

## Interlude from Awakenings: The Racial War Saga, Book 1

## Grandeur

By: A.J. O'Connell

Reality was centered by the Rainbow Braid, a pillar of raw magical power. The Braid however, only partially touched Reality, so it was hidden, as if in a shadow just at the edge of sight. As the massive eddy twisted, centrifugal force pulled finer threads away, which launched into ambience. Individuals who could see the colors through the shadowy veil, spellweavers, were able to not only touch the Braid, but manipulate it, mold it, and weave it. The threads were unaffected by the weather of Reality as they moved in their erratic courses, but each color was defined by a specific, self-serving pattern of travel.

The corkscrewing Blue ricocheted from unseen barrier to unseen barrier, while the Yellow floated like particles of dust trapped in rays of the sun. The Violet was long, thin and knotted easily while the Red was short and sharp. Orange was thick, like a chain that would bend and flex but never break. The Green Braid was more similar to a frayed rope with tiny threads peeling away as it sped past. The Indigo Braid was odd in that it was long, but sometimes thick, and sometimes thin, and sometimes, bulges rippled along the length as it burrowed through the air. Shaygin watched with concern as all seven of the colors spun wildly towards an unseen point in the sky above.

Trapped between the Forest Dragons and the Magma Dragon Cambalis, the only two humans that kept the peace in the area were the Headmaster of the Temple of Sorcery, Bargiss Vandelin, and Shaygin Bowman. While Bargiss dedicated his time to teaching the art of spellweaving to the world, and his everlasting soul to the goddess D'Aryasia, Shaygin patrolled, watched, and defended against all would-be assailants.

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Looking out from atop the Temple of Sorcery, Shaygin raised an eyebrow at the tumultuous, multicolored clouds. By allowing her vision to cloud, as if daydreaming, she could see the loose threads of the Rainbow Braid, and what she saw was disconcerting. The uncharacteristic swirl began to steadily intensify as she looked on.

Shaygin had been trained by the best to not only see the Rainbow Braid, but wield it as well. Spellweaving was a useful tool to Shaygin but her true love was the sword on her hip. She opened her hand and released the coiled whip of Indigo she had been holding. She watched as it too was sucked upward where it reintegrated with the dyed clusters. Her griffon mount chirped in response to her cautious mood. Shaygin's ash-black hair and rose-colored cloak waved like steadfast banners as the windy gusts increased. The griffon chirped again; a hoarse crow whose voice was too deep. She had never seen a day like this one, when the weather of Reality and the patterns of the Rainbow Braid acted in unison.

Shaygin stroked her mount's mane and cooed soothingly as she looked over her shoulder to the northwest where Mount Cambalis loomed. Other than the occasional burp of lava, the mountain was unusually silent. Perhaps Cambalis had decided to go for a stroll. Because of Headmaster Bargiss' diplomatic relations with the ancient dragon, Cambalis did his hunting away from the small hamlet of Orielle. Shaygin turned her mount and scanned the horizon, beyond more nearby farms, where Kelshin's Forest spread to the east further than she could see.

The griffon shook its head and ruffled its fore feathers as it waited anxiously to be commanded. Shaygin continued her survey while she stroked her mount's mane. Southward, the eerie, swirling fog called the Wall of Reality by local townsfolk blanketed the rocky beach

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beyond. To the north was farmland that stretched all the way to Mountainwood Pass, the slim passage that separated Kelshin's Forest and Mount Cambalis. All was as it should be, except for the Braid and the weather.

Shaygin looked skyward and dug her fingers into the thick mane surrounding her griffon's neck. She clicked her teeth, squeezed her knees and the griffon launched into the air.

"Easy Ashfeather," Shaygin pulled on the hair of the mane, "Don't strain a wing, let's get there alive." The griffon was eager to soar.

Ashfeather was smarter than the average griffon mount, and to Shaygin, far more beautiful. The black and grey feathers that made up her wings were unique, but the silver-streaked mane was unheard of. As a griffon, Ashfeather's hindquarters and flanks were similar to a lion while her wings, forequarters and head were similar to an oversized eagle, with the exception of the mane. The soft fur of that glorious mane had gotten Shaygin in more brawls than she would care to admit, even to herself.

"Higher now, let's go over it not into it," shouted Shaygin over the winds.

Ashfeather worked vigorously against the raging winds as they rose ever higher into the sky. Shaygin laid low on Ashfeather's back and they climbed past the ashy shroud, then beyond to inspect the disturbance over their town. The griffon strove to rise over the dense clouds that were a staple above Orielle, while Shaygin watched the Rainbow Braid continue to be drawn into a tight spiral. Ashfeather brought them closer. Shaygin stared incredulously at the cumulous clouds and caustic haze from the belching volcano as they swirled together, in unison with the Braid. She pulled on Ashfeather's mane once more and the griffon squawked.

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An inverted funnel formed above them. The Braid, the volcano's ashes, the wind and clouds all, twirled into a jumbled maelstrom of roaring chaos. Beating her wings against the suction was not enough, Ashfeather turned to flee but her wings struggled feebly against the overpowering wind.

Shaygin looked down as Ashfeather began to spin out of control towards the vortex. Directly below she saw the Wall of Reality that perpetually covered the beaches south of Orielle. The Temple of Sorcery and the students loitering around outside, awaiting a class graduation so far below, were unaware of the dangers above. Shaygin's stomach knotted as she wrapped her arms around Ashfeather's neck and clung tightly. Together, the duo disappeared into the twisted nether...

Visions of the Temple of Sorcery filled Shaygin's mind. A classroom full of students, sitting at rectangular wooden tables watched silently as the teacher spoke. Shaygin recognized Grettis, a plump woman who spoke feverishly about the Rainbow Braid. She was also a devout follower of D'Aryasia, but as the image faded into a twisting haze, Shaygin screamed in vain as the sound fell weakly from her lips. Her warning went unheard to the dozen children who sat attentively listening to their teacher.

*"Kekekek grrrrp!"*

Ashfeather straddled Shaygin on the stony outcropping as she opened her eyes. Groggily at first, until she realized what had happened. Shaygin sat up and sternly nudged Ashfeather

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away. When the griffon moved, Shaygin could not help but stare in awe at the warped landscape before her.

Shaygin pulled herself to her feet and shock stroked the stem of her mind. The region was nearly devoid of color. Diamond trees stood waving in the wind and with each ripple, chimes and bells sounded as the rhombus branches clanged against one another. Each gust of wind was different, and carried with it, every color of the Rainbow Braid. Soft whispers twitted past her as she slowly stood, dumbfounded.

“Intrusion...”

“Stranger!”

“Human...”

The murmurs slipped past too quickly for her to completely understand. Each word sounded from a different, metallic voice, and each voice was draped in musical sorrow. Grasping for understanding, Shaygin looked for the source of light, but no sun or moon was in the sky. The Rainbow Braid itself was glowing, as each windy breath carried the threads towards the diamond forest. Shaygin tried to touch the Braid, so she could manipulate it, intent to teleport home, but it was too fast, too slippery. Everything moved at blurring speed. She ran her fingers along the hilt of her longsword and was comforted by the runic inlay and fine craftsmanship of her heirloom.

With the exception of her current perch, the area was covered in black sand and crystalline trees that dotted the landscape. She turned and even the mighty Mount Cambalis was nowhere to be seen, but instead, a vast, empty black hole had been opened.

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“Color!”

“Blight...”

“Death...”

Fear tickled at the back of Shaygin’s mind as the whispers thrummed past her more urgently. She reached out once again, this time for the jagged Red Braid but the slimy surface did not allow her a firm enough grasp.

“Who are you!” She shouted, but her voice did not carry. There was no acoustic reverberation. It felt to her as if Ashfeather, so close, may still have not heard. Shaygin looked out over the ledge on which the vortex had deposited her and slowly backed away. Dread cinched a knot in her chest.

Thunder roared with a sharp retort that had no echo, only the clanging of diamond chimes answered. The cacophony of sounds beat louder. Shaygin ripped her longsword from the sheath on her hip and spun away from the emptiness to face the sounds. Several of the trees had slid out of their sandy prisons to stand as humanoids. Six diamond monstrosities were in motion already when Shaygin faced them. Lurching side to side, they made their lumbering way towards her. One creature was close enough that Shaygin felt air rippling off of its body as it vibrated.

“We are Beelfrond,” a whisper floated past. “Need colors?”

Shaygin cringed as the creature raised sharp, crystalline talons over its head. Ashfeather squawked as she lunged forward and crashed into the creature. A mass of feathers and glassy shards tumbled toward the sand. The two rolled around until Ashfeather found her footing and backed away. Silver hackles stood up from the center of her mane and Ashfeather twittered

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threateningly, even accusingly at the creature. Shaygin steeled her nerves and ran to the aid of her loyal mount.

Dazed, the diamond creature lay on the ground for a moment as Shaygin brought her longsword down against its chest. The weapon clanged against the creature's gemstone body again and again, but the resulting bell tolls only awakened more from the forest of diamond trees. Cerulean branches stretched and bent as diamond roots rose up from the black sand. Shaygin hesitated as more crystalline trees uprooted and morphed into humanoid creatures. All of them turned and stared at Shaygin as she resumed the sword strokes. Ashfeather stalked forward then raked her claws across the legs of the creature to no avail. Irritated at her own ineffectiveness, the griffon stepped forward and pecked only to screech wildly and jerk back in pain.

Ashfeather recovered and chirped in support of Shaygin's relentless assault until the sword cracked against the thick shell of the creature on the ground. She caught her breath as the tip of the sword flew through the air. A burst of colorful wind pushed the lump of metal over the cliff and into the void below as both the griffon and rider somberly watched its passing. Ashfeather's resulting mournful whistle directly reflected Shaygin's thoughts.

"Yeah," Shaygin agreed, "I think we're in trouble."

The wind blew torrential gusts and Shaygin looked down at the broken end her family's ancestral blade. The other five diamond trees stepped towards her in slow, lumbering fashion as the one on the ground began to right itself. Shaygin drew the sword back, over her head with both hands on the hilt. Ashfeather clacked angrily, her mane bristled in its entirety, and she bent her front legs with her wings horizontal to the ground, ready to pounce. A few anxious moments

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in time crawled past as the two inseparable companions stood ready. Beautiful Ashfeather looked regal in her posture. Shaygin stole that moment to enjoy her loyal mount's stalwart heart. Together they had braved monsters unheard of, save fairytales and bedtime stories, and she envisioned a glorious last stand. Shaygin glanced back, at the black hole behind, hoping for an escape and found only emptiness. A last stand here would be anything but glorious. Upon further introspection, Shaygin did not like the idea of a last stand at all.

The black hole shimmered and Reality came into focus. For a brief instant, Shaygin saw the inside of a school room once more. The rotund teacher turned toward the misty portal and for an instant, Shaygin believed that Grettis could see through, but as quickly as it had materialized, the image faded. Shaygin swayed and Ashfeather spread her wings in an attempt to appear larger, but when Shaygin looked again, six multihued, crystalline creatures loomed before her. Behind those six, hundreds, if not thousands more had begun shambling towards her.

Panic drove her into action.

Shaygin sheathed the sword and leapt onto Ashfeather's back in one fluid motion.

"No!" The urgency of the passing whisper gave Shaygin pause.

"Wait!" Another metallic whisper struck her mind.

"Go Ashfeather!" Shaygin screamed as she dug her heels into the griffon's flank.

Ashfeather burst into the grey sky, just over the reaching, branch-like claws. A moment later, Ashfeather squealed as a mighty gush of wind yanked her out from beneath her rider. Shaygin's feet swung wildly in the air. For that anxious moment, everything felt as if it slowed down. To Shaygin in that instant, the wind stopped blowing, all sound ceased to exist and even her heart

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refused to beat. At long last, she slammed down into the coarse sand with a grunt. Shaygin rolled to her back and saw three of the lumbering crystalline creatures standing over her. Ashfeather moaned somberly somewhere nearby and fear crept under Shaygin's resolve. The diamond creatures raised their claws high and Shaygin winced.

The Braid slowed its blurring swim through the surrounding ambience and altered course. Shaygin watched, mesmerized as the six diamond trees wove a musical web of the Rainbow Braid. They had no fingers with which to weave the Braid, but what they did was no less spectacular. As their harmonies intensified and unified, the Braid warped and changed in response.

Individual bands of the seven colors diverted from their original courses, circled around and passed through hundreds of crystalline bodies as it created a tight circuit. Shaygin held her breath in awe as the Braid slowed its movement and solidified into a complete, oval rainbow. She could not determine where one color began and another ended until the closest diamond tree extended its appendages forward and the Braid congealed around them. Surprised at allowing herself to be dazzled, Shaygin tentatively took hold of a streaming thread of the Green Braid. Subtly, she began to twist it through her fingers, in attempt to go unnoticed.

"You do..." a metallic, bell-like voice chimed. Shaygin could not determine if it was one tree or many that spoke on the wind. The mind-numbing sounds of the voice penetrated Shaygin's thoughts and snapped her concentration.

"Not stay..." finished another. Shaygin's hope of salvation and her incomplete spell faded back into ambience.

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“Not safe...” as the final words rang through her mind, the sand beneath Shaygin thickened.

The grains hardened against her skin and began to compress. Tiny cuts formed on her flesh then long, serrated wounds opened along her arms, legs and neck. Shaygin fought to sit up as the diabolical substance ripped her sleeves, pants and vest. She struggled violently against the dire sand but received several gashes along her neck shoulders from the crude, penetrating substance. The pressure on her arms and legs intensified until she felt as if her bones would snap. Shaygin screamed as she ripped her arm free of the grasping sand. Blood sprayed outward, feeding the sand's frenzy as her flesh tore open. Where her blood landed, the sand roiled and bubbled excitedly then pooled into dark mud. The mud slipped beneath her and pushed against her back as if it could force through her skin. Shaygin felt the strain against her entire body as the mud and sand began to suffocate her.

Bells pealed in sudden harmonies and the Rainbow Braid reacted. Two score diamond trees had surrounded Shaygin and Ashfeather. Several saw-like bands of the Red Braid sliced through the mounting dire sand. The sturdy Orange responded to the tolling music by encompassing Shaygin in a shimmering cloak. The sheet of protective color surrounded her and kept her from further intrusion as the sand was cut away. The radiant Yellow seeped into her open wounds and began to stitch the broken flesh. The diamond trees continued to increase the volume and intensity of their extraordinary song as more of the creatures joined in the symphony.

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When she realized she had been holding her breath, Shaygin opened her eyes and gasped for air. Flapping her wings Ashfeather exploded from her own bindings, circled several times over head before she settled on a hovering position above. Relief and concern flitted through her long series of nervous squawks. Shaygin felt the vibration of the Blue Braid as it corkscrewed around her and hastened her movement. Shaygin stood and realized she too was hovering, just above the groping sand. Indigo waves had been slipped between her and the black sand which kept her afloat. She watched as a wide string of the Violet Braid passed through several of the diamond trees and formed a knotted web. A thick handle of the flowing Violet then slid towards Shaygin. She reached out tentatively to the proffered handle and understood then what she was expected to do. The spell had been cast; the diamond creatures had designed a net with which to trap the sand, or hold it at bay. When Shaygin took hold of the serpentine handle, it felt energized and strong. Elation filled her at the realization that she could once again feel the Braid between her fingertips.

Shaygin squeezed the handle tightly and pulled. The web expanded outward from the chests of the diamond trees. As far as she could see, Shaygin watched the blanket of tangled Violet lay down in heaps atop the dire sand. A smile parted her lips and she looked at the living trees from a new perspective. As she hovered, Shaygin felt the energy of the diamond trees flow into her through the vibrations they emitted. Whether by spell or vibration, Shaygin could not tell, but she had been interlinked with the collective thoughts of the wondrous crystalline creatures. A light buzz filled her thoughts; a beehive of gentle music swarmed through her every emotion. Ashfeather circled over head, chirping encouragingly as Shaygin looked out over a sea

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of diamond trees. Her feet touched down on the Violet-covered sand and she rubbed her arm instinctively, but no wound remained.

“I have so many questions,” she stated excitedly.

“*Use colors, return home...*” from the incoherent buzzing, a harmony of sounds formulated words in her mind, though Shaygin could not determine if it was one voice, or many.

“*Quickly home...*” the urge was echoed by more voices.

Shaygin understood. She took hold of the Green Braid and combined it with the Violet by closing her fist around them. There was an immense amount of Braid in the area, which made gathering it as effortless as breathing air into her lungs, and she could wield it once more. In only a few moments, she had bound enough to create the portal she needed. Shaygin looked down, into the vast black hole and paused. A new opening had appeared and the instructor, Grettis was glaring at her...

“Shaygin?” Grettis said sternly. “Well?” The obese teacher’s stare had an uncanny ability to dig under the skin.

“Um...” Shaygin, the fourteen year old, shy spellweaving student delayed. She looked around the room at the others, “The lesson is that you shouldn’t judge someone because they’re different, no matter how strange they look.”

The other eleven students seated in the room giggled.

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“Well, that is a good lesson, but that didn’t answer my question.” Grettis folded her arms just under her ample breasts and raised an eyebrow. “Do you know why the Rainbow Braid bounces around?”

“Of course I...” Shaygin caught herself, and looked around at the other, grinning students in the class. She forced saliva down her dry throat as she panicked, she did not want to be laughed at again. Shaygin looked around for something, anything to avoid telling what she knew, until her eyes fell to the ornamental longsword mounted on the wall above Grettis’ desk.

“They’re diamond trees, but they’re not really trees,” she blurted. “They’re scary but nice because they help fight the black sand,” she explained to her teacher.

After an uneasy pause, the classroom erupted into laughter. Grettis smiled and quickly patted the air with her hands to the rest of the class.

Shaygin looked at the sword again and realized with distressing clarity that it was not chipped. Embarrassment crawled up her spine like a blazing trail of fire and turned her face bright pink in its aftermath.

“Oh? Well thank you for clearing that up. Seeing as how no one has ever discovered the true reason behind the erratic patterns of the Rainbow Braid, it is refreshing to know that we have had the answer right here, all along.” The students laughed at the instructor’s sarcasm. Grettis leaned her head to one side empathetically. Finally, after an agonizingly long time, she shook her head and turned to waddle to the front of the room.

“Diamond trees? Wow, did you stay up late last night thinking of that one?” Shaygin’s assigned partner, the cat-like fialt from Kelshin’s Forest leaned near to whisper in her ear. “You

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were daydreaming all morning! You humans sure are strange. I wonder what else you could possibly have been thinking.” Jerrem grinned, “Was it that elf that came in last night? I saw you dancing with him at the Headmaster’s surprise party...”

“Shut up, Jerrem!” She snapped.

“Oh, you know, the one with the patch over his eye and the black armor?” Jerrem smiled wide, showing his nearly perfect teeth, perfect except for a broken canine. “Elbow, Eldo... what was his name?” Jerrem teased.

“I’ll break the rest of your teeth,” Shaygin threatened.

The classroom door opened.

“Pardon the intrusion, Grettis, please, I must borrow Jerrem from you.” Bargiss stepped into the room. His signature purple robe and immeasurable amounts of jewelry swayed and jingled with every step he took. Bargiss had wide shoulders and black hair with tiny specs of grey. His beard was only a few days old, but still thick and Shaygin imagined running her fingers through the coarse hair. He was powerful, but carried himself meekly. He was the reason the town of Orielle even existed, yet he always asked for the advice of the farmers, the teachers and the workers before making any decisions that affected them. He was perfect.

Grettis appeared startled at Bargiss’ sudden entrance, but nodded and pointed to Jerrem seated next to Shaygin.

Shaygin’s eyes glazed over and she watched as the Rainbow Braid followed the Headmaster. The trail of colors only heightened her crush by encompassing Bargiss in a fantastical hue. He could have been a Beelfrond the way the Braid flowed around and through

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him. Shaygin felt flush once more, but not from the giggles of her classmates. She smiled at the memory of being able to dance with Bargiss the night before. She had danced with Eldorion, but only to get closer to Bargiss. Shaygin was glad that Meliahn and Pleathany were graduating and she hoped that they would leave the school soon. They were always talking with him and the fialt girl, Pleathany was always swaying her hips in front of him. Shaygin would get Bargiss' attention somehow.

Jerrem bumped Shaygin as he stood, glanced at her distant stare and bumped her again. He turned his wide smile toward Bargiss and kicked his foot out behind him, striking Shaygin in the knee. As he walked out the door, Jerrem kept his hands behind his back, all the while twisting the Green through them. Jerrem was the best in the school with the Green Braid, even better than those in the class ahead of them. Jerrem released his subtle spell which tickled Shaygin's ear as the door closed behind him.

“Get the diamond trees to break my teeth,” he said, “I'll say ‘hi’ to Bargiss for you”.

Frustrated, embarrassed and flustered, Shaygin slapped the tabletop and stood abruptly as if to leave. Bargiss would listen, he would understand, she just had to tell him.

“Oh no child, be seated,” chastised Grettis, “I have yet to get a moment of your time today, and I think you need some extra practice. Besides, Bargiss asked for Jerrem, not Jerrem's spellweaving partner.” Grettis smiled and clapped her hands together.

“But, we're partners and we're supposed to stay together, you said that...” Shaygin argued as she moved toward the door.

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“Ah, but I haven't finished hearing about today's fantasies,” Grettis interrupted. She waited patiently as Shaygin returned to her seat frumpily. Grettis nodded then interlocked her fingers.

“Please,” she said dramatically, “Tell the class more about these fantastic diamond trees and your delightful delusions of grandeur.”

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