

Prologue

Deep in the belly of the volcano, my talons grip the baking rock. I sense liquid fire bubbling, heat rising: this is my birthplace.

Dawn is near. An event long awaited is about to begin. I must act; I feel it from my talons to the tips of my shimmering wings.

I take to the air. My powerful wings lift me into the swirling hot currents and I rise out of the crater in a burst of flame. I hover in the cool night air, letting the breeze ruffle my feathers. I look out over my homeland: Avantia.

Out there is my destiny. My Chosen Rider. At last it is time to find him.

I open my beak and let out a cry that echoes between valleys and trees; my signal, sent out to trusted friends. It is many moons since we last met. I settle onto the volcano's crater to wait.

I spot a tiny shape in the distance, far above me, moving swiftly against the lightening sky. Excitement races through me. The shape grows larger, until it takes the form of...a

grey wolf. He dives towards me. At the last moment he opens his leathery wings and lands gently on four strong legs. He paces around the edge of the crater. I nod my head in recognition. Gulkien has come.

An eerie yowl cleaves the air. From the shadows pooled at the volcano's foot appears a huge, puma-like cat, lithe and agile, bounding over boulders towards the summit. Sparks fly as her claws rake the rocks. Her fur is golden and her amber eyes flash in the volcano's fires. Here is Nera. I know her of old – her fierce courage will be needed in the testing times ahead. It fills me with pleasure to see my friend return.

From the other side of the crater comes a slithering sound. I turn to see the great serpent, Falkor, emerge from a vast fissure in the rock, his forked tongue flicking the air, tasting it. The flames from the lava-filled crater reflect on his scaly form as he winds his way towards us, his body pulsing with muscular energy. Colours swirl on his flanks, like spilt oil in water. His wide head, bristling with spines, bows in greeting. Nothing – neither stars nor fire – reflects in his black eyes. Falkor folds his shining coils around

a boulder, alert and waiting.

My feathers blaze more brightly. This is a momentous day: we have come together again. I open my wings to their widest extent. The Beasts come closer, bowing their heads to listen. The air crackles with energy, as if a storm is about to break.

It is time, I tell them. Our enemy of old, Dertfin, brings danger to the kingdom. War is brewing. We must each find our Chosen Rider.

Gulkien throws back his head and unleashes a howl that reverberates around the volcano's slopes. Nera joins in with a thunderous growl – I feel the rocks beneath us creak and shift. Falkor hisses and tightens his coils around the boulder, causing a crack to spread. My own exultant cry erupts from deep within my throat.

Gulkien leaps into the air, beating his wings savagely. I watch him speed away. Nera bounds down the rocky slopes to disappear into the shadows. Falkor stretches his body out to its full glittering length, bows his head to me in farewell, and slithers into a fissure.

Good luck, my friends. My thoughts are with you.

*Last of all, I spread out my wings, feeling their power,
and take to the air.*

I am Firepos, and my Chosen Rider is waiting...

*I fly, watching the land as it speeds beneath me in a blurred
patchwork of crop fields and dark woodlands.*

*Rolling hills stretch far ahead – hulking shadows
beneath the pre-dawn sky. At their feet, undulating in the
breeze like a black sea, is a vast pine forest. Beyond the
trees lurk bleak, fog-shrouded moors, and then a wide
grassy plain. Smoke curls up from the villages that are
scattered over the land like seeds. The ocean is like a silver
thread to the west.*

All seems quiet in the world...

*I smell smoke. Smoke, and something else... My feathers
glow in anguish: it is the odour of charred flesh. Human
flesh. Ahead I spy a flickering orange glow.*

Fire.

*I swoop down, gliding over the dense forest. My talons
brush the leaves of the tallest trees. I see cornfields bathed
in an angry wash of flame, and thatched huts billowing*

smoke. The village of Forton is under attack!

Screams rend the air over the inferno's roar. Invaders in battle-scarred armour storm the streets, scattering villagers before them. Spear tips and swords glint, many dripping with blood. I see a few villagers turn to fight, but they are cut down without mercy. The streets are littered with bodies.

Deep in my core, my senses stir. He is here somewhere: my Chosen Rider.

I should have come sooner. What if I am too late?

I hover over the woods near the edge of the village, bristling with anxiety. All I can do is wait, and watch...

A sweat-streaked warhorse canters down the track from the village. On its back rides a giant of a warrior. His body is encased in close-fitting black armour, adorned with spikes. A cloak the colour of dried blood hangs over his broad shoulders and at his hip hangs a bronze-hilted sword. His face is obscured by a leathery mask – misshapen and ugly. My feathers tingle.

That mask. I know it...

Spikes jut from its dangling jowls and its gaping jaws

are lined with pointed teeth. Two horns curl up from its temples, ending in wicked barbs like fish hooks. It is the face of a Dark Beast, a near-mythical creature called Anoret, which stalked the land many years ago. The mask is an artefact of great power.

The Face of Anoret, also known to the people of Avantia as the Mask of Death.

And the rider – it is Dertsin!

I tip my wings and swoop down with a cry of fury.

Dertsin twists around in his saddle to face me. I channel flames towards my talons – a fireball gathers in strength and intensity. Soon this enemy will be a heap of smouldering ashes...

I see his eyes glitter through the holes in his grotesque mask. With a casual flick, he waves his hand at me.

It feels as though I'm caught in a hurricane. An invisible force smashes into me and hurls me off my attack course. The ground rushes up. Too quickly...

With a screech, I crash into a cornfield. The fireball in my talons bursts around me, scorching the corn and lighting up the night. My wings buckle, bones at breaking point.

Through the haze of pain, I understand: the myth of the Face of Anoret is true! It bestows power over the Beasts of Avantia to the wearer.

My fear grows – I am unprepared for this fight. I try to move, but I cannot: Derthsin still holds me in his thrall.

As I lie helpless and hidden from view, a man runs along the track towards the warrior. Dressed in rough woollen jerkin and leggings, he carries a farmer's threshier: two pieces of wood joined with a chain. Behind the man chases a small boy, his tear-streaked face framed with brown hair.

My senses blaze. It is my Chosen Rider! I struggle to get up, but still I cannot move.

The boy grasps the man's hand and tries to pull him back. His face is stricken with fear. The man shakes him off. 'Go and hide in the woods, son!' He turns towards the warrior, who has dismounted and drawn his long, wicked-looking sword.

With a cry of rage, the man charges at Derthsin, raising his threshier and aiming a clumsy swipe at his head.

Derthsin neatly sidesteps, allowing his attacker to pass

by. A noise like laughter comes from the mask, the sound distorted and ugly. With the speed of a striking snake he closes on the villager and raises his sword to strike...

The man ducks beneath the swinging blade, and as he stands up he swings the thresher – more by luck than judgement – into Dertfisin's head. Dertfisin bellows in anger as the mask is torn from his face. He falls to his knees and drops his sword. The villager kicks it away.

I feel Dertfisin's hold over me fade, but I am still too weak to move.

I can see his dark features: thin, bloodless lips, a heavy brow looming over deep-set black eyes, and a strong nose. A thin trail of blood trickles down his cheek. He stares at the farmer. One more swing of the thresher will kill him.

'Think carefully,' Dertfisin says. His voice is soft but commanding. He glances at the boy. 'Do you want your son to see you kill an unarmed man?'

The man turns and shouts back to my Chosen Rider. 'Get away! Hide! Find your mother...'

Dertfisin's hand creeps to a sheath on his belt. He draws out a long dagger.

I struggle to get up.

In two long strides Dertfsin closes on the man. Moonlight flashes on steel. The man groans as the blade slides between his ribs. The thresher hits the ground.

Someone else approaches, stumbling down the road from Forton. A woman, crying in anguish. She bends over the stricken villager, cradling his head in her arms. A band of jeering soldiers follows in her wake.

'Put her in the cart with the rest,' Dertfsin orders. The soldiers drag the screaming woman back to the village.

Dertfsin picks up my Chosen Rider by his collar and stares into his eyes. The boy struggles, legs and fists flailing.

'I sense strength in your soul,' Dertfsin growls. 'But death is stronger than you.' He raises his knife, pointing it at the boy's heart.

I turn my feathers the colour of coal and silently take to the air. I circle once and swoop at the murderous warrior.

The boy's mouth opens in a silent scream.

I plunge my talons into Dertfsin's shoulders and lift him off the ground. He drops the boy and roars as I carry him

up into the air. I feel him writhing in my grasp, but I will not let go. Not yet.

Over the forest and plains I fly. Ahead I spy the glow of my volcano. He must know now where I mean to take him, for his roars become screams. Over the crater, the heat blasts us. In the depths, the pool of molten rock bubbles.

'You'll pay for this!' Derthisin roars.

With a victorious screech, I let him go. His hand grips one of my feathers, but I twist, and the feather tears away. It doesn't slow his fall. His body tumbles and spins as he plunges through the air. The lava swallows him, cutting off his screams.

I soar back to Forton, which is still ablaze. The soldiers are scattering, searching for their leader. Dark smoke billows across the road. The boy leans over his father. The smoke sweeps past him, but he doesn't seem to notice. Beside him is the Mask of Death.

I land on the road and gently nuzzle the boy. He throws his arm around my neck and sobs into my warm feathers. He can feel our bond. He is young and fragile and his