

# Aria in Fire

Galatyne Knightwyng

*Falana and her companions return to the ruins of Marj Ayunn to unravel the mysteries of the ancient elemental gateways. When one of their number attempts to open a damaged gate, Falana and the others must work quickly to prevent the destruction of... everything.*

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Falana staggered. The world around her spun. Carved stone gateways.... A circle of blue sky.... People... running.... She fell against a stone wall. Fire... fire everywhere.... She pressed her face against the cool stone of the gatehouse and focused on clearing the images that assaulted her mind. Using the exercises Galatyne and Ellam had taught her began, she first slowed and then halted her own tumultuous flow of thoughts and emotions. That done, she found the calm center of her Self. Then she let her mind rest and allowed the images sent at her to flow over and around her as if she were a stone in a river. The key, she had been told, was not in trying to erect and maintain barriers as many powerful mages might do, but in letting go entirely and reestablishing her Self unattached to what went on around her. After a few moments, the rush of images faded into the background.

A screech drifted down to her, announcing what she already knew—Reiksciel was back from hunting and his strongest memories of this place sprang up whenever he reentered it. She looked up as the wyvern spiraled into the ancient volcanic cone that walled Marj Ayunn away from the rest of the world. “Must you do that every time you come back?” she asked aloud, though she knew Reiksciel couldn’t hear her.

She had been aware for almost a year that Reiksciel had formed a mental connection to her, but his thoughts had never been so strong, not until they had come back to Marj Ayunn, anyway. The flood of thought-images upon reentering the city had left her unconscious on the flagstoned street. The mental disciplines Galatyne and Ellam had taught her helped some, but it took so much concentration... all the time. Even when Reiksciel slept, the images didn’t stop, though they came slower. It was in the quiet depths of night, dreaming Reiksciel’s dreams, that Falana had pieced together much of what had happened, and why they had had to come back, not just to right some past injustice, but to save the midlands, and perhaps all E’atara from a firestorm that could destroy them.

Falana turned and looked out over the empty city from atop the rocky bluff the keep sat on. It really was quite a beautiful city, or would have been in its day. Below her, the cracked white marble of the citadel caught the sun, almost glowing amidst the shadows of the nearly subterranean city. Holes pierced its walls, not crumbled away, just gone, as if dissolved. Beyond it, the city’s streets and rivers intertwined and passed by the grand bazaar with its sprawling caravansary of buff granite that looked like a sunset itself when the light hit it just right. That too had gaping holes where the pink stone looked to have been sucked out. In a quiet garden the center of the city, the Springs of the Spirits—perhaps the only place untouched by the devastation—housed the ancestors of those who long ago fled this place.

It was the walls of the city, though, formed from the inner surface of the volcano, that amazed her the most. On the other side of the cavern, the Wall of Lights rose from the floor to the ancient

volcano's opening. At one time, it would have lit the Fire Quarter with twinkling, multi-hued ribbons of flame that cascaded down the stone. It was dark now, the flames long extinguished. The Wall of Tears still flowed in the Water Quarter, calling out their trilling song in the silent cavern and the trees of the Climbing Wall formed their own cascade of greenery down the flank of the Wood Quarter.

But when she tried to sleep, Falana still saw the horror of the last day Marj Ayunn was occupied. A black mass of shadows, like ravening wolves, rampaged through the city. Whatever it touched, flesh or stone, was simply gone... devoured... snuffed out of existence. The Aelshir, the elemental venerants who built and lived in this place, had had no way to fight it. They had fled through their gates to other realms, perhaps other worlds. The pack had followed one group into the fire gate and damaged it. Now the plane of fire threatened to break out and engulf all of E'atara.

A scuff of a boot on stone drew Falana's attention. She turned back to the keep, her keen eyes picking out Rinka's form, even in the deep shadow beyond the gatehouse. Probably coming from the lower library again. "Hi Rinka!" she called and raised a hand in greeting.

Rinka bobbed her head, grunted, and brushed passed her, clutching a large opalescent stone to her chest.

"Bye Makei," Falana said, and waved again even though she—he—didn't look back. Hopefully, Makei would soon find a way to make his peace with this world and give full control of Rinka's body back to her. For now, though, he seemed to be helping. Falana sighed and turned back to the keep. She yet had a short stack of books of her own to read before anyone tried stabilizing the magic of the gates.

Falana followed the keep's winding passages down into the depths of the rock. The place seemed to have been built more to ward the knowledge accumulated by the Aelshir than to protect the people themselves. It had several libraries on each floor and a near catacomb of bookshelves carved into rock at its back. It had taken several days of exploring to find the shelves they needed. Finding the books, or more specifically, the pages they needed was another matter, though she knew they were getting close.

Falana stepped into the reading room, and the wall sconces flared to life. She didn't jump this time. After more than two weeks, she was finally getting used to the almost sentient magic of this place. She walked over to the room's single long table and studied the covers of the books spread out on it. Rinka, or Makei, or both, had been going through some new works. But she needed one of the first ones they had found. One that referenced— Some black lettering on a dark cover caught her eye. Ah! Here it is.

She picked up a small book, bound in worn grey leather – *Neria Stana il e' Stan*.

"The Element of No Element." She laughed softly. That sounded like something Ellam could have written. When she had first stumbled across it, she had thought it to be an esoteric text discoursing on the possible existence of a seventh element beyond the six the Aelshir believed in... no, more than believed in... lived. The city was divided by element—earth, air, fire, water, wood, and metal— and arranged so that complementary ones were next to each other and opposing ones were on opposite sides of the crater. The design was amazing. The Aelshir called it a *keunosol*, a six-knot. The arrangements of the six elemental foci, bound and connected by the shape of the volcanic cone that housed the city, served as a natural magic amphitheater, gathering and focusing magical energy. Where necessary, they had even shaped the stone by hand to create just the right focal energy. It was why Reiksciel's mental presence had increased so dramatically when they entered the city. Falana thought she could feel the rhythm of the Song more clearly as well.

But she had come across something else that suggested that the “no-element” perhaps wasn’t so esoteric after all. She sat down and opened the cover, smoothing out the thin parchment of the first page. She read the first line of the near-elven.

*It has been debated whether the element of no-element exists.* She knew that already and flipped ahead, skimming. There—*dauth aemetta*. Death of emptiness.

*The only true evidence of no-element are the dauth aemetta. Whether they live in a realm whose nature they reflect or are aberrations among the six real elements is uncertain. And no matter what is believed about the plane of no element, the presence of the dauth aemetta and their effect on the world of the real elements is unquestionable. They are anathema to life... to existence... to creation. They are sentient holes in this world. They devour it. They destroy it, giving nothing back.*

Falana leaned back, frowning. The first reference she had found to the dauth aemetta was in the journal belonging to the elemental guardian named Cari. The Aelshir were led by Marah Scalhs, a sort of guardian warrior-priest—six of them, each with power aligning with one of the six elements and the ability to gate through their elemental plane. Cari had been the guardian of the winds, and Reiksciel’s former owner. The only other Marah Scalhs mentioned in her journal were Seraf, Marah Scalh of fire and someone for whom Cari had some affection, and Arian, Marah Scalh of metal and a bit of a passive rival of Seraf’s.

Before coming to E’atara, the Aelshir had been slaves of a people called the Cu’Ri. The Cu’Ri had used the Marah Scalhs to create gates that allowed them to attack their enemies. When the Aelshir had had enough, the Marah Scalhs had opened a gate into a place that had destroyed the bulk of the Cu’Ri army, and then fled with their people. The dauth aemetta had been unleashed by the Cu’Ri to take revenge on their former slaves—exactly, how, Falana didn’t know, but the dauth aemetta had to be the pack of shadows that had destroyed the city. That they might have to be dealt with in order to restore the fire gate was a grave concern. How does one fight something that is nothing?

She scanned the rest of the book, looking for something about how to combat the dauth aemetta.

*The planes are not separate entities, whole unto themselves. They interweave, as do the warp and weft of good cloth. People separate out the obvious components for ease of understanding, but in doing so, create an incomplete picture, instead showing pieces absent of the connections. But each is part of the others and contains them within it. By mastering his element, the Marah Scalh masters all the elements. By understanding how his element fits into the weave, he understands all elements. To combat the dauth aemetta, it must be understood how no-element fits into the whole. It is to this that we must devote ourselves.* There the text ended.

Falana dropped the book on the table. Great. The Aelshir didn’t know either. Now what? She stretched. Her foot bumped against something. She looked under the table. On the floor lay a small book. That’s odd, she thought. All of them treated these books with great respect. Some were very old. She bent down and picked it up. *Ylle Hila Rakenta... The Nature of Gates...* must be one of Rinka’s, or Makei’s. She couldn’t imagine either just leaving it, or not noticing they had dropped it.

The corners of several pages were folded over. Falana flipped to the first, worry creeping in. Again, none of them would fold the corners of a page, especially not on books such as these—not even Makei. She turned her attention to the heading on the marked page:

—*Elemental Paths*—

*Before a gate can be opened, a Marah Scalh must shape the path between portal stones. Once the way has been walked, formed, and warded by a Marah Scalh, the gates can be used by others as a bridge across that elemental plane...* That’s right... Falana remembered something about that. The Marah Scalhs could actually

walk their elemental plane. Not only that, they could also forge a path that others could walk. The gates simply shortened the paths. She turned to the next fold:

—*Anchors*—

*Each end of the gate must be anchored or the traveler will enter only to find himself lost in the plane it the gate's path goes through. For those not conditioned to certain elements, the experience could be fatal.* The chapter went on to detail the process of creating anchors and binding them to the endpoint and the path. It also spelled out the danger to E'atara they had already discovered. A broken path could cause the element of a plane to backwash through the gate. The fire gate was eroding, threatening to unleash the plane of fire in E'atara. Falana glanced over the chapter and turned to the last fold:

—*Free Thresholds*—

This was new.

*Free thresholds are paths torn from an anchor. Most commonly, this is caused by improper anchoring or the destruction of a gate. Less commonly, it is caused by a severing of the path through the elemental plane created by the Marab Scalb. Free thresholds should be reanchored as soon as discovered, for, as previously discussed, they present a grave risk to travelers and anchored ends of a gate. The free threshold, however, can be redirected to any point in space, perhaps in time—*

Falana felt a chill as she read three words scrawled in the margin:

*Stop*

*Makei.*

*Hal'lee*

Suddenly, Falana understood Makei's desire to accompany them on this expedition. With Rinka's knowledge of gates and his understanding of magic, he hoped to manipulate one of the gates to take revenge on Hal'lee, or change history by killing her. Now, it appeared that he might actually be able to bend a free threshold to any place, any time—only the gate most suited to his needs was the fire gate... which was leaking fire... and might be holding the dauth aemetta at bay.

Rinka had spent a lot of time at the fire gate, working on the engravings, trying to reinforce it... No! Makei was using her to reconstruct the gate on this side. He was going to try to open it. The stone Rinka had... it must be a fire opal, a keystone—

Falana bolted around the table and out the door. The catacombs flashed by, grey stone and black shadow. She opened her mind. *Reiksciel!* Nothing. *Damn it! Reiksciel!* A flash of sky and stone spires—the Spires of the Wind in the Air Quarter. Falana cast out with her mind, sending an image of Reiksciel swooping down and grabbing up Rinka/Makei. Nothing happened. Was she a receiver only? It wasn't fair. She screamed inside. Reiksciel answered with shriek that sent Falana tumbling to the floor. She released the link and scrambled to her feet. It worked! He understood! She started running again.

Up through the twisting passages she ran. She darted out through the gatehouse in time to see Reiksciel plummet to the ground, wrapped in a web of magic. "No!" she screamed. "Makei! No!" She sprinted down the hill toward the citadel and its ring of gates.

Rinka-Makei stood before the fire gate, arms raised, chanting. The original shape of the gate etched into the stone had been restored, shapes of flames and dragons winding around the portal stone. A fire opal had been set in the receptacle above the portal stone. It glowed with multihued light. The gate had been keyed. But Makei had not yet anointed it with fire, a required element of opening the gate. Falana breathed a little easier and slowed. She wasn't even sure a normal fire would open the gate, especially not if it were magically sealed as they suspected.

But as she drew closer, she noticed additional ‘artwork’ on the stone paving in front of the gate—a circle scribed ‘round with runes.

“What’s happening?”

Falana turned toward the voice. Ellam stood just behind her. He must have seen Reiksciel go down as well. “I’m not sure,” she answered. “Makei’s trying to open the fire gate.” She pointed to the circle. “But he’s also summoning something. I can’t figure out why.”

Just then, Galatyne and Kiriannin—actually, Beorhtric in Kiriannin’s body... no, back in his own body—ran into the citadel from the other end. Blue flames swathed Galatyne’s arms. At the same time, a dark form began to materialize in Makei’s circle.

Falana suddenly understood. Makei had found a source of magical fire to try on the gate. “No!” she yelled. “Galatyne! Don’t!”

Blue fire arced out from the paladin’s hands and towards the thing Makei had summoned. Falana stepped outside conscious action and the world slowed. She hurled herself across the space between her and Galatyne faster than most eyes could see, slamming into him and knocking him to the stone. The paladin-fire arced wide of Makei’s circle and splashed harmlessly along the wall next to the portal stone.

Rinka-Makei screamed and whirled toward where Falana struggled. “Nooo!” Rinka cried. “Kill it!”

Falana grabbed for Galatyne as he heaved her up and rolled out from under her. He came to his feet in a crouch, attention back on the creature coalescing in the circle. Falana shoved him before he could unleash another bolt of fire. “Galatyne! Stop!” she said. “Makei has keyed the gate. If you use your fire near it, it will open, and we might all die.”

Galatyne turned toward her, brows drawn down as he weighed the risks.

“Not just us,” Falana added. “Everyone. Everywhere. We have to stop Makei from opening that gate.”

The fire around Galatyne’s hands flickered and died, though his gaze returned to the circle. “So how do we stop Makei without hurting Rinka?”

Beorhtric strode toward the fire gate and a seething Rinka-Makei. “I might have an idea.”

Falana waited with Galatyne to see what Beorhtric had planned. Rinka raised her hands, and two darts of white light streaked toward Beorhtric in twirling arcs. Beorhtric paused, seeming to concentrate for a moment. The darts struck his chest, and two flowers, fell to the ground. Beorhtric resumed his advance. Makei continued to hurl spells at him from Rinka’s body. A whirling maelstrom of conjured blades became a small cloud of butterflies that swirled around Beorhtric then flew off over the citadel wall... Thorned vines twined up his legs, engulfing his entire body, then suddenly turned to gossamer webs that he brushed aside.

“What’s Kiriannin doing?” Galatyne asked.

“Beorhtric,” Falana answered, watching his advance, “though I’m not exactly sure what he’s doing,” or, she thought, what he could do to Makei that wouldn’t hurt Rinka. Rinka’s eyes, however, were wide with fear and Makei’s spells were coming faster, but less focused—almost desperate seeming. Suddenly, Rinka began to claw at her the air, as if trying to climb out of something. It seem that Beorhtric had finally launched an attack of his own.

He rushed across the final yards separating them. Rinka collapsed on the stone paving, writhing as if caught in a net. Abruptly, she went still. Beorhtric propped her up against the stone wall away from the gate. She sat quietly, appearing for all intents and purposes to be merely asleep.

Beorhtric left her and walked back toward Falana. He hadn’t escaped his battle with Makei totally unscathed. A cut ran from just under his eye to his ear. It looked shallow, but bled profusely.

His legs and arms bled from numerous small punctures as well. He dabbed at the cut on his cheek with a handkerchief. “Just an annoyance,” he said, apparently noting the concerned looks. “But those vines really smarted.”

“What exactly did you do?” Falana asked.

“Anything Makei threw at me was essentially a magical construct. It didn’t exist until the magic brought it into existence, gave it substance and an identity, so to speak. I simply gave it a new identity, a new name.”

Falana arched an eyebrow. “Simply?”

“Well, it isn’t too hard to do if the magic can be reshaped soon after its casting. Its form is still malleable. I... we then did the same thing to Rinka—enforced the separateness of her and Makei’s beings. Its all about identities and naming. I wasn’t able to drive Makei out, though. He retreated too far inside for me to do that without harming Rinka. But her own self should be reasserting itself any minute now.

“When Makei realized what I was doing, he tried to turn the tables on me. He tried to drive me out of this body.” Beorhtric grinned. “He apparently forgot who it really belongs to. It’s much harder to actually change the truth of someone’s being than it is to alter the illusions they identify themselves with.”

“This is all very interesting,” Galatyne said, “but we still need to do something about that.” He nodded toward the creature Makei had summoned, glowering from within its confining circle. “Can we shut the gate down so I can deal with it?”

Falana considered their options. They needed to either find another way to kill what Makei had summoned or remove the gate’s keystone which was behind the protective circle. Unless... “Beorhtric, can you send our guest back?”

Beorhtric pursed his lips and frowned. “I’m not sure, but it’s well warded, so we need not rush—”

A loud whoosh, as of the rush of wind through a narrow opening, filled the street. The demon shrieked and clawed at the protective circle, then erupted in a shower of black ichor and fragments of flesh and bone as a depthless blackness filled the circle.

Falana’s fingers went cold as she reached for her sword, knowing that if the circle didn’t contain it, steel wouldn’t help them. She had seen this before, in the visions sent by Reiksciel. “Dauth aemetta,” she whispered.

The dauth aemetta shaped itself to the circle, a column of black nothing. Then, with a howling roar, it tore through the warding circle as if it wasn’t there. They made it not there, Falana supposed.

“Now can I kill it?” Galatyne asked.

“Yes,” Falana said, drawing her sword and darting away to give them both room. “Please.”

Blue fire flared out and into the roiling shadow. They didn’t slow. They didn’t even appear to notice it. Galatyne turned and ran. Ellam darted in and slashed the blackness with his sword. The blade dissolved as it passed through, and Ellam flung the hilt to the ground as he whirled away. Beorhtric took his place, arms raised, chanting. Arcs of light crackled out from his fingers, weaving a glowing web before the rampaging shadows. Where they touched it, the glowing strands dissolved away.

Then the dauth aemetta were past Beorhtric in their pursuit of Galatyne. When they were almost upon him, Galatyne turned back and threw up a shield of bluish-white light. The dauth aemetta paused, towering over the paladin. Tendrils of darkness lashed out against the light, which flickered with each strike, but held.

Falana watched, feeling helpless, but she found a glimmer of hope. If the paladin fire didn't harm it, why did the light shield stop it? She admittedly knew very little of what paladins did, but... Curious, she reached out with the Song as the elven Singers had taught her. She followed its thread around the dauth aemetta and Galatyne. Her doubt-tempered hope turned to surprise.

It was a stalemate, a battle of polar opposites. The dauth aemetta were identifiable only by their total absence of Song. It did not touch them. They were, as the book had said, a hole in the fabric of existence. In contrast, the light around Galatyne was a source of Song. She had never seen one before. The light was pure creative energy, the force of Lyfaye, perhaps, and the dauth aemetta could not destroy it fast enough to maintain their momentum. The source might be infinite, but the channeling of that force was tiring Galatyne. Though the light held, it grew dimmer with each passing second. The change would not be noticeable to the eye, but the weakening flow of Song could not be mistaken. Eventually he would falter, or the dauth aemetta would simply turn aside and seek other prey.

How did one destroy something that wasn't there? A hole in creation. The book had called them a hole in creation. One didn't destroy a hole... one filled it! Falana raised her voice and followed a thread of the Song to where it had been severed at the edge of the dauth aemetta. She held the thread, fed it, strengthened it, then reached across the blackness and found its continuance. With her voice she added to them, drawing in part from the light energy around Galatyne. She knew it might weaken him further, but it was their only chance. He had to hold. She focused, not on the nothing of the dauth aemetta, but on the energy of the Song... And then the threads joined.

At the edge of her consciousness, Falana felt the dauth aemetta shift, seeking out what might be its first potential threat. She pushed more power into her voice, drawing threads of the Song together through the emptiness. She was aware of the dauth aemetta moving toward her, and Galatyne trying to stay between them. Just a little more time....

With a flash, the dauth aemetta broke off from the paladin and surged around him. Blackness rushed at her, tentacles flailing out. She allowed the fear to wash around her and focused on weaving Song. A shadow brushed her arm, and icy daggers twined up it and into her chest. She struggled not to scream, not to break the Song. She held the melody, rapidly knitting threads as the blackness gathered before her. With a howl it rolled over her and bore her to the ground. She did scream then, losing the Song as she hit the stone. Claws raked her shoulder and a great weight crushed the air out of her lungs, choking off her scream. She couldn't breathe. It was hot... dark....

Then the weight lifted and air rushed into her lungs. She gulped it in. Light. There was light again, even if everything was blurry. Hands gently raised her head. The blurs took shape. Galatyne, Ellam, and Beorhtric knelt over her.

"What exactly did you do?" Beorhtric asked.

"I'm not sure," she answered. "I tried to make something, to fill up the hole."

"You made a wolf," Beorhtric said.

"The size of a horse," Ellam added.

"Why didn't you make something like Kiri—Beorhtric's butterflies?" Galatyne asked.

Falana tried to shrug, but it hurt too much. "It reminded me of a pack of wolves. I didn't have time to really think about it." She glanced beside her. A huge black, furred mass lay beside her with four arrows in its skull. The fletchings were Ellam's.

"You need to think happier thoughts, Falastra," Ellam said, pointing a finger at her. "Never know when you might need one."

Falana struggled to her elbows. "I—" Pain lanced through her chest, and she sucked in a breath. She had broken a rib... or two or three. "I happen to like wolves... usually."

The odor of something burning wafted on the air. Falana looked around for the source.

“There,” said Ellam, pointing toward the fire gate. The portal stone gave off a faint red glow, but heat shimmers in the air in front of it spoke to the danger lying just behind.

“The gate is decaying faster,” Falana said. “The dauth aemetta must have brushed it. If we don’t do something soon, the fire will flood E’atara.

“Any ideas?” Ellam asked, no hint of worry in his voice or demeanor. Nothing ever seemed to phase him. Always on task, but never attached to the results.

“I might have a few,” Falana answered. She put a hand to her head, suddenly feeling dizzy. “Okay... maybe one, but we need Rinka...” everything started to look fuzzy again... “and I think I might need Galatyne’s help...” Darkness took her.

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Falana stood back and to the side of the fire gate, Galatyne beside her. Stars shone in the small circle of sky overhead. The rest of the city was dark. Only the red-orange glow of the fire gate’s portal stone illuminated the citadel roadway. She reached out with her voice and felt the melody of the Marj Ayunn and the elemental magics that filled her quarters. Falana felt much better after Galatyne’s ministrations but could have used a good night’s sleep before attempting this. None of them thought the portal stone would hold that long, though; so, after only two hours rest, they had decided to try.

Once the gate was opened, Rinka would keep it that way. The onslaught of fire from the other side continued to erode both its physical and magical properties and it might not stay open on its own. Rinka had speculated that if the gate collapsed, it might solve their problem. But she had also acknowledged that an uncontrolled collapse that might prevent travel could also leave tiny perforations that fire could leak through, or it could explode and tear a hole between E’atara and the fire plane.

Beorhtric, had studied the texts on the interaction of the elements and thought he knew enough of air to contain the fire that would leak through the gate while Falana worked. All of their magics should be enhanced by the kuusol of the city. It should work. Should.

“Are you ready?” Galatyne asked.

Already deep in the Song, Falana only nodded. She felt more than saw the paladin fire snake out and touch the portal stone, activating the gate. Elemental fire rushed out, filling the citadel with light and heat. She felt Beorhtric withdraw the air around the gate, seeking to quench the flames, but it didn’t work. She should have guessed. Elemental fire would be different from normal fire. It burned without fuel to consume and so did not need air in the same way a camp fire did. She was about to yell for Rinka to close the gate if she could, when the flow of fire changed. The flames dimmed and drew back toward the gate. Beorhtric was manipulating the air in a more subtle way. She realized then that as elemental fire and normal fire are different, so too might elemental air and normal air be different. He had found a way to change the elemental air that wove through all the other elements and thereby control the fire—just as *The Nature of Gates* had said. The song echoed the drain on him, though. The already tenuous hold Beorhtric held on the body he had once departed was weakening as he wove his non-corporeal Self into the fabric of air. There would be a price this. Falana knew she had to work fast to minimize it.

Falana followed the flow of the Song into the gate and the fire, but she quickly lost its thread. In the plane of fire, the music was more chaotic. It was raw. Even the path made by the Marah

Scalh was rough-hewn and hard to follow. She had little experience with such rawness of Song, and she was tired. “I can’t follow it... the fire... too confusing.”

“Falastra. Follow me.”

Suddenly, there was order within the fire. Order shaped like... Ellam! Fire could not harm him. She traced the song of his ordered being as he negotiated the path in the fire.

*Here, his voice came back along the Song to her. It is broken here.*

Falana focused her efforts on the path before Ellam and felt the ragged gash the leaked fire. The way had been severed, like so many of the physical structures in the city. It bore the mark of the dauth aemetta. They had indeed followed someone. As she had done with the dauth aemetta, she began to reweave the structure of being; only here, she followed the pattern of the path. It was much harder than with the dauth aemetta. She could not create whatever she wanted. She had to follow exactly the established harmony... exactly—and those were coarsely stung together and hard to duplicate. But she completed it and they moved on to the next break... and the next.

After what seemed like hours of patching tears in the path, they found themselves before a gate. The last hole patched, and the flow of fire stopped, Falana realized then that the gate would naturally lead to the last place it had last been keyed to. She couldn’t help but wonder if this was where some of the people who had fled Marj Ayunn had gone.

She touched the gate with the Song, but drew back instantly. It opened onto the Ashtasohillai, the demon grounds. Suddenly, everything made an unfortunate kind of sense. The dauth aemetta had come through Makei’s circle. Seraf, the Marah Scalh of fire must have led them on a chase through the plane of fire, a ground he could manipulate in his favor, weaving a path as he went. Unable to stop them, he opened a gate into the demon grounds. If he wasn’t taken by the dauth aemetta, he likely died there, or worse, had been kept alive in endless suffering by its denizens. What if languished there still? It was, after all, a place of unnatural existence—

*Falastra...*

Ellam’s urging pulled her back. He likely sensed the nature of the portal, and possibly her intent as well. None of them were strong enough for such an encounter. It might even be just a one-way portal. Regardless, such a gate should not be left connected to E’atara. *May your death have been swift, Marah Scalb,* she offered, then unraveled the anchor’s song.

Back at the E’ataran end, as Falana unraveled the other anchor, she tried not to think of all the work that had gone into repairing the path only to destroy it. But at least she understood something of the choices made by those who had inhabited Marj Ayunn. By releasing both anchors, the path would cease to exist. A new location would have to be keyed for the gate to open.

Falana wove strengthening magic into the main gate, then released the Song. She opened her eyes to a pale dawn. Around her, stood the others—actually, only Galatyne, Rinka, and Ellam. They all seemed exhausted. Beorhtric lay on the stone a few yards away. “Is Beorhtric—”

“He’s fine, physically,” Galatyne said. “Whatever he was doing pushed him past his limits. After the gate closed, he collapsed. He started asking where he was and who we were, then passed out. I think he just needs rest, but we should be prepared for him waking up a bit confused, I think.”

Falana nodded, then looked over to the fire gate. It was cool stone once more.

“It’s a bit damaged,” Rinka said, “but I think it can be repaired with some work.” She paused and cocked her head to one side, as if listening to something. “Makei says it can definitely be repaired... and he’s sorry for the trouble he caused.”

“He’s back?” Falana asked.

“Only sort of. He’s saying farewell. His need for vengeance was a small seed in the back of his mind. It grew and came to hold him here. He’s leaving this existence for good, but... Wait... no, I don’t want— Darn him!” She sighed.

Falana frowned. “What now?”

Rinka crossed her arms and stuck out her lower lip. “He left me a gift. A bit of magic. I was relieved to be getting rid of the magic I had! I don’t need more!”

Falana heard their continuing discussion only as a distant murmur. She was so very tired, but something yet tugged at her. A hand rested on her shoulder. “Are you alright?” Galatyne asked.

“There’s something I need to do,” Falana said.

“Do you need company?”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry, something just got me thinking... I’ll be back in a little while.” She walked around the citadel until she found the wind gate. Reiksciel’s Marah Scalh would have taken this gate. It should still lead to wherever she had gone. She keyed the portal and stepped through.

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A fresh wind carrying the scent of the sea breathed across Falana’s face. She lay back against the stone and looked up at white clouds drifting across a blue sky. Her fingers found the weathered engraving in the slab of rock she lay on. She had visited this place many times on her patrols around the elven lands. Only now did she see it for what it was—a grave marker and a portal stone. Below, the forests of her former home stretched out from the base of the cliff and along the sea.

She missed home. It was amazing how nothing turned out like you expected. One day, you’re riding the borders of your home, protecting it and proudly wearing the colors of the home guard. The next, your home is gone, you’re thousands of miles away across the ocean, and fighting for hire and the causes of others. What might have happened had the Aelshir never fled E’atara. What if she had never fled Amarlann or found Marj Ayunn...

Falana sat up, possibility pricking at her. A new path had just opened before her. Whether or not her people were directly related to the Aelshir, they had certainly influenced one another. In some way they were kindred. Marj Ayunn could be home to them again, hidden away and warded from those such as the Cu’Ri and the Lyfeians. The magic could not be stamped out. Indeed, the kuusol would amplify the magic of the Singers. She smiled. When seeds are scattered to the wind, a few will ultimately take root. Perhaps it was time for her to choose her ground. Perhaps others had as well. They might even be found and joined via the gates.

But a new home would require a new name—one that kept the memory of her first guardians but would still speak to the new. Falana remembered the first thing that had struck her on entering the city. *Lanthir-Lamath*... Waterfall of Echoing Voices. She nodded. That should do quite nicely. A new strain will soon be heard in the world.