

Soul Intent

Galatyne Knightwyng

For some people, soul searching involves a quiet, introspective moment. For Clianna, the search for her soul will lead her and her friends into a darkness greater than any of them could ever have imagined...

I

Clianna ducked down beside Kyara as another black, winged horror dove, jaws snapping in the air where she had stood a moment before. Silver flashed over her head, and Fiona's axe cracked into its skull, eliciting a screech of pain that was answered with a dwarven curse. Clianna wasn't sure which drove it off. As twenty feet of black reptilian muscle banked away, Kyara rose and loosed two shafts into its back before it vanished into the darkness with a twitch of its barbed tail. The trio gathered themselves and ran to catch up to the blue flares ahead. Clianna was tired of the running.

Most of their journey through the Shadowlands had been uneventful, if tense. In the beginning, Rinka Tur had been able to lead them to safe gates where they could rest outside the eerie darkness. But they had long ago left behind the last marker, leaving Rinka to find her way through unknown territory. Clianna knew how much this put the Shadowrunner on edge, though she never let it show. Falana's connection to the song-thread of the Clianna's imprisoned faerie-spirit told them in which direction her spirit lay, but it was Rinka who had unerringly led the party deeper into the blackness of the Shadowlands—gate by gate.

Often they had found themselves torn between stepping through an unknown gate or seeking a hiding place to sleep. They'd done both. But for the last two days, there had been no gates, no hiding places, and little rest. The denizens of the Shadowlands had caught their scent and now hunted them relentlessly. The little rest they had came at the expense of Galatyne or Khallil maintaining a circle of protection with no respite for themselves.

At last, Rinka had found what she thought was a gate to the Under Planes, and it was not a welcoming sight. Where most gates glowed white, this one scowled a deep red. Up ahead Clianna could see blue flashes where Galatyne and Khallil, led by Rinka, fought to clear the way to the Gate. Behind her, fire streaked from Loquitor's bow. Brigitta had finally found a way to make use of her uncontrolled fire magic. She set each shaft aflame as it left the string. When it found its mark in the swarm of shadows, she released the fire, and a creature erupted in flames. Falana darted around them, driving off any that avoided the flaming shafts. They had thick hides, but they weren't impenetrable, and steel driven by a will to live seemed able to do them grievous harm.

Unfortunately, the magic and flashes of light, while potent weapons, also brought more creatures out of the dark. They fed on magical energy, though fire generated through it was even more deadly than the steel. Rinka had cautioned against light, but they had finally found themselves with little choice but to use the magical fire or become a midnight snack, and it was always midnight in this place.

"Hurry!" Rinka called from the glowing gate.

Galatyne and Khallil had already disappeared, no doubt to make sure something worse wasn't waiting on the other side.

As they ran for the dubious safety of the Under Planes, something struck Clianna, knocking her to the ground and raking fire up her back. A dark shadow rushed past. Clianna tried to rise, but her arms and legs wouldn't move. Falana and Fiona appeared beside her, lifting her up.

"Go!" Loquitor yelled, and ducked as another shadow darted overhead. He rose and sent three fiery shafts into the darkness after it. Blue fire followed it, and Clianna managed to raise her head enough to see Galatyne framed in the red glow of the gate. Everything turned fuzzy. Maybe if she just closed her eyes for a moment. Clianna's eyes drifted shut, and she felt herself floating.

II

She lay on her side.... The heat was oppressive.... Clianna opened her eyes, but had to squeeze them shut again against the harsh glare. She held a hand before them and tried again. Peeking out between her fingers, she saw only red rock and blowing red dust. Above her flapped an edge of canvas. She rolled onto her back and looked around. She was under a low lean-to made from their tents. Galatyne slept in the meager shade beside her. For a moment, she thought perhaps they had returned to E'atara in the middle of Red Desert, but no... the sky was wrong. It was orange shot through with yellow. And there was no sun. The brightness seemed to come from everywhere. The canvas barely provided any relief from the glare—and heat.

Clianna crawled out from under the lean-to and climbed to her feet. Her back hurt a little when she stretched, and her head ached, but otherwise she felt strong, though thirsty... very thirsty. In any case, no pain compared to the emptiness that gnawed inside her. Ever since her spirit-essence had been taken by that demon at the Moonlit Mug, that emptiness had been growing, expanding. She had little doubt that, eventually, it would simply consume her and she would cease to exist. Or perhaps this was just what being human was like and was a taste of the rest of her life.

She didn't want to think about that. Granted, she hadn't always been faerie, but the transformation had seemed right. It had freed something inside her. She had become a life force. It was an understanding she had only recently come to appreciate in her near helplessness. She would not have made it two steps on this path without her friends. She did not want to go back to being just human.

She found a water skin hanging on one of the sticks holding up the canvas. No, it wasn't a stick. Clianna leaned closer. Too smooth and straight. She scratched it and jerked her hand back. It was a bone—a single bone about three feet long. She wrinkled her nose in distaste and carefully lifted the water skin off the knobby end. She uncorked it and took a long drink... and almost spit the water back out, it was so hot. But she forced herself to swallow it and drink more. Her headache immediately began to fade. She replaced the cork, making sure it was tight. They had refilled the skins not too long ago, but there was no telling when they would next find drinkable water. She dropped the skin back on its grisly hanger, snatching her hand back in case the bone thought to leap out and grab her, and looked around for the rest of her friends.

As far as she could see, there was nothing but flat red rock and hard-packed dust, almost rock itself. She turned around. Khallil, Kyara, and Brigitta stood with their backs to her, hands above their eyes, peering out into the wasteland. Beyond them, far out into the waste, a massive column of black clouds rose from the ground high into the sky. Now and then, lightning flickered within. Only when Clianna approached her companions did she notice that they stood at the edge of a low plateau with a sharp drop before them. Below, the wasteland continued on endlessly, but the red was spotted with white.

"What is that?" Clianna asked, joining her friends in studying the angry cloud wall.

“A demon holt,” Khallil answered. “We think. It’s not moving in any case, and there’s another one in the distance behind us and one off to the left... but farther.”

Clianna squinted out into the glare behind them. “I can’t see anything.”

“It’s there,” Khallil answered. “Trust me.” He tapped a finger next to one eye.

Clianna sometimes forgot how much better elven eyesight was, even in this bright light.

Kyara nodded agreement. “It is. I can see them too, but the others are sort of pale greenish.”

“Galatyne sensed a concentrated darkness in each of those directions too,” Khallil continued. “Near as we can tell, this wasteland makes up the Under Plane and various, um... beings... have carved out havens in it. The space in between seems to serve as a buffer... and a battleground.”

“Battleground?” Clianna asked.

Khallil pointed out into the red waste below the plateau. “See those white patches?”

Clianna nodded.

“Bones.”

Clianna’s face wrinkled and she shivered. “And we have to go through there?”

“It’s between us and your spirit,” Kyara said, “and it’s not likely to be the worst of it.” She pointed to the seething, black cloud mass. “Falana said your spirit is in there. How are you feeling anyway?”

“Much better,” Clianna stretched. “Did Galatyne—”

Kyara nodded. “You were hurt pretty bad—the barbs on those things’ tails were poisoned. Galatyne healed you, but it took a lot out of him. You’ve both been sleeping for some hours.”

Khallil turned and looked off to his right. “Here come the others.”

Again, Clianna peered out into the brightness but could see nothing. Then, gradually, Loquitor, Falana, Fiona, and Rinka materialized out of the glare, shuffling along the edge of the plateau.

“There’s a way down a little ways to the... that way,” Loquitor waved his hand behind them.

“Looks to be a pile of rubble blasted out the side of the plateau,” Fiona said.

Khallil frowned. “Blasted?”

“Well,” Fiona wiped a hand across her brow and took a drink from her water skin, grimacing—most likely at both the water and the fact that it was hot, “it’s not a natural rock fall, and there were scorch marks on the rocks. We didn’t go down. Too much of a climb to make more than once in this heat.”

“How’s Galatyne?” Falana asked. Even she looked worn.

Khallil nodded back toward the canvas shelter. “Still resting. Though we should wake him now that Clianna is up. It will do us no good to stay here.”

“Maybe we should wait for nightfall,” Loquitor said. “It might be cooler traveling.”

Khallil shook his head and turned toward the canvas shelter. “I don’t think night comes in this place. And I wouldn’t want to see it if it did.”

III

Clianna leaned back and shaded her eyes with her hand as she peered up at the wall of black clouds. It was hard to believe it was still a quarter mile away. It towered out of sight and stretched for miles to either side. The immensity of the wall and the flatness of the wasteland made it very hard to judge distance. They had been walking for nearly two days, and for at least half of that, it had seemed as though she should be able to simply reach out and touch it.

Fortunately, nothing lived in this barren waste, though it was obviously traversed from time to time. The white patches were indeed bones, thousands of them—many non-human—strewn across

the red rock. They had stopped once to sleep, spreading their canvas tents over the wind-scoured ribcage of some great beast in a meager attempt to some shelter against the never-darkening sky. The only way to make any real shade was to bring the edges of the canvas almost to the ground, but then the heat that built up inside was almost unbearable. They had settled for a meager dimming of the glare and a few uncomfortable hours rest before trudging on.

It all made Clianna realize just how much of her existence had been linked to the magic of life. Not only had she been less susceptible to the elements, but she would also have been able to bring relief to her friends with a bubbling pool of water and perhaps something green to break up the lifeless red rock. She looked out through the shimmering heat haze. Perhaps she would have put the pool over there... with some willow trees around it for shade, and a soft carpet of moss beneath... She shook her head. Those thoughts only made her miss her faerie gift all the more. She needed to learn to accept life like this, just in case. She sighed.

“Everything alright?” Galatyne asked. Fiona trudged along on her other side, while Khallil, Falana, and Loquitor ranged out in front. Not that there was much to see, but elven eyes could penetrate the heat shimmer better, and any warning was good.

“Not really,” Clianna answered, not wanting to become mired in the depths of her heartache again. But she had learned paladins could be... tenacious. She sought to change the subject. “Ummm... So how is this place connected to E’atara?”

Galatyne shook his head. “I’ve been thinking about that, and I’m not entirely sure... but I don’t know that this place is entirely separate from it.”

Fiona quirked an eyebrow. “Come again? You do remember the gates, right? Or has the heat baked the sense out of you?”

Clianna was a bit surprised herself. She hadn’t really meant it as a serious question.

Galatyne shook his head. “Not quite yet... I hope. The world we see in E’atara is a shadow of the truth. It is the physical with much of the magic, the spirit, walled off from it. I think we are somewhere on the other side—where the physical exists as a manipulation of the spirit, where those with the most power, the most control over the magic, shape reality. I also think that there may be different levels of existence within the realm of spirit and they are all connected through the physical world, perhaps some are directly linked. Rinka could confirm this, but I would have to guess that the Shadowlands run between the realm of the physical and the spiritual as well as between different physical realms.

“It’s my thought that the faerie folk and their realms are strongly linked to, if not mostly within, one or more of the spiritual planes. This is another, only here, the constant war over spiritual territory has left a wasteland between zones of influence—regions no one, or no thing, can shape. It’s like...”

Galatyne trailed off as something ahead caught his attention. Clianna looked up. A hot wind had risen up, blowing red dust toward them from the cloud wall. Dark clouds boiled at the edge and the lightning flashes seemed to gather directly before them. A pulse of red flared the blackness.

“Down!” Galatyne called.

Clianna and Fiona both ducked as a bolt of red lightning flashed out, straight toward the paladin. Galatyne raised a hand swathed in blue fire. The lightning struck his upraised hand and arced down. Blue fire flashed around his body just ahead of the red energy as it crackled to the ground where it left a black scorch mark on the red rock.

Khallil, Loquitor, and Falana trotted back to where the others were. “What was that?” Loquitor asked.

“Well...” Galatyne said, “We didn’t really think we could sneak up on it. I’d say our presence has been noted. And I think we have been measured.” He took a step forward. Another bolt of red lightning arced out and struck him. Again, his blue fire shielded him, but he stumbled and fell to his knees.

“Actually,” Fiona commented, “I think it was just you who were measured... and I don’t think you are welcome.” She strode forward to stand beside Khallil. No fiery objection was forthcoming.

Galatyne frowned. “You might be right,” he said. “Give me a moment.” He knelt on the hot rock and closed his eyes. After several minutes, he stood and strode forward. The clouds remained peaceful and the angry boiling dissipated.

“What did you do?” Clianna asked.

“I closed the door on my spirit and warded it. The fire is still there, but I will not be able to call it forth readily. Hopefully, our host will believe that I was either destroyed or simply turned back.”

“No paladin magic?” Fiona asked. “I don’t know if I like that.”

“I could wait out here...” Galatyne gestured to the expanse of red dust.

Fiona shook her head. “I like that even less.”

At the edge of the cloud wall, Khallil reached out a hand and waved it inside. “At least it’s cool,” he said. “Stay close.” He stepped into the darkness. One by one, the others followed.

IV

Clianna reached out and grabbed onto the hem of Kyara’s tunic as she neared the black wall. She hated being scared like this, but she couldn’t help it. If something went wrong, she’d be stuck in this place, in this form, with no magic. She wasn’t even sure she was immortal anymore. For a moment, she felt guilty; none of her friends was immortal and they were risking their lives to help her. Then the shadowy darkness enveloped her.

The inside of the cloud was what she’d expected, cool, almost cold, and wet. She was a bit surprised when water swirled around her ankles, but as long as it didn’t get deeper, she wasn’t worried. Water was at least something familiar to her, something reminiscent of her former nature. It would have been a true comfort and welcome relief from the heat of the wasteland had it not been for the cloying feel of evil all around. It hung in the mist and clung to her like heavy cobwebs. Far above, thunder growled, low and ominous.

And they weren’t alone. Things moved in the shadows, and in the occasional lightning flash, she could see shadows gliding overhead. Now and then, it looked as if something was standing off to one side or the other, not moving, just watching. Once, something splashed into the water next to her and scurried off into the darkness before she could see what it was. She tightened her grip on Kyara’s tunic and moved a little closer.

Abruptly, Clianna emerged from the darkness into muted light. She turned around to see Fiona step out of a solid looking rock wall, followed by Rinka and Brigitta. Clianna looked up. The rock face towered above them, disappearing into leaden clouds. To either side, it stretched off out of sight.

“Well,” Fiona said, rapping her fist against the rock, “we won’t be going back that way.”

Suddenly, Brigitta shrieked, throwing her pack to the ground. A black, spidery looking creature twice the size of her hand leapt from the top of the pack to the wall and melted into the stone. Everyone stepped back from the rock.

“Apparently some things are granted passage,” Khallil said. “But I think Fiona is right. *We* will not be returning that way.”

Before them stretched a great plain, lush and green. In the distance, Clianna could just make out the darker green blush of a forest. Out of the trees, rose the steep, rocky spire of a single mountain, its top lost in the low clouds. The scene was not at all what she'd expected in a demon's home.

"We could make the forest by nightfall," Khallil announced, "if indeed the days pass in here, but in any case, we need to rest, and I'd like to put some distance between us and this boundary. If things go in, things can come out."

Everyone nodded their assent, hitched up their packs, and set off.

It was almost a leisurely walk, but the distinct lack of life and the dark, ominous sky created a surreal air that reminded everyone of their perilous situation. As they drew closer to the mountain, Clianna could see that the slopes were covered with buildings—almost as grey and forbidding as the sky.

It also became apparent that day and night did indeed move in cycles within the holt, and as the light dimmed, the party found themselves faced with choosing between spending the night in the forest, which looked almost as dark as the Shadowlands, or out in the unprotected open. After a few minutes of debate, Galatyne and Khallil decided camping a few score yards from the forest edge would be their best bet. They could see anything coming and would be able to run for the relative shelter of the woods if necessary. Hoping to avoid using Galatyne's magic and alerting the guardians of this place to the paladin's presence, they also figured the open space would make the best use of Brigitta's talents without risking burning them all.

Loquitor, Khallil, Rinka, and Fiona did venture beneath the canopy to collect wood, which was laid out at the four corners of the camp. But no fire would be started unless absolutely necessary. They ate a cold dinner of dried meat, fruit, and bread, then laid out their bedrolls. They slept in shifts, taking watch in pairs.

As soon as full darkness fell, things began to wander out of the forest and materialize out of the grasses. Most were only slightly darker than the overcast, starless night. Several approached the camp almost right away, but Brigitta drove them off with wildfire. After that, the firelays were lit. Anything that came too near felt the wrath of the fire mage or the sting of a flaming arrow. Most of the attacks were half-hearted, almost seeming as if they were intended more to distract and disrupt than to do any real harm. Once again, sleep came only in quick naps and fitful dozes.

With the arrival of dawn, the prowlers vanished, and the party, exhausted from nearly a week with almost no sleep, slept well past the rising of the sun behind a low, overcast sky. When at last they arose, they ate a quick breakfast and gathered their courage to enter the forest. Khallil led the way when they crossed into its shadow, and it was not without some trepidation, for they knew from last night that things lived within.

V

Clianna stepped uncertainly into the wood. Even without her faerie senses, she knew this forest was not the same as the forests she was used to. While sometimes dark and spooky at night, during the day, the forests on E'atara were typically awash with emerald light and radiated tranquility and life. Here, the canopy was so thick that it felt like another layer of dark clouds and the light barely brighter than dusk. And there was little life. Only thorny vines, fungus, and a few strange plants with black, velvety leaves and flowers the color of a bruise grew on the forest floor. The vines twined up trees, in many cases completely covering the trunks and wrapping around branches in a tangled mass, as if trying to strangle them. Clianna shivered. She was a creature of light... and life.

“There are no forest sounds,” Khallil commented as if in echo of Clianna’s thoughts, “no life, like everything else in this place.”

Kyara shook her head. “But there are things out there. I can feel them.”

Khallil nodded. “Yes... and like I said. No life. This is a place of death.”

The thought seemed to sap the desire to speak and they walked on in somber silence for a while. Around them, the forest seemed to hold its breath, studying them, waiting.

Suddenly, there was a rustling from the floor of the forest all around them. Ropey vines twined up Khallil’s legs and around his body. Falana leapt forward, hacking at the ground, but more vines appeared as fast as she cut them.

Brigitta raised her hands, but Clianna shouted, “No! Not here! It’s too dangerous.”

More vines began entwining other members of the party, some dropping down from the trees like long, sinewy snakes. Blades darted and slashed in a futile effort to fight off the forest. Clianna managed to dart out of the way of the vines, but she had no weapon and was powerless to help her friends.

Khallil stood immobile as vines wrapped up around his throat and over his head, probing at his mouth and nose. A thick vine covered with red-tipped thorns rose up in front of him. Clianna wasn’t sure, but the red looked wet. All of a sudden, the vines let loose and fell to the ground. They were all free. No one moved.

“What happened?” Falana asked.

“They might be demon plants,” Khallil said, “but they are still plants and subject to druid magic.” He shivered, and a shadow seemed to flicker over his face. “Although, I had not thought I would ever have to touch the side of myself that could communicate with such darkness. I can’t help but think perhaps it was I who was measured this time.” The vines on the ground in front of Khallil slithered aside. “Stay close.”

From then on, they stayed in a tight knot. The woods around them were filled with rustling as the plant life scurried out of the way ahead and closed in behind. Although Khallil seemed to have the plant life well in hand, Falana, Loquitor, and Fiona kept their blades in hand, just in case. Soon, the deadly nature of the forest became all too obvious as they began to encounter bones scattered in amongst the vines. The farther they traveled, the more numerous the bones became. Most were human sized. Many were wrapped in vines high above the ground.

Khallil slowed their pace and studied the dark vegetation around them carefully.

“Maybe we should go back,” Clianna offered. “Maybe we can go around.” There was death here and it unnerved her more than the creatures out on the plain.

Khallil shook his head. “I’m beginning to think this place is designed more to keep people from leaving than getting in. First, the rock wall we came through. Now, as we get closer to that city on the mountain we are finding bones. My guess is that this kingdom has a tight rule.”

“And you would be right,” said a high pitched, nasally voice from the shadows.

Three bows strings drew taught, feathered shafts ready to leap into the darkness.

“No, no, no,” said the voice, and a tiny, grey clad man hopped out from behind a tree, waving his hands before him. His clothes were little more than grey rags that hung on a frame barely covered with pale skin. Wispy grey hair and beard lent his gaunt face a ghostly appearance. Slightly pointed ears poked through the wild mop. “I mean you no harm.” The arrow tips did not waver.

“What are you?” Galatyne asked. “What are you doing here?”

“What am I?” The little man laughed. “What am I... I am Nakara, and there,” he gestured in the direction of the mountain city with a bony hand, “that is my home now. What are you?” He hobbled up to each of them in turn, heedless of the weapons trained on him, and scrutinized them.

His head bobbed up and down, back and forth, as he took in their dress, their features, everything about them. He seemed to take a decided interest in studying their eyes.

“How odd,” he clucked. “You’re not demons, or even of this plane.”

Fiona leaned away from him as he tried to peer into her eyes, but she refused to give ground. “And why would you think we were?”

Nakara waved his hand as if she had asked a silly question. “Not much else lives outside the city, and demons can look like whatever they want.” He stood in front of Galatyne, staring intently while the paladin frowned at him. “You,” Nakara said, shaking his finger, “barely has any spark to speak of.”

When he got to Clianna, he stepped back and his eyes opened wide. He grabbed her head between his hands and peered into her eyes. His eyes were a dim grey that seemed to flare to life for a moment and peer deep into the soul. “Nothing,” he muttered and let go. “Nothing at all. Empty. How is that possible?”

Suddenly he spun around. “I should perhaps be asking what you are doing here. Outsiders don’t come here. You would have business with someone in the city? Or perhaps in the citadel?”

No one answered.

“Mmm hmm,” Nakara mused. “And not invited, most likely.”

“So,” Fiona said, crossing her arms in front of her, “if the forest slays people who try to leave the city, how is it you are free to wander?”

“Ahh... well, yes. I’m not leaving, you see. I’m looking for things people who were leaving might have dropped. It’s all in the intent, as it were. You can’t just walk into the citadel, you know. I don’t care what you think you can do, it won’t be enough.” Nakara looked at the ground and fidgeted. “But Nakara can get you in.” He looked up hopefully at Fiona, then glanced at Khallil.

Clianna didn’t like him, didn’t trust him. She saw Khallil turn toward Galatyne and open his mouth to say something, but Galatyne frowned and shook his head, then ducked his head once toward Khallil and once toward Nakara. Khallil nodded in understanding. Clianna frowned, puzzled.

“What’s in it for you?” Khallil asked.

“Me? Why, you take me with you when you leave. You wouldn’t come in here without a way out.”

Fiona snorted. “You obviously don’t know these people very well at all.”

“But you have a soulless one with you,” Nakara protested. “She’s the prophesied. There are no barriers to her.”

Clianna’s jaw dropped. Could that be true? Could she just walk through all the wards? Nothing on the Under Plane had harmed her so far. The vines hadn’t touched her... She wished she had touched the rock face they had walked through. But what was this prophecy stuff?

“I’m sorry, she’s the what?” Fiona asked.

“The prophesied. A soulless. It’s said that one would come to free us—”

“Very well,” Khallil interrupted. “We’ll take you with us when we go. let’s get moving.”

Nakara grinned. Fiona opened her mouth, presumably to ask how, but closed it again when she caught warning glances from both Khallil and Galatyne.

As they walked, Nakara explained how he had come to be here. Apparently, he had been a powerful, elven mage who had summoned the same demon that had taken Clianna’s spirit, and his ward had failed. That was over two hundred years ago. He had served his new mistress with his magic for a while, but she had become bored with him and found others. Clianna became bored with him soon, too.

“Can you sense anything from him?” Kyara whispered to Galatyne.

Galatyne shook his head. “It’s all tied to the same source,” he whispered back, “and I don’t know if I could tell anyway. This place is saturated with dark power.”

Clianna leaned close to Galatyne. “Why didn’t you want Khallil to talk to you,” she whispered.

“Nakara obviously sensed something of Khallil’s power and sees him, and perhaps Fiona because of her bold forthrightness, as decision makers among us and so is directing his attention toward them. He sensed little from me, and doesn’t seem to regard me as anyone of consequence. I think I’d like to keep it that way for now. If Khallil had asked me what I thought or pulled me aside to talk, Nakara might have thought to take a closer look at me.”

Clianna nodded. “Secret paladin weapon?”

“Something like that.”

Falana asked Nakara about the prophecy, and Nakara launched into an explanation of how some people spoke of a soulless one that would be the end of their world. Many welcomed the thought, even if it meant their destruction as well. The prophesy was apparently a thorn in the side of all demon lords, for it gave hope of release, however slight, to those trapped in their demesnes.

The trees thinned abruptly and the party broke out of the woods. Before them rose the mountain city. No great wall surrounded the city, only the forest, and a few of the outer structures were choked with vines and crumbling in their grasp. The buildings and towers strewn across the flanks of the rocky spire were as grey up close as they were from a distance, though now, figures could be seen moving slowly along twisting roads that snaked up the steep, craggy slopes. The mountain’s top, presumably where the citadel stood, remained shrouded in low clouds.

Everyone looked at Falana, who in turn looked up and up the steep slopes, beyond the last visible buildings, and nodded. Clianna’s spirit was up there.

VI

“Now,” Nakara admonished in hushed tones, “you don’t look like you’re from here at all, and there’s no disguising it, but not to worry. Nakara has that figured out. You follow close behind me, hear? And don’t speak, but look as if you will slay anyone who steps in your path, and if they do... do it. You’ll be doing someone a favor. Trust me.”

Nakara turned and strode into the city beside Khallil. The rest followed in pairs, and Clianna found herself once again walking beside Galatyne, looking around at the mountain hold. The city had obviously been magnificent, once. But whether because of the nature of this place or the beings inhabiting it, its beauty had long ago worn away to be replaced by a thick layer of decay. It looked like death, smelled like death, the still air even felt like death.

Long stairways and switchback streets threaded between ash grey buildings and around spires of dark red rock. Beings of all races trudged through the streets or worked to clean buildings. It seemed their sole task was to try to keep ahead of the decay or build over it. In some places, white gleamed through the grey; in others, black rot crept up walls and columns. But mostly, everything was just grey. Elves, dwarves, humans, ogres, orcs, mixed bloods, and some races she couldn’t even identify paused to study this strange group that had come among them. Many bore deformities or mutations, whether from breeding, magical experiments, or simply the energy of this place she could only guess, and didn’t want to stay long enough to find out. And she had never seen such haunted looks in the eyes of any soul. She wondered how many had sold their souls and how many had been taken prisoner.

As they went Nakara would periodically call out, “Make way! Make way for the emissaries of Gauri’dun! They bear an allegiance with our Mistress!” Clianna could only assume Gauri’dun was a nearby demon holt. She didn’t know if people made way and didn’t challenge them because they believed they were actually emissaries or if it was because Nakara was the Under Plane equivalent of a local crazy and always did this sort of thing. She suspected it was more of the latter, which might actually be for the better. Now they were disregarded as a fanciful parade led by a crazy man. But, even so, people’s gazes lingered on her longer than she liked and when she turned around, many would still be standing, staring at her.

Once, a small child almost ran into Clianna. When he looked up at her, startled, she saw blood red eyes with vertical slits in an unmistakably elven face. The child hissed at Clianna and she flinched. The child’s mother rushed forward and grabbed him. She was full elf, and the look of despair and anguish on her face spoke as to how the child had come to be. After that, Clianna put her head down and watch the ground go by. From time to time, she glanced back at Kyara. The baroness’s face was flushed slightly red and Clianna could see the barely suppressed rage etched on her face. Kyara would be especially sensitive to the condition of these people, however they came to be here.

After a few tense hours, they climbed past the last building and into the cold mist of a cloud. A giant gate of black, wrought iron in a massive stone wall loomed out of the fog. The gate had been made to look like a jumbled lacework of black bones—arms, legs, ribs, and spines. Here and there in the openings rested an all-too-real skull that turned from side to side. As the party approached, the skulls all turned to look at them with empty sockets. Two creatures in black spiked armour stood on either side of the gate. They were not human, elf, or anything that had ever called E’atara home. They loomed over the tallest member of the party by two and a half feet and had eyes that burned red in the darkness of their snarling helms. Each grasped a great spiked axe that looked as though it could cleave stone.

“Open the gate for the emissaries of Gauri’dun!” Nakara shouted.

The guards just looked at him.

“Open the gate!” Nakara demanded. “Our lady Mistress would hear their entreaty.”

“Why should we not squash you, little bug?” one of the guards grated, his voice like metal on stone.

Nakara waved a hand, gesturing for the massive guard to lean down. The guard did so, and Nakara whispered something to it. The guard laughed and nodded to its companion, who turned and whispered something to the nearest skull. There was a grinding noise, and several of the hands at the bottom of the gate opened fingers that had been curled around other bones. With a harsh squeal that almost sounded like a wail, a section of the gate swung out, creating an irregular portal.

Beyond, a dark passage sloped steeply upward. Judging by its length, the wall was at least eighty feet thick at its base. A bright light shone at the far end. As the gate clanged shut behind them, and they started upward, Khallil leaned forward to Nakara. “I don’t think they believed we were emissaries. What did you say to them?”

Clianna strained to hear the answer.

Nakara chuckled. “Oh... I told them you were outsiders of no small power and that you thought I was helping you gain access to the citadel but that I was really under orders to bring you to be sacrificed or enslaved depending on the whim of our Mistress.”

Khallil looked back over his should at Galatyne to see if he had heard. By both their expressions, Clianna could tell they were none too pleased. Nakara had gotten them in, but in doing so, he had assured they would not be let back out.

“It was the only way,” Nakara insisted. “Otherwise, we would all have died where we stood. He winked at Khallil as if they shared some secret they had pulled over on the guards.

Clianna squinted as they emerged from the tunnel into the bright light of day. They were above the clouds, and the sun, or a reasonable magical semblance, shone brightly. All around them, polished, black stone gleamed in the sunlight—the walls, the ground, the buildings. Above them, the mountain spire, glistening black shot through with red, climbed higher still. A black flagstone road flecked with gold spiraled up the peak to a soaring white tower at the summit. Fountains spilled shimmering water down the rock to run under arching bridges and collect in shallow pools.

Along the wall walked guards. Their true nature was disguised beneath armoured plates as black as the wall, but their shape and the wicked design of the armour left little doubt as to their inhumanness. When they stood still, they looked like nothing so much as gargoyles carved out of the stone beneath them.

Nakara pointed to the tower. “The citadel.”

Falana leaned over and whispered something to Khallil who nodded. “We need to go into the mountain,” he said to Nakara, “under the citadel. Is there a way in?”

Nakara looked surprised. “Under the citadel?” He wrung his hands. “All that lies there is the Mistress’s crèche. Why would you want to go there—” Nakara broke off suddenly and stared at Clianna. “Oh!” he said, eyes growing wide as some realization lit his face. “Ooohhhhh! By the fates.... Please, no! I cannot take you there! I thought you had come to cast down our Mistress.... I’ll be tortured for eternity if I take you in there.” He was almost weeping.

Fiona stepped forward, grabbed a fistful of his ragged shirt, and pulled him close. “Listen, you sniveling little weasel,” she growled, “I’m not walking into your mistress’s seat of power and challenging her to a fight. And you told those guards back there that crap about us being sacrificed, so they aren’t going to just open up and let us back out. If we don’t get out, neither do you. Now take us where the elf wants to go!”

When she let go, Nakara fell back, eyes wide and trembling, but he nodded his head and beckoned them forward.

VII

The tunnel was cool and dark, illuminated only by the pale light of Khallil’s magic. It was also enough light, unfortunately, for Clianna to get a closer look at the black stone that made up the mountain’s summit. The stone turned out to be translucent, and deep within, shadowy shapes writhed and twisted. She tried not to look too closely, and ignore the movement she saw constantly out of the corner of her eye; she didn’t really want to know what they were.

Nakara led them through snaking passages, first up, then down, taking the left fork here, the right there. Soon Clianna had no idea where they were. She hoped that maybe Khallil or Fiona would be able to retrace their steps if need be. She sure couldn’t.

Nakara stopped before a black wooden door bound in black iron and set in opaque, black stone. “The crèche is in there,” he said pointing.

Khallil grabbed hold of the iron ring on the door and pulled. With a groan of protest, the door swung open on ancient hinges. Inside, was a modest sized, circular room. A soft yellow light illuminated the center of the chamber from somewhere above. Around the edged of the room, niches had been carved out. Each one held a finely carved figurine of translucent stone. At the far end of the room, another passage vanished into darkness. Khallil started to step forward.

“Wait!” said Rinka, running forward. She studied the door and the stones around the archway and nodded. “This is a gate.”

“The door?” Khallil asked, frowning.

“No, the door*way*. These three stones,” Rinka pointed to the stones resting on the floor at the bottom of either side of the archway, then to the cornice piece, “they make the gate.” She touched the stones—top, left, right... then top, right, left. The air in the doorway seemed to shimmer, then the little stone room beyond faded and a fetid stench wafted out, nearly gagging everyone.

Fiona coughed, grabbed Nakara, and shook him. “What are you trying to pull! Where were you about to send us!”

Nakara fell to his knees. “No! No, I swear! I didn’t know it worked that way! I’ve only been in when the Mistress summoned me, and it was already open.” He fell to his knees. “I didn’t know... I swear I didn’t know...”

Fiona snorted and stepped away from him in disgust.

Kyara looked as if she was about to snap at Fiona but suddenly grabbed Clianna’s arm. “Clianna!” she said. “I can feel you!”

Everyone leaned forward and peered through the door. The chamber beyond was dark, but faint purple light traced a glowing lacework on the floor amidst and over hundreds of pale, luminescent, spheres that ranged from the size of a head to two feet in diameter.

Khallil stepped through the door. “There’s stairs. Be careful.”

A dozen steps bore Clianna down into a darkness more despairing than she had ever known. The place felt immense and the blackness sucked up Khallil’s light. A stink like rotting meat covered a more subtle, but fouler stench—that of raw evil. She held onto Kyara’s hand for comfort.

Suddenly the door slammed shut. Loquitor, who was only a few steps down from the landing, turned and flung himself against the door. “It won’t open!” he called down. At the same time, Clianna noticed that Nakara was nowhere around.

A high-pitched screech rent the darkness, followed by a sound like knives on rock.

“Rinka!” Galatyne shouted as he drew his sword. “See what you can do with the door!”

Rinka ran back up the steps.

Khallil had his bow out and rowan shaft tipped with silvered holly nocked on the string. Loquitor bounded off the stairs and vanished into the darkness.

Another metal on rock rasp echoed across the cavern. Something big and black dropped from the ceiling and skittered, spider-like, across the floor. It stood nearly ten feet tall, and its arched, segmented legs ended in razor-like talons that dug into the stone. A long serpentine neck arched out in front of an armour-plated insectoid body. Saliva dripped from its fangs to hiss on the rock, leaving little pits on the surface.

Two arrows thudded into its neck. One hissed and fell smoldering to the floor. The other, the rowan shaft, stuck fast. Black ichor seeped from the wound. Falana darted between its legs, but its armour was too thick and she found herself dodging talons. The thing arched its neck down and spit a thick, sticky acid, but Falana was already gone. The rock where she had stood hissed and melted.

Brigitta let loose an uncontrolled burst of fire. It washed over the creature, but found nothing to burn on its armoured carapace. The fanged head swung around seeking the fire mage.

Galatyne pushed Clianna back behind Kyara and Fiona. “Watch her,” he said and rushed out. As he ran forward, Clianna saw a thin flicker of blue flame run along the edge of his blade. He had released the barest trickle of his power, hopefully not enough to bring down the entire holt on them.

The monster’s head snapped around as soon as the blue flame appeared and it started toward the paladin.

“Galatyne!” Loquitor’s voice called out of the darkness. “This way.”

Galatyne ran in the direction of the voice. The creature followed right behind. As they passed by a ledge, Loquitor leapt onto its back. The thing stopped and craned its neck over its back. As the head swung around, Loquitor loosed two shafts into its eyes and dove away. It screeched, and acid sprayed out, dripping off its own back.

“Now, Brigitta!” Loquitor called.

Fire roared out from Brigitta’s hands and ignited the acid. The thing turned to snap at Brigitta but, blinded, couldn’t find her. It spit acid in a desperate attempt to fell its tormenter. The party scrambled out of range and watched as it fueled its own pyre.

As the flames died away, Rinka came back down the stairs. “Any luck?” Galatyne asked.

“Sort of. I don’t think we’ll be able to open the door from in here without breaking it down.”

“Based on what was in here, it’s probably warded against that,” Fiona commented.

Rinka nodded. “Probably. But the gate part should still work. Although the runes are inscribed on the other side, each stone spans the entire width of the archway. Opening the door actually activates the gate. I closed it so we could enter here. I might be able to activate it again from this side, and we should be able to step sideways into the Shadowlands without going out the other side. I don’t want to do it until we are ready to go, though. I don’t know where this gate is intended to open up.”

Galatyne nodded. “Let’s keep going then. Falana, which way?”

Falana shrugged. “I… don’t know. I could follow the thread of her song to this point, but it’s suddenly too diffuse. I can’t pinpoint it. Kyara, you said you could sense Clianna’s spirit?”

Kyara nodded. “I can feel her essence sort of everywhere, but it’s strongest that way,” she said pointing off into the heart of the cavern.

“I’ll wait here,” Rinka said. “If something tries to operate the gate from the other side, perhaps I can mess it up.”

“Are you sure?” Galatyne asked.

Rinka nodded.

“I’ll stay with her,” Brigitta offered. “If there’s any trouble, I can warn you.”

Galatyne eyed them for a moment as if weighing the risks. “Alright,” he said, “but be careful.” He turned and followed the others into the gloom.

The room was indeed an enormous cavern, and it was full of demon eggs, hundreds, maybe thousands, of the pale white orbs were scattered across the floor and heaped in piles. It turned out that they were also the source of the stench. Bits of partially dissolved, rotting flesh lay on many of the eggs. When Loquitor touched one with an arrow, the tip sizzled. “That thing we killed must have been a guardian-nurse of some sort,” he said. “I bet she, it, covered the eggs in this acid goop and then dropped flesh on it so that it would dissolve and the nutrients soak in.”

The glowing purple lacework was actually made up of gelatinous tendrils that trailed across the floor and feathered out over each egg, like tiny roots, feeding some kind of magical energy to the unhatched demon.

They picked their way carefully through the crèche, careful not to touch anything.

“Oh!” Kyara suddenly exclaimed, pointing toward a thick cluster of the glowing tendrils.

Before them stood a stone sculpture, an altar perhaps, carved into the shape of two claws reaching up out of the rock. Above it, suspended upright by an invisible force, floated a most familiar figure. Clianna. Her eyes were closed. Crumpled, wilted wings drooped from her back and dripped colored splashes of light onto the stone claws. A thread of purplish light descended out of the darkness above to touch her brow. Glowing purple tendrils wrapped around her limbs and body

like creeper vines and cascaded down the altar to the floor where runners branched and spread across the floor to the eggs.

Everyone stared at the Clianna suspended over the sculpture, then at the Clianna standing before them. “I think we found your spirit,” Kyara whispered.

VIII

Clianna could only gape in wonder as she stepped cautiously around the tendrils and eggs on her way to the altar. Kyara went with her. Clianna trembled. It was her. She could feel it, like homesickness. This close, the feeling of separation was almost unbearable. She fought back tears. What if they couldn’t free her? She would be a prisoner forever. “Get her out!” she said, and reached out.

“Wait!” Khallil and Galatyne called in unison.

“We can’t just tear her out,” Khallil continued. “She’s bound into the heart of the life web of this place.”

“That’s why I could no longer follow her song!” Falana said. “This whole place is full of it. Her essence flows through these tendrils.”

Khallil nodded and pointed to the thread of purple light that vanished into the darkness overhead. “And she’s still tied into the life force of E’atara. Clianna’s spirit is acting as a conduit between this plane and home. E’atara’s spirit energy is feeding the crèche.”

Clianna felt sick. This was worse than she could have imagined. If they couldn’t find a way to free her, safely, Galatyne and Khallil could not allow the demon holt to continue to feed off E’atara, or even her spirit. They would destroy the conduit, and her spirit with it, if there were no other choice. “How do we get her... me... her... out?” she asked. She almost didn’t want to hear the answer. With no answer, there was still hope.

Khallil stepped over beside Clianna and studied the tendrils around her spirit self. He closed his eyes and reached his hands out toward the spirit Clianna. There was a bright flash and Khallil was thrown backwards onto the stone. Galatyne and Falana helped him to his feet. He put a hand to his head and massaged his temples. “There’s a ward,” he said. “A powerful one. I’m not sure I can penetrate it. If we break it...” he shrugged. “I don’t know what that would do. All of this is so tightly woven together. I—”

A jet of fire lit the darkness behind them. “The gate!” Galatyne shouted. There was a flash, like lightning, and a loud crack followed by a rumble shook the ground.

The spirit-Clianna’s eyes shot open, and she mouthed a silent scream. She knew who was coming. It was more than Clianna could bear. She would not meet her end broken and terrified. It was time to test Nakara’s words about the soulless. The reactions of the people in the city to her were proof enough that there was some kernel of truth to what he said. And he seemed to operate on such kernels, just enough truth embellished with what the listener wanted to hear.... She rushed forward.

There was no flash, no invisible wall to stop her or magical fist to hurl her back, and she found her hands resting against the cool stone of the altar. She grasped the edge and hauled herself up. She got her feet under her and glanced over her shoulder. The others had fanned out in a semicircle weapons drawn. They hadn’t seen her yet.

Clianna reached out and touched her spirit. For an instant, it was like touching fire and then the sensation passed. She was whole again. She could feel her spirit inside her. She tried to step forward and couldn’t move. She looked down. Her body was covered in purple tendrils. Then the

nausea struck and she could feel them worming their way through her body and her soul. She could feel the thin trickle of life force flowing to her from E'atara and out through the feeder vines. If she shut off that flow, she would die. Worse, she might just lose consciousness and the flow would resume. She was reunited with her spirit, but she was still bound.

"Trapped little fly?" said a voice like honey. "Too bad. All this way for nothing."

Clianna looked up. A tall, shapely woman materialized out of the gloom. Long, black hair framed a pale lovely face and cascaded down over a voluptuous figure barely concealed beneath a diaphanous white gown. Beside her scurried a figure in grey rags—Nakara.

"You see, Mistress?" Nakara whimpered. "It's as I said. They brought the soulless one. I locked them in and—"

A wave of the woman's hand silenced the babbling elf. "You've done well, Nakara. You shall have your reward." She didn't move, didn't speak a word of magic, but Nakara's frame straightened and grew taller. Color returned to his skin, and his hair filled out, long and golden. His tattered rags turned into rich robes of wine.

Nakara smiled and raised his hands before him, gazing at them as he flexed them with newfound strength. Clianna could also see a new aura about him now, black swirled with pale shimmering gold, elven magic tainted by darkness. A moment ago, it had been only a grey shadow.

She could see auras again! Clianna quickly scanned her friends. Loquitor, Falana, and Fiona all had a sullen black-striped orange—the crouched tiger, Clianna called it—waiting to spring if the right moment presented itself. Kyara radiated the wisp of faerie magic that was always there, but there was something else—a churning mix of muddled auras—though only the swirling yellow did she recognize as Kyara. Clianna didn't understand.

"I'm afraid that now you'll have to remain where you are," the demoness was saying. "And I can't allow your friends to go either. The druid will give me mighty children, and others... well, they will provide suitable... entertainment."

Clianna looked to Khallil and Galatyne. Khallil radiated green power that rose up from him and branched off above him like a great, sheltering tree. And Galatyne had almost no aura. Around him she saw only the palest blue wrapped with black bands—power bound. But then she noticed breaks in the bands. He was ready to loose the fire, but he needed a few moments to free it completely, moments in which the demon would sense his nature and destroy him. It gave Clianna an idea, but she needed time... they needed time.

Clianna closed her eyes and felt the darkness pulse through her. She had been one with it for so long... she knew its ways... she knew its name!

"Kasdaye," Clianna said, opening her eyes. "Her name is Kasdaye."

The demon's eyes flashed toward Clianna, but then she smiled, almost sweetly. "My name can not be used bind me in my own home, foolish one."

"No," said Falana, "but a name is a song, and a song is a key, and your being is unlocked to me."

Clianna smiled as Falana darted forward.

Kasdaye growled and the mage raised his hands toward Falana. A hand axe flew through the air toward the mage, but he turned and cast out his hand. The axe dropped to the floor. An instant later, an arrow tore through his throat and he crumpled to the ground. Two more arrows streaked toward the demon, but bounced off an invisible shield.

Falana's blade came down. There was a brief flash as it cut through the shield. Kasdaye raised her hand and caught the blade. Bright blood flowed down her arm. The pale, beautiful skin cracked and sloughed off, revealing a scaly back claw. She wrenched the blade out of Falana's hand, then

grabbed the elf and hurled her through the air. Falana tucked into a ball, somersaulted through the air and landed on her feet, a dagger in each hand.

Two more arrows streaked from Loquitor's bow and struck the demon. The shield was gone, but the arrows did not penetrate the black hide beneath the flesh. Still enraged, Kasdaye flung a hand out toward Loquitor. A ripple rushed through the air striking the elf and knocking him off his feet.

Kasdaye screeched. All around, the larger eggs burst open and small misshapen creatures leapt out. Loquitor struggled to rise and reach his blade, but was buried under a tide of demon hatchlings.

"No!" Kyara screamed. She ran toward Loquitor, loosing arrow after arrow. As she reached her brother, Clianna saw her aura suddenly shift to blood red. She dropped her bow and drew her bronze dagger. She grabbed the nearest hatchling, yanked it into the air and slashed it open with the dagger. It shrieked briefly before she threw it to the stone and snatched up another one. Fiona rushed towards her, hewing a path with her axe.

Kasdaye raised her hands again, then suddenly turned toward Galatyne, eyes wide. Blue fire arced out and engulfed Kasdaye. She roared—a mix of pain and anger. Her sensuous façade melted away, and her black scaled body stretched upwards, sprouting two more sets of arms. Red lightning lashed out toward the paladin, but Khallil stood before him, Aldathule in his hand. The lightning struck him and exploded into harmless shards of light. Blue and red energies crackled back and forth. Clianna was forgotten.

IX

Clianna closed her eyes, felt the magic course through her— both the life force of E'atara and the demon tendrils. She closed her mind against the evil that had nested within her and reached back through the conduit, touched the source of faerie power.

So, she thought, you like faerie magic? She spread her mind and opened the conduit further. Life force flooded her being but was quickly sucked away through the tendrils. She called more power. The feeders swelled and pulsed with the added magic. Several of the smaller tendrils ruptured. The eggs they fed turned black and withered.

"No!" Kasdaye's voice pierced the roar of magic that filled Clianna's head. "What are you doing!"

Clianna opened herself entirely to the faerie magic that was her right. Tendrils and eggs throughout the crèche exploded. The thin conduit from E'atara burst, but Clianna no longer needed it. She was the conduit now. Power poured through her and flooded the cavern. Light stripped away the darkness. Suddenly she was free. She looked down at the altar. With a loud crack, the stone split and the demonic hands fell away to either side, breaking into rubble. Clianna alighted on the floor. Behind her, gossamer wings of faerie magic trailed streamers of sparkling motes.

Clianna calmed the storm raging within her and looked around. Light still filled the cavern, and Kasdaye was nowhere to be seen.

Galatyne and Khallil were on their knees in a bed of flowers. Falana stood next to them, bluebells twined through her hair. They had been in the direct path of the faerie magic. Across walls and floor of the cavern, green things sprouted. Dozens of butterflies fluttered around. Most of the hatchlings writhed on the floor as brightly colored wings sprouted from their backs.

Loquitor struggled to his hands and knees. Blood oozed from a score of shallow gashes. Beside him, Fiona held Kyara's arms behind her back. The baroness was covered in black gore and

rage still burned in her eyes. “Viha ta’haltia!” she screamed and brought her boot down on the neck of a floundering hatchling with a sickening crunch.

“What happened to Kasdaye?” Clianna asked.

“She fled,” Galatyne said, climbing to his feet.

“And none too soon, either,” Khallil added. “I think it’s time we get out of here. She was unprepared for us, especially Clianna, and was momentarily overwhelmed, but I think she’ll return soon... with ire to spare and reinforcements.”

Galatyne turned to Loquitor. “Will you be alright for the moment?”

“To get out of here? You bet.”

“I’ll help him,” Falana said and hurried to lend Loquitor her shoulder. Khallil, too, offered an arm.

“Can you handle Kyara?” Galatyne asked Fiona.

“Not a problem.” She lifted the kicking baroness off the floor.

“What about Rinka and Brigitta?” Clianna asked.

Worried silence filled the cavern for a moment, then Galatyne set off at a run for the door. Clianna followed right behind him.

At the stairs, they found scattered pieces of wood, iron, and stone. The steps were now covered in moss and leafy vines sprouting red flowers spread into the corridor beyond the open doorway. Brigitta lay at the bottom of the stone stairway, unconscious but breathing. Rinka was sprawled at the base of the wall, blood puddled by her head.

Galatyne knelt beside Rinka and held out his hands. Blue light bathed her and her eyes fluttered open. Galatyne gasped for air and staggered to his feet. “Sorry... that’s all I can do right now. We need to get that gate open.”

Rinka climbed unsteadily up the stairs with Galatyne’s help and stood before the broken doorway. “The gate stones are damaged... but still in place. They should work... I think.” She put a hand to her head. “I... the demon... we... scrambled it pretty good though. I was randomly activating stones so she couldn’t work the gate from the other side. Maybe if I just sit down a moment...” she started to sit down on the stone.

Galatyne grabbed her arm and hauled her back up. “I’m sorry we don’t have time. We have to get out now and we can go back into the city. The gate’s our only chance.”

Rinka nodded. “I’ll try.” She reached out and touched the stones in the sequence she had before. Nothing happened. “That’s right,” she said, “it’s backwards from this side.” She tapped them in reverse order. Nothing happened.

“What’s wrong?” Galatyne asked. The others had all gathered on the steps.

“I’m not sure,” Rinka said. “Can’t think...”

A loud scrape echoed down the hall beyond the door. Galatyne grabbed Rinka by the shoulders and turned her around. “Rinka Tur! Activate the gate, find the path, and lead... us... home.”

Rinka snapped to attention. “That’s right!” she said. “The gate was active when we opened the door the first time. Touching the stones in that sequence shut it off. I need to know how to turn it on.” She stepped through the archway, over flowers, and studied the rune-marked stones again.

A black, armoured shape charged down the corridor behind Rinka. Suddenly, a thick vine lashed out, snaked around its throat, and yanked it back against the wall with a loud crunch.

Clianna looked around. She hadn’t done that. She saw Khallil on his knees, one hand out and breathing hard, but a smile lit his face. “Now these are my kind of vines,” he said.

The sound of heavy feet and steel clamored down the corridor. More vines rose up, weaving a dense, leafy wall that was immediately attacked with black blades. Rinka stepped back through the archway and tapped the cornice stone three times. The gate flared to life.

X

The sound of breaking waves rolled up over the low hill behind Clianna, and a slight breeze carried the sharp smell of saltwater through the air.

Clianna scowled at Kyara. “Sit down!” she said. Kyara didn’t move.

She wished Galatyne or Khallil were awake. Either might have been able to help. But Galatyne lay asleep against one the crumbling south wall of Shorehold’s keep. He had healed the worst of the injuries sustained by Loquitor, Brigitta, and Rinka and then passed out. Khallil was dozing too, against the trunk of a giant oak.

The Shadowland path that Rinka had found through the gate in the crèche was very old, but she had quickly found an exit... to Shorehold. The city was in ruins, but it was a vast improvement over their alternatives. They could at least rest here and regain their strength. Fruit grew on trees in the old courtyard and game was plentiful. There were also several springs.

Clianna sighed as she stared down Kyara. She didn’t seem to be hurt, but neither was she herself. Her aura was still a muted red, and she didn’t seem to recognize anyone but Loquitor. She’d hit Galatyne when he’d tried to see if she was wounded and almost gotten a hold of one of Falana’s daggers—which was odd in itself, because she usually avoided touch steel.

Clianna was different too. Her wings had vanished after the initial rush of power in the crèche had faded. But it wasn’t just that. She felt different. She wasn’t the same. She didn’t know if it was a result of being infused with Kasdaye’s magic for so long or because she had tapped into a part of her own being she had never touched before. She still felt chaotic. She hoped that perhaps with time she would find some equilibrium and settle her spirit.

But Kyara needed to be dealt with now. “Fine!” Clianna said. “Get ready to catch her.” She had no more patience left. She opened her hand and a fountain of lavender flowers erupted onto Kyara. Her aura shifted to a blur of swirling colors and she fainted. Fiona and Loquitor caught her before she fell. As they eased her to the ground, her aura flickered and turned to a swirling yellow.

Loquitor knelt down next to her. “Kyara?” He gave her shoulder a gentle shake. “Kyara!”

Kyara’s eyes snapped open. “Loq!” she said, “you’re alright!” She reached out and hugged her brother. Then she looked down at her gore-spattered body and shrieked.

Ubi spiritus est vita est

Where there is spirit, there is life