

GATE OF SOULS

A Familiar's Tale, Book One

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A Familiar's Tale
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This is a work of fiction. All characters and events are fictitious and used fictitiously. Any similarity with persons or events is purely coincidental.

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So much of what is best in us is bound
up in our love of family. That remains
the measure of our stability because it
measures our sense of loyalty.

— Haniel Long



Prologue

*B*elwyn was agitated by the dry heat and sand. A gray mountain owl, Belwyn was bred for cooler climates, and the constant grit and hot sun of arid deserts made him cranky. His magical nature as a sorcerer's familiar broadened his adaptability, but that didn't mean he liked it.

"My feathers itch," Belwyn grouched.

The shrill whistling wind outside their tent only added to his frustration—one borne of helplessness as he watched over his sorcerer, Cathal. Cathal sat in mute misery on the dusty rug, dark hair sweaty and matted, gray eyes cast in a blank stare. Not even his rage remained, only sorrow that devoured his heart.

The oil lamps smoked and sputtered out, casting more gloom in the shelter. "Bloody hell," Belwyn grumbled.

Caliste entered the tent, "The storm is finally abating. We should be able to leave tomorrow," she said in a weary voice, shaking red dust from her hair and clothes.

"Good. I hate being blasted by sand," Belwyn said.

"Why is it so dark in here?"

"It reflects my mood," Belwyn bemoaned.

"How's Cathal?" she asked with concern. "Any change at all?"

"You needn't whisper, my dear. He's a statue of flesh, closed off to everything...including me."

Caliste sparked the lamps to flame with a nimble turn of her hand. "That's better. There has been enough darkness." She sat next to Belwyn, her beautiful black face pinched with concern, "I wish we could do something. He can't go on like this."

"The Sorcerer War is over," Belwyn said, "but for some of us, it will never be over. The death of his family was the final blow that broke his spirit." Belwyn fought down raging emotions that threatened to erupt. Nothing could excise this pain, but Belwyn would not retreat into his own mourning until Cathal could at least weep for his loss.

"Cathal once called Ashur son, when he married his daughter," Caliste said with bitterness. "I still can't fathom how he became such a monster. How he could—"

"I know," Belwyn whispered. "None of us will ever understand why."

Belwyn winced as memories of Cathal's wife and daughter rose like ghosts. "So many lost. Yllia, Rualla, even Rualla's familiar, Striker, all dead, along with so many others, because of a sorcerer's madness. The worst blow was Runa."

The thought of Ashur murdering his own daughter tormented Belwyn. Talons dug deeper into the ragged carpet as more memories unleashed. The fateful meeting on the battlefield in Thill and Ashur's gruesome gift: a silver urn filled with the ashes of Cathal's wife and daughter—and his granddaughter, Runa. Tied to the urn were the women's silver and amber wedding rings—and Runa's tiny rattle.

That confrontation led to a mad chase across the continent and several battles, ending here in Mowad, in the middle of this damned desert. The forbidden magic they used to defeat Ashur would give Belwyn nightmares for years to come. There wasn't enough ale in the world to make him forget, but he learned a long time ago that to fight evil you had to get your talons bloody.

Ashur was dead. The fight for Cathal's salvation would be harder.

"Any word on Ashur's forces?" he asked.

"Fled or surrendered, all over the continent. Even Ashur's demons are vanishing like phantoms, or crawling back into the foul pits they slithered out of. It's like they know Ashur is dead."

"What of Koll?" Belwyn asked with grim interest.

"That evil sorcerer has disappeared," Caliste replied with anger. "He's not among the dead or captured."

Belwyn's feathers bristled, "Pity. I wanted to stain my claws with the blood of Ashur's Chief Warlord."

"Don't upset yourself further. You should rest. It's been two days, and you haven't slept or eaten. If I bring some fresh food and water, would you at least pretend to eat?" Caliste asked.

"Maybe later. For now, just tell the others Cathal is resting," Belwyn suggested. "Let's not add to their concern. They've all been through enough already."

"Very well," she agreed. She kissed Belwyn, and then Cathal, on the head, and departed.

Alone with Cathal again, the owl pondered on how to reach his sorcerer. He couldn't remain like this. The dangers of his emotional retreat could be permanent if he didn't do something soon. He shouted, cursed, and begged. He nudged Cathal with his beak again and again without response. Desperate, he bit him on the shoulder, drawing blood. Nothing. Belwyn finally used the bonding to telepathically slip into his mind. He had not intruded before, since he wanted to allow Cathal his private mourning. But enough was enough.

Cathal...Cathal! Can you even hear me? It's Belwyn. Remember me?

There was a stubborn wall shielding Cathal's thoughts. At least it wasn't an empty void.

Cathal!

Leave me alone, Belwyn.

His response was hollow, barely a whisper. But it was something.

Not a chance. You should know me better than that.

They're dead. There's nothing left.

I know, Belwyn answered. The sorcerers need your leadership. I need you.

I'm not strong enough...not anymore.

"I need you," Belwyn wept aloud. "I will be strong...strong enough for both of us. Come back to me."

Loud voices outside disrupted Belwyn's concentration. "Damn it! Now what?" he snapped.

"Belwyn," Caliste shouted, "You better come see this!"

He relented and poked his head out of the tent to see what the commotion was about. The glaring sun *still* scorched the earth. The people were *still* dirty and smelly from lack of water.

And above in the hot, cloudless firmament of this unbearable desert, Belwyn spotted some new, unexpected arrivals.

In the sky a cavalry of Ilyrran rangers riding perytons descended to earth with powerful grace. Perytons, the magnificent winged deer native only to the lands of Ilyrra, were a rare sight in this bleak land. The stunned soldiers and sorcerers gave them a respectful welcome as they rode into the camp.

What the blazes are they doing here, Belwyn wondered.

Belwyn's feathers raised on his back when he recognized the lead ranger in the dark green and black of his command. As he dismounted a silver peryton, the desert gusts exposed a resolute wind-burned face, long black hair, and the upswept ears that marked the Ilyrran race.

It was Ryen.

The gathering crowd parted with solemn silence at his determined stride as he marched toward their tent.

Belwyn winged to Cathal's side, "Our friend Ryen is here. Cathal please, this must be important!"

Caliste lifted the flap and led Ryen into their small tent. Ryen looked weary and filthy, but it lifted Belwyn's heart to see him.

"Light's Blessing, Belwyn," Ryen bowed, giving the traditional Ilyrran greeting.

"No blessings or light here. We're a bit short on those now," Belwyn said with grim humor. "But I am glad you're alive, Ryen. Is your family safe?"

"Yes, thank be the Gods," Ryen replied. "I've been hunting you for days." He looked at Cathal, brow furrowed with worry. "How bad is he?"

"I wish I could say he's been worse, but that would be a lie," Belwyn confessed.

"Perhaps I can lighten his burden," Ryen said, kneeling before Cathal. Ryen gazed into Cathal's face, and said, "I'm sorry for your loss, my friend. Yllia was of our people. We mourn her and Rualla. But I have someone you need to see, Cathal. Someone who needs you."

Ryen opened his heavy cloak, revealing a small bundle wrapped in a blanket that began to cry. Belwyn sucked in his breath when he saw that the treasure he held was Runa.

Cathal stirred and gasped in a weak voice, "Runa."

"Yes, it's Runa," Ryen nodded. "Your granddaughter."

Cathal opened his arms and Ryen placed the weeping infant in his care. In the span of three breaths, Runa ceased crying and gazed with innocent trust at the man who held her. "How?" he whispered.

"We were fighting in the north, near Thill, where Ashur's forces crossed into our borders. While camped by the river, a red panther staggered into our midst."

"Striker?" cried Belwyn. "You found him!"

"Yes," Ryen nodded. "He was carrying a ragged cloth in his mouth. We recognized Rualla's familiar and ran to his aid. Striker's wounds were beyond our skill and he had lost a great deal of blood. Striker gazed at me with relief and laid his precious prize at my feet. He collapsed, and, in that fragile moment, he died in my arms. A cry issued from the rags he protected. We opened the scraps of cloth and found Runa. She had been content in the jaws of the panther and cried when we took her from him. Striker died before he could tell us how he rescued Runa from Ashur's wrath. He paid for his last act of bravery with his life. I'm sorry, old friends, for Striker. But I return Runa to your loving care, Cathal."

Runa's crystal green eyes, reminiscent of Rualla and Yllia, lit up the dim shelter. Tenderness softened Cathal's features as he cradled baby Runa. Hope seemed possible again.

Weary but relieved, Ryen stood and said, "We carried Striker's body back to Moonthorne. The Raven Wing honored him with the funeral of fallen heroes and buried him in the sacred grove beneath an old willow oak. When word

reached us the war was over, and that you were here, we came as fast as we could.”

“Thank you, Ryen,” Cathal said, his voice choked with emotion.

Cathal rocked Runa in his arms, until finally, blessedly, he wept.