

Chapter One



It is time. He is waiting.

Taryn placed a finger on the page she was reading and cocked her head, listening. Voices from the pub below drifted through the thin walls of their flat. The kitchen staff preparing the day's meals. Her stomach twitched with anticipation.

She scanned the sparsely decorated room, her gaze resting on her grandfather. He sat in his favorite chair, pipe at his lips, one hand curled around a cup of tea long gone cold. Unblinking, unmoving, he remained focused on the fireplace, oblivious to his surroundings. She leaned against the window frame and shook her head. Two weeks of being cooped up was affecting her mind.

Outside, clouds, dark as pewter, blocked the sun that only an hour ago warmed the tiny room. Defiant rays struggled through the mass, but the summer storm released a torrent of rain, tamping out the last of the light.

It is time. He is waiting.

Taryn jerked forward, snagging her T-shirt on an exposed nail.

“Did you hear that?” She pinched the rip in her shirt as if the force alone could mend the frayed fabric.

Brandt continued staring into the flames. “Hear what, darling?”

“A woman. It sounded like she was standing right next to me.”

“It must've been the storm.”

“I guess.” She rose from the window seat and stretched her long body, working cramps out of muscles more accustomed to long days of work than sitting. “Want to visit the museum today?” She had to get him out of the flat. Away from the apartment and back to work. Yet he refused every opportunity she or their clients presented. His lack of motivation perplexed her. And worried her. He was getting on in years; perhaps the constant traveling was finally catching up to him.

Wisps of white hair vibrated with the quick shake of his head. “Not today, love. Not today.”

Her grandfather had loved his job, as did she. Loved the travel to far off civilizations, the discovery of long-forgotten artifacts, even loved the hard work associated with archeological digs. Then one day, without any warning, he told Taryn they were going back to London, to their flat, where he remained day after day, staring into the fire as if waiting for an answer to an unspoken question.

She rested her cheek on his head, and smoothed the tweed jacket he wore, grimacing at the lack of substance beneath. He wasn’t eating well, nor did he sleep much at night.

A crack of thunder startled them both. Taryn’s pendant thrummed against her skin, an insistent pulse that irritated her. She tapped the silver with her fingertips, shushing it.

A *pop* from the fireplace drew Brandt’s attention, and he sat up straighter.

It is time. Awaken.

“There it is again. Tell me you heard that.” Taryn scanned the room, her nerves twitching.

Brandt stood still, listening as she’d done a few minutes earlier. When he turned to face her, his eyes shone with excitement. “Aye, lass. I did.”

A crack of lightning flashed outside their window, rattling the fragile glass.

“I hear you,” Brandt shouted to the storm. “I hear you!” He grabbed Taryn’s hands, startling her as much as the thunder had. A smile started at the corners of his lips and stretched to his cheeks, giving him a mischievous glow. “It’s time, my darling girl. It’s time.”

“For what?” Uncertainty clipped her words. The sleepy entropy they’d cultivated over the past few weeks dissipated in the space of a moment with Brandt’s sudden excitement.

“There is so much I need to explain but not here. Grab your rucksack and follow me.” He spoke in the language they used in private, never around others, and as far as Taryn knew, only the two of them understood. The strange language was just one of Brandt’s peculiarities. Inventing adventures was another.

“Baba, stop. This isn’t funny. I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately.” Only when alone did she use his nickname, finding it easier to call him by his given name around the men and women she worked with.

“It’s time,” he said, pulling her toward the door, “Come with me.”

She grabbed her backpack and followed him down the narrow staircase that led to the back of the pub.

The smell of bacon assaulted her before they reached the ground floor and her stomach growled its unhappy emptiness. The sound of pots clanging and cooks yelling above the din was a comfort to her, but Brandt ignored it all as he hurried through the kitchen, its modern appliances gleaming against the ancient stones. Taryn rushed after him, swiping a scone from a nearby tray before heading through the back door.

Brandt led them down creaky steps to the cellar, where nothing more than broken chairs

and leaky casks littered the earthen floor. After flipping on a single light switch, he stopped in front of a heavy oak door and motioned for her to wait. She shifted her backpack and leaned against the wall, bristling against the dampness. In the nearly twenty-three years they'd lived above the pub she'd been to the cellar twice; neither occasion she recalled with much enthusiasm.

The scone's warmth and buttery aroma did little to alleviate the cellar's mustiness. She chewed absently, painfully disappointed she didn't grab a cup of tea as well.

"Seriously, what are we doing here?" Despite her whispering, the melodic words echoed off the walls.

"I'm taking us home." His fingers danced across the edges of the doorframe, a peculiar amber light flickering beneath them.

"We are home," she mumbled through a bite of her scone. The way he focused on the door unnerved her. The air around them shivered, and she straightened, alert to unseen danger. "Baba, what's going on?" Her pendant flicked icy heat against her. The air thrummed with every breath, vibrated with each heartbeat as if it were a part of her. "We should go."

She reached out to Brandt, but he shook his head, sadness clear in the amber depths of his eyes. "We can't go back. You are so much more than this world would ever allow." Excitement crept into his words. "Through this doorway is a portal to our world. Our real home."

"A portal?" She snorted a laugh and choked on a bit of scone. Swallowing down her anger and the scone, she warned, "I don't know what you're up to, but I'm not a child anymore. You don't have to create distractions to entertain me."

"This isn't a game, Taryn. This is your chance to discover something wonderful. Won't

you allow an old man just one more grand adventure?”

With a wink, he kissed her nose and turned back to the doorway. The way his fingertips traced around the frame and then the door itself, entranced her. There was a pattern to his movements, a staccato beat ending with him pressing his palm against the wood. A shock of searing heat flashed from her pendant, and she staggered against the pain. The air around them sighed with centuries' old longing. Amber lights blazed against the oak, and then the door was gone.

Instead of a storeroom filled with casks and old chairs as she'd expected, Taryn stared into a gaping blackness. “Bloody hell.”

“Take my hand, and whatever you do, don't let go. There's no telling where you might end up.”

“Where does it lead?”

“Aelinae.” A mixture of wistfulness and mirth filled his tone.

“Ay-lynn-ay?” A memory teased her thoughts. Of a bright star. A man with moss-green eyes.

“Another world, another planet, actually. One of beauty and wonder. You'd be surprised what's possible if you look beyond what you think you know.”

She reached out to the undulating, seductive void, stopping before her fingertips touched the darkness. Her mind raced with questions, doubts, and fears, but curiosity overrode everything. Nerves trembling, she took Brandt's hand, clasping it tightly. “Portals to other worlds? For real? You weren't kidding about it being an adventure.”

“Are you ready?” Brandt's eyes glittered with unshed tears.

Not trusting herself to speak, and before she could tell him “hell no” and run back to their flat, she nodded. A thick cocoon enveloped them as soon as they stepped into the chasm. A deep, primal fear itched its way from her core, sweeping over her, suffocating in its entirety. Her breath came in small gasps that left her feeling lightheaded. Complete blackness engulfed her. If Brandt remained beside her, she couldn’t see him. Nor could she see her own hand held an inch in front of her face. No sound, no brush of air indicated they were moving. She shoved down her panic, trusting that Brandt would see her safely through the abyss.

She floated in darkness, with licks of heat burning against her face and then slipping beneath her T-shirt, cutting her skin before soothing her with cool caresses. Blisters formed on her lips, then disappeared with a kiss of frost.

The sensation moved down her jeans to touch her in places no man ever had. A small moan escaped her lips, silent to all but her. Heat wrapped around her legs and bound her in its warmth. Cold thrills traveled through her, searing against the invisible flames that made her sway with desire. She yearned for the touch, opened herself to the seduction of the darkness.

An image of a man with short brown curls and eyes the color of summer moss drifted in her mind—the man from her dreams. Her submission wavered, and the void took on a prickly coldness before it shifted to a reassuring heat that wound its way over her breasts. It crept up her neck to her lips, lulling her back into sweet oblivion. The dream man called out her name, and she jerked against the stupor.

A sibilant hiss lashed against her senses. A moment later, she slammed into the unforgiving ground.

Sparks lit behind her eyes. A shock of pain ran the length of her. Ragged breaths ripped

her lungs as she coughed against the dust flooding her throat. Her fingertips raked through the soft soil. After the etherealness of the void, the sand chafed against her skin.

A melody played in her mind, its tune sweet and light, hopeful. She stretched her fingertips to her pendant. “Quiet.” The song lowered to a faint hum.

Each move sent a fresh spasm of pain across her forehead, trailing down her spine. Nothing felt broken, yet everything felt abused. Ignoring the protests from her scraped hands and knees, Taryn pressed up to all fours. She untangled herself from her backpack and fought off a wave of dizziness before she stood on unsteady legs. Faint light from the portal made it difficult to see where she was.

“Brandt?” Her voice died on empty air.

The portal brightened and elongated, stretching to allow Brandt to step through. “Thank the gods. I thought I’d lost you.” He pulled her to him, crushing the air from her lungs. When he released her, tiny golden lights haloed his head.

The air shuddered as the portal closed in on itself until there was nothing left to indicate its existence. Brandt held her hands, murmuring beneath his breath. Several orbs lit around them, giving off enough light to see. An electric current pulsed up her arm; not unpleasant, exactly, but she resisted the urge to pull free from her grandfather’s grip.

“Welcome home, my darling girl.”

Fear gnawed at her belly, sharp pricks of unease heightened by the strangeness of her surroundings. “Is this—what did you call it?”

“Aelinae.”

After her experience in the void, her emotions were raw, conflicted, vulnerable, and yet

she was excited. “We did it? We crossed through to another *planet*?”

“Aye, we did.”

His hand swept out and the light expanded, illuminating a cavern with glistening white walls and sand floors. Crystals radiating from pale white to deep purple grew in all manner of shapes and sizes. Beneath her pendant’s jubilant tune, she heard a deeper strain that harmonized perfectly with her charm. The two melodies sang of a world full of light and shadow, of waterfalls and green meadows. Of temples to gods young and old, of mountains and a vast forest. They sang of a palace that overlooked the sea; they sang of Aelinae.

A world she knew without knowing.

At her back, the pull of the void beckoned her to return. Insistent. Demanding. Jealous.

“Aelinae is where you were born, Taryn.” The whispered words echoed through her conscious. He didn’t lie. Somehow, she knew it was true.

Taryn took a step forward, closer to the glittering gems. “I remember a star.” Taryn pointed to the ceiling. “From up there.”

Tears shone in Brandt’s eyes. “Come with me. There is someone I want you to meet.”

They wound their way through the forest of stalagmites, the crystals smooth beneath her hands. Some were as thick as her waist, their frosted coats shaggy with fingerlike growths that stretched in all directions and feathered ends blossoming toward one another.

Beyond the muted glow of the crystals, a large lake nestled in a well-lit cavern. Taryn blinked against the sudden light and instinctively headed toward the water, but Brandt stopped her with a grip on her arm that made her cry out.

She started to protest but then saw what he’d noticed first. Two men, arguing not more

than fifty paces away, turned toward the sound of her shout.

Of equal height, they were opposite in expression. One dressed in clothes of darkest night with hair to match and eyes the color of mist. No warmth, no greeting entered those eyes as they traveled the length of her, bringing the slightest tilt to his tight lips. He hadn't moved from where he stood—feet firmly planted in the sand, shoulders back, head tilted just so—but his presence pressed against her, violating her space.

A breath caught in her chest, and she looked away only to meet the steady gaze of the other stranger. His eyes didn't raze her body but stayed locked on her face. Concern hid in the depths of those eyes. A tightness in his jaw and twitch to his lips made her want to reach out and stroke him, to soften the hardness beneath the stubble of beard. The idea both shocked and thrilled her. His stance wasn't as rigid as the first man's, but there was no mistaking his strength. Her gaze went from his lips, full but hard against his tanned skin, back to his eyes. They were an unmistakable shade of summer moss.

It was the darker of the two who spoke first, his voice a low vibrato, thrumming against the empty cavern. "Greetings, Your Eminence." He bowed to Brandt, his steady scrutiny never leaving Taryn. "Well met on this day. Your absence has been too long, but I see you have returned to us that which was lost."

"What's going on? Who are these men and how do they know our special language? You told me no one else spoke it."

Brandt's chuckle did little to reassure her. "We are speaking Elennish, the oldest language on Aelinae. It was the least I could do to prepare you for your return."

Taryn stared at Brandt, mouth agape, an argument on her lips, but the handsome man

stepped between them and the man in black, drawing her attention. Green lights sparked across his body.

“Zakael, this is nothing that concerns you.” In contrast, his voice blended with the environment, eloquent, melodic. Safe. Comforting.

Dark, silvery flares whipped around the one he called Zakael “I wouldn’t be too certain of that.” He indicated Taryn. “Who is the priest’s friend? She’s tall for an Aelan, but those blue eyes and that glorious, sun-touched hair remind me of someone.”

The air shifted around them, electric, full of pent-up animosity.

“Stand down, Rhoane. Zakael will not harm us,” Brandt warned, his anger directed at the darker of the two men. “I don’t want a quarrel with you or your master. Leave this place at once.”

A flash of anger crossed Zakael’s face. “You have something that belongs to my lord.” A bright ball of silver fire sprang to life on his outstretched palm. “Give it to me, and I’ll let you live.”

Taryn shrank behind her grandfather. The flame danced on Zakael’s hand with a menacing ferocity, as if impatient to be released.

“Zakael,” Rhoane said low enough Taryn had to strain to hear, “this cavern is sacred to the Light. Do not work your Dark power here.”

“I demand that you give me what is mine.” The force of Zakael’s stare immobilized her where she stood.

Her mind screamed at her to run, to take Brandt and sprint to the portal, but her body betrayed her instincts and wouldn’t budge.

Seconds passed in slow succession. Rhoane's jaw tightened, his fists flexed in anticipation. Then Zakael's body softened, his shoulders slumped forward, and he turned to leave. Taryn exhaled the breath she'd been holding, but Brandt gripped her hand tighter.

Zakael took a few steps and then swung around, his black cloak fanning out like wings. A silvery ball flew at Rhoane. Prepared for the attack, a web of green power consumed the fireball, dissolving it with an angry hiss.

Thick strands of Zakael's energy spiraled to the ceiling and loosened several crystals, sending them crashing to the ground. A wall of tawny light sprang up, protecting her from the glittering shards that shattered all around her.

"We need to leave. It's not safe here," Taryn urged Brandt, edging back toward the portal.

His eyes held a sadness she'd never seen before. "There is no going back for us. Aelinae is, by turns, beautiful and dangerous. You must trust this is for the best." Brandt moved them away from the fight, keeping his body between her and the men, never losing contact with her. The luminous wall of energy swirled in a frenzy, as if it longed to join the fray.

Taryn watched in stricken horror as Zakael circled Rhoane, taunting him. Their grudge went beyond this morning; that much was clear. The crystals lost their translucence, their glow vibrating in deep shades of aubergine and red.

"Do not do anything that cannot be undone," Rhoane warned.

A jag of laughter was Zakael's answer. A length of ashen energy whipped around Rhoane's legs and pulled him to the ground.

A sword appeared in his hand and he slashed through the bindings, missing several times before he freed himself. He leapt up and advanced on the other man, a murderous tilt to his

features.

“Baba,” she begged, “please. If we don’t leave right now, one of these lunatics is going to kill us with those energy balls. Please. Now?”

Zakael held his hands out placatingly. “My quarrel is not with you this day, Glennwoods.” He turned his attention to Taryn, his leaden glare cutting her soul before he settled a look on Brandt. “Priest, I will only say this once more. Return that which has been stolen.”

Brandt opened his mouth to speak, but before any words were said, a bright flash of silver shot toward them.

“No!” Taryn moved to cover Brandt at the same time he threw a ball of amber flames at Zakael. A deafening explosion rang through the cavern when the two orbs collided. Sparks flared in a rainbow of color, and the impact flung Zakael backward with such force he hit the wall with an ominous *crack* before his body slumped to the ground in a motionless heap.

Waves of energy pushed over her, biting at her skin. Brandt staggered and then slid to the ground, pulling her with him.

“Brandt!” Taryn bent over him and felt for a pulse. His labored breathing echoed through the cavern. “No, no, no. Stay with me, Baba.” Rhoane knelt beside her and placed one hand on Brandt’s forehead, the other on his chest. “Help him, please,” she begged while stroking Brandt’s face. Her vision blurred with unshed tears.

Her grandfather’s eyelids fluttered open, and he smiled at Taryn. “My darling girl.” He reached up, cupping her cheek in his soft palm. “So much I have left to teach you. Too much left unfinished.” His gaze traveled to Rhoane. “*Cael glinth aedder dia. Kulmacht vroider s’ael llynvayr khol dorn.*” Brandt spoke in a language she’d never heard.

“What’s he saying?” Taryn asked Rhoane. His eyes widened, but he didn’t reply. “Baba,” Taryn pleaded, “what did you tell him?” A wave of nausea rose in her belly, and she swallowed hard to keep the sickness at bay. A green thread of Rhoane’s energy wound around Brandt, hovering above his mouth as he struggled to pull in air. “We need to take him back through the portal. We have doctors and hospitals. Someone there can help him.”

“No, Taryn.” The wheeze in Brandt’s voice hurt to hear. “This is the only place that can help me now.” The calmness in his eyes made her heartbreak more terrible. “Rhoane al Glennwoods ap Narthvier, I’m entrusting you with protecting Taryn.” A look passed between the two men, and Brandt gripped Taryn’s hands. “Promise me you’ll stay here on Aelinae with Rhoane. Promise you won’t return to Earth.”