

VOYAGER 15 SNEAK PEEK

POWER UNBOUND

Dream of Asarlai: Book Two

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SHAUNA

Shauna Connell pressed her hands into her armpits to keep herself from grabbing the potion from her fellow student and doing it herself. Star above, but Brian Mochrie was a nervous twit. He came across initially as all arrogant and confident but put him in the spotlight, make him test himself and suddenly he was like a virgin on a first date — shaking with anticipation and fear.

She almost smiled as his trembling hand extended over the beaker, and the dropper he was holding jerked up and down. She glanced sideways to see Asarlai watching him carefully and hoped their teacher realised how undeserving he was.

‘Nervous much?’ she thought at him.

He slid a glare at her from the corner of his eye. He probably wanted to call her every name under the sun, but didn’t dare in front of Asarlai.

Despite the fact she and Brian were both members of the League of Purification and dedicated to separating gadda from the pestilence of humanity, she’d never liked him. Brian came from one of the richer families in Sclossin and didn’t understand the value of work, effort and persistence. Everything he wanted had been handed to him from the moment he was born. Shauna thought that made him weak; Shauna was strong.

Brian squeezed the rubber and three drops slipped into the grey emulsion in the beaker. Stillness; Shauna wondered if he had actually failed. Star, let it be so. Then the liquid began to bubble and steam, turning from grey to a purple so dark it seemed black.

As much as she hated Brian, Shauna was pleased to see the potion had worked. The texts had again lived up to their promise.

‘It’s ready,’ Brian said.

Asarlai stood and walked over. Shauna noted the newly grey hair, and lines unfamiliar on a face that was well-known to most gadda. She felt a burst of pride that of all the people who could have received this new knowledge, Asarlai had chosen her. She saw something in Shauna that others didn't.

Asarlai bent down, looked at the beaker and sniffed it before she nodded to Brian. 'It looks and smells as it should. Now, see if it works.'

Brian picked up a syringe. Shauna tilted her head to check for the small hair inside the glass vial. Slowly, he drew some of the potion up into the vial. As the purple-black potion touched the hair, he murmured something under his breath.

The mixture in the vial bubbled.

'Shauna, bring the animal over,' Asarlai said.

Shauna opened the cage on the bench next to her and grasped the gerbil. It wriggled and screamed and she gave it a gentle squeeze, sending the message it would not escape. The rodent settled, but it trembled within her grasp.

She took it over and watched calmly as Brian pinched some of its skin and injected the potion. The gerbil screeched and tried to escape, but Shauna held it firm until Brian had emptied the needle. Then she put it back in the cage.

Brian nodded to Asarlai. 'It is done.'

'Give it some time to take effect. You can clean the laboratory.' Their teacher returned to the armchair in the corner of the room.

They started to clean away everything that Brian had used to create the emulsion. As Shauna picked up the beaker with the leftover potion, Asarlai said, 'Don't throw that away. Divide it equally between two containers.'

Shauna felt Brian's questioning gaze on her. She looked at him, shrugged and did as she was told. Whatever Asarlai had planned, it would undoubtedly be for the best.

When everything but the extra liquid had been tidied up, Brian asked, 'Is it time?'

'Try it,' Asarlai said.

Shauna followed Brian over to the cage. He took a deep breath, and she rolled her eyes. Show a bit of gumption, she thought.

He spoke a word. 'Muireadhach.' Irish for lord or master.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the gerbil began to twitch, and then shake, the small body staggering around the cage. It fell onto its side, shook one last time and then was still.

Shauna almost clapped. She wanted to dance. It was incredible. Amazing. With just one word, the creature had been killed.

'Test it,' Asarlai said.

Brian opened the cage and touched the animal. It didn't react. He poked it harder. Nothing.

'It's dead.' He took a step backward and looked at Shauna.

'It worked,' she whispered, her eyes shining.

'Well done,' Asarlai said. 'However, we need to test it further. I want you each to cut a lock of your hair and put it into one of the beakers.'

Brian looked at Shauna. 'Does she mean to kill us?'

'Of course not.' Shauna wanted to hit him. 'Why would she do so? She is training us to assist her, has spent more than a month teaching us.' Shauna walked over to the bench, picked up a knife and hacked a bit off her ponytail. As she went to stand in front of one of the beakers, Asarlai said, 'Wait. At the same time.'

Shauna looked at Brian, who had gone as pale as cream. He was going to refuse. He would show who he truly was, and Shauna would be Asarlai's favourite student. Her right hand. The one she relied on. The one she trusted. The one people would talk about for centuries.

'Brian?' Asarlai's soft voice whispered through the room but still Brian shuddered as though she'd yelled at him. 'Will you do as I ask?'

Slowly, he walked over, cut some of his own hair and held it over his beaker. Shauna held hers out and, at the same time, they let go.

As their locks hit the liquid, Asarlai said, 'Cacht.' Slave.

The potions bubbled and then subsided; tendrils of smoke wafted past Shauna's nose.

'Drink it.'

Without hesitation, Shauna picked up the beaker and downed it. The potion had a peppery taste and slid down her throat with more fullness than she expected. It thumped into her stomach and for a terrible moment she thought it would come right back up again.

But she controlled the reaction, turned to Asarlai and said, 'I am worthy.'

The teacher nodded and Shauna felt a thrill. The things they would do.

Brian stared at the beaker for a long while before he finally picked it up and drank it. He put it down, his mouth pulled into a grimace.

'How do you feel?' Asarlai asked.

Brian put his hand to his stomach. 'I feel a little nauseated.' Shauna rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Asarlai nodded. 'You will remain well, unless you betray me. Now, take out your notebooks and write out what you have learnt today.'

Shauna bounced over to the notebook, opened it and began to scrawl so fiercely that her pen nib ripped small holes in the page.

She understood why Asarlai had poisoned them — she needed to know they would be loyal to her before she started them on the next, more dangerous path. A path that would lead them all — every gadda alive — to glory.

Shauna was smiling as she wrote.

CHAPTER ONE

lone Gorton snapped the lid shut on the last plastic container and looked on the results of her morning of effort with satisfaction. There was a large chocolate mud cake — her mother-in-law's favourite — and her father-in-law's preferred potato and pumpkin scones. To keep Jack satisfied on the trip to the farm, she had included a lunchbox of choc-chip cookies and caramel fudge while for Mark there were the ubiquitous currant squares.

She traced her finger over the lid, a half-smile twisting her lips. Every once in a while, she did something that prompted particular memories of Patrick. Currant squares had been her husband's favourite, and as a teenager she'd made them whenever he and Mark went away on a trip together. Her brother always thought she'd made them just for him. She'd confessed the reality to his best friend on their first date.

It had been more than seven years since Patrick's death and still, there were moments where she missed him with a pain that brought tears to her eyes. She brushed her finger over her cheeks and went to find the one person who could always make her feel better.

Jack was sitting on his bedroom floor, surrounded by piles of computer games. His small face was ping-ponging between the two he was holding as lone walked into the room. He looked up at her, his face scrunched up.

'I can't decide,' he said. 'I'm only part way through Doom 4, but if I finish it then I'll have nothing to do, but if I start The Mighty Thor I might not finish it and then I'll have two games to finish, not just one.'

'I'm astounded you're only taking one,' lone said, moving a pile of games aside to kneel down.

'I'm not.' Jack looked back at the two titles in his hand. 'These are my serious games. I'm taking other games for entertainment.'

Star love him, lone thought with a smile. She certainly did. 'What other games?'

'Well, I've got my Nintendo DS so I'm taking Super Mario Galaxy Two and WarioWare — DIY and I'm taking Rock Band and the PS3 for Grandpa, 'cause he likes that you know.'

A suspicion began to dawn on lone. 'Have you packed?'

'Yep, see?' Jack waved his hand at the large suitcase on his bed.

lone went over and opened it and stared at the collection of electronic drums, guitars, microphones and games systems. 'Um, Jack ...'

'What?' He didn't look at her, intent on making his decision.

'While I can see that you have your entertainment needs well and truly covered and I congratulate you for being so thorough, I'd like to know what you're going to wear for the next two weeks. You aren't going to have those on day and night, are you?' She pointed to his jeans and jumper.

"Course not.' Jack frowned at her. 'I packed pyjamas.'

Ione looked closer and saw that indeed, his Godzilla-print flannelette pyjamas had been squashed down the side of the case. 'You need more clothes than this, Jacky-boy.'

'They won't fit.'

'Then you're leaving some of this behind.' She started to pull the instruments out.

'But Mam!' Jack jumped to his feet. 'Grandpa loves Rock Band.'

After a hard day in the fields, Paddy Gorton was more likely to want to collapse in front of the television than to rock it out on a plastic guitar. That's if Susie would even allow the raucous noise in her house.

'Then your grandfather can get his own. Where are all the clothes I washed for you yesterday?'

'There.' Jack pointed to the floor at the end of his bed. Ione looked and saw a pile of fabric pushed into the corner.

'Patrick Jack Gorton.'

'I'm too little to pack for myself.'

Ione looked at her very intelligent eight-year-old son and snorted. 'Yesterday you said you were too old for me to pack for you. I wanna do it, Mam, I'm old enough.' She mimicked his words.

He looked at her with big, solemn blue eyes. Patrick's eyes. 'I'm a kid. I can't be trusted.'

It was hard to be angry at him when all she wanted to do was laugh and hug the stuffing out of him.

'Let's make a deal. You can take Guitar Hero and the guitar, but no Rock Band, the drums and the microphone are making way for some actual clothes.'

'All right.'

'Now, you go pick that clean stuff up and fold it.'

'You'd do that better than me.'

'You're never going to get better if you don't practise.'

'I love you, Mam.' He fluttered his eyelashes up at her.

She laughed and kissed him. 'Fold. Now.'

Jack turned with a grumble but stopped when a familiar chime rang in the air. Lone watched all his assurance melt and a shifty look appear on his face. Why would Jack be scared of Maggie?

'Stay.' Lone pointed a finger to her son, then went into the loungeroom. On the wall was a button, installed by the previous Sabhamir, that she could use to grant permission to enter. He'd come up with lots of little tricks to get around her lack of power.

Maggie Shaunessy, her best friend, appeared. She was wearing a long red robe. This wasn't a social visit: Maggie was here as the Ceamir, the guardian responsible for overseeing interactions between the gadda and humans.

Lone made an educated guess as to the reason for Maggie's visit. 'What has my son done?'

Maggie rolled her eyes. 'Where is he?'

'Bedroom' Lone led the way. Jack was standing in the middle of the room, his eyes wide and soft. Trying to butter Maggie up, Lone thought. It didn't work.

Maggie bent down. 'Jack, why did you put that post on the Magic for Kids website about the gadda orders?' she said in a calm voice.

'It wasn't me,' Jack said.

'Yes, it was,' Maggie said.

For a moment, Lone wondered if Jack was going to continue his denials. Then his head slumped forward.

'They were talking shit,' he muttered. 'I had to tell them what real magic was.'

'Jack, how many times have you been told that you don't talk about gadda stuff to humans?'

'Lots,' he muttered, trying to dig a hole in the carpet with the front of his shoe.

Maggie put a hand on his shoulder. 'Mate, I know how hard it can be to keep the secret. Remember, I went to a school where I was the only gadda, and I wanted those kids to know me and like me and I hated that I couldn't tell them, or show them. But buddy, that's what we have to do. Gadda aren't just lucky to have power, we've got a responsibility to look after it.'

Jack looked up at her. 'Are you going to banish me?'

'No. But do it again, and I'll send the Heasimir to talk to you.'

Jack's eyes widened and Lone put a hand over her mouth to hide her smile. 'Never again, Maggie, I swear.'

'Good boy. Now, I've fixed the website, so there shouldn't be any damage done. But you aren't to go there again, you hear me? No chat rooms at all, in fact.'

'Yes, Maggie.'

'Good. Now, I'm going to go discuss this with your mother. You need to do something about this bedroom.'

The two women waited until Jack's bedroom door was closed behind them before they began to laugh.

'Great idea, Mags, threatening him with the Heasimir,' lone said, giggling. The Heasimir was the healer of the gadda and the coldest woman lone had ever met.

'She has to be of use for something. Now, I believe you should make me some coffee.'

'Sure thing.' lone led her friend into the kitchen to put the kettle on. 'Rocking the robe, by the way.'

Maggie sighed and her clothing shifted until she was wearing a skirt, jumper and knee-high boots — all red.

'I thought Jack might take me more seriously in the full- on garb.'

'Nice boots.'

'Yeah, I thought they were nice too. Yesterday. When I bought them. When they were black.'

lone laughed as she pulled the coffee out of the cupboard. There were many things that Maggie had found difficult to deal with since her elevation to the guardianship a month earlier. The fact her wardrobe had become all red was one of the harder ones.

'Be grateful you've got the colouring for it,' lone said over her shoulder and took a moment to admire Maggie's honey-blonde waves and blue eyes. 'Could be worse, you could be me.' She tapped her own tight red curls.

Maggie snorted as she walked into the kitchen. 'As if you've ever worried about clashing with your hair. God, I'll never forget the electric pink muumuu.'

'What you'll never forget is how good I made it look.' lone said as she put the kettle on.

'Yes, damn you. It was a muumuu, and it was electric pink, and you have red hair, and yet you looked exotic and wonderful and I hated you.'

'Thanks, Mags.' lone started to put biscuits on the tray, then stopped and looked over her shoulder. 'Is this an I-can-stay-and-pig-out visit or a quick-cuppa-before-I-return-to-saving-the-world visit?'

'Probably the latter.' Maggie leant against the bench, the smile slipping from her face. With it gone, lone suddenly noticed the small lines that surrounded Maggie's eyes and mouth — lines that hadn't been there earlier that year.

Star, had it only been four months since they were flatmates?

'Is everything OK?'

'About as OK as it can be when the most dangerous books on the face of the planet are missing and we don't have a clue where to start looking for them.' Maggie sighed and pushed her hand through her hair. 'Even with Sean Flaherty being as surprisingly helpful as he has been, we've got nothing. Oh, we do know roughly when they were taken, but that's it.'

A chill ran down Lone's spine. The Forbidden Texts were created centuries earlier and, after it became clear that they bent power and people and put the balance of life at risk, they had been kept supposedly safe and secure. So much so that most gadda had forgotten they existed.

But someone hadn't, had tracked them down and stolen them and no one really wanted to know what would happen if they weren't recovered.

Maggie herself had experienced the power of the books first-hand — Sean Flaherty had been under the influence of the texts when she had a one-night stand with him, and he'd sent a stream of monsters to her family's home in Australia in an effort to bring her back to Sclossin — monsters he shouldn't have been able to create. He'd done that after just one brief touch of the texts.

If the shadows on Maggie's face were any clue, Lone guessed her friend hadn't been getting much sleep in her efforts to help locate the books.

'You'll find them.' Lone walked over and gave Maggie a hug. 'I know it's scary now, but you'll find them and one day, we'll be laughing about this.'

'Oh yes, lots to chortle about so far. Let's see,' Maggie began to tap her fingers to count each event. 'Grandpa was almost paralysed, Mum was knocked unconscious, a human was attacked and, oh yes, Lucas was kidnapped and could have been killed.'

Lone began to tap her own fingers to refute the blackness of Maggie's thoughts. 'Your Grandpa was just hysterically paralysed, and tell me that isn't bloody hilarious for someone who is sixth order and supposed all-powerful. Your Mam finally got to have a rest, which she deserved; the human got a few days off uni which she undoubtedly needed; and, as for Lucas, well, you're making it up to him, aren't you?'

Becoming Ceamir was the least of the changes in Maggie's life. She'd found love with Lucas Valeroso, one-time unknown gadda and all-round hottie. If Lone hadn't loved Maggie so much, she'd be annoyed her friend had found him first.

'Bloody oath I am,' Maggie said, following her out to the table. 'So hurry up with that coffee, Gorton, 'cause I've got a hot man to return to.'

'Sure, rub it in.' Lone grinned, but looked over when she heard Maggie's gasp.

'I'm sorry.' Maggie moved quickly and flung her arms around her friend's neck. 'I didn't mean that.'

lone hugged her and laughed. 'I know you didn't. It's OK, Mags. I'm happy that you've got Lucas.'

'And you'll meet someone. I'm sure of it.'

lone herself wasn't so sure. Not that she steered clear of men — in fact one of the great things about Jack going to stay with his grandparents regularly was the freedom it gave her to find the occasional partner for a night of fun.

But she was quite sure she'd never meet anyone who could convince her to get fully involved or marry again. She just didn't think any man could make her as happy as Patrick had.

'You know you can always come talk to me about Lucas,' lone said, changing the subject.

'Thank you. It's good to know you're here.'

'Any time, darlin'. Me for you and you for me, remember?'

There was a knock at the door, followed by Jack's shout. 'He's here. He's here.' The two women turned and watched the little boy barrel past the kitchen and toward the front door.

'And the reason for this excitement is?'

'Mark's taking him up to the farm.'

'What did Jack do to deserve that?'

lone frowned. 'Can it, Shaunessy.' When Mark and Maggie had first met, they'd got along well and even dated for a while. Then Mark had suddenly adopted an almost obsessive respect for authority which put him at odds with Maggie's eccentricities. Over the years, the relationship had become completely antagonistic.

'Stay here.' lone went out into the lounge room to see her son jumping up and down excitedly in front of his uncle.

'When we get there, can we go straight to the creek?' Jack's face was flushed with joy. 'I wanna see if the dam is still there.'

'If there's time before it gets dark, sure,' Mark said.

'Cool. I'll get my things.' Jack spun on his heel and raced back past lone to his bedroom.

'Hey, Marky Mark.' lone stretched to plant a kiss on her brother's cheek.

'Io. How are things?'

'Good. Fine. How are things with you?'

'Not bad. Been working hard, so I'm looking forward to the trip.'

'I doubt you'll enjoy it for long. Jack's beside himself and I'm guessing within the hour you'll be regretting taking him.'

Jack's a good kid. He'll behave.'

Must be wonderful to live in a world of black and white, lone thought.

'I packed you some food for the train trip. I'll go get it.'

His eyes widened. 'Currant squares?'

lone laughed. 'Have I ever sent you on a trip without them?'

'Thanks, lo.'

She rolled her eyes at Maggie as she got the containers of food out of the kitchen. By the time she'd returned to the lounge room, Jack was struggling to pull his suitcase through the doorway.

'Jack, how much clothing did you put in there?'

'All of it. Honest, Mam. I didn't put the drum back or anything.'

'Here, Jacky, let me help you with that.' Mark came forward with a smile to take the suitcase. lone caught her brother's eye and they shared an affectionate grin.

'I'll just check.' She put the cakes down on the lounge and bent to undo the suitcase.

'You really should trust me, Mam. It would be better for our relationship.'

lone shook her head. Jack had put all his clothes in there, as he'd said. Unfortunately, he hadn't folded them but just stuffed them in.

'Your grandmother is going to think I'm a terrible mother, sending you off with a case looking like this.'

'I'll tell her it's my fault.'

'You bet you will,' lone said, quickly pulling the clothes out and, with Mark's help, re-packing.

They carried the suitcase and the cakes down to the taxi. Mark had left room in his luggage for lone's cooking.

'Now, give your mother a hug and then we'll be off,' Mark said.

Jack turned and wrapped his arms around lone's hips, pushing his face against her stomach. 'Love you, Mam.'

lone bent and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. 'Love you too, little man. Be good for Uncle Mark, and for Grandpa and Grandma.'

'I will.' There was a flurry of movement, then the car sped off.

Ione went back upstairs and, as the door closed behind her, silence fell on the apartment. She took a deep breath against the sudden crush of missing Jack and let it out slowly. She knew it was good for them to have their own time, do their own things, but damn she missed him.

'Oi, Gorton, coffee's getting cold.'

Thanking the universe for a friend who knew exactly what to say when, Ione smiled and she went into the kitchen.

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