

The  
Chronicles of  
Avantia



*With special thanks to Stephen Chambers*

*For Mamasan*

www.chroniclesofavantia.com

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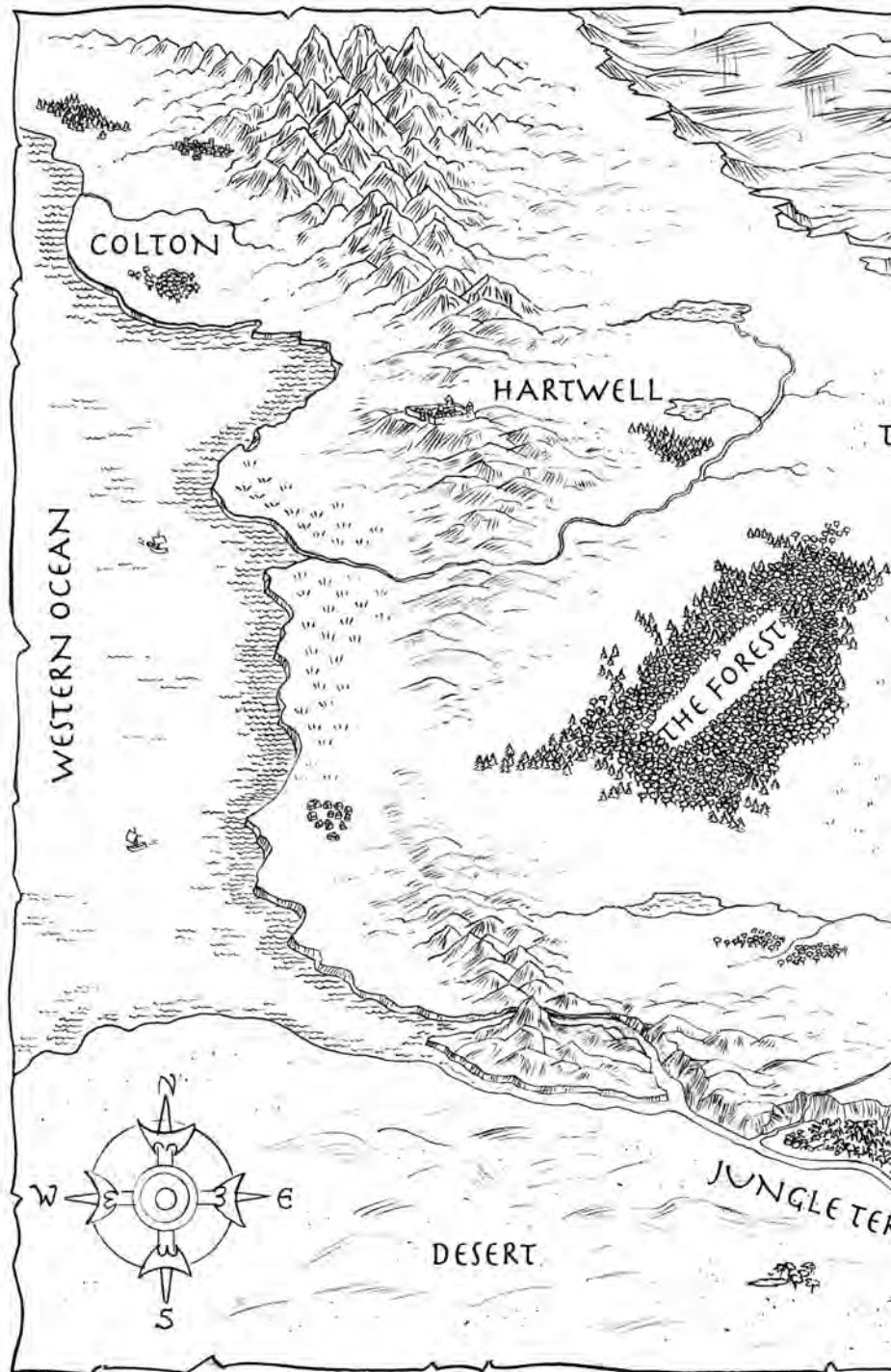
# Call to War

By Adam Blade



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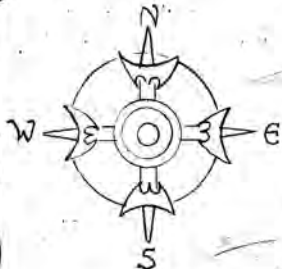
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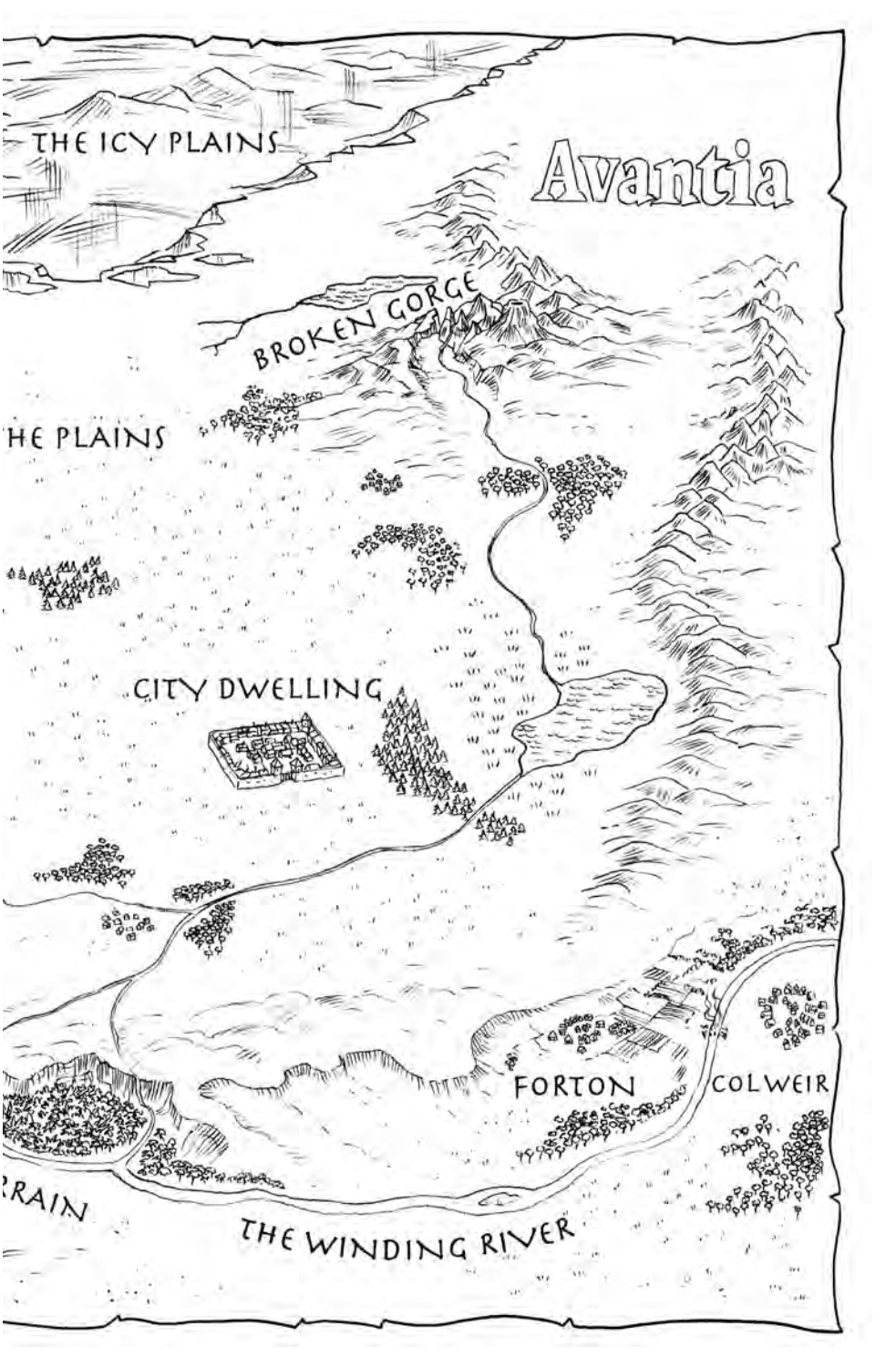
THE FOREST

WESTERN OCEAN

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DESERT





THE ICY PLAINS

# Avantia

BROKEN GORGE

THE PLAINS

CITY DWELLING

FORTON

COLWEIR

THE WINDING RIVER

RAIN



*Predators and prey*

# Prologue

*The world is dark, but I am awake, alert. I feel alive in the night. I sit in the moonlight, listening to the forest. Branches scrape, leaves rustle, and I detect the sweat from an animal's skin and the warmth of their breath not far away. Good.*

*My golden brown fur covers muscles that ache to pounce, but I don't move. Not yet. My eyes adjust and filter the moonlight into a blend of green foliage and purple shadows. A holly bush trembles directly ahead of me. I smell it in the wind: a wild boar is rooting in the dirt. I am Nera, a Beast of claw and poise. Slowly, I slip forward, muscles tense like the spring of a trap. I pad closer, my mind calm, all the tension flicking in my tail. I am invisible in the night, and I am upwind. I am the hunter. I know no fear. Creeping closer, my attention is fixed on the shaking bush and the prey behind it. I am close enough now. It can't get away – I can outrun it in the chase. I am sure of it. I am no ordinary jungle cat. I am Nera, hunter.*

*Behind me, I hear a low chirp.*

*I freeze. The bush stops shaking – the boar’s heard it too. My body tenses, I glance back: Firepos, my mentor, is watching me in the moonlight. A great Flame Bird, she is a Beast of terrible fire and wisdom. Now, as my vision shifts to bring her into perfect focus, her feathers shimmer red and orange. Her beak is curled and sharp, and she stares me down with unblinking eyes. She’s as big as me.*

*I hear the boar begin to dig again. I can catch it, I know I can, but Firepos does not break her gaze. She knows something.*

*Behind the boar, a twig snaps. The boar bursts from the brambles, running fast. My claws curl into the dirt, I slink closer, ready to attack, and – a boy leaps out of the bushes after the boar! His sword raised, he is exhilarated, until he sees me. The youth freezes, our eyes meet, and he frowns, breathing hard. The sword is too big for him, oversized in his hands.*

*‘It’s getting away,’ he says. ‘You made me lose the hunt.’*

*I made you lose it? I step closer to him. He is different from anyone I have seen before. He doesn’t cower, doesn’t*

retreat, as I sniff and flash my teeth. I think: I am Nera, boy. You will fear me.

When I growl, he smiles. 'I am not afraid of you,' he says, 'whatever you are.'

He is too young to be this headstrong. Yet something about his easy stare and steady stance – his sword still poised – is familiar. I should teach him a lesson.

I tense, and the boy points his huge sword at my neck.

'Try it,' he says.

I pounce, and as I swipe for his head, he ducks, grabs my fur, and leaps onto my back. When I roar, the boy raises his sword and whoops a war cry. His shout matches mine, and his weight on my back feels...right.

Finally, I understand. I know why his gestures are familiar. I know them too well: they are just like mine. We are the same.

When I look round, Firepos is gone. We are alone in the woods, and as I pace in the moonlight, I catch the scent of the boar again.

'Nera,' the boy says. 'Your name is Nera. I'm Castor.'

I send him a message: We are the same. I feel his muscles

*relax in understanding. Then I sprint into the foliage, and Castor laughs, surprised at my speed.*

*'Let's catch the boar!' he cries.*

*I bound faster, trailing the hot stink of the animal. We hunt the boar, then a deer, and in the morning, when he returns to his village, Castor pats my side. I feel his message strum through me: I'll see you tonight.*

*I purr, and one night becomes two, two nights become years with Castor on my back and beside me with his sword, until he's grown enough for its hilt to fit his hand. We revel in our hunts, in the way entire herds of goat and wild horses scatter before us. We face bears and vipers, clumsy horned cattle from the north, and we always return together. We are stronger than them.*

*'We'll always be together,' Castor says once, exhausted and covered in the grime of a creek bed. We had chased a clipper eel downstream for miles, finally pinning it under rocks.*

*That night, as I carry him home, I think, I will kill anyone that touches you. My chosen Rider, my Castor.*





*Riding over ruins*

# Chapter One

The golden chain turned slowly as Gwen held it in front of her face. Scratched and worn at the edges, the locket still glittered in the dawn light. Gwen's blue eyes were bright and focused, her white-blond hair tucked behind her ears, still dishevelled from where she had slept on the ground. Behind Tanner, Castor was still waking up.

Their three Beasts, Gulkien, Nera, and Firepos, stood guard at the edge of the forest clearing. Firepos was a huge Flame Bird, her feathers shimmering golden as tiny flames flared at her wing tips. Beside her, the flying wolf, Gulkien, stretched his leathery wings as his lips curled back and he ran his tongue over long fangs.

Tanner could sense the message Firepos sent him across the air: *A new day brings fresh challenges.* Tanner and his Beast had been together ever since he'd been a young boy. Together, they'd survived

the death of his father and the kidnapping of his mother at the hands of the evil warrior, Derthsin. Firepos had helped Tanner survive.

*And we'll keep surviving, won't we, Firepos?* He silently sent the message to his Beast. They instinctively understood each other, and always had.

A crow cawed. Tanner recognized that sound: the screech of a carrion bird, searching for a corpse. He waited as Gwen traced her finger around the edge of the locket, tapping a hidden button. Something clicked, and the front cover popped open.

Castor came over to see, his golden hair clumped with leaves and dirt where it curled around his temples. 'Why are we up so early?' he grumbled, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

Gwen carefully placed the open locket on a clear patch on the ground. She plucked out a tiny gossamer square that shimmered and sparkled like river water in the dim light. 'We have to keep moving,' she said, without looking up. 'Open the map.'

Tanner reached into his tunic and slowly unfurled the parchment map they had followed over the past few days. His hands steady and careful with the cracked edges, he laid the map between them. Gwen shook open the gossamer – it unfurled like a tiny sail – and she placed it over the parchment. Behind them, Tanner heard Firepos rustle her wings. Gulkien sniffed and paced, while Nera’s wide cat-eyes scanned the forest canopy.

Castor sighed. ‘I don’t see anything.’

‘Be patient,’ Gwen said.

Tanner leant close to Gwen. The gossamer shimmered like a wax skin, blurring the colours of mountains and forests, smearing the lines of roads and the names of towns and villages.

‘It makes things harder to see,’ Castor said, craning over the top of their heads, ‘not easier.’

‘You know how this works,’ Tanner said, still watching the map. ‘It should show us where to find the third piece of the mask.’

‘Right,’ Castor said. ‘So we can lose it like we

lost the other two pieces.’

Tanner tried to ignore him.

‘Castor please,’ Gwen said. ‘Just wait...’

The wind blew harder, and when the overhead branches parted, a shaft of daylight lit the map. A tiny picture blotted the gossamer, like an ink ghost, as if the daylight had brightened the world just enough that they could see something that had been there all along. A small image glowed like a gemstone. When Tanner peered closer, he saw the outline of a leathery cheek and the edge of a brow – a piece of a small, empty face. Tanner shivered, but there it was, hidden near the Southern Caves. The third piece of the Mask of Death. Tanner had been tracking the pieces of the mask ever since his grandmother, Esme, had died at the hands of Derthsin’s general, Gor. She’d told him to go to Jonas the Mapmaker.

They’d fought hard to snatch the pieces of the mask from Derthsin, but Castor was right – they’d failed. They didn’t have a single piece – General

Gor hung the pieces from his belt, as if to mock them. The mask was said to be made from the face of the first Beast of Avantia, Anoret.

*We have to get the pieces back,* Tanner swore to himself. *For the sake of all that is good in this kingdom. If Derthsin gets the mask, he'll have power over all the Beasts, and then he'll be able to rule Avantia.* It may have been made up of feudal towns and villages, scraping together an existence, but it was the place Esme had loved with all her heart. For the sake of his murdered grandmother, Tanner wouldn't allow Avantia to crumble.

Gwen tapped a north-south line on the map. 'This path links the armoury – where we saw Derthsin's men making weapons and armour – with the Southern Caves.'

'They may have built the armoury there,' Tanner said, thinking aloud, 'so they could equip an army for the south.'

Castor frowned. 'I don't like this.'

As Tanner rolled up the parchment map, he

looked over the flat greens of Avandia's grassland and the darker blotches of forest that stained the centre and edges of the map. There were still so many parts of this kingdom that Tanner had never even visited, yet he knew he would be willing to fight for all of Avandia. Anything rather than give it up to Derthsin.

Derthsin. The man who had murdered his father and abducted his mother. After this happened, when Tanner was a child, he had been left in the care of Esme, who had showered him with love and discipline in equal measure.

Firepos had cared for him too, training him as a Chosen Rider. Then, the nightmare had returned. General Gor's army had attacked Tanner's village, under the orders of Derthsin. Tanner had thought that this evil, faceless warrior had died after Firepos had taken her revenge, hurling him into a volcano. *But I was wrong*, Tanner thought.

Derthsin had returned, to torment not only Tanner, but the whole of Avandia. He wanted the

Mask of Death, which would give him control over the Beasts. Pieces of the mask were scattered and hidden around the kingdom. With her dying breath, Esme had sent Tanner to find Jonas the Mapmaker. Tanner had failed. But he had found the twins, Gwen and Geffen, whom Jonas had adopted. Gwen had a secret map, revealing the locations of the pieces of the mask.

Since then, they'd travelled with their Beasts – Tanner on his Flame Bird and Gwen with her wolf. They'd met Castor in a village stripped of its menfolk; he'd been the last boy standing. Tanner could hardly believe that this preening boy with a sword and dagger had a Beast, and was chosen to fight alongside them. His arrogance had taken Tanner's breath away, and only reluctantly had he fought alongside this new friend. But they had been bound together with blood and loss during the fight in Derthsin's armoury. Gwen's brother, Geffen, had been lost to the evil thrall of their enemies, and he'd lost his life in the armoury.

Tanner risked a secretive glance at Gwen. She'd seen her brother's death. Would she ever be the same again?

Tanner returned the map to her and touched her shoulder. Her eyes were swollen from lack of sleep. 'I'm fine,' she said. She put her gossamer away and hung the locket back around her neck.

'Come on,' Tanner said. 'It's time to go.' Once he'd been a simple baker's boy; now he had a mission to stop Derthsin. He'd become a better swordsman and could think tactically now. But it wasn't just that. *I need to finish this*, he thought. Whatever Derthsin had started, he would end, or he'd die trying.

'Hang on,' Castor said. 'I'm part of this team. I think we should wait. I have better instincts and I'm telling you, we need to wait until the sun burns off the morning dew.'

'You have better instincts?' Tanner said. 'We don't have time to hang around, Castor. General Gor has two pieces of the mask.'

‘And we all know whose fault that is,’ muttered Castor.

Anger flared in Tanner’s chest. He remembered General Gor taunting him at the mines. ‘You have nothing to look forward to but your deaths,’ he’d told them. He’d almost been right – there had been too many soldiers and Tanner had been helpless to steal the mask pieces from him. But in the mines, Castor had been brave, selfless – he’d helped Tanner save the boys, even though Gwen’s brother had been lost. *We need that Castor, not this arrogant, disgruntled one,* Tanner thought.

Gwen put a hand on Castor’s shoulder. ‘Please Castor, don’t fight about this now.’

Tanner went to Firepos and grasped her bright feathers to help him climb onto her back.

‘We can’t wait,’ Tanner said. ‘We have to start our journey. It’s time to go.’

Castor smiled at Gwen as she climbed onto Gulkien. The wolf bared fangs the size of daggers, and leathery wings sprouted from his shoulders.

His yellow, unblinking eyes watched Castor leap onto Nera's shoulders. Her eyes blinked and she sent out a hiss, baring her razor-sharp teeth. From his position on her shoulders, Castor called to Tanner, rolling his eyes: 'Well then, fearless leader, lead the way.'

*Flames flickering at my wingtips, I launch myself into the air. It feels good to stretch my body, point my beak towards the adventure ahead. As I take off into the trees, breaking for the sky, I feel an irresistible pull. I know Tanner feels it, too. We are drawn towards the next test of our strength; we cannot turn away. We approach our fates; let Destiny be kind to us.*

Firepos carried Tanner up, and in a blur of smashing branches, they blasted through a hole in the canopy into the open air. Firepos cried out, revelling in her speed. Tanner gripped his Beast, but as Firepos lurched right, his hold slipped. Frantically he grasped Firepos's feathers, fingers

digging in hard, hauling himself upright.

*You're faster than the wind!* he thought, sending a message to his Beast. He smoothed Firepos's feathers, and they shimmered with brilliant yellows, oranges and rippling reds. When he looked closely, Tanner could see the feathers flickering with the fire that burned inside them, waiting to be released. *My phoenix*, he thought, *my Flame Bird*.

'Hey!' Castor called from below. On the ground, Nera bounded over the hills in sudden, irregular bursts of speed as her golden fur rippled over tight muscles. There was no bounce or rhythm to her movements. Instead, Nera leapt from one position to the next, as if she were always searching for the best point of attack.

Firepos banked lower. They had cleared the forest, heading south. Gulkien flew with Gwen beside Firepos, and below, the Northern Mountains flattened into hills. Bulging rock turned to grassland and isolated evergreen tree

copses that might have once marked the borders of estates or chiefdoms.

‘Hey!’ Castor called again.

‘What?’ Tanner shouted down to him.

‘We should race!’ Castor yelled. ‘Nera is faster than Firepos and Gulkien put together.’

Beside Firepos, Gulkien snorted and pawed the air, his leathery wings beating steadily. ‘Castor...’ Gwen said.

‘What?’ Castor said, his face flushed. ‘You’re scared?’

‘Stop it, Castor!’ Tanner shouted. ‘We need to move cautiously. You know there may be an army in the south...’

‘Stop making excuses,’ Castor called. ‘You’re afraid you’ll lose!’

Gulkien growled as Nera started to run faster. Even Firepos made a low, grumbling cry.

*Idiot, Tanner thought. We may be flying right into the path of an entire army, and he wants to race.*

Nera was charging ahead, leaving Tanner, Gwen

and their Beasts behind.

‘Enough!’ Gwen called. Her cloak flapped open in the wind as she leant forward on Gulkien. Tanner glimpsed the rounded hilt of her rapier, a long, slender blade, and the grooved handles of her throwing axes. *She has surrounded herself with blades of iron*, he thought. Gwen laughed and pointed ahead. ‘Go, Gulkien.’

Gulkien howled and pounded his wings in a sudden jolt that sent him after Nera. Castor laughed and shouted back, ‘Catch up, Gwen!’

Firepos’s chest rumbled again, and Tanner leant closer to her. Seeing Gwen smile made Tanner’s pulse quicken. *If she’s ready for a race*, he thought, *I am too*. Over the rush of air, he said, ‘Beat them, Firepos.’

Firepos screeched and flew higher, her great wings of feather and flame streaking hot against the sky. Looking over his shoulder, Tanner saw trails of steam as she rose. Tanner knew that she was rising the same way a hawk circled, ready

to drop in a flash of talons and deadly speed. He remembered almost losing his grip the first time Firepos had shown him how fast she could dive.

Now, as they rose higher, he watched Gulkien's shadow close on Nera. He heard Castor taunting Gwen. She laughed and called back. But ahead, the emerald farmland and distant sheep pastures were shrouded in smoke. There were smudges on the far-away roads. Tanner scrambled in his tunic for his Looking Crystal. When he lifted the opaque glass to his eye, it cleared and distant objects snapped into focus. He saw bodies, overturned carts, and slaughtered cattle, horses – even dogs. Firepos was rising faster now, preparing for her dive.

Tanner trained the Looking Crystal on the hedges and cornstalks, on the wheat fields and green, shimmering grasslands. At the edge of every plot, he saw rubble and a grey, sooty filth. He tried to stay calm, but the race was forgotten.

Gwen pulled up alongside on Gulkien and Castor abandoned his mocking shouts from below. They all sensed trouble.

*Not again,* Tanner thought. *Not more attacks.*

As they continued south, it got worse. Villages without walls had been gutted and left in crumbled, smoking ruins. The towns with low keeps and protective walls had been smashed completely: their walls had been shattered like piles of sticks, the wooden buildings ground to char around lonely brick chimneys, still standing. The smoke grew thicker, and now Tanner could smell it. It stank like an unnatural firepit, where things had been torched that weren't meant to burn.

Surrounding one village, he saw long sticks with bodies mounted on them, and there, along the side of a road, were skulls stuck on pikes. Crows circled the dead. A black bird sat on a wooden sign where words were scrawled in brownish dried blood:

## LORD DERTHSIN SERVE OR SUFFER

These were Derthsin's warnings to anyone who defied him or fought back.

Firepos stopped rising, and she leant back to rub her claw against a patch of scarring under her right wing. It was an old scar: an empty wound of grey-pink flesh and mottled black spots where a feather should have been. Firepos had had the wound since Tanner was a child – since a day long ago. The day that Tanner's father had been killed and his mother dragged away. Dersthin had been there, laughing from behind his mask. Firepos had plucked Derthsin up and thrown him into the flames of molten lava. He should have died. But he'd survived. Derthsin had had the mark of a feather burned into his palm – the feather he'd grasped to try to save himself, tearing it from Firepos's flesh and leaving a scar. Why was this old scar bothering Firepos now? Was it connected to

Derthsin? Tanner stroked a hand over his Beast's feathers, and tried to comfort her.

Below, Gulkien was soaring over Nera as she sprinted. The horizon was filled with black smoke. The roads were churned up and livestock left dead.

Then Firepos began to plummet earthwards, uncontrolled, as if she'd been hit. Tanner felt pain in his fingers flowing up through his Beast's feathers. Pain snapped into Tanner's temple, like knives wedged under his skull. He heard himself cry out simultaneously with Firepos. They felt the same pain. Tanner closed his eyes and saw an empty, dead face on the inside of his eyelids: a mask of skin and flesh in four pieces that had been bound together. Mocking laughter filled his ears like thunder. The sound grew louder. He knew where it came from. Dersthin.



*Tanner plummets to certain death*