

Prologue

“Arise, oh people of the Northlands, children of the bristling boar. Arise and seek the fiery stars.”

– Boar Clan traditional

Slar watched the cold, ebon water of the Galesh River churn past. Its dark hue matched his mood.

His humor held far less cheer than it did a week ago, before the Boar Clan patrol marched out from under the solid gates of Blackstone. Slar had thought this a final foray into clan territory before the Winter Gathering—a pleasant trot through the late autumn countryside. Continuing the journey, however, brought a solid knot of worry into his gut. It burned deep within, an anxiety he had never felt before, even at the approach of battle.

Put away your worry, old woman! Neither Bear nor Wolf would raid this far south during this season. His thoughts turned toward his sons. *I will see them soon enough – when the clan seeks shelter at Blackstone.* His eyes searched the leaden sky, seeing only a horizon that matched his heart. *Looks like we will have a long winter together as it is.*

“Storm gathering behind us, Captain,” Sergeant Radgred grumbled in a low tone as he walked past Slar. The veteran stalked toward the tight circle of warriors resting nearby. “Up, you dogs! We’re on to Sourbay!”

The squad gathered within moments, the squeak and clink of leather on metal the only sounds they made. With a wave of Radgred’s arm, the patrol set off again. Their mail rang with the rhythm of their march as they exited the small copse of trees in which they had taken their afternoon rest.

After about a mile, Slar leapt atop a lichen-crusting boulder, his nail-shod boots scrambling for purchase against the stone. Looking back to scan the westward horizon, the burning knot in his gut sank even further. He squinted against the wind that howled along the northern slopes

of the Dragonscale Mountains. The last of the sun hid behind purplish clouds, heavy with the first snow of winter. They hugged the rocky, conifer-covered slopes, hiding the eternal white of impassable peaks.

Slar signaled to the column some distance down the worn, ancient road. “We had better make double time, Sergeant!”

Radgred looked back. “Aye, Captain!” For a fraction of a second, the sergeant’s face sank at the sight of the storm. His expression shifted to grim determination before he smacked the shoulder of one of the warriors. “You heard the Captain. *Move!*”

Slar scanned the landscape from his perch. Ahead, a small stream trickled down from the Dragonscales, its clear flow carving a narrow gorge before it tumbled into the Galesh. He jumped down from the boulder, wincing at a creak in his knees that had not been there a year ago. He ignored the protesting cartilage and the sourness lingering in his stomach and sprinted to the front of his patrol.

“With me, lads!” he shouted, passing them with a steady gait. “There is cover ahead.” The troops picked up speed to match that of their captain. Radgred followed at the rear, scowling each time he glanced over his shoulder.

His eyes alert, Slar watched the fir trees that spread down the mountains. They began to sway as the first flakes of snow whipped about the squad. By the time he led his warriors down a dry gully toward the gorge, white powder had gathered within the crevasses. Reaching the bottom, Slar ordered Radgred to unroll the heavy, oiled mammoth skin the sergeant carried on his stout back, and the entire patrol huddled beneath it.

Forcing cheer into his voice, Slar wrapped an arm around the warrior next to him. “We can’t build a fire, but if we gather together we can save our warmth from draining away.” He

shouted against the storm that now raged beyond the shaggy tarp. “Huddle close, lads! This is going to be a long night.”

His dreams were fitful. Gloomy images flitted through his mind, calling to him from a great distance. Slar searched his dream for the source of the summons, but before it ended, it was he who fled from a dark hunter.

Morning broke outside their dome of snow and flesh. Slar crawled from cover and blinked at the sunshine glittering off a blanket of white. The snow had piled deep, even within the relative cover of the gorge. The thump of drifts settling under the new sun echoed from the cleft in the rock.

After a breakfast of hardtack and snowmelt, he led his men out of the gorge and back onto the road, hidden by a few inches of swiftly melting whiteness. *I know this land like I know the veins tracking the back of my fists. It is as if this land's very soil and water flow within my blood as well. I pray to the Fires that my sons may roam it as long as I have.* The frown on his face deepened. *I fear they will not.* “Back to it, lads.” He waved a hand forward, shooing away his dark thoughts. “We can be in Sourbay by nightfall if we press hard.”

He shifted the scimitar on his hip, caressing its worn handle. *This sword travelled the road long before I ever did.* The knot of anxiety still tore at his gut, unrelieved by the storm's passing or his morning movement. He struggled to keep a grimace of pain from his face. Shaking off his discomfort, he jogged to the front of his men. He set a fast pace that would test their stamina. *Perhaps I can shake loose this pain, and my useless worry.*

It was still there, though, when he led his men into the outskirts of Kragnek, a small village that was the last settlement before Sourbay. Mud brick huts with thatched roofs huddled on a small knoll overlooking the Galesh. A few goats milled through the recently harvested barley fields. Slar smiled. *Barley bread is our staple, but barley beer keeps us alive!*

He marched his men to the open-aired bar serving the small community. “A round of beer for my men, who run like heroes,” he said to the barkeep. “With a fresh loaf for each – and yogurt as well.” Slar dug into his pouch, past the gold to the copper underneath. *The glitter of real gold will cause a riot in a town as poor as this.*

“To the captain!” Radgred hoisted his brew and quaffed it down.

A cheer rang out before the rest of the squad followed their sergeant’s lead. The beer mugs emptied well before the bread disappeared.

While the men ate, Slar pulled his sergeant aside. “I have a feeling of unease,” he whispered, “greater than any I have had since you first led me on this trail nigh twenty years ago.” He glanced toward the warriors, who paid them no mind, and continued in an even lower tone. “Something unnatural haunts our steps. Not just raiders from another clan. Something more...powerful. I know not what it is.”

Radgred raised an eyebrow, matching Slar’s clandestine tone. “You are the one with the Old Blood. That is why you are captain, and I am still sergeant. Even though you never sought to become Boar chieftain like your father once did, you still sense things that others do not.” He narrowed his eyes. “Your whole family has this ability. I trust your lead, as I once did your father’s.” The sergeant clapped Slar on the back. “As I will some day follow your sons.”

Slar watched Radgred while the sergeant gathered the squad once more. They grabbed what sustenance still lay on the table and jumped into line behind their captain. Slar trotted the first few miles. Running his warriors on a full stomach would waste the food he had just bought them.

The beer he had consumed did nothing to ease the fire in his stomach. Before long, Slar doubled their pace. *The faster we reach Sourbay, the sooner we return to Blackstone.* Slar frowned at his sergeant, whose focus remained upon the surrounding woods.

Talk of my sons has set them on my mind. Grindar should arrive at Blackstone any day. I bet he found another wife this summer. He smiled at the memory of his youngest son. *Sharrog won Victor status at his first Clanhold this year! Perhaps he might even be home from his Victor's Hunt when we return!*

The knot in Slar's gut loosened somewhat with thoughts of his sons and home. He knew that before long, the days in the Northlands would last only a few hours, and a winter storm might last for days. Blackstone, however, would be warm with the fires of Slar's people. The meat from their hunts would fill bellies throughout the long, dark season.

His pace never slackening, Slar ran his squad into the early autumn evening. Dusk hung in the air when the squad jogged into a sharp cleft cut into the rocky hillside.

"Weren't these carved by the shamans of our people in the Elder Days?" Warrior Lishnak asked under his breath.

"It is true," Slar said to the new recruit. "They wielded great power. That was in a time of greater glory for the Clans." *Before the Dragon Wars left us broken. Before the Clans began to turn on one another.*

Gossamer threads of twilight sifted through the tree limbs, casting an eerie glow upon the unblemished snow as Slar followed the coiled road through the cleft. The sour knot in Slar's gut tightened into the fiery ball he knew from the moment before battle. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the sun had left the sky purple.

Stars pricked the firmament, until sudden darkness, deeper than the night, blackened them out as it flew overhead.

"Spread out!" Slar drew his family sword and dove to the ground. The pace of his heart quickened. "Take cover!" He held his breath while Radgred and the others scrambled into the brush along the road.

Slar crept forward on all fours. The cold snow bit his knuckles, but the feeling remained distant. His mind focused outside his body, becoming one with the world around him.

The black shadow darted overhead again and crashed to the earth. The concussion threw Slar backward along with chunks of stone and earth. He slammed into the ground, breath fleeing from his lungs.

Forcing his chest to heave again, he shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears. He scrambled to his feet, ignoring the crimson that seeped from scrapes on his elbows and the pain throbbing through his cheek. He shook his head to clear his senses. His heart pounded furiously, though it was not from the fear of any enemy. Awe and respect for the power that radiated before him coursed through his being. Anticipation and trepidation filled his heart at the sight of it.

The swirling shape seeped upward from the blast crater, forming itself with more purpose than simple smoke. It spread a deep shadow across the snow, turning it black rather than just hiding the light. A roiling, vaporous figure coalesced above Slar. The shadow morphed into a serpentine face. Two sparkling points of silver opened before him.

A voice like the breaking of an ancient, rusty hinge screeched into the night. *“Come forth, Slar, Captain of the Boar Clan!”*

The silver light of the eyes bore down on Slar. The pain that had tightened his gut throughout their march faded, slipping away from his perception, much like his sword that clattered to the ground. He dismissed it all, as his entire being focused only on the form billowing before him in the windless night.

Bathed in the light, Slar raised his green-tinted claws into the sky in exaltation. Even though his conscious mind did not completely comprehend, his warrior’s heart recognized the

colossal power of the spirit hovering before him. The blood red irises of his eyes beamed with adoration as the grating thunder of the voice continued.

“I am Galdreth, ancient master of your people. Dismiss your fears for them. My prison weakens at long last! You are my Chosen, and I shall raise you to become Warchief of the united Orc clans.”

Slar barely noticed the gasps of startled fear that escaped his warriors. Radgred shuffling up behind him only scraped his conscious mind. He took another tentative step toward the presence towering over him, ignoring the tiny screams of pain from his lacerated hands and knees. The fear in his heart had disappeared, replaced by a sense of joy and wild freedom.

The voice howled again, echoing over Slar, his men, and the empty countryside.

“You must find the vessel I have chosen, so that I may break free of my prison. Then I shall remake the history of the Dragon Wars and return the Orc clans to their ancient glory!”

Chapter One

Before the foundation of the Western Realm, the inn now known as The Sleeping Gryphon was an outpost of the Bluecloaks, far outside the border of the kingdom. However, as the west became more civilized, this structure became a waystop not just for soldiers, but for nearly every trader or pioneer passing along the westward trail. Rebuilt at the expense of the king after the Gavanor Rebellion, it has become one of the finest inns in the entire kingdom. – “Second History of Gannon, Vol. III” by Elyn Bravano

Tallen Westar stretched his hand back under the old stove and scrubbed the horsehair brush back and forth with vigor. The grime he targeted came free at last, though not without a good scrape of his knuckle on iron. He cursed and sucked a small dot of blood welling up on his finger. Tallen despised this job, but his arms were the only ones in the family long enough to reach that spot.

“Cleaning is half of cooking,” his father used to tell him. His memories of the old man were few, but still clear – most of them revolving around the kitchen where the innkeeper taught his youngest son the cooking part of the family trade. The thought saddened Tallen, bringing back memories of Lloyd Westar’s death in the Bloody Flux nearly a decade ago. *With Mother gone to the cabin most of the year, it’s left to me to keep this kitchen running. Dad would have wanted it that way.*

“Have you finished in there yet?” his middle brother called from the open, three-storied great room. Glynn offered a friendlier countenance with the customers, if not his younger brother, and usually took on the duties behind the bar. “Won’t be any more folks eating tonight, and Linsay went home. I need your help out here with the drinkers.”

Tallen tossed his brush into the bucket of wash water, splashing gray suds onto the tile floor. Most of the black came off his hands with a hardy wipe on a towel. He stepped through

the swinging half-door and approached the washbasin behind the bar. “You just want to get everyone out tonight so you can go home to *her*. The new hasn't yet rubbed off your nuptial bed.”

Glynn tossed a white rag at Tallen to replace the dirtied one he had thrown over his shoulder. “Get rid of that grime under your nails before you serve any of my customers.” Glynn’s frown split into a wide grin, as he leaned over to whisper, “Actually, Linsay can't keep her hands off me. You’ll understand if you can ever ask Jennette to marry you.”

Tallen laughed in spite of his doubt, the comment about his fingernails irking him more than the one about his sometime girlfriend. *Father would never have abided dirty hands in the Gryphon, and neither will I!*

He bent over the washbasin and scrubbed the fine, sheepswool brush over his hands. His umbrage at the thoughtless comment from his brother washed away with the grease.

Glynn stood at the other end of the bar, fists on his hips and an odd look on his face.

He knows he's too hard on me, but he doesn't have the guts to admit it. I know he's had a lot on his shoulders since Dad died, Mom left, and Jaerd joined the army. I can give him the space to be himself. I just wish he could do the same for me.

“Truth is,” Glynn said, now in a more fraternal tone, “and don’t tell mother in any of your letters to her up north...” He looked over his shoulder as if Kaylyn might appear at any time. “But I think Linsay may already be...” his grin doubled in width, “...with child!”

Bursting with a hearty laugh, Tallen wrapped his arms around his older, smaller brother. Glynn returned the gesture, first tentative, then slapping Tallen on the back.

“You must keep it quiet,” he whispered into Tallen’s ear. “For now, at least.”

Although a few patrons called for more ale, the crowd inside the Gryphon remained sparse. As evening wore into night, the clear sky hanging over the inn had filled with clouds carrying

the promise of rain. Tallen knew most farmers would work late in their fields to beat the coming storm. *Everyone else is at home saving their coin for the Sowing Festival in three weeks. My own purse is a little lighter than I might like.* Tallen scowled at the few customers haunting the corners of the spacious common room. *Looks like that situation isn't getting any better tonight.*

The last two farmers, both with plenty of sons and grandsons to plow their fields for them, wobbled out. Tallen wiped down their abandoned table. The old men had left a copper each next to their thrice-emptied mugs. Tallen frowned. He could not buy half a mug for himself with the measly tip. He made a foul gesture, little finger flicking his nose toward the closing door, but jumped when it banged open again, caught by a gust of wind.

Lightning crackled through the night, announcing the rain's arrival. Two men stood framed against the flash. One, tall with flowing black hair and a thick mustache, bore a longsword strapped over his shoulder. The other, shorter and rotund, wore a graying goatee beard and carried a dog-headed staff. Both men were clad in the blue cloaks of the Royal Guard of Gannon, though red fringe trimmed the shorter man's cloth.

"Hallo to the inn," called the taller soldier, whose collar held three silver stars. "My men and I seek shelter before this deluge makes our travel impossible. Have you rooms open? We carry the king's coin."

"Absolutely, General," Glynn said with pride from behind the bar. "Always a room in the Sleeping Gryphon for Bluecloaks. It's been that way since the Western Realm was founded."

Tallen pulled chairs out from around a large table near the still glowing central fireplace. "Even before it was founded." He tossed a couple of split hickory logs onto the embers, stoking the flames to warm the room. More heavily armed soldiers followed the first two men through the door, seating themselves with some order around the long table Tallen prepared. A

wolfhound the size of a small horse followed close behind them. The dog padded over to a rug near the fireplace, circled twice, and curled up, his snout examining the entire room.

The general cast his eyes about the inn and nodded in approval. “Stew and bread for all of us, if you have any – including a bowl for Brawny here.” The wolfhound snorted. “Ale all around.” He flipped a fat, Eastern mark in Tallen's direction.

Catching the shiny piece of gold in the air, Tallen examined it for a moment. Stamped upon it glittered the image of Arathan VII, like most coins in the kingdom these days. The Old King, as he was often called, had ruled for nearly seventy years. Few grandfathers could remember a time before his reign.

“I have some of today’s stew still warm in the kettle, sir.” Tallen nodded his head. “Would you take butter or oil for your bread?”

“Both,” grumbled the rotund man with the staff. “And that stew better have hoofed meat in it for the price Boris paid.” His gray eyes had not left Tallen since the soldiers entered the inn, and something about the man’s stare rattled Tallen’s nerves.

“I use beef from a farm just a few miles away sir.” His voice remained cool. “I assure you it was fresh when I prepared it this morning. The vegetables are last autumn’s store – carrot, onion, and parsnip. However, they keep quite well in our root cellar here.”

The man's bushy eyebrows loosened, but the stare continued. Tallen felt it on his neck all the way into the kitchen. *It's not just that he watches me, it's the intensity. I've never felt such a gaze.*

The olive oil glistened a pale green when Tallen poured it into a small bowl. “This comes from a special provider,” he called through the service window, “who makes a trip from Gavanor six times a year. He brings me the freshest of his stock from Avaros. My younger sister, Dawne, churns the butter.”

Tallen tossed a little more beef stock into the cauldron hung on the heavy iron hook within the fireplace. A little adjustment to his banked fire, and soon the stew bubbled away again. He scooped out enough for half a dozen bowls, placing them on a tray along with the butter and oil. He set a couple loaves of bread next to them and hefted the tray onto his shoulder. Bumping the swinging door with his hip, he returned to the great room.

“Here you go, sirs.” Tallen smiled, sliding the tray to the center of the table. “Hope everything meets your needs.” He sat a bowl down in front of the dog, who almost had it gobbled down before he turned back to the six soldiers.

“Thank you, lad.” The general wiped foam from his coal black mustache with the back of his hand. “If it is half as good as it smells, your stew will be almost as welcome as the ale.”

“Hear, hear,” said a giant of a man who sat at the captain’s right, tearing into a butter-slathered loaf. He tossed a chunk of the bread to Brawny, who caught it in midair. A big, dwarf made battle-axe rested on the empty table behind the soldier. Tallen had seen their craft before, but never one so large. The image in his mind of the huge man wielding it sent a shiver down his spine.

The officer in the red-fringed cloak sniffed his bowl. “Smells like it could use more pepper.” He bit into a small, tentative spoonful before the frown faded. “Not bad. Well seasoned, for the most part, but definitely needs more pepper.”

Tallen nodded. “I would agree with you for my own palate, sir, but I must keep the locals happy.” With haste, he grabbed the grinder from a nearby table and sat it before the man. “They fear spices as if they might melt the stomach.”

The older Bluecloak’s pale eyes, barely leaving Tallen since their arrival, remained focused on him. “Do you know what this red fringe on my cloak means, boy?”

“Yes sir.” Despite his nerves, Tallen fought down his indignation at the mage’s assumption of ignorance. “You are one of the Royal Battlemages sworn to the service of His Majesty, King Arathan. It is likely you trained on the Isle of Wizards, and probable that you excel in the Fire Aspect.” He paused, but could not hold it all in. “We have books here on the frontier, sir. They read just as easily in small towns as they do in great cities. This inn's own library is quite well stocked, and they are available for use by patrons.” *You are far from the first mage to eat from my kitchen. Though it has been a few years.*

The furrow in the mage’s brow deepened. “Are you a Dreamer, boy?” he growled.

Shock darted through Tallen. “I’m sorry?” He chose his words with care. “I— I have dreams, like any normal person.”

“I mean...*Dreams.*” The Bluecloak mage squeezed his finger and thumb together. “Ones that seem more real than others. Dreams that sometimes come true.” The man continued his harsh stare a moment before leaning closer to the taller officer. Even though they both wore three silver stars upon their collar, the mage seemed to defer. “I think I see something in him.”

The general shifted his gaze from the stew to Tallen. Eyes that nearly matched the blue of his cloak appraised Tallen with a deft stare. Tallen’s gut sank, as if a predator had noticed him.

“You are the judge of power, not I.” The general released Tallen from his gaze. “Eat your stew.” He pointed his spoon at the mage’s bowl, before taking another bite from his own. “We have more to worry about than apprentice hunting right now,” he said around the mouthful. The general swallowed with a satisfied smile that crept above the dimple in his chin. “And let the lad do his job. He seems to do it well.”

The Battlemage’s scowl did not disappear from his face, but he did dip a piece of bread into his bowl. The frown lessened while he chewed. After a second bite, he waved his hand at Tallen in dismissal.

Tallen slipped away, the mage's words filling him with apprehension. Something in the back of his mind warned him to avoid the Bluecloaks as much as possible for the rest of the night, although he knew that was easier said than done.

When Tallen delivered their second round of ale and more bread, the mage sat deep in whispered conversation with his commander. The gruff man seemed to give him no more mind than he might any other waiter. Before Tallen left the table, however, he was certain he overheard the word "Highspur". *The great fortress?*

After the soldiers quaffed their second ale—wooden spoons clattering into bowls wiped clean with bread—the general rose from his seat.

"That is enough for tonight, fellows," he said. "We must be onward before dawn, rain or not."

The rest of the squad rose with precision. The tallest, four bronze discs upon his collar, picked up the long, dwarven battle-axe when he stood. "You heard the Earl, boys. Get some clean sack time before we wander out into the wilderness."

The other soldiers grabbed their gear and followed the sergeant. Brawny hopped up from his spot near the fire, and trotted after the soldiers.

Tallen moved to gather the empties. The mage ignored him when he stood, though the soldiers nodded thanks, each leaving a silver penny behind on the table.

"Good night, sirs," Tallen said, watching Glynn lead them into the west wing. He stacked the empty bowls on a platter and took them into the kitchen. He stood at the sink washing dishes when Glynn returned through the swinging door.

"They will be off early. Their commander gave me coin for their rooms." Glynn tried to stifle a yawn. "Do you have that gold mark he tossed you?"

Tallen sighed and wiped the dishwater from his hands before reaching into his pocket.

“Keep it.” Glynn gave him a confident nod. “You do a fine job. Dad would be proud.”

The startled expression that crept onto Tallen’s face was unbidden, but obvious.

“Well, you don’t have to gawk at me.” Glynn filled his voice with feigned hurt. “I can give a compliment.” He shrugged. “Once in a while.”

Tallen laughed. “Linsay is rubbing off on you. Your baby will be a good one.”

Glynn clapped him on the back with a smile before heading off to his own bed. Tallen cleaned every dish and put out the hearth fire before he followed.

Darkness swirled around Tallen. He struggled for orientation. Vaporous clouds of shadow muddled his perception. His stomach turned. Tallen knew he had been here before, and with each visit, he gathered more awareness. He righted himself, though he was certain there could be no up or down here, and fought to gather his senses.

Memories of the one book he found describing this place flittered into his confused consciousness. The wizards called it the Dreamrealm, a thing of magic and the dominion of the Dreamers. He had asked every bookseller and peddler that came west for more information about it. His search had been in vain, for none could further his query.

Tallen looked outward, though he had no real eyes in the Dreamrealm. He thought of walking, and he floated forward, though he had no real legs. A galaxy of starpoints surrounded him, flashing in a blinding rainbow of colors. The more Tallen came here – the more he concentrated on those fascinating twinkles of light – the closer he came to touching them.

Focusing, Tallen reached outward, but no hand moved in the darkness. These visits had increased over the last year while his body and mind matured, and certain lights he recognized now. One of the points glowed dusky white, its beauty captivating him. It called to him beyond his normal senses. His absent heart yearned to touch it.

A sudden stab of fear tore into his peaceful thoughts and ripped the glistening white point from his awareness. Another presence swarmed about him in the darkness, one Tallen had never sensed before. Even though he had no neck in the Dreamrealm, he felt the hairs lift upon the back of it.

Silvery shadows shimmered through the darkness, wafting like smoke rising from the bowl of a pipe. It wrapped around him, caressing – insistent and pervasive all at once. Tallen fought to move. He could not think beyond the coalescing form curled about him. Glowing with a silver light, it condensed. Two pitch-black eyes peered out from the reptilian face that materialized before him.

Tallen's heart would have stopped had he been in his body during that eternal moment. Those liquid drops of blackness captured his eyeless gaze, a black deeper than that of the Dreamrealm. They stared into his soul, ripping it open, leaving it bare.

Like silk sliding along steel, a voice rang out. ***Know that they come for you, human!*** The thing screamed into the emptiness it now filled. ***Know that I am Gan returned! The ancient trap once set for Galdreth and I has at last weakened!***

The spirit softened its tone, but the words still reverberated in Tallen's mind. ***Galdreth seeks to escape it, yet I remain held tighter than my counterpart. I may only approach you in this realm for a short time, but Galdreth can once again touch the physical world.***

The form gathered itself, the voice taking on its previous, more strident timbre. ***If Galdreth is let loose, the chaos would destroy the world. Do not forget the People of Gan.***

The bright figure and the power that held Tallen breathless blinked out. Only the darkness of the Dreamrealm loomed about him, now far more foreboding. Tallen reached for the waking world like a breathless swimmer scrambling for the surface of a lake.

He woke to the cyan of pre-dawn creeping through his narrow, second story window. His heart raced, and his head thumped. Tossing the sweat-drenched sheets aside, Tallen stumbled to his small, blue-painted dresser. With a sigh of relief, he splashed cool water from the chipped basin onto his face. His heart pounded in rhythm with his head. The all too real dream had rattled him to his core. While the Dreamrealm was something familiar to him, the entity that had spoken there was not. He splashed water again to drive away the ghosts of his encounter, but the memory of the dream still haunted him, even though the words spoken had slipped away.

Outside Tallen heard the hushed calls of men and the jingle and stamp of horses geared for a journey. Quiet whickers and a short whinny broke through the muffled sounds of dawn. The noise of the horses, common to the inn, helped sooth his nerves. Dabbing his face with a towel, Tallen looked out of the window overlooking the courtyard of the inn and watched the Bluecloaks mount in unison. The muscular wolfhound had already cleared the front gate. The mustached general gave a muted call and waved for his soldiers to follow him toward the River Road.

The Bluecloak mage paused, his red fringe shifting about him. That sharp gaze stared up at Tallen's window, though there was no way the man could have seen him in the faint light. Tallen felt those eyes pierce his – a stare meant for him and him alone. The Battlemage nodded once, before turning his horse to follow his companions.

Chapter Two

The five Free Cities, once known as the Last Cities, are all that remain of the lost elven kingdom of Lond. They are also the only places in Tarmor where humans, elves, and dwarves live in common community. This not only provides for diverse cities, but for a difficult political and economic atmosphere. By the fourth century A.R. (After Return), only Kerrigier and maybe Novon, could still be called cities. The others remained little more than prairie cow towns. --

“History of Gannon, Appendix C” by Elyn Bravano

Maddrena Conaleon filled her lungs with the crisp night air. She relished the fresh scents of spring hanging on the breeze. Beneath the more pleasant smells hung the pungent scent of urine, something unavoidable in a city, even one so small as Dern. Maddi watched the moon lift into the night, its sizeable curve recently risen. It provided enough light to work by, but not enough to be easily spied.

“The perfect night for a heist,” she whispered to the silver crescent.

The soft soles of her calfskin boots allowed her to grip the slate beneath her feet with ease. She climbed to her favorite vantage point on the roof of a former counting house. She kept one of her hideouts here, places where she found refuge when occasion called. Scanning the horizon of the city from the heights, she saw the Earth Temple rising in the distance. Horse-sized sconces lit its ziggurat shape of stacked mud bricks. The townhouse she sought sat on the square within the temple’s shadow.

If the old bastard spoke the truth. Maddi tied her glossy black hair into a bun with a leather thong. Taking a deep breath, she made her first leap of the night. When she touched down with grace on the other side of the alley, the slight skitter of her soles on slate forced a tingle of nerves up the back of her thighs. *The first one is always the hardest.*

Steadying herself with another deep breath, she took off at a quick trot. Her nimble frame danced across the rooftops, packed one next to another along the winding, cobblestone streets. Some of the shingles slid under her feet, but she kept herself steady. At one point, she was forced to shimmy down a gutter pipe, dash across a quiet avenue, and use her rope and grapnel to scale back up the wall of an abandoned tannery. Once there, she felt back in her element, skipping across the low slate roofs of her city.

Soon the townhouse she sought coalesced from the darkness, one story taller than the buildings packed next to it. Maddi tossed her grapnel up and pulled herself along the hempen rope. Scanning the city from her new vantage, she ducked behind the parapet and coiled her line. Only empty streets, dimly lit by the temple sconces, lay before her.

Keeping her crouch low, she scurried across the flat rooftop until she discovered a wooden hatch bound by iron and a heavy padlock. Given time, she knew she could spring the lock, but the rusted hinges on the old portal appeared a far easier target. She squeezed a little olive oil from her pouch onto the hinges before pulling out her toolkit. A little twisting with her pliers and a couple taps of a small hammer and chisel – muffled by a wool cloth – and the corroded hinge-pins came loose. Maddi pushed and the door fell inward, hanging awkwardly from the still-latched padlock.

Dust swirled through the air as she dropped down into the attic. A few old trunks sat strewn about. From the smell, she doubted they held anything more than mothballed clothes, probably long since out of style.

Another hatchway, this one unlocked and with a folding ladder, led her to a floor of empty bedrooms covered in a decade-thick layer of dust. The stairwell leading down to the second floor remained undisturbed, lit through tall windows by the moon. Outside she could see the Earth Temple and the gray, quiet streets of the square.

Once Maddi reached the hallway below, she gasped in surprise. A set of large boot prints trotted up the stairs from the ground floor, entered a side room, and then headed back down the way they had come. She leaned in closer to examine the prints. Only the slightest sprinkling of new dust lay over them.

The old coot's story may be true, then. Drawing a quiet breath, Maddi flitted through the shadows toward the entry, avoiding the tall windows. This locked door was hinged on the inside. *I guess I'll have to do this the hard way.* She pulled a delicate leather pouch from her bag, and fished through the dozens of lock picks it held, each designed in a different size or shape, most made of steel, a few of wood or bone. She avoided the one made of a smoky, glasslike substance, hidden within the pouch that Renna had given to her. *I can't chance using that pick. I might shatter its beauty.*

Another breath steadied her racing heart, before she pulled out two of the simple pieces of steel. After a dip in olive oil, she worked them inside the keyhole for a few moments. The lock clicked open. With a twist of the knob, she pushed the heavy door inward.

A broad oak desk sat in front of two thick-curtained windows, barely visible in the moonlight from the hall. Maddi pulled a clear marble from her shirt pocket, and held it in her open palm. Through pursed lips, she blew a wisp of breath over the small, glass globe. The marble sparked to life with a faint glow, just bright enough to see the sheet covered furnishings within the study. The recent boot prints led to the desk, behind it, and back out the door.

Maddi followed them in absolute silence, frowning with doubt. *He was too drunk when we spoke in the Queen of Wands this evening. He couldn't have known what he was talking about, could he? Although, he did know about the hatch on the roof...*

The linen covered chair had been placed back under the desk, but Maddi saw from the swishing patterns in the dust that the previous entrant had pulled it out. She did the same and

ducked under the desk with her glowing marble. One of the floorboards was larger than the others. She found it easy to pry up the plank, and place it aside, careful to make no sound.

An old, folded piece of calfskin had been hidden within the recess. Maddi pulled it out before replacing the floorboard. She unfolded the skin to reveal a rusty tin box with an intricate lock that held it tight.

I'll work on that later in privacy. Leaving the calfskin on the floor, she tucked her prize away and hopped to her feet. She dashed back into the hallway. Another soft breath and the marble blinked out. Up the stairs she trotted, paying less heed than she had during her entrance. She climbed into the attic and hoisted herself onto the roof, excited to examine her prize.

Sinewy arms wrapped around her, hard as old tree roots. She tensed as a cold blade pressed against her throat.

“Ere now, lassie,” the slurred voice grumbled into her ear. “Thought you could pull one over on ol’ Jeevsie, did ya?” His breath reeked of the onion the old drunk had been eating like an apple in the tavern. When he hacked to clear his throat, the stench of sour wine and vomit stung her eyes. “Well?” His tremulous hand shook the knife where it touched her slim neck. She felt a tiny prick of pain, followed by the tickle of warmth trickling down her neck. “Seems that whatever you slipped into muh wine didn’t last as long as you mighta hoped.”

Dip me in the Fires! I know better than to short dose a drunk! Always takes a heavier measure to break through the alcohol already swirling in their brains.

The man pushed his face even closer to hers. “I been watchin’ this place since Lord Baelric fired me an’ left town. I been waitin’ ta hit it since I saw him sneak back in last week. This was *my* score!”

His voice broke, sounding as rusty as the knife felt against her throat. Maddi hoped his reactions might be the same. She focused her mind, knowing that old drunks were often quick drunks.

“Course I knew he lef’ somefin’,” Jeevsie grumbled in her ear, his slobber dripping onto the nape of her neck. “I heard him curse a woman’s greed as he locked the door, empty handed. I got a feeling she wanted what he hid, and he didn’t want her to have it.” He hacked again, the stench of his breath turning her stomach. “I jus’ didn’ have the skill to git through the locks. Knew you did though.” He hissed. “Stupid to trust a little bitch!”

Damn it! I should have been paying more attention! Maddi moved a fraction, shifting her body closer to his and farther from the knife.

“Oh, think I forgot ye was a lass, did ye?” The hard-handed man grunted. His wiry beard scraped against the skin behind her ear. The hand that clamped over her mouth loosened and shifted downward to grab her breast. Maddi did not struggle, even though her spine curdled with revulsion at the touch. The knife lingered near her throat. She shuddered at the thought of the rusty edge ripping through her windpipe.

“You treat old Jeevsie nice,” he cooed, as Maddi’s lip curled in revulsion, “an’ I might find it easier to let you off this rooftop with your throat still closed.”

Maddi nodded in silence, shifting a hand behind her and reaching for the strings of his breeches.

“Tha’s muh gal,” he mumbled, his knife hand slipping from her neck.

She offered a slight smile, then snarled as she grabbed his crotch fiercely, crushing the shriveled parts she found there.

The old drunk’s voice squealed, rising to the pitch of a young girl. He stumbled, almost dropping the knife in his agony.

Spinning on her heel, Maddi smashed the tin treasure box into his face. She heard the satisfying crunch of bone, followed by a wet gurgle.

Jeevsie blindly swung the knife at her, missing by half a yard when she dodged out of his way. He swung again, catching the cuff of her shirt, and cutting off a button that clattered into the night.

Her boiling anger froze, and the ice crept into her voice. "Now you've done it."

She drove the box into his face once more. This time his nose crumpled under her attack. She lost herself in a moment of rage at his touch. Two and three swings later, blood leaked from the ruin of his face onto the rooftop.

Maddi pulled back, bringing her rage under control. A thief she might be, but not a killer.

She wiped the gore-smear on Jeevsie's stained jacket. His breathing came in shallow puffs, but the rest of his body remained still. Her voice filled with disgust. "You forced this from me." She rose to her feet and dropped over the side of the building.

Her trip back across town flew by, her mind still in shock from the attack. Slipping inside the old counting house, now used as a flophouse, Maddi frowned at its rundown condition. *It's a safe place to sleep.* She covered her neck with her hand as she passed the proprietor. She smiled, and he returned it. She had paid him double his normal rates for privacy, so he allowed her use of the old safe as a bunk.

Tucked inside its block walls and wrapped in a fine wool blanket, she worked the tricky lock under the flickering light of a candle, until the rusty lid popped up. She pried its bent hinges wide for a better look.

Inside rested a small gold locket hung on a thick chain. It opened to reveal the cameos of two young children, a boy and a girl, both brunette and smiling. Maddi tossed the chain aside and pulled at the satin backing of the box. With a hearty jerk, it came loose. White sparkles

greeted her eyes, which returned the gesture. A half dozen diamonds, each nearly a carat in size glittered in the candle glow.

Maddi laughed and fondled the gems. “A woman’s greed, eh?” She tucked them into a velvet pouch and curled up with it next to her chest. She blew out the candle, throwing the room into blackness, and picked up the locket before drifting to sleep. Caressing it, she wondered who the children might be.

Maddi shielded her eyes against the midmorning sun, bright with the promise of a warm spring. She skipped over a puddle. The cobblestone streets in this part of town stood in better repair than those near her flophouse, and more businesses occupied the tightly packed buildings. She hefted the bag she carried higher on her shoulder and hopped up the two steps into the apothecary. A familiar bell rang when she opened the door.

The waft of scents greeting her held flavors both exotic and familiar. Last season’s herbs hung from the rafters drying, while seedlings covered dozens of trays on the counter. Maddi took a deep breath. The scents of foreign spices crept into her sinuses, mingled with the more astringent smell of curative balms and chemicals. The aromas seasoned the memories of her childhood.

“Well, I’m amazed you remember how to find your way here, it’s been so long since you last visited.” Renna, the closest thing to a mother Maddi had ever known, entered from the back room. Even though they were really just distant cousins, Renna had taken Maddi in when her father died of the Bloody Flux. Maddi had never known her natural mother. All her father had told her was that she passed during childbirth.

Maddi inclined her head toward her foster mother. “I’ve been busy.”

Renna stepped out from behind the counter. Her mock-disapproving scowl changed to concern when she saw Maddi in the light. She gasped at the red-spotted white gauze Maddi had wrapped around her own neck. “What happened to you this time?”

“I made a mistake that won’t happen again.”

Renna stepped closer and unwound the bandage with care. The elder woman batted Maddi’s hand away when she raised it in protest.

“I’ve taught you a lot, young lady,” Renna said with a firm tone, “but I still know some things you don’t.” She gasped when she revealed the wound and clucked her tongue when Maddi placed the used bandage on a counter. “You used a good salve, and you wrapped it well, but that will still leave a heavy scar. You are too beautiful to allow that.”

Maddi scoffed. “I made the mending balm myself. The scar should be minimal.”

“Yes.” Renna closed her eyes and reached for Maddi. “But I will leave no scar at all.”

Startled by its suddenness, Maddi gave in to the cool, clear tingle of Renna’s healing Talent. Its familiar tickle had channeled through her body many times over the course of her life. Yet each instance shocked her anew, like dunking her body into ice water. Renna’s Talent crept along her neck. Maddi stopped herself from scratching at the sensation of skin and torn muscle mending together. She cringed at the image of a dozen tiny beetles crawling up her throat. She gasped, and it was gone.

“Have a large lunch.” Renna stepped back, her gaze an eternal examination

“I know.” Maddi stood there uncomfortably, dreading the subject she had to broach.

Best to be direct about it. “I have to leave town,” she blurted out.

Renna’s face remained calm. “I prepared myself for this.” Maddi had expected a far more heated reaction. “Is it because of *that*?” She pointed an accusatory finger at the crimson-spotted bandage.

“It is related,” Maddi admitted. “But it is not the only reason.”

Renna looked up at Maddi with sadness in her eyes. “Am I one of those reasons?”

Maddi tried to force her sadness into anger.

Damn it, woman! A fight would have made this much easier. Giving in to her better virtues, Maddi sighed. “You are not one of the reasons. In fact, you are the only one I can think of to stay.” She took Renna’s hand, fighting back the tears she had sworn would not come during this conversation. “It’s this town – the thieves are too thick, and the pickings too thin. I have to move on.”

Her foster mother nodded, tears glistening in her eyes. “I knew this day would come – especially once I agreed to teach you about more than just herbs.” The older woman wiped her welling tears with a small kerchief. “Do you need anything from me?”

Maddi smiled. “As a matter of fact, I have something for you. Here...”

The diamonds sparkled when Maddi poured them out onto the counter. They tumbled to a stop near the now forgotten bandage.

“By the Waters...” Renna gasped. “No wonder you must leave in a hurry.”

“Sell them one at a time—”

Renna raised a weary hand. “I know how to fence a gem. I’m the one who taught you.”

Maddi returned a shy smile.

Leaving here is more difficult than I had expected.

Renna spread her hands on the counter in front of her. “If you are leaving forever, then there is something else I must tell you. It is something I have suspected for a long time, but...” She paused, her brow furrowing. “I suppose I haven’t found the courage to tell you, because it can be as much a burden as a blessing.”

“What are you talking about?” Maddi’s voice trembled. “Is this about my mother?”

“No, Maddi,” Renna said, “it is about you.” She crossed behind the main counter of her shop in silence and pulled out one of the large bags of mixed herbs she sold to travelers. Renna paused, working her mouth. Finally opening the bag, she found the words she sought. “My Talent in healing is limited. That’s why I spent so much of my career learning about herbs, potions, and other curative methods – to supplement its weakness.” She reached up among the dozens of jars in her personal stash of ingredients, placing several on the counter next to the travel pack. She shook her head, returning one Maddi thought contained saffron to the shelf. Renna replaced it on the counter with a jar holding wormroot. “But the part of my Talent that is somewhat gifted is an ability to see the Talent in others – to see the seed that can bloom with practice and training.” Renna picked small samples from each of her chosen jars, wrapped them in waxed parchment, and placed them in a small leather pouch. She looked up from her work to meet Maddi’s gaze directly. “You have the Talent, Maddi. I have always suspected – perhaps it is part of why I took you in with such readiness. In recent years, however, I have come to be certain.”

Maddi’s heart leaped into her throat and her mouth clamped shut. Blood pounded in her ears with the shock of realization. Pieces of her life, moments of empathy and odd sensations, clicked into place and made sense.

Renna spoke, filling the silence. “A Doctor that lived here many years ago opened my Talent for me. I never went to the Doctor’s College in Daynon. Perhaps that is why my Talent never bloomed enough for me to mend more than flesh wounds.” She looked up again from her packing, and the tears rose once more in her eyes. “If you get that far, you should seek the College out. I don’t have the strength to open your Talent myself, or I would have tried to do so long before now.”

Maddi's thoughts still swirled about inside her head. *I could be a Talented healer? What does that do for me? Healers can't heal themselves!*

"Will I need to attend this College to use my...my Talent?"

"Not necessarily." Renna pulled the strings tight on the pack. "If you come across a very Talented doctor somewhere else, they might do it for you. But if you want to make certain it is done right, and that it maximizes your potential, you should go to the College." Renna smiled and tossed the pack to Maddi. "Besides, much of the other healing knowledge I have given you, the wisdom of country midwives, is likely still a secret to them. You might be able to teach them a thing or two yourself."

Maddi stared at the bulging sack of herbs. A gift of Renna's most precious ingredients was not what she had expected – a fight maybe, or at least an upset argument, but not kindness and acceptance.

I certainly did not expect to be told that I have healing Talent! "I don't know what to say, Renna." Maddi squeezed the words around a sob that ached in her jaw.

"Say you'll consider going to the College." Her foster mother raised a brow of concern. "I know that you have chosen another path for yourself, but that does not have to last forever. A Doctor has a much safer lifestyle than a..." Renna tilted her head toward the stained bandage lying next to the naked diamonds.

With a nod of acquiescence, Maddi folded her arms around the pack of herbs. "I will consider it."

"That is all I can ask." Renna came around the counter and approached her. "You will leave today?"

"Yes." The pressure returned to Maddi's head, and she fought back another sob. "I already purchased a horse."

Renna spread her arms with uncertainty, the tears now winding their way down her cheeks. Maddi collapsed into those arms, her headache draining away when she let the sobs come at last. The two stood there near a minute, the warmth of their embrace and the coolness of their tears the only sensations Maddi felt. "Goodbye, mother," she sobbed at last.

In the end, Renna let go first with a soft caress of Maddi's cheek and a sniffle. Maddi whispered another good-bye and turned for the exit. The final ringing of the little bell brought on the threat of more tears. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it, drawing a deep breath.

The clatter of horse hooves on cobblestone shook her. Maddi dabbed her eyes with her cloak to hide any proof of emotion from the passers-by. With a quiet sniff, she stalked toward the livery stables.

Chapter Three

When Benicus Varlan, son of the Emerald Duke, handed his father's head to King Aradon, not only was the Gavanor Rebellion formally ended, but the ducal line of succession remained within the Varlan family. With the line of Princes ended in Gavanor, the son now possessed much of what the father had sought – no liege lord other than a far away king and an entire Realm to rule, rather than just a city. – “Short History of the Gavanor Rebellion” by Jalianos Sofra

Lieutenant Jaerd Westar struggled to hold his head high while he marched into the great hall of the Citadel of Gavanor. He forced himself to focus on following the emerald green cloak in front of him, ignoring the rainbow of nobility gathered on either side. The bees buzzing in his stomach threatened to bring up the lavish lunch laid out in honor of him and his fellow officers. The food had been rich enough that he might have felt ill despite his nerves.

I've been outnumbered by brigands in a dozen fights. That never had me as shaken as this pomp and circumstance.

A hush covered the throng within the great hall while he and his two companions in burnished armor marched down the long, stone-flagged aisle. Most of the soldiers stood in ranks near the entry. The multicolored coats of the Western Realm baronies huddled in segregated clusters near the dais at the far end, bearing the gold chains and sigils of their houses. Jaerd strode beneath corresponding pennants hung from the high ceiling, the gray stone wall on emerald green of Gavanor at their forefront. Jaerd noticed the golden cougar on maroon of Whitehall Castle drooped in a far corner, its listless manner a match to his spirit. He stared at the long aisle down the middle of the crowd as if it were a path to the hangman's noose.

The two officers he marched behind appeared to hold no such trepidation. They wore beaming, almost absurd smiles. Wolfsgate Captain Loren Baner marched in front of Jaerd, his

uniform straining at the belly. The leader of their little procession, General Sandor Vahl, made enough money to have his uniform let out so it did not pull so tight on his even larger gut. Watching the two of them waddle forward sickened Jaerd almost as much as the ceremony.

These men will outrank me forever!

Duke Aginor Varlan rose from his chair on the lower step of the dais. Above it, on the highest step, sat the black throne that once accommodated the Princes of Gavanor. Jaerd's stomach eased somewhat at the sight of the duke. He knew the man had proven his bravery fifteen years ago in the Border Skirmishes, back when Jaerd had played in the pond near the Sleeping Gryphon.

Aginor waved his men to haste. *It is an honor to serve in his guard.* The other officers did not notice, continuing onward in their stately procession. Jaerd willed the wide men to move faster, but they would not speed their advance down the gauntlet of western nobility.

At last, Captain Baner and General Vahl took their places in front of the duke, Jaerd on their far left. Duke Aginor moved toward Vahl, but at the last moment, turned on his heel and stepped up to Jaerd. The higher-ranking officers shuffled their feet. Even though Jaerd was not an expert on protocol, every fool knew that the duke should recognize the senior officers first.

"Lieutenant Jaerd Westar," Duke Aginor intoned, his voice familiar with how to use the hall's acoustics, "you have proven yourself a valiant soldier of the Gavanor guard. You enlisted ten years ago as a guardsman and have climbed your way up the ranks to become an officer." Jaerd's face shifted into the closest thing to a smile he had worn all day. "Your service was invaluable to my son in wiping out the Miller's Creek Brigands." Jaerd's eye caught a nod from Doran Varlan, a vocal supporter of his promotion into the officer corps. "This..." The duke held up a silver, five-pointed star identical to the one already affixed to Jaerd's collar. "...is well deserved."

Duke Aginor reached up to the emerald green of Jaerd's tunic, and pinned the second star there next to the first. The duke then pulled down on his own matching tunic, the stone wall of Gavanor picked out in thread of silver, and straightened it with formality. He gave a sharp salute, right fist over heart, which Jaerd snapped in return. A familiar twinkle remained in the duke's eye.

"Wolfsgate Captain Jaerd Westar." The duke released his salute. "We welcome you to service."

"With honor!" Jaerd called in a clear voice that rang throughout the hall.

Aginor stepped to the next officer. "Former Wolfsgate Captain Loren Baner," he spoke out, "You have served with honor in your position for a decade, managing the flux of traffic through the Wolfsgate. You caught many smugglers in your day." The duke paused. Jaerd had never seen him with such a flat expression. "This is why I have decided that rather than make you General of Gates, you shall be transferred to Magdonton as General of Docks there. That position has been empty for many months now. Your skills will be useful against river smugglers."

A soft, almost imperceptible gasp rustled through the crowd. The men dressed in midnight blue of House Magdon smiled begrudgingly. One not much older than Jaerd wore a silver chain with a crescent and stars in gold and diamonds suspended around his neck.

The duke leaned in to pin a third star upon Baner's collar, but the man seemed not to notice. His face remained in a shocked grimace, yet he retained enough sense to return the duke's salute.

Duke Aginor turned to the last and eldest officer. "General of Gates Sandor Vahl, your service began when my father ruled this realm. You served me during the Border Skirmishes as a capable assistant quartermaster." The duke stared into the general's eyes with a commanding

presence, his stony jaw locked. “Your retirement will be accepted with regrets. I have commissioned an engineering battalion to build you a fine house along the Stonebourne.”

This time the crowd openly muttered. Vahl’s relatives barked calls of surprise. The general himself looked as if he could choke. His face reddened, and his fingers clutched into fists.

“My liege,” he sputtered, “I was to become your Marshal!”

“Things change, General.” The duke shrugged. “I felt it was time to shake things up in *my* army.” The duke turned his voice on the crowd that still had not calmed. “We have become complacent! Years of peace and good seasons have left us fat and slow.” The duke did not hide his direct stares at the heavysset officers. Jaerd sucked in his solid gut just a bit tighter. “My son Doran will serve as General of Gates until I find an officer worthy of the title. I will serve as my own Marshal of the guard.” The duke looked directly at the multihued representatives of his bannermen. “The barons of the realm should do the same. Too long has name and length of service been the major requirement of rank.” The duke’s voice took on a softer tone, one of a caring lord. “I fear we are too satisfied in our safety. I for one will not let our realm be caught unaware by the inexorable tragedies that come with the future.”

The duke walked back toward his dais, while the multitude murmured. Many nodded their heads in agreement, while some, mostly those in the most garish or expensive dress, scowled with disapproval. Doran Varlan joined his father with an outstretched hand of encouragement, as did Baron Chalse Whitehall. The pot-bellied man in maroon heartily nodded his close trimmed, balding scalp. The new General Baner walked over to the men from house Magdon with a hat-in-hand smile. They greeted him with fair nods. The former General Vahl stormed out of the hall with grumbling members of his family. Most of the green-cloaked soldiers smiled and nodded, but the few royal Bluecloaks in attendance watched everything with intensity.

Jaerd was about to slip away to the barracks when Duke Aginor waved his hand. “Captain Westar, please join us.”

With a deep breath similar to the one he took before drawing his sword, Jaerd trotted over to the nobles, his well-blackened boots ringing against the stone.

“Congratulations, Captain.” Doran Varlan smiled and offered Jaerd his hand. “I knew you were going to make good a long time ago.”

“Doesn’t surprise me either,” Baron Whitehall pronounced. “The Westars are from Dadric, from a long line of old Gannonite stock. They’ve been out here since Gavanor was little more than a castle on a knob of stone.”

“Thank you, sirs.” Jaerd bowed his head. “I am honored by your trust.”

The duke pointed at him. “You’ve earned it Captain...as have some others.”

Doran chuckled. “Already scouting for my replacement, Father?”

“More so for mine!” Duke Aginor laughed in return. “I look forward to a measure of retirement soon.” He gave his son a poke. “It’s your generation’s turn to take the reins. I want to go hunting.”

Jaerd shifted his feet in discomfort.

Doran smiled at his father. “It all depends on how upset House Darilla is over your ‘retiring’ General Vahl.” He laced his voice with sarcasm.

The duke huffed. “We shall deal with Baron Maylar when the time comes. He is not so close to his cousin as the fool might believe.”

Baron Whitehall joined Doran in another chuckle.

Staring at the floor, Jaerd listened to the nobles jest with each other. “If you have no more need of me, my lords,” he broke in with a bow of respect, “I have new duties at the Wolfsgate.”

All three of the nobles laughed aloud.

“Don’t overdo it, Westar.” The baron clapped Jaerd on the back. “They trust you’ll do the job.”

Doran shifted his green cloak over one shoulder. “Likely the fellow has sense and wants to spend as little time among noblemen as he can.”

Jaerd had fought alongside the ducal heir against the Miller’s Creek Brigands enough to know the man had earned those three stars on his tunic.

“Actually, this is the whole point of my speech.” Duke Aginor nodded his head with certainty. “The average nobleman’s son would have stood here kissing our behinds until we ran him off.” He saluted Jaerd again, this time with less formality. Jaerd returned it as if on parade. “You may take your post, Captain, but I want you to understand that you are a part of this restructuring I have proposed. Some of my peers do not entirely approve of it. Your position at Wolfsgate is essential. Keep your eyes open.” The duke paused as if considering. “Have you heard of the Earl of Mourne? Do you know his face?”

I believe they served together in the Border Skirmishes. Jaerd nodded. “Yes, sir. Black hair and mustache.”

The duke nodded. “We agreed that he would use the Wolfsgate upon his return.”

Lifting an eyebrow, Jaerd folded his arms behind his back. “Will he be cloaked in blue?”

“Likely. He travels in the company of other Bluecloaks as well as a Battlemage.” Duke Aginor’s bronze eyes searched Jaerd. Apparently finding what he sought, a confident smile crossed his face. “It may be several weeks before he arrives. The Earl Boris should ask for the Wolfsgate Captain when he does. Bring him directly to the citadel upon his return.” His voice slipped to a near whisper. “Tell none in your command who he is, just for whom to look. Bring him directly here yourself.”

“Directly here.” Jaerd saluted again. “Yes sir.”

Duke Aginor shifted his shoulders into a more relaxed posture. “Well done, Captain Westar.” The duke returned the salute. “Dismissed.”

Jaerd snapped a turn and marched with purpose from the great hall. Most of the crowd had dispersed. Only a few onlookers lingered. Some gave him an appraising stare, while one or two scowled in his direction. He paid no attention. His heart leapt with unexpected excitement over his new position. Yet his gut sank at the same time with trepidation at its challenges. Jaerd clenched his hands, focused on ideas of how to improve his command.

I'll still be standing at the gate all day, no matter how many stars I wear.

Chapter Four

“Fie! Turn me not into a toad!” – Prince Amadon to the wizard Cannor, “The Mage’s Eye” Act II, Scene iii

Dorias Ravenhawke, last of the rogue wizards, sighed while contemplating the trees of Ravenswood. The Gray Mountains loomed in the distance, their white peaks sparkling in the sun. Dorias reveled in the forest hued with the pale green of rising spring.

Tumbled black stones lay cast about among the ancient trunks, carved with the ravens that gave the forest its name. Dorias had built the very tower on which he now stood out of similar blocks. *No one owns the stones any longer. Those that carved them died a thousand years before the Dragon Wars began.*

A flutter of black wings drew Dorias from his reverie. The bird was late.

“Merl!” A hefty raven landed on its pinewood perch set into the parapet. Dorias handed him a strip of jerky. “You’ve had fun on your little ‘sabbatical’, eh?”

The raven let out a brash caw and rubbed its head on Dorias’ cloak. “Ladies!” it called in quite clear Common Tongue.

“Ah, yes.” Dorias’ laugh carried out over the forest. “I assume there will be a rash of rather large young hatchlings born this year?”

Merl cawed again in the affirmative.

Dorias ran a hand over his close-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. He knew his own wings held far more silver than Merl’s. “But now you are done for the season, true?”

The raven hopped from his perch to Dorias’ shoulder. He stretched his wings out to shade the wizard’s head from the noonday sun and rubbed his onyx beak on Dorias’ collar.

“Good.” Pushing the door open, Dorias climbed down the spiral stairwell leading from the roof of his tower. “We have many things to do.”

Following the downward curve of the stairwell, Dorias passed his bedroom. He descended further, ignoring the door to the library. He had crammed it full of carved shelves in a dizzying array of styles, each packed with books, scrolls, and odd items found on his many journeys. Continuing down the wide stone steps, he spiraled past a dozen more doors, some of which opened onto rooms that would confuse the average being. One of them appeared to open out onto a terrace overlooking the Jade Sea from one of the thousands of islands surrounding it. It was an illusion of course, an illusion Dorias had created with a self-sustaining spell of Psoul magic, the Aspect of the Dreamers.

“The Dreamrealm is closed to me, Merl.” Dorias shook his head. “I have tried to enter it for the last several nights. It is as if a dark cloud obscures it. I have never felt such a thing.”

He touched a carved walnut door near the bottom of the tower, and it swung open on its own. Rosewood paneled the walls inside. An array of shelves tucked into the paneling held his favorite tomes and trophies. A rather simple maplewood desk sat squarely in the middle, while ordinary windows looked out on the Ravenswood forest behind it. He walked over and pulled out the soft, velvet-upholstered chair. He sat in it with a comfortable sigh, the warm velvet ensconcing him. Merl hopped up to perch upon its tall back and turned to clean his wings.

“I hope your presence can help me break into the Dreamrealm,” Dorias told the raven, opening one of the side drawers. “This might help as well.” He pulled out a creamy crystal almost the size of his thumb. A low reverberation thrummed through the

study when he placed it on the desk. The deep hum crawled down his back and settled into his buttocks. "I think this will work..."

The crystal's pitch rose, and a soft glow kindled in its heart. Dorias opened himself to his power and directed an intense beam of Psoul Aspect into the blossom of light. He closed his eyes and made an attempt at connection. His consciousness dived into the crystal.

A cloud still obscured the Dreamrealm. He thrust himself toward it, pushing first with gentle pressure from his mind, then increasing the flow of Psoul Aspect until it neared his limit. The shadow met him like a giant, impenetrable fog, smothering every attempt to enter the place he knew as well as the waking world.

Dorias let the stream of Psoul go. "Burn it in the Flames!" He considered summoning the Earth Aspect to smash the crystal, but a more constructive idea entered his mind. "Come on, Merl." Dorias rose and slipped the crystal into a pouch on his belt. "Let's go for a ride."

Merl cawed a query.

"Well," Dorias said with a smile, "you will fly, of course."

Merl fluttered to Dorias' shoulder, and they left the study. Dorias trotted down the last few twists of the stairs, stopping only long enough to grab an apple from a fruit bowl.

A wide pool covered the entire ground floor of the tower with a maze of stepping stone paths crossing it. Dozens of multihued koi fish swirled the still water, darting back and forth beneath the lily pads and birds of paradise. The soft trickle from a waterfall at the edge of the pool brushed upon Dorias' ears. He stepped toward a patio with a large double door and pushed it open.

A wooded pasture stretched out before him, set in an eternal summer with no rain.

He whistled. "Shade!"

Out from behind a spread oak, a charcoal mare galloped over one of the grass-covered hillocks. She whinnied, stomping with pride once she came close. Merl cawed a greeting to the horse, who snorted in return. She took another step and nudged her diamond spotted forehead into Dorias' shoulder, uttering a soft nicker.

"Hey, there," Dorias said. "Good to see you too." He handed her the apple. The mare's satin-whiskered lips tickled his hand when she popped the apple in one bite, crunching away with a happy shake of her head.

"We need to go for a ride." Dorias stroked the mare's neck while she nuzzled him, seeking another apple. "Maybe after we get back. Come on."

The mare took her light saddle without qualm. Dorias used an old style bridle, one without a bit. *Shade follows my lead by trust, not by force.*

He led her out of the pasture and into the room with the pool. Gathering a small stream of Psoul, Earth, and Water magic, the three Aspects in which he most excelled, Dorias reached out and placed his hand upon the tower wall. The stone blocks folded back on themselves, opening onto the gloomy Ravenswood. Once they passed through, the wall knit itself back together, leaving the unblemished black surface of the tower behind.

"Let's cover some ground." Dorias grunted, swinging into the saddle. Shade gave him a moment to settle, then took off at a quick trot. Merl flew ahead through the trees.

Wrapping his cloak about him to ward off the coolness of the shadows, Dorias rode through the trees. He barely noticed the light underbrush, speckled with white diamond

and knicker-breech blossoms. Violets popped up here and there, as did mayapples, short and unopened.

“I bet if we looked in the right spots, we could find some morels,” Dorias beamed. Shade took no interest in mushrooms, and Merl had flown out of sight. “Fair enough,” he huffed. “I suppose we do have more important things on our plate than mushrooms worth their weight in silver.”

The shattered relics of the ancient people of Ravenswood lay scattered between the trees. Gigantic oaks grew over the black stones, some of those trees centuries old themselves. A large mound rose to his left, its rim crowned with tall hickories. The stones carved with ravens lay gathered in large numbers upon its slopes. Merl dropped from the sky and landed on Shade’s rump. The raven croaked at the mound, his wings spread wide.

“Don’t worry, Merl.” Dorias gave the raven a kernel of corn from his vest. “We won’t be going back in there. I found what I wanted last time.” He patted the milky crystal in his pouch. “Among other things.”

The mound receded behind them. Soon the trees opened up, and the stones became larger. Wide foundations remained here, where the people had built their capital. Shade picked her way between the crumbled buildings, Dorias allowing her to choose her own path.

At the top of a rise, marble columns ringed a wide bowl near thirty yards across. The raven people had formed it from a vein of stone so white that after two-dozen centuries, it still blinded the eye. Merl perched upon the tallest column and watched in silence, while Dorias dismounted and walked out into the center of the dish. A small

pedestal of the same snow-colored stone rose from the center. Removing the milky crystal from his pouch, he placed it onto the pedestal and stepped back.

The resonance he had felt before returned, this time spreading wider. Dorias bored into the crystal with Psoul magic, increasing the power he used in his study. The air surrounding him vibrated. Shade backed away from the rim of the bowl, and Merl fluttered from the column when it wobbled. A hum shook the elder trees spread around.

Dorias funneled more of the Psoul Aspect into the crystal. He closed his eyes and found the passage to the Dreamrealm. The cloud of shadow remained. It felt murkier, more substantial. He pressed against it with tentative power. His tendrils found small cracks, places in the Dreamrealm where the fog was not so dense. He reached further inside.

This is too easy. Perhaps I should be more cautious with all this power.

With a vengeance, the obstructing cloud snapped back at him, pushing his magic away with a violent thrust. His tendrils of Psoul snapped, ripping out the last of his breath. The dark power tossed his presence from the Dreamrealm like a ragdoll, and Dorias popped back into his body. He found himself airborne from the concussion. He gasped when he struck the rim of the bowl, and then slipped into a dazed stupor.

He woke to a whiskered nudge, followed by soft wetness. Shade whinnied in concern.

“Wake!” the rough call came.

“Shut up, you overgrown crow.” Dorias squinted through the pain in his head and rump. He stood, tentative in his movements. “It is obvious that we deal with something far more powerful than I originally thought.”

He patted Shade on the nose to reassure her. The mare nudged him again, before stepping back from the edge of the bowl. *She does not like setting hoof on the stone. It took a lot for her to come close enough to wake me.*

With careful steps, Dorias walked back to the center pedestal. The crystal had vaporized, leaving a light scorch on the pristine surface. Not a shard remained.

“Damn.”

Dorias mulled through his thoughts during the ride home. Once they arrived at the tower, he removed Shade’s saddle and led her out into the illusory pasture. She gave herself a good shake, and he set a whole bowl of apples down next to a trickle of fresh water. She danced around him happily, nudging closer for a scratch.

“We may be leaving on a much longer ride soon,” Dorias whispered in her ear as he brushed her neck. “Enjoy your home for now.”

Upon entering his study, Dorias collapsed into his velvet chair and sipped on a cup of green tea, steeped with a little willow bark for his headache. *I need to sit here and think. No power has ever stymied my entrance into the Dreamrealm.*

He stared out the window and watched the mountain shadows creep across the forest while the sun dropped behind them. The porcelain cup, long emptied, remained in his hands. His gaze seldom shifted, even as night cast its shadow over the tower.

“What!” Merl croaked at last. The raven remained perched upon Dorias’ chair.

“I have known what I must do since we arrived back home.” His eyes remained fixed on the dark mountains. “I have just been sitting here working up the courage to admit it.” He reached to scratch Merl’s beak. “We must go to the Isle.”

“*What!*” The raven’s caw nearly rattled the windowpanes.

“I know.” Dorias sighed. “Varana will not be happy to see us.”

Merl flapped his wings and warbled a derisive sound.

“Alright,” Dorias admitted, “not happy to see *me*. However, I can only hope she will allow me a look at the libraries there. She owes me that much.”

I will never forgive Malcolm for forcing me to kill him. Why would he not surrender to her?

Dorias cleared his throat and pushed himself up from the chair. Merl hopped to his shoulder. “Well, let’s at least get some good rest tonight.” He stretched his arms with a sigh of resignation. “We will be leaving early tomorrow.”

The Avari Plain stretched before Dorias when he and Shade rode out from the cover of the Ravenswood. Merl flew ahead, by far the most excited of the three to undertake this journey. Dorias enjoyed the scenery, but dreaded his destination.

They set a quick pace along the Rappenron River where it swung beside the edge of the Avari. For days, they travelled in peace, Merl scouting out ahead while Dorias and Shade followed the river.

As they paused to rest one afternoon, Dorias heard a low rumble from deep within the ground. He remounted Shade in haste and rode her to the peak of a small ridge. A gritty haze hung against the horizon, obscuring a hundred thousand woolly mounds trotting across the landscape. Bison ranged over the plain, spreading like a sea of horn, hoof, and brown fur. Their movement shook the land and left a trail of destruction and dust that hung in the air for some time. Dorias soon spied a dozen wolves trailing the herd. A pride of prairie lions tracked them too, though they stayed well clear of the other predators. Buzzards circled back along the trail, closing the cycle of life behind the passing herd.

Two more days on the trail, and they approached where the Rappenron River met the Andon. *Once the Rappenron alone fed the Andon, but that was before the Cataclysm – before the Dragonscales climbed into the sky and drove all waters to the Great River.*

The sun dipped toward the west when Dorias came upon the confluence. A tall outcropping of rock hung over the swirling eddies where the cold water of the Rappenron met the warmer flow of the Andon River. Sheltered between the rocks and the water, Dorias made camp and unsaddled Shade to give her rein to graze.

“I’ll have a scoop of oats for you later.” He scratched her shoulders before wandering down closer to the river. Merl lighted to a tree nearby.

“Let’s find dinner, shall we?” Dorias reached out to his power. His strength in the Aspect of Air was not great, but still enough for the task at hand. He stretched a thin tendril of Air out into the water. Near one of the warmer eddies, he found a small school of trout. Dorias wrapped his strand around one of the fish and ripped it up from the river. The silvery creature thrashed against his magic, yet Dorias held it firm.

“Fish!” Merl cawed into the twilight.

Dorias smiled in agreement. “Not so challenging as the old fashioned way, I’ll grant, but it is certainly faster.”

His strength in the Fire Aspect was no greater than his power in Air, yet he still possessed enough to get a good campfire going faster than flint and steel or even a dwarven match. Dorias scaled the whole fish and placed it over the fire to roast, seasoned with a little salt and herbs he carried in his pack.

After his meal, he leaned back against the rock, his belly full of broiled trout. Merl picked at the bones nearby, and Shade munched on her evening oats.

“Time for a pipe, I say. I believe it would be the perfect dessert.”

Dorias had just sparked the bowl with the tiniest burst of Fire, when the skin across the back of his neck began to crawl. With a wild snort, Shade backed away from the campsite, her ears flattened against her head, while Merl leaped into the air, abandoning his fish carcass.

Dorias rose to his feet, teetering on the edge of embracing his power. "Please come out, Ancient One. I know when I am in the presence of one of your kind." His heart raced, awaiting an answer to his call.

The trees rustled. A hulking form heaved from behind the outcrop. The fading sunset danced off golden scales. A long sinewy neck resolved itself, ending in a head with a wide, leonine face. Sharp fangs, inches long, protruded from the upper lip. Its vertical slit eyes focused on him, reflecting gold and green in the last of the dying sunlight. A slightly sulfurous scent wafted into the clearing, hinted with a flavor of cinnamon.

Dorias let go of his power. It could not match a dragon so large at this range. Shade held her ground, but her eyes rolled white, and her hooves stamped the turf. Merl, however, sat perched in a nearby tree, watching.

"I could have burned you and your horse from the sky, had I wanted to, wizard," the great beast rumbled with a slurred accent still quite understandable. "But I have a desire to share words. My mother taught me your resonance before she died. She told me that the wizard known as the Ravenhawke could be trusted above all humans." The dragon scoffed, an ominous sound from so deep a chest. "That is, of course, a relative idea. No humans can truly be trusted. We have learned that hard lesson over the centuries."

With a wave of respect, Dorias bowed near to the ground. "Ancient One, you honor me with your presence. You could only be of the brood of Grannis. She honored me with

her trust a long time ago.” He flourished his hands again. “I offer you my words and my service if you wish.”

The dragon laughed. The bellowing sound cheered Dorias, while at the same time driving fear into his heart. The mix of emotion made him feel almost giddy. “I have no need of your service, human,” the dragon returned, “and only precious few of your words.” He sat on his haunches. The long digit at the end of his front claw folded the leathery, golden wings back along his forearm. He leaned upon the padded knuckle where it met his thumbclaw. “I am Groovax, the son of Grannis.” The creature curved a long, scaled tail around the front of his claws as he sat. “I come to give you a warning.”

Dorias stood up straight, thumbing his short goatee. “A warning?”

The dragon paused, his golden eyes piercing into Dorias’ soul. He stood there, trapped within the dragon’s gaze. He would not have turned from it even if he could have. *I have great respect for this creature. I want him to respect me.*

The dragon pulled a great breath into his nostrils. Most men would have feared that flames might follow, but Dorias knew that it was a sign of respect. *He has accepted my scent.*

“Many of my lesser kin have disappeared.” The dragon’s lips moved with great dexterity, forming the words clearly. “I believe they flock to the Dragonscales. Whatever call they answer I cannot fathom. The presence hides from me behind a dark cloud.” He flicked his long tongue along his upper lip, curling it in a threatening way around his fangs. “Those of my kind who have heard the call are removed by many generations from the Ancient Ones. They are more...primitive. My sire was of the Ancient, as well as my mother.”

Dorias raised one eyebrow with hesitation, uncertain the dragon allowed questions in this parley. "Why do you tell me this?"

A ridge above the dragon's own eye lifted. "I tell you because..." The dragon paused again as if considering. "...because there are too few Ancient Ones left among us to stop our kin. Whatever power calls the lesser dragons cannot mean well for those of us who remain beyond its influence." Groovax flicked his tail, his horned brow furrowing. "Most of my brethren have given up on human kind."

"Yes." Dorias tapped his bare upper lip. "That would explain why so few have been seen in recent centuries. Most humans believe dragons to be extinct."

"We nearly are." Groovax held both regret and anger in his voice. "A good portion of that is our own doing, however."

Dorias nodded. Of all humans, he best understood the sad history of the dragons. "There is something I should tell you." The dragon's head popped forward, sending Dorias a half step back. He calmed his heart with a deep breath before continuing. "I believe that I have sensed the same presence you mentioned."

The dragon cocked his head in a quizzical expression. "It forbids me entry into the Dreamrealm," Dorias continued. "It is a dark, shadowy cloud that I cannot penetrate with my mind."

Silence pervaded the clearing. Groovax stared in thought. Shade stamped cautiously. Any other horse would have bolted long before. Merl sat in his perch, for once saying nothing.

"Perhaps..." The dragon cocked his head. "I will not speculate. Your magic is far different from ours." He stepped back and stretched his arms, fanning out the fingers of his golden wings. They caught the firelight and reflected it back like polished bronze. "I

know your resonance, human. If you find a way back into your Dreamrealm, you may contact me from there. If I discover anything more, I will find you myself.”

Dorias bowed again. “You may be confident in your trust, Lord Dragon. This darkness has spurred me to action already. Our alliance against it honors me.”

Groovax laughed once more. It echoed across of the rivers below, masking the rush of their flow. Dorias felt the laughter in his stomach and bones. It made him want to giggle.

“We shall see if this becomes an *alliance*, human.” The dragon laughed again, flapped his wings, and leaped into the moonlit sky. Dorias heard another chuckle from a distance as the great beast disappeared into the night. His spirits dipped in sadness at the dragon’s parting.

“Flame!” Merl cawed out, startling Dorias.

“At least that flame isn’t aimed at us, Merl.” He watched a dark shape cross the moon. “For now.”