’re willing to train and learn, but when I offered to teach you on your own, you weren’t interested?” She wanted him to think she was hurt. That way he’d done what she wanted.

“It’s not like that,” he said.

Imogen glanced over to Jorend, who was waiting for her, and began to walk away. “It does not matter, Gaspar.”

“It’s not like that,” Gaspar said again, hurrying to catch up to her. “I don’t need an excuse to spend time with you.”

Imogen frowned but stayed silent.

“I also suppose I don’t really need an excuse to spend time with Alana, but I do want her to be prepared,” he said. “And I think she will make a better choice if she knows that someone she is familiar with is there with her.”

She eyed him. “So this has nothing to do with her.”

“Yes and no.”

“And what about me?”

“I wasn’t going to avoid you,” Gaspar said, seemingly confused.

“So you wouldn’t mind if I handled her training myself.”

He blinked. “You would do that?”

“If she is to learn quickly, she needs to learn from the best.”

Gaspar smiled tightly. She wasn’t sure if he was smiling at the fact that she had made the comment about being the best, though it was not a boast, or if it was that she was offering to train Alana herself. Either way, she didn’t think it mattered.

“When would you start?” he asked.

“I’m afraid it will have to wait until we cross,” she said, “because there is one thing I can see.” Imogen closed her eyes for a moment and picked up the strands of silver light that seemed as if they were creating a pattern in front of her, and

all of those patterns seemed to lead toward one conclusion.
“We will cross soon.”

“But when we cross, will there be time to train?”

“It depends on how much training we can compact into a short period of time.”

“How would you do that?” Gaspar asked.

As much as she didn't want to draw on the Porapeth ability, she thought she needed to now. The lines coalesced, and she saw how she could do it.

“I have some ideas.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Preparations went quickly.

Almost everybody Gavin asked was willing to come with him to help. The Leier were eager, as were most of the enchanters. Even the Society sent a dozen sorcerers, none of which Gavin knew. The El'aras even volunteered five people to come with him, including Brandon.

There was a darkness in Brandon's eyes as he approached Gavin at the outskirts of the city, where they were continuing to make their preparations.

"You went to sleep before we had a chance to discuss," Brandon said.

"You could've had somebody wake me up."

Brandon looked over to where Gaspar was gathering a trunk filled with enchantments. As far as Gavin could tell, most of them were golems of some sort, and many were enchantments Alana had made. He worried that she might have exerted too much of herself in making them, as he had seen what happened when she did that. And if they were like the folded enchantments she had made for him, would it drain some part of her if they were damaged? Others like Mekel reluctantly admitted that there was some impact, but Gavin had seen it enough times to know that the consequences were real.

"We tried," Brandon said, "but your friend would not permit it."

“We’re going after her,” Gavin said without preamble. “I understand that the El’aras feel a bit conflicted about the Shard at this point, and that some of you may not feel as if we need to—”

“We need to go after her, and none of us are going to disagree with that, but not all of us are willing to go. Not all want to go chasing the past. Some have begun looking for a different purpose.”

“What about you?”

“My path follows you, as it has from the moment I met you, Chain Breaker.” Brandon chuckled. “But I also think we need to give her a chance.”

“And the others?”

“Some have offered protection to the city, and there are some who are working with the Society, others working with the Leier, and...” He shrugged. “We’re trying to find ourselves.”

“By abandoning the El’aras?” Gavin asked.

“Not abandoning, but trying to incorporate other aspects of the world. We cannot continue to rely on what was. We need to find what can be, sort of like you did. You are one of us, or you should have been, and you have embraced other ways of this world.”

“I don’t know that you should use me as an example of what the El’aras can be or should be,” Gavin said. “I was never raised as one of you. I don’t want the El’aras to lose their culture.”

“We lost our culture long ago. The elders maintained elements of it, but they have not maintained all of it. Perhaps we have been clinging to the past when we need to look to the future.” Brandon shrugged again. “At least, that is something I’m starting to wonder about. Besides, if I get to learn how you fight, then maybe I can defeat you.” He smiled, though he didn’t do so with much mirth. It was an unsettling change to the El’aras man.

What if they were changing too much?

Gavin let out a heavy sigh. “Thank you for coming.”

“You do not need to thank me.”

Gavin turned away, and he continued working with the others to gather enchantments and prepare as best they could. It was slow, tedious work, and it left him wondering how Anna was doing on the other side. He didn’t know what to make of what had happened to her, but having heard her calling for help did make him a bit concerned.

Gavin approached Wrenlow, who had a stack of books next to him.

Wrenlow grinned at him. “I’ve had Char helping me. I was hoping he might come with us, but I think he’s busy with the Society and is worried about leaving them for too long.”

“Well, I think that’s probably a good reason.”

“I know it is, I just appreciate having somebody with his mind with me. Olivia has helped modify a couple things that the Society suggested, and I think we finally have a way to transfer any documents that we might find from one place to the other.”

“You can’t just send them across?” Gavin asked.

“Those enchantments are too power intensive,” Olivia said. She stood next to Wrenlow, and her voice was quiet, almost timid. Gavin had been working with her enough that he was surprised to still see that side of her. “But what we need is a way for us to just transfer some of the information across so that somebody might be able to pick it up and use it.”

“So you’re just sending the pages?”

“It’s like taking a drawing of them and sending it over,” Wrenlow explained. “What’s great about this is that if there’s paper on this side, then the enchantment will replicate it.” He grinned. “You have to see it. It’s pretty amazing.”

Gavin laughed. “I will have to trust you on that.”

He kept moving around and watching the others who were getting prepared. As he did, he realized something: He would need to replace the communication enchantment. It didn’t take

him long to find where Zella was coordinating with some of the other enchanters. One of them was her student, who would be coming along with them, it seemed.

Zella glanced over. “Let me guess, you need more enchantments. I didn’t think you were using them quite as much as you once did, but if you need anything, you have it. I don’t have them sorted in the way I prefer, though.”

“Just a communication enchantment,” Gavin said.

“I thought you had one that the El’aras made. What happened to it?”

“Damaged.”

“I see. Well, you need it so you can communicate with your usual team?”

“I do.”

He didn’t think the others had been damaged, but he would need to replace them nonetheless. There was a possibility that they had been corrupted in some way from the power in the folded realm.

“I have something, but it may require that you modify it a little bit,” she said. “You may even need to power it once you get there. It’s possible that the connection to the other side is potent enough that it will disrupt things if you were to activate it here.”

Gavin hadn’t considered that before. “That’s a great idea,” he said.

She reached into a nearby trunk and grabbed several small items. “These were going to be for my enchanters to be able to communicate with one another, but I suppose we can make more.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Certain. These are exquisitely made, Gavin. I would not give you anything that is of poor craftsmanship. But be cautious with that. These could sell for quite a bit.”

They were very nice, though they were not El'aras in origin and were not nearly as elaborate or ornate as the one Anna had made for him. Gavin had used that enchantment for so long that he had felt as if it were a part of him.

He took the enchantments and thanked Zella, then handed them out to the others. Wrenlow took it without much thought, though he frowned at it for a moment before swapping it out. Imogen didn't say anything as she changed hers, but it was Gaspar who challenged him.

"I don't know what happened," Gavin finally said.

"So it got destroyed, and you don't know who is responsible for it, and you worry about something happening to ours, so you're having us take a new enchantment to a strange place and trusting that it's going to work."

Gavin shrugged. "Well, pretty much."

Gaspar grunted and shook his head. "Can't say that I care much for that, but if it is necessary, then it's necessary. So. What else do we need to do?"

At this point, Gavin didn't know what to do other than finish preparations, so he waited and watched the others as they worked.

It would be a good team.

For the most part, they weren't heading over to the other realm to fight. Yes, that was likely going to be required, as it was always the case given the kinds of things Gavin did, but it wasn't the primary purpose.

He felt a faint pulsation. It was like a tapping that drummed on him, as if there was an energy that was there, something that seemed to be pushing on him in a way that left him trembling a little.

He hesitated, but then used the Lightning Strikes pattern, shooting straight into the air and then hovering overhead. Down below, the city was active, and on the outskirts, where all of his team was gathering, it was even more active, but everything looked so small from above.

There was an energy from where he hovered, though he couldn't tell what it was.

Imogen shot up into the sky, joining him. "Can I help with anything?"

"I feel something. Maybe it's just the same as what we have been picking up on, but it seems to be building. I just wish I knew more about it."

"There may be something we could try that we have not yet done."

While they floated using the Petals on the Wind pattern, Imogen focused. Gradually, her eyes flashed with silver. Then a wispy bit of energy streamed out and slowly took on a shape. Gavin had not seen her summon the Porapeth fragment very often, but when she did, he recognized that she felt as if there was something she needed to see.

Benji took form. He was made of silvery swirls of power, but little more than that. He looked humanoid, though Gavin wasn't able to make out any of his features. He was curious what he would've looked like in life, especially as he had never met a Porapeth.

"Up here, First? Really?" the fragment said.

"I didn't realize you had such difficulty with heights," Imogen said.

"Not heights, but I don't like it very much. Though I didn't think that you did, either."

"I'm using nothing more than a sacred pattern," she said, bowing her head slightly, "and it is one that I believe you yourself made sure we knew."

Gavin had learned that the Porapeth were responsible for the sacred patterns, or at least this Porapeth in particular was responsible for the Leier learning the sacred patterns, but it was still amusing to hear Imogen mention it, and it was still a little disconcerting to see the fragment interacting with Imogen so easily.

Benji barked out a laugh. “Well, maybe I did. What is it now?”

“We need information,” Imogen said. “You spoke to us once about the Forerunners.”

The fragment stiffened, if such a thing were even possible.

“We intend to go and explore,” she said.

“I won’t be able to help you there, First.”

“I’m well aware,” Imogen said. “And I’m not going to ask for your help. I’m not going to do anything that is going to damage the power that you have provided, but I do want to know if there’s anything here you can help us learn more about.”

Benji turned, twisting in the air, seeming to thin out for a moment. As he did, Imogen’s eyes flashed again with silver.

The connection she had to this fragment was strange, and so different from connections that others had to fragments of power. It didn’t seem as if it were harmful to her. In a way, it was more like the connection that Jayna had to the Sul’toral power she’d used with Ceran.

“You should leave it alone, First.”

“I’m not sure that we can.”

“If you fail there...”

“What happens?” Imogen asked.

Benji flickered, and it seemed as if he was shimmering. “If you fail there, the power is gone.”

“Are you saying that there is no way of collecting a fragment?” Gavin asked.

Benji turned to him. “Oh. The Chain Breaker. No, I’m not saying that power is dissipated. I’m just saying that if you fail there, and if you fall there, nothing remains.”

“Why?” Imogen asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “And we never knew. And maybe...” He shook his head, which seemed bizarre coming

from a fragment like this. “Maybe I did. But you know how it is, First. Too many lost memories. Fragmented.”

“Fragmented,” Imogen repeated. “Thank you, Benji.”

“I think you should just wall it off like we did. They cannot get through.”

“I don’t know that we can do that any longer. We have tried.”

“You will be on your own with this, then, First. I won’t be able to help you.”

With that, he dispersed, becoming little more than a silvery cloud that then flowed back into Imogen.

Gavin found that a little alarming, but Imogen was smiling.

“What was that?” he asked.

“It was Benji’s way of telling me that he believes in me,” she said. “And, unfortunately, I’m not sure if he has misplaced his belief. But we should not linger.”

Gavin could feel the pulsations of power and wondered if there was going to be another attempt to break through. If there was, they needed to have people monitoring for that. Even if they didn’t have the ability to stop it or counteract it, he still wanted to make sure they were dealing with that threat.

“We should watch for that kind of incursion,” he said.

Imogen eyed him for a long moment. “I have already taken care of it.”

Of course she had.

There were things he had to do—and much he no longer had to worry about.

But there was still so much to deal with.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IMOGEN

The air in the other realm felt odd. Imogen wasn't sure she would ever get accustomed to it, as she had not been able to shake the feeling or the uneasy energy that she detected when trying to make sense of what she might need to do here. She knew that a fight was going to be necessary, as it was always necessary, but she wasn't exactly sure what that might entail.

Gaspar was clad in many different types of enchantments, enough that she had a hard time keeping track of just how many he had on him. More than that, she had a hard time knowing the purpose behind each. Whatever he was doing with those enchantments was not something he felt the need to share with her. She would never demand that he do so, as it was every bit his right to choose how he was going to use enchantments. She had been trying to figure out what he was using and how he was using them, but had not been too successful.

He stayed close to her, as if he were afraid of putting too much space between them. She found that a little amusing, as though he feared, or felt, that she was unable to protect herself. Or perhaps the alternative was the more likely answer. Maybe it was that Gaspar stayed close to her because he wanted her protection, not so much that he thought he needed to protect her.

"It sounds weird here," Gaspar said, keeping his voice a whisper as they were making their way across the ground.

The entire procession was far larger than Imogen would've expected them to bring over here. Gavin didn't seem to be bothered by that, though she was. She didn't like having so many people here, putting so many at risk, especially when they didn't really know where they were going. Not only that, but she didn't necessarily care for the fact that none of the people they'd brought over here had the ability to travel quickly—not the way that she and Gavin and only a few others would.

“Are you nervous?” she asked Gaspar, glancing in his direction, slightly amused by the prospect of Gaspar being worried about anything. When she had first met him what seemed like an eternity ago, Gaspar had never been the type to come across as nervous. Even now, she wasn't sure if it was nerves or if it was more just that he was worried for Alana. Not that he was concerned for himself. No. That didn't strike her as something Gaspar would feel.

“Are you not?” he said.

“I suppose this place has its own uneasy instability,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “I've been trying to make sense of it, trying to see why I am so troubled by it. I can't quite place it, though.”

Gaspar jerked his head around. “I can tell you why I think it's unpleasant.”

“And why is that?”

“It's because of whoever is responsible for it.”

She didn't need for him to explain. That was one of the reasons they were here. It was certainly the reason she was here, though she suspected that Gavin was here for a very different reason, not because he wanted to try to understand things about this place. That may be part of it, but she doubted that was all of it for him. Rather, in her case, she was here so she could try to make sense of who was responsible for all of this.

And there was another reason, one that she had not spoken to many people about. It was one she had not really known

how to broach because in her mind, it was something that left her with quite a bit of uncertainty. Any time she started to think about this place, the power that was here, and whatever she might need to do with it, she felt some part of Benji reacting.

It was odd for her to be aware of that. She didn't know why Benji would respond in that way, only that she could feel some part of him seeming to squirm inside her. His reaction told her that something was amiss.

Still, she couldn't call him forward. She might try to, and she might attempt to get his attention and perhaps gain some of his focus, but whenever she did, there was no response from Benji. He was just there, a quiet stirring deep within her.

He had warned her that would be the case, though. He had told her that there were things he could do in this place, and things he could not. But she still thought she needed to try to make more sense of the power so that she could use it—and find a way to understand what more they needed to do.

“We will find the answers,” she said.

Gaspar glanced over, arching a brow.

She shrugged. “Or we will not.”

“If nothing else, we haven't had to fight for a little while.”

“You almost sound disappointed.”

That was more like the Gaspar she had expected.

He snorted. “It's not disappointment. It is more about having expectations met. In this place, with everything we've seen and everything we've done, I fully expect to have something target us. Target me. That has been my experience every time we have come over here.”

“Have you considered the fact that you were coming just the two of you?”

“I've given it some thought,” he said, “but it had been the case even when it wasn't just the two of us. It happened when more came over here before.”

“And that was when Gavin was injured.”

“Would you stop making sense?”

She let out a laugh. “Only if you start.”

“Anyway,” he went on, shaking his head, “Gavin seems to think we’re going to be able to reach one of these old settlements that will provide us some answers.”

“You don’t feel that’s going to be the case?”

“I have no idea. Possibly. Truth be told, it wouldn’t surprise me if there were some settlements that do have answers. Considering that I don’t know what answers we’re looking for, though, I can’t tell you one way or the other.”

“We need to know more about who rules in this realm.” Imogen felt that deep inside her. “We must come at it from a place of understanding. That is going to be the only way we will understand what more we need to do.”

“And there you go again,” he said. “Having practicality.”

“I am Leier,” she said, as if that was the only answer she needed. And in her mind, perhaps that *was* the only answer she needed. She was Leier. She was not going to rush into anything, and she certainly wasn’t going to assume there was a danger when there might not be.

“I am a little concerned about what he intends to do with her,” Gaspar said.

“And by ‘her’ do you mean Alana, or do you mean the El’aras woman?”

“I suppose I mean both. I know what his goal is with Alana, even if he doesn’t say it. He intends to help her find a sense of purpose, though I’m not entirely sure that Alana wants to have a sense of purpose.”

“Everybody wants to know their place,” she said.

“I don’t mean it like that,” he said hurriedly.

“I don’t believe you did. I’m just saying that everybody deserves to have an opportunity to know where they fit. It may

not be where they once thought, but they can find that place. It gives them a chance to be who and what they want.”

Gaspar went quiet.

The sky around them had a hazy quality to it, though it did seem almost as if it was sunny. It wasn't a direct sun shining down, though Imogen couldn't remember if there ever had been in the time she had been here. Perhaps this was all it ever was. If so, that was unfortunate. Unpleasant, as well. There was not much wind, and it wasn't warm or cold. It was just somewhat... even. Everything about this place struck her as if it were dead or dying. All of it left her thinking that whatever had once been here was lost, and perhaps that was the way it was meant to be: a dead—or dying—place.

Everything made her feel uneasy. And maybe that uneasiness was more her imagination than anything else, but she still felt it, nonetheless.

About midday, or at least what felt like midday considering when they had departed, the procession came to a halt. Gavin went off, scouting the way that he often did, leaving them behind. Imogen was tempted to go after him. He used the Lightning Strikes pattern to scout, and though he did it skillfully, there were still elements of the pattern that she thought she could correct to make it even more effective for him. She was tempted to tell him that, but if she did, she worried that doing so would only serve to irritate him. She had to strike a balance with him.

Instead, she stayed behind. She checked with Jorend and several of the other Leier to make certain they had all they needed, though her people were fully capable of handling things all on their own.

She moved on and watched the gathered El'aras, including Brandon, who she knew Gavin had a certain fondness for. Brandon fumbled with some of the sacred patterns. There had been a time when she would have been offended by that, a time when she would have been bothered by the fact that someone—and in this case, she knew it was Gavin—had shared the sacred patterns with somebody not of the Leier.

Now she no longer felt that same possessiveness. That was partly because she understood that there was only so long that the Leier could retain the sacred patterns, and partly because she started to feel like everybody from Yoran was a part of her people to a certain extent. She was tempted to go and visit with the El'aras, to offer her knowledge, and she started toward them.

Jorend came over to her, brow furrowed, causing her to hesitate. "You do not need to go over there, First."

She regarded him with curiosity. "I don't?"

"Do you permit their learning?"

She smiled tightly. "Do I need to provide my approval?"

"You are the First. You are the sacred sword master."

"And yet these are not my patterns to possess. They are meant to be for anyone."

He was quiet for a moment, staring off toward the El'aras. Imogen imagined the way his mind was working, trying to decide who and what they would teach. Imogen had already taught those not of the Leier how to use many of the same patterns, so she didn't have the hesitation that he did.

"They have some skill, do they not?" Jorend asked.

"They do," she agreed. "Untrained, and a little raw, but they have some potential."

"They might have been formidable before."

She started to smile at that. It was actually significant praise from him.

"They might have?" she said.

"Before," he added again.

"Of course."

Jorend turned to her. "If you would like, I can instruct them in some of the finer points of the patterns. I believe the burly man there actually has some talent."

"Brandon," she said.

“He’s the one that the Chain Breaker is fond of.”

“He is. He’s different.” She frowned. “Even among the El’aras, he was something of an outsider.”

“Much like you.”

She nodded. Maybe that was why she felt so compelled to help, and drawn to participate.

“He was like me. And not exactly like me,” she said. “I have to say that he’s not quite as talented.”

Jorend barked out a laugh. “Modesty from the First.”

She glanced over. “Was that modesty?”

“Well, you said that he wasn’t quite as talented. There aren’t many who are quite as talented as you.”

She stood with hands locked behind her. “See if you can’t instruct them on the particulars of the Tree Stands in the Forest pattern. Start with that. They need to understand the basics, especially here.”

“Yes, First.”

“And as you work with them,” she went on, leaving it out there that she assumed he was going to continue to work with them, even after this, “I want you to help them see the interconnectedness of the trees. Can you do that for me?”

Jorend regarded her, and then nodded slowly. “I see. That is probably the right idea. Of course, First.”

“I thought so.”

“The others would like your attention,” he said. “When you have an opportunity, that is.”

Imogen nodded.

“I will ensure they have proper training.” He offered a slight bow, and then he hurried over to the El’aras.

Imogen watched for just a moment, taking in how quickly Jorend took control. He really would have been a skilled leader. There was a time when he thought he was going to be the next general. That was before Imogen, though. Yet he

didn't ever show any signs of disappointment, or irritation, or really any sort of emotion about that. They had grieved the loss of their homeland, and then they had moved on. As the Leier would do.

Maybe that was something she needed to do, as there might be a part of her that had ignored the pain of what had happened, and ignored the effect it had on her people. That could be dangerous, she knew. And if she ignored it for too long, there was a real possibility that it would eventually build to the point where her people struggled to know who they were supposed to be and understand how they fit into the world as it now was.

There was a stir deep in her mind. Once again, it left her thinking of Benji, and she knew that he was there even if he wasn't speaking to her as he would normally. His presence existed, nonetheless. She found it strange that he was reacting, but he didn't want her to feel compelled. Why now?

"If you want to say something, go on and say it," she said. "If you are going to harass me this way, then be silent."

She waited, hoping that confronting him directly might lead Benji to interact with her in some way, but there was nothing. No comment. No response. Just nothing.

Imogen sighed, and then she picked her way through the different sorcerers, including where Wrenlow was talking to several of the scholars. She found Alana seated near them but by herself. That surprised her, though it occurred to her that it wasn't so much the sorcerers that she positioned herself close to as it was the enchanters.

Zella had come along, and much like many of the others, she actively made enchantments the entire time they walked. Now that they were camped, she was busy ensuring there were other enchantments that could be made. Zella shot Imogen a look of distrust, though Imogen wondered what she had done to deserve that.

Maybe it was just the fact that she was walking too close to Alana, and Zella did not trust anybody with the girl.

“It is time for you to work,” Imogen said, interrupting Alana as she traced her hand along a pile of stone. Or, at least it looked a little bit like stone, but as she moved her hand against it, it rippled, and then it began to shift and compress, compacting down into something more like a box.

Alana looked up at her. “Gaspar told me that you were going to work with me. He said that it was time I learned how to fight.”

“He believes that you need to know how to protect yourself. He’s probably not wrong.”

Alana smiled. When she did, there was a quality to her that reminded Imogen of the young child Alana had been. It was almost enough for Imogen to forget just how much the girl had been through. Almost. But then she turned, and it would have been imperceptible if not for the fact that Imogen held on to the Tree Stands in the Forest technique and was aware of the power used around her, so she could feel the way Alana was pouring some of that power through her. She was connected to something in this world, something that was not present on the other side, and something that only she, and now Gavin, had a link to.

“I don’t really want to fight the way you do,” Alana said. “Not that I’m saying that your fighting style is not beneficial. It’s actually quite beautiful. It looks like you dance.”

Imogen smiled at the compliment. “A true battle is but a dance,” she said. “And when I first trained, that was what we did. We danced with practice swords. It was not about overwhelming an opponent or destroying them so much as it was demonstrating the forms.”

“And you think I can learn your forms?” the girl asked.

“The traditional forms?” Imogen said, and then shook her head. “No. I do not think you could master the traditional forms.”

The spark in Alana’s eyes faded.

“But we aren’t asking you to become a traditional swordsman,” Imogen clarified. “We aren’t asking the El’aras

who Jorend is training to become traditional swordsmen.”

“All of the El’aras know how to fight,” Alana said.

“They know, but they don’t know. There is a difference between traditional fighting, what I was taught, and what I will teach you now of the sacred sword patterns. Are you open to learning?”

Alana nodded, sitting up and somehow looking older again. “Do you think that my connection to this place will work?”

“I don’t know, but I am curious to find out. Gavin’s ability does not change here.”

“He’s bigger and stronger here.”

“That’s not the ability I’m talking about. I’m talking about the sacred sword patterns,” Imogen said. “That power does not change here. Neither does my connection to them, so I am hopeful that you may find the same.”

Alana looked around. “What do we practice with?”

“You will have a sword.”

“And you?”

“You will be lucky to touch me.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gavin chose to bring everyone to the ruins.

That was the first place he had seen any evidence of human activity on this side, and it was where he thought he might find something more, assuming they were able to move carefully here. As they transitioned over, he did so near one of the ancient trees, and a massive caravan of people came through with him.

Nothing attacked them.

Gaspar was quiet.

Wrenlow, on the other hand, was not. Everything was new and fascinating and exciting to him. He studied the grasses, he studied the plants, and he even studied some of the small insects that Gavin hadn't paid any mind to. Wrenlow had plenty of theories about what they were doing and what they were finding here, and he was not at all ashamed to share those with them, because it seemed as if everything he encountered, and everything that they came across, was exciting to him in a way he needed to make sure they all heard about it.

When they reached the ruins, Wrenlow and the other Society scholars hurried inside.

Gaspar started laughing.

"What is it?" Gavin asked.

"Oh, it's this kid. You knew he was going to be excited, and I know you've been trying to figure out a way for him to come here without actually having to come here, but I don't

know that it would've been nearly as exhilarating as doing so this way.”

Gavin shrugged. “No, I think you're right. Wrenlow needed to be here in person. He would've wanted to come over here, anyway.”

Gaspar snorted. “How long do you think it's going to take for them to find anything?”

“To be honest, I have no idea, though I figure that if anybody's going to find anything, it's going to be Wrenlow with a crew of Society sorcerers.”

“You know they've cataloged the entire library.”

Gavin nodded, looking over to see the Leier starting to encircle the grounds, which he was thankful for. They had agreed that they were going to provide a measure of protection for Wrenlow and the scholars as they were researching, and that Gavin and the others were going to do whatever exploration they needed, but Gavin wasn't even sure where they were going to need to go.

As Gaspar and Imogen spoke quietly to each other, Alana approached him.

“You didn't bring me here,” she said.

“I didn't,” Gavin said. “I thought about it, because I knew about these ruins, but I wanted to see how you reacted on this side first.”

“You were concerned about me?”

“I was concerned about what this place might do to you.”

She frowned for a long moment, as if trying to decide how she wanted to take that comment. Gavin didn't mean it in any way other than wanting to ensure her safety. He still wasn't entirely sure what this place would do to her with her power.

“I feel like I should know it.” She reached into her pocket, and she tapped on one of the enchantments she was holding, then twisted it in her hand.

There was a certain sense of power within whatever it was. He wasn't sure why he could detect it, though.

"If this was my home, shouldn't this be familiar to me?" Alana asked.

"Well, we don't know how much of this was your home," Gavin said. "Or whether you just came through here."

"But my power is stronger here."

He nodded. "It is, but just because your power is stronger here doesn't necessarily mean this is where you're from. Maybe your family escaped from this place. Or maybe it's just that the kind of power you have is concentrated here."

"If it's concentrated here, then..."

"I don't have answers," Gavin said. "But we will find them for you. All of us."

"That's not why we're here, though."

"Not entirely, but it's part of the reason. And you and I both know that most of the people that are with us will do whatever is needed for you to understand where you came from." He touched her arm. "You can go in there, and you can see if you find anything. I'm sure Wrenlow would appreciate it."

"He gets so preoccupied," she said. "I love his passion and his energy. I love the way Olivia looks at him."

Gavin frowned at that comment. "You do, do you?"

"I'm not saying I have feelings for Wrenlow," she said hurriedly.

Gavin smiled. "I didn't think that you did."

"It's that they seem like they are just meant for each other. It's sweet."

"It is, and interesting because Olivia is quite a bit older than him."

"She is?"

“We didn’t talk about that? Well, back in the day when the enchanters were in Yoran and there was something strange to the power that exploded there, she and some of the other enchanters got caught up in it, and...” He shrugged. “To be honest, I don’t think Wrenlow knows how old she is. Then again, I don’t even think Olivia knows how old she is.”

“I don’t know how old I am,” Alana said.

“One more thing we need to help you find.”

“Gavin,” a voice shouted from inside the ruins.

Gavin smiled at Alana and then said, “I guess it’s time for me to go.”

“May I come?”

“It’s probably best that you do.”

He glanced over and saw that the Leier had situated themselves, but surprisingly, several of the sorcerers had also done so, busily laying out different enchantments and working around the entirety of the ruins. Sorcerers and enchanters, all under the direction of Jorend, who was guiding them. Mekel had stationed many of his golems and was activating them himself. Gavin frowned at that, wondering how many of those enchantments might be stronger if Alana were to help.

He hadn’t even considered whether he might be able to add anything. He was touched by this power as well.

He paused near one of Mekel’s stone golems, this one looking something like the spike monster he had battled. Gavin pressed on it, pushing through it and using some of that shifted energy until he felt a rumble inside it. He poured out a little power into the enchantment, and from there, it began to bloom, which caused the enchantment to stretch.

“Oh.” Mekel approached Gavin. “You did it?”

“I’m sorry,” Gavin said. “I didn’t know what would happen. I thought I could be helpful here.”

“No, you *have* been helpful. I was hoping you or Alana might try something. And to be honest, I think some of the

El'aras have the ability to access the same power. I was going to talk to them, but they have been a bit irritable.”

Gavin looked over to where Brandon was standing, holding on to the Tree Stands in the Forest pattern. “They are struggling with that side of things, so I don’t know that they will be altogether thrilled with the idea.”

“A shame,” Mekel said.

He hurried into the ruins and caught up to Wrenlow, who was crouching down next to a collapsed section of wall, tracing his hands along the surface of it. There was a sorcerer next to him. Gavin didn’t know the woman’s name, but she had a spell trapped on the stone that was causing it to tremble ever so slightly. Some of the power that was spilling out from her was a bit different than Gavin had seen before.

“Look,” Wrenlow said.

Gavin didn’t know if Wrenlow was talking to him or to Char through an enchantment that was connected to him. “What am I looking at?”

Wrenlow looked up. “Oh. Gavin.” He grinned. “This. It’s just a fragment, but it looks like a map. I don’t know why they would have it on this stone, but it’s really the first thing we’ve found that has any sort of writing on it, and I’m hopeful that if we are able to track down more like this, we might be able to learn more about this place.”

A map?

“What am I looking at here?” Gavin asked.

“I think this is where we are,” Wrenlow said, motioning to the central part of the stone map. “The west side of it is cracked, though we have explored there. And off to the east, you can see this. And then the north. It seems enormous.” He looked up at him. “I don’t know what to say, only that it looks like this is not the only settlement.”

As Wrenlow pointed to a few different marks on the map, Gavin noticed that they flickered. Touching them seemed to make them change somewhat.

“Are you using an enchantment on it?” Gavin asked.

“None, really. I’m just...” Wrenlow frowned, and he tapped again. “Oh. Look at that. It seems like it’s reacting to me. I’m not really doing anything other than just tapping on it, though maybe it’s the different enchantments I have here.” He looked down at his bracelets. “I wonder if some of these are draining the enchantments. I don’t have any way of testing that.”

Gavin hurried forward and tapped on the map over Wrenlow’s shoulders. When he did, he felt a faint stir inside him. It seemed as if it reacted to his power, but he didn’t feel as if anything was draining from him.

“I think it’s safe, but I would still be careful. We don’t know if these enchantments might change them. Maybe it would drain something from them. Or from you.”

Wrenlow’s eyes widened. He stared for a moment, as if seeming to gather his thoughts. “So with this map, we now see that it is pretty extensive here, but we have other places you can visit too. Why don’t we go and see what else is there?”

“We will, but we’re going to need to send scouts first. Make sure it’s safe for everybody else. Then we move the base camp. That is, assuming you haven’t found everything you need. Don’t worry. We will take whatever time necessary here.”

Alana was staring down at the map, and Gavin had the distinct sense of unease from her.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s just...” She frowned, looking up at him. “It feels like I’ve seen this before.”

“And?”

“And...”

She leaned down, and she tapped the map.

Everything on the map changed as it unfolded.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“**W**hat did you do?” Wrenlow turned to Alana, and there was a look of alarm in his eyes. Gavin knew exactly why—Wrenlow was concerned that she might have damaged the map.

“I just felt an energy here. I didn’t know what it did. I’m really sorry,” she said, looking up at Wrenlow.

The map had unfolded, becoming layers of stone that grew thinner and thinner as they spread out. And as Gavin looked at it, he realized something. “You had said it looked large, but this is something else entirely.”

Wrenlow gathered himself as he studied the map. “Fine,” he finally said. “So we have where we are.” He stepped closer, and then the map again changed and became more three-dimensional. He looked over to Alana. “Well, maybe I owe you an apology. I don’t know if I would’ve been able to find this otherwise. Look. These are the ruins. Only...”

He took another step forward, and as soon as he did, everything around them shifted. The ruins suddenly seemed to take on a more distinct shape than they had before.

“Move back,” Gavin said. “I can see what you’re trying to do, but I think you need to move away before you damage this.”

Wrenlow hesitated before taking a step back. The map shifted another time. “Can you fold this back?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Alana said.

“We need to know,” Gavin said. “If it works, then it’s portable.”

Alana nodded and then touched the map. There was a pulse of unknown energy from her, and the map compressed down even more. It looked like a thick book.

Wrenlow frowned at it. “That’s it?”

“I think you can move it now,” she said.

Wrenlow looked at her. “You mean we can take it with us?”

“I thought that was what you wanted to do so you might be able to see if there’s anything else out here to track.”

“That’s... Well, that’s fantastic.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“All right,” Gavin said. “We can keep looking here, but now that you have a map, we have to keep moving. I can feel the pulling sensation, and I have questions as to what’s out there drawing on my power and whether or not it’s tied to Anna or if it’s something else.”

Gavin was growing increasingly certain that it was somehow related to Anna and whatever had happened to her.

They spent the better part of the day exploring the ruins with the sorcerers and the scholars like Wrenlow, and they even talked to Char through the enchantment. Gavin, Imogen, and Gaspar patrolled around the perimeter of the ruins, but even as they did, they didn’t find anything hostile. No creatures attacked. There was nothing dangerous here, just the sense of power that Gavin had.

After a while, Wrenlow’s voice came through the enchantment, calling him over. Gavin found him seated next to a pile of debris, and Wrenlow pointed to one section of it.

“Look at that,” Wrenlow said. “According to the map Alana has been showing me periodically, this used to be a large building. Maybe some sort of a warehouse, though I can’t really say. It doesn’t show us what it was inside, though

it's interesting in that you can walk the streets here. It makes you feel as if this place were still alive in a way."

"Did you find anything useful?"

Wrenlow ran a hand through his hair. "Not particularly. I kept hoping we would find other records so we could piece together the writing that is all over these buildings, but I'm not able to figure out anything from it."

"And Char?"

"I've been showing Char as much as I can, but so far, he hasn't been able to help me find anything, either. I think he's getting frustrated with it since he's not here." Wrenlow laughed. "You know, I never would have imagined that there could be so many things to explore."

Gavin chuckled, leaving Wrenlow to his studies before heading off to meet with Gaspar.

"You look like you're focusing on something here," Gaspar said. "Like you're bound to this place in a way that others are not."

"Other than Alana," Gavin said.

Gaspar nodded. "Other than her. And even with her, I'm a little concerned about the fact that we're talking about leaving her here and somehow letting her be drawn into this."

"We can set up camp. We get through the night, and then we can keep exploring."

"And if we don't find what we're looking for? I think you need to consider the possibility that something might've happened to that woman, boy."

"I know something happened to her. I'm just looking to see who is responsible. They don't just have Anna, Gaspar. They keep causing these creatures to attack our side. That's what I'm concerned about."

"So you just want to know who took her."

"That, and *why* someone would've taken her."

Gaspar sneered. “Well, the why is pretty easy. Because if she did what you claim she did, and she was out here slaughtering some of these animals, it might be that they just reacted and tried to eliminate her as a threat.”

“I’m not sure that’s the case. Somebody convinced her to use that power. That’s what’s been troubling me. She thought the elders were speaking to her.”

That idea bothered Gavin. It wasn’t as if Anna was not a smart woman. She was, and she was a skilled leader of her people. Yet she had bought into the fact that these elders—or whatever they were—were granting her the kind of power she didn’t have otherwise.

That would have appealed to Anna, he knew.

It had certainly appealed to some of the other El’aras who had struggled to understand their purpose and their place in the world. Gavin knew that he needed to try to help them, and it was part of the reason he had felt so compelled to offer them more, including whatever they might want of the Leier sacred patterns.

He kept waiting, expecting danger, but it never came.

The night passed uneventfully. Except when daylight came again, the ground around them was not *quite* as it had been before. Gavin felt a subtle change, almost as if the landscape itself had shifted.

He noticed a darkened shape off in the distance. He looked back at the camp, at the ruins, and everybody who was gathered there. The Leier were still on patrol, watching, but for the most part, everything was quiet.

He used the Lightning Strikes pattern and shot upward, then came to land next to the fallen form. Imogen landed next to him. He hadn’t even realized she was following him.

“It looks like your dragon,” she said.

The shape was similar, but not quite the same. It was blockier, and though the wings were a similar size, they were thick rather than leathery. Maybe it was a dragon, but one that didn’t start its life as an enchantment.

“Who do you think killed it?” Gavin asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t detect anything in the night.”

“You were up most of the night?”

“As were you.”

Gavin had patrolled the entire night, using just a bit of sh’rasn powder to keep himself alert. It was not enough to make it so that he was going to crash the way he did if he took too much, but enough that he could stay awake and alert.

“I didn’t realize you were awake as well,” he said.

“When I’m on patrol, I find it much too difficult to get a lot of sleep,” she said.

He felt the same way.

Gavin turned, and he focused on everything that was around them—the hillside, the grasses, and the strange energy that he sensed. He couldn’t help but feel as if some part of that had changed as well.

“There’s something else too. Look at the landscape,” he said.

“What is it?” Imogen asked. “I don’t know what you’ve identified, but I can tell that something is troubling you.”

“It’s all of this,” Gavin said. He spread his hands, gesturing around him. “I can feel that something is different, but I’m not exactly sure what it is, just that it feels like some part of everything has changed.” He frowned, shaking his head again. “I know how absurd that sounds, but it almost seems like this place has moved.”

“Could it have?”

The idea that the entire place might’ve moved seemed ridiculous, even to Gavin, but then again, so many of the things they had done, and so much of what they had dealt with, had been ridiculous.

Who had the power to do that?

And that was reason to be concerned.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It didn't take very long for the gathering to get packed up.

Though Wrenlow was a little disappointed to have to leave so soon, as were some of the sorcerer scholars, it did seem as if they recognized the need to keep moving because there were limits to what they were going to be able to find in a place like the ruins. The stone had mostly collapsed, and even overnight, some part of it had changed, almost as if the act of studying the ruins had caused the stone to crack and crumble. They hadn't fallen, not entirely, but it did look as if some parts of the ruins were going to collapse at any moment.

They headed off to the east, away from the dragon-like creature they had found dead on the ground. As they moved, he found Gaspar looking over at him every so often, as if he knew what Gavin was concerned about.

"You're keeping something from us, boy," Gaspar said.

Gavin took a deep breath. "Did Imogen tell you?"

"She suggested that you might have experienced something."

"There was a creature. I don't know what it was, but it was dead. Someone had slaughtered it, but there was no sign of a struggle and no sign of who was responsible."

"So it was just dead?" Gaspar asked. When Gavin nodded, Gaspar shrugged. "Maybe it wasn't actually."

"It sure looked like it."

“Things in this place look strange,” Gaspar said, as if that was all the explanation they needed. “And I wouldn’t be terribly surprised if what you saw wasn’t exactly what you thought it was.”

Gaspar wasn’t necessarily wrong. Things in this place were strange.

“Well, then there’s another thing that we need to be more alert about. Everything seems all shifted this morning. Keep an eye on things and see if you notice anything changing.”

Gaspar grunted. “Even walking has caused things to change around us, boy,” he said. “I just thought it was tied to the enchantments we’re using and the power we’re drawing on, but maybe it’s more than that.”

“Maybe that’s all it is, but I want to be ready for the possibility that it’s something else.”

Gaspar let out a soft, frustrated growl. “None of this feels quite right.”

“No. And thankfully, all it will take is for us to tap on the enchantment to send us back.”

“About that.”

“What?” Gavin felt his heart sink, as he had been planning on enchantments being able to get them back.

Well, not him, but the others. He had been the one to bring most of them here, and they had preserved the enchantments that the sorcerers and the enchanters had made together that would allow for them all to transition back across to their side. It would be difficult, but they would be able to return.

“I am starting to question where it is you brought us,” Gaspar said. “We don’t know what’s going to happen when we travel from here, do we? Do we know if these enchantments might work?”

Gavin frowned in thought. “Well, even if they take us someplace unusual, we should be able to travel quickly from there. We have means of transportation on the other side. The

renral can respond, and we have our flying enchantments, and —”

“Not all of us can travel quite as easily as you can, boy. Some of us need to use enchantments, but some of us need to rely upon others. To be honest, I don’t know that we want to rely on the possibility that we aren’t going to just appear someplace dangerous. What if there is some sort of corollary to what’s on this side and what’s on the other?”

It did make a certain sort of sense.

Gavin shook his head. “I haven’t seen any distinct connection from one side or the other. It just seems like we can travel from one place to another, but—”

“But we don’t know. It is possible. And the only person who might be able to tell us is Alana, and I have the sense that she isn’t sure about much of this.”

Alana was talking with the sorcerers. There was something about her curiosity and her excitement that Gavin found endearing. She came out of her shell here, and seemed much more open than on the other side. This was Alana in her element.

“I get it,” Gavin said.

“I hope you do.”

They kept moving. Every so often, they would pause, and Wrenlow would place the map down and Alana would unfold it. Gavin half expected the map to look the same as it had inside the ruins, but every time they unfolded it, the map changed, shifting with wherever they were located.

All of it struck Gavin as if this had once been an incredibly powerful ancient civilization, and all of it left him wondering how this still existed, and especially what had happened to it. He kept thinking about the warning that Benji had given them, a warning not to come here, and about what he had said in the past about the Forerunners and the dangers on this side.

There was obviously a connection between this world and theirs.

Wrenlow pointed at the map. “Here,” he said excitedly. “We look like we’re getting close to this place.”

Some of the others gathered around them, and they were all talking animatedly.

Gavin had a good sense of the map, and he recognized that there was a pattern to it. Patterns were something he was able to piece together, but in this case, he realized that the others were doing just fine. There was no reason for him to intervene. It was much like when he was in Yoran and gathering everyone together to ensure they had protections made for the city. There were certain things that Gavin needed to be involved in, and certain things he did not need to be involved in because it didn’t make a difference any longer.

“You’re standing back,” Imogen said to him.

“Should I not?”

“It’s just that you have been taking a much more passive approach.”

“Passive?” Gavin arched a brow at her.

“I’m not trying to offend you. I’m just commenting that your approach seems to have changed. You’re not doing like you once did. Charging ahead, that is.”

“I don’t know that I need to charge ahead.” He nodded. “We have good people here.”

“You think they are choosing the right path?” she asked.

He knew it was a loaded question. “I think so.”

“And where will it lead us?”

“Hopefully toward answers,” he said softly.

She watched him for a moment, and then nodded.

Gavin began to feel that drawing sensation again. He focused on the link to Anna, the connection between the Shard and the Champion, and wondered if there might be some way to use that connection.

They had been moving steadily, and the landscape had shifted around them, but it was tied to their movements. Every so often, he had the distinct sense that something was moving around them even as he was standing still. It was subtle, and were he not paying attention, Gavin didn't know if he would notice it. Even just standing there, he could tell there was a faint shift. He looked at the map, and he noticed that things were changing on it as well. The appearance was subtle, but he was convinced about what he had seen.

They kept traveling until they finally reached another settlement, this one still intact. The buildings were mostly single story, made of a pale gray stone and surrounded by what looked to be a crumbled wall around them. It looked more like a town than a city, yet it was completely abandoned.

The map had guided them toward it, as if it— or whoever had made the map—had wanted them to find the settlement. It left Gavin questioning if they were supposed to have found it. The landscape had shifted with subtle, slight changes as they had picked their way forward. Most of it now looked to be an empty rolling expanse of dried grasses, though it was unclear if this once had been made up of vast farm fields for a town like this.

What if this world was a dead world? Not only empty, but completely devoid of most natural life?

He didn't ask the question. It was too troubling to consider.

By the time they reached the settlement, the excitement from the scholars had increased. It was probably mid-afternoon, though the time of day was difficult for Gavin to follow in this place, where time didn't seem to have the same meaning. In that, it reminded him more of the prison realm. He wasn't tired, but he noticed that many of the people traveling with him were, and they were moving much more slowly than they had been.

When he said something to Gaspar, he nodded.

"I think we have probably spent the better part of the day walking," Gaspar said. "Everything is strange here."

“When we make camp, we should check the city to make sure it’s safe and that there aren’t any surprises, and then we can set up for the night. We can give Wrenlow and the scholars an opportunity to explore and see if there’s anything here that would give us more answers.”

“You just know that the kid is going to love that,” Gaspar grumbled.

It didn’t take long for the Leier to sweep through the town. And much like the ruins, this was empty.

Gavin had had a distinct sense that it was going to be. It was almost like he had simply known that there would be nothing else here.

Was that his power, or was it something else? He didn’t know if his new connection to this place was responsible for it, or perhaps it was about using the Leier pattern the same way Imogen was now doing.

The moment they had reached the town, he had seen her testing, her tree taking on something of a physical form. When she finally released it, the tendrils of the tree dissipated slowly. Silvery lines hung in the air—aspects of the Porapeth power, he suspected, but not the Porapeth himself.

“It seems like I still have things to learn from you,” Gavin said to her.

Imogen tipped her head slightly. “Well, I *am* a sacred sword master.”

“How did you do that? It looks like things were more physical than they had been before.”

“It is just a matter of how you hold the pattern.”

“What did you find?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, sounding troubled. “I’m bothered by the fact that there is something here, but there is also nothing here.” She looked over to Gavin. “Does that make any sense to you?”

Gavin nodded. “Unfortunately.”

They continued their search, finding nothing. Empty buildings. No sign of personal belongings, just the stone, separate rooms, and lots of dust. By the time everyone had gotten settled, he finally relaxed, no longer fearing that something might jump out at them.

Once night fell, Gavin began to feel a pulsation of power moving toward them. He froze, then immediately began to focus on his core reserves and on the odd, shifting power inside him.

“I feel it as well,” Imogen said, joining him.

He needed to get used to her sudden appearances, but it was difficult because she moved far faster than he would’ve expected. When she just appeared next to him, it was a little unsettling.

“What do you think it is?” Gavin asked.

“It’s moving. That’s all I know. Do you think we can defend this place?”

“Probably, but why don’t we go and make sure nothing is coming.”

Imogen nodded.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I mogen wasn't the only one who went with him. Brandon, Gaspar, and several sorcerers all agreed to go, though Gavin didn't want to take too many people because he didn't want to run the risk of weakening their defenses. The protections that had been placed around the settlement were not terribly dissimilar to what had been put around Yoran. A perimeter had been set, a mixture of enchantments, sorcery spells, and Leier power, all designed by those who had a stake in it.

Gavin had been the reason that the people knew how to make such preparations so quickly, and he was confident that they were as safe as they could make themselves. Even if he was delayed in returning, there were El'aras who could help defend the town and help bring people back across. It didn't have to be just the enchantments and Gavin.

The darkness quickly swallowed their patrol.

Everything changed around them, moving and swirling around them. Gavin hesitated, and he looked over to Gaspar. "Tell me I'm not the only one who just noticed how everything suddenly shifted like that."

"You aren't," Gaspar said.

"Is it an enchantment?" Gavin wondered aloud.

He called on his core reserves, and the moment he did, he began to feel pressure on him. He thought that maybe he was detecting something tied to Anna, or perhaps to whatever it was that was happening to her, but that didn't seem to be the

case at all. Instead, it seemed as if it was this place, and the power and pressure shifting around them and pushing on him.

It forced him to stop reaching for his core reserves.

But he had other power. Not just his core reserves. Not just his bralinath connection.

He had the power that came from this place, which he allowed to unfold inside him. It seemingly strengthened him but did not expand his size. He had a measure of control over that much now, at least.

Gaspar was watching him as he did it and frowning.

“I’m not able to use my core reserves or the bralinath power. Whatever is here is reacting to me.”

The moment Gavin had released his core reserves and his hold over the bralinath power, he’d felt some of that reactivity dwindling. It was faint, and the effect of it was subtle, but he was certain it had changed.

Other El’aras with him were probably triggering the same type of reaction. Brandon might be the only one of them who was going to be able to separate himself from some of his connection to his El’aras abilities. Gavin had taught him about that when they were dealing with Chauvan and the nihil power, but that had been a long time ago, or seemingly so. He wondered if they would even remember how to do that.

“We’re doing it, Chain Breaker,” Brandon said. “But I do not like that we need to do it.”

They moved for a little while longer until Gavin noticed a series of darkened shapes lumbering toward them. There had to be a dozen of them, thirty feet tall and broad. Long gray fur covered their sides, and dark eyes stared out at Gavin and the others. They looked like the rock giants he had faced before, but they weren’t made of stone. These were living creatures, or at least they seemed like it.

But it was more than just that. Energy seemed to fill those creatures as they made their way toward them. It was that energy that Gavin felt pushing against him.

“Well,” he said, “seems like we found what was pushing us, but how are we going to redirect it?”

“You want to redirect it and not just fight it?” Gaspar asked.

“Both,” he said. “We need to keep them from town, but we also need to make sure we can defeat them. We’re going to need to be coordinated. And I think...” He looked over to Imogen. “I think we need you to lead us.”

She frowned at him for a moment. It seemed as if some kind of conflict passed behind her eyes. She nodded, but not before there was a flash of silver in them. “Gaspar and I will take the sorcerers to the south, with one of the El’aras. The Chain Breaker can go north with the remainder.” She stared at the creatures in the distance, and then nodded again. “We will pinch them in and test their defenses.”

“You’re basically having us split up,” Brandon said.

“I’m splitting us up, yes, but we are dividing the power in a way I think will be effective,” she said.

Gavin recognized what she was going to do, as if he had already seen it.

That was odd. Had she mentioned something, or was it just so obvious?

He pushed away those thoughts as they split off. He used a burst of Lightning Strikes to carry him toward the creatures, landing close to them. The ground trembled underneath their footsteps, power blooming from inside them. Some part of that echoed within Gavin, as though it were trying to call to him—either toward him, or so it could attack him.

He readied a pair of blades. He didn’t call upon his core reserves. He didn’t call upon the bralinath power. Instead, Gavin focused only on the power from this place, and the blades that formed were blades of stone.

His entire being seemed to unfold, and he allowed himself to grow larger and expand, feeling the power of this place filling him.

And then Gavin pushed what he could summon through the blades of stone.

The power bounced off the creature.

That's no good.

He decided to try something different, using one of the other sacred patterns and gliding forward, before whipping upward. When he did, a rippling wave of stone shot out from him, with unusual effect. Gavin still struggled to make sense of just what it was that he was able to control with this power, as he was trying to get a sense of this energy within himself in order to master how he could unleash the stone power from deep inside. The blade ripped away, and it caught the nearest of the monsters.

This time, it pierced the creature's skin.

The thing rounded on Gavin, roaring. The sound was strange, a deep, booming power filling the air. It felt enchanted.

Gavin braced for the next wave of attacks, but he noticed the others near him beginning their fight. Lightning came from Imogen in the distance, and it was followed quickly by the trembling of the ground and several other types of attacks.

It wasn't just her. Enchantments thundered around these monsters.

The creatures turned, first facing Imogen, then the sorcerers, then the El'aras, and finally Gavin. They spun in place, as if uncertain where to focus.

The only thing that had caused any damage had been the bizarre stone blades that Gavin had managed to use against them, but he needed something else that would affect them. He had to stop them from reaching town. If they did, it would be destroyed.

He could practically see that playing out. It was almost like there was some sort of a pattern there, a pattern that was forming in his mind and starting to fold in place.

The idea that it was *folding* into place almost made him freeze where he was.

But he hesitated a moment, and then he decided that there had to be something else he might be able to do. He had plenty of different fighting techniques, but none would be effective. Gavin could already see that.

He could use this new fighting technique, he could use his core reserves, or he could use his power, but any time he attempted to do anything with them, he already saw how it was going to end up. Nothing was going to be effective.

And so he tried something else. Another weapon.

He hadn't even thought about it, but he pulled out the small circular item that Alana had made him, and rolled it toward the center of the creatures. As soon as it reached the middle of them, he counted. He could practically feel the energy within the enchantment, and he pushed on his core reserves, on the bralinath power, and on the strange stone energy that was inside himself, to try to trigger that item.

It exploded.

The explosion was unlike anything he had ever felt before. It washed toward the creatures, which then began to collapse inward—folding. That folding carried the creatures with it, a rippling energy dragging them down. There were shrieks as they struggled, but their efforts were not enough. They were drawn into the sphere.

And then everything went still. Quiet.

Gaspar broke the silence. “Where did you get that one, boy?”

“Alana,” Gavin said.

Gaspar strode forward toward the sphere, though he looked tentative doing so. Once he reached it, he crouched down, holding his hand above it. “It’s a good thing we have her on our side.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They continued their patrol, and they found nothing more.

Gavin had worried that the creatures now inside the sphere might have some way of escaping, but so far there had been no change to that.

“We need to bring the girl with us,” Gaspar said as they made their way back toward the town.

It was still late, at least as far as Gavin could tell, and completely dark. They hadn’t found anything else and all agreed it was time to return. Not only that, but Gavin also felt as if he could anticipate the need to return. He didn’t know why, but he felt drawn by some invisible strand of energy.

“I’ve been saying that for a while now,” Gavin said.

They got back to town, and they settled in. He took up a position on the outskirts, the same way he had the night before at the ruins. Imogen joined him.

“Something was different with you there, Gavin,” she said. “I can see it, but I’m not sure why I can see it.” She held his gaze for a moment. “And I think you know.”

Gavin turned away and stared off into the darkness. He attempted to shift some of his core reserves and some of the bralinath power to enhance his eyesight, but it never cleared the darkness completely. And he found that he didn’t need it, as he still had a sense of where he needed to go without it.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’m aware that there is something out there, and I could pick up on the different

fighting styles. It's like a pattern."

"What sort of a pattern?"

"How a pattern would unfold." He was less careful with sharing this time, as he felt as if Imogen needed to know the truth.

"Have you ever had anything like that happen before?" she asked.

"No," Gavin said. "Well, with patterns, since that's been part of my ability, and something Tristan had trained me to do. It's why I'm able to learn fighting styles as quickly as I can. It was how I could learn different fighting techniques and replicate them quickly too."

"But I don't remember you having that ability before."

"Not quite like that," Gavin said. "When I fight, I can see things, but I haven't been able to see patterns like I did that time. It seemed as if I was able to anticipate what you were going to do, and what the others would do. I could... predict... what was going to happen."

She breathed out slowly. "I wonder if Benji knew about this," she whispered. It was mostly to herself.

"It just feels like something is still changing with this power," Gavin said.

"We always change," Imogen said.

Gavin grunted, and then he looked off into the darkness, feeling the energy out there. "Well, in this case, I feel as if some part of me is changing in a different way than I expected. I can feel this place. I feel it drawing me. It's unlike before."

"Do you think that might be tied to her?"

He hadn't considered that, but it was a reasonable possibility. He and Anna had been linked, first as the Shard and Champion, then as El'aras. Maybe they were still linked in some way. "I don't know. There's no doubt in my mind that the Shard and the Champion are connected. We have never been able to share power, though."

“That is not exactly true,” Imogen said. “From what you’ve told me, you were able to help her talk to the elders, weren’t you?”

“I’m not exactly sure that I was able to help her talk to the others, so much as I was trying to help guide her to understand the power there.”

“But if you were guiding her, you might have been able to help her see something different.”

“Maybe,” Gavin admitted. “This still feels different.”

“I remember when I first gained Benji’s gift of sight,” Imogen began, talking cautiously. “I had been so focused on the sacred patterns that I had not anticipated that there was another kind of power that I might gain. Even now, I am not entirely certain what it means that I have added that ability. It makes me a more potent fighter, but it also grants me challenges that I’m not fully equipped to handle. My people look at me for expertise, and I don’t always have what they need. Still, it is a useful ability. Perhaps yours is not quite a Porapeth gift, but it may be a similar enough power that I can help you with it. Mine does not involve patterns falling into place. It is only about seeing possibilities.”

She moved her hands in front of her. Silvery lines formed, as if she were swirling that energy out from her. It was the tree. It was branches. It was vines. And all of that was flowing from her, and she was using that to demonstrate the different possibilities.

“It is sort of like trees that I see,” she said with a chuckle. “At least, I see that now. I was still trying to learn and try to understand the possibilities. I was struggling with what that meant for me, and how to control them. When I was first learning, I was told that I had to embrace the power and accept the possibilities. Fighting it just makes it more difficult to see.”

“So you think that if I just relax and allow the pattern to come to me, I should be able to see it as well?” Gavin asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, and then she shrugged. “Maybe your pattern, and your tree, are different than mine. To be honest, given everything we have experienced together, I think that is likely. You and your experience, and you and what you have encountered, are different than what I have experienced.” She shrugged again. “But if you can control it, it can benefit us, especially here. Do you see anything now?”

Gavin had been trying to focus on that puzzle, but had not found anything. “I don’t see any additional attacks coming,” he said.

“Neither do I.”

“Did you see the last one?”

Imogen was quiet for a moment. “It’s odd in this place. It is almost as if the lines are a bit clearer. That is unusual for me, because around you, Chain Breaker, most of the time the lines are very difficult for me to follow. Here, for whatever reason, I’m able to do what I couldn’t before.”

“Maybe that means that what I have on the other side is not going to be quite as powerful,” he said.

“Possibly.”

They stood quietly for a while, and Gavin just stared.

“You said that you’ve been seeing things more clearly,” he said. “Is that how you ended up finding me?”

“I’ve found you when I thought you needed to be found. And it’s more a feeling. I told you about the different strands.” Once again, she held her hand out, and silver lines twisted, turned, and formed what looked like different branches. “And sometimes, it’s difficult for me to prune those branches to find the answers. Every so often, I feel as if I can look through them. When I do, I might be able to uncover something else. I struggle making out the purpose behind it, but I also feel as if the more I look, the easier it becomes for me.” She turned and watched him. “In the case of you, I find that many of those branches lead in one direction. They lead me toward you. When they do, I have learned that I needed to go.”

“So you’re just following the branches, following the pattern.”

“Sometimes following that pattern is the right thing,” Imogen said.

“Sometimes?”

“Sometimes the pattern can be misleading. Even though I see different possibilities, Benji always said that the more intriguing possibilities were the ones he couldn’t see.”

“That fragment is quite interesting,” Gavin said.

“Oh, he is definitely interesting.”

“Have you ever thought about trying to complete the fragment?”

“You mean like the sorcerer did?”

Gavin nodded. “I know that Jayna was trying to bring her Sul’toral back together. I think she succeeded, but I still don’t even know what it means that she did.”

“Some fragments need to be maintained, and others need to be dispersed. I can’t say that I know which is which.”

That was something Gavin still struggled with. There was a pattern here, and he needed to follow it. But what if he didn’t? What if he didn’t need to follow the pattern?

He began to feel something different, a soft, steady tapping. Gradually, as that tapping began to intensify, he started to focus on the source of it.

And finally, he realized what it was.

“Somebody needs our help.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gavin used the Tree Stands in the Forest pattern but could not feel anything.

Whatever he'd detected was not coming from the town. Still, he was certain it was something potent.

"It is from the other side," Imogen said, and she turned to Gavin. "You need to go, Chain Breaker. We will keep an eye on things here. We will continue to explore, but we will wait for your return."

"We could all go," Gavin said.

"I'm not sure that's the best strategy. If this is something you feel is necessary, then you should do it. We will be able to defend ourselves in your absence. But return as quickly as you can."

He stepped away from her and then folded immediately. When he reappeared, he did so in the middle of a vast desert. Shifting sand dunes surrounded him. A steady hot wind gusted on him, and everything around him was dry.

He didn't have any idea where he was, but when he focused, he could feel the dragon.

A part of him wondered if he should try taking the dragon to the other side, though he wasn't sure it would even be possible. Could the dragon make the transition? Would some part of it be lost?

It didn't take long for the dragon to come streaking toward him. It used some of Gavin's power, but it had some of its own

potential as well, and perhaps even folded from place to place using knowledge that Gavin had struggled to master.

Once the dragon came fully into view, he used the Lightning Strikes pattern to shoot upward and then land on the dragon's back.

“Something is calling to us,” Gavin said, patting it. “We need to figure out what it is and who needs us. Can you take me to it?”

He knew there was a connection between them and the dragon understood his words. More than that, Gavin could sense some of the energy within the dragon; he felt it reaching out to him and recognized how it was channeling that power to hasten their journey.

The dragon took off, flying faster than Gavin had ever experienced. It seemed as if the dragon was drawing on a part of Gavin that he hadn't anticipated, almost like it was siphoning some of his energy. It wasn't quite the same as his core reserves, but it was another type of power. This energy seemed to course through him and into the dragon.

While traveling in this manner, the world around Gavin seemed to fall into place. He felt as though he was looking at a puzzle. As he focused, he thought he could identify individual pieces of this puzzle, pieces that fit perfectly, and he felt compelled to follow these pieces to bring them together and merge them into a coherent whole. What surprised Gavin the most was that the dragon recognized the puzzle and knew how to assemble it, guiding their journey.

They continued at this pace until they reached a forested area.

Was that the El'aras?

Gavin didn't recognize the forest. Somewhere down there, he felt something unusual. From above, he could see aspects of the forest, trees that seemed a little higher in one place than in others, and his mind pieced it all together, recognizing structures down in the forest.

“Keep an eye on me,” Gavin said.

He jumped down from the dragon's back and streaked downward. Before he reached the trees, he fortified his skin, then plunged through the forest and braced for impact. Gavin landed amid a series of towering buildings buried in the middle of the forest, trees growing not only around them but up through the middle of many of the structures. It was an enormous city filled with energy. And much like the ruins on the other side, it was empty.

Still, there was power bulging through here.

Gavin had felt something like that many times—power from the other realm that attempted to break free and would threaten his world.

“What are you doing here?” said a voice.

He immediately shot a burst of his core reserves upward. It mingled with some of the stone, but Jayna easily deflected it. Eva wrapped smoke around her and Jayna, creating wings, and they came to land next to him.

“What are you two doing?” he asked.

“We felt something,” Jayna said. Her red hair floated in the wind, and she swept her gaze around. “We’ve been tracking the same things we’ve been tracking lately, but we haven’t found much. By the time we get to places like this, everything has calmed down. I’m assuming you’ve had a hand in that?”

Had he?

“Maybe,” he said. “I guess I hadn’t considered it. I’ve been dealing with things on the other side, but haven’t wondered if anything is trying to bubble up from there through it and to our world.”

“Something is trying to *bubble* up?” Eva asked.

“Well, there are plenty of strange creatures on the other side,” Gavin said, and he described what he had experienced with the flying birds that vented power and caused the rippling of the ground. So far, he didn’t see any ripples here, though he could *feel* the bulging. And they were causing the pressure.

Gavin could feel it now. Something potent attempted to push up. He focused on his bralinath tree, creating a barricade that fortified this place, pleasantly surprised that the trees around the town itself augmented what he was doing. That was unexpected.

“Can we talk about it more when we finish this?”

“Fine,” Jayna said. “Are you going to fold us, or do I need to do it?”

“You can do it?” Gavin asked.

“It’s just a matter of focusing on going from one location to the next,” Jayna said with a shrug. “I just follow the lines of power. Why?”

“You can just fold us?”

She nodded and created her sorcery spell. Gavin noticed lines of power within it that he had not seen when he had been fighting alongside Jayna in the past. Her magic was potent, there was no doubt about that, but this time he felt the considerable energy that she was summoning. Eva granted some assistance too.

The folding was gentle, almost, and different than when Gavin folded. As that energy wrapped around and carried them, he braced for pain, but it never came. Then again, these days, he never felt the same sort of pain when he folded either. When he did it, he felt as if he was just guided downward and shifted from one place to another. In this case, he was much more aware of the power as it summoned them from one realm to the next, as if they were traveling down some sort of funnel.

They emerged in a similar forest, and the resemblance was almost enough to stop Gavin. They were rarely in similar landscapes when they went from one place to the next. The trees in this forest were odd, with broad leaves and sharp thorns.

He immediately fortified his skin, and then he noticed a massive creature stomping up ahead.

“That,” Gavin said.

A beam of dark energy formed in Jayna's hands. It seemed to come straight from her ring, with a bit of dark red light.

"Well, if you're doing that," he said, and he created a pair of stone swords.

"Show us," Eva muttered. Smoke flowed from her. Heat built, but it was different than he had seen from her before. It was almost as if she was generating fire, though Gavin had never seen that from Eva in the past.

Gavin had to ignore all of that as he darted forward to catch up to the creature, which had cleared space in the forest. The thing was gigantic, probably a good forty feet tall, and it looked like it could take out an entire city block. It had three horns on its head and thick, stocky legs. It turned toward them, and its eyes blazed.

"Suggestions?" Jayna asked.

"We dealt with something similar not too long ago," Gavin said. "The creatures were violent, and I had to use one of Alana's bombs to fold the creatures." When Jayna looked at him, he shrugged. "I can explain that later."

Jayna turned away, and she began to trace her hands in a unique pattern that formed lines of flame, which she sent streaking toward the creature. Eva added to what Jayna was doing, mixing some of her Ashara power. The combination caused the flames to energize even more.

Then Gavin flew forward wielding the spikes.

He found himself unfolding, almost uncontrollably, as he attempted to use that power and keep it controlled. It did not work nearly as well as what he was accustomed to, partly because he struggled to avoid drawing on the bralinath side of him, or on his core reserves.

The nearest of the creatures was a tall, slender humanoid that Gavin jabbed the spike into. He expanded the spike, feeling some part of it unfold. He withdrew it and then moved on, attacking the next one.

Jayna used fire, augmented by Eva's smoke. The creature they were fighting was an enormous boxlike figure,

surrounded by fire and smoke. The heat crackled, gradually working its way up the body until Jayna used an eruption of energy that slammed through the creature's chest, dropping it.

Gavin continued using the spikes, taking down one creature after another. When he finished, he looked over to see Jayna's spell causing the last of them to explode.

Everything fell quiet.

"Well, that was awful. I think I need a drink," Eva said.

Jayna nodded. "I actually agree with you this time."

CHAPTER TWENTY

IMOGEN

Imogen couldn't help but feel as if she had been making some progress with Alana. They had been practicing the whole time they'd been here. The girl had been distracted at first, wanting to better understand some of the different ruins, but Imogen had made a point of leading her away to see if there was going to be anything she might be able to teach of the sacred patterns. Thankfully, Alana had shown an interest in them.

More than that, she had shown an affinity for them. That had proven useful, but it had forced Imogen to modify her teaching.

During the very first session, she had seen that Alana wasn't going to learn the techniques the way Imogen normally taught them. But it was a sign of a poor instructor to keep forcing the student down a path they were not equipped for. It was the sign of a flexible mind to embrace the challenge and teach in a way that the pupil needed.

In this case, she could tell that what Alana needed was very different than what someone like Gavin did, or the El'aras. The technique required Imogen to adapt.

Gavin had been gone for a while now, long enough that Imogen had known that either they were going to have to make plans without him, or they were going to have to wait. She was fully prepared for what it might look like if she were to have to wait. There had been no further obvious attacks, but that didn't mean there had been none. Imogen had been careful. She had noticed several rumblings of power, primarily

when she used Tree Stands in the Forest, and she had brought her most talented Leier with her to negate that threat. It was relatively straightforward.

“Relatively” being the operative word.

There was a part of her that wished that she had the renral here. She suspected that they could traverse between realms, but it was not something they had tested, and Imogen was not interested in harming them in order to do so. Therefore, she had not pushed the issue at all. When she had made an offhand comment to Jorend, Alana had offered to make one of her enchanted renral, but so far Imogen had avoided asking her to do that. She simply didn't know what effects those enchantments would have, and she didn't know what it might look like if she were to draw on them and use them.

“You're forming the pattern with some other power here,” Imogen said.

“I'm not really trying to do anything wrong,” Alana said.

Imogen stood before her, hands behind her back, staring off into the distance. She could feel Alana, which meant that she was fully aware of the way Alana was focusing on her own tree pattern. Her pattern had been unique. Imogen had thought that the way Gavin reached for Tree Stands in the Forest and the bralinath connection was unique, but his was nothing compared to what she felt from Alana.

The way the girl used that power, and connected to it, was different. It felt as if she was creating something more akin to a pillar rather than a tree, but perhaps that was just how she compressed that power. She folded and unfolded in a different way than what Imogen was accustomed to. That energy felt special—and it was what had told her that she needed to teach Alana in a different way.

“Did I say that was a mistake?” Imogen asked.

She slowly turned toward Alana, but even as she did, she was trying to hold on to the connection of power that she had, to see if there was going to be any way to pull more of that connection to this place through her. She had been hoping that

she could learn something from the technique Alana used, as she had learned something from Gavin during his attempts at using Tree Stands in the Forest. As much as she was the one to teach others, she also learned from others.

“I guess I just thought you were saying I was making a mistake,” Alana said.

Imogen’s lips curled in a smile. Alana was nothing if not an eager student. Imogen understood why Zella had been so interested in training her. “There is no mistake if you learn. And I am hopeful that you can come to terms with what it means for you to unfurl your power in this place. I suspect that it will make you potent in a way that others are not, and in a way that others cannot be.”

Alana shuffled closer to her. She had been focusing on the Tree Stands in the Forest technique, and doing quite well for somebody who was not born to the sword. Imogen had once thought that someone like that would not be able to learn, but Alana was not the first one to prove that a lie. She was just the most recent.

“Gavin thinks I can control it,” Alana said. “That I can use the power in this place to unfold it in some way, but I just feel it trembling all around me. I don’t know what to make of it, and I’m not even entirely sure if I’m supposed to know what to make of it. It’s just that it’s there.”

Imogen breathed out slowly and steadily. “That is one way to describe it, isn’t it? I’m curious why the power would be around you rather than within you, but perhaps your way of describing it is all that is needed.”

“Would you call it anything else?”

“No. There is power. I keep thinking that I might be able to access it myself, but such a thing is not meant for me.”

Alana glanced over. “You think you could?”

“The sacred patterns allow many things,” Imogen said.

“I guess I didn’t think it would allow you to access the power of a place like this. I thought that would only be possible for somebody who was bound to it naturally.”

“What makes someone bound to it naturally? Who is to say what that requires? And who is to say what is natural?”

What Imogen didn't need to say, and what she suspected that Alana also knew, was that they had both seen how Gavin had tapped into that same connection, doing so in a way that was not natural. He was now bound to this place as well.

The last time Imogen had fought alongside him, she had known how he was drawing on that power, and she had come to start to feel it in ways she had not noticed before. That power was growing increasingly potent for him. She feared what would happen if he were to lose control over it. She didn't think he would, but there was always that possibility. It was an unknown kind of power, which meant it was potentially unstable. It was the kind of thing that Imogen feared losing control over, as it was the kind of thing that could cause more and more problems unless a person were able to truly master the way they could hold on to it and the way they could fold it.

She thought about Benji and the pull that he had on her, but she didn't use that connection now. Nothing she would see from him would make a difference in how she would teach Alana. She knew what was needed, much like she knew how to train someone.

“Why do we keep focusing on this pattern?” Alana asked.

“Because it is the first one.”

“It just seems so strange. I'm not even fighting.”

Imogen smiled. “Only later. Right now, the fight is with yourself. And until you master yourself, you cannot master any other elements of the patterns. That was the hardest lesson for me to learn.”

“So I can't learn to do the other stuff, like shooting into the sky the way Gavin does?”

“Have you mastered yourself?”

Alana frowned. “Well... I suppose not.”

“In this case, perhaps helping you master yourself is the greatest thing I can offer you. It is not teaching you to fight, though maybe there is an element of that which would be useful to you. Perhaps what Gaspar asked was to help you find the technique, to understand what it means for you and to understand how you are connected to all of it.”

She stared off into the distance. Something was different, but Imogen had a hard time identifying things here.

Every time she thought she had her tree set, something about it would start to change. That had become the trickiest part of this land. She would use the Tree Stands in the Forest technique, but occasionally, some part of it would radiate out from her in a way that was not quite as it should be. She kept thinking that there was something she had missed, but she kept finding that it wasn't working that way, and that what she needed instead was to try to make sense of some greater, and more difficult, part of it.

If only Gavin were here.

She felt weird thinking that way. Gavin should not be necessary, and certainly not necessary for everything she would do. But in this case, and in this world, she couldn't help but feel as if his connection to such things would actually offer a benefit to her and all of them. Because of who he was and because of what he had done, he might be able to pick up on the changing contours of the landscape, and what they meant, in a way that Imogen herself could not.

“Imogen?” Alana said.

“What is it?”

“You're staring.”

“I know.”

“But you're staring and moving.”

“Am I?”

“I can feel it.”

Imogen smiled. “Good. That means you are connecting in a way you had not before.”

“I don’t know if that’s how I’m feeling it,” Alana said. “I don’t think I’m using your sacred pattern to pick it up.”

“I suspect you are but you do not know.”

Alana’s brow furrowed. “Shouldn’t I know, though? Shouldn’t there be some way for me to detect and identify just what it is?”

“You should know, but you may not know,” Imogen said.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I realize that.”

She started to turn, and she noticed something else as she did.

There was a tremble, and this time she was certain of what she felt. More than that, she was certain of where she felt it coming from. It was distant, but it was moving toward them. In the time that they had been here, Imogen had had an increasingly difficult time identifying when power was moving in their direction. It built in strange, and sometimes unpleasant, ways that made it awkward for her, and it made it so that it wasn’t always obvious to her what was out there, nor about how it was building. In this case, what she identified was a different sort of power that was radiating in a way she was struggling to make sense of.

“I need you to return to the city,” she said without turning back.

“Something is out there, isn’t it?” Alana asked.

“I believe it is.”

“I could come with you. I could help.”

“Yes,” Imogen said. “But I would not risk you.”

“Gavin was willing to risk me.”

She shook her head. “Gavin was not. He was willing to work with you. He was willing to help you grow, and to stretch, and to change, and to find your place, but he was not willing to risk you. He wanted you prepared so it would not be a risk.”

Alana opened her mouth to object, but then she closed it and sighed. “So all of this was about getting me ready.”

“Perhaps,” Imogen said.

“For what?”

Imogen closed her eyes. For the first time since she came over to this side, she really wanted to be able to see differently. The silver lines were there, and they formed a different network of patterns than what she was accustomed to. But in this case, the network of lines that she was able to make out became something difficult for her to discern. She attempted to try to follow them, to track the way those lines of possibilities would unfold before her, but even as she attempted to do so, she did not see anything that would help her identify a specific pattern.

It became increasingly frustrating for her, partly because she didn't want to waste the power that she drew, not wanting to run the risk of draining Benji's fragment.

“For whatever you are meant to do, and for whatever you are meant to be,” Imogen replied.

“What if I'm meant to do this, and what if I'm meant to be out there with you?”

“Not yet. But I fear it will be soon.”

She looked back, and she focused on the Tree Stands in the Forest technique, and when she did, she pushed, linking that connection to Alana. She needed to try to fortify something, but it wasn't so she could hold her, or harm her. Instead, what she attempted was something that she normally reserved for someone who wasn't one of the Leier, and who had been training with her. She wanted her to experience what it was like to be linked from one tree to the next, to feel some connection form. In this case, she couldn't help but feel as if that link, and that connection, was enough.

And it was necessary.

“I feel it,” Alana said.

“I know,” Imogen said. “You should feel it. This place allows you a level of control that the rest of us will not have. I want you to learn how to allow yourself to flow through this power, and this connection, in order for you to better understand what that means for you and for your power here. Do you think you could do that?”

Alana nodded.

“Good. Now head down into the ruins, and stay safe.”

Alana nodded, then started away.

Imogen pressed out again. This time it was a little different, a simple pulsation. It was still Tree Stands in the Forest, but it was also a summons.

With that, she took to the air using the Lightning Strikes pattern, then shifted into Petals on the Wind and floated. It didn't take long before several of the other Leier joined her, also floating. There were half a dozen, including Jorend.

They all had weapons in hand. Most of that was habit, Imogen suspected, nothing more than that. They were accustomed to needing weapons, and accustomed to fighting in that way, but she guessed that none of them truly did any longer. Their fighting techniques, and what they were able to do, were quite a bit different now than it had been when they were still learning the sacred patterns.

For her part, Imogen no longer even used a weapon when she fought. She would occasionally unsheathe her narrow sacred sword master blade, but it rarely offered her anything she couldn't do bare handed.

“Did you feel it?” Imogen asked, glancing over to Jorend.

“I was training the El'aras,” he said.

“So you did not?”

A look of fear coursed over his features for just a moment. She understood why, but before she could reassure him that he had not disappointed her, he said, “I'm sorry, First.”

“Do not apologize. This land is unusual, even for me. I still struggle with how the tree pattern will take shape here. I just

wanted to know if you felt it.”

“I did not,” he said.

“Then perhaps we still have time.”

“Time for what?”

“To prepare.”

His brow furrowed. “For what?”

She looked over to three of the Leier who were floating with her. Hilacsh was ten years her senior and had rapidly developed under Jorend’s tutelage. He had served as something of Jorend’s next-in-command, though he rarely reported to Imogen. But then again, he did not need to.

“For what is to come,” she said.

Imogen streaked off using her own sacred pattern. This was one that very few had ever seen or would even understand. She was using some aspect of the connection that she had to Zealar, and borrowing some element of the renral power. It allowed her to shoot in a way that the Lightning Strikes pattern would not. It allowed her a measure of control and a measure of speed that she simply could not have otherwise. The others followed, trying to keep up, but not succeeding.

She only traveled like this for a single purpose—she needed to know what was out there before they caught up to her. And when she saw it, she knew that they had less time than she had believed.

Creatures of all sizes and shapes were lumbering toward the ruins. There had to be a dozen in this place, but there were more still coming. Imogen couldn’t tell how many, but she guessed it was enough that it would be a difficult battle for them.

“What do you propose, First?” Jorend asked as he finally caught up to her.

“I would have argued that we stay and fight,” she said.

Now was a terrible time for Gavin to be gone. Now was a time when they needed him and what he could do, and she did not know that she had the same faith in the people who had come over here as she knew he had. Without that faith, she worried about what would happen and whether they would have enough potential to withstand what was coming.

“But I fear that our efforts may be better spent elsewhere,” she went on. “We need to go back, and we need to prepare. The others will need to fight.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The three of them folded back.

Gavin prepared for the possibility of an attack, but everything was quiet. The dragon circled overhead, and he immediately felt the connection form between them the moment they were back. It was a strange sort of connection, almost trying to provide some type of warning to him.

What was the dragon warning him about? Was there something else out here?

Gavin didn't detect anything, and he wished he had a way of seeing through the dragon's eyes the way he did with the paper ravens. Perhaps he could if he better understood the dragon's power.

"Care to tell us what's going on?" Jayna asked.

"Anna was abducted on the other side, and we're looking for her."

"How?"

Gavin peered around the forest. He didn't feel any of the power trying to come through like he did before, but he was curious about the ruins. The buildings felt as if they had been lost to time. Wrenlow would probably love coming to this place and exploring—at least, he would have prior to going across the realms. Now he would be preoccupied with what they found there.

And it might not even be necessary.

Places like this were often El'aras, but he didn't have any sense of the El'aras here. He wasn't exactly sure why they would have abandoned a place like this either. This kind of a place would be isolated enough that he could have imagined that the El'aras would have stayed here.

"How about we find another place to talk," he said.

"I think we should meet in Nelar," Jayna said.

Gavin nodded. Nelar would be safe enough, he suspected, and since he knew how to find this forest, and even the desert, he figured it would be an easy matter to return to the same place he had crossed over.

He allowed the dragon to carry him, though the Leier patterns probably would carry him just as quickly. Letting the dragon navigate gave him an opportunity to think as they flew toward Nelar.

The city was large, though not quite as large as Yoran. As they approached, Gavin was vaguely aware of the different protections that had begun to be placed around the perimeter, not that dissimilar to what had been set up around Yoran. He suspected most of them had been created by enchanters—or the dular, he should say, since this was Nelar. The protections were likely incredibly potent. He couldn't identify what was here, though he wasn't sure he needed to.

When the dragon landed, he waited for the others. He was surprised that he had made it here so much faster than Jayna and Eva, though he didn't have to wait long before Eva came swirling toward him with a trail of heavy smoke, carrying Jayna with her.

Jayna shuddered. "You know, I'm not sure I'm ever going to get used to that," she muttered. "I think I would prefer just using an enchantment."

"Go ahead," Eva said. "Tell me what enchantment can move that quickly."

"None, but that doesn't mean I like it."

Gavin snorted, and he shook his head at them. "Well, ladies?"

“Tell us what’s going on.”

He didn’t want to take too much time, but he needed to fill them in. They were his allies, and they were powerful ones at that. So he told them as much as he could about crossing over, about Anna, and about searching for her. He spoke of the shifting landscape and his feeling that things were moving on the other side. Eva seemed particularly interested in that.

“And you are certain that this isn’t the order again?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” Gavin said, “but to be honest, if it were the order, I would’ve expected to see some signs of them on this side. What we’ve seen so far has only been on the other side.”

“Whoever is over there clearly has some control over the creatures,” Jayna observed. She had caught onto the same realization that Gavin had.

“Seems that way,” he acknowledged.

“So, we need information. At this point, I think the only way to obtain it is to approach someone connected to the order,” Jayna suggested.

“I don’t know if I have time for that. I need to get back to my friends, see if they’re in any danger.”

“We can’t move forward without more information,” Jayna countered. “This is a situation where we need to take the time, Chain Breaker.”

Gavin exhaled deeply. Perhaps she was right. Maybe he needed to be patient, gather more information, and be prepared for what he might discover upon his return.

He nodded in agreement.

As they made their way through the city toward Teluminder’s shop, Gavin’s anxiety grew. He wasn’t sure if it was tied to the surrounding events or his concern about his absent friends. But once they entered the shop, his anxiety temporarily ebbed. Taking in the familiar scents and sensing the enchantments pressing against him, he became aware of a distinct power present.

Jayna strode forward, and she called for Telluminder.

He came out from the back of the shop and blinked when he saw her. When he looked at Gavin, he shook his head. “I don’t want any trouble with you, Chain Breaker.”

“I think you’ve already had your trouble with him,” Jayna said.

Eva wandered around the shop, smoke swirling around her, which seemed to be checking different enchantments. Her power would press into a certain enchantment, and then it would drift back to her. Gavin wasn’t exactly sure what she was doing, as he had not seen her doing anything like that before.

“I don’t have any answers for that one,” Telluminder said to Jayna while gesturing to Gavin. “I’m not going to be able to help him.” He slapped the top of the counter. “Besides, he’s accomplished what he wanted. The order has splintered.”

“I don’t think that’s a bad thing,” Gavin said, “but that’s not why I’m here. At least nobody’s grabbing for power they shouldn’t have.”

Telluminder grunted. “Now we have a shortage of scholars.”

“No shortage,” Gavin said. “It’s just that they’ve changed what they’re doing. I happen to have a couple of scholars working with me right now.”

“Sorcerers,” he muttered, shaking his head.

“Not all.”

Telluminder frowned at him. “Oh? More than just the sorcerers?”

Gavin wasn’t going to take the bait, though he could tell that Telluminder wanted more from him. He just wasn’t going to offer it.

“I need to know more about the power that your order has been chasing. Tell me more about what’s on the other side.”

Telluminder watched him. Like he did most times around Telluminder, Gavin felt acutely aware of the strangeness that the man projected. There was something unusual about him, enough so that a part of Gavin wondered if he might even be somehow vaguely related to the power in the other realm. Maybe he was even connected to the Forerunners.

That was something Gavin had not even considered.

“They were looking for something,” Telluminder said. “Answers. I don’t think anyone found them.”

“I think they were close to it,” Gavin said. “And I think it was tied to fragments, but those fragments have been secured.”

Telluminder was quiet for a moment, and then he frowned, looking over to Jayna. “Not all the fragments.”

“You’re talking about her Sul’toral?” Gavin asked.

“Ancient power. Power that came from someplace different.”

Gavin frowned. Different? That wasn’t what he had heard about. He had believed that the power had been here originally—power like the El’aras, power like the Sul’toral, power like the Porapeth.

But what did he really know?

“Something from the other side,” Gavin said.

Telluminder let out a laugh, and he scratched his chin. “Which fragments are you talking to? Hers?” He motioned to Jayna. “I didn’t think she freed fragments of anybody who could talk to you.”

“Ceran doesn’t like to talk,” Jayna said. “He recognizes his time is over, and that he can only be *used* for power now. I’m not using or misusing his power in any way he wouldn’t have wanted me to, so we aren’t going to go into that.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Telluminder said.

“And I’m not talking about Ceran,” Gavin said. “I’m talking about Porapeth power.”

He turned to Gavin. “Porapeth? I thought the Porapeth were gone.”

“Most of them, but one fragment remains. One particularly *potent* fragment.”

“The First.”

Gavin knew there was no point denying that, because he also knew that Imogen wasn’t trying to hide the fact that she had a connection to the Porapeth and was able to connect to that power.

“She still speaks to him.”

“And what does the First say?” Telluminder asked.

“Well, the Porapeth warns us not to go to the other side because whatever is over there is dangerous. It’s the kind of thing we shouldn’t even be bothering with.”

“Then you should listen.”

“Much like your order listened?”

“The ones who chase that kind of power are fools,” Telluminder said. “Anybody who has learned anything, and who has followed any of this, would have been able to tell you that. I would never have done the same. Chasing that power was too dangerous for anyone, and too dangerous even before.”

“Before?” Jayna asked.

Telluminder huffed. “Don’t start challenging me on that.”

Gavin raised his hand. “I’m just trying to understand. One of the El’aras was taken.”

“So?”

“The Shard,” Gavin said.

There was something odd about the way Telluminder reacted. He stiffened, but it also seemed as if he became more pensive. His eyes went distant. They didn’t flash silver, but he did seem to be staring for a long moment, as if looking at something only he could see. “Could it be?”

“Could what be?” Gavin asked.

Telluminder popped off his stool and then hobbled to the back of the shop, leaving Gavin and the others looking around.

“We just have to give him a moment,” Jayna said. “I know he can be a bit cantankerous—”

“A bit?” Gavin mumbled.

“Yes. A bit. And I know you feel like he betrayed you in some way, and maybe he did, but we can learn from him. He knows things. Isn’t that what you’re after?”

Gavin tried to be patient, but it was getting difficult. He couldn’t help but feel as if he needed to get back. His friends were waiting on him, and they would need him.

What if there was another attack?

What if the defenses they had placed weren’t effective?

What if...

He had to push those thoughts away. Imogen had reminded him that he wasn’t necessary for all that. And Gavin had been the one to comment on just how prepared everybody had been.

There were plenty of what-ifs, and he had to let them go.

“Let’s see what he has to say. I just don’t want to get caught in some philosophical debate of power with him.”

“I wouldn’t expect you would,” Jayna said, and a hint of a smile curled her lips. “Besides, what sort of philosophical debate would you need to get in about fighting?”

“You’d be surprised,” Gavin said.

Telluminder finally came out of the back of the shop, and he was holding a massive book that looked to be made out of stone. And what was stranger was that Gavin thought he had seen something along that line before.

“Where did you get that?”

“Why?” Telluminder asked.

“Because I’ve seen something like that. It was a map.”

Telluminder frowned, and he dropped the book on the counter. “A map? How would you have a map of the Forerunners?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ever since first hearing about the Forerunners, Gavin had been curious. And now he was with someone who seemed to have an understanding of them.

He looked intently at Telluminder, his mind whirling, trying to understand the man's words. "What are you talking about?" Gavin asked.

"What I just mentioned," Telluminder said. "How did you get a map of the Forerunners?"

Gavin shrugged, contemplating if there was anything new to uncover or any fresh insight he could gain. He wanted to decipher what knowledge Telluminder held; the enigmatic man seemed to know more than he was sharing. At that moment, Gavin was uncertain about many things.

A swirl of smoke appeared in the corner of his eye, and Eva positioned herself beside the counter. It seemed as though she might be trying to convey something to Telluminder, or perhaps even intimidate him. This behavior was unexpected, especially since Gavin believed that Eva and Telluminder shared a good rapport.

"Don't behave that way," Telluminder admonished, glancing at Eva. "I haven't done anything to harm you."

"You need to talk." Eva tapped on the counter. "Because we're trying to figure out how much we can trust you. Given the fact that you have been... well, *you*, and you have been trying to keep things from us, I think it's time that I step in."

Eva reminded Gavin a little bit of Alana. Both of them had memories that had been taken from them. Whereas Alana had become innocent, Eva had become angry.

“You obviously are familiar with the Forerunners, and I am curious about how,” Telluminder said, and he straightened on his stool. When Gavin said nothing, Telluminder breathed out heavily. “It is power that escaped from another place. Well, that is what we have long suspected. As far as we know, power is not natural to this place. Or at least, it does not seem to be natural.”

“That’s not true,” Gavin said. “Everything in this world has some sort of power to it, whether it be sorcery, enchanters, or—”

“All of those were gifted power from the Forerunners.”

“So you’re saying they are some sort of god?” Jayna asked.

Telluminder shrugged. “I’m not saying they are any sort of anything. Just merely telling you what I know about them, the kind of power they possess, and what that means for you.”

“So if you assume that they are escaping from something,” Jayna said, and this time, she glanced over to Gavin for a moment, before turning her attention back to Telluminder, “it begs the question as to who and what they were escaping from.”

Telluminder nodded. “We have very few artifacts of that time.” He shifted in his seat again. “As you can imagine, anything that deals with the Forerunners would be ancient. But it was more than just that. It was heavily guarded. Anything we were able to find is little more than fragments, and snippets of information that seemed meant to be kept from us.”

Could that even be possible? Would the Forerunners be able to prevent power from escaping to create a measure of mystery?

“And let me guess,” Gavin said, “you don’t know anything about them?”

“I know terms,” Telluminder said. “But they are not in their documents. They are in the documents of others.”

“Like a Porapeth.” Gavin frowned for a moment.

“I... Well, to be honest, I don’t know. I never had much interaction with a Porapeth. As far as I know, the order never had all that much connection with them either. They were secretive and tended to be secluded.”

It was too bad Imogen wasn’t here. She would be able to speak to the truths of the Porapeth.

“What about others?” Gavin said.

“There were others of power,” Telluminder said, and he looked at Jayna.

“The Sul’toral,” she said.

“They also had documentation of the Forerunners. I can’t speak to how much documentation they had...” Telluminder watched her as he said it.

She shook her head. “I don’t know anything about it.”

“I didn’t say that you did, Jayna. You aren’t necessarily a scholar,” Telluminder said. Jayna arched a brow, and he raised his hands defensively. “I don’t say that in any way to diminish who you are and what you’ve done, I’m just saying that you aren’t a scholar the same way some of these ancients have been scholars. Your pursuit of knowledge has been out of necessity.”

Gavin’s pursuit of power and knowledge had stemmed from similar reasons.

He turned, focusing on Jayna for a moment. “So these Forerunners obviously have power, and given what we’ve seen on the other side—”

“What do you mean, on the other side? Nobody knows the Forerunners’ realm,” Telluminder said.

“Nobody but us,” Gavin said.

Telluminder looked at him for a long time, and then he smirked. “I’m afraid that is unlikely.”

“Well, I told you about the map.”

“And anything else?”

“We haven’t had enough time to explore,” Gavin said. “I have a team of scholars looking at certain things, so…”

“I would like to go,” Telluminder said.

“No,” Jayna interrupted. “And I don’t think Gavin would even let you, as I think he recognizes that he can’t quite trust you. If you were over there, there’s a very real possibility that anything you might do would interfere with what *he* needs to do.”

“There is a possibility,” Gavin said to Telluminder. “Do you know the sorcerer Char?”

Jayna shot Gavin a hard look, but he ignored it.

“He’s been working with my people, using enchantments to communicate across the distance,” Gavin explained.

Jayna relaxed just a little bit. Gavin wasn’t going to do anything to harm her friend, especially as he knew that she had a connection to him.

“Are you offering me an opportunity to communicate?” Telluminder asked.

“I’m saying it might be useful. You can reach out to Char, and if he’s open to it—”

Jayna nodded. “He’d be open to it.”

“—that way if there’s anything you might be able to offer, you can,” Gavin finished. “And if Char believes you wouldn’t be a hindrance to the rest of our investigation, he might share it with you.”

“You don’t know what might be a hindrance,” Telluminder said.

“I don’t,” Gavin said, “but I do know what you’ve done so far. So if you work with us, and you’re helpful, then we can see.”

Telluminder regarded him with suspicion. Finally, he huffed out a breath, his great eyebrow tufts flickering as he did. “I find that acceptable. In exchange, I will give you something that might be acceptable to you.”

He hobbled away from the counter, and he worked his way along the row of shelves, until he stopped at one of them.

The strange little man had a bunch of different types of enchantments in his shop. Most of them were for purposes that Gavin didn’t even know. Telluminder crouched in front of a boxlike enchantment, with writing all along the surface of it. It seemed to radiate a bit of the power from the other side.

Gavin could feel that energy pressing on him. Though he didn’t have foresight like Imogen described, he had the distinct sense that if he were to activate this enchantment, the result would be something dangerous—not only for him, but for others.

Was that the puzzle unfolding for him?

Telluminder turned to Gavin and held the box out. “This is an enchantment that has never been identified. We recognize that the writing on it is not from here, and it is probably from the time of the Forerunners.”

“You’re keeping something like that out in the open?” Jayna asked.

Telluminder waved his hand. “I haven’t necessarily kept it out in the open, but nobody’s able to activate it, so it doesn’t matter. There’s no danger to it.”

“I can feel the danger,” Gavin said.

Telluminder arched a brow at him.

Gavin shrugged. “Well, I can. It’s filled with power, and I think you should keep it here for now.”

“Even if it would help you?”

“I don’t know if it would help or not, especially considering I don’t know what kind of power is inside it. All I can tell is that I can feel something dangerous within it.”

Telluminder looked down at the box. “Then wouldn’t that be useful for you to have?”

“I will wait,” Gavin said.

Maybe once he had better control over his own power, something along that line might be useful, but right now it was nothing but a danger.

Telluminder seemed as if he wanted to argue, but he didn’t.

“Thank you for your help,” Jayna said as she strode away, and Telluminder called after her. “What is it?” she asked.

“I would like to have an opportunity to speak to Char.”

“I will send an enchantment that will make the connection,” Jayna said. “I can’t guarantee that Char or Wrenlow will share much with you, but they will decide for themselves.”

With that, Jayna exited the shop. As Gavin followed her outside, she turned back and stared at the shop, as if trying to decide whether she wanted to say something more.

“Do you believe what he was saying?” she asked.

“I believe that he doesn’t know anything about the Forerunners,” Gavin said.

“Oh, I think he knows much more than he’s telling you,” Eva said. “I saw the way his expression shifted when you refused to take that enchantment.”

“So what? He’s in on something?” Jayna asked.

“I know you like to trust him because he’s been useful to you in Nelar, but I am uncertain this time,” Eva said.

“He serves the order. That’s my reason for not trusting him.”

Jayna squeezed her eyes shut. “I just thought...” She shook her head. “Anyway. What’s the plan?”

“Well, I need to get back because I worry that my friends need me, but I have concerns about the Forerunners.” Gavin watched her. “And if the Sul’toral were involved...”

Eva nodded. “Why don’t you just ask him?”

“You know he doesn’t like to talk about those sorts of things,” Jayna said.

“Who?” Gavin asked.

“Oh, just my Sul’toral mentor.”

He frowned for a moment. “Imogen was talking about her Porapeth connection as well, and she spoke to the fragment. He warned us against going anywhere because he said that it was too dangerous for us, so maybe your fragment would have a similar experience?”

“Maybe,” Jayna said. “We can talk to him, or at least try to. Ceran does not like to answer, but...” She looked back at the shop again. “Not here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

They reached an area outside Nelar that was surrounded by trees. It wasn't the trees that impressed Gavin so much as it was the series of enchantments staggered all around the clearing. It seemed as if Jayna had prepared for power here, which surprised him a little.

A billowing layer of smoke began to float over everything. Jayna gave Gavin a nod and pushed him toward the center of the clearing. A smoky curtain shrouded them, and once inside the circle, Gavin looked around. He felt as if a new kind of power was building around him.

"This might feel a bit unusual," Jayna said. "I'm going to attempt to summon Ceran from the ring. If he's willing to communicate. And if he is..."

"I've witnessed something similar," Gavin replied. "Even if it feels odd, it's not entirely unfamiliar to me."

Jayna eyed him briefly before turning her attention to her ring. Gavin had often noticed its coloration. Over time, its hue had transitioned to a deep blood red. As she manipulated it, he sensed a surge of power emanating from her. Part of him instinctively responded, raising a protective barrier.

"Ceran," Jayna said, twisting the ring.

"Does he just shoot out of the ring?" Gavin asked Eva, who stood nearby.

"I don't know," Eva said. "Most of the time, when she comes out here, she doesn't want anybody else to have any idea what she's doing. She's trying to hide the connection that

she has to him. I know she views him as something of a mentor, but he also used her to a certain extent. She has a hard time seeing that.”

Jayna shot Eva a look, and then went back to the ring.

“Mentors can be difficult like that,” Gavin said.

“Oh?” Eva said.

“I have my own experience with my mentor, and unfortunately, we weren’t on the best of terms.”

“What happened with yours?”

Gavin had shared it so many times that he didn’t want to go on about it anymore. But given that Eva was curious and he couldn’t help but feel as if sharing with her would mean that she would share with him, he wasn’t sure how much he should say.

“I need the two of you to be quiet,” Jayna said.

He snorted.

He recognized power beginning to shift around them. And then the ring started to change. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but this was very different than the way Imogen had summoned her fragment. It seemed to start inside the ring, before it spilled outward, releasing power. Then a form began to take shape.

The man that erupted was initially made out of light, little more than a hazy figure. It reminded him a bit of Benji in his silvery form. But as the figure in front of them started to solidify, he took on features—something of a face, though it was a little blunted, and difficult for Gavin to make out much in the way of details. Gradually, the form started to solidify even more, and then there was an older man standing across from them, dressed all in brown and gray, and he had his hands clasped in front of him as he watched Jayna.

“There you are,” he said to her.

“There I am?” Jayna asked. “I was hoping you would answer my call, but you’ve been a pain in the ass lately.”

There was a part of Gavin that wished he would've had a chance to talk like that to Tristan. A part that wished he had an opportunity to ask questions. And maybe he still could, if he could find that particular fragment. He just didn't have time for such things.

"I'm here now," Ceran said.

"Well, that's good," Jayna said. "We need to know what you know about the Forerunners."

Ceran didn't respond at first. His energy flickered, almost as if some part of him shifted for a moment, before it solidified again. As it did, he took a step toward Jayna.

Jayna made a quick movement with her foot, and she created a circle around her. The fragment stopped, like he wasn't able to get any farther.

Gavin didn't know if Jayna worried about what Ceran could do, but she seemed prepared nonetheless. It was very different than what Imogen did with her fragment. Jayna had to be ready.

But it wasn't just her, Gavin realized. Eva was doing something, and the smoke was swirling, flowing slowly across the ground. Had Gavin not been paying attention to it, he wasn't even sure he would've been able to see it. It slithered toward the circle Jayna had formed, and created another ring of power, adding to what Jayna had already placed. The combination of Jayna's power and Eva's power was considerable.

"Is that really necessary?" Ceran asked, stepping back and moving his hands to cross them over his chest. It looked almost as if he was at ease, but it still seemed a bit odd from a fragment.

"I don't know what's necessary and what's not," Jayna said. "To be honest, I don't know what kinds of things you might decide to try to do to me, or to the people who are with me."

Ceran looked over. "You have a new person with you. There is something about him that is familiar, though."

“I told you about him before,” Jayna said.

“I see. The one you sparred with.”

Jayna nodded. “He is, and he’s been a useful ally.”

“Useful?” Gavin muttered under his breath.

Eva shot him a look, but she didn’t say anything.

“We need to know what you know about the Forerunners,” Jayna said, continuing to twist her ring.

Gavin understood that the ring itself was what held the fragment. Imogen had a fragment, but he had no idea what held hers—other than possibly her sword. It wasn’t that dissimilar to the bralinath trees that carried the power of the elders, summoning their fragmented power.

That was how fragments could be used. An aid, mostly. Borrowed power.

But what of the El’aras? What of the Ashara? What of others who had their own innate power?

He wasn’t sure.

He needed Imogen, and her experience, and her connection to her fragment, as Gavin couldn’t help but feel as if she had an inherent understanding of fragments in a way others did not.

He breathed out for a moment, and he turned his attention back to Ceran. This was a Sul’toral. A precursor to the sorcerers. Somebody who had incredible power. And yet, Gavin didn’t really even know anything about the kind of power the Sul’toral had, or anything about where they came from. The only thing he really knew was that the Sul’toral had been around before the sorcerers and had mastered power in a way others had not.

“The Forerunners,” Ceran said, and he sounded a little distraught by the fact that he was going to have to talk about it. “You are asking about something that predates me.”

“But you know about them,” Jayna said.

“I know in vague terms. There is one thing that changes as we fragment, Jayna. In time, you may come to understand this. You lose memories.”

Eva tensed.

Had she been fragmented? She was Ashara, and she certainly seemed alive, but what if she was nothing more than just a fragment?

And Alana?

He wouldn't think like that. Alana was... Alana.

“I understand that there are gaps,” she said, and Gavin had the distinct sense that Jayna was aware of the connection between what Ceran was saying and Eva's experience. “But I'm just looking for whatever you can share with me. We're trying to understand what's happening here and now.”

“The Forerunners should not be able to cause any problems for you now. They are gone. Only fragments remain.”

“Fragments?” Gavin asked.

“What do you think gives this place the power it has?” Ceran asked, turning to him. There was a frown on his face, almost as if he was trying to search Gavin for something and failing at it. He surged, and for a moment he flared with a little brightness. Some of that light energy began to spill out of him. “I see something about you,” Ceran said, coming toward Gavin.

“What do you see?” Gavin asked.

“I see...”

Ceran backed away, and some of the power flowed again. This time, Jayna struggled, or seemed to, as she attempted to maintain her hold over the power, to keep it from dissipating altogether. Jayna struggled with the ring, as if using a spell to hold on to that power.

“Ceran,” she said. “You can go back.”

“Why did you do this?” Ceran asked. “Why did you bring him here?”

“What about him?” Jayna said.

She held her hand out, and it looked as if she was trying to grasp the fragment, to pull it back into the ring, only the fragment was not going.

Ceran remained focused, staring at Jayna. There was something about all this that Gavin could feel but couldn't quite make out. There was energy building in what Ceran was doing, pushing on Jayna.

“You should not have brought this here, Jayna,” Ceran said. “You should not work with this. You should not stay with a Forerunner.”

Then that wispy power began to fade, disappearing quickly into the ring until there was nothing left.

Jayna rounded on Gavin, and a burst of energy exploded from her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Gavin did the only thing he thought he could—drawing on the power of the bralinath trees—but he unintentionally drew upon something else, shifting some of the power inside him so that it exploded through him. He created a ring around him, and he pushed outward.

He knew that he had to ensure that he was safe from Jayna, but he also needed to be safe from anything Eva might do. The idea that he was a Forerunner...

Well, maybe that wasn't all that ridiculous, especially given the kind of power Gavin now had flowing through him.

"What was he talking about?" Jayna asked. "I can tell that something is different with you, and I wasn't exactly sure what it was, but I can feel it. You're hiding something from me, Gavin."

"I'm not hiding anything. You were there when this happened. It was when I was attacked and nearly died. Some part of me changed and absorbed some of that power. It doesn't mean I'm a Forerunner."

Eva had not released her smoke, as if holding out until Jayna permitted her to.

Jayna let out a deep breath. "All of this is so strange."

"I know," Gavin said. "It's old power that we need to understand. It's part of the reason we're out here, isn't it? But it's not why I went to the other side. I'm not chasing power." He flicked his gaze to the ring on Jayna's finger. "I'm simply

trying to understand who is responsible for what's happening here—and who abducted Anna.”

“And if you don't stop it, how long will it keep affecting us here?”

“I don't know. If creatures keep trying to burst through, it's possible that whatever boundary exists between the realms will shatter. Which is why I'm going back.”

“Fine. I'm coming too,” Jayna said.

Eva looked confused, and then she frowned. “I'm feeling like there is something I should know about these Forerunners. What if the Ashara are tied to them, and that is why we're here?”

“Maybe all power is tied to the Forerunners,” Gavin said. “But I don't know if that even matters really. We just need to interrupt whatever is happening, and whatever it is they plan to do now.”

Jayna and Eva were quiet.

“Can we travel from here, or would you have been able to hold me?” Gavin asked.

Eva had already started to withdraw her smoke.

“I don't know,” Jayna said, and she looked at him. “It's possible that you might have been able to use that particular ability, but I don't know enough about it to tell you with any certainty whether I would've been able to restrict it from you or not.”

Gavin headed to the edge of the ring of the enchantments, and once he stood there, he could feel some of the energy pushing against him. It was tied to the smoke coming from Eva, from the wings that spread out from her, a pressure that built from both of them. Then there was pressure coming from the dragon, as if trying to resist what was happening to him.

He chuckled under his breath. Eva eyed him, and he pointed up. “My dragon is concerned about me,” Gavin said. “It seems as if whatever you did here was separating me from the dragon, and separating me from...”

He hesitated.

It was separating him from something else.

He hadn't realized that it was shielding him in a way, cutting him off from others—and their enchantments.

“Gavin?”

A sudden crackle came through the enchantment he was wearing on his lapel, different than the one he kept in his ear. Gavin jumped at the sound before realizing what it was.

He tapped on the enchantment. “Wrenlow?”

“There you are,” Wrenlow said. “Something’s going on here, Gavin. I don’t know where you are, but we need you to return. That is, if you can.”

“I’m on my way.”

“It’s dangerous.” Wrenlow’s voice was breaking up as it came through the enchantment.

“Wrenlow?”

There was no response.

Jayna looked at the enchantment as Gavin continually tried to call to Wrenlow and Gaspar. When he gave up, she pointed at it. “Skillfully done, but I think Topher would’ve been able to make you better enchantments, if you would’ve had an opportunity to work with him.”

“Maybe next time,” Gavin said.

He could travel from here, but he wasn’t sure where it would take him on the other side. There was another place, though, that he did know where it would lead.

“How quickly can you travel?” Gavin asked.

“Quickly enough,” Jayna said.

He turned to Eva. “How quickly can you travel?”

“I can travel fast,” she said softly.

“Good. Meet me outside Yoran.”

Neither of them argued. He flew upward, ignoring the dragon as he shot over it, before streaking back down toward the city, the connection to Yoran blooming inside him as if it were a beacon calling to him. The dragon followed.

When Gavin landed, the ground around him rippled with energy. The forest here was different than the one outside Nelar. This one had bralinath trees, and they were flourishing with more energy than usual, and Gavin could feel it in a different way than he normally did. It was as if these trees had been somehow influenced.

He wandered through the forest, feeling some of the bralinath trees and trying to make sense of the power that was here, but not really able to do so. He wondered how much of the energy he detected came from the traditional power, and how much of it came from a strange undercurrent of power that originated from the other realm. He could feel it, however distantly.

He had pushed power across the realms using the bralinath trees. He still wasn't entirely sure what happened when he did that, only that it had seemed to secure something in a way that he still needed to better understand. Unfortunately, there was a part of what he had done that might have caused more problems.

What if he should have paid more attention to the shifted power that came across? What if he was somehow responsible for what Anna had been compelled to do?

He didn't have those answers.

And he didn't know if he was changing because of the connection he had forged. More than that, he didn't know if the trees were changing because of what had happened to him.

Gavin felt the sudden shift. The air became smoky as Eva and Jayna suddenly appeared and landed near him. The look in Jayna's eyes spoke volumes, but she didn't say anything.

"I'm using one of the Leier sacred patterns," Gavin explained.

“I think that would be a useful technique for me to learn,” Jayna said.

“Well, I can teach you when we have more time.”

“Really?” she said.

“I’m not trying to keep anything from you.”

She grinned and glanced at Eva, who simply shook her head, a little bit of smoke trailing from her.

The enchantment had remained quiet. That worried Gavin.

The others shuffled closer to him, and then he folded, carrying them across. When he stepped free, he felt a difference in the power around him.

“This feels different than the last time we came over here,” Jayna said.

“It does,” Gavin said. “One of the things I’ve noticed whenever I come to this side is that things have started to change.” Jayna arched a brow at him, and he shrugged. “To be honest, I don’t know much about the change, only that I can feel something is different.”

He focused, using the Tree Stands in the Forest technique to detect where they were, and to track where his friends might be.

He felt a sudden buildup and a burst of power.

“Well, it seems like we’re about to face our next attack.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Gavin darted forward, drawing on the power inside himself.

He hesitated to use his core reserves or the bralinath power, as he wasn't sure if there was a danger in doing so here, given what he had experienced before. Instead, he expanded, allowing the power of this place to unfold, creating a pair of swords in both hands. He was a little concerned that he wouldn't be able to fight as effectively as he needed to.

The last time he had fought any sort of creatures here, he had needed Alana's enchantments. He still had a few of them, but he wasn't sure if those were going to be necessary.

Eva was a marvel as she took flight. Smoky wings spread out from either side of her, and power glowed from her. Jayna stayed close to Eva and hovered with her.

They reached a trio of massive three-horned creatures. Gavin had faced one of these before, but three at once would be much more difficult. The monsters came rumbling toward them, and Eva swirled smoke toward the creature first. She concentrated that smoke, which solidified into something like flames that seemed augmented by what Jayna was adding, their powers much more effective together than separate.

Gavin flew forward with his stone blades. Even as he raced, the puzzle pieces he was seeing of the fight began to unfold in front of him. An answer came, guiding him, though it was not like what Imogen described. This was not showing possibilities. This was simply giving him the solution.

It was guiding him directly toward a specific part of the creature—the center of its head.

He jumped and twisted in the air, then drove a bolt of power down into the creature's skull using what he had seen of the puzzle. He managed to avoid its horns, but barely.

He pushed off, twisting the other way, and then he dropped, rolling on the ground.

The creature stumbled and collapsed.

That worked.

Gavin quickly explained to Jayna and Eva what he had done, though he omitted the detail about the emerging puzzle in his mind.

It didn't take long for them to realize what they needed to do. Jayna used a burst of fire that slammed into the creature between its horns. Eva augmented Jayna's power the way that she often did. Gavin still wasn't exactly sure how she did that, only that her power seemed to concentrate whatever Jayna was doing.

Was that what the Ashara power was meant for?

It seemed like an unusual strategy to strengthen a sorcerer, but it worked that way.

Gavin used his spikes and slammed them into the next creature. Jayna blasted the third one with fire and wind and something else he felt but couldn't quite identify, mixing it all. When it was done, all the creatures were down.

There was an odd residual energy that lingered in the air. He was not quite sure what to make of it, only that he could feel that power and some of that buildup. More than that, he could feel some additional power, though he didn't know what it was.

He observed his surroundings. Everything felt unfamiliar. The power near him was different from anything he had sensed before. He could perceive the energy, but it felt distinct and seemed to recede from him.

"Were those creatures waiting for us?" Jayna asked.

“I’m not sure,” Gavin admitted. “I’ve never encountered something like this. They shouldn’t have known we were coming this way.”

“Unless you often use this passage and they anticipated you’d return,” Eva suggested.

Gavin thought about that. It was plausible that the creatures recognized a route he’d taken previously. After all, he had relied on that power before to guide him. While the environment felt vaguely familiar, he was surprised that any entity could have anticipated their exact path.

Unless they had some way of tracking him.

Gavin tapped on his enchantment. “Wrenlow. Gaspar. I’m back, and I’m going to be making my way toward you.”

There was no response.

A sense of energy pushed on him, as if trying to warn him about using his more familiar powers. He didn’t know why that would be, but he understood what he needed to do. He moved away from the ancient tree while trying to draw on that bralinath connection. It felt as if there was a power guiding him.

Not only that, but there was a directionality to it.

What would he find if he followed it?

The puzzle didn’t sort itself out in his mind the way it had during the fight. That was too bad, as it would be useful to find the answers without needing his life to be in danger.

Still, he could feel something pulling on him.

“This way,” he said.

“We just walk there, or do you want us to fly?” Jayna asked. It wasn’t even a sarcastic question.

“I think I have a better idea.”

He reached into his pocket, pulled out three of Mekel’s enchantments, and tapped on them. These were ones Alana had added to. As the enchantments unfurled, each of them

took on a cat shape. Gavin hesitated, then climbed on the back of one.

“We’re supposed to ride on these?” Jayna asked.

“They will move quickly, and won’t require any strength on our part. We can conserve what we need.”

He motioned to the other two enchantments. Jayna and Eva scrambled onto their backs.

Jayna leaned forward. “I can feel something from it. That’s unusual.”

“Enchantments can vary significantly, and these particular enchantments are unique because they were crafted by an enchanter friend of mine and then enhanced by another.”

Jayna gently traced her hand along the creature’s back, then suddenly lunged forward on the cat. Without hesitation, both Gavin and Eva were right behind her. As he drew closer, he could sense a pulsating energy within the creature.

While they continued on, an intricate puzzle began forming in Gavin’s mind, one reminiscent of patterns he had discerned in the past. As the image grew clearer, he detected a shift in its energy. It seemed to change, morph, evolve, but he couldn’t identify the exact transformation.

Only one thing was certain: He was being directed somewhere specific.

And wherever this path was leading them, Gavin needed to understand its endgame. He had started on this journey to find Anna. Now he worried whether he would be able to save her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

IMOGEN

Imogen wasn't sure if she was fully ready for the attack.

She told herself that she was, but at this point, she simply didn't know if she could be ready for what was coming—or if she even was. She had been picking up on the distinct sense of the creatures as they were making their way toward her and the others, and so far, there had been nothing to suggest that they were getting close enough to cause any sort of danger, but Imogen knew it was only a matter of time. They were going to be here before she knew it.

Which was why getting ready was so important.

She had been attempting to ready her people—all of her people—in order to ensure their safety. More than anything, Imogen knew that they had to find a way to be fully prepared for what was coming, but at this point, she didn't know if what they were going to be able to do would be enough.

With the ruins spread out behind them, she hovered, looking down and trying to make out the dangers that were there, but even as she did, she could not identify what they might have to face—if anything.

“You can come down from there,” Gaspar said, breaking through the quiet of the wind around her. The enchantment crackled in her ear, and the sound of his voice startled her, disrupting the sense of calm she had as she hovered.

“I need to know what is coming,” she said.

“And you will, but you need to come down here so we can all work together on this, Imogen. It doesn’t make sense for you to stay up there and just wait.”

“Actually, I think it does make sense for me to stay up here. This is the only way I’m going to be able to determine what is here and what we may have to do.”

“I can tell you what’s here. We are. And we need the general.”

There was urgency in his tone, and it was something she was not accustomed to hearing from Gaspar. But there was also an element of a command. He was trying to direct her, trying to guide her, and maybe he was trying to advise her.

That fit with Gaspar.

She swept her gaze out along the landscape once again, looking for any sign of an attack, and when nothing seemed obvious, she finally started to descend, slowly drifting closer and closer to the ground until she came to land.

Gaspar was standing with several of the enchanters. Mekel was nearest him, already beginning to set some of his stone golems in place, activating them with a brief touch and causing them to expand. Their size alone would have been enough to be imposing, Imogen knew. She had seen the way those enchantments worked around Yoran, and how they had been useful in battle. But that wasn’t all he did. Alana followed him, and she would hesitate, focusing as she held her hand out, but she didn’t touch them.

Imogen realized that Alana didn’t need to. She was using the Tree Stands in the Forest technique and adding some power from this place into those enchantments.

“You are modifying them,” she said.

Alana looked over. “It’s working,” she said, seemingly much more excited about this than Imogen had seen her before. “I’ve always been able to add to enchantments, but the layering of techniques wasn’t always so obvious to me. But this time, and in this way, it’s working in a manner it had not been.”

“What are you doing differently?” Imogen asked.

“I don’t even really know. I feel like I’m adding something to the technique that you were teaching me, and it seems like it’s causing some part of me, and some part of the power, to unfold in a way that allows it to link up.” She smiled as she said it. “But it might be something less obvious than that.”

Imogen chuckled. “Well, whatever it is, it’s good that you are here.”

Gaspar glanced over to Imogen. “All because of what you taught her.”

“*They* taught her. And I seem to recall somebody else claiming they were going to work with me.”

“Well, that was a little bit for me, and a whole lot for you.”

She frowned. “For me?”

Gaspar shrugged. “I knew that you needed to have some purpose. And truth be told, I needed to have an excuse to work with you.”

“You realize that you don’t have to have an excuse to work with me.”

“Sometimes it feels like I do,” he said. “Sometimes it feels like you are so busy being the general that I don’t have an opportunity to really spend the time with you that we used to have.”

She stepped toward him, and then a shout rang out.

She froze, then immediately used Tree Stands in the Forest to brace herself and test for whatever was calling to her. She couldn’t tell what it was, only that there was something building.

“It’s getting closer,” she said.

“We are making our preparations,” Gaspar said, then looked around. “We were pretty much good already, and this is actually a good setup. Everybody here has their role. Everybody knows what they’re supposed to do, and everybody

has experience in placing protections like this, Imogen. Nobody is concerned about it.”

“I’m concerned,” she said.

“Because that’s your nature.”

She wasn’t sure if that was true or not, or maybe it was just the nature of being the First. The nature of being the general. The nature of being somebody who felt as if they had a responsibility to keep the people here as safe as possible.

She let out a heavy, slow sigh. When she did, she thought about the connection that Benji had gifted her and about the different possible lines around her. Ever since she had come here, those different lines of possibilities had become much more extensive than what had been there for her in the past. She could feel them flowing through her. There was an element to the way those lines were working that allowed her to discern some different aspect of them, but it was one she still wasn’t sure she could identify. She didn’t know what it was about those lines, or about that power, that drew her, yet she felt something about it all.

“It would be useful having your help here, Benji,” she said.

Gaspar glanced in her direction. “What was that?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Where do you think the boy is at?”

“He’s still not back,” Imogen said.

“Are you sure? I’ve been trying to reach him, and his enchantment isn’t working. So either he’s there and he’s ignoring us, he’s there and he can’t reach us, or he’s dead.”

Imogen snorted. “I doubt he’s dead.”

“Oh, I doubt he’s dead as well, because we would not be so lucky as that.”

“Gaspar,” Alana said.

“Fine, fine,” he muttered. “We don’t want him dead, anyway. We need him to get back.”

“We don’t need him to get back. We can go without him,” Imogen said.

“Well, that’s true enough,” Gaspar said, “so I suppose I shouldn’t be so excited to have him return.”

Imogen just laughed. It was a nice thing to laugh before a fight.

There was a part of her that wondered if it would be possible for them to avoid a fight altogether. It felt as if everything about this place conspired to bring them closer and closer to fighting, something she was not entirely sure she wanted.

But why must it conspire to do so? Imogen didn’t know why that would be the case.

When the ground trembled again, and when she began to feel the buildup of energy that seemed to come from some distant attack, she knew she needed to be ready. It was her responsibility to ensure that she was, and her responsibility to ensure that the rest of the people with her were prepared. Or as prepared as possible.

And it was going to be her responsibility to lead, and less so to fight.

“You have some enchantments,” Imogen said, glancing over to Alana.

“I do.”

“Good. You may need those.”

“I don’t know if they’re going to be as effective as they were the last time. That one seemed to take quite a bit out of me.” She squeezed her eyes tight. “I... Well, I don’t even know if I made it right.”

“What were you trying to do?” Imogen asked.

“There’s different ways of modifying enchantments,” Alana started, as if she was hoping to explain the whole process to Imogen. Imogen couldn’t make any enchantments, so in her case, it didn’t really matter how the girl described it, as it wouldn’t make any difference one way or another. “Many

times, the enchantments can be augmented. When I do it that way, I'm unfolding some power into them. That's easy enough. That's what I was doing on the other side. I could feel it. It's like some part of me got deposited inside it, and I allowed that to pour into it, and then it would unfurl." She frowned. "At least, that's the way it seemed. But there's another way."

"What way is that?"

"It's the harder way," Alana said. "It involves taking some of that connection, and weaving it into it. It then becomes a little less stable, and rather than unfolding outward, it unfolds downward."

"So you're taking the power and trying to compress it?" Gaspar asked.

"Something like that. Truth be told, I don't even know how to really describe it. It feels strange. And it's strange to even describe, because it just doesn't work the way that other enchantments work. But when I made the one that helped trap the creatures when Gavin was here, that one felt as if it folded down and then stayed."

"And what about the ones you made now?"

"These feel like they pull down until there is nothing left. It's like I'm working on some part of the enchantment I haven't quite mastered, and I'm still working on it." She frowned. "I don't even suppose that makes any sense to you."

"It makes a little bit of sense," Gaspar said.

Imogen looked over at him. "Does it?"

"A little. I can't say that I'm really able to understand everything she's talking about. I'm not an enchanter. I've been around enchantments enough that some of it does make a certain sort of sense to me."

"Imogen," a voice from behind her said.

She glanced back. Jorend had walked up, and he had three of the El'aras with him. She hadn't even heard him

approaching. Good for him. That suggested that he was gaining more mastery over things.

“We have created the entire ring on the outer perimeter,” Jorend said. “I don’t know if it’s going to be enough, but I can feel that something is trying to push on us.”

“Good,” Imogen said.

That much she had detected. Part of the time she’d been spending standing here had involved using her connection to Tree Stands in the Forest to attempt to squeeze and compress some of that energy down so she could identify whether there were some additional parts she might need to use. She wasn’t sure if she had done it fully, but she was aware of some aspect of it that had created a different connection than it had before.

“I’m not sure that it’s good,” Jorend said. “This attack is different than what we faced in the past.”

“How?” she asked.

“Can you feel it?”

Imogen hadn’t been paying much attention to it, but that was because she’d been talking to Gaspar and Alana and trying to make sense of their protections and whether or not there was going to be any sort of danger here. But now she started to focus, and she began to feel for the energy around her. In doing so, she recognized there was something about it that felt a bit different than she had expected.

There was pressure. She had anticipated that. That was typical for any sort of attack, so she wasn’t at all surprised by it. But it was not just about the pressure she felt. It was the location of the pressure and how it was working around them. It had encircled them in a way. And in doing so, it started to squeeze, compressing them in a fashion that left Imogen feeling like that pressure, and that attack, were not just from a single focal point.

It was coming from all around them.

“They know we’re here,” she said in a whisper.

“What do you mean?” Gaspar asked.

“It means that they know we are here.” She looked over to Jorend, who nodded. “Set the defenses. Make sure you have the entirety of the city ringed using Tree Stands in the Forest, and make sure everybody is prepared for that.”

“It has been done,” he said.

“And get everyone else prepared for what we are going to need to do,” she said.

“What is that?” Gaspar asked.

“It involves an attack.”

“How so?”

“In this case, it will be slightly different than what you faced before. We are going to use the Leier patterns to create a level of protection. Then we’ll use the enchanters and the sorcerers to provide an offensive sort of attack. And we are going to hope that is enough.”

Gaspar frowned at her. “Hope isn’t the way I normally would assume that you view things.”

“Normally, it would not be,” she said. “But in this case, it is all we have.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The path led to a set of ruins. These were different than the ones Gavin had spent the evening at. Had the ruins continuously shifted over time? Perhaps there was an inherent power within these places that induced change, making it challenging to track any consistent path. And if such changes were the norm, could they ever truly navigate their way through? This notion of evolving ruins, or the very landscape itself transforming, left Gavin with more questions than answers.

“Is this where they are?” Jayna asked.

“I don’t think so,” Gavin said.

“Are we even going the same direction?”

“It’s difficult to tell in this world. The directionality here seems different, but I think so. I think...” He shrugged. He wasn’t about to tell them that the pattern—the puzzle—was guiding him in this direction, but this was where they needed to go.

And he needed to be ready.

Jayna was already twisting her ring. Eva trailed smoke around her. They both recognized danger here, even though they didn’t say anything.

Surprisingly, the cats they had been riding had prowled forward. They jumped over the ruins, amazing Gavin with their quickness and fluidity of movement. The ground rumbled, and he could feel something within it, almost as if his cat was trying to communicate with him in some way.

And then he felt the ground ripple again.

There was power here, but something about it didn't feel quite right.

Gavin used the Tree Stands in the Forest technique but did not detect anything. Jayna was looking around, and Eva was still letting smoke spill from her, both turning in place while searching.

The cat pawed at the ground again, and there was another tremble.

It was trying to tell him something.

“What is it?” he asked the creature as he slid over to stand next to it. The cat stomped on the ground again. The stone trembled.

The stone.

Was there something to it?

All of this was old and covered with moss and weeds, but it had drawn the cat's attention. Why not try?

He could use the power he had here, but he was also the Chain Breaker, and he could use his core reserves to break stone. He had done it before.

He brought his fist down. The stone shattered, revealing a door. It was ancient, and it was covered with symbols that reminded him of the enchantment he had seen inside Telluminder's shop.

Jayna came over, and she looked down. “How did you know this was here?”

“I didn't. The cat did.”

“The cat just told you?”

“I think it's similar to the kind of enchantment the dragon once was. My power mixed with the power of the two enchanters who helped create it, modifying it. I don't know if it works the same for everybody, but it certainly did for me.”

Jayna frowned as she looked at her cat. “What do you think?”

“I already tried, but nothing changed,” Eva said. She turned and watched her cat, then snorted. “Well. Perhaps I’m mistaken.”

Gavin glanced over. Eva’s cat looked as if it was emitting smoke now.

Were they actually changing these enchantments? How was that even possible?

He didn’t know if there was something tied to this land, or if there was something tied to the enchantments used to make those creatures. Regardless, it was a useful power.

“We get the door open and figure out where this leads,” he said.

“Your people were traveling above ground.”

“I still think this is where we were supposed to go. It’s just a feeling I have.” She didn’t question that, and Gavin was thankful that she didn’t. “I don’t know where this will lead us, but hopefully it will take us toward answers.”

“Or maybe it’s a trap. We don’t know if we can trust these enchantments,” Jayna said, then looked over at the cat. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m not just trusting the enchantment,” Gavin said.

“It seems to me that you are. You’re letting some enchantment guide you, and—”

“Ever since I’ve been here, I’ve started to see things,” he said.

Jayna watched him. Eva stepped forward, and he could feel some of the smoke swirling off her. There was also something more to it that was blooming within her, almost as if she was trying to make sense of just what it was that he was saying.

“I can’t quite put it into words, but ever since I arrived here, I’ve been able to anticipate events,” Gavin confessed.

“You possess the gift of foresight?”

“I’m not sure. I discussed it with Imogen because the Porapeth are known to have such abilities. However, I’m uncertain if it’s a Porapeth trait or if it’s linked to my bond with the Shard.” He delved into his experience as the Champion, his connection to Anna, and his suspicion that there might be a link between them. “While I could tap into the past, she could glimpse the future. Ironically, she clung to the past, and I often found myself looking ahead.”

“It’s not irony,” Jayna mused, “just intriguing. So you can foresee events?”

“I can anticipate and strategize. Right now it’s mostly in combat situations that this ability truly benefits me. Outside of those moments, it often remains dormant, providing no real guidance.” Gavin gestured toward a door. “This is the sole instance where I felt it directing me.”

“What if this gift is a trap?” she asked, approaching the door. “I know you believe you might have a bond with this person, but remember, she’s the same person who betrayed her people and you. Can you genuinely trust her? If she’s manipulating you, aware of your foresight, she might be leading you and others into danger.”

Gavin frowned, considering the possibility. Yet he felt a compulsion, an instinctive pull toward a greater purpose. “You might be onto something,” he admitted. “But I still feel like this is where we need to go.”

Jayna nodded in understanding. “Fine. Open the door. We’ll assess the situation and then decide whether to proceed.”

“I’m not certain it will simply open,” Gavin observed, indicating some inscriptions. “Look at these markings.”

“They’re just runes. You merely activate them.” She tapped the runes, and to Gavin’s surprise, they responded. But it seemed the activation stemmed more from her Toral ring than anything else. She jerked her hand back. “Oh. Seems like Ceran wants me to do this, as well.”

“Does he do that often?” Gavin asked.

“Ceran can be a little fickle. He’s a difficult person—or fragment, I suppose—for me to figure out. I can’t always identify what he wants me to do.”

Gavin focused on the strange doorway and pressed out with his core reserves, realizing immediately that he wasn’t going to be able to activate it with his core reserves. It would only react to the other part of him, that new part of him, and unfold for him. But he hesitated.

“Go on,” Jayna urged.

“All right.”

He let the power flow into the door, and it opened with a surge of light.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Gavin paused outside the doorway. Despite the brightness of the light, everything inside was dark. Jayna fixed that by sending a ball of light floating downward. He nodded his thanks.

The stairs led down, and from there...

“Is that water?” Jayna asked, glancing over to Eva.

“It sounds like it,” Gavin said. “We haven’t seen much water in this place.”

“Right, so we head down, and then we find... what?”

“Everything seems to be leading us down here. That’s all I can tell.”

The only thing he knew was that the puzzle sense, that guiding sense, was leading him in this direction. As he focused on it, he could practically feel the way it was coaxing him down the stairs, and then into the darkness.

He took a deep breath, focused on the power inside himself, and then started down the steps. It was probably a foolish choice.

Jayna followed, as did Eva.

And then, surprisingly, the cats followed them.

“I’m shocked they’re coming with us,” Jayna said.

“I suspect they made the enchantments protective, so they are just following us to help keep us safe.”

“You have some interesting friends with interesting enchantments,” Jayna said.

As they continued onward, Gavin could feel the energy coming from down below. Something pulled on him.

He reached the bottom of the stairs. It opened into a massive, broad tunnel.

“Which direction?” Jayna asked.

It looked as if it went in either direction. He used the tree form, but when he did, there was pressure against him, a resistance he had rarely felt before. It was as if this place was somehow protected from the Leier sacred pattern.

“I don’t know,” Gavin said. “It’s like it’s trying to warn me. I want to be cautious.”

There was a crackling sound, and his enchantment triggered. Gavin grabbed it, and he brought it up to his ear. “Gaspar? Wrenlow? Imogen?”

“Hey there, boy,” Gaspar said, his voice coming through the enchantment a bit weaker than before. “We’ve been waiting on you. Find us yet?”

“Not yet. I was guided into a tunnel system.”

“Tunnels? Good. We found something as well. Sort of fell into it. There was an ancient ruin inside the city that we got trapped in. It just collapsed. We’ve been trying to get out, but it’s holding us. Can’t say we know much more about it, but we would love it if you’d be able to help us.”

“Where are you?” Gavin asked.

“I don’t really know. Imogen says everything’s been moving and that you wouldn’t be able to find us based on what you were able to do before, and yet, here you are.”

At least that confirmed Gavin’s fear. “We just need to keep searching, and I suspect it will eventually lead us out.”

“Let me try,” Eva said.

She stepped forward and pricked her palms with the enchantments on her hands. Smoke swirled away from her,

shooting down the hallway. At first, it went in both directions, but then it redirected. It funneled down a single side until it dispersed, disappearing into nothingness. Gavin could feel the power building inside him as a reaction to what she was doing, though he wasn't sure what it was that he detected.

Jayna stayed with him, as did Eva, and the cats followed behind them.

"Maybe they should take the lead," Gavin said, motioning to the cats. "If we come into danger, I wouldn't mind having them protect us."

"You would sacrifice our poor little kitties?" Jayna asked.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't sacrifice anything. I'm just thinking that maybe if we had them ahead of us, they may be able to handle anything we might encounter."

"You just want to hurt our poor little kitties." Jayna scratched the cat she had been riding, even using a little bit of sorcery in the process.

Gavin turned his attention back to what he was doing and continued marching along the tunnel. It was long, but they were moving quickly.

He found the source of the water.

A stream crossed through, creating a waterfall that ran down to the tunnel, which then disappeared into the darkness.

Gavin appreciated Jayna's presence and the light she sent streaking out from them. It illuminated the inside of the tunnels, and yet there was still some darkness that swallowed them. He tried enhancing his eyesight, but it didn't work.

Through it all, Gavin felt energy. It felt like a pressure on him, but he wasn't sure why.

He was bothered by it. Bothered by what was coming, bothered by what he felt like he had to do, bothered by what he felt like he had not yet done.

Jayna was watching him. She said nothing, but then, he didn't know if she needed to.

He'd tried to use the enchantment but hadn't been able to reach them. They needed to know he was coming. They needed to know that they were not going to be alone. They needed to know that he would come and fight with them.

He was the Chain Breaker, after all. They needed his help to break free of whatever chains they found themselves in.

They crossed the stream, and then Eva raised her hand. For a moment, more smoke spilled out of her and stretched beyond, slithering along the hallway until it drifted upward where Eva pointed.

"There's something up there," she whispered. "I can feel it moving. Maybe there's another opening here?"

Gavin saw no sign of stairs. There was no doorway. Nothing but the smoke.

Could he detect anything more?

Maybe the tree pattern would help. As he focused on Tree Stands in the Forest, Gavin picked up on a bit of resistance. Something opposed his pattern.

At least when he pushed downward.

He remembered how Imogen had spoken about modifying the tree pattern depending on the types of soil that were found. Rather than pushing down, he allowed the energy to flow outward, curling the tree out of the tunnel, stretching until it found almost imperceptible cracks overhead. He was able to stretch that power forward, and then he pushed another part of himself through it.

He attempted to force some of the stone up, and he modified the power he was holding on to and tried to shift it.

A shearing sound came from the energy he exerted. Most of it was from this new power he had inside himself.

Power from the tree unfolded overhead. The cracks widened until they formed an irregularly shaped opening, two feet by three feet. The distance was considerable given that the tunnel was quite thick, and as Gavin forced his way upward,

he could see a bit of dim light. He hesitated, readying for whatever was going to be out there.

Gavin looked over to Jayna, and then Eva, and nodded to them. “Up we go.”

“Are you sure this is the right idea?” Jayna said. “Because we don’t know what’s up there, and if we end up getting—”

“I don’t know if it’s the right idea,” he said. “I don’t even know where it’s trying to lead me. Or if it’s trying to lead me at all. But I think we need to go up.”

Using the Lightning Strikes pattern, he shot upward into a large clearing of ruins much like the last one he had been in. He saw no sign of his friends. He felt nothing.

As he hovered, Jayna and Eva came streaking up through the opening, both wrapped in smoke. Eva set Jayna down on the ground, then unfurled her wings.

He heard a scrambling sound of claws scratching on stone, and he looked down to see the cats crawling out of the opening. They shredded the opening a little more until they were free of it.

“I guess that explains how they are getting out,” Jayna said. “I’m glad we don’t have to leave the kitties behind.”

There was power here.

Gavin moved forward toward what he felt, with Eva floating alongside him.

“Do you detect anything?” he asked.

“I feel pressure against me, but I do not know what it is.”

Eva flew higher into the air, and she was gone for a moment before there was a burst of flame.

Gavin shot upward on the Lightning Strikes pattern again, shifting into Petals on the Wind to float. He saw the ring of flame, and the inside the ring was a solitary figure.

The figure looked from Eva to Gavin and finally to Jayna, who was riding atop one of the cat enchantments. She held her hands up in a placating gesture, seemingly waiting.

“What do you think?” Gavin asked as he caught up to Eva.
“Go down for a chat?”

“I think that’s what we are here for. But you should be careful that this may be a trap.”

“Oh, you think everything is a trap,” he said.

“Because it often is.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Gavin didn't want to put anyone in danger by engaging the figure, but this was the only person they'd encountered. He looked over to Jayna, who was readying some power, though he couldn't tell what she was doing. Eva continued to circle, and she had taken on an almost imperceptible change, with a little more smoke than before.

He elected to drop to the ground, and did so with a burst of power and energy, allowing himself to focus on what he was doing. He could feel that energy inside himself calling to him.

There was another surge of a different kind of power nearby.

He came to stand across from the man. He was tall, slender, and dressed in a ragged gray cloak. There was something about it that struck Gavin as familiar. The man regarded him with an intense expression.

"You got me down here," Gavin said. "Now what?"

The others were still in the air, watching. Gavin debated whether he should call them down, but he wasn't sure he needed to. The cat enchantments circled them. He could feel a connection to the cat he had activated, which was still a little surprising to him.

"You are the one they call the Chain Breaker." The man's voice was strangely accented, and he spoke hesitantly, as if he wasn't exactly sure what he was saying, or how to get the words out.

"I am," Gavin said. "And who are you?"

“My name is Naelum Elarine.”

Gavin stared at him for a moment, and it seemed as if this Naelum thought that Gavin should recognize his name. When he said nothing, the man continued.

“Thank you for finding me.”

“Did I have much of a choice?”

He wasn't sure if this man had drawn him to him, or if something else had.

“Where are my friends?” Gavin asked.

Naelum blinked. “I did not harm them. I held them. Protected them.”

“Protected?”

“Danger here. Because of the Chain Breaker.”

“The danger isn't because of me. You are the danger.”

“I'm not danger,” the man said. “Danger here.”

Gavin wanted to argue, but he knew that would be a mistake. Something about this man left Gavin with a weird familiarity. He didn't know why or what it was that he picked up on.

“Well,” Gavin began, “you have me here. You have my attention. Now, why don't you tell me what it is that you want from me, and what you intend to do with me and my friends.”

“Need Chain Breaker,” Naelum said.

Of all the things this man could say, asking for Gavin's help was not what he had expected.

He tapped on his enchantment. “Gaspar, I found somebody who claims he is holding you for your protection.”

There was a momentary pause, and then Gaspar's voice came through the enchantment. “Well, there might be something to that, boy.”

“Oh? What's going on?”

“Well, after we were dropped down about fifty feet, a ring of creatures started to encircle us. Don’t know that we would’ve realized they were there had it not been for the collapse, and though Alana and some of the others have been trying to attack some of those creatures, they aren’t having a lot of luck with them. It seems as if they’re able to deflect most kinds of power.”

“Even Alana’s?” Gavin asked. That surprised him, as he would not have expected her power to be deflected.

“Hers has been a little different. Then again, she has limits to how much she’s able to do. Everything she’s been trying to do and trying to help us with has been posing a challenge for them, but it also has strained her.”

“Keep her safe,” Gavin said. “I’m going to figure this out.”

He turned his attention back to Naelum, who was watching him, as if waiting for him to finish the conversation. And maybe he knew exactly what it was that Gavin was saying.

Could he?

“All right,” Gavin said. “You have my attention.”

“You are here for the Forerunners.”

Gavin tensed. Everything within him went cold.

The man knew?

Of course he did. He was probably one of the Forerunners as well. Considering the dangers they had found in this realm, he had to believe that it was all interconnected.

“I’m here because of something along those lines,” Gavin said. “What do you know about them?”

“I once served them.”

Gavin blinked. He needed the others to hear this—scholars, not just somebody like him. Wrenlow and Char. Even Telluminder would be better than nothing.

He flicked his gaze up, hoping that Jayna would recognize that he was trying to signal to her, and he was relieved when she came to land next to him. She looked over at the man.

“He looks El’aras,” she said.

Gavin frowned. “He what?”

Naelum frowned at her too. “I look like who?”

“Not who, but what. The people.” Jayna turned to Gavin. “Maybe I’m wrong, but he reminds me of some of the El’aras. You have more experience with them than I do, though.”

Gavin focused on the man, and as he did, he started to realize what she was saying and recognize that there was some truth to it. He hadn’t even considered that possibility, but maybe there was some element of El’aras to Naelum. That might be why Gavin hadn’t detected something strange here in the first place.

He needed to make sense of what was going on, but could not tell anything obvious. If this wasn’t an El’aras connection, did that mean that the El’aras had come from here? The man had said he had once served the Forerunners, and they believed the power on their side had come from this one.

So many questions, but so difficult to find answers.

Gavin tapped on his enchantment and waited a moment for it to activate. “Wrenlow, I want you to listen.”

“I’m here, Gavin,” Wrenlow said.

“Don’t say anything unless I specifically ask it. Can you do that?”

Wrenlow laughed. “Can I do that? You’re asking like I can’t control myself, like I’m little more than a child who can ___”

“Can you do that?”

There was a momentary pause, and then Gaspar said, “I’ll keep him under control, boy.”

Gavin was thankful for that, and he turned his attention back to Naelum. “What do you mean that you served them?”

“We once served them. What you call the Forerunners, we called something else. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What did you call them?” Eva asked, coming to land on the other side of Gavin.

The man turned to her, and his eyes widened slightly. Then he smiled at her. He held his hand out, which caused a bit of power to bubble on the surface of it, glowing softly with a pale bluish light.

From what Gavin could see, there was something about that glow that seemed as if it were calling to Eva. If this man was El’aras in origin, maybe he also didn’t like the Ashara.

Only, what Gavin was seeing from this man and the way he reacted when he saw Eva suggested that he didn’t necessarily share that feeling. Maybe he didn’t have the same problem with the Ashara that other El’aras did.

And if he didn’t, then it suggested that he wasn’t El’aras. Or at least not like the El’aras that Gavin had spent time around.

“I have seen your coming, Chain Breaker,” Naelum said.

“I have been trying to understand this realm. What is this place?”

“It was once a place of great wonder.”

“Doesn’t look like all that much now,” Jayna said. “With everything crumbling and fading and—”

“It has been destroyed,” Naelum said. “The destruction was a long time ago, or perhaps not in your time.” He shook his head, frowning. “I lose track of such things.”

“What do you mean?” Gavin asked.

“I mean...” He frowned again. “I don’t know what I mean. Your language is difficult for me.”

“You speak it fine,” Jayna said.

“I speak it out of necessity. It is not the language of my ancestors.”

“Then what is?”

The man looked as if he was struggling to answer the question. His gaze settled on Gavin. “I have felt your coming. I have felt the effect you have on those you call the Forerunners.”

“And what is that?”

“They have hoped to escape.” The words hung in the air. “They are trapped here. This place holds them. Your world was sealed from them.”

Everything within Gavin went cold again, and he thought about what Benji had said, and then he pursed his lips.

“Wrenlow,” he said, speaking into the enchantment. “Tell me Imogen heard that.”

“She heard,” Gaspar replied instead. “She says that it is as she feared.”

The Forerunners.

The great battles.

Benji had mentioned them, though Gavin wondered about it. He couldn’t help but feel as if there was some part of this that he needed to better understand. If he only had an opportunity to talk to the Porapeth, or somebody who had the necessary knowledge, maybe this wouldn’t be so difficult for them—and him.

Now he was left wondering if maybe there was something he should have been digging into so he could understand just what the Porapeth was concerned about, because a very real possibility existed that there was real danger here.

The Forerunners were trapped.

Perhaps Gavin coming and going had drawn attention to the fact that there was an escape.

But that didn’t explain Naelum. Nor did it explain Alana.

“You said you’re a servant. What happened?” Gavin asked.

“We abandoned them.”

“We? Are there more of you?”

“Perhaps,” Naelum said, and he swept his gaze around. “We have been looking for one another, but it is not safe to stay together. So we stay separated.”

“It’s not safe?” Jayna asked.

“They hunt us. They use their trained beasts, and they hunt us.”

“Why?”

“Vengeance,” he said. “Anger. And they use us.”

“Use you for what?” Eva asked. Her smoke was swirling closer to him.

“They want to use us,” Naelum said.

Gavin nodded. “Yes, you said that already, but we’re trying to understand what they want to use you for.”

“They want to use you to escape, don’t they?” Jayna said. “That’s what they’re hoping to do with you. They think they need to use you, on whatever it is that you can do, to break free of this place.”

“Yes,” Naelum replied. “They learned from the Chain Breaker that such a thing is possible. And now they want to replicate it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

IMOGEN

The attack came suddenly, and any question about whether it was coordinated went away. Imogen had known that it was, and she had known that the strangeness here was obviously going to be focused on something, and tied to whoever was responsible for everything in this realm.

Then again, she had not known what that was going to look like. She had only known the way it had felt.

There had been an ongoing sense of direction from the attackers, and it had been building in a way she was not entirely sure they were going to be able to withstand. This place had its own unique and dangerous power, and within that, Imogen found herself questioning whether the people that were with her would be enough to handle what was out there.

“I thought we would have him with us,” Gaspar said.

“I think he thought the same,” she said.

“Can we do it without him?”

She looked around. She could feel the protections. Most of it was what she felt through the Tree Stands in the Forest pattern. It was the strongest barricade she had helped her people create since leaving their homeland. That had been potent when they had been assaulted there, and this...

In many ways, this might even be more potent, simply because the people who were holding on to that pattern and that power were far more competent than they had been

before. Their skill allowed them the ability to wield a much greater barricade. That by itself was enough.

And there was another layer here. There were the El'aras. There were the sorcerers. There were the enchanters. Everybody was working together to ensure that whatever danger was here would be taken care of. She found herself marveling at how everybody was so willing and able to work together.

“I think he made sure we could,” Imogen said.

“He did this?”

“I know you don't like giving him too much credit,” she said, smiling at Gaspar, “but in this case, I suspect that he deserves much more than you have given him before.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “Why?”

“Everything he has helped place around Yoran. Everything he did to help the people see that it would be necessary. All of that is tied to this. And because of him, we have this potential. We have this ability. We can work together. We don't have to be separate peoples. We can be one. One people serving a single cause.”

Gaspar grunted. “Oh, don't go telling him that. That's just going to swell his head too much.”

She smiled again. “But it would be helpful for him to be here because I think that whatever is happening to him is tied to what's going on in this place. I also think we need to understand that just as much as he does because it is going to be crucial for us to know what role he has, and what role we have, as we come to understand the purpose and danger of this place.”

That was all Imogen could say as the first wave came.

It did so with a mysterious roar of thunder. If Imogen hadn't known better, she would've thought the sound was from horses stampeding toward them.

The creatures that came racing at them out of the growing darkness were not horses at all. They looked more like hairless

wolves with sinewy limbs, long snouts with enormous fangs, and paws that looked as if they could rip apart a person with one swipe.

They came storming at them, but not just from this direction.

Imogen didn't have to be on the far side of the ruins for her to detect the same attack from elsewhere. They were coming from all around. Whoever was commanding these creatures and sending them here was doing so with an onslaught of power.

Why here and now? There was always a reason. Always a strategy.

In this case, Imogen couldn't help but wonder if the strategy was tied to Gavin's absence. Had it taken them this long to realize he was not here? And if they knew he wasn't here, what had prompted them to decide that now was the right time to attack?

Unless it had taken time to gather the creatures.

She still didn't have a real understanding of these creatures and what they were capable of doing. She knew they could be violent, and she knew they carried power within them, but nothing more than that.

She braced, readying for the possibility that she would have to fight.

But it was not necessary.

She was the general. She had to allow herself to be the general now. That was difficult, and as much as she wanted to intervene and step forward to be part of all of it, she knew their counterattack needed to be directed by the people themselves.

The enchanters attacked first with a series of explosions. It sounded like thunder mixing with the roaring onslaught of those creatures, and as they came closer, the power began to shift.

And then the creatures were thrown back, some of them seemingly exploded backward. Others cried out as projectiles struck them. Some were caught up in explosions of wind. Still others were simply battered by the stone golems.

Then the sorcery attack came next using waves of different kinds of power.

Some deep part of Imogen reacted with each attack. She felt that buildup, and she felt the way it was rising in her, as the danger was not gone. It took a bit of willpower for her to ignore it. Then she began to feel laughter deep inside her.

“That’s enough, Benji,” she said. “If you’re not going to come out and talk, I don’t want to hear your amusement.”

“So predictable, First,” Benji whispered. It sounded as if he wanted to come out, yet there was a part of him that seemed hesitant to do so.

“What are you afraid of?”

She felt awkward having this conversation with Benji while the attack was taking place, but as she watched, and as she could feel the different onslaughts, she knew she didn’t need to do anything. Everything was happening at its own pace, and her people were handling everything quite well without her intervention. She did not need to take any additional steps.

“What makes you think I’m afraid of anything?” Benji asked.

“I can feel your hesitation.”

“You can feel nothing, First.”

“Ever since I’ve come here, you’ve been feeding me the potential,” she said. “But don’t you fear using the rest of the fragment potential the way I do?”

Even now, Imogen could see the layers of possibilities out in front of her. There were hundreds of thin silver threads sweeping out, giving her an opportunity to try to make sense of what was there and the possibilities that existed. But even

as she focused on them, she could not feel anything more. She felt nothing.

“Do you believe this was all me?” he asked.

“You’ve been pushing it,” she said. She felt certain about this. “You’ve been pushing because you are concerned about it. I don’t understand, and maybe you don’t want me to understand. And I don’t want you to use the rest of what you are.”

The more she thought about it, the more she began to question if maybe that was exactly what it was.

“You called me out before,” he said.

“I did.”

“Did you think it was necessary?”

At that time, Imogen had thought it was necessary, but the way he said it now suggested that he was somewhat upset about it.

“You’re losing something with this, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Fading, First. Not losing what I am, as I am no longer. You’ve worried about fragments and what becomes of them. It is those who remember who hold on to us.”

“Are you afraid that I’m not going to remember you?”

“Oh, you will always remember me,” Benji said, and his voice was little more than a faint whisper in the back of her mind. She could almost imagine him standing before her the way he had when she had first met him, teaching her some of the sacred patterns and helping her understand what she needed to know in order to progress with her own talent and the connection she had to that power. And yet, all of it was happening deep inside her mind, making it feel as if it were little more than a flicker of an image, a bit of a memory, but nothing more than that. “I do not fear that you will forget.”

“I don’t want you to lose what you are,” Imogen said.

The next wave of the attack had come, this time something larger. It felt like the ground itself was trembling under the weight of it, as if there was some sort of giant onslaught coming, and it reminded her of what they had faced when Gavin had still been here. Surprisingly, she did not feel the same concern she had before. There was still that pressure, and it was building, yet the enchanters' attack, combined with that of sorcery, was also building in a way that was deflecting anything coming toward them.

There was no reason for her to be afraid. She didn't have to do anything. The Leier had created the protections. It was odd because for so long she had viewed her people as the sword, and the sorcerers as the shield. Why would it reverse here?

Then she smiled. Why wouldn't it reverse here?

They were the shield. The others would be the sword.

"I do not fear losing myself, First," Benji said.

"I don't want to lose *you*," she admitted.

"And you never will."

"Others in the world will have missed out on having an opportunity to know you and your strange advice."

"But will they?"

The question lingered in her mind. It was vague, little more than that.

"They will," she said. "You provide something that others do not."

There was a moment of quiet, and in that moment, Imogen thought she felt a bit of the darkness beginning to swell. A few explosions of light emerged all around her as the attack continued to strengthen. Several fireballs exploded in the night, slamming into some of the creatures. At one point, she saw Alana toss something that went rolling away, and it caused an entire section of the ground to crumble and crack. The force of that explosion was enormous, and the amount of power that was coming at them now was considerable.

Why so much effort right here and right now?

She stared ahead and tried to make sense of the attack, wondering if there was anything she might be able to see. The attack was coordinated, but even as she watched, there was nothing to that coordination that told her anything more than what she'd already identified.

“Even now, you do not see it, while you still see it,” Benji whispered.

“What’s that?” Imogen asked.

“You have already found what you need to find.”

She didn’t say anything at first. She wasn’t accustomed to fearing what was happening. “I need your guidance.”

“You are the First.”

There was no mocking in his tone the way there normally was. For so long, he had used her title as some sort of taunt, but in this case, it was not that. It was simply an acknowledgment of the title she had taken on. Perhaps she had even earned it.

“I am the First, but I don’t want to lose the Porapeth.”

“I am but a fragment,” he said. “I am not the same. And fragments should fade. They should become something else.”

Another explosion thundered in the distance. This time she sighed as a ring of fire mixed with a bit of wind, pushing the flames outward toward the next wave of attackers. She noticed shapes flying in the darkness. The silvery lines connecting to them gave her a hint of where the next attack would take place. She immediately reacted, not giving anybody else a chance to run the risk of getting attacked by it, and used her own renral attacking pattern to shoot lightning up into the air. It created a cascade of energy that coursed through the sky, and then the flying creatures came raining down, dropping to the ground.

That alerted the Leier to the threat, along with the others, and the attack shifted again.

Imogen knew that it was good. She knew that what they were doing—the way they were fighting and the way they were defending—was going to hold this off.

They had time.

Something Benji had said came back to her, and it niggled in the back of her brain. She wasn't sure why, but she couldn't shake that. It seemed as if it lingered in the deep recesses of her mind, something she should have recognized sooner, but for whatever reason, she had not.

The ground started to tremble beneath her, and she noticed that it seemed to be tied to something Alana was doing.

The protections were there, but what was coming?

Imogen had no idea whether what was coming was going to be dangerous or not. The only thing she knew with any certainty was that they were secure.

“Benji?” she said.

He was quiet.

“Benji, I know you're still there. What were you saying you should become?”

No answer.

“Benji. Don't do this to me.”

“You know what we should become,” he said. “You know what fragments should be.”

“And what is that?”

“A memory.”

Then he went quiet, leaving little more than a haze of silver in her mind. Lines of possibility formed, forced by what Benji must have done before fading.

And Imogen saw, almost a moment too late, what was coming.

There was a rumble and an explosion of power, and all the ruins dropped into the earth.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Gavin breathed out a heavy sigh of frustration. “Do you know how to find my friends?”

“I do, Chain Breaker. I can show you,” Naelum said.

“Above ground, preferably.”

Naelum watched him, and he looked as if he wanted to argue for a moment, but then he just nodded and strode toward the ruins. Gavin climbed onto the cat’s back and tapped out a message to Gaspar, letting him know they were coming.

Jayna walked over to him and leaned forward, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Something about this doesn’t feel quite right,” she said. “And you believe what he’s saying?”

“I am finding it difficult to believe what anybody in this world would say. It seems like he wants us to believe him, but I don’t know if what he’s telling us is true. We have to be careful, but we also need answers, and he’s the first person we have found who seems interested in talking to us.”

He hurriedly filled her in on what had happened with Benji’s fragment.

Jayna twisted her Toral ring for a moment. “I may need to call Ceran,” she whispered.

“Can you do it without revealing his presence?”

“It is possible,” she said. “Difficult enough in the best of circumstances, and this is definitely not the best of circumstances, but I will see what I can find from him.”

She climbed onto her cat, as did Eva, and they talked quietly to each other.

Gavin urged his cat forward and caught up to Naelum, who was standing at the edge of the ruins and looking out into the darkness.

“They will be watching us,” he said as Gavin neared.

“‘They’ as in the Forerunners,” Gavin said.

Naelum nodded. “They.”

“But my people wouldn’t be terribly far from here. You claim you did something that was to protect them, and if you were able to do that, then it means you have some way of monitoring.”

“I can see.”

The way Naelum said it reminded Gavin of Imogen talking about her ability to see possibilities. But it wasn’t only her who had that ability. Anna had something similar, the connection to her as the Shard, which she had been trying to help him understand before she had changed.

“So you can anticipate dangers,” Gavin said.

“I can see, and there is one way we can go, but it will be dangerous. Perhaps not for you, Chain Breaker,” Naelum said, guiding Gavin forward into the darkness.

Naelum advanced at a measured pace. They weren’t moving as quickly as Gavin would have liked, especially considering the urgency he felt to keep pace with the cats and their swift movements. Then again, Gavin didn’t actually need the cat to travel. He could use Lightning Strikes, leaving him to wonder if that would have been a more efficient means to reach his friends.

He concentrated, reflecting on Imogen’s words about identifying distinct energy strands and the intricate ways they intertwined. Despite his efforts, he couldn’t see any patterns. From what he’d experienced, this ability had seemed to amplify when he felt endangered. If he could tap into that protective instinct, perhaps he could harness this power.

As he considered the dangers, he noticed a line forming in front of him.

He had not seen that before, but as he imagined the danger and thought about what was happening with his friends and what he wanted to do, he also began to see possibilities of how he could do it. For one moment, he was able to see the trail that led outward, almost as if it was trying to guide him forward.

Gavin followed the sensation, letting it steer him and propel him forward, and he moved past Naelum.

“That’s not the way,” Naelum said.

“It is my way,” Gavin replied.

Naelum attempted to lead them into the darkness, but Gavin remained on the narrow path, which seemed to be illuminated by this light, bathing everything in a silvery glow. Straying from the path plunged everything into darkness.

Jayna approached him, asking, “Are we going to abandon him?”

“I’m not sure he’s leading us where we need to go. It’s a feeling. I’m beginning to wonder whether this has another meaning.” He explained his unique ability, which he’d started to think of as his puzzle power. He shared how he concentrated on those around him and his intentions to ensure their safety.

“So, we follow this path?” Jayna asked.

Gavin nodded.

Naelum came running up. “There is something out there,” he said. “It is coming closer to us, and—”

Gavin turned and stared into the distance.

Shadowy forms moved in the darkness. It was subtle, but he was certain about what he saw. He couldn’t tell what they were, even as he shifted some of his core reserves to enhance his eyesight.

Eva used her smoke, letting power swirl away from her and toward the shadows. Some of that power coalesced around her. “I count a dozen, but I can’t tell what they are.”

“We call them endozar,” Naelum said. “They are large and dangerous. They will be able to easily overpower us.”

“How fast can they move?” Gavin asked. He had a vague sense of how fast these creatures were moving toward them, but he wasn’t sure.

Naelum stared blankly. Something about him still troubled Gavin. Why was he here? Better yet, how was he here? Somebody like him would not be able to survive alone, Gavin didn’t think.

“They move quickly. If there are a dozen of them, they will attack in thirds.”

“Thirds?”

As soon as he said it, however, Gavin realized what Naelum implied. These creatures would split up and try to surround them.

And they did. At least, they started to.

Gavin pulled out an augmented orb, one of the enchantments Alana had made, and debated how he wanted to use it. He now had several of them that could be effective, depending on how he chose to use them.

He squeezed some of his core reserves into the enchantment, and then he tossed it.

The orb went rolling, and Eva did something to it. Gavin noticed how she used a bit of smoke and sent the enchantment gliding in a specific direction.

“We want it in the middle of them,” Gavin said.

Eva gave the orb another nudge with her smoke.

A wave of energy washed outward as the enchantment exploded, capturing the creatures before collapsing downward. There was a tremble, and then horrifying shrieks.

“That’s unpleasant,” Jayna muttered.

“Just wait till you see what happens after this,” Gavin said.

“What are you doing to them?” Naelum asked.

Gavin shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s either destroying them or containing them. It depends on how the enchantment works.”

“You don’t know?” Jayna asked.

“There are two possibilities, and either way, the creatures were captured.”

Everything fell quiet.

The enchantments Alana had made were incredible. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t have any more until he got to her and the others, which meant that he was going to have to conserve what he had on him.

Jayna looked into the distance, though Gavin couldn’t tell what she was staring at. “If we would’ve gone in the direction he wanted us to go, what would have happened?”

“Well, I suspect that we would’ve been caught by those creatures, but that isn’t to say I believe Naelum knew,” Gavin said.

“And here I thought you were the distrusting type.”

“Oh, I am. I do distrust him, but I don’t know that he’s trying to lead us to those creatures. I’m not sure what his goal is, though.”

They followed the pale light that gradually began to lighten. His eyesight allowed him to see into the darkness, and he noticed the ring of creatures up ahead. They were surrounding his friends.

“Any suggestions?” Gavin asked.

But he didn’t need an answer.

The others were fighting in full.

Gavin had not known what he was going to find when he got here. He knew that Imogen, in particular, would have ensured that everyone was safe and secure. He would’ve

expected nothing less from the general. What he had not fully anticipated was that the Leier, from what he could feel, were not leading the attack.

Instead, the onslaught came from the sorcerers and the enchanters, all of them exploding power out at the creatures on the ridgeline. He could feel it, even though he wasn't entirely sure what it was that he was picking up on. It was just a distinct sense of energy that bloomed.

Fire and flashes of light and blasts of wind and trembling of earth all exploded. Enchantments marched and battled. Different ones exploded, tossing creatures back.

And through it all were his friends. Secured. Safe.

“Do we even need to do anything?” Jayna asked.

“I don't know. Probably not, but maybe we can speed this up.”

“They targeted your friends. Why, do you think?” Eva said.

“Maybe because they thought I was with them,” Gavin replied.

Even as he said it, he knew that wasn't true. There was only one reason they would have targeted them. Alana.

He needed to get to her, and he needed to help, even though he could feel that there would be very little that would happen. Whatever had come here had been a massive attack, as if the ones responsible for whatever had happened to Alana had decided to throw everything they could at her, here of all places.

But even in doing that, Gavin didn't know if that attack was going to be enough.

He summoned the spikes of energy into his hands, then allowed himself to unfold, to grow. He needed that power inside him.

Then he shot himself forward using the sacred patterns.

By the time he reached the nearest of the creatures, he barely had to do much. It was a slaughter, though at the same time, he was not the reason for it. Gavin carved down several tall ogres, but for the most part, they were already getting pushed back. Power rippled around him as the creatures were forced backward. Jayna blasted fire, even mixed in smoke, but none of it was really necessary.

As he looked down the ridgeline, he saw the Leier ringing the entirety of the fallen ruins. The El'aras were among them, holding on to sacred patterns. And then there were the sorcerers and the enchanters, leading the attack.

His people did not need him.

And in the middle of it all was Wrenlow, who looked up and locked eyes with him, then waved. "Hey there, Gavin."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

As Gavin regrouped, Gaspar and Imogen were watching him.

“So you’re saying it’s dangerous for us to keep power here,” Gaspar said, “because we run the risk of these Forerunners accessing that power and using it. Then it’s probably already too late.”

“Maybe. They have Anna,” Gavin said.

“Well, we know that the Shard, and other El’aras, are capable of opening the connection between these worlds, so it seems to make sense that if they were to have tried something, they might have been able to use that to travel,” Gaspar said.

“Do we need to destroy the Forerunners?”

“You will not be able to destroy them,” Naelum said.

Gavin hadn’t realized that the man was listening, and he turned to him. “Why do you think that?” Gavin asked.

“Because they are too powerful, and they have been trying to break free for a long time. The only thing you would do would be to provide them a way out.”

Gavin sighed heavily and turned back to Gaspar.

Gaspar shrugged. “So we deal with this now. Remove the Forerunner threat.”

“You make it sound like it’s going to be so simple,” Gavin said.

“Simple? Hell, boy. This isn’t going to be simple at all. Maybe we should have just listened to Benji when we had a chance.” He looked over to Imogen, who was frowning and nodding, mostly to herself. “Because if the Porapeth thought that was the case, then—”

“Porapeth?” Naelum asked. He had stepped forward, and now there was a strange, almost troubling energy to him.

Gavin positioned himself in between the man and Imogen, making sure that Naelum could not get closer.

“You know the word?” Gavin asked.

“They once led us,” he said, anxiety in his voice. “They were our priests.”

Imogen raised an eyebrow. “Priests?”

“They guided us,” Naelum explained. “They were the ones who proclaimed our need to leave, our need to rebel.”

“And you’re certain of this?”

“I wasn’t among them, but the tales have been passed down through generations.”

“How many generations?” Gavin interjected.

A nagging unease bothered him, its root hard to pinpoint. His experience in that bizarre prison realm came to mind. Time had felt distorted there. Days had seemed to stretch endlessly, but upon his return, he had learned that mere moments had passed. Was time skewed here as well?

“When was the last assault?” Gavin asked.

“Nearly fifty years ago,” Naelum answered.

Gavin glanced at Imogen, noting her deepening frown.

“Fifty years?” Gaspar echoed.

“And in the realm we traversed? How long might it have been there?” Gavin probed.

“Considerably longer, I’d wager,” Naelum said.

“And our time here?”

“Around two days,” Gaspar replied, hesitating slightly.

Two days in this realm, but potentially far more in the other. Given their newfound insights, could it be that they had been absent longer in their realm? Had events transpired there during their absence?

Gavin chided himself. He should’ve considered the time discrepancy earlier. It was a crucial detail he had overlooked. Gaspar’s warning came back to him. They didn’t know enough about this realm or about the time they spent here.

He thought about Alana. Something was different with her. When she came over here, she was older, more mature. When she was in the other world, she was younger, almost innocent.

Drawing in a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he observed his surroundings before speaking. “So, fifty years have passed here?” Gavin said.

“Which means we must act swiftly,” Imogen said. “Not only is time against us here, but they clearly believe that Anna, as the Shard, is the key to a breakthrough. How long before they overcome her resistance?”

Gavin wasn’t sure. Assuming she *did* resist.

But she’d called to him. She was trying.

With a mix of frustration and determination, he sighed. “All right,” he conceded, “we press on and we locate Anna. I sense her presence and believe I can use it to find her.”

“Follow?” Naelum said.

Gavin turned to him. “Yes. The person they captured. I can follow.”

“You do not need to. I know where they are.”

Gavin hesitated for a moment. “So, where?”

“It is dangerous.”

“Obviously. Anything that is controlling these creatures, whatever they are, would be dangerous.”

“Dangerous,” Naelum said again. “All who go there do not come back.”

“But there has to be a way in, which means there’s a way out. I’m not going to allow the Forerunners to harm anybody I care about.”

Did that mean he would have to fight—and sacrifice himself—to stop them?

As the thought occurred to him, he knew that it did. What other choice would there be? What other choice would he make?

There might not be anyone else who could stop the Forerunners. If they didn’t do it now, it might not happen.

And he was always willing to stop a greater threat. That was who he was as the Chain Breaker. And unfortunately, there was always some greater threat.

What he wouldn’t give to be the greater threat someday. Then he could fade away and enjoy his days in quiet.

He turned to Naelum. “We need to know as much as you can tell us about this place and how we get to it so we can find the person they are trying to use. We need to be able to stop them from traveling over.”

“If I do this, will you help me?”

“Why should we assist you?” Gaspar asked, skepticism heavy in his voice.

“I am trapped here,” the stranger said.

“Trapped? Or imprisoned for a reason?” Gaspar pressed, his eyes sharp.

“Gaspar,” Gavin warned.

Gaspar locked eyes with him. “What if he’s one of the Forerunners?”

“Perhaps. If he is, then we’ll address it.” Gavin turned to Naelum. “Rest assured, I won’t allow any harm to come to those with me.” He gestured toward the people laboring within

the pit. Many were crafting enchantments, fortifying their defenses.

Among them, Alana moved with purpose, touching an enchantment here and there, infusing it with a trace of her own power. Her method of intertwining her power with the enchantments seemed fortuitous, especially after witnessing her talents firsthand.

Could Alana have ties to the Forerunners?

The thought had gnawed at the recesses of his mind. If she did have a connection, the question remained—how and why?

He looked over to Imogen, and he found her watching him.

She knew.

Of course she knew.

Of all the people he was working with these days, Imogen was the one he believed had a better understanding of things in the world than anybody else. She had spoken to the Porapeth. She could *see* the world, she could *feel* the world, and understood it ways that others did not.

He looked to Naelum. “You will lead us. You will take us where we need to go, and you will show me and my people how to get to this place. And if there’s a danger here, you will not be involved in the fighting.”

Gaspar frowned at him but said nothing.

“And when this is over, we will decide,” Gavin said.

Naelum met his gaze. “You will see, Chain Breaker. I can be trusted.”

“We will see.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Gavin moved down into the sunken ruins and paused next to Alana, who was working with Mekel and some of his different enchantments. When she looked up at him, there was a look in her eyes that reminded him of the young girl he remembered when he had first met her, but it was fleeting. For the most part, the look in her eyes was from someone much older and more mature.

“Gavin,” she said. “I’m glad you made it back.”

“Same,” he said. “Listen, Alana. There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“You mean the stranger you brought with you?”

Gavin nodded. “He is trying to help us understand the Forerunners. Apparently he was one of their servants, and there was some sort of uprising. I’m still not exactly sure, but we believe that some of those servants were tied to the people from our world.”

“How?”

Gavin shared with her what they had learned, what he had detected of Naelum, and how he reminded them of the El’aras, but also how he had some ability with foresight. And he also shared with her what he had learned of the Porapeth.

“So the servants escaped?” Alana asked.

“I’m wondering if it is more than just that they escaped,” he said. “I don’t have any proof of this, at least not yet, but I’m

suspecting that the people who escaped their service here are the ones who settled in our world and provided power.”

“What kind of power?”

Gavin held his hand up and counted on his fingers. “El’aras. Ashara. Maybe sorcery. Possibly countless others. And the Porapeth. Can’t forget them.”

“I see,” she said.

“To be honest, I don’t really know what to make of it, only that I have these suspicions. We need to better understand more about this place and this realm and this power.”

“I’ll do whatever you need, Gavin.”

“And there’s something else,” he said.

“Of course there is.”

“You know what I’m going to say.”

“I suspect,” Alana said.

“You think it’s possible?”

When they had been on the other side, and when she had seemed younger, Gavin wasn’t even sure they would’ve asked her that. But now that they were here, and now that she was acting more mature and seemed as if she were an adult, or almost an adult, he thought he owed her that.

“I don’t know,” she finally said. “I don’t remember much. But if what you’re suggesting is true and I am descended from the Forerunners, then it may be possible.”

“I know,” Gavin said. “I just wanted to talk to you before we go rushing in there and deal with the Forerunners and anything they might attempt to do to us. I—”

“I’m not going to betray you, Gavin,” she said.

He smiled sadly. “No. I would never accuse you of that.”

“Never? Isn’t that what you are doing?”

“Actually, I wasn’t. I trust you, Alana. I know you. And I know that you want to know who you are and where you come from.” He looked over to where Eva was standing, and at the

smoke swirling around her. “I get it. It’s the same thing I went through, trying to figure out who I am and what I’m supposed to be. I think all of us go through it in our own way. But I also want to make sure you feel comfortable with this. I don’t know what we’ll face or what we might encounter, and I don’t want it to affect you in a way that’s dangerous.”

“How would it be dangerous for me? Are you worried about what I might do?”

“I’m not,” he said.

She frowned at him. “It seems like you are a little bit concerned.”

Maybe he was.

And even if he understood, he still wasn’t sure what to say to her. The idea that she could be a Forerunner was strange, but it also offered an explanation that they didn’t have. They didn’t understand why she could do the things she could, and they had never really known about her power, but considering some of the things he had seen in this realm and the kind of power that existed here, Gavin was left wondering if perhaps that was the source of it.

Then there was the issue of why the order had wanted her in the first place. It all had to be connected to her, the Forerunners, and whatever connection she had to them.

As he glanced over to the others, who were making their preparations, he found Naelum watching Alana. The look in the man’s eyes left Gavin a little concerned. He didn’t like that look.

He would do whatever he had to do to protect his people—including Alana.

He patted her on the shoulder. “We are going to get through this together.”

Gavin started toward Gaspar, and he began to feel something beginning to build, leaving him feeling uneasy.

But it was more than just uneasiness. It was like something was drawing him in. He had felt that before, but not in quite

some time. It was pulling on him, almost as if it were trying to guide him in some way.

He had felt this sensation before, but this time he could detect the origin.

Anna.

There was an urgency within it.

Why now?

“All right,” he said, mostly to himself.

Another shooting pain began to build, but it came from deep inside him. It was an unusual and familiar sensation. As soon as he felt it, a blossom of energy lit up around him. Lines began to form. It was as if the puzzle was unfolding for him.

“Don’t fight it,” Imogen said. “Let it come to you.”

Gavin tried to ignore the pain.

He was the Chain Breaker. He could ignore it.

This was agony unlike anything he had felt before, though.

The lines began creating a pathway, almost like he could see exactly where he needed to go to follow the puzzle that was this realm.

He breathed out.

As he started toward that line, he recognized that the pain within him was easing. He wasn’t going to have much of a choice but to follow it. It was as if this pain and this energy were going to guide him regardless of whether or not he wanted to go there.

When he said as much to Imogen, she frowned. “I’ve never had experience with that before. It has always been possibilities, but the choice was always mine.”

“And if this is not my choice, we should be more concerned,” he said.

“I have not known of anybody who has the ability to force a pathway.”

Imogen knew things about this ability, so for her not to have heard of anything like that was worrisome.

But this was where it was pulling him. He couldn't fight it.

He moved, and a procession trailed in his wake. Gavin was acutely aware of the presence behind him, each footstep a whispered echo of his own. An energy coursed toward him, unfamiliar and laced with an undertow of strangeness. It left an odd sensation that lingered, one Gavin couldn't quite decipher.

Was there a trap waiting for him?

That fear gripped him. If a trap lurked in the shadows, he needed to identify it, to find a way to neutralize it. But the gnawing doubt persisted—what if, when the trap was sprung, he found himself powerless against its pull?

In silence, they pressed on.

Every so often, Alana, Gaspar, and Imogen would draw close, their eyes laden with concern as they checked on him. He waved them away, as there was nothing they could do to help.

A persistent pain throbbed within Gavin. Any time he attempted to veer away from the path illuminated inside his mind, he felt as if some part of it was forcing him back. But it was more than just that. He could feel some emergence of energy and a bit of pain as he attempted to make sense of it, but he didn't know if what he was feeling, and how he was feeling it, was anything he should be worried about.

He turned to Imogen at one point, and she said nothing.

But even as he focused, even as he felt that power, Gavin couldn't help but feel as if there was something else out there.

The energy that was there, the power he detected, continued to build for him. And within it, Gavin recognized that whatever was rising inside him was leaving him with a bit of power.

And then...

And then he felt the weirdness.

He focused on it, and he focused on whether there was anything he might be able to use.

Gavin wasn't exactly sure how much of the pain was real, and how much of it was imagined. Some part of it felt real, like this drive to follow this path was exactly what he was supposed to be feeling, but some part of it also felt more like imagination than reality. He found himself struggling with it all more than he would've expected, trying to make sense of how he was supposed to follow it, but every time he veered in a direction that seemed different than the way the path wanted him to go, the pain surged inside him.

That burning sensation lingered, carrying through him, and seemed as if it were building in a way he couldn't quite fathom.

What was the source of that pain?

It was the question that left him wondering if this was all some sort of trap, and Gavin didn't have an answer to that. He didn't know if this was a way for something—and possibly one of the Forerunners—to try to use him, to draw him into whatever game it was they were playing, or if this was simply something Anna had done.

Increasingly, he was convinced that Anna had a hand in this, even if he wasn't entirely sure what she was doing or how she was doing it. She had to be responsible in some manner, though. Otherwise, he didn't think he would've had the visions he was able to have.

They stopped at one point.

Gavin had given up leadership, but then again, he didn't even know if he ever *had* the leadership on this journey. Ever since they had set out, he had not been the one guiding them so much as just showing them which direction they needed to go.

Rather, it seemed as if Imogen was in charge. Of course, she was the general, so that wasn't terribly surprising to him. However, it did surprise him how easy it was for him to allow

her to take the lead, and how comfortable he was with someone else guiding him.

But maybe it wasn't that it was easy so much as it was that it was Imogen. That, more than anything else, might be what permitted him to feel how he did. He trusted Imogen in a way he didn't trust very many people.

She strode over to him after getting everybody settled for the night. It was dark, yet he had no idea whether it was truly dark or if it was just imagined. In this place, with the way time passed, Gavin had a hard time knowing the difference.

"You need to try to rest," Imogen said.

"I don't usually need much sleep," Gavin said.

"No, you don't normally need much sleep, but whatever it is that's happening to you now will necessitate that you have some sleep. Perhaps when you do, you might be able to process this a little differently and absorb it in a manner that will allow you to see and feel things in ways you wouldn't have been able to otherwise."

He frowned at that concept. "Do you really think so?"

She shrugged. "To be honest, I don't have any real answer to this, but it does seem to me that you need to sleep. You're struggling, Gavin. And I know you don't like to admit it."

"I'm not struggling," he said.

She smiled tightly. "No, of course not." She started away.

"Imogen?"

She turned. "What is it?"

"Tell me about what your Porapeth gave you."

There was something about it, something about the way she used that power that he needed to better understand. There had to be something with it, didn't there?

"Benji? Well, Benji gave me the gift of sight," she said. "At least, that's what he's been trying to make a point of telling me lately. I kept thinking that he gave me the gift of the sacred patterns, but it seems as if that was something I was

always going to have, so regardless of whether I learned from him or from another, it wouldn't have made much difference to him, or to me." She started to laugh. "Of course, that's only if you believe the Porapeth."

"You mean you don't?"

"Benji has his own perspective on things," she said. "He has always tried to guide, and intervene, in ways that were meant to provide his own insight." She shrugged. "Not that I can blame him, nor do I think that what he was doing was necessarily bad. In fact, I think everything Benji has done has been for good purposes."

Gavin breathed out slowly. "I just feel like I'm close to understanding. When I was fighting, I felt as if there was a puzzle that was unfolding in front of me, and that I could see the different solutions for. But in this case, it's not all like that."

"I think that whatever you have been given now is working a little differently than what I was given."

"But it all has to come from some similar source, doesn't it?"

Given the conversations Gavin had had about different sources of power and their origins, he couldn't help but feel as if that had to be the real key to everything. Imogen's Porapeth ability had to be like what Anna had, and maybe even came from a similar source. Maybe they were all descended from the same people, in fact.

It might not have felt like that, and it might not even seem quite right, but everything he had seen, everything he had felt, struck him as if that had to be at least a possibility.

"Are you seeing lines of possibilities that expand before you?"

She'd mentioned that before, and Gavin wondered if it was possible for him to see it that way, but so far had not picked up on anything quite like that. "I'm seeing a single path," Gavin said.

"Then you are seeing much more than I am," she said.

“I thought you said that in this place, you were seeing things more clearly.”

“I had been,” Imogen said. “I think because Benji was influencing things.”

“And you also said that the Porapeth wasn’t going to influence anything.”

“Oh, I think he tried to make it seem like he wasn’t going to, but once we got here and he had an opportunity to intervene, he took it. But I think he did it because he thought it was necessary.”

“Why would the Porapeth have thought it was necessary?”

“Because he believes that’s how he was going to have to help me.” She breathed out slowly, shaking her head as she did. “Truth be told, I’m not entirely sure. The power he has—or had—the power that he gifted me is strange and unique, and it is something I have been struggling with trying to understand how to use. Unfortunately, the longer he’s been away, the harder it has been for me to understand him. Now he’s fading, I think. And I worry I’m running out of time to know what I can do with this gift and the purpose he had in giving it to me.”

“I thought you knew your purpose.”

“To be the general?” Imogen shrugged. “Maybe that’s my purpose, but maybe that’s just a part of it. I have been trying to demonstrate as much as I can to the others, but even as I do that, I still think there has to be something more for me. I feel like there has to be more in this world for me.”

“I feel like that at times,” Gavin said.

She smiled. “Of course you do, Chain Breaker.”

He chuckled. “Aren’t we quite the pair.”

“Are we?”

“Well, we feel like we know what we’re doing, and we feel like we should have the kind of power that we do, and that we should be able to use it, but it seems like even as we attempt to

wield it, we continue to struggle with how to do it in the right way.”

Imogen nodded slowly. “And yet, in my mind, that tells me we’re doing the right thing.”

“Why?”

“Because we care. If we didn’t, we’d be interested in the powers we have—or that were given to us. That is why I trust you, Gavin. It’s also probably why you trust me.” She patted him on the shoulder. “Follow the path, or don’t. But if you don’t, you need to be prepared for what choices you’re going to make, and you need to be prepared for what it’s going to look like. And, to be honest, you have to make it work *for* you, not *with* you. Does that make sense?”

He sighed. “I don’t even know.”

“Well, right now you’re following the path that it’s taking you on, but you’re not choosing a path. And until you make that choice, it’s going to be in control. I never had the sense from Benji that that was the intention.”

She stepped away from him.

Gavin sat there for a few moments, trying to process what she had said.

The power was in control. But did it have to be? Better yet, should it be in control?

Even if it was something Anna was giving to him and guiding him with, that didn’t seem to be the way it was supposed to work. He didn’t know what it was doing or how it really was supposed to work, only that what he was feeling struck him as significant.

And perhaps more than anything else, perhaps more than what he had done, he needed to better understand that power, and himself, to know what he needed to do.

As he stood off to the side of the group of people with him, he found himself watching, and thinking about the kind of power he had. He kept hoping that the answer would come to

him, and hoping that if this was Anna, he would be able to gain insight into the power before it was too late.

But he didn't know. And it was the not knowing, and the uncertainty, that bothered him more than anything else.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Gavin watched Imogen.

He had found himself doing that more and more these days. She might try to tell him that she didn't really know her purpose, but as he watched her, he had a strong feeling that she knew exactly what her purpose was. Her purpose was to guide the people—all her people—and help them find what they were supposed to do. And he couldn't help but feel as if what she was doing was more significant than what he had done.

Right now, for instance, she was training with Gaspar and Alana.

Gavin had spoken to Gaspar, and he knew that was something the two of them were doing. He also knew that Gaspar wasn't training with Imogen to gain some additional sword fighting techniques, though Gavin would've loved if Gaspar were willing to do that because he thought Gaspar would benefit from learning the sacred patterns and knowing how to fight with them. Rather, Gaspar had agreed to train with Imogen because he wanted to help Alana.

As Gaspar worked, there was something unique to the way he was fighting with her, and to the technique he was using, that seemed to be helping Alana reach for power. Gavin could feel it.

The fact that he could feel it seemed odd, but perhaps it wasn't. The sacred patterns involved various techniques, and they granted different aspects of ability to their users that he really didn't understand. But it was more than just that. He

could feel something stirring inside him, almost as if when Alana was reaching for that power, it was touching on that strange, shifting stone energy within him, and perhaps it was doing the same thing for her.

What if he could use the sacred patterns to help him access that power himself?

He didn't need Imogen to teach him that.

Well, he didn't *think* he needed Imogen to teach him that, but even as he was focusing on it, and focusing on the power that he had, he felt as if some aspect of that was telling him something he hadn't known before.

And perhaps that was exactly what he needed from Imogen. He needed to see it, and whether it was from Alana or from her, it didn't matter. Gavin tried to do something similar.

"Hey, Gavin," Wrenlow said, running over to him and dropping down to the ground. "Have you looked at the map recently?"

"I have not." Gavin hadn't felt as if he needed the map. The pull of the power continued to draw him forward, forcing him in a specific direction. "Why?"

"Well, I feel like we're getting into a more populated area."

That surprised him. He hadn't expected that. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, it's not shifting quite as much as it did before. I don't even know what that means, but it seems like there has to be something significant to it. The shifting meant we were moving around, and maybe it was more on the periphery, but now it seems like it's not doing that as much." Wrenlow tapped on the folded map.

Gavin hid his concern and waited for him to unfold the map.

"I'm not seeing any cities. I'm seeing a lot of ruins, and yet, with your path guiding us, it doesn't really seem like it's leading us to one particular place."

“Can I see the map?”

Gavin hadn't even considered the possibility that he could use the map to figure out where he was being guided. He could feel something inside himself, and he was aware of the way that was driving him, pushing him, and he should have paid attention to that. But he had not, which was a mistake. It was the kind of thing he normally didn't do, as he was normally much better with that, but now...

Now he had to try to take an opportunity to do that.

Wrenlow looked around. “Here?”

“Why? How much is it going to unfold?”

“It tends to unfold a fair amount, but that's only if we push quite a bit of power into it. Alana usually controls it, and she has gotten a lot more skilled at doing that.”

“I've noticed,” Gavin said.

“She's quite impressive.”

“I'd be careful saying that around Olivia.”

Wrenlow flushed. “I don't mean it like that. I'm just saying that her powers are impressive. It's so different. I just want to *study* her.”

Gavin let out a laugh. “Well, maybe don't tell her that either.”

He got to his feet, and he followed Wrenlow away from the rest of the campsite. Wrenlow set the map down and waited, and then Gavin approached. He focused on the strange power from this realm. As he touched the map, he pushed a little bit of power out of himself and into the map. Gradually, the map began to unfold.

Its portability was probably its greatest feature, and the kind of thing Gavin could easily imagine trying to replicate in their world. That was, so long as they had somebody who would be able to replicate the folding. Maybe there were enchanters who could do something similar.

“Here’s where we’ve been traveling,” Wrenlow said, stepping into the map and pointing to the ruins they had come from. “And this is where you found us.”

“Right,” Gavin said.

“This is where we’re going.” He drew a line across the ground that was almost completely straight.

“I don’t see what the issue is.”

“No issue,” Wrenlow said. “Well, I didn’t even know if there was, but it just felt like... I don’t know. It just feels like it’s showing us something. I feel like the closer we get to it and the farther we come along here, the more we are going to have to try to figure out what your path is taking us to.”

Gavin studied the map. One of the things that was incredibly unusual about it was the fact that it seemed to shift the farther they went along it. It didn’t provide answers unless they were traveling on it.

“So we come from here,” he said, pointing to the back of the map, “and we’re heading in this direction.”

“Pretty much,” Wrenlow said.

“And we need to figure out what’s up here.”

“Yes. Because if you’re telling us the truth,” he said, and he did so with a bit of a smile, “then there has to be something up there that’s pulling on you, doesn’t there?”

Gavin frowned. He had been staring at the map, trying to make sense of it, but even as he did, he wasn’t exactly sure where he was going to be guided or what that was going to look like. The only thing he knew with any real certainty was that he had to keep moving, because whatever was happening here, whatever was building here, was significant enough that he needed to try to find it.

He stepped forward, moving into the map just like Wrenlow did.

When he did, he focused on that path.

That seemed to fill his mind.

It was an odd sensation.

For the first time, he felt as if he was a bit more in control. Not exactly in control fully, not the way Imogen spoke about it, but at least he felt like he had a measure of control he hadn't had before. He tried to focus on what he could feel and on the way that power was building inside him so that he might be able to see the path and where he was supposed to go.

The map started to unfold even more.

His breath caught.

“What did you do?” Wrenlow asked.

“I didn't do much of anything,” Gavin said. “It's just...”

He didn't know how to describe it except that the power he was feeling was pulling on him through the map. That allowed some part of the map to change and unfurl, as if he was meant to use his combined powers in that way.

“What?” Wrenlow asked.

Gavin shook his head. “I...”

He had no idea. He didn't know what he was going to need to do, but he thought he might be able to focus and unfold that power the way he had told Imogen he could. And in his mind, he believed there had to be some way he might be able to use that power so he could figure out just what it was doing and where it was guiding him. The more he focused on it, the easier it became for him to feel that path. And he pushed it into the map.

The map continue to unfold.

The effect was impressive. He had never seen anything quite like that.

Staring at the map didn't show him anything obvious. He focused on the strange pull deep inside him, and as he did, he could feel something there, as if the purpose he'd been searching for was just at the edge of his understanding.

He knew what he was supposed to do.

He saw where the path was guiding them.

It looked like a series of ruins, similar to what they had found in other places here. The ruins were much more extensive than in some other places. Rather than buildings that were still standing, now they were toppled, with crumbling walls, the remains of streets, and little more than a memory of the power that had once been there.

The pain began to build inside Gavin again.

It was becoming almost too much for him.

He tried to make sense of that pain, tried to focus on whether there would be anything he could control, but even as he did, the pain was rising with an intensity that Gavin could not ignore.

“I have to keep moving,” he said, he looked over as Imogen joined. “I don’t feel like I have a choice but to do so.”

“There is always a choice. That is what you have told us yourself,” Imogen said.

That was what he believed.

But this path guided him.

Could he find a way to clear his mind, come to terms with what was here, and find another path?

“Let’s say they are using this to get to me,” he said. “I don’t know why, but if it’s about me, then they are using it so they can draw me here.”

“Possibly,” Imogen said.

“And if they did, then it’s somehow gifted me the ability to see, right?”

She nodded. “That is what the Porapeth did to me. And you have a connection to the Shard, who has some of this ability, so I would not be surprised if that is what you’re encountering.”

“I need to find possibilities, right? Not just one path.”

Imogen watched him, saying nothing.

He had been forced along one path, and he had seen the puzzle unfolding, forcing him in this way, but maybe it didn't need to. Maybe if he could focus on the different energies that were there and the different ways he was being guided, he might be able to find something within all of it that would help him understand if there was anything more there that he might be able to do with it.

And so as he stared, focusing, feeling for the different power, Gavin began to recognize that there were other possibilities.

It had worked at times. It had worked when he had felt that his friends were in danger. Were his friends in danger now? Then again, in the time that he had been in Yoran, his friends had always been in danger.

As soon as that thought came to him, he began to see a different series of possibilities.

He nodded to himself. "All right, here's what we're going to do."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

As they approached the ruins, the pain was a pressure inside Gavin's mind. He tried to ignore it, but it was difficult. Instead, he simply pushed it to the side, no longer thinking about it, and focused on the unusual ruins ahead of him. These ruins were different than some of the others they had seen. When he turned his head from side to side, something about the ruins themselves seemed to shift in a way that left Gavin feeling uncertain. He did not know why he saw them like that, but something didn't feel quite right.

Alana came over. "Something about this is different."

"What is it?"

"I cannot tell. I can feel... Well, I can't tell what it is I can feel, but something about this is not right."

"Make sure you have your enchantments with you."

"I have them," she said.

"Do you have anything in reserve?" Gavin asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's always the need for reserve weapons," he said, trying to talk more confidently than he really felt. "When I was training with Tristan, I learned that sometimes you end up dealing with threats you aren't able to handle on your own, and they manage to surprise you. That was one of the things he liked to surprise me with. He kept something on hand that would never really make much of a weapon most of the time, but 'desperate times bring out desperate thoughts'—that was

what he would say to me. So keep a trick in place. Or at least, be ready for that need. Maybe it's having something you can unfold. Maybe it's a hidden enchantment. I don't know what it will be for you."

Alana stepped forward, murmuring to herself. She raised a hand, reaching out, and then everything in front of them seemed as if it unfolded.

It reminded Gavin of the map.

The landscape went from looking like strange ruins to an enormous, towering complex of stone buildings. They were a drab gray, and a gigantic wall surrounded all of them, looming high above.

It reminded Gavin of the enchanters' fortress in Yoran, only this was older. Much older.

He studied the buildings. Everything about them struck him as unique, and even a bit unsettling, almost. But there was something else to it. He wasn't quite sure how to place what he was feeling, only that it seemed to draw through him as if he were compelled here. He had no idea why, nor did he really understand what it was, just that it felt like something was pulling on him in a way it had not before.

He looked around and paused for a moment. "I need to check on something," he said, looking over to Gaspar.

Gaspar grunted, and Gavin launched himself into the air. He did so with a push of the Lightning Strikes pattern, letting it carry him. As soon as he launched upward, he felt the pull of power that he had been feeling for so long now. It wasn't painful like it had been before, which was weird for him. There was still a little bit of discomfort, at least when he considered the possibility of veering off the path it wanted him to follow, but now that he had discovered what he needed to do to guide them and how he was able to use the path and its directionality, he was able to feel that pain easing out of him, as if the mere act of using that power allowed some of that discomfort to fade.

He didn't know how to control it, but he knew there had to be some way he could.

He hovered for a moment by himself, looking down. Most of this place looked as if it had been abandoned long ago. But there was something about it that struck him as strange and familiar. Maybe it was the draw. The pull on him had changed so that it was no longer as potent as before.

“What do you see?”

Gavin glanced over to see Imogen floating next to him. She looked casual and comfortable, and for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, she was holding her sword unsheathed. He was surprised by that, partly because it left him worried that maybe he had overlooked something. He didn't like to think he had, but Imogen holding on to her weapon gave her a much more intimidating appearance. Pale yellow energy crackled along the blade, as if she were controlling lightning around her.

“I just see where we were called,” he said. “I'm trying to make sense of what it is and why I was called here.”

“Do you think there is something here that has pulled on you?”

“Well, I know something has pulled on me, but at this point, I'm not entirely sure what it is, nor do I know why it's drawing me forward. It just feels like it's dragging me here. And as I stared down at this place, it seemed as if there are layers here that weren't there when the path was the only thing calling me here.”

Imogen frowned. “Describe the layers.”

Gavin shrugged slightly. “To be honest, I'm not exactly confident what to make of it, only that I can see different layers all around these ruins. It seems as if that power is lingering in a way that creates something of a pattern around it, and I feel like I should have recognized it, but I don't. Not the way I want to.” He snorted. “I realize how that sounds. Probably a little crazed.”

“It sounds like somebody who is trying to understand his visions.”

“You think that’s what this is?”

“I don’t know, Gavin, but given what you have experienced and what has drawn you here, I can’t help but feel as if it is at least tied to it in some way. It must be, for you to feel compelled like you have been.”

He didn’t have an answer to that, and he didn’t know whether or not that was true, but he did feel as if something was calling to him. He was struggling with it, and the more he struggled, the more that he felt the uncertainty, and he recognized that there had to be something there.

He felt it.

“I think there’s a ring around the ruins,” Gavin said. “But again, I’m not sure what to make of that ring, except that I can see it.”

“You see it as it is now, or do you see as it could be?” Imogen asked.

“I don’t really know the difference.”

“Study it.”

He turned his attention downward, focusing on the layers he noticed around the city. “I’ve been trying to study it, but even as I do, nothing clear is coming to me.”

“I need you to continue to study it. The way it looks. How it feels. What it does to you internally. Because I think this is important.”

“Do *you* see anything?”

“Here everything is a bit blurry,” she said. “I think that’s because I do not have the connection to this land that you do. There is some certainty, but there is quite a bit of uncertainty as well. I am trying to make sense of it, trying to understand what it is that I see, but even as I do, I find that it tends to blur for me in a way.”

Blur. That was an interesting word. When Gavin turned his head from side to side, he did experience a little blurring too. He recognized that, but he didn't know the purpose of it. He could make out something that seemed as if it were shifting beneath him, and some part of what he thought was there was not looking the way it should.

"I can see a little blurring as well," he said. "But truth be told, I don't know what to make of it, and I don't know why I'm seeing it."

"You are seeing what the El'aras has given you. I need you to keep focusing on it, I need you to keep trying to find the answer. There has to be something there for you. Either from what you're seeing—or what she sees."

What she sees?

Did that mean that all of this was just from Anna?

But why here? There wasn't anything here that made sense to him. Only that it seemed to be the source of it all.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I can feel that much, at least," Imogen said.

Gavin stared ahead. As he did, he thought about the layering he had been seeing and feeling and trying to understand. But he still couldn't tell anything about it.

"Maybe it's just the protections around the city," he said. "Or protections that *should* be around it." As soon as he said it, something felt right about it. "That seems to be what I'm feeling. I don't exactly know, it just seems..." He shrugged. "It seems like that's what I should be feeling."

"Focus on that possibility," she said. "See where it's guiding you."

"I don't know how to do that."

"Focus on the vision you see."

Gavin stared at the layers he saw around the city.

"Let it draw you," Imogen said.

He tried, but shook his head after a moment. It wasn't working.

“Focus your mind the way you do when you are finding the sacred patterns.”

He frowned. That was something he thought he could do.

The sense of it reminded him of the tree pattern. He let it fill him, the strange sense expanding into the branches. When he did, everything brightened, and then there was an even brighter pull.

Everything seemed to focus, concentrating toward the center of the ruins. Even with that, everything seemed to become brighter than before.

When he said as much to Imogen, she nodded. “Good,” she said. “Now we know what we must do.”

“So you think this is trying to tell us that we have to create protections around this place?”

“It must be,” she said.

“But why here? Are we supposed to hole up here for a little while?”

He couldn't tell if the path kept going. That was difficult for him, because even though he felt some part of the path, it also seemed as if it just ended, fading here.

“We should get down to the others,” Imogen said.

“Are you concerned?” he asked.

“I am ready to prepare. And until we do that, I think we both should be a little concerned.”

He dropped back down to the ground, then followed Imogen as she strode over to Jorend and some of her other Leier and issued her commands.

Gavin looked over to where Gaspar was, but he had already scurried away, heading toward some of the enchanters.

“What was that about?” Gavin asked Alana, who was still studying the outside of a building.

“Oh, she has Gaspar relaying commands.”

Gavin barked out a laugh. “She has Gaspar doing that?”

“You know how he feels about her, and she does as well, and the two of them...” Alana shrugged. “I think the two of them are just doing whatever they feel like they need to do to spend time together. If it involves Gaspar running around and giving out commands for her, then he’s going to do it.”

Gavin didn’t know what to say to that. Yet he understood. He had seen that side of Gaspar, even if the old man never wanted to admit it.

“There’s something here,” Gavin said. “Or there *may* be something here.”

“Like the last time?”

“Maybe. I can see it. It’s like there’s a collection of energy around it.”

“So that’s what Anna is doing,” Alana said. “She’s creating the same perimeter that we used before.”

“Well, it was effective,” Gavin said.

She nodded. “Incredibly effective, and I am actually surprised at how well that worked.”

Gavin was quiet for a moment. As he watched, he noticed how the Leier, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and even the El’aras were all situating themselves around the ruins. They were all taking their places, all doing what they needed to do.

“I’m not surprised by it,” he said.

“Only because you’ve been in magical fights before.”

“Actually, I’m not surprised because it’s the kind of thing we had established around Yoran, and I think that’s what she was trying to replicate here. It gave her, and us, an opportunity to try to ensure our defenses.”

She frowned in thought. “That makes sense. I hadn’t seen it before, but I do now.”

“You see it?” Gavin asked, a bit of a smile coming to his lips.

“Not like you do,” she said.

He snorted as he looked at Alana. “How is it going with Imogen?”

“She’s helping me understand how to connect to this power more effectively. It’s a little different than what I was thinking.”

“You’re using the sacred patterns.”

“Not like Imogen does,” she said. “At least, I don’t think I am. When she talked about this tree pattern, I don’t really feel myself forming a tree. It’s more like I’m forming some sort of post inside myself, and then I compact it down, compressing it and—”

“Folding it?”

She nodded. “Folding it.”

“Then that is working the way it needs to work,” Gavin said.

“I don’t know. I feel like... Well, I don’t even know what I feel like.”

“You just need to keep working with it.”

“I know,” she said.

They wandered around the perimeter of the ruins, and as the evening started to settle, Gavin began to feel something else. It wasn’t the same pull of the path, but he didn’t know what it was. Something was building, some different energy, some almost uncomfortable power that was rising inside him. He tried to make sense of it, wanting to know just what it was that he was picking up on, but even as he focused on it, he could not tell what it was.

When he looked over to Alana, she was frowning.

“You feel it as well,” he said.

She nodded. “I don’t know what it is, but it seems like it’s building. Does that make any sense?”

“It does, unfortunately.”

“Why? What do you think we’re picking up on?”

He shrugged. “Well, the only thing I can think of is that we’re feeling an effect of what’s coming.”

And at this point, Gavin had no idea what was coming. All he knew was that something had to be growing stronger, some power that was working, and it was coming in their direction. He worried about what it was and whether or not there would be any way he would be able to control it, because until he had a measure of control over it, he didn’t think there was anything he could do with it.

Alana sighed. “I—”

She didn’t have a chance to finish as a strange pressure began to build.

Gavin recognized that pressure. It came from something unfolding. Something nearby.

He tried to focus and make sense of it, but he knew he didn’t have much time. He could feel it, and until he knew more about it, he didn’t know if there was going to be any way he was going to be able to counter it.

“Chain Breaker,” Imogen said, hurrying toward him using one of the sacred patterns, though it was one he didn’t recognize. It seemed to be a mix of lightning and a burst of speed, and the combination was unlike anything he had seen from her before.

He had no idea how she was able to do that, yet it was something he wanted to replicate. There was always more to learn, and when it came to Imogen and what she was able to do, it seemed that would always be the case. He couldn’t keep up with what she was capable of doing. And maybe it wasn’t about keeping up. Maybe it was about developing his own connection to the sacred patterns and having a better understanding of what it was that he could do.

“What is it?” Gavin asked.

“You feel it, don’t you?”

“I feel something unfolding,” he said, and he looked around. “But I’m not sure what it is, only that something is growing stronger, and it’s heading toward us.”

“I’m sure you can pick up on it.”

He could tell that a considerable amount of power was rising close to him. He recognized that source of energy, and he recognized what it was doing—even if he didn’t know why it was coming out.

That power was building, and it was dangerous.

Jayna strode over to him. She had Eva with her, and the smoke was swirling from the two of them. Gavin had been distracted during the journey and hadn’t spent much time with them, but they had been talking with Gaspar, Imogen, and probably even Alana, who were keeping them updated.

“Something is trying to get through,” Jayna said. “I’m not able to pick up on it, but Eva can. She says it’s beginning to squeeze across the boundary between realms, the same way it has different times now. I don’t know what it is, and I don’t know whether we’re going to be able to stop it from this side.”

Gavin understood what she was getting at. “You want to go back.”

“I think somebody needs to be on the other side to ensure that whatever is trying to break through doesn’t have an opportunity to do so. And I am volunteering.”

“I can’t fold you over,” Gavin said. “It might take too much time, and I need to be here.” There was a concern about *where* the folding would lead him.

Jayna watched him for a moment. “You probably do. But you aren’t the only one able to bring us across, are you?”

Gavin pursed his lips in thought. “I don’t know if we have any sorcerers that are strong enough to bring you across like that. Maybe if they had time to build an enchantment, but there isn’t time.”

“I will take one of the El’aras,” she said.

“I will go,” Brandon said, striding up behind Gavin. “I will take her. And if possible, I will return, but if it’s not possible, then I will stay and help fight on the other side.”

Gavin looked at him, and there was a part of him that wanted to tell Brandon he didn’t need to do that, that he needed to stay here, but then there was a part of Gavin that knew he needed Brandon’s help with this.

“You shouldn’t go alone,” Gavin said. “Take as many of the El’aras with you as you can spare.” He looked over to Imogen. “As long as that’s okay with the general.”

Imogen regarded Gavin, then nodded. “It is fine.”

They stepped aside, and Gavin didn’t have much time to make preparations. He didn’t know what was coming, but then, when he felt a sudden pop, he knew they were out of time.

The birds, or whatever they were, were massive. They were like dragon-birds, enormous and powerful, and they immediately began to siphon power from this spot, radiate it outward, and push it through the realm.

There was something about all of it that was unsteady and uncertain.

“We can’t sit idly and wait for what they will do. We need to attack first,” Imogen said.

“I’m on it,” Gavin said.

“Bring me,” Alana said.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Bring me.”

Imogen streaked upward and was followed by a dozen Leier. They all targeted the creature that Imogen was going after. The sorcerers began to fight another. Naelum stayed with them, but behind, as if he didn’t want to get caught up in what was happening.

Gavin focused on one nearest him. Alana stayed close, and with a pair of enchantments in her hands, she looked ready to battle.

She glanced over to him. “It will be fine, Gavin. I promise.”

He snorted. “I’m not even sure I want to know what you’re going to promise.”

Her grin widened.

He launched the two of them upward using the Lightning Strikes pattern. Even as he did, he knew it wasn’t going to be enough. He could feel the power that was building, the way it was rising, and how the energy was spilling out of him, and he could tell that the power he was wielding would not be able to keep them safe.

He had fought these things before and failed. But in this case, he didn’t need to do anything.

Alana simply tossed an enchantment.

He didn’t know what it was. He could feel it, however. She followed it with another, and another, and then another. With each one she tossed, he felt a surge of power. He realized that she was spilling quite a bit of energy into those enchantments, unfolding that power. It was almost too much for her.

When he said as much to her, she sucked in a sharp breath. “But it worked,” she said.

He looked around. All those birdlike creatures were gone. They were all down, no longer a threat.

Gavin slowly began to lower them back down to the ground. He landed and released Alana, who took a gasping breath of air.

“Thank you,” she said, and then she moved toward the wall surrounding the ruins.

Imogen and the others landed too, and Gavin looked at the ruins, bracing for what they were going to need to do. Alana looked over as if she was going to say something... but then she simply disappeared.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Gavin darted forward, but Imogen grabbed his arm and held him back. He felt her forming her tree pattern, securing things.

“You should not go rushing into that,” she said. “You don’t know where that will take you.”

“I am not going to let her be captured.”

“Think about why they are after her. You may not have been the target. It might have always been her.”

“I know,” Gavin growled. “But I said I would protect her.”

“I have a few ideas,” Mekel said, stepping forward. “Alana helped me with these.” He held out a satchel filled with enchantments, shaking it briefly. “She embedded a little bit of herself into each of them, so I think that if nothing else, they should be able to help us get her back.”

“What do you know about this, Naelum?” Gavin asked.

“They should not have been able to do that,” the man said.

“I need to know what kind of power they have.”

“They are the Forerunners.”

“I understand that they are, but what kind of power do they have?”

“They have all power,” Naelum replied.

“What?” Gaspar asked.

Naelum nodded. “They are the Forerunners. They have all power.”

All power. They had the power of the Porapeth, the sorcerers, the El’aras, the Ashara, and maybe others that Gavin didn’t know about.

He wouldn’t be able to stop them. Not by himself.

Gaspar looked at Gavin. “I’m with you, boy. We aren’t going to let anything happen to that girl. Whatever it takes, we’re going to do it.”

“We have to fight our way to her.”

“Well, we came here looking to save somebody, right?”

Mekel started placing enchantments down on the ground, and then he looked over to Gavin. “She said you needed to activate them. That it was going to make them stronger.”

Gavin absently tapped on each enchantment. As soon as he did, they began to unfold, getting larger and larger.

“Find her,” Gavin said to them.

He had no clue what would happen. He didn’t expect much from it, but surprisingly, the enchantments blasted at the wall.

As they did, a power bloomed inside them. It was oddly familiar to him, and it felt as if they were drawing on the energy of this place in some way. Gavin had no idea how that would be possible for these enchantments, only that he could feel it.

The wall shattered.

Naelum gasped. “That should not have been possible.”

The moment the wall was gone, Gavin saw possibilities. He realized that as soon as Alana had been captured, the pain had faded. He had been guided here, guided toward this, guided toward them taking her. But that didn’t mean he had to accept it.

He needed to focus on the possibilities. And there *were* possibilities—not just a single answer, but many different

ones. Those different possibilities formed the puzzle, and the solution was the pattern he had to solve.

As he concentrated, he thought he knew what he needed to do. He needed to follow the power here.

Gaspar and Imogen watched him, both of them looking on edge.

“Thoughts?” Gaspar asked.

“We need to keep the scholars away from this,” Gavin said.

Gaspar grunted. “Already did it. Wrenlow and the others are staying outside. We’ve got half a dozen Leier keeping an eye on them, and they are all ready to transfer back if they need to.”

“Create a perimeter, like in Yoran,” Gavin said. “We want to secure this place. Not to ensure that nothing gets in, but to make sure nothing gets out.” He looked around. “We also want to make sure nothing crosses over. We know how to control that with enchantments, so get everyone working.”

He ran off, stopping to talk to Jorend and the Leier, and then meeting with the enchanters and the sorcerers. Brandon stayed with Wrenlow, having arranged for someone else to bring Jayna and Eva back. Every so often, he would glance toward Gavin, but he did not say anything to him. It took only a moment before everybody started to spread out. They had experience. If nothing else, coming to this place had helped hone that experience. They had set up camp several times, and in doing so, they had learned to work quickly and create protections. Now they needed to do that in a way that would help make sure those protections did something different.

Not to defend, but to fight.

Gavin couldn’t be a part of those preparations. He had to stay focused.

He marched forward toward the nearest building. The ruins loomed ahead, expansive, shadowy structures consumed by age and neglect. Crumbling spires and broken battlements reached upward, silhouetted against the sky. Vast walls bore

the scars of time, their original colors obscured by moss, ivy, and decay.

Inside the grounds, dried-up fountains and cracked basins hinted at what they once represented. Overgrown vegetation claimed the pathways, and wild plants twisted and turned around long-abandoned statues.

The silence around him was palpable and dust hung heavy in the air.

Seven figures waited, all dressed in curious, flowing robes inside of a massive chamber. They emanated power that Gavin could not fully identify. These had to be the Forerunners. He didn't move forward, not yet, not until he could figure out what the right strategy would be and not harm Alana, who was standing in the middle of them.

He noticed the possible lines of energy around him, silver possibilities, and then they settled.

He knew what he had to do.

Gavin started forward but immediately felt a push on him. It was pressure, and it was almost like a folding, but it wasn't quite like that.

"Shielded," Imogen said. She had rooted herself with her tree pattern, pushing outward to try to detect if there was something out there.

He followed her lead and used the same pattern, and he could feel that there was something to it.

His own tree pattern may not even be enough, though. Not the bralinath tree, at least. But what if he added the power of this place?

He had not mixed those two successfully before. Could he do it?

Gavin forced that power down and rapidly unfolded it.

Everything trembled around him, and the Forerunners turned to him.

"Do what you can, boy," Gaspar said.

“We don’t have much time,” Imogen snapped. “They are preparing something. They will use her.”

“Hopefully the protections we have placed will give us some time,” Gavin said.

Alana cried out, but the sound was muted, unable to escape fully.

And yet, they did not fold.

“What kind of power are they using?” Gavin asked Naelum.

“This is just one aspect of it. If you use the theluscar, it should work. Unfortunately, they have been lost long ago. The only ones who still have that power are the Forerunners.”

Gavin stared at him for a moment. “I don’t even know what that is.”

“It was a strange spike power...”

Well, if it was that, then he might be able to do something. He had already been using that with his tree, so why not shoot spikes out of his tree?

He pushed, and they exploded, striking the shield. He didn’t penetrate it, but he could feel it crackling.

Gavin continued pushing.

“How is it that you can do this? I thought you were the Chain Breaker,” Naelum asked.

“I’m more than that.”

Maybe the Forerunners had given him the power to defeat them without even knowing what they were doing.

He pushed the spikes forward toward the barricade, and it crackled again.

Gavin couldn’t wait. He could feel what they were doing. Somehow, he was aware of the folding and what they intended. He did not have much time.

He rushed forward.

Three of the Forerunners turned toward him.

Gavin had seen one of them before. It was the same man who had abducted Anna.

“You will let her go,” Gavin said.

“I think not,” the man said.

His words were accented, somewhat like the accent that Naelum had, only a little different. There also wasn't the same hesitation in his speech, as if he was fully comfortable with using the language.

“All I want is the girl,” Gavin said.

“Do you even understand what she is?”

“Well, I assume she's like you.”

“No,” the man said. “A weapon. The others created her.”

Gavin blinked. “Created?”

“They lent aspects of themselves. They used that to create this power. They wanted to escape.”

Gavin glanced behind him to Naelum, whose eyes were wide.

The man sneered. “They thought they could target the weapon at us, and that it would be useful for them, but we pushed her away. Much like we will push her away now.”

They wanted to use her?

Something wasn't right.

“Can you hold him?” Gavin asked Imogen.

“I already have,” she said.

Naelum was attempting to get himself free, but Gavin ignored it. He suspected that Naelum, much like the Forerunners, knew nothing about the Leier patterns. It was a different kind of magic than what others possessed, drawing on a different kind of power in the world.

And her Porapeth friend had known.

The Forerunners were coming toward him.

Gavin used his tree pattern, and he tried to push away, but it wasn't enough. They shattered it.

They had too much power. He realized that immediately, because they had no difficulty surging through any defenses that he formed.

Could he do anything else?

Not against this.

And yet, he felt something. Pressure. Sorcery. Enchantments. Leier magic. Even the El'aras. All of it built, and it pushed inward.

The perimeter. It had formed. His friends had secured this place.

Now they had to fight.

Only, now they were trapped as well.

"Use your reserve weapon," Alana cried.

Gavin didn't have a reserve weapon. After all he had said to her, he simply did not have one.

"Don't worry about me," he said.

And then he knew what she meant—the explosives. But he wasn't about to use those on her.

"Please," Alana said. "I don't want to be the reason that others suffer. You can defeat them all."

She wasn't wrong. With the perimeter that his people had established, it would take them all out. It would end things.

The Forerunners would be captured. And then what?

The others could return, but not Gavin, Gaspar, or Imogen. They would be stuck here too. Stuck with Alana.

Could she fold herself out of it? It was possible, but was he even willing to have her risk herself like that?

"Gavin," Gaspar said. "The power is too much."

He realized that Gaspar was backing away. A ring of enchantments was trying to create a barricade, blocking the

Forerunners from getting closer, but the enchantments shattered, one after another. Even the ones that Alana had added power to. There was nothing they could do.

Gavin breathed out heavily, then reached into his pocket, took out one of the orbs, triggered it, and rolled it forward.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

IMOGEN

Imogen had unsheathed her sword.

It was strange for her to have it out, but in this place, she felt as if she needed the potential that the blade would offer her. She barely even had to move it to make any impact with it.

Nearby, Gavin was using that bizarre blade of spiky power, which protruded in between his hands. He had a measure of control over it that he hadn't had before. And there were the Forerunners, all ready, all attacking, and all threatening.

Alana had been the target all along.

Imogen should have known.

She had been too distracted. She wasn't sure how and when she had gotten distracted, but at some point, she had. She had overlooked the obvious. The attack had been focused on the ruins the moment Gavin had left. Well, perhaps not that exact moment, but it had certainly happened near enough to that time.

One of the Forerunners turned toward her. He flicked his wrist, and a wave of what seemed like a mixture of sorcery and another kind of power came toward her, something that Imogen immediately felt. Some part of her that was distant and reactive knew of that power. Some part of her that had trained from birth in how to be a Leier, and had recognized—and destroyed—magic. Ever since she had unified her people, she had not needed that.

And now she did.

She swung her sword, cutting through the magic, disrupting whatever spell or pattern this Forerunner was using on her. He frowned, seemingly surprised by it, but Imogen didn't give him a chance to react. She darted forward with the Axe Falling pattern, the blade sweeping down before she shifted into another of the sacred patterns, which cleaved his arm off. A burst of power erupted from him. She felt it as much as she saw it, and didn't understand what it was that she was experiencing. But she knew there was power, and it was causing part of the problem.

And then it was gone. The energy had changed, and she saw nothing but a series of different lines around her. They were silver, and distinct, and confusing.

The Forerunners were confronting Gavin, but for now, he was holding them off. Alana was still trapped, and Imogen worried about what would happen if the girl remained so. And there was still the issue of the El'aras woman they had come to save. At least, that they had initially come to save.

Imogen didn't have answers.

"I could really use your help right now, Benji," she whispered.

She had no idea whether Benji was even going to answer. At this point, she had no clue whether he was even willing to keep talking to her about what was going on, or what he would offer her. The last time he had, he had spoken about needing to disperse, and needing to depart in a way that meant he would no longer be with her. But ever since they had been targeted, and ever since Alana was nearly lost, Imogen had started to feel something different. It was as if there was some urgency to Benji, and what he had gifted her, that had lingered.

Another of the Forerunners slipped toward her. Imogen whipped her blade, sliding forward in one of the sacred patterns mixed with a traditional one, and then jerked her sword around. The Forerunner was startled at first, but brought his hands together and created a shimmering barrier that her blade bounced off. That was unexpected.

Unexpected was not good. Not with this kind of thing. Not when she was under attack. She needed to know what was going to happen, and she needed to be able to anticipate and defend against whatever was here.

“Benji.”

His voice came to her quietly. “You do not need me, First. Not here.”

“I do need you,” she said.

“You have never needed me. You have just feared accepting what has changed.”

“I have feared it?”

“You have,” he said.

She didn’t feel like she had feared anything. She had felt like she’d accepted everything, but what if she truly had feared it?

“Then what can I do?” Imogen asked.

“You must accept it.”

“And what is it that I’m accepting?”

“The truth about you.”

“What is the truth about me?”

“The Porapeth are gone,” Benji said.

“I know the Porapeth are gone,” Imogen said with irritation.

Two of the Forerunners came at her. There was fighting all around. Gavin was moving faster than she would’ve expected. He had somehow unfolded and then refolded, expanding and compressing, his size becoming both an asset and a liability, but it was faster than she had seen from him before. And it did seem to throw off and distract the Forerunners. So far, they hadn’t had an opportunity to do whatever they were going to do to Alana—which Imogen thought was for the best. She still didn’t know what was going to happen with the Forerunners, nor what they had in store for the girl, but increasingly, she

couldn't help but feel as if it was not going to involve her death.

It could not.

She had to dart to the side to avoid her attackers, and she swept her blade up. She shifted, using some of the renral pattern to send lightning across the ground. That much was a surprise to her attackers, but one of the Forerunners captured that lightning and balled it up, and then it dissipated altogether. That by itself should not have been possible. At least, it wouldn't have been possible had it been an actual renral, and not just her using the sacred pattern that seemed to summon some of that energy.

"You keep acting as if I am still there with you, but I'm not," Benji said. "I am but a memory. And that is what I must be."

"That isn't all you are."

That didn't feel like the case, but what if that *was* what it had been?

"It is," Benji said.

"And you want me to accept it," she said.

There was a part of her that thought she understood. It was something that Benji had been telling her from the very beginning. She had to see the possibilities, and she had to understand what they meant, but until she understood herself, much like she had been trying to teach Alana, she wasn't going to be able to accept that power, nor was she going to be able to accept all the possibilities. And perhaps that was the entire purpose of what he was saying to her. She had to accept it, because what was there, and what was building, was not something she would be able to do without accepting it.

"I won't be able to talk to you any longer once I do this, will I?"

"You will have the memory," Benji said.

"And then I become the memory," she said.

There was a bit of laughter, much like the old Benji. “Now you see, First.”

“I’m still going to talk to you.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

As a Forerunner came toward her, she saw several different lines, several different possibilities, around him, but she still wasn’t able to conceptualize what they were all doing, or their purpose. The only thing she recognized was that the combination was still too complex for her to follow.

Benji had been trying to teach her and had been hoping she would learn, but there had come a point where she had stopped focusing on that aspect of her abilities and what he had taught her. She had started to focus instead on what it meant for her to be a First of the Blade, and not so much on what it meant for her to be *the* First.

She had to be more than just the general.

She had to find a way to lead, and in order to lead, she had to see.

She had to plan. She had to anticipate. She had to be ready. Her people—all her people, which now seemed like it was more than just the Leier and the shamans, but also the El’aras, the sorcerers, and the enchanters—all needed for her to do that.

She couldn’t fight the gift Benji had given her. She couldn’t fear losing him.

He was already gone.

So she pulled upon that silver energy. She felt it. And she drew it into the combined patterns.

When she did, possibilities erupted around her. They were not the possibilities she had seen before. Those had been there, but they had still been somewhat complex and difficult for her to follow. Even though she had been able to see different possibilities, she hadn’t been able to manage them, nor had she been able to understand just what it was that she needed to do with them. Now that she had pulled at them, she saw.

And it felt like some part of her changed as she felt a stir inside her.

“A priest?” the Forerunner in front of her said.

She ignored it. She saw what he was going to do, and though she knew there were many different possibilities, there was a single one that came into focus much more rapidly than it had before. Imogen drew on that, harnessed it, and drove her blade forward, stabbing it into his chest.

He backed away. Energy coursed from her, and more possibilities surrounded her. In many of the possibilities, she saw Gaspar, and though he was fighting nearby, she had not fought alongside him. Increasingly, she could see the mistake. She needed him. He needed her. The possibilities, and the actions, would draw them.

She had to stop resisting it.

Much like with energy, she had to accept what had changed.

She had changed.

Gaspar had already accepted that the two of them were different—and how they could be different. Could she?

She tore her gaze away. That was a thought for another time. For now, she settled on Gavin. She saw him fighting, and saw him nearing Alana, and several different possibilities blazed in her mind. Only one of which would succeed.

She had to get to him to tell him what he needed to do.

“Thank you, Benji. You will not be forgotten.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“I have a different reserve weapon in mind,” Gavin shouted at Alana. “So be ready to run.”

Her eyes widened just as the orb exploded.

Seven giants burst free.

He hadn't known if it was going to work. There was a possibility that he had made a huge mistake here and that the creatures would be destroyed rather than just contained. But they scrambled out.

One of the Forerunners turned toward those creatures.

Alana jumped, reaching for the creature, and she pushed something into it. The creature rippled, and some part of it changed. It brought its hand up and then slammed it downward. The Forerunner created a barricade around themselves as a shield.

But the shield shattered. The Forerunner was crushed.

That drew the attention of the others.

Alana darted forward, and she hurriedly added power to some of the other creatures, and as she did, Gavin noticed something. The power that she was pushing out was changing those creatures and turning them in some way, though Gavin wasn't exactly sure what it was.

He could feel it, though. He could feel the energy, the way it was flowing and how that power was rippling. Through it all, Gavin thought there had to be something else he could do

here, but he wasn't sure how. The only thing he was certain of was that Alana was modifying it.

The light was a blur.

All around him was chaos.

Imogen was battling some of the Forerunners, but she was fighting with a technique he wasn't familiar with. That was almost enough for him to pause and watch, as he was curious about what she was doing and whether there would be anything he might be able to help her with.

Then he saw that she didn't need his help.

And he realized that the people—his people—hadn't needed his help during much of what he'd been doing. Gavin had been gone for long stretches, where they had managed to create the right kind of defenses to ensure that the attackers didn't reach them. Imogen had organized the people well enough that he hadn't needed to get involved.

A Forerunner stepped close to him.

Gavin fortified a spike and slammed it forward.

The Forerunner backed away... and into one of the creatures.

The creatures were active and violent, and there wasn't anything he could do to turn them back. The power that was building was enough that he couldn't stop them. Not the way it seemed Imogen was able to do, but that didn't mean he could do nothing.

Gavin had to *push* the Forerunners toward the creatures he'd released.

Only then would they get out of this.

He charged.

The movement was a mindless race forward, and he really didn't expect much, but he cried out as he did, knowing that he probably sounded like he was losing his mind. One of the Forerunners turned to him—a dark-haired man with a very round face—and smiled.

Until the creatures attacked.

One of them stomped down, and there was a disgusting pop as a Forerunner was crushed. Then there was another, and another. They fell underneath the onslaught.

Gavin used several of the Leier patterns to keep the Forerunners from moving, and it worked. They were forced back toward the creatures, which took care of the attack and made it so that he didn't have to do anything else.

He had already done enough.

He had forced them here.

A strange quiet hung over everything. Imogen had moved toward Gaspar, but Gavin couldn't pay attention to what she was doing. There was a single Forerunner still waiting. Watching.

There was a dangerous edge to the man. Gavin could feel the power coming off him, though he couldn't tell much more than that. Just that there *was* power to him.

Gavin used the Tree Stands in the Forest technique but had changed it. Now he was drawing on the power from this realm, along with that of the bralinath trees. There was a mingling of the power he was able to link together, and thankfully it seemed to connect—and hold the man back.

“She *will* come to us,” the man said.

“You're not getting Alana.”

Gavin shot toward him using Lightning Strikes mixed with some of the spike power. But the man simply raised a hand. Gavin was forced back, but not before he tossed another orb at him. He anchored with the tree pattern, twisted, then shot a spike toward him.

And missed.

The man tried coming toward Gavin, but he was locked in place.

Gavin got to his feet. “Feeling the hold? That would be my friends. They've got a way of keeping you here. They will

hold you while we figure out what we're going to do with you.”

That they had succeeded in that was more than he could have hoped for. He hadn't known it would work like that, and was thankful that it had.

The man twisted so he could look around the room. His gaze lingered on all the fallen people here, then he held his hand toward the ground.

Gavin didn't know what he would—or *could*—do.

Power built.

Gavin prepared for an explosion of power, of something, but it never came.

Just a pop of energy. And the man was gone.

Everything fell still.

It wasn't over. Not yet.

They'd found the Forerunners. Knew they were behind the attack on people in his realm, but there was still more that he would need to do. More that he would need to find. They would have to ensure that the Forerunners couldn't get through, and if they did, that they couldn't cause any more problems.

That would be for another time. Now it was time to find a way to relax, if it was possible.

Gavin hurried over to Alana and found her leaning forward, hands on her thighs, breathing heavily.

“Did you know that was going to work?” she asked.

“I had no idea. That's often the best plan, anyway,” he said with a smile. “Plus, I did have another reserve weapon.”

“I thought you said just one reserve.”

“Well, I am the Chain Breaker.”

The creatures stood around them without attacking.

Imogen strode toward Gavin. “He is gone,” she said. “I cannot tell where he went. He simply disappeared, much like

the others.”

“Great. I don’t know if Naelum is with them and was trying to deceive us, or if he was just trying to use us in their war against the Forerunners. Either way, it feels like we are caught up in it.”

“Do we have to be?” Gaspar asked.

Gavin looked over to Alana. “I think so. Because she is part of it.”

Gaspar grunted.

“Do you believe what he said?” Alana asked.

“I don’t know what to believe. Is it possible that you are somehow tied to the Forerunners?” Gavin shrugged. “Sure. Is it possible that you were some sort of weapon?” He shrugged again. “Maybe. But here’s the deal: It doesn’t make a difference. The only thing that makes a difference is what you allow.”

“Say, boy. What about the reason we came here in the first place?” Gaspar asked.

Anna.

Gavin had lost that thread, focusing instead on Alana and her potential disappearance. But that was a mistake.

“I don’t know what happened to her. I don’t know where she is.”

Alana pointed. “She’s there, Gavin. I... I saw what they did, but I don’t know what you can do for her.”

A figure lay in the back of the room. A series of stones surrounded her, reminding him of the temple ruins that had strange writing on them.

He hurried over to her. “Anna,” he said.

She rolled her head over to look at him. “Did you see it?”

“Did I see what?”

“The path I laid out for you.”

“That was *you*? It wasn’t them?”

“I... I wanted you to see,” she said.

“I saw what you were trying to show me. That’s how I’m here.”

“I’m so sorry, Gavin. I was too lost in the past. But I think I finally found a way to see the future.”

“Anna?” he said.

“Protect our people, Gavin. You be the Shard now.”

She reached out to him, and he tried to touch her, but the ring of stones prevented him. He tried the spikes, thinking they would work the same way, but nothing could get past the stones. He couldn’t get to her.

He looked at Alana, who shook her head.

“It’s all right, Gavin,” Anna said. “It is my fault. But I can be better. I can be like you. I can be the one who breaks the chains this time.”

With that, Anna started changing. A ripple of power washed away from her, then washed down and up.

“What’s she doing?” Gaspar asked.

“She’s becoming bralinath.”

But there was something unusual about the bralinath tree. Gavin could feel how it was changing, but he could also feel the way that power flowed, as if it were squeezing down and up, as if it were...

He understood what she was doing. It was the same thing Gavin had done with the other bralinath trees.

As that tree erupted, he focused on the connection. He felt the bralinath power in a way he had not felt quite as strongly in this realm. Somehow, she had joined with the elders.

And for the first time, he heard the voice of the elders in his mind, the fragment speaking to him. It did so with Anna’s voice.

“I will help you use the past to protect the future.”

The Chain Breaker continues with: [A Power Unfolds](#).



The Chain Breaker must find a way to unite power, or his realm will be destroyed.

The Forerunners have revealed their plans, and now Gavin and his team must find a way to stop them. Doing so involves coming to understand the powers of the world, including some that have been long forgotten.

Gavin has learned to fight with the team he's constructed, but this might be a battle fought alone.

And not by Gavin.

How can the Chain Breaker learn to let go of everything that he has been to be what he must become?

If he can't everything will be destroyed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *A Realm in Ruin*. I hope you enjoyed it. If you would be so kind as to take a moment to leave a review on [Amazon](#) or elsewhere, I would be very grateful.

I'm also always happy to hear from readers! Email me at dkh@dkholmberg.com. I try to respond to each message. Don't forget to follow me on Facebook as well!

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All my best,

D.K. Holmberg

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