

Prologue

When I heard her laughter, I felt certain that she was my Chosen Rider. I was prowling in the high grass as the sun came up. I knew the world had colours, but I didn't know what that meant – I couldn't see them.

My eyes see things differently to humans. To me, daylight is white, and shadows and shapes are like grey shades, which turn to black. The morning air tasted like water-rock mist. I could smell the children, and, as I crept closer to peer through the waving grass, I saw a girl and her twin brother splashing in a river outside a village. I could hear every rustle in the grass, every drop of water fall. I could even smell the way their tunics moved and shifted, releasing their skin's scent.

'Gwen,' the boy called. 'You can't catch me!'

So that was her name. Gwen. As she laughed again – a beautiful, rippling noise, like a current in the air – I knew that I was right: she was my Chosen Rider. I'd found her! I knew it in the same way that I knew winter always follows autumn. This was deeper than a feeling;

it was fate. It was as Firepos had predicted.

'Geffen!' Gwen cried out to her brother. 'I'll get you!' Then she paused, and looked in my direction. She squinted in the sunlight. Somehow, she knew I was there.

'Gwen?' Geffen said. 'What's wrong?'

I walked out of the grass to the edge of the river. Geffen grabbed his sister. I snorted and tensed, unfolding my leathery wings from my back, casting huge shadows over the children.

'A Beast!' Geffen said. 'A wolfmonster...' He scrambled away from me, shoving his sister in front of him, using her as a shield. Wide, frightened eyes watched me from behind her shoulder. That's when I knew for the first time: Geffen was a coward.

'It's all right,' Gwen said. She stepped closer to me.

'Don't!' Geffen said, drawing her back, but Gwen shook him off.

'Stay there,' she said. 'I'll be fine.'

Reluctantly, he nodded. Gwen came nearer, raising her hand towards me. I could smell her brother's acid fear, and under that, Gwen's calmness.

'Gulkien,' she said. 'That's your name.'

She knew me, in the same way I had known her when I heard her voice – the same way the sun knew to rise in the morning. This was the way the world worked; this was destiny.

I lowered myself to let her climb through my fur, and onto my back. She settled comfortably, as if she had been doing so for years. As I stood tall and opened my wings, my shadow dropped over Geffen. He smelt like terror, and I heard his heartbeat racing, faster and faster. Silly child.

'Gwen—' he began.

'It's all right,' she said again. 'Stay here, Geffen. I'm safe. And don't tell anyone!' She gave him a reassuring smile, as if to tell him what I already understood. She is not afraid. She always felt this was part of her fate. She rested a hand in my fur, and her eyes widened as she took in my huge wings. I flexed them for her, so that she could see how powerful her Beast was.

'I never dreamt you would be so beautiful,' she murmured.

I braced my hind legs and lunged into the air, my

wings beating hard, disturbing the river in a rush of air. She grasped my fur tightly. I flew high to show her my speed, and as we raced above a flock of geese, I dropped and opened my jaws—

'No!' Gwen shouted.

I pulled back and the geese scattered, honking. They smelt like dirty feathers and meat.

'You were going to kill those birds for sport,' she said. 'I won't let you do that, do you understand?'

I growled. Geese were senseless animals: prey. Couldn't she smell them? But if that was what she asked, I would obey. Even here, in the wet clouds, she wasn't frightened. Her heartbeat sounded so steady; it was as if she had been expecting me.

The clouds broke, and her pulse quickened.

'Oh, it's wonderful,' Gwen murmured. 'Look at the ground, so far below us – I've never seen it like this. I can see the whole curl of the river, and the sunlight is so orange and red along the edge of those hills.'

I looked: the river was a black line, and the hills were hazy and grey, cut with splits of white sunlight. I could

smell the earth, and hear the grass rippling, the water rushing, but I couldn't see it as she did. I was glad to have her with me.

We followed the Deep River to soft mountain springs. I felt her shift on my back as she gazed around us.

We acted as one, with me as her guide and protector. My Chosen Rider, my Gwen.



Geffen's betrayal is discovered

Chapter One

Timbers creaked and crashed into the inferno, showering orange sparks. A fire in the building!

Tanner fell back, choking. How could he have let it happen? The sound of laughter made him look up.

A shadow appeared in the midst of the fire. A dark shape, moving. A survivor.

The figure stepped out of the flames. Black armour, cracked and smoking. The warrior wore a dark cloak, and carried a blood-caked sword. Innocent blood. His face was pale, with a heavy brow, and thin lips twisted into a sneer. One dark eye watched Tanner, the other was hidden behind a leathery piece of the Mask of Death. Derthsin. The warrior who had killed his father.

Tanner couldn't move as his enemy strode towards him. Every limb felt powerless. Derthsin lifted the sword above his head, and the bronze blade gleamed dimly.

'All of the mask will be mine!' he bellowed.

Tanner knew he was going to die.

The sword descended with a deadly hiss, slicing the air.

Tanner jolted awake. Stars were shining above him. His Beast, Firepos, stirred against his back. Her feathers shimmered gold beneath the moon and she dipped her huge beak to rest her head against Tanner's shoulder. The forest below smelt like pine and wet dirt, and a moonlit mist hung in the air. In the trees, the songbirds were roosting and no wind rustled the branches. Even the night noises of owls and crickets were absent.

Derthsin wasn't here. It had been a bad dream; that was all.

The sweat cooled on Tanner's skin, and he shivered. His grandmother used to say that dreams revealed deep and dark secrets. Grandmother Esme was dead now; killed by Derthsin's general, Gor. Tanner had held her body in his arms as blood bubbled from her wounds.

Tanner thought back to his village of Forton,

the destroyed home that he had left behind. *So much death, all in the name of Derthsin.* When Tanner was a boy, Derthsin had killed his father and kidnapped his mother. He had no idea where she was now but still thought of her – usually last thing before he fell asleep. Was she still out there, somewhere?

In revenge, Firepos had snatched up Derthsin and hurled him into the crater of the Stonewin volcano. Esme had told him this story over and over again. ‘He fell to his death,’ she had said. ‘A death he deserved.’ But she’d been wrong – Tanner knew that now. Derthsin had survived, clinging onto one of Firepos’s feathers, tearing it from her to slow his fall. Now Derthsin had come back to Avantia in fiery visions, instructing General Gor to inflict more and more devastation on the land. He aimed to claim the Mask of Death once again. The mask would allow him to control all the Beasts of Avantia and beyond that – perhaps

the kingdom? Tanner had no idea, but he knew it would be disastrous. He'd seen Derthsin's lust for power, tasted his evil. He wouldn't let that creature's dark influence stain his kingdom. *Not if I can stop it*, Tanner swore to himself. *I'd rather die.*

A few paces away, Gwen lay with her head nestled in Gulkien's fur. The wolf's massive flanks rose and fell gently as his leathery wings lay folded against his body. Until two days ago, Tanner had believed he was the only Chosen Rider in Avantia, but now he had a friend with her own Beast. As Esme died in his arms, his grandmother had sent him to find Jonas the Mapmaker in a neighbouring town. Tanner hadn't found Jonas, but he did find his adopted twins, Gwen and Geffen. He learnt that Jonas had been missing for many years.

Tanner and Gwen had already retrieved one piece of the mask, paying dearly for it. And Gwen had the secrets of the map that showed where the other pieces were, scattered across Avantia. Hidden in a locket that she wore at her throat

was a piece of gauze. When she laid it over a map Jonas had left her, the locations of the mask pieces were revealed. If the two friends could keep going – if they could find the other three pieces of the mask – Derthsin would never have the power he lusted after.

Tanner watched Gwen sleep as he rested beside Firepos, the warmth from her feathers protecting him from the cold. He couldn't imagine how it would feel to be torn from Firepos, for his Flame Bird to answer to Derthsin. Beasts like Firepos and Gulkien were strong – not just with muscle, but with a powerful connection to this land and its people. Tanner had seen how Firepos could sense danger. Imagine if she became a creature of evil...

Avantia was already a kingdom of strangers – one village hardly ever saw its neighbours. Most people in the kingdom drew back from the Beasts, on the rare occasions they were spotted. What if the Beasts used this fear to drive people even

further apart? Tanner shuddered.

Derthsin had armies, and he had Varlot – a true Beast of evil. Tanner would never forget his first sight of the Beast: half horse, half man, he was coated in armour, with terrifying bronze hooves that morphed into human hands, and long, strong fingers armed with vicious claws.

Tanner smelt a whiff of smoke and looked back into the cave. He saw the shape of a body beneath a blanket beside the campfire – Gwen’s brother, Geffen. Geffen had been snatched by General Gor, but Gwen and Tanner had managed to rescue him from the suffocating embrace of the man’s evil – even though, at the time, Geffen had thought he didn’t want to be rescued.

We did the right thing, Tanner told himself. Gor had been swept away on an avalanche of water and rocks, created by Firepos. If they hadn’t snatched Geffen, he’d be dead.

Embers smouldered and cast deep shadows

across the other boy's profile. The smoke thickened in low clouds and filled the air with the pungent smell of burning. Too much burning...

Tanner sprang up and ran into the cave. Geffen's blanket was on fire! Tanner could see that a stray ember had fallen onto it.

'Geffen!' he shouted.

But the boy didn't move.

'What is it?' asked Gwen, sitting up sleepily.

Tanner flung the blanket aside and revealed a pile of firewood arranged in the rough shape of a body. Tanner swivelled around, his eyes scanning the cave. Where was the piece of the mask that had lain beside the fire? Geffen had been looking at it last night, his eyes narrowed in concentration as he inspected the thick, leathery skin of the mask, hewn from an ancient Beast's face.

Tanner still shuddered whenever he saw the pieces of the mask – wizened skin as dark as coal,

the shrunken crease of an eyelid and puckered lips peeled back in a wolfish grin. The Beast, Anoret, had once looked out from this face. Growing up, Tanner had heard stories about the first Beast of Avantia, born of fire. Legend had it that all other Beasts were descended from Anoret.

‘Geffen?’ said Gwen. Now fully alert, she leapt to her feet and drew her rapier. The braids in her white-blond hair hung loosely.

‘He’s gone!’ said Tanner, kicking the wood angrily across the cave. ‘And he’s taken the piece of the mask with him!’

Gwen rushed back to the cave entrance. She called out her brother’s name over the trees beyond.

‘Geffen! Geffen! Where are you? Come back!’

Gulkien, lifting his head, howled at her side. The wolf’s lips curled back as he sent a call out across the air, his leathery wings stretching wide as he clambered to his feet. The wolf waited, his ears pricked. Nothing. He settled back down on the

ground and looked at Gwen, licking his lips. His eyes spoke his understanding. Gulkien realised that Geffen had betrayed them. How long would Gwen take to accept it?

‘We have to find him!’ said Gwen. ‘He might be in danger.’

Tanner shook his head. ‘Don’t you see? He’s abandoned us and stolen the piece of the mask.’

Gwen frowned at him. ‘No,’ she muttered. ‘He wouldn’t do that.’

‘You must have seen how he was looking at the mask last night,’ said Tanner. ‘He waited until we were all asleep, then scurried off like a rat. I *knew* we couldn’t trust him.’

‘Then why did you help rescue him? Don’t talk nonsense. He’s my brother – he wouldn’t do this to me. To us.’ Gwen’s face was pale as she looked out over the landscape, her eyes scouring the horizon.

She can’t bear to look at me, Tanner thought. But in her heart, she knows I’m right.

Beside her, Gulkien growled, lifting his black lips to reveal fangs as long as Tanner's hand. Warning him not to make Gwen even more upset.

Tanner looked out hopelessly over the forest and fields. Pink dawn was pushing back the black curtain of night, and pale clouds streaked the sky. Geffen could be anywhere.

'Well, whatever has happened,' said Tanner, 'we need to find him. And quickly.'

'Why?' Gwen spat. 'Because you're concerned for his welfare, or because you want your precious piece of mask back?'

'It's not my precious mask,' Tanner argued, 'I'm doing all this for the sake of Avantia. Or have you forgotten?'

Gwen shook her head in disgust. 'And why does Avantia need you, in particular? Geffen and I were happy before you arrived in our town. Now he's disappeared.'

'Happy? Your town was being attacked!' He couldn't believe that Gwen was being so stubborn.

Why wouldn't she accept that her brother had betrayed them? *I didn't ask for any of this either*, Tanner thought. He'd seen death, been torn from his home and forced into a fight against evil. He'd done exactly what had been asked of him – and more.

Gwen sheathed her rapier and went back into the cave. She snatched up Geffen's blanket and held it under Gulkien's snout. 'You'll help me, won't you?' she said. The wolf sniffed, his pale eyes widening as he took in the scent. Gwen put a hand on the fur of his neck and he lowered himself so she could climb onto his back, nestling into his thick fur.

'You take to the air and follow us,' she said coldly to Tanner, still not looking at him. 'We'll find his trail on the ground.'

Tanner nodded and hoisted himself into the space between Firepos's wings. The Flame Bird ruffled her feathers. With a nudge from Tanner's feet, she spread her mighty wings and sprang from

the ledge, falling for a heartbeat before climbing into the dawn sky on thrusting wings.

Gulkien, with the thin membranes of his wings pressed tight against his body, leapt into the gorse below, scattering loose rocks. With perfect balance, he made his way down the steep slope, Gwen clinging tightly to his fur. At the bottom of the gorge, he paused at the tree line, nose close to the ground. Taut muscles shifted along the wolf's broad back. As Gulkien smelt the trees, he snorted. His eyes glittered like molten gold. He plunged into the trees with a spray of leaves and pine needles.

Tanner steered Firepos in pursuit, the wind blasting his face. The forest below was a dense, dark green. They soared higher, cutting through strands of pure, wet cloud. Beyond the forest lay fields of yellowing wheat, crisscrossed with dirt roads and animal paths. Avantia glowed in the morning sunlight, grass rippling like waves. But there was no sign of the boy.

Below them, Gulkien streaked across a forest clearing, then into the trees again. Even if Tanner couldn't see Geffen from up here, the scent down below must have been strong. Tanner's anger burned. *We've been through so much to find the mask. And now Gwen's brother has run off with the prize. Why?*

Beneath them, the trees ended. Gulkien paused, panting for breath. From Firepos's back, Tanner squinted into the sun. There was a shape on the far horizon – a tiny figure, running. Tanner felt in his tunic and pulled out his Looking Crystal. The oblong of opaque stone, inherited from his father, allowed him to see far into the distance. Lifting it to his eye, the swirling white faded away and a boy snapped into view. *Geffen!* Gwen's brother clutched the leathery fragment of Derthsin's mask in one hand. As Tanner watched, he disappeared over the crest of a hill.

Tanner swooped down, calling out to Gwen over the wind, 'I see him ahead. Follow me!'

Gwen urged Gulkien on and the Beast set off once more, racing with strides twenty paces long. They were approaching the low hill. Tanner squeezed Firepos's flanks and the Flame Bird beat her wings faster. He could sense the Beast's excitement. *We've almost got you!*

They broke over the crest of the hill. The sight made Tanner lurch back: hundreds of soldiers, formed into neat ranks, their arrows trained into the sky. They were led by the familiar silhouette of General Gor.

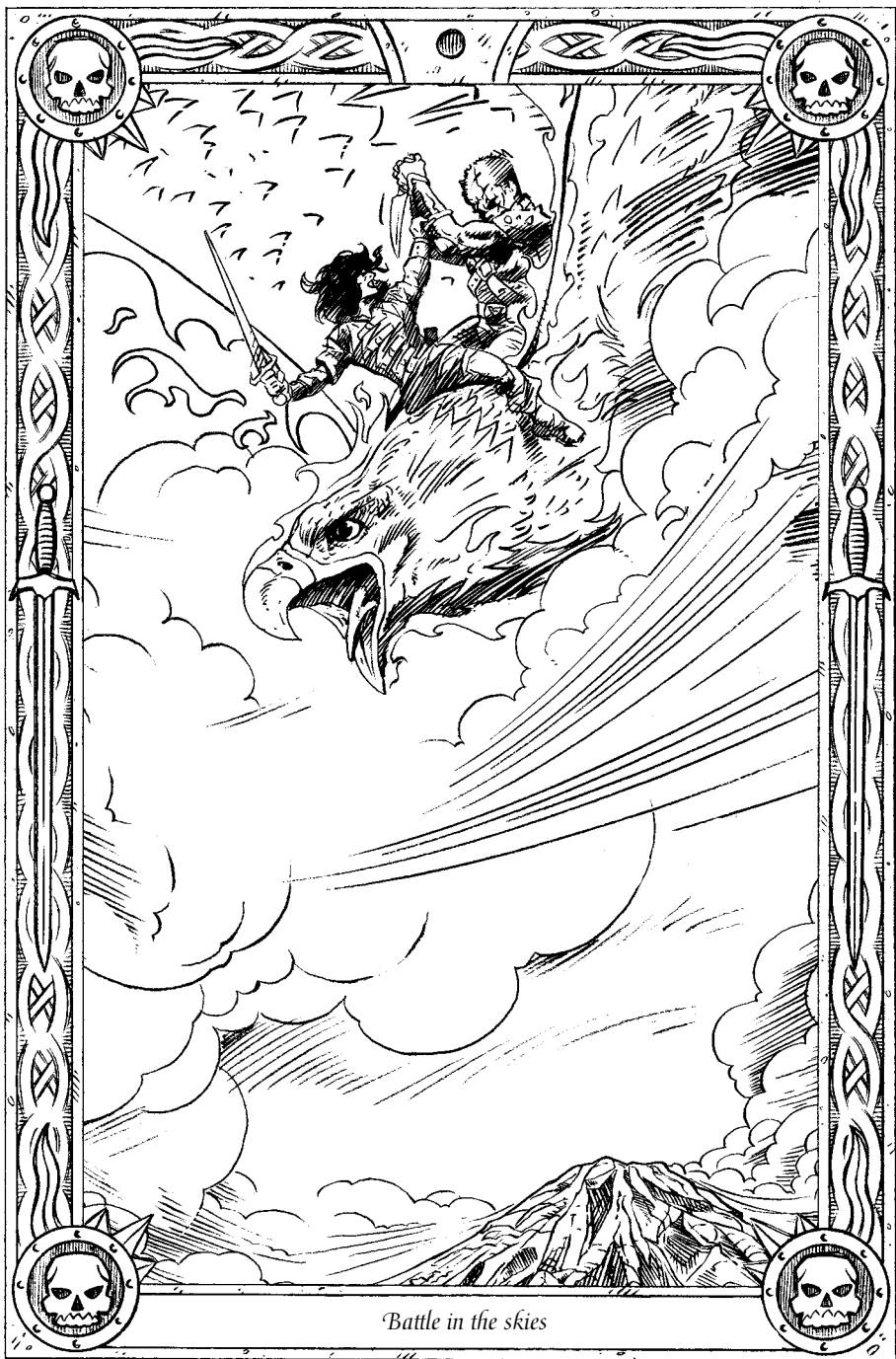
Tanner saw straight away that these troops were different from before. Some of the men had armour that was more highly polished, the tips of their spears glinting with the smooth metallic shine of weapons that had not yet seen warfare. Even from this distance, Tanner could see how fresh some of the men's faces were. *They're new recruits*, Tanner realised. As quickly as he'd defeated Gor's men in the mountains, the general had found replacements to bolster the missing

soldiers from his army.

So Gor's still alive. Tanner had been certain that the general had died in the torrent during their last fight. And how had General Gor known where to meet Geffen? *Had he...* Tanner thought back to how Gor had failed to push Geffen out of Firepos's grasp. The Flame Bird had easily swept the boy up, to return him to his sister. *Too easily?* Had this been part of Gor's last, desperate plan – to let Geffen come back to his friends? Had the two of them planned this meeting place?

There was no time left to think. General Gor, mounted on his black stallion and wearing his dragon-snouted helmet, lifted his arm and pointed at Tanner.

He shouted, 'Loose!'



Battle in the skies