

THE IRON DRAGON SERIES ↔ BOOK ONE

The Golden Cord



PAUL GENESSE

The Golden Cord

Book One of the Iron Dragon Series

By Paul Genesse

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This novel is for my wife, Tam—the love of my life.



For more about the plateau world of Ae'leron please visit www.paulgenesse.com

Thornclaw Forest

One inch is 20 Miles



The misty Void,
an abyss of white
clouds, surrounds
the Thornclaw
Plateau.

Cliffon

Wind
Walker
Mountains

Shadow
Cliffs

Blue Creek

Blue
Lake

Grasslands

Armistead

Cinder
Lake

Griffin
Ridge

Steam
Valley

Steam
River

Red Canyon

Boulder
River

Quartzada

Snow Lake

Snow Valley

Thorngrass
Plains

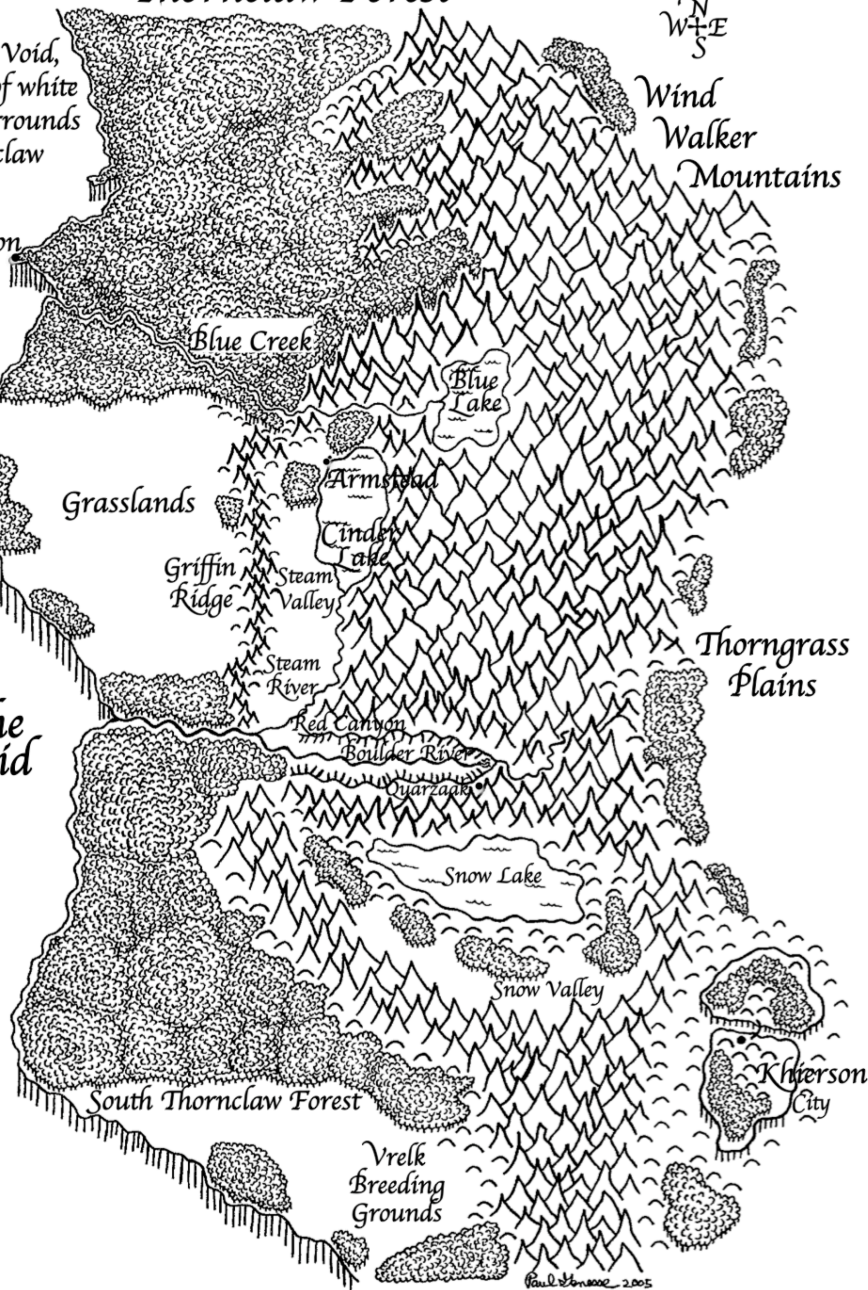
The
Void

South Thornclaw Forest

Vrelk
Breeding
Grounds

Khierson
City

Paul Stanoor 2005



The Thornclaw Forest

Don't look back.

Drake fought the urge to leave the trail and hide in the tangled undergrowth of the Thornclaw Forest. He knew the predator was behind him, thanks to the shrill warning call of the ferretlike surikat.

Don't let them see your fear.

The young man marched a step closer to his father and the party of eight veteran hunters bound for the mountains. He clung to the faint hope that the early morning darkness would hide them from the griffin following close on their heels. Even though one of the eagle-headed demons could tear him apart in an instant, he kept telling himself it didn't matter that he was last in line. As the youngest—only fifteen winters old—his people's customs placed him in the back, where his courage would be tested.

Acting naturally, so as not to alert the prowling griffin, Drake tapped his father casually on the elbow, then made the hand-sign for griffin—a fist with three fingers hooked like talons.

His father brushed his hand away dismissively, infuriating the young man.

The surikat's ululating call faded and Drake held his breath as an unnatural silence spread across the forest. All he heard were the hunters' vrelkskin boots on the moss-covered path. The griffin had to be much closer now, ready to strike.

Another piercing cry erupted behind them.

Drake and his father whirled and stood motionless. The bushy tail of a surikat vanished into the tangled canopy of thorny branches and serrated leaves. Drake scanned the ironbark trees, but saw nothing. He turned to look into his father's dark brown eyes, so much like his own, and made a questioning hand-sign. Tyler Bloodstone's eyebrows scrunched together and his

expression showed that he'd known all along—something was following them. The confirmation made the hair on Drake's neck needle into his skin.

Tyler whistled a short and sharp signal. The hunters turned stern faces toward him as he relayed the information with rapid hand-signals. His cousin Rigg, Uncle Sandon, and the other men took Tyler's cue and walked faster. Their hurried steps on the curdle-moss covered trail released a caustic odor that burned Drake's nostrils and filled his mouth with the taste of sour milk. His undesirable position at the end of the line guaranteed he would endure the strongest vapors.

Switching his empty crossbow from hand to hand, Drake fought the urge to bend back the thick cord with his iron crank-lever and nock a broadhead bolt. It took all his willpower not to break tradition and cock his weapon. He wanted to ask his father for permission, but Drake shook his head. Such a foolish question wouldn't be tolerated. He'd be told what to do and when to do it. For reassurance, Drake gripped the handle of his forward curved Kierka knife sheathed on his hip. He glanced backwards, his mind racing as he thought about what kind of creature could have landed to hunt them. Few wingless beasts would pursue ten men. It had to be an aevian; probably a griffin or wyvern. *Please not a dragon.*

Swallowing the sour taste of fear mixed with curdle-moss, Drake knew if he fell behind the monster would strike. He matched the older men stride for stride, almost bumping into his father when the hunters slowed their fast-march at a wide cleft in the trees. Drake focused on the predawn sky above. It was large enough to prove fatal if an aevian was circling, waiting in ambush. Perhaps they were being herded to the forest window where a flight of cunning griffins waited to pounce.

None of the hunters spoke as they crossed the open space. Ten pairs of eyes searched for the slightest sign of danger. Drake held the butt of his crossbow against his shoulder, aiming his unloaded weapon upwards and wishing it held a sleek broadhead or a stout, steel-tipped war bolt. Empty, it was an ineffective wooden club.

Drake's father ducked under a branch crossing the trail without turning his eyes from above. The young man tried to imitate his father's expert movements, but grabbed a tree limb to steady himself. Before he realized his mistake, a long thorn pierced his left palm. Muffling a curse, he pulled away as the pain spread across his hand. It would have been unforgivable for Drake to cry out under the opening, but having a bleeding hand was worse. Griffins loved human flesh and could smell blood on the wind. He might as well have lit a torch and screamed. He sucked on his bleeding palm, tasting the bitter poison, which would burn for at least an hour and leave another tiny scar. Thornclaws always left their mark, and the namesake plant of the dark forest was fond of his flesh.

The trilling song of a staerling as it flew off made his father glance back. Drake concealed his discomfort and hoped his father couldn't see the blood oozing from his hand. It was only a tiny wound and the curdle-moss would mask his scent from the griffin. He hoped.

Drake stifled a gasp. *The griffin will smell my blood on the thornclaw vine!* The aevian demon would do anything to eat his flesh once it picked up his trail. It would never stop hunting him. His heart sank into the rising acid pool in his stomach.

Even if he lived through the day, Drake feared this would be the first and last mountain hunt his father would ever take him on. He'd be stuck in Clifton, trapped in the village. He'd never climb the slopes of the Wind Walker Mountains, visit his cousin Rigg's home in Armstead, or explore the famed Red Canyon his grandfather had spoken about so often.

A hard glance from his father chilled Drake's blood. He had opened his mouth to admit his mistake and whisper a warning about the blood on the vine, but his father's frown struck him silent. Tyler squinted his left eye and tightened his jaw. He'd seen that look a lot, ever since Roan Graywood had been killed by a griffin three months ago. Since that day the Bloodstone household had been a very troubled place.

Drake's skin bristled with a pulse of warning he couldn't shake off as he considered his father's familiar expression. He couldn't escape the feeling of something creeping up behind him in the darkness—something he desperately didn't want to face.

The trill from another staerling caused Tyler to stop and spin around. His father's eyes became tiny black orbs as he locked his gaze on his son. "Get rid of him."

Drake shuddered. He knew what followed them. It was worse than a griffin. His father's tone and expression made perfect sense. Drake hesitated, his lips forming words of protest.

His father cut him off. "I want you to take care of it. Alone."

Drake's sour mouth turned dry as sand. He tried to think of a way to get out of the distasteful task, but he was dumbfounded.

"I'll go with him." Cousin Rigg stepped toward the rear of the line.

"No." Tyler barred seventeen-year old Rigg from moving closer to Drake.

The young men's eyes met. More than anything Drake wished that Rigg were his brother, not just his favorite cousin from a distant village. "But, Father . . ."

"Alone." Tyler Bloodstone fixed his stern gaze on his son. "You carry a thorn bolt. You're a hunter now."

Nothing came out of Drake's mouth, but his mind screamed, *Don't make me do this alone!*

"Catch up when it's done." His father turned and strode away with Rigg and the others, leaving his oldest child to face the challenge on his own. A hundred words Drake should have said echoed in his mind. He should've stood up to his father.

Turning, Drake clutched his crossbow. The drying blood from his pierced palm coated the stock, making it sticky in his trembling hands. He held the weapon close, searching for courage in the fine grain of the wood, then moved off the trail to set up an ambush and wait for his quarry.

* * * * *

Drake braided himself into the fabric of the forest, disappearing into the prickly brush and waiting with unblinking eyes. The excitement he had first felt about the adventure in the mountains had disappeared long ago. Dread clung to him like a clump of foul mud. He knew what he had to do, but his mind sped in a hundred different directions, *There has to be another way*.

Something moved on the trail. Out of the dimly lit forest a small figure on gaunt legs limped toward him. A slight tremor twitched the muscles of one of the young man's thighs, making his gait labored and unsteady. A small backpack rested awkwardly over skeletal shoulders and a child's crossbow with a slack string dangled in wizened arms. The ailing youth tried to maintain the quick pace of the hunting party he pursued, but his rapid breathing showed the strain on his weak lungs.

Drake wished a griffin would have appeared, instead of Ethan. His father would help him with an aevian, but not with his best friend.

At this moment, Drake hated his father even more than any aevian.

A nauseating thought almost made him retch with despair: A bolt through the heart might be the kindest thing anyone could do for Ethan. He could almost hear one of the older hunters—or maybe his father—saying the words.

Rejecting the hideous notion, Drake watched Ethan trudge along with his usual determined stare. Drake had always admired Ethan's willpower, and for a moment he considered letting the other boy trundle past without ever revealing his position. But Drake knew he couldn't.

He had to stop him.

Ethan would not survive the trek to the mountains, or the dangerous vrelk hunts once they arrived. Drake slipped out of the brush and stepped onto the trail. He stood rigid, a different grim determination etched on his face.

Ethan took one more laborious step before coming to a wavering halt. “Drake, I’m coming with you. We’ll see the vrelk herds and the mountain meadows . . . and Red Canyon . . .” The smaller boy’s words trailed off as he read Drake’s dour expression.

Drake couldn’t find the words he had to say to his adopted brother. He didn’t want to do it. How could he? Ethan’s only crime had been being born physically weaker than everyone else. For that he’d been labeled the outcast, the misfit. Ethan could never be more than half a man in the eyes of almost everyone in the village—except Drake.

“You knew I was following?”

Drake nodded.

“How far away are the others?”

“Not far.”

“We better get going or they’ll get too far ahead.”

“Ethan . . .” “What?” The young man’s intense eyes belied his frail body, but not his sharp mind.

“You know my father said you can’t come.”

“So what. My father would’ve let me go. He’d let me try anything. He never held me back.”

Drake couldn’t say it, but he thought: *Your father’s dead, Ethan. Roan Graywood is dead. The whole village thinks he’d be alive if he hadn’t taken you on a hunt. He was worrying about you and he should’ve seen the griffin before it killed him.*

“You’re not stopping me.” Ethan stepped forward with his head held high.

Drake took a wide stance, “I don’t want to, but—”

“Why’re you in my way?”

“My father wants me to send you back.”

Ethan shook his head. “I don’t care. He’s my Watch Father, not my real one.”

“He just doesn’t understand you.”

“I’ll make him. Keeping me in Cliffton is wrong. It doesn’t matter what your father says. I’m going to see all the places beyond this damned forest. I’m not hiding in Cliffton forever.”

“But you have to do what my father says.” Drake’s tone pleaded for his friend to be reasonable. “I’m sorry. He doesn’t know what you’re capable of.”

“Just because I live in the Bloodstone house doesn’t mean your father owns me like some Nexan slave.”

“He took you all in. He loves you. He just wants to protect you and your family. What would your mother or sisters say if they knew you were here?”

Ethan sighed, but didn’t answer.

“They don’t know you’re gone, do they? And what about Jaena?” Drake didn’t want to bring her into it, but he had to use everything—and everyone—he could think of. “You’re supposed to watch out for her while I’m gone. Remember?”

“Shut up, Drake. Your father just doesn’t want me around. I’m just a burden to him. He wanted to get away from me. So did you. Admit it. My mother’ll be glad I’m gone for a while too. She blames me for my father’s—”

“That’s not true. Don’t say that. It wasn’t your fault.” Drake wanted to believe what he was saying, but he couldn’t.

Pain and guilt spread across Ethan’s face as he hung his head in shame. He never talked about his father’s death. Drake figured it was still too painful for him. “My father just wants to keep you safe, and so do I.”

The terrible palsy affecting Ethan’s body made his right hand shake uncontrollably. Drake wanted to pick his friend up and rush off to see the village healer. Priestess Liana Whitestar and her golden-haired daughter, Jaena could stop the grotesque tremors, but they would always come back with a vengeance. Ethan was cursed.

“I can take care of myself, Drake. Now let’s get going.” Ethan hid his hand.

“Wait. You’ve got chores back in the village. You’re the path warden for the next two weeks. And you promised to feed my new pups. You’re supposed to watch over both of them and all the other dogs. You’ve always done your share. Don’t stop now.”

“Feeding guard dogs and pruning cover tree paths isn’t the goal of my life, Drake.”

“Keep your voice down.” Drake scowled and glanced at the canopy, hoping they hadn’t attracted any predators.

“I’m tired of getting the worst jobs in the village. Anyone else can do them better than me. It’s not fair. They won’t even let me go into the forest to hunt and I want to see the mountains for once. This is my chance. Mountain hunts don’t come very often. You told me yourself.”

Ethan was right. The sojourns to the mountains were rare. He didn’t know what to say. When Ethan made up his mind nothing would stop him. Seeing his father killed hadn’t broken Ethan’s spirit—at least Drake didn’t think it had.

“Let’s go. We’re falling behind.”

Drake realized his only option was to block the trail himself. He didn’t know what else to say or do. He needed time to think.

“Do I have to push you out of my way?” Ethan glared at him, his thin eyebrows raised. After laying his crossbow on the side of the path, Drake folded his arms across his chest. He hated resorting to brute strength to stop his best friend. Trying to intimidate Ethan made Drake feel like one of Clifton’s bullies.

“Move out of the way,” Ethan’s high-pitched voice cracked with emotion. “You promised.”

Remorse washed over Drake. He wished he could take back what he’d said after Ethan’s father’s memorial ceremony. It had been a mistake to promise that they would go to the mountains together.

“Move.” Ethan stepped forward. He was much shorter, but he put his frail chest against Drake’s strong one and tried to push past. Drake shifted to keep the smaller boy from slipping by

and nudged his friend backwards. Ethan lost his balance and fell hard to his knees, sprawling on the ground. Drake reached down to help, but Ethan slapped away his hands and bared his teeth. “Don’t touch me!” He struggled to stand as Drake knelt on the mossy trail, extending his open palms.

Ethan locked his bony fingers onto Drake’s hands, grappling for dominance.

“Stop it.” The words hissed through Drake’s teeth. He held firm in spite of his friend’s powerful aura of courage and the stabbing pain from the thorn wound now being squeezed. They stared at each other, neither giving up. The realization that Ethan wasn’t going to quit gave Drake a desperate idea. He didn’t dare bring up Roan’s passing and slur the memory of a fallen hunter, but there was something else he could say.

“You don’t carry a thorn bolt. You’re not a true hunter. You’re just a boy. You can’t go on the mountain hunts until you have one.” Hating every word that fell from his lips, Drake spoke like all the bullies who had ever picked on Ethan. “That’s Cliffton’s law. You’re bound to it. Your body’s not strong enough. Face it and go home.”

Ethan’s lips quivered, but words erupted as if he didn’t care if every griffin in the forest heard him. “The Council won’t even let me try to get a damned thorn bolt. You know that, you dung eating woodskull!”

Drake felt like he had just shot his best friend in the back with a poisoned bolt. Every hunter in the village had gone to Thorn Bolt Rock; but when Ethan had reached his fifteenth birthday he had been forbidden to go. It was too dangerous. Everyone knew it, but the leash intended to protect Ethan had become a noose. Shame clawed at Drake as he towered over his friend. “That’s because you can’t get one. There’re some things you just can’t do. This hunt is one of them.” Releasing his grip on Drake’s hands, Ethan’s shoulders sagged with despair. Drake heard the words he had just spoken, but they were said with Tyler Bloodstone’s voice. He had repeated what his father had told Ethan the night before.

Now Drake hated himself even more than he despised his father.

Ethan shrank a bit at Drake's betrayal, looking like a ravaged sapling dying from a bark-beetle infestation—but his obstinate expression remained.

"Doesn't matter. I don't need a thorn bolt to be a hunter." Ethan's voice was just a whisper as he fought back tears.

Drake knew he had to press his argument further to land the telling blow. He blurted out the words before he could think. "Go back before you summon a griffin down on our heads and get us killed like . . ."

"Like my father?" Humiliation turned to rage. Ethan's face became bright red and he clenched his fists. Drake thought his friend was going to punch him in the face.

"I hate you. You're not my friend."

Drake wished Ethan would have hit him instead.

The afflicted young man staggered to his feet and stumbled down the path toward Cliffton. Tears welled in Drake's eyes. He wondered if shooting Ethan would have been easier.

* * * * *

When there was no sign of his friend, Drake mustered enough willpower to catch up to his father and the others. The sun appeared above the treetops as he hustled along, turning the Thornclaw Forest from shades of gray to many variations of dark green. Drake had been looking forward to the light, but now it brought more attention to the barbs and stinging nettles of the lush undergrowth.

A strong hand reached out of the brush and grabbed Drake's shoulder. The young man drew his knife even as his father said, "You're lucky I wasn't a skulking aevian gone to ground."

You're lucky I didn't cut off your damn hand! Drake thought, pushing his Kierka blade back into its sheath and glaring at his stone-faced father.

"You sent Ethan back?" Tyler stepped onto the path facing his son.

Drake wished he'd stood up to his father before ambushing Ethan and sundering their friendship.

“Well?”

“I sent him back.”

Tyler nodded. “The village needs all of us to come back alive. With him along—”

“I would’ve looked after him.”

“You can’t protect him all the time. Roan was a veteran of the Thornclaw and he’s dead. What makes you think you could’ve done better than his own father? Do you want to end up in an aevian’s belly? This isn’t a children’s game out here.”

“It’s just not right.” Drake said what Ethan would have. Things were always right or wrong with Ethan.

“I know it wasn’t easy.” Drake heard the pride he longed for in his father’s voice. “But you did what you had to do.” He didn’t hate his father so much at that moment. Tyler put a hand on Drake’s shoulder. “He’s lucky he lives in Clifton. Our village is a good place for little Ethan, even though he’ll never be a hunter.”

Drake touched the ceremonial thorn bolt in his leg-sheath and wondered if Ethan would ever forgive him. A cold chill crept up Drake’s spine, rooting him in place.

“What?” Tyler scanned the canopy and surrounding bushes preparing to loose a killing bolt at whatever had spooked his son. “I don’t see anything.”

Spirals of fear pulsed through Drake’s chest. His eyes opened wide. He knew what Ethan was going to do.

“What’s wrong?”

Drake flung his pack and crossbow to the ground, then sprinted back down the path.

“Where’re you going?!” Tyler called as he scooped up the discarded gear and chased after his defenseless son.

“To stop him!”

Drake ran as fast as he could down the trail, dodging the low-hanging branches and poisonous vines. He outran his pursuing father, moving faster than he ever had through the

dangerous forest. He almost didn't care about the chance of ambush by an aevian demon. His friend's life was at stake and he was willing to risk his own for his adopted brother.

Drake's face and hands were soon cut and bleeding after a few minutes of rushing through the Thornclaw. He ignored the pain, accepting it as fair punishment for what he had done to his best friend.

The village was close and the trail became less wild as it approached Cliffton. He spotted the open ground between the forest and the village's long palisade wall. The wide firebreak was barren except for countless tree stumps and small ground-hugging plants. He glanced at the open ground, then up at the thick domes of the cover tree grove before dashing away from the village gates.

Drake ran back into the untamed forest, veering toward the edge of the great plateau, near where Cliffton had been built. He took the path to the Lily Pad Rocks and the edge of the Void. He could almost sense the yawning abyss of the Underworld as if it called his name, tempting him to come closer.

Any moment now, the ground would fall away and the sea of clouds would begin. Drake nearly tripped over Ethan's pack and crossbow, and the sinking feeling in his stomach intensified. He hoped he wasn't too late as he approached the terminus of the plateau. *Please Goddess, let me be in time. I'm sorry for what I did.*

The brightness at the end of the forest tunnel made him blink. Blinded for an instant, he respected the danger of falling into the Void and slowed his mad sprint. His eyes adjusted to the glare and he saw the lip of the stony cliff.

Beyond the sheer precipice, an ocean of clouds stretched to the horizon. The deep green of the forest contrasted with the sea of pure white mist reflecting the morning sunlight. Drake swerved left at the edge of the unfathomable gulf. The surface of the wavy mist began five hundred feet below the cliff. He had no idea how deep the fog extended before the Underworld

began. Not wanting to find out, he ran alongside the chasm taking careful strides—a stumble would mean death.

At last, Drake spied his destination. The six Lily Pad Rocks poked up from the Underworld like long demonic fingers of grayish stone. The summits of the flat-topped towers were the same height as the plateau where the Thornclaw Forest had sunk its roots. Five of the spires were barren except for a few patches of crusty lichen.



Drake spotted Ethan staring at the sixth and furthest rocky island. His friend's back was to him. The frail youth stood wavering in the strong breeze and appeared unaware of Drake's arrival.

Despite his fear, Drake was impressed Ethan had made it so far out. Leaping across all but one of Lily Pad Rocks was quite an accomplishment for a person with his strength, but Drake knew he wouldn't stop until the end.

There was one more jump to make, the longest of them all. Drake glanced at the rare and ancient sikatha tree clinging to the sixth rock where it had watched over the Void for hundreds of

years. The squat and thorny sentinel grew on the most remote island—Thorn Bolt Rock. Thick barbs projected like quills from its fat trunk.

To become a fully recognized hunter Ethan needed one of the thorns, but Drake had to stop him before his friend fell to his death. Drake prepared himself for his jump over the Underworld. If he missed a step he would plummet into the abyss, where his soul would be forever doomed to wander as a ghost.

Drake launched himself toward the nearest Lily Pad, easily making the short hop onto the first of the six pillar-shaped rock islands. He had made the long step several times before. For him the mental challenge had always been greater than the physical one. There would be no hunters covering them, and a person never knew if demons were watching and waiting to fly up and attack.

Ethan stood motionless, ready to attempt his final jump at any moment. Drake knew Ethan didn't lack the heart, only the body for the last challenge.

"Ethan, stop!" Drake screamed, knowing that all the heart in the world wasn't enough sometimes. Ethan heard the plea and turned his grief-stricken face to Drake, who recognized the mournful expression he had seen since Roan Graywood had been killed. His face showed defeat. The final leap was impossible. The Void had finally crushed his friend's unrealistic hopes of becoming a hunter.

Drake vaulted over the fourth gap and bounded across the rocky spire. He'd be at his friend's side after one more easy jump.

Ethan shook his head at Drake.

He's not turning back. Drake could see it in his friend's eyes. As Drake neared the fifth crevasse, Ethan lurched toward Thorn Bolt Rock. Drake nearly miscalculated his own leap when Ethan shambled toward the depths separating him from the far island and the prize growing on the venerable sikatha tree.

Ethan picked up speed, but it wasn't enough. His friend flung himself forward, arcing over the chasm.

Drake sucked in his breath. Ethan wasn't going to make it. There was nothing Drake could do. He blamed himself for the nightmare unfolding in front of him. He had pushed his friend to this ultimate moment of insanity. Drake's arrival had spurred Ethan to try a desperate attempt to become a hunter. Now his best friend was going to die.

Ethan's bony hands and palsied arms barely caught the lip of the rocky island. His lower body slammed into the stone tower. Drake gasped when he thought he heard the sound of his friend's bones breaking.

But there was a chance. Ethan hung on.

Drake's legs had felt like tree trunks at times during his desperate run through the forest, but he reached deep into his soul and sprinted the last few paces.

Ethan dangled above the gaping mouth of the Void as Drake reached the final gap and leaped with all his remaining strength. He sailed over Ethan's head and landed hard on the weathered ground. Momentum pushed him forward, but Drake whirled around and lunged for Ethan's hands.

Their eyes met.

Ethan fell.

"Ethan!" Drake shrieked and reached out to his friend, almost hurling himself over the edge. Ethan screamed as the opaque fog of the Underworld enveloped his withered body, devouring him.

Ethan was gone.

Drake lay paralyzed on the cold rock and stared into the misty chasm. His wide, unblinking eyes searched in vain for his lost friend. Drake's body shook as the wind whipped at his face. A whisper escaped his trembling lips, "Ethan, I'm so sorry. Please come back."

Only the empty, mocking Void stared back at him.

Part One

The Clifftoner

I

After years of searching, The Dragon is finally within my reach.

—Final entry in the Lost Journal

Bölak Blackhammer screamed as the dragon fire melted his flesh. The huge tunnel blazed with light and for an instant he spotted the dragon's head at the eye of the firestorm. The dwarven warrior flung away his white-hot metal shield. The round disk had blocked most of the wyrm's fiery breath, but it had become like a branding iron, searing through his clothing and roasting his skin.

Fighting through his pain and the thick cloud of smoke, Bölak saw the monster's long black horns jutting forward like a bull's as it prepared to charge. The dragon's gigantic mouth filled with flames and its eyes shone red as it locked its gaze on him.

Choking on a sulfurous cloud, the band of dwarven warriors struggled to breathe as the sudden inferno consumed the air itself. Bölak fell to his knees with the others, taking shelter behind a pockmarked boulder. For a fleeting moment a fading crimson glow surrounded the dwarf's body. He realized that the powerful Earth magic shielding him and the other dwarves from fire had been shattered by a vile Draconic spell an instant before the conflagration.

Peering over the rock, dwarven warrior saw the charred bodies of Gillur and Tharak on the cavern floor. The flames had been hot enough to melt their armor and the half-molten puddles

of metal and flesh barely resembled the two dwarves slain by the wyrm. “Fall back!” he yelled, as those with unburned eyes saw death approaching.

“To the small tunnels! Run! We’ll make a stand there!” Bölak shouted, wincing in pain from the smoking burns on his arm. As they fled, he blinked away tears, as much from the pain and caustic air as from the deaths of his friends.

Blood sprayed across Bölak’s neck. He glanced back to see a giant claw tearing through the chain mail of Doran, whose burning boots had hindered his retreat; but the brave dwarf’s sacrifice didn’t stop the raging creature.

Stones rumbled as the beast closed in. Their rear guard, Karek, loosed a steel-tipped crossbow bolt, which darted through the smoke-filled tunnel. Enchanted with powerful Earth magic, the missile flared with silver light as it pierced the scaly hide of the dragon’s neck, sending jolts of silvery-white energy surging across the dragon’s iron-gray scales. Roaring in pain and rage, the colossal beast checked its charge and threw back its horned head.

Knowing the priests needed time to reinvoke the magic that would protect them from the devastating flames, Bölak stopped running. He yelled to his followers, “Go! I’ll hold here!”

Bölak’s best friend paused. Nalak’s neck swiveled and his always-stony expression fractured like a rock hit by a sledgehammer. Sadness poured from the old dwarf’s eyes as Bölak realized Nalak would rather die than leave his side.

A pain much sharper than his burned shield-arm filled Bölak’s chest when he stared at his most loyal friend; but taking advantage of Nalak’s delay, he flung the smoking pouch holding his rune-inscribed journal to his second in command.

“Go! Live!” Bölak screamed as his friend of so many years clutched the journal to his chest. Nalak gave him one sharp nod and gritted his teeth before fleeing down the tunnel with the other warriors. In the span it took Bölak to whirl around and face the approaching dragon he prayed to Lorak. “Let them return and finish our Sacred Duty.”

Bölak shouted the war cry of his clan, “Blackhammer!” his deep voice reverberated off the cavern walls as he brandished his ancient warhammer.

The iron-gray dragon stopped and stared down. Fury and loathing beamed from the dragon’s eyes. Scalding spittle dripped to the rocky floor as the beast opened his cavernous mouth and lunged at the lone dwarf blocking his path.

As the massive head descended, Bölak had only a heartbeat to take aim before throwing his magical blacksteel hammer at the dragon’s forehead.

The sword-length fangs approached at incredible speed as the hammer flew to its mark.

In the next instant, the battle was over.

* * * * *

Bellor Fardelver bolted up from his mossy bed under an ironwood tree. The old dwarven War Priest snatched up his axe even as he opened his weary, golden-brown eyes. As the verdant trees came into focus Bellor lowered his guard. He thought, *What did I see? A terrible fight between my kin and Draglûne? Was it a vision of the past, or the future?* Bellor noticed Thor Hargrim, his much younger dwarven companion, standing watch over their primitive camp in the depths of the Thornclaw Forest. “Dreaming of battle again?”

Bellor nodded. *Perhaps it was just a dream.* He couldn’t be certain and tugged nervously on his graying beard, which had a few streaks of loamy brown running through it.

Thor rubbed the green stains and debris of the forest off his round shield emblazoned with a black warhammer. When Bellor noticed the Blackhammer clan symbol his mind filled with images of melted dwarven bodies, a dragon’s mouth spewing fire, then glaring at him with hate-filled eyes.

Bölak stood alone in the path of Draglûne. I saw The Wyrms through Bölak’s eyes. “It was so real,” he whispered to himself. Bellor decided to record the frightening images in his journal for later study. He took out his small, leather-bound book. Rather than writing down the horrific dream, however, he found himself praying that he and Thor would find the village where they

would attempt to hire a guide. *Perhaps the humans will know the fate of our lost kin? I can only hope that they do and this trek into the wildwoods will not end in our deaths. We must find Bölak and the others.*

Praying silently, Bellor rocked back and forth. Thor stopped his fastidious polishing. The young dwarf's lips parted behind his dark brown beard, but he didn't ask another question. Grateful for Thor's uncommon silence, Bellor prayed for guidance and considered what he had seen. In his mind he saw the dragon fire killing his kin again . . . and again.

Bellor's eyes shot open. *The vision was a warning! We cannot fail!* The old War Priest struggled to his feet, locking his wild gaze on his friend. "We've rested too long. We've got to move."

A sudden gust rustled the leaves. "What's wrong?" Thor raised his shield and scanned the looming trees.

"That's not wind." Bellor lifted his axe. "It's an aevian's wings. It's landed behind those trees."

II

The Void is the source of all evil.

—Priestess Liana Whitestar, litany from the Goddess Scrolls

Drake stared into the Void from high atop Clifton's wooden watchtower. The ocean of white clouds below brushed against the sheer walls of the plateau as the wind blew them south. Leaning forward, he searched for any break in the mist stretching to the horizon. Wispy vapors floated in the air like restless ghosts. He had seen it a thousand times before.

Mist and fog. Nothing solid, only ephemeral vapors rising from somewhere in the Underworld. In the five years since Ethan had been taken, the veil over the unfathomable abyss had never parted, but Drake kept looking into the depths where his best friend had fallen. For some reason, he felt like today of all days, he needed to be watching the Void and treetops.

A sudden breeze tousled his dark brown hair. A vortex of mist caught his eye and he wondered if some creature churned the clouds from below. The superstitions about the Void were many, and the old villagers often said that a misty vortex was an omen of danger, perhaps the sign of a demon coming up from the Underworld.

Drake snatched his crossbow, slipped his foot into the stirrup on the front of the stock and began bending back the cord with his split-tipped iron crank-lever, or dog's foot, as his grandfather called it. His muscles bulged as he fought against over a hundred pounds of draw weight until the cord latched into place. Without ever turning away from the Void, he slipped a feathered bolt from the quiver on his hip and loaded it into the track. He almost hoped for something to break the monotony of the never-ending clouds and moved his finger to the smooth wooden trigger carved by his grandfather's expert hands.

Drake waited long enough to see that no creature, demonic or otherwise, was rising up into the sunlit world. *Nothing. Just the Void tormenting me.* His lips curled into a grimace as the vortex subsided. *I must stop listening to the superstitious ravings of the rest of the village,* he thought, dry releasing his crossbow. He took a deep breath of the early spring air to clear his mind. He always expected the breeze from the Void to be smoky and foul, but it smelled fresh and moist. How could the Priestess be correct about the ever-smoking fires down there? It didn't seem right, and the more Drake had thought about it recently, it never had.

But who was he to question the Goddess Scrolls of Amaryllis? "Face it, Drake," old man Laetham had once said, "Ethan's soul is damned. Stop questioning the wisdom of the Scrolls or your spirit will be punished for unbelief."

Unbeliever. Good.

Even though he liked the sound of that, Drake hoped the rest of the villagers didn't think of him so poorly. He worked hard to gain their respect—though at times he didn't think he'd been very successful. What did it matter if he didn't believe exactly how they did? *I do my duty and serve the village. That's what should matter the most.*

The faint, high-pitched laughter of a small child floated to Drake's ears. The boy was close to the watchtower, playing in the cover tree pathways.

"Neven, help Mommy find the herbs."

Drake recognized the voice. *Mae Boughcutter. Jaena's friend.*

The boy's laughter faded away, swallowed by the trees of the large unpopulated garden-grove where the small fields had been planted. Drake was pleased that he had finished pruning the cover paths so Mae could navigate the trails without getting stabbed by thorns while keeping an eye on her four-year old son. Clearing all the paths in the garden-grove had taken several hours, and his right arm ached from swinging his Kierka blade. But the pain didn't matter. There was still much work to be done.

The loose hinge on the east gate had to be tightened before his father and the others returned from their hunt. They'd be back from where Blue Creek plunged into the Void in a few hours. Carrying the butchered meat was the hardest part of their trip, and always put his father in an awful mood. Tyler Bloodstone would berate him in front of all the hunters if the gate wasn't fixed before they returned.

I do the work of two men and Father still isn't satisfied, Drake shook his head. Path warden and village guardian. No one else does both jobs, but still I'm ridiculed. They ambush a vrelk after sitting under a tree for a few hours and they're real men?

"Nev-en! Where are you?" The fear in Mae's voice slapped Drake in the face. He realized that while he was feeling sorry for himself the little boy had run off into the grove. His hunter's intuition whispered ill tidings and the young mother's urgency compelled Drake to slide rather than climb down the ladder. *The gate can wait. Damn my father.*

As he hit the ground, Drake had the terrible feeling that leaving the watchtower and the alarm horn was a mistake, since no one was watching over the village. He couldn't shake the feeling as he concealed himself within the shadows of interlocking cover trees and listened for Mae's voice. He heard the sound of his two bullmastiff dogs panting and suspected the boy had passed nearby.

Jep and Temus whined and wagged their tails as Drake hurried toward them in the bushes. Their black frowning faces with pendulous jowls stared up at him as the dogs rolled on their backs, showing him their bellies.

"We've got to find Neven. Get up, boys." Drake patted their bellies and dust rose from their fawn-colored coats. "Find him. Come on." Temus didn't understand and licked Drake's boots with his pink tongue, but Jep jumped up and sniffed the ground where a path led into the grove.

"Jep, do you smell Neven?" Drake knelt down touching Jep's back as Temus arrived to help. "He came by here, didn't he?" Drake pointed at the ground and the dogs' noses snuffled

over the trail. Drake bit his lower lip waiting for them to find the scent. “Nev! Where are you, baby? Come to Mommy.” Mae’s distant, panicked voice sent slivers of ice into Drake’s guts.

A loud *woof* announced that Jep and Temus had found the boy’s trail.

“Find him.”

The dogs trotted down the path, following their noses. Curdle moss would have made tracking by smell impossible, and Drake was thankful the shade-clover blanketing the trail didn’t obscure Neven’s scent. The dogs led him toward one of Clifton’s many hidden cover tree paths. He slipped through a tight thorn-door after the dogs, turning his broad shoulders sideways and ducking to allow his nearly six-foot frame to fit through the space between the iron-strong branches. He had pruned the barbs, but kept the thorn-door narrow to keep out big aevians.

As he passed through the doorway the strong, peppery scent emitted by the broad leaves repelled the hook flies buzzing around Drake and the dogs. *At least Neven will be free from them*, Drake thought, but he worried about the child stumbling into a nest of the nearly impossible to eradicate fever ants. One step on a hidden mound and the boy would be stung to death.

Being under the most sacred kind of tree in the village usually made Drake relax, but his shoulders tightened as he passed the cover tree’s thick central trunk. He scanned the ground where the lowest layer of the tall branches arched down and into the dirt to form a wide circle around the base of the trunk. The lower boughs drooped to the ground and took root, caging the area and forming a dome. The wooden bars grew close together where they had melded with the ground, and only small animals like surikats or thorn vipers could pass between them. Larger creatures would be held back after feeling the poison sting of the thorns.

Drake hoped Neven hadn’t slipped through a small break where he couldn’t follow. Even if he had an axe, it would take at least half an hour to hack through the branches. His arm was already sore from pruning the thorns from the cover trees doorways, but wherever Neven went he would follow.

The dogs led Drake from one giant cover tree to the next, tracing the boy's scent down the camouflaged pathways. *Neven's probably lost and afraid.* Anyone unfamiliar with the grove would have difficulty navigating the thorn-doors and the hard-to-see trails. Any footprints on the lush shade-clover would have already disappeared as the soft ground cover sprang back to its original shape, but Drake searched for any sign of the boy or his mother. Mae's voice had grown distant—then silent. He realized she was too far away for him to hear. Mae must have gone the wrong way.

The vortex of mist Drake had seen in the Void swirled in his mind. Right after he saw it was when Neven had run away from his mother. *Don't be a fool.* He chastised himself for the superstitious thought, but he couldn't shake an uneasy feeling that made the old scars on his forearms itch as if fever ants were crawling all over him. His nervous touch broke open a fresh scab from his morning work.

Drake didn't pause to staunch the oozing blood and instead glanced through the branches of an adjacent cover tree, searching the shadows. Another path ran parallel to the one he and the dogs were following.

Laying face down in shade-clover was Neven's tiny body.

"Neven!" Drake rushed toward the boy, but a cover tree barred his way. He reached through a gap in the ground-rooted branches, ignoring the thorns scraping against his shoulder. Stretching as far as he could, he grabbed the boy's slender arm.

Neven lifted his face from the soft shade-clover with a playful smile. "How you see me?"

Drake sagged backwards. *Just a game. Thank the Goddess.* "Neven, stay there. I'm coming to get you." He glanced at the adjacent path where Neven had been hiding. He'd have to backtrack past a long screen of cover trees separating him and the four-year old.

"No. Dwake. I play hiding."

"*Neven.* Stay there."

The boy's cherubic face beamed a smile before he darted away. "Jep, Temus. Find him." Drake pointed down the trail and the dogs took off while Drake ran the other way to trap the boy between them. He sped down a path beside a vegetable garden, always keeping an eye on the patches of open sky. A flight of small birds, thorn shrikes, sat in a line on a branch where they had impaled a tree frog on a thorn. They picked at the frog's flesh with their sharp bills and watched Drake with their little black eyes. He stomped past the shrikes, which took flight and disappeared. Superstitious thoughts flitted through his mind. *The little demons might report my position to one of their larger cousins. I'll have to be ready.*

Drake arrived at the spot where Neven had been laying. The boy had scampered away, but Jep and Temus loped down a nearby path after him. Drake took a different route to cut Neven off and saw rows of vegetables growing in the open ground.

Scanning the crop area, Drake made certain Neven hadn't taken a short cut. The children of Cliffton were taught to stay under cover, but Neven was so young he might forget. A griffin or some other aevian could swoop in and snatch him before anyone would know what had happened—especially with no one in the watchtower.

Passing the garden where old Tearl, Jep and Temus' sire, had been killed defending Tallia, Drake's sister, made his heart skip a beat. She had twisted her ankle running for a cover tree, but Tearl had held off the rogue griffin long enough for her to crawl to safety. The aevian flew off with the valiant bullmastiff clutched in its talons instead. Drake wished he had been there with Tallia, instead of being on a vrelk hunt. *What a waste of time. Even at thirteen winters, I was needed here. One well-placed bolt and Tearl would still be alive. My first dog was taken while I was away. Never again.*

A second griffin skull would be on the basement wall in the Bloodstone family home, matching the one his grandfather had killed years before. The young men wouldn't tease him for volunteering to be guardian all the time if he slew a griffin. He was tired of them urging him to shirk his duties at home and join them on the boring hunts. *Why don't they understand?*

A chorus of high-pitched squeaks and short trilling barks erupted from a troop of surikats in a nearby melon patch when he appeared. The ferretlike animals foraged across the entire village-grove killing and eating fever-ants, beetles, and thorn-snakes. They were always on guard during the day keeping such a sharp vigil that most of the Cliftoners called them watchkats. One or more of the kats was usually in a tree keeping watch over the thick canopy and keeping in contact with the troop on the ground with chirps and barks. He listened to their calls, recognizing the meaning: “The sky is clear.” But after a lifetime listening to them he also heard another message revealed in the urgent tone. Fear.

Drake spotted a mob of the foot-tall watchkats standing on their hind legs in the garden. The surikats short brown and grayish fur with black stripes stood erect from head to tail. Their black eyes darted back and forth and Drake’s hunter’s intuition told him to load his crossbow. *Now.*

The watchkats shrill ululating call for “Big aevian!” echoed through the grove.

Neven screamed from somewhere close. Drake sprinted forward. The high-pitched child’s wail sliced through Drake’s spirit. The boy’s shriek ended abruptly and there was no time to cock a crossbow. Jep and Temus sniffed at a thorn-door leading into a garden. The dogs growled and bared their teeth at something in the open ground.

Unsheathing his Kierka blade, Drake stood with his dogs, ready to repel any aevian demon. He stared into the garden, looking at the sky above the tall treetops. There was no sign of a griffin or worse demon. His eyes were drawn to a child’s footprints across the soft ground. A few paces from the thorn-door a little shoe lay in the dirt.

“Neven!” Drake shouted as he scanned for any other signs of the four-year old boy. *This can’t be happening.*

Despair sapped the failed village guardian’s strength, and his numb body sagged against sharp branches. *My fault. I can’t take this again. Not again. Not a little child.* He stared at Neven’s shoe in the garden. There was nothing else.

Something moved inside the grove behind him. He heard small gasping breaths coming from behind a tree trunk. Springing toward the sound, Drake ran around to the other side of the tree where he found little Neven huddled against the trunk. He swept the boy up in his arms as waves of relief and joy swept aside his anguish. Jep and Temus stopped growling after a moment; but the dogs stayed on guard at the thorn door.

Looking into the boy's eyes Drake asked, "Nev, what did you see?"

Neven's entire body shook with fright as his eyes filled with large tears. Drake could feel the tiny boy's heart pound as he hugged him close. "It's all right. You're safe. I'll protect you."

The watchkats' alarm calls had stopped, but they echoed in Drake's mind, sending jolts of worry through his body. *What was it?* He glanced at the dogs, wishing they could tell him what they sensed. Both remained rigid, ears up. Drake wondered if the aevian—or whatever had been out there—was gone. He wanted to ask the boy more, but decided he'd been through enough for one day. Hugging Neven, Drake asked, "Did you run for cover when you heard the watchkats?"

Neven nodded.

"Good boy. Always listen to them and don't go out in the open."

Tears fell from Neven's big brown eyes as he nodded. Drake remembered a time when he was a little boy, perhaps six years old. He and his mother were in the garden planting seeds when she had grabbed him and ran under the nearest cover tree. An instant later a flight of griffins passed overhead. After the danger had gone his mother had knelt in front of him, putting her face in front of his so he would pay attention. Her eyes were so big and shiny. He could still hear her urgent words and recalled her trembling hands clutching his small shoulders.

"Remember that sound. Hear it now? Listen carefully . . . that's the danger call for big aevians. Promise me, if you ever hear that sound, run for cover as fast as you can. Promise?"

"I promise, Mommy."

She had cried and hugged him tight. Drake remembered being very afraid, just like Neven.

“Neven!” Mae Boughcutter ran down the path and took her son into her arms.

“He’s all right.” Drake made his voice as calm as he could manage.

“I heard the watchkats and your shout and I thought that . . .”

“Everything’s all right. He ran for cover. You taught him well.” Drake showed her a confident smile, but in the back of his mind he knew that whatever Neven had seen was still out there.

III

The forest is endless and filled with all manner of barbs and briars. I wish to feel the smooth stone halls of home under my feet again.

—Bellor Fardelver, from the Thornclaw Journal

“Lorak’s blood!” Thor untangled his brown beard from a spiky plant. The unyielding foliage of the Thornclaw Forest appeared to have a single duty—shed dwarven blood.

“Thor. Please refrain from using Lorak’s name so . . . irreverently. Have I taught you nothing?” Bellor made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat and thought, *Thor will never change his ways, and two weeks of floundering in this green prison hasn’t helped.*

“Humans,” Thor fumed as he ripped away from the bush snagging him. “Only a species as short-lived and as shortsighted as them would inhabit a forest like this.”

“Please, calm down and pay attention to where you’re going.”

“Where I’m going? I don’t have any idea where I’m—”

“I’m certain the human village is close by.” Bellor rubbed his square jaw and broad nose. “We must find a guide.”

Thor pulled his much sharper facial features into a scowl. “There probably isn’t a village, and they won’t help us anyway.”

“Of course there’s a village. Now please be silent.”

“This forest is driving me mad.”

“I think it’s driven you mad already and not eating for two days hasn’t helped.” Bellor felt guilty when he saw Thor’s exasperated expression.

“Hrrmmff.” Thor frowned.

“I’m sorry. The humans fled to this frontier to keep us away, so please don’t prove their fears correct when we find them.”

“But why can’t there be a trail? Is that too much to ask? I know they can make trails. It’s one of their few skills. I just don’t know why any sane human would—”

“Be silent, will you? If the aevian is around it’ll certainly hear you ranting.”

Following behind Thor in the relative quiet for a moment, Bellor wished the impassable brambles were their only enemy. He was more concerned about the aevian beast pursuing them. He seldom saw its shadow as it flew over the canopy, but knew the monster was waiting for a chance to strike. Bellor thought it ironic that the sharp leaves and poisonous thorns were keeping them alive—or perhaps just killing them much slower than the aevian would.

Mumbling vulgar Drobin and Nexan oaths, Thor plowed through the forest like an irritable bulldog. Amused, Bellor watched as Thor took out his frustrations on the plants blocking their way. After an hour of listening to Thor’s gruff swearing, Bellor called for a much needed rest and they drank water collected from the leaves. Thor sat gnawing on a twig and swatting at hook flies.

The War Priest napped against a tree until Thor woke him. “Hear that?”

“What?” Bellor roused himself, then focused on the sounds. Something large crunched through the brush, then stopped.

“A vrelk?” Thor lifted his crossbow as the sounds started again. “We need food.”

“Too big, and it’s coming closer.” Bellor pulled his battleaxe from the leather baldric suspended across his back.

Bellor led Thor backward, looking for a place to run or hide. Nettle shrubs formed a thick hedge hemming them in. *Why didn’t I pick a better place to rest?* Bellor rebuked himself when he saw they were trapped.

A thunderous crack resounded through the canopy as a dead tree snapped and fell just beyond the bushes in front of them. The dwarves ducked behind a large ironwood tree as the beast closed in. The thrashing sounds stopped on the other side of their hiding place.

The monster's breath sawed in and out of its lungs as Bellor's eyes darted around, searching for a way to escape. The impenetrable hedge of nettle plants stretched into a vast thicket as far as he could see. He dropped to his knees, dug his fingers into the soil and noticed a small opening leading through the hedge. Bellor motioned for Thor to follow him as he crawled into the tunnel-like passage.

As Thor wriggled after Bellor, the creature crushed the entrance to the thicket an arm-length behind Thor's legs. It tore up the plants as both dwarves crawled away as fast as they could. Bellor thanked Lorak for the ground-hugging animal trail that had prolonged—if not saved—their lives.

The aevian's frantic thrashing faded as Bellor and Thor crawled further into the maze of nettle shrubs. They lost themselves in the impenetrable thicket and Bellor wondered if they would ever find their way out.

* * * * *

"Is it still there?" Thor slipped his shoulders between two biting nettle plants, using his shield to keep the stinging leaves away from his face.

"We must always assume it's there." Bellor searched the tenebrous ceiling for evidence of the beast. Blinking his dark eyes at a bright patch of sunlight ahead of them, he smelled a fresh breeze almost unfiltered by the musty trees and decaying leaves.

Hoping they had eluded the creature, Bellor stood up at the edge of the thicket and scanned the trees. Thor followed his lead and both dwarves stretched their cramped bodies. Hours of crawling under the sharp plants had left them sore and covered with small scrapes from the nettle plants that stung like cold fire and left their fingers numb and painful.

“Thor, angle to the right, there’s a clearing ahead we must avoid. We don’t want to get caught in open ground.”

Thor grunted in disgust to protest Bellor’s order as he moved ahead through the endless thorny shrubs.

“The aevian could land there.” Bellor dodged a nettle plant. “We can’t risk it.”

“I only need to stretch my legs for a moment away from this thicket. You act as if it’s a spawn of Draglûne.”

“Shhh.” Bellor sunk to the moist ground and scanned the treetops. His intuition whispered another warning. The two dwarves hunkered back to back and searched for whatever had spooked Bellor.

The screeching of nearby thorn shrikes drew their full attention. The birds’ high-pitched cries echoed across the forest, then died out.

Where are you, aevian? Bellor felt something hidden watching him. Waiting.

After a few moments of vigilance, Bellor pointed in the direction he thought they should go, making a drastic course change.

“I hate this,” Thor complained as he broke the trail, step by laborious step. “Let’s set a trap for it. We should be doing the hunting.”

“No. Too dangerous.”

Thor rolled his eyes and Bellor remembered all the young dwarves he had seen killed because of Thor’s impatient attitude. The War Priest wondered how much longer he could keep his friend from doing something foolish that would end in his death. He had resigned himself to keep Thor alive, foolish or not. He was the only one left alive that Bellor could trust to accompany him. Grinning to himself, Bellor pondered the subtle difference between foolishness and bravery.

“Is this the right way?” Thor pushed past a tangle of sharp stalks trying to pierce his light chain mail hauberk.

“Of course it is.” Bellor spoke in the same encouraging voice he had used hundreds of times in the past weeks to reassure his precocious comrade. Bellor thought about what Thor would say next: *But how do you know for certain?*

“But how do you know for certain?” Thor asked for the tenth time that day.

Bellor knew the routine better than his friend. And in spite of all his protests, Bellor enjoyed the game. It got their minds off their pursuer, and Thor required much more religious instruction if was to ever take on the mantle of a full War Priest.

“Is your faith wavering again, my Earth Brother?” Bellor smiled, “Because if it is, take heart in knowing that Lorak, Our Maker, has given me the gift of finding the way. Trust in Lorak and—”

“I was just asking a simple question! I’d hate to break a trail for you in the wrong direction, *Master Bellor*.”

The beams of sunlight invading the forest in front of them were interrupted as something passed overhead. The shadow cast a pall over the two dwarves, silencing their conversation. Both dwarves crouched under a low tree branch as they checked the tiny patches of sky all around them.

“It’s here,” Thor whispered, his right hand resting on the warhammer hanging from his belt. “Should we span our crossbows?”

Bellor nodded, keeping his fear hidden behind his thick beard as they bent back the braided strings on their weapons with small steel crank-levers, then loaded scale-piercing quarrels.

“Curse this forest.” Thor spit on a thorn bush covered with dozens of spider webs. “I wish we could see it.”

“It’s the same creature that’s been following us. I recognize its shadow. It has a very wide wingspan.”

“How wide?” Thor eyed the canopy.

“We’ll be safe as long as we stay in the thick forest.”

“It’ll find a way to get to us eventually.” Thor wrinkled his nose.

“Lorak will help us.”

“Have you forgotten that you also taught me ‘by committing to action Lorak will help us’? I say we find it first.”

“I also taught you to be patient and trust Him.”

“I’ll trust my steel. I have great faith in it.” Thor grabbed his blacksteel hammer in one big meaty fist and held his crossbow in the other. “I’m too hungry and too tired to sit here and wait for it any longer.”

“Then let’s get going.” Bellor pointed south. “The village is that way. We’ll have to fight soon enough.”

Thor hesitated for a moment, grumbled to himself, then plowed through the undergrowth. They entered an area of sapling burnwood trees and saw light streaming down from the sparse canopy. The soft-wooded trees were perfect for cutting and burned well once they were dried—but they didn’t provide much protection when they were young.

Bellor realized the short trees were replacing old growth, which must have died or rotted away years before. Remnants of old logs and a few stumps poked out of the ground. Bellor saw the telltale signs of axe cuts on the wood. “We’re close to the human village.” Any celebratory thoughts soon faded to despair. The short trees had allowed malicious thornclaw shrubs to grow to tremendous sizes, making the dwarves’ advance much more difficult. Each step involved eluding the snaring branches that hooked their clothing.

Bellor couldn’t get out fast enough. He encouraged his companion to move quicker. Sweat poured off Thor as he cut the trail through the clawing bushes that fastened onto him like the talons of tiny demons. Thor and Bellor were soon dragging disembodied thornclaws from the exposed links of their chain mail coats.

Leading with his shield, Thor pushed through a tangled mass of scratchy thorns until he reached the far side. His lead foot didn't find the ground.

Thor started to fall, momentum carrying him forward.

Lunging, Bellor caught the back of Thor's belt just in time and latched onto a thick bush with his other hand. Both dwarves teetered on the edge of the cliff. Far below, the tops of white clouds lapped against the sheer face of the plateau like waves. Bellor stared over Thor's shoulder at the clouds separating the living world of Ae'leron from the churning cauldron of the Underworld.

"Pull me up! Pull me up!" Thor's arms flailed for a handhold and were cut by the thorns.

Bellor dragged Thor back to solid ground and they collapsed into a pile of beards and short limbs.

"That's no way for a warrior to die." Bellor patted Thor's shoulder.

"I'm indebted to you again, Master Bellor."

Bellor nudged him off. "I shouldn't have pushed the pace so much. I'm sorry." The War Priest looked out of the hole Thor had made in the brush and, realized they were on a small southern facing peninsula jutting out of the plateau. They ducked back into the shrubs and scanned the light canopy above them. "We're going to have to backtrack and then follow the edge if we want to go south."

"The Void lured us off course again?" Thor raised a bushy eyebrow. "That's never happened before."

Bellor ignored the jabs and gazed out into the infinite abyss. "We'd better turn back. I wish we had a guide. I'm sorry, but I've led us into a dead end." Bellor immediately regretted his choice of words as the shadow of the aevian passed overhead again. He wondered which would finish them off first, the aevian, the forest, or the Void.

IV

The treasures of the forest are not only the trees, but the folk who tend them.

—Priestess Liana Whitestar, litany from the Goddess Scrolls

Drake and his dogs watched over Neven and Mae, escorting them through the dense garden-grove. They made their way toward the heart of the village, and Drake's eyes searched the shadows for threats.

"Walking with Nev and I is most kind." Mae hugged her son close to her chest. "If you hadn't found him . . ."

Drake reached back and brushed his hand through Neven's fine hair. He forced a smile at Mae, and suppressed his guilt about not reaching the boy sooner. *He could have been taken.*

"Mommy, kats told Neven hide."

Mae and Drake grinned at each other upon hearing the boy's first words since his sighting of the aevian. Mae kissed Nev's soft cheek. "Thank the Goddess for sending the watchkats to us. And bless Priestess Liana and Jaena for keeping the trees healthy and strong."

Mae's prayer played through Drake's mind. Every day he was more amazed at Liana's skill as an arborist. No tree under her care had ever died and the path they followed was well shielded, but the aevian was still out there. He wouldn't relax until the young mother and her child were safe. Then he would check on his own family and Jaena. He suspected a griffin or one of its cousins, perhaps a manticore, might be circling the village. He scanned the canopy for signs of the aevian and looked at the trail behind them. Mae was about to speak, but she looked away. "Mae, what is it?"

“Nothing. I was just wondering if you knew Jaena and Liana visited my house this week.”

He tried not to become distracted from his task of guarding them, but he did recall a lot of visitors going to her house in past days and he turned around. “Didn’t my grandfather deliver some paint?”

“He did, for our arboreum.” Mae’s beaming smile said it all. “Priestess Liana says the baby will come in five months!”

“Mae, I’m so happy for you!”

“I knew I was with child, and Liana told me when I would give birth. It was so wonderful. I even think I felt the baby move inside me when Liana touched our tree and used the magic of the Goddess. She says my baby will be healthy. I’m so happy.”

A wave of protectiveness flooded over Drake. Something deep in his soul demanded that he get her home. “Come on, Mae.” He took Neven in his arms, the dogs guarded their flanks, and he marched down the trail.

A moment later they approached Mae and Neven’s home, which nestled under the arches of a five-hundred year old cover tree. The two-story log house abutted one side of the middle-aged trunk, leaving plenty of room for the growth of the tree, which would be accelerated by Tree magic during healings and ceremonies. The small ceremonial structure was connected to the main house and touched the tree, giving easy access to the trunk.

Neven’s great-grandmother opened the door and the four-year-old squirmed out of Drake’s arms and ran to her. He waved from inside and smiled at Drake. Mae stepped toward the doorway, then turned back. Her eyes misted over with tears and she couldn’t speak. “Sorry.” She wiped her eyes, looked away. “Thank you for being there for us.”

He didn’t know what to say, but when he met her gaze Drake decided to paint her arboreum himself. Tomorrow. Two coats.

Mae wiped away her tears. “You’ll make Jaena a good husband,” she touched his arm, “and you’ll be a good father someday. My mother told Liana she thinks you’ll bring Jaena a marriage branch soon. Will you?”

Lame excuses came to his mind. He had so much to do and Jaena needed to finish her priestess training. He didn’t want to distract her from her studies any more than he already had. She hadn’t been able to use the Tree magic successfully yet, and Drake wondered if her slow progress was because of him. He nodded at Mae, trying to hide his embarrassment at living three winters past seventeen and not being married yet.

“I never thought your sister would be married before you. Remember when we were little and your mother watched Jaena, you and me? I knew that you two would marry.”

It’s always the same. He hid his discomfort with an awkward smile. Father had told him at least twice in the past month, “By the time I was your age, I’d been married for almost four years. I’m tired of your daydreaming and skulking around the village by yourself while the rest of us hunt. Wake up. When are you going to marry Jaena?”

Drake forced his father’s words out of his mind and looked at Mae. “Sorry, I’ve got to go.”

* * * * *

Jep and Temus followed on his heels as they jogged past the house where Ethan’s mother and her second husband lived. He passed a few other dwellings, stopping at the front thorn-door of the Bloodstone family home. His place of birth was much like Mae’s. A tiny ribbon of smoke wafted from the stone chimney poking out of the domed tree. He enjoyed the mixed fragrances of the peppery cover tree leaves, the rich burnwood smoke, and especially the wild onions and thyme. Grandmother was cooking a vrelk roast.

Drake breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his sister Tallia sitting on the front porch with Mother. Tainting the mouthwatering scent of cooking meat were fumes from a pot of Grandfather’s vrelk-hoof glue. He wrinkled his nose as Tallia dipped the tip of a crossbow bolt

shaft into the pot, then affixed one of the new iron points, which Father had bartered for in Nexus City. Temus sneezed, shaking his jowls as the mingling odors drifted through the air.

The mob of watchkats playing next to the porch called out with chirruping barks to greet Jep, who bounded forward to play while Temus lay down. *Damn! I wasn't going to stop. I've got things to do.*

Tallia glanced up from her work, but his mother's eyes focused on sewing white cloth flowers onto Tallia's wedding dress. His seventeen-year old sister's face lit up when Mother lifted the almost completed dress for inspection.

Learning about Mae's pregnancy sparked him to remember what Tallia had told Mother a few weeks before. "The Priestess said I won't have any trouble conceiving healthy children. She has foreseen it."

"Good, Tally. Just wait for after the wedding to—"

"Mother!" Tallia's cheeks turned pink. "Of course Vance and I will wait."

With her wedding only two weeks away, Drake suspected he'd be an uncle in less than a year. For Vance's sake—and his sister's honor—he hoped it would be at least nine months.

Jep *woofed* and rolled on the ground with the watchkats. Drake stepped toward the porch, muttering to himself. *I'll only stay a moment.*

Tallia gave her brother the contemptuous smile she reserved just for him. "Get tired of daydreaming in that old watch tower, Drakie? Can't you find something else to do?"

He rolled his eyes, then realized from her playful mood that there hadn't been any sign of the aevian over the village itself.

Mother glanced up. "You can't be done with the trails already."

He held up his hands showing the fresh scabs from eight hours of pruning. "They're done."

"Oh." Mother's eyebrows raised a little. "Have you fixed the hinge on the gate?" She stitched another cloth flower onto the linen dress.

“I will.”

“You’d better before Father comes home.” His sister pointed a shaft at him.

Jep ambled over and sniffed at the pot of glue beside Tallia’s feet. The big dog sneezed, nearly blowing over a watchkat.

“Get this mutt out of here before he drools on my dress.” Tallia pushed Jep away with her bare feet.

Drake grabbed Jep’s collar and pulled him away.

“Keep those dogs away from my dress.” Tallia glared at Jep.

“All this wedding work is making you surlier than usual, Tally.” Drake held Jep, but let him lick Tallia’s feet, prompting her to squeal and scrunch up her face.

“Hush,” Mother scolded, “you’re both distracting me, and I want this trim to be perfect.”

Tallia smirked. “Get out of here and take those dogs with you before I find a crossbow and shoot one of these up your—”

“*Tallia!*” Mother flashed her a disgusted look.

“With your aim, I’m not worried.” He grinned at his feisty little sister.

Tallia dipped an unfinished bolt in the glue and threw it at Drake.

Jep jumped in the air and caught the shaft. Tallia frowned when her sticky dart missed the mark. Jep displayed his catch, wagging his tail. Laughing, Drake tugged and groaned for added effect as he tried to pry the bolt out of Jep’s jaws. Tallia giggled as Jep battled Drake like his doggy-life depended on keeping the bolt. Even Mother chuckled a little while the big dog held on, no matter how hard Drake pulled. Temus watched from the thorn-door, leaving his more playful sibling to have fun for both of them. The watchkats observed the tug-o-war and their little black eyes lingered on the growling dog with fascination.

“Drop it!” Drake commanded, causing Jep to open his mouth. “Here, Tally.” He tossed his sister the slobber-covered shaft, which had dirt and leaves stuck to the tip.

Tallia deflected it away with her hand. “Achhh!” She wiped the drool off and stuck out her tongue at her brother.

Off with you!” Mother shook her head. “*Children.*”

Satisfied he had won that particular exchange, Drake smiled and strutted away. “Good dog.” He scratched Jep on the head and patted Temus, who yawned. “Come on, boys. We’ve spent too much time here already. Let’s check on Jaena.”

The dogs trotted down the path toward the Shrine of Amaryllis. Jaena and Liana would be teaching the children, unless they were out tending ill villagers. Visiting home had calmed him, but the sense of urgency he’d felt while escorting Neven and Mae returned.

Nothing must happen to Jaena or her mother. Without them the entire village could be wiped out by sicknesses that only the Tree magic could cure. Mae’s baby could die at birth, and his grandfather might already be dead from old age without Liana’s healing hands. He swallowed the lump of fear that collected in his throat. *Everything is fine. The village is safe. But what’s out there?*

Despite the dangers of aevians and the harsh forest, he thanked the Goddess for her blessings. At least the Clifftoners were free, unlike most of the Nexans who lived under the steel fist of the Drobin Empire, where Amaryllian Priestesses were persecuted and often killed. Dwarven priests held sway over most humans, and the Temple of Lorak branded Amaryllians as heretics and rebels; but the arms of the stunted folk didn’t reach this deep into the Thornclaw Forest.

Drake reaffirmed a vow made long ago. *Nothing will ever happen to anyone I love, especially Liana or Jaena, while I’m the village guardian.* He would do anything to protect his people from aevians or dwarves. His life would be an easy trade and he knew the rest of the men of the village felt the same way. All enemies of Cliffton would be slain without mercy. He would make certain of it.

V

An unexpected chasm, real or imagined, always seems to get in our way.

—Bölak Blackhammer, from the Lost Journal

Thor and Bellor ran along the narrow peninsula of rock, trying not to give the aevian time to cut them off. The immense Void lay in wait just beyond their vision. “Careful, Thor.” Bellor said, trying hard not to make an ill-advised step of his own.

The young dwarf grunted and moved as fast as the clawing bushes would allow. Bellor knew they had to backtrack into the older, more protective forest. If they were cornered at the edge of the Void in the lightwoods, their Sacred Duty would come to an abrupt and unpleasant end.

The thunderous cracking of tree branches behind them sent icy needles of fear shooting into Bellor’s stomach. “It’s landed, run!” The two dwarves struggled forward, but the dense undergrowth coupled with their short legs didn’t allow for much speed.

Something large smashed through the bushes a few paces behind them. Bellor heard the creature’s scales scraping over the thornclaw thicket. The large predator closed the distance with a leap. The ground shook when it landed.

Bellor felt the aevian’s hot breath on his neck. He thrust his head forward as the creature’s jaws snapped together and ripped out a chunk of his gray hair. He barely noticed his ringing ears or felt the pain from his bleeding scalp as he dove after Thor, who had scurried under an arch made by a fallen log.

The beast’s head smashed into the rotting wood behind him, sending an explosion of bark blasting over Bellor. The War Priest scrambled forward on his hands and knees, then rolled down

an embankment after Thor. They both crawled under the exposed roots of an ancient tree and ducked into the thicker woods.

The monster fell back and Bellor realized they were in the older forest. The smaller trees gave way to an extensive and thick canopy filled with layers of thorny branches.

The loud thrashing sounds faded, then stopped.

Bellor realized the monster couldn't follow them inside the tangled foliage. The dwarves' four and a half-foot tall stature helped them outdistance the larger aevian as they continued.

"A trail, look." Thor jumped onto the narrow path leading south.

"Follow . . ." air wheezed out of Bellor's lungs, ". . . go."

Thor jogged down an animal trail snaking through the forest. Bellor's old legs weren't as energetic as his younger comrade's, and first he fell behind, then dropped to the ground, utterly exhausted. The old dwarf hid within the raised roots at the base of a tree trunk. Thor slumped down next to him to catch his breath. On guard, Bellor prayed they would be safe. The shadow of the large creature circling overhead crushed his hopes.

"We've got to keep moving!" Thor grabbed Bellor's arm and hauled the exhausted priest down the trail.

"No." Bellor gasped for breath and shook off Thor's grip. "I can't . . . run any . . . more." He scanned the interlocking branches of the canopy above them, looking for any sign of the beast.

"Let's stand and fight!" Thor raised his hammer. "Before we're too weak to give a good accounting of ourselves."

The loud flap of the aevian's wings made Bellor gasp and look upward. The layered ceiling of the forest blocked his view as the monster's claws raked across the canopy. Snapping branches exploded above them as the creature landed on the ironbark sentinel where they had taken shelter. Broken tree limbs and leaves rained down, and they guarded their eyes as the plant material pelted their bodies. Bellor cringed as the canopy sagged under the weight of the aevian.

Hundreds of leaves fell to the ground and Bellor stared upwards through the storm of vegetation. Huge wings blocked out the sunlight, creating jagged shadows on the forest floor. The beast's distorted silhouette loomed over Bellor as thick boughs bent and creaked.

The dwarves froze, waiting in silence with weapons drawn. Thor brushed away a leaf that landed on his face and Bellor scanned their surroundings for a way out. His heart sunk as he realized the trail and all their avenues of retreat passed under breaches and thin areas in the canopy.

Bellor thought, *If we run, it will pounce. Cornered at last.*

Thor looked at his mentor and asked with a hand-sign, *What now?*

The War Priest's eyes measured the outline of the demon perched above them before reexamining possible escape routes. "Thor Hargrim." Bellor used his commanding battle voice. Thor's body tensed as if he were ready to leap into the tree, climb the towering ironbark's trunk and attack. "Before we draw its blood," Bellor spoke with all the determination he could muster, "we're going to build a great fire. Gather green wood and tinder."

Thor squinted at Bellor, but gathered dry leaves and several armloads of branches sent down from above. The aevian shifted its weight several times as they waited beneath the tree—caught in its trap at last.

Sharp cracks punctuated the groans of the splintering branches as the aevian's bulk sunk deeper into the collapsing roof of the forest. Thor glanced upward with every loud sound. Bellor didn't flinch as he cleared a small area, dug a fire pit, and built a mound of earth beside the hole.

Thor pushed several armloads of dead leaves into the pit and Bellor quickly arranged the fuel so it would give off as much smoke as possible. Then he reached into his belt-pouch and withdrew a rectangular red stone as large as his thumb. Bellor placed the smooth rock under the tinder and made certain the archaic Drobin rune painted on its surface faced the sky.

"*Feör.*" Bellor spoke the command in Old Drobin and a flame erupted from the black symbol. The leaves caught fire and the green wood began to smoke. Bellor added several

handfuls of leaves and blew into the flames, which grew stronger; but didn't ignite the wood still moist with tree sap.

"*Löshun*," Bellor whispered and the fire from the rune stone extinguished itself. The leaves kept burning as acrid wisps of smoke drifted into the forest.

Using a stick, Bellor plucked the warm rock from the fire and put it back into his leather belt-pouch. He withdrew a similar sized rune stone of white marble, this one painted with an intricate silver pattern across its surface. Bellor saw the question in Thor's eyes.

"It's a Chanting Stone." The old dwarf traced his finger over silvery symbol. "Given to me by my mentor over a hundred years ago. I have no others, but this can be saved no longer." The War Priest put the rune stone on the mound of earth in front of the smoking fire. He knelt to pray and touched the ground with the palms of his hands. He felt the dampness of the soil as he channeled the Earth magic. Bellor began to chant Lorak's Song of Fire and his deep voice carried into the woods. "*Sûng-gen feör um-Lor-ak*."

A faint glow shone from the rune as he chanted the ancient words of power and silvery light mixed with gray smoke.

"*Sûng-gen feör um-Lor-ak!*" Bellor's voice became louder and Thor joined in, singing at an even lower pitch. Their voices filtered through the forest and soon a third and fourth voice echoed their own. On Bellor's cue the two dwarves stopped singing, but the magic of the Chanting Stone continued their prayer-song even louder.

Thor pointed up, then punched toward the aevian, *Climb the tree? Attack?*

Shaking his head, Bellor pointed south toward an avenue of escape concealed under a choking cloud of smoke from their green wood fire.

Thor scowled, then signed with terse, slashing gestures, *We kill it now!*

The War Priest's right hand moved patiently, *No. We Drobin kill aevians on the ground. Not in trees.*

The loud chanting continued as the dwarves slipped away into the smoky forest. The sound of their voices faded as they got farther away, but Bellor knew the singing continued. Sadness at leaving such a precious rune stone behind prevented a triumphant grin, but relief stopped a frown.

Thor halted on the path they had been following and pointed to another trail burrowing through the trees like an underground tunnel. Foul-smelling curdle-moss covered the new path, and Bellor gestured for Thor to take it and head southwest—back toward the Void. The sour stench irritated his nostrils, but the aevian wouldn't catch their smell if they stayed near the moss.

Following close behind his companion, the War Priest held the weariness sweeping over him at bay. The Earth magic had taken its toll, and he concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. He didn't ponder long before a glowing beacon of sunlight appeared at the end of the forest tunnel.

Approaching with caution, Bellor's eyes adjusted to the light as they looked across exposed ground dotted with short tree stumps. Forty paces away stood the log walls and sturdy gate tower of a human settlement.

Thor grinned. "I knew this trail would lead to their village."

Bellor rolled his eyes and shook his head at Thor while they stared at the dozens of dome-shaped trees that sealed off the village from the sky above. Bellor wondered if they would be safer in the village with the humans, who undoubtedly hated them, or outside the walls with the horrors of the Thornclaw Forest.

VI

If one is lost, follow the roots of Amaryllis back to the source, where they will find the love of the Goddess.

—Priestess Liana Whitestar, litany from the Goddess Scrolls

Drake marched toward the center of Cliffton, hoping to find Jaena there. He performed the ritual of honor to the Goddess by tilting his head back and admiring the uppermost branches of the gigantic central cover tree. He headed for the steps of the most sacred place in the village, the shrine of Amaryllis, silently thanking the Goddess for Neven's life.

A cluster of watchkats spotted him and his dogs as they entered the enormous arbor dome. The little animals called out with a shrill ululating cry, "Groundwalkers." A few scurried into their burrows under the stone foundation of the Hunters' Meeting Hall, where two old men sat on the porch of the long wooden structure. Their harsh eyes followed his every step.

"He stayed home again." Hallan Greenbow, the old pugnacious hunter, didn't bother to whisper.

Mae's grandfather, Craik Boughcutter, sighed. "Not right for a Bloodstone to miss so many hunts."

Greenbow scowled. "I wouldn't stay home if I could still hunt."

"Maybe his eyes are as bad as yours, Hal."

The men sniggered and Drake bristled, but he kept his chin high and didn't look at them. The oldsters' ridicule quickened his pace as he entered the patchwork of shadows and sunlight surrounding the shrine. Varnished log walls formed a large rectangle around the base of the holy tree. As he approached the front entry, inspecting the red tile shingles and the narrow stairs going

to the small moon-prayer platforms in the upper branches. He peered into one of the rainbow-hued, stained glass windows transported with great effort from Nexus City—where they traded for all of their glass and metal goods. His shoulders relaxed when he saw the familiar silhouettes of Jaena and her mother. *She's safe. Thank the Goddess.*

Pausing, Drake watched a small gathering of children and one elderly man at the base of the steps. Old man Laetham, Clifton's self-proclaimed historian and Elder Councilman, sat in the shadows facing the youngsters. *Of course he would be in my way.*

A dozen children sat in a half-circle listening to one of the tales Elder Laetham had learned when he was a soldier in the Drobin King's army. The old man's raspy voice became deep and quiet. Drake recognized the final lines of the "Tale of the Two Gods" as Laetham leaned into a patch of sunlight and spread his battle-scarred arms wide. "Mount Nexus erupted in fire and smoke that rose all the way to the moooon! But the Goddess brought rain to the volcano, putting out the great fire. This angered the Mountain God, Lorak, who had raised the plateaus above the Underworld. Foolish Lorak wanted to raise the peaks higher than the moon and block it out from the sky forever!"

The smallest children gasped, their horror at losing the silver moon imprinted on their faces.

"Prideful Lorak had made Mount Nexus explode with fire a hundred times already, and he wanted it to explode a hundred times more until it grew tall into the sky. But before the mountain could erupt again the Goddess sent a great storm of clouds, more clouds than all the mist in the Void. Lorak and Amaryllis argued for hundreds of years as Her rain fell and the wind blew, cooling off the burning mountain—and with it, Lorak's anger.

"In the end the Goddess stood beside the Mountain God and the sky was clear. The Two Gods decided to work together to make the folk of Ae'leron and began under the light of a full moon. They used Mount Nexus as a giant cauldron and combined the Earth and Tree magic."

Shaking his head, Drake thought about how the dwarves told a much different tale to their own offspring and the human vassals bound to serve the rulers of the Drobin Empire. According to Grandfather, the Lorakian priests said the humans had been created to be the loyal servants of all Drobin, who watched over them as wise, all-knowing fathers—fathers who should be obeyed at all times. *Vrelkshit*.

Laetham continued, “Amaryllis and Lorak created the people of Ae’leron within the cauldron of Mount Nexus. From the tall trees once growing on the mountain she created our Nexan ancestors. And from the short stone boulders and the fire the first dwarf king and his priests were born.”

“What’s a dwarf?” a little girl asked. It was Edeline, the second child of Ethan’s older sister.

“Later, child,” Laetham snapped, “that’s another story.” He took a deep breath. “The folk were born from the mountains and trees and have lived on the great plateaus ever since, with the blessing of the Two Gods. Remember always, children, the Mountain God raised the plateaus to separate us from the demons that dwell in the Void mist.

“The plateaus are high above the Underworld, but without the trees of Amaryllis we would never be safe. So, all of you mind the teachings of the Priestess and stay under cover. Don’t spend your days looking into the Void or playing by it, or you’ll call up a demon who’ll carry you away.”

Drake swooped in and picked up the curious little Edeline, who screamed and then laughed as he snarled like a dog.

“What’re you doing here?” Laetham glared at him. “Don’t you have work to do?”

Drake hugged Edeline. “It’ll get done.”

Laetham’s mouth wrinkled. “Don’t be like him, children, and spend your days staring into the Void. Listen, wee ones, the men of Cliffton should spend their time hunting, not hiding.”

Drake shook his head.

“Do you hear me, Drake Bloodstone?” Laetham asked, “You know you should be out with your father and the other hunters, not lazing around here.”

The muscles in Drake’s jaw tensed and he put Edeline down. He met Laetham’s gaze. Harsh words sizzled on the tip of his tongue, but he turned to walk away.

Edeline hugged Drake’s leg. “Don’t listen to him,” Edeline looked up at him with soft brown eyes that reminded him of Ethan’s. “You’re the best guardian in the village. Don’t ever go away.” She squeezed his leg as the other children nodded, their young faces echoing Edeline’s sentiments.

Laetham snorted. “Don’t worry children, we’ll always find someone to watch over Cliffton.”

“How about me?” A smooth and playful feminine voice asked from the top of the stairs. “Inside, children, time for the afternoon lesson. You mustn’t keep Priestess Whitestar waiting.” Jaena smiled as the children scampered up the steps and Edeline waved at Drake before going inside.

Jaena stood supervising the kids as they entered the shrine. She gently touched each of them as they passed. Drake gazed at her long, curly blond hair, which caught the few rays of light and shone like dew on golden-yellow roses. Her white, long-flowing dress with green and blue threads woven into the fabric intensified Jaena’s sapphire eyes.

Drake shifted uncomfortably in his dirt brown vrelkskin tunic, patched pants, and scuffed knee-high boots. He knew Jaena didn’t care about his hunter’s clothes. His spirit of determination and service was just one of the things she loved about him. Jaena always understood Drake’s need to protect their people, and he understood her calling to provide everyone with health and support. They had different ways of accomplishing their goals, but they were both guardians of Cliffton.

Love for Jaena filled him, and he realized he’d been gawking like an awestruck little boy ever since she appeared. His eyes glanced away and he rubbed his chin, reassuring himself that he

was clean-shaven, just the way she liked him. He remembered their tender kisses before he had left for the watchtower and hoped his cheeks would still be smooth enough for her liking later in the day. She probably wouldn't have time, but he could always hope.

The memory of her soft skin and the smell of her hair when he held her close made him slowly let out his breath. His yearning for her during the last several months had been difficult, especially since Jaena had been talking more about having children someday. He watched the last little child go inside and wondered if someday they would have beautiful, blond babies who looked like Jaena.

Drake's mouth went dry as twenty-year old wood and he felt his pulse pounding in his ears. *No. I wish I could marry her, but I can't be a father. What if I can't protect our children? What if they die? I can't do it.* Shame washed over him and he knew he was weak. *I wish I was more like Rigg. He could face anything.*

"Too bad you like this unbeliever, Jaena." Laetham picked himself up off the ground and dusted off his tattered pants. "There are other men who deserve your attention."

Laetham's words spurred Drake and the challenge gave him a burst of confidence. *I will ask her to be my wife. I must. Soon.*

"Elder Laetham," Jaena's smile spread across her face until tiny dimples formed in her cheeks, "it would be difficult to find someone as devout as you." Her soft tone and disarming expression made Laetham pause. He chuckled to himself before hobbling toward his friends at the Hunters' Meeting Hall.

Another victory for Jaena's smile. Someday I'll resist it, but not today. Drake stood mesmerized as Jaena glided down the steps to embrace him. She didn't go down the last one and stayed just high enough to remain at an equal height with him. He held his unloaded crossbow in front of him in mock protest, "I'm village guardian and path warden today. I don't think I have time for—"

“I think you’d better put something long and sharp in that weapon if you’re really a guardian.” She pushed the crossbow away and wrapped her arms around him. The little wooden star charm he had carved for her hung from her bracelet and tickled his neck. Jaena’s rosy lips beckoned and Drake lost himself in the warmth of her body as they kissed.

VII

Premonitions are so common among us, but why don't we Amaryllians always heed Her warnings?

—Priestess Liana Whitestar, from her personal journal

Jaena hugged Drake tight after their lingering kiss. She couldn't resist, though her mother would not approve of kissing him on the steps of the shrine. Besides, she had heard Laetham insulting him, and Drake needed cheering up. She whispered in his ear, "I'm glad you're here."

He forced a smile, and they pulled away from each other to a more discreet distance.

Jaena stared into his handsome face. *I've got to tell him about my dream, or whatever it was.*

Jaena made her expression serious, and his smile disappeared. He glanced up at the branches. "What's wrong, Drake?"

"Nothing." His eyes lingered on the tall branches for a moment. "Tallia's wedding and . . ."

She caressed his tense, muscular forearm, trying to relax him with her soft touch.

"Everyone, especially Father, has been pressuring me to . . ." Drake bit his lip, "you know . . . ask you to . . . to be my . . ."

Jaena couldn't think of what to say. He didn't need to hear that from her too, though she wanted him to ask her to marry him more than anything.

"I'm sorry, Jaena. I just . . ."

Jaena read the lines on his face like they were words on the Goddess Scrolls. *Guilt. Fear. Shame. Why can't he see what he's doing to himself?*

Jaena struggled to find the words to lift his spirits. “You don’t have to prove yourself to me or anyone—especially Elder Laetham or your father. I know you’re one of the best hunters in the village.” She eyed the new scabs and scratches on his hands. “And you do more work than anyone.”

“It doesn’t matter. Father always wants me to leave the village and go with him on the hunts.”

Jaena lifted his chin with her delicate fingers. “You’re one of the best crossbowmen in the whole village. How many thistle deer and vrelk have you shot when you were on the wall or in the gate tower, scores of them? I’ve seen you shoot them when they’re the entire length of the open ground away. Not many can do that.”

“Father can. And no one thinks that me shooting stupid animals who’ve wandered into the firebreak makes me a hunter.”

“But you are.” Jaena sighed and thought about all the hours she had spent watching Drake and his family practice their fast, intuitive way of shooting. No other family in Cliffton could duplicate the Bloodstone Way.

“Look at me. Don’t think of anything else.” Jaena fixed her startling blue eyes on his dark brown ones and everything became irrelevant as they connected with each other. Jaena and Drake became the only two people in the village. “I love you. No matter what anyone else thinks. I know who you are, and I love you.”

A true smile spread across his face and his shoulders straightened as some of his stress lifted.

“Jaena, I love you more than anything.” His smile broadened. “And my sister isn’t the only Bloodstone getting married before the next full moon.”

Jaena kissed Drake hard on the lips and didn’t care if anyone saw.

Holding hands, they sat on the wooden steps of the shrine, and Jaena couldn’t stop smiling. Jep and Temus lay panting at their feet while the children’s high voices inside the

building repeated Priestess Liana's well-enunciated words. Jaena listened to her mother teach the children about the outside world and remembered when she had sat with Drake and Ethan learning the same things, repeating the same lines.

"I can't stay long." Drake shifted his weight. "I've got to work on the east gate before Father gets back. And won't your mother be upset since you're not helping her in there?"

"She will, but for a few minutes she'll be fine." Jaena hesitated, struggling to find a way to explain her dream to him. It was hard to put the images into words. She couldn't focus as she thought about getting married and her strange dream. She needed to get back inside and the sound of the children echoing her mother's lesson further distracted her, "Cliffon, Armstead, Nexus City, Drobin City . . ."

"Jaena, remember when we were kids and your mother taught us exactly what she's teaching them right now?"

"My mother made you, me, and Ethan sit in the front." Jaena winced and looked at Drake. *Why did I say that?* She wished she had spoken of her dream, or their wedding, anything but their dead friend. "He would've liked today's lesson because it's about the world outside Cliffon." Drake leaned backward, resting his elbows on the steps.

"He always wanted to leave, didn't he?" Jaena sighed, resigned that she had spoiled a time when they could have had a happy conversation about their wedding.

"Wouldn't you want to leave if you were him?" Drake asked.

"*No*. Remember when he said it was a curse that I was going to be a priestess bound to Cliffon?"

He nodded.

Jaena tapped her fingers. "I can't remember what he wanted us to do in Nexus City."

"He said he could be a fletcher or a scribe, you'd be an herbalist, and I could make crossbows or hunt dangerous aevians for bounty. Just children's dreams."

Jaena shook her head. "I never wanted to be an herbalist in Nexus."

“Why not? You’d be a good one. Hundreds of people would come to you.”

“No, I want to be a priestess and use the Tree magic of the Goddess. I couldn’t practice magic in Nexus City. If the dwarves found out, they’d either kill me or exile me into the forest to die.”

“I’d never let them hurt you.” Drake sat up straight.

Jaena knew he could never protect her from the power of the Lorakian Priests. They both sat for a moment, and she realized she had to finish their conversation about Ethan before they could talk about anything else. “Going to Nexus City was a fine dream for twelve-year olds, but this is our place. We belong here, not out there with all the Nexan thralls.”

“You sound just like your mother.”

Jaena poked his shoulder. “*Do you want to prune the cover tree paths with your bare hands?*” They both grinned because she used Priestess Liana’s favorite warning.

“But Jaena, don’t you ever want to see for yourself if all the things we’ve been taught are true? No one our age has ever been to Nexus City.”

“Thank the Goddess for that, and shall I remind you that living in Cliffton has its advantages?” Hoping to lighten his mood, she flashed a mischievous smile, and pulled away so he could see her feminine curves. He stared for a moment, then turned away with the familiar look in his eyes: Drake was always questioning what they’d been taught. “Come on, my mother would never lie.”

“I know, Jaena, but don’t you ever wonder if Ethan was right?”

She felt a chill in the air and Drake pulled away. Jaena couldn’t explain it, but she sensed a presence hovering around him—as if Ethan was still there. She caught a glimpse of some vague shape out of the corner of her eye, then saw nothing when she looked. She had felt and seen similar things many times since the Void had taken Ethan. Jaena shivered as Drake rubbed his forehead.

What is he not telling me? She moved closer and put a hand on his leg. “We’re doing what the Goddess intends us to do. Both of us are doing Her will. This is how it is supposed to be. I’ll follow in my mother’s footsteps, and in time you’ll be my husband.”

“Being your husband isn’t what I want to change.”

“I know.” She rested her head on his shoulder and wished things had been easier for him. He made his choices, no matter what others said or did, and suffered the consequences. Jaena wished she could be more like him, but her role in life had been decided before she was born. It was all meant to be. As she had many times before, Jaena accepted her duty. “Things can’t be different. Our path in life is predestined by fate. I will be the next priestess of Cliffton. I can never leave my duty.”

“I know. Neither can I.” He scanned the branches above him with a guardian’s searching gaze.

Worry poured from his eyes and beneath his over-protectiveness of the village she sensed a restless spirit hiding in the back of his mind. Before Ethan’s death all Drake wanted to do was hunt in the mountains, but that changed because of the Void’s treachery. For five years he had avoided the long hunts, only going on short patrols near Cliffton where he could be summoned by the alarm horn.

Jaena put her cheek on his shoulder and an arm around his waist. Her mind cleared and she remembered what she needed to tell him. *My dream.* Jaena also thought about going into the shrine and helping her mother with the children. *No, I can’t keep something so unusual from him. It’s too important. I need to tell him.*

She was confused about her what she had seen. *Was it a vision of the future?* Jaena stood up, paying homage to the colossal cover tree above them by gazing into the branches. She searched for the protected platform in the upper boughs where she and her mother had meditated the night before. Under the light of the moon she had seen the vision. *Please, Goddess. What did it mean?*

“Do you see something?” Drake stood up and scanned the upper branches with her, as if she had seen an aevian flying overhead.

“Drake, I had a strange vision last night when Mother and I were performing the Moon Ritual. Instead of seeing the moon in the sky I saw . . .” She touched the middle of her forehead, activating her invisible third eye of prophecy.

“What did you see, a griffin?”

“No. I saw you. You were standing—”

The loud barking of several bullmastiffs in the distance stopped her in mid-sentence. Jaena could tell they weren’t bellowing at some harmless forest animal that had strayed into the open ground outside Cliffton to graze.

Jep and Temus sprang to their feet. “The watchdogs at the east gate.” Drake grabbed his crossbow. “I’ve got to go!” He sprinted along with Jep and Temus toward the guard dogs in their pen under the gate tower.

Jaena’s third eye sensed the danger and throbbed painfully in her forehead. She knew without question, something terrible had come to Cliffton.

VIII

I survived because of my vigilance. The Giergun War taught me to never let down my guard.

—Gavin Bloodstone, from the Bloodstone Chronicles

Drake sprinted to the east gate tower. He tore down the cover tree paths, darting through the thorn-doors until he reached the palisade wall at the edge of Clifton's grove. Half a dozen bullmastiffs barked and howled inside the gate tunnel, which ran straight through the wooden guard tower. He could tell the outer gate, made from ancient ironbark trees, was closed tight. The heavy wooden crossbeam, thick as a man's chest and lifted by a counterweight, lay securely in place as he ran toward the closed doors on either end of the tunnel. A ladder went into the fortified watchtower where he could see the entire open field, but he decided to check on the dogs first. They saw or smelled something they didn't recognize. Something dangerous.

Five more bullmastiffs running at full speed appeared on a path. Drake grinned as the pack of guard dogs that freely roamed Clifton arrived to back him up. As they appeared he opened the inner gate, which was half again as tall as he was. Drake cursed the loose hinge and shut it behind him so the male dogs couldn't mix with the females in the kennel-tunnel. He grimaced when the gate wouldn't shut tight because of the slack hinge, but forced it into place.

Ignoring the strong smell of dog, Drake faced the agitated bullmastiffs in the tunnel. "What is it, girls? What do you smell?"

Some of the dogs stopped barking and whined. A few of the younger ones sniffed his hands for food. When they smelled nothing to eat, they returned to their loud barking. The gruff

barks thundered in the confined space and hurt Drake's ears. He fought through the mass of dogs and tried to see what was causing the commotion.

Peering out a shooting window in the outer gate, he saw the expanse of green grass dotted with hundreds of old tree stumps. He was confident that the treeless firebreak would act as a killing place for anything uninvited approaching Cliffton. Nothing moved on the gravel-lined path.

The dogs apparently barked at something in the dense woods forty paces away; but he couldn't see a threat. Drake's hand brushed against a rope hanging down through one of the shooting holes in the ceiling of the tunnel. A hunter—probably his father—had threaded it into the grooves of the gate after tying it to the counterweight lever in the tower. The end of the rope had been buried under the front gate, where someone on the outside could grab it and pull.

The hunters away at Blue Creek could easily open the gate in case they were in a hurry and couldn't wait for him to heed the summons of their horn call. Drake hated it when his father left a pull-rope without telling him. He snatched the rope away from the ground so no one but him could open the gate and began searching the edge of the trees for any sign of what the dogs were watching.

Something moved. Two small figures stepped onto the path. "Quiet!" he commanded the dogs, who stopped barking as he took a better look. *No. It can't be. Two dwarves? What're they doing out here? Impossible!* Wondering how many more of them were in the forest, Drake knew he needed to sound the alarm horn hanging beside him. He had to try to warn the hunters from Blue Creek and gather the men from the village, but if he blew the horn he couldn't surprise them. Drake chose not to use it. Not yet. He also decided that the Drobin must be scouts for a larger war party. If he killed them both, they wouldn't be able to tell their war party about the village. In the span of a single breath he made his decision.

I've got to kill them.

He bent back the cord of his crossbow then loaded an iron-tipped war bolt. Keeping an eye on his quarry, he saw the pair of stunted folk scanning the sky from their covered location. They didn't carry a truce branch and didn't use the hailing horn hanging on a tree next to them. Everyone knew the custom and by not blowing it to announce their presence they named themselves hostile. *Definitely scouts.*

The two dwarves sneaked out of the woods and kept low to the ground. They tried to hide behind tree stumps, but were still easy targets. They were foolish to give him an open shot at such close range.

Comparing them to the tree stumps, Drake estimated the pair were at least four-and-a-half-feet tall, though he had imagined dwarves would be much shorter. The Drobins were very wide at the shoulders and wore thick beards drooping over their upper chests. He thought about climbing into the guard tower where he could get into the armory and have a second crossbow spanned and loaded for a follow-up shot. They'd be easier targets from up there, but he might not have time to get into position. He'd have to shoot two bolts through the tiny window in the gate.

The dwarves kept coming. Drake wondered if they were worried about getting killed by a hiding sharpshooter. Tremors of fear streaked through his body. He couldn't look away from the enemies he was about to kill. He wanted to leave the tunnel, climb the ladder, do anything but stand and wait for them. Soon he would have to look them in the eyes and shoot.

The dwarves marched past the numerous tree stumps, which looked so much like the headstones in Clifton's cemetery. *I'll bury the dwarves in the field beside a stump. What names will I use? It doesn't matter.* He would kill the first one when the pair reached the gate. The other would run away and have to cross the full forty paces to retreat. *I might not have time to reload after the first one falls, but I can't let the second one make it back to the trees. He won't get far. I'll hunt him down.*

The dwarves hastened forward and Drake got a clear look at them. Both were armored in lightweight chain mail coats, but the interlocking rings appeared quite durable. Even with a war

bolt, he decided he should shoot them in their necks or legs to avoid the chain mail links. The first dwarf had a well-groomed brown beard and carried a circular metal shield with a black hammer emblazoned across the surface.

The lead warrior would be killed first before he could lift his dented metal disc. The dwarf also carried a warhammer on his belt and a small crossbow hung across his backpack. Drake reasoned that from his fine traveling boots and expensive clay-colored cloak, the dwarf must be from a clan of noble warriors. *Odd choice for a scout.*

The other dwarf was much older and wore an earth-colored cloak similar to his companion's. His beard was also well-kept, consisting of intermingling streaks of brown and gray hair. The second Drobin turned to look back at the forest, and Drake saw a long-handled battleaxe in a baldric slung across his back. The vicious curved blade was made for cutting flesh—not trees. The intricate pattern on the axe blade glinted in the sunlight and Drake caught his breath when he realized its tremendous value. The amazing craftsmanship was similar to Grandfather's longsword, *Bloodguardian*.

The older dwarf also had a crossbow strapped to his back and carried a small pack. Drake's sharp eyes noticed the axe-carrying dwarf was quite different than the shield-bearing warrior. The gray-bearded fellow walked with an air of caution. He had more observant eyes than the younger warrior, who looked straight ahead, while the older warrior glanced in many directions—but especially at the gate tower where Drake waited.

I'll shoot the elder one first.

He wondered why the dwarven fighters had come all the way to Cliffton. Perhaps he shouldn't kill them? *No. Both must die.* He took aim through the shooting window at the older dwarf's throat. His finger touched the smooth trigger.

The winged form of a wyvern appeared over the forest. Drake suddenly knew why the dwarves were risking their lives by approaching the gate. The two-legged dragon creature glided over the treetops on its batlike wings stretching over forty-feet from tip to tip. Black and dark

orange scales absorbed the sunlight as two talons thrust forward like an eagle anticipating snatching up one of the dwarves and carrying him off. The swooping wyvern opened its long mouth filled with dagger-like teeth while whipping its barbed tail forward. Poison dripped from the curved stinger aimed at the dwarves' backs.

Drake chose his target and pulled the trigger. The quarrel flew toward the dwarves, but the missile shot past the surprised Drobin and struck the wyvern, piercing its chest. The shaft buried itself until only the feathers protruded from the fatal wound. The wyvern's claws snatched only air as it sailed over the heads of the Drobin before crashing to the ground, banging into several tree stumps and sending a cloud of dust rising into the air.

The two dwarves were upon the wounded serpent-dragon before it realized its death was at hand. "Blackhammer!" The younger one's war cry echoed above the crunching sound of breaking bone as his hammer split the creature's skull.

The old dwarf swung his axe with two hands and chopped into the neck of the snakelike dragon, causing a gush of blood to spurt onto the ground. A death spasm caused the wyvern's long tail to lash out. The wicked scorpionlike stinger hit the shield of the hammer-carrying dwarf and knocked him backwards. Dark poison squirted out as the aevian shuddered and fell limp as its soul returned to the Void.

Drake blew the alarm horn to alert the village, then cocked his crossbow while keeping watch over the two Drobin. As he put a new shaft into the bolt channel he thought about what had just happened. His shot had not been aimed with his eyes, but with his instincts. The Bloodstone Way had taken over. By pure reflex he had released a killing strike. Some hunters would say it was a lucky hit, bringing the wyvern down with a single shaft, but Drake knew better. The dwarven fighters had finished off the dying serpent before it could attack them, but it was already dead from the bolt piercing its heart. It just hadn't known it yet.

Drake realized he had almost shot the gray-bearded dwarf and had planned to let the wyvern finish the other. He didn't remember deciding to shoot the demon. His heart had made the choice for him, his hatred for aevians outweighing his loathing of the Drobin.

Clifftoners climbed into the gate tower. The click of crossbow strings being latched into place made him feel even more confident. He pulled the rope to the counterweight lever and the bar lifted. He kicked open the gate and stood tall, eying the monster's corpse while scanning the sky for danger. In addition to the men assembling in the tower, six huge dogs in the gate-tunnel were ready to attack. Low growls rumbled from the back of their throats. They would kill on his command. Lifting his chin higher, Drake thought, *I won't kneel to them like a Nexan thrall. Never.*

The older dwarf stepped forward after cleaning off his axe on the grass. He slid the long handle into the baldric on his back and showed his open hands to the sky. It was the ancient peace gesture his grandfather had taught him, but Drake didn't trust them.

The gray-bearded dwarf called out in perfect Nexan, his refined accent and dialect more proper than the Clifftoners. "Friend, we thank you for your assistance and excellent shooting. May the blessings of the Mountain God go to you and your village."

Drake suspected that the dwarf spoke the servant language so perfectly because he often dealt with Nexan thralls.

"I am called Bellor Fardelver and am a humble War Priest of Lorak. We come as friends."

The Clifftoners in the tower grumbled. Grandfather Bloodstone had said Drobin War Priests were very powerful and had potent Earth magic. They were not to be trifled with, and Drake heard the nervous chatter of the men in the tower confirming this.

"My companion and I seek shelter." Bellor took a step forward. "We wish to purchase food and information from your village. Is there an Aethling we may speak with?"

“There’s no Aethling here. Nobles have no place in our village.” Drake pulled the wooden crossbow stock against his shoulder, targeting Bellor’s throat. “I speak for the village.”

The hammer-wielding dwarf stepped in front of the older one and angled his shield to turn aside any missile. Drake studied his foe and the hammer he carried. The flat smashing side and single claw on the back of the head were small, but he’d already seen the savage impact of a blow on the wyvern’s skull. It couldn’t be thrown very easily across the fifteen paces that stood between them. Up close it would be more devastating.

Thoughts of a duel with the seasoned Drobin warrior weren’t comforting. An image of the expertly wielded hammer smashing the skull of the wyvern flashed through his mind. He imagined his own skull being split open. Gripping his crossbow tighter, Drake changed his aim to the hammer-wielding dwarf’s throat, deciding to kill him long before he reached the gate.

“I am Thor Hargrim, crossbowman. You made a good shot, if it was meant for the wyvern.” The dwarf pointed his hammer at the dead monster. “But if it was meant for us, you’ve a lot to learn.”

The older dwarf sidestepped his companion and bowed his head. “Forgive our manners. We’ve had a long journey through the forest. Thank you for aiding us, crossbowman. The wyvern would’ve left its mark had it not been for your expert shooting. If I may ask, what are you called? It is our custom to record the names of men to whom we’re indebted.”

“I am a guardian of Cliffton, Drake Bloodstone.”

The two dwarves glanced at each other for an instant and Drake suspected they had some trick planned. He wanted to let them think he was a foolish backwoodsman and lowered his weapon to give them a false sense of security. He held the crossbow with one hand and rested his other on the bloodstone gem affixed to his iron belt buckle. The polished green stone, streaked with red flecks that looked like drops of blood, would help him detect the lies of his enemies—if family lore was correct. “Have you traveled all this way alone, or are there more of you in the forest?”

The older dwarf's jaw tightened. "We're alone, and at your mercy, Guardian Bloodstone. We seek shelter, and upon our sacred honor vow our friendship to you and your village."

The younger dwarf balked after the War Priest's words. He started to raise his shield, assuming a fighting stance. The older dwarf's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

In the gate tower, old man Laetham whispered, "We can kill them now, Drake. Don't be a fool. Never trust the Drobin."

"We'll release our bolts after you shoot." Hallan Greenbow appeared in a window and Drake guessed Mae's grandfather, Craik Boughcutter and a few others were also there.

The Hunter's Law. I saw them first. I have the first shot. No one shoots unless I miss or defer my right. Drake suppressed a grimace. They had given the peace gesture, asked for shelter, promised friendship on their honor—as if Drobin had honor. And there were only two of them. They didn't look like scouts and it would be a simple thing to pull the trigger. He had to protect the village. Sacrifices had to be made for the safety of his people.

What would Grandfather do? Shoot them. No. Drake removed the bolt from his crossbow and rested the weapon against his abdomen. "Under the protection of the Hunter's Law." He glared in the direction of the old hunters in the tower before turning to the dwarves. "You may enter the safety of my village."

"Woodskull!" Laetham shouted as Greenbow and some others in the tower reacted with other vulgar words and hateful remarks. Drake showed a hand to the sky. "You Drobin will find that we Amaryllians also have honor."

"We're twice indebted to you, Guardian Bloodstone. Thank you very much." The older dwarf bowed his head low—the gesture of a Nexan servant. Mouth hanging open in shock, Drake never imagined he would see a dwarf bow to him. Humans bowed to dwarves, never the opposite.

Some of the men in the tower stormed down the ladders as the two Drobin approached. Drake wondered if he'd regret letting the dwarves live as Elder Laetham stomped toward him. Laetham stepped past Drake so close he could almost feel the anger seething from the wiry old

man. He planted a booted foot on the ground in front of the younger man's right shin and looked Drake in the eyes with a cruel gaze. Before he knew what was happening, Laetham shoved Drake from behind, tripping him hard to the ground. The front of Drake's crossbow hit the ground first and the butt poked into his gut, the wooden stock driving the air from his lungs. Gasping on the ground, he couldn't believe what had just happened. Rolling on his back he found himself staring up at Laetham, who aimed a cocked crossbow at Drake's face.

"You traitorous pile of vrelkshit." Laetham's whole body shook with rage. "You disgrace your family offering Drobin safety here." Two of Laetham's fingers touched his crossbow's trigger and he leaned forward, the tip of the bolt pointing at Drake's chest.

The pain in Drake's abdomen turned to cold fire. His face flushed with shame and anger. He wanted to leap up and see how many yellow teeth he could knock from Laetham's mouth. He glared into Laetham's eyes as he got to his knees, his hand touching the handle of his Kierka knife.

Laetham fingered the trigger, his body tensing. "I've put you down once today, boy. I'll do it again."

Drake stood up slowly, his chest thrust forward, daring the old man to shoot. Anger surged through him, and he slid his knife halfway out of the sheath.

"*Laeth.*" Mae's grandfather, Craik Boughcutter put a hand on Laetham's shoulder. His eyes moved toward the Drobin and he gestured with his own crossbow—aimed at the dwarves. "Laeth and I will cover the Drobin. Now pick up your crossbow, Drake," Craik ordered, "this is still your watch."

Before leaning over to pick up his weapon, Drake shook his head at Elder Laetham and turned away trying to keep his anger from erupting. His face flushed and his pride stung at being bested by the old man. His gaze fell hard on the Drobin and Drake knew the day was only going to get worse.

IX

Wyrm must be respected, studied, then killed without mercy.

—Bölak Blackhammer, from the Lost Journal

The scaly wyvern lay in a tangled heap of broken wings and twisted claws. The aevian reminded Drake of a gigantic winged snake with the hind legs of a lizard and no forefeet—only leathery wings with dark branching veins. Even keeping upwind, it reeked worse than the fumes from a stink-beetle nest.

Estimating its fully extended body would be over twelve paces, Drake couldn't take his gaze away from the wyvern's corpse. He suspected it was the creature Neven and the watchkats had seen over the garden-grove. Drake shuddered when he thought of the monster snatching little Neven in its talons and flying away with him. *Not on my watch.*

Villagers gawked from the gate tower at its ugliness. A few shouted congratulations to Drake on an impressive kill, while others whispered, probably about his confrontation with Elder Laetham. Many of the people's faces were filled with disdain for the dwarves and scorn at him sparing them. He wished Jaena was at his side, but she was with her mother at the urgent meeting of the Council of Elders. All the Elders had gathered, except his grandfather. Gavin Bloodstone had wanted a look at the wyvern and the dwarves before he met with the council. He had told Drake he would be the deciding vote if the others were evenly split on what to do. Drake already knew what Elder Laetham would say. *Kill them, and Drake with them.*

Waiting while the council discussed the fate of the two Drobin made acid bubble in Drake's stomach. He would have rather been out with the groups of hunters who were searching the forest for more dwarves. They had to verify if the two were alone.

Time passed slowly while they all waited for the Elder Council to finish their discussions in the Hunters' Hall. The setting sun painted the western sky pale red. The once yellow orb seemed to cloak itself in scarlet mist as if the Void was rising up to drag the globe of light below the horizon.

Night was coming much sooner than Drake expected. He berated himself for giving in to the old Nexan superstition—but he still thought it was an ominous sign. There had been many bad omens today, starting with the vortex of mist before Neven disappeared in the grove. Perhaps the council would vote to kill the dwarves, even after his invocation of the Hunter's Law and his promise of safety to them. *I'll find out soon enough. Priestess Whitestar can't let the sun set before the aevian is taken care of. Traditions must be followed.*

As the sun dipped farther into the Void's scarlet mist, Drake stood waiting near Cliffton's palisade wall with thirty armed hunters who watched over the dwarves with him. They had returned from Blue Creek and all were armed with loaded crossbows. If the dwarves tried to leave or a demon appeared, either would be riddled with bolts from sharpshooters in the gate tower and by the men on the ground.

The Drobin stood away from the hunters, under guard, whether they knew it or not. They said very little and none of the Clifftoners approached them. Drake couldn't tell if the strangers minded that he received all the credit for slaying the serpent-monster. He couldn't read the guarded expression of the Drobin, though he guessed the one called Thor trusted him very little. The older one, Bellor had much better manners. He was the one to watch.

Grandfather Gavin and Drake's father strode toward the aevian. For the third time they inspected the black and dark orange hide of the wyvern. Tired of standing and waiting, Drake followed them.

Grandfather knelt down and wrinkled his brow. "I've never seen a wyvern colored like this one before. It doesn't look like the ones from the Wind Walker Mountains or from the Northern Thornclaw Forest. Where did it come from?"

Father shook his head.

Bellor ambled closer to the wyvern after Grandfather's words. Thor stepped behind him and seven of the hunters came closer, keeping their sharp eyes on the dwarves.

"Those have to be scars on its neck just below the axe cut." Grandfather examined the two large s-shaped lines running from side to side on the scaly throat. He ran his fingers across raised marks mirroring each other. The lines stood above the creature's hide like giant skewed letters.

"They're claw marks." Bellor stepped closer. "From an encounter with another wyvern . . . or some other dangerous creature. They mark this wyvern as very powerful himself, since he survived the clash with whatever nearly slit his throat many years ago. Those scars are old."

Some of the gathered hunters nodded their heads, grudgingly agreeing with the dwarf's words. It surprised Drake to see his folk concur with Bellor.

"It was a killing shot. I taught my grandson well." Grandfather slapped Drake's father on the shoulder. The patriarch of the Bloodstone family pointed to the bolt piercing the wyvern's scales. It poked out at the heart level below the two s-shaped scars. "This one will make a fine companion to the griffin skull in our basement, don't you think?"

A guarded smile showed on Drake's face as he stood among the gathered hunters. Some of the men glared at him, then back at the wyvern. He pretended not to notice. His injured pride healed slightly at knowing he had slain the beast before it had attacked the village—despite Laetham getting the better of him.

One of the hunters whispered to another after the dwarves backed away from the men. "Too bad the aevian didn't kill the dwarves before Drake slew it."

"We could finish them now."

"We can't."

"Why?"

"Drake offered them safe passage."

“Foolish.”

“The Council will order them slain.”

Drake’s ears burned as he listened to their mutterings. He couldn’t take it anymore. Drake turned so only the men could hear him and said through slightly clenched teeth, “What about our honor? They didn’t attack us.”

The men bristled.

Grandfather Bloodstone cleared his throat, shook his head, then pointed at the wyvern. “I wonder what our wives are going to say when they see this?” He frowned a little. “They’ve never minded the vrelk antlers, but anything aevian . . .”

Tyler sighed. “We better keep the skull out of sight or they’ll have Tallia throw it in the Void.”

Drake didn’t blame the women of the house. Grandmother, Mother, and Tallia were all more religious than the Bloodstone men and took Priestess Liana’s admonitions against aevians very seriously. All three women abhorred the griffin skull perching in the basement and made sure it was displayed in the darkest corner.

Grandfather’s, Father’s, and Drake’s non-aevian trophies got more visible locations upstairs. The wyvern was sure to suffer the same fate as the griffin. It would end up hidden in a shadowy corner or a worse place. But when Drake stared at the monster he realized he would rather never see it again. He imagined that without flesh it’s skull would be even more hideous.

“Are you finished admiring the demon spawn?” Priestess Liana Whitestar asked as she and Jaena arrived next to the carcass with the Council of Elders.

The hunters parted as the Priestess and her apprentice arrived wearing ceremonial blue and white robes. The attire of the blond women provided a startling contrast to the drab vrelkskin hunting clothes of the men.

Drake searched for any sign of the fate given to the dwarves. Anger simmered in Laetham and Liana kept a stern countenance. Jaena kept her eyes on the ground.

“I asked, *Drake Bloodstone*, if you were *finished* glorifying the aevian?”

“Yes, Priestess.” He almost stammered with embarrassment when he realized she had been talking to him.

“It’s time to cleanse this land and return the demon to the place of its birth.” Liana pointed to the Void.

“We will claim the trophy of the hunter.” Grandfather Bloodstone put a foot on the creature’s head. “It’s our right.”

Liana scowled at him. “If you must, Elder, but do it quickly. The Void is taking the light of day. We must finish this task before the sunlight is gone or risk a curse worse than we’ve already suffered. I expected you men would’ve been moving the creature by now.”

She glanced at Drake with contempt.

“Sorry, Priestess.” Humiliation turned Drake’s face red again and he hoped Jaena wasn’t looking at him.

Father and Grandfather freed the wyvern’s head from its body after a score of chops from their Kierka knives. Thick blood oozed onto the ground, staining the grass reddish-black.

The dwarves watched the lengthy beheading and spoke in Drobin a short distance away from the large group. Bellor inspected a small copper vial that had already been filled with the wyvern’s blackish blood. The dwarf corked the small vessel, tucked it away, and inspected a shiny black scale he had collected from the beast.

Twenty men dragged the wyvern’s headless and bleeding body toward the edge of the Void seventy paces away. They tried to avoid the stumps, but the wings became snagged several times as they approached the cliff. The dwarves watched, but didn’t help with the ancient Nexan custom.

During the backbreaking process a dozen others kept watch on the dwarves and the dusky sky with their crossbows ready. Drake pulled as well, silently cursing the old tradition of throwing dead aevians off the plateau’s edge. But if the superstition was right, the aevian’s spirit

would be condemned to the Underworld for eternity—if they threw it in before the light of day was gone. A dim glow bled over the horizon, but it would be dark in a few moments.

“We must hurry.” Priestess Whitestar’s voice conveyed her urgency as she directed the final progress. Some of the Clifftoners were stained with dark blood as they reached the edge of the cliff with the heavy carcass.

Drake stared into the abyss. Gray swirling clouds writhed and flowed like a great river hundreds of feet below the plateau. Liana began her prayer to Amaryllis in a somber tone as the men heaved with one final push. “Goddess, we ask you to banish this demon from our land and condemn it to the Void for all time. We pray for this place to be cleansed of its evil.”

“May the sky be clear.” The Clifftoners offered their most common prayer.

Drake and the men pushed with all their remaining strength. The wyvern fell toward the churning mist—just after the horizon faded to darkness. *We’re too late*, he thought, still hoping they had succeeded in beating the sunset and condemning the spirit of the aevian to the Void.

Unable to watch the corpse fall, Drake turned away and shivered. He tried to suppress the memory of Ethan’s face as his best friend had plummeted into the mist at Thorn Bolt Rock. Since that day he couldn’t watch anything fall into the Void. He turned his gaze to Jaena and made eye contact. Using subtle gestures he pointed to the dwarves with a flick of his chin, then pushed his thumb to his heart as if scratching an itch: *Are the dwarves to be killed?*

Jaena mouthed a reply. He read her lips: *Not yet*.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Drake’s shoulders relaxed, but his imagination needled him with the vision of the dwarves’ dead bodies being cast into the Void.

Priestess Whitestar led the hunters back to the gate tower, while Thor lingered on the edge of the cliff. The dwarf spit into the Void and balled a fist while making some forceful statement in Drobin.

The action sparked a vague memory in Drake. His grandfather had told him something, but he couldn’t quite recall the story. He guessed Thor made some kind of oath or curse to the

dead wyvern, though no translation was needed to understand the bitterness and anger in Thor's voice. Turning to his grandfather he asked, "Did you see the dwarf spit into the Void?"

Grandfather nodded.

"Why did he?"

"Disciples of Lorak make offerings to the Void. They believe it's the most powerful way to make a pledge or an oath. They think blood given to the Void is powerful magic."

"Is it?"

"I've seen it work before." Grandfather fixed his dark eyes on his grandson.

Nodding, Drake recalled Liana teaching him, "Never cast anything but dead aevians into the Void. You'll risk the wrath of the demons below." *Vrelkshit. Just another stupid superstition to scare the children.* Still, he wished they had beaten the sunset.

X

Alliances tempered with hatred and doubt shatter like brittle blades in the heat of battle. I must forge a friendship with the humans tempered with respect and honor.

—Bellor Fardelver, from the Thornclaw Journal

The scent of rancid dog urine filled Bellor's nostrils as he stepped into the gate tunnel. The pack of dogs snarled from the rear of the passage, their growls rumbling off the log walls. For the first time Bellor saw the animals that had been barking at him and Thor. He recognized the wide jaws and large heads of Drobin bulldogs, though they had the frame of tall Nexan mastiffs. *Clever breeding*, Bellor thought. *These are not simple folk.*

The young village guardian, Drake Bloodstone, held the dogs at bay with an outstretched arm and a terse word that instantly silenced their barks. Bellor knew the obedient animals would lunge forward and attack with a simple command. Still, he worried more about the men above them, especially the one called Laetham who had pushed Drake to the ground. Bellor's old dwarven eyes pierced the darkness at the ceiling of the gate tunnel. Men with armor-piercing bolts loaded into their crossbows aimed at him and Thor. The humans watched them through murder holes and rested their fingers on the triggers of cocked weapons. *Please Lorak, let this have been the right decision.* Bellor clung to the hope that by hiring a guide he and Thor would stay alive long enough to find their lost kin.

Drake opened the inner gate. The young man winced as it sagged on a loose hinge. The War Priest pretended not to notice the gate and kept away from the dogs as he and Thor entered the massive arbor dome of a venerable cover tree that grew into the guard tower and wall. The

group of hunters and the two Amaryllian priestesses ahead of them disappeared around the wide trunk of the tree, their footfalls silenced by soft ground cover.

“Follow me.” The Clifftoner strode past Bellor with two large male dogs at his heels. The pair of bulldog-mastiffs sniffed at Thor before loping after their master.

“These trees smell . . .” Thor’s loud sneeze made the dogs whirl around and stare at him with their curious brown eyes, “smell . . . terrible.”

Bellor shook his head, relishing the peppery fragrance, which cleansed the putrid urine smell from his nose and kept away the flying insects. The War Priest fell in line behind Thor, the dogs, and Drake. They circled the broad trunk and Bellor searched for a trail leading out from the cage of ground-rooted branches. There appeared to be no way out, but Drake stepped toward the thorny wooden bars and slipped through a slender portal hidden by leaves. With no sign of the large party of humans preceding them, Bellor wondered if the villagers had taken another way. He heard low angry voices as several grizzled hunters followed as Drake led Bellor and Thor deeper into the grove. They passed under domes of various sizes, taking a twisting, circuitous route through the camouflaged portals.

After only a moment in the maze of random hidden paths, Thor whispered in Drobin, “Which way back to the gate?”

Shrugging, Bellor realized he had no idea. *Clever folk indeed.*

Thor’s sigh became a groan, attracting the raised ears of the dogs. “They never should have built their village so close to Void. This is madness. We can’t trust these Nexans. Leading us in circles.” Thor glared at their guide and the armed men behind them.

“They’re far from being servants, and the young guardian saved our lives.” Bellor’s golden-brown eyes rested on Drake. “And he has the earth name, Bloodstone, like the man from Nexus City.”

“I know. I’m not stupid,” Thor emphasized the harshness of his Drobin words, “and he wears the same belt with the bloodstone gem, just like the man in the city did.”

“Same clan.” Bellor slipped through a thorn door. “Say nothing about it. I’ll tell what we know of his kin when the time is right.”

“Where have I heard his hearth-name before?” Thor hid his mouth with his shield. “Isn’t *draek* a Drobin word?”

“It’s of the Old Father Tongue, yes.” Bellor touched his beard. “It’s in the sagas about our ancient allies, the *draeks*. But who named the young man in the first place? Only a Lorakian Priest could access those histories.”

Thor frowned. “He may have a Drobin name, but he’s man-blood.”

“He did help us, Thor. We may have found an ally.”

“More likely a servant.” Thor squinted at the Clifftoner, who flashed them a suspicious glance.

“He wonders what we’re saying.” Thor spoke his Drobin words louder. “Perhaps I should tell him what I’ll do if these forest-crawlers betray—”

“Keep your tongue behind your beard. I speak for us here.”

Grimacing, Thor lowered his voice, “We’re not staying long, are we?”

Bellor shook his head. “We might join the wyvern at the bottom of the Void if we do, especially if I let you handle the negotiations.”

Thor snorted.

“But above all,” Bellor glanced at Thor, “we can’t linger here. I’ll not have us bringing ruin to their village. The Void is so close, and the wyvern—”

“You think I’d ruin their village?” Thor smirked.

Bellor’s mouth wrinkled. “I know it’s hard for you to imagine, Thor, but there are things more dangerous than you. There could be another wyvern, or a worse thing hunting for us now. Have you forgotten how close we are to the Void?”

Thor shook his head.

Bellor sighed. “I won’t have the blood of these folk spilled because we delay here like fools. I’ve seen enough death to last me ten lifetimes.”

Thor shrugged and fixed his gaze on Drake. “Spilling man-blood doesn’t bother me.”

“I know.” Bellor rolled his eyes. “That’s what worries me.”

Author’s Note

Thank you for reading the first ten chapters of *The Golden Cord*. If you’d like to find out what happens next please find the novel from a bookseller online, at your local library, or at your local bookstore, or get an autographed copy at <http://www.paulgenesse.com>.



Dragon art by Ciruelo Cabral; Thorn Bolt Rock by Mitch Ta'tafu; maps by Paul Genesse