

GOLD FOR STEEL



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The Gates of Kastriel - Book One

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I dedicate this to my best friend, Chris. Thank you for introducing me to the genre of Fantasy. Without your influence, none of this would be possible. I miss, and will always love you.

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Chapter One

Dalvin, Oremund and Marco

Dalvin heard the roar of the massive beast while he attempted to flee into the woods. The creature stood well over two stories tall with a wingspan of twenty men. Dalvin stumbled as a gust of wind almost knocked him off his feet. He expected the gust was from the animal's wings as it began to take flight. Dalvin knew he had to hide amongst the trees before it was ready for a second assault. It would fly into the low clouds before striking down like lightning upon its prey.

Originally Dalvin and Oremund engaged the beast in the open to draw its attention and lure it to the woods. After quickly snatching the beast attention, Oremund quickly sprinted to the forest and started climbing a tree. Dalvin's heavy armor slowed him quite a bit, but he would not dare go into battle without it.

He heard the sound of the mammoth wings getting further away as it soared amongst the clouds. *Good*, he thought to himself. Even though he knew it would only be a matter of seconds before the monster came swooping down for his next attack, it may give him enough time to reach the safety of the ember trees ahead. He looked for his third companion Marco; who had been hiding in the forest already but could not spot the rogue from his location. At this point, he had even lost track of Oremund, who had disappeared in the thick branches. *How could Oremund climb so quickly*, he thought to himself? Though Oremund did not wear heavy armor, he still wore mail under his garments. Dalvin was the only one of the band of sellswords who wore armor. Of course, he was the only one who used to be a knight. With that said he no longer had his helm and his armor was quite old. None the less it was still effective.

Suddenly Dalvin heard the loud siren of the winged devil. The screeching sound it made cut like a thin blade in his inner ear. He

did not need to look up to know the beast was diving straight for him. The monster blocked out the sun engulfing him in his frightful shadow. Dalvin was so close to the tree line he just needed a few more seconds. He dared not to look up in fear it may cost him his life. He felt the wind above him and knew the monster was near. He told himself the second he felt talons he would just thrust his bastard sword at any part of the beast he could reach.

He felt the creature right above him and prepared himself for the attack. For a second he tensed his body in preparation of mighty talons grabbing him and taking him up into the air. When no embrace came Dalvin question what was taking so long? His question was answered as the enormous Griffin landed right in front of him, blocking the trees. *Clever beast*, Dalvin thought as the Griffin let out another deafening roar. This monster has slain quite a few men. They must have also sought refuge in the forest as well. This tactic was apparently used before. A tactic that apparently has not worked since the Griffin is still alive and deservedly infamous.

Without breaking stride, Dalvin charged the beast bastard sword in hand. He saw his opening and was not going to be deterred. Once in range the Griffin snapped at Dalvin with its sharp beak, which Dalvin anticipated. He sidestepped the attack while slashing at the beast cheek just below its right eye. The Griffin raised its head and roared in pain allowing Dalvin to slash at the beast's heels as he ran between its legs. As Dalvin made it from underneath the Griffin, something rammed into his back causing him to fly into the base of an ember tree. The loud crash sounded more brutal than it actually was. The impact did not hurt him, but the wind had been knocked out of him, and he dropped his sword.

Did it kick me, he thought? He felt the ground shake as the beast ran towards him. He could not see where his sword fell, but he knew it had to be close. Regardless he had to get to his feet. The Griffin closed the distance quicker than Dalvin expected. In an instant, the monster was upon him and ready for another attack when an arrow flew by Dalvin and struck the Griffin in the neck. Without warning, two more followed both struck the Griffin in the

left cheek. This caused the beast to stumble allowing Dalvin to get to his feet and hide behind a tree. He spotted his sword behind the Griffin and made a dash for it. More arrows came flying from the dark forest causing the Griffin to charge deeper into the thick of the trees. *What a silly beast*, Dalvin thought as he picked up his sword. Most animals would flee away from such an attack. This monster ran towards it.

Griffins are vicious creatures, but this was more than a mindless rage. It had no fear of pain and would not back down. No wonder the bounty on this beast was so high. Dalvin charged the monster, running up from behind it. He slashed at its tail causing the Griffin to kick at him with its hind leg. Dalvin avoided the strike and slashed at the Griffin's foot. The Griffin turned around immediately and snapped at Dalvin once again. Dalvin rolled out of the way and swung his sword missing his target. The Griffin raised itself on its hind legs and spread its wings out as wide as they could stretch. For a second Dalvin lost himself in the sight of this marvelous wonder. He quickly regained his focus as the Griffin began to claw at Dalvin with its front talons. It walked like a man inching forward on its hind legs as it used its tail for balance. Dalvin swiped at the monster with his sword until a talon scraped across his chest plate. The force knocked him down to a knee.

As he looked up, he saw Oremund in a tree behind the Griffin. He knew what was coming next and thanked Isaac that he was finally in position. With a short sword in each hand, Oremund came flying down upon the Griffin plunging both swords in its back. The beast roared in agony, as it began to flail viciously. Up and down the creature jumped as Oremund kept stabbing away at the monster's back. Oremund then started to use his short swords to climb up the beast back making his way towards its head. Each time a sword was plunged into Griffin, the beast screamed and flailed more and more. *How much punishment could this monster take*, Dalvin thought in astonishment? Blood gushed from the Griffin's wounds. Marco's arrows were still planted in the beast cheek and neck. Its dirty white feathers around its collar now looked like they were painted with

dark red wine. The Griffin; finally having had enough, began to sprint from out of the forest and into the open plain. *It has finally reached its limits*; Dalvin thought as he followed the Griffin out of the woods. Suddenly Dalvin realized what the Griffin was doing.

“Jump off!” Dalvin yelled. “Oremund, it means to take flight!” With that said the beast jumps into the air with a powerful thrust of its wings with Oremund on its back. It wasn’t long before the monster was well into the sky. The grace from its flying was gone due to the damage it took, but it flew just the same. Marco came running out of the forest longbow in hand. His long black hair was tied in a ponytail and flew behind him as he raced out into the open.

“Did he jump?” Marco asked as he reached Dalvin.

“No,” Dalvin replied in a somber tone. The two men stood to be about equal height just above 6 feet tall. Dalvin, a bit older of the two had started to gray in his beard and mustache. He had a small streak of gray in his dark brown hair but somehow it made him look proven instead of old.

“Look,” Marco, said as he pointed to the sky. The Griffin began to flounder in the air. Its wings did not flap with the strength it had during takeoff. It was weakening and may soon fall low enough for Marco to shoot it from the sky. The two men chased the beast. As they ran, Marco began to leave Dalvin behind. Dalvin tried his best to keep up, but his armor was made for fighting not fleeing. They chased the Griffin until suddenly it stopped flapping its wings and went limp in the sky. Life had left the beast in mid-flight, and it now began its descent hurling towards the ground. It sounded like thunder when it finally made impact. It took a couple of minutes for Marco to reach the Griffin with Dalvin shortly behind him. There was a small crater around the Griffin’s body from where it landed. As they approached the slain monster, they showed no signs of hope for Oremund. *Dammit*; Dalvin thought, *why didn’t you jump?*

“Do you see him?” Dalvin said with no answer from Marco. They searched the ground around the Griffin thinking he may have been flung from the beast upon impact. *What if he fell before they crashed*, Dalvin thought? The image of Oremund falling

from the sky sent a chill through Dalvin's body. Suddenly Dalvin heard a cough. The Griffin's feathers ruffled from under its neck until a head emerged. Oremund emerged trapped underneath the Griffin. His partners rushed to his side and asked if he was injured. Oremund looked up at them.

"Bards will sing songs about this," Oremund said with a grin on his face. "Now if you could please get this bugger off me."

"How are you alive?" Marco asked in disbelief. "The weight of the beast should have killed you when you landed."

"That's why I will be a legend," Oremund smirked back.

"No!" This seemed to infuriate Marco. "What kind of magic is this? You should be dead."

"Would you rather he was dead?" Dalvin questioned his friend. Obviously Marco was thankful his friend was alive. He was more frustrated with the idea of what he just witnessed. "In any case it will be awhile before we can free you Oremund. Neither Marco nor I are strong enough to lift this beast. We will have to remove its head, which will take a while. With its head gone, we will be able to pull you free. Besides we need to bring the trophy back to Unthar's Keep to collect the bounty." Oremund's eyes widened at the thought of the two men attempting to behead the beast with him underneath it. "Marco, would you mind getting the axes?"

"Not at all," Marco said as a smile came across his face. He kneeled down closer to Oremund. "You are going to need one hell of a bath after this." Marco laughed as he began to walk away. "I will make sure the bards keep this as part of your song." Oremund was speechless for one of the few times in his life. Though he found it somewhat amusing, Dalvin did not show it. He was still amazed by what Oremund had accomplished. Knowing his friend was now safe he began to think about the bounty. This was quite the payday for the trio. It was a good job and a better kill. News of this would spread and with it the price of their services would greatly increase. *Well done*, Dalvin thought to himself. *Well done*.

Unthar's Keep

Unthar's Keep was quite livelier than Iman had expected. She knew it was a frequent stop for traders and sellswords but she was not prepared for what she found. It was busier than any Valikarian city she'd ever seen. At first she thought it may be just the merchant district, but as she made her way through the city the streets remained full. She kept her eyes on Narissa and the Qoraag as they explored their new surroundings.

Even though Three Wardern was more open to demons; than the Empire, she was still worried about the attention Qoraag may bring. Narissa, only being nine did not worry, or was even aware of such things. As long as Qoraag stayed covered up, the pair would look like two children playing in the streets. Iman was confident her fellow pedestrians were aware that Qoraag was a demon but none of them made a scene or shied away. She noticed a few looks but nothing that should cause concern. Maybe everything she heard about Three Warden was true and she had nothing to worry about.

From time to time Iman would tell Narissa to stay close and not to wander too far away. Unthar's Keep was the first city they entered since they arrived to this foreign land. Not knowing what to expect she could only take the word of others who had traveled here before her. They told stories of monsters and strange customs. It was important that the three blended in as much as possible. She was pleased to see two ebony skinned guards at the city gate. Seeing them made her feel better about herself and Narissa. She had still not seen any demons though. Even if she saw just one it would make her feel more at ease about Qoraag. Maybe if one was working at an Inn or a Tavern. *No need to worry yet*, she thought to herself. *No one has made a scene yet so maybe they really don't care in Three Warden*. If that was the case then this half of their journey should go quite smoothly.

As they walked to an intersection Narissa, began skipping leaving Iman behind. Iman yelled to Qoraag to grab her. She sees him grab Narissa, by the wrist and point back to Iman. Holding

hands, they walk back to Iman.

“Narissa, you can’t run off like that,” Iman declared, with a stern look on her face. Narissa apologized in a soft voice and lowered her head. Iman was not trying to be hard on the child, but she must learn to be aware of her surroundings. For a moment she thought about comforting the child. Just to let her know that she was not angry with her and that she understood Narissa was just excited. Instead she turned to Qoraag and thanked him. Qoraag nodded his head and said something to Narissa to make her smile. Iman could not make out what he said but it really didn’t matter. Qoraag always had a special connection with Narissa. He could always make her smile or at the least make her feel safe. He was an important part of their trio. Iman had grown to lean on him as well. Iman began to survey the area looking for a street called Green Walk. She had the name of the Inn where they were supposed to stay; it was just a matter of finding the street it was on. Iman was well educated and spoke the local Ballek tongue fluently. She could not make out all of the Ballek symbols but she knew enough to get the gist of any writing she came across. Though signs were posted on the street corners she still had trouble finding her way.

“You seem lost,” a worn voice, said from beside her. She turned to spot an elderly man dressed in tan linens. His attire was aged and he wore no accessories of any kind. On second glance she realized he was older but not elderly. Though he was in his twilight he looked healthy if such a thing was possible for one so old. There was no arch in his back and he walked unassisted. “Perhaps I could be of assistance?”

“Yes actually,” she replied. “I am looking for Ulric’s Tavern and Inn.”

“Ah, Ulric’s place,” he said as his eyes lit up. “He was a good man. His children run the place now. In truth it is his daughter who handles the Inn. The boy does more harm to his father’s legacy than good. In any case you will want to-” He pauses for a moment. His eyes look up to the corner of his head as if he could see his thoughts floating above him. “Why don’t I just show you,” he says with a

smile.

“Oh no, you do not have to.” Iman is cut off.

“Nonsense. We are close enough to it. Besides how often does a decrepit such as me get a chance to walk the streets with a foreign beauty of the Marsh Coast?” The elderly man extends his forearm for her to take. His smile widens to show his last remaining misshaped teeth. Iman was surprised by the man’s hospitality. She was even more surprised he knew she was from the Marsh Coast. Her skin and accent would obviously give away she was from Valikaar but most Northerners did not venture lower than the Freed Cities. She knew if anything he was well travelled. She did not yet decide if this was a good or bad thing. Iman returned his smile and softly took his forearm. “The name is Jacob,” he said.

“Nice to meet you Jacob,” Iman replied. “I am Iman.” She looked towards her companions. “The young one is Narissa. The other is named Qoraag.”

“I see. Well hello there young traveler,” Jacob said, as he laid his eyes on Narissa. At nine Narissa was just an inch or two shorter than Qoraag. Narissa looked up at the old man but shied away from him instantly.

“Narissa,” Iman said in a firm voice.

“It is quite alright,” Jacob replied in the child’s defense. “It is wise to be wary of strangers.” Jacob turned to Qoraag who unlike Narissa did not shy away. Instead Qoraag did not break eye contact with the silver haired man. Jacob looked over the rough grey scaly face of the demon. He saw that his hands were covered in gloves and that he kept his hood over his head despite the heat. “You do not have to hide my friend. There are no slaves in Unthar’s Keep. The people of Three Warden are not like our misguided cousins to the North.” Jacob noticed Narissa and Qoraag holding hands. “Are you her protector?”

“Yes,” Qoraag replied.

“Good man,” Jacob answered before turning his attention back to Iman. “Ulric’s place is this way” he said as he began to guide Iman. Iman, waved for Qoraag and Narissa to walk in front of them.

She wanted to keep them in her sight. She felt Jacob pull her close as he leaned into her.

"Three Warden does not have slaves, but we do have slave traders," Jacob whispered in her ear. "He is a small one who appears to understand Ballek. He would go for good coin in the Empire as a house servant. Keep him close when you are not within the city limits. You are safe in Unthar's Keep but I would still see about getting papers for him while you are here."

"I will look into that. Thank you Jacob." He nodded his head back to her.

As the group made their way through the streets Jacob informed her on various points of Interest. He told her which merchants were the best and which were cheats. He let her know some of the major laws in Unthar's Keep. For the most part they were the same as most places but Iman felt comforted by his desire to look after them. Jacob had a warming presence about him. He felt more like a wise uncle than a stranger. Iman found it odd how quickly she was able to feel comfortable around him. She did not lower her guard by any means but she allowed herself to enjoy his company.

"How did you know I was from the Marsh Coast?" Iman, asked.

"Those two will want to take a left at the well up ahead," Jacob said. Iman yelled out to Narissa and directed her down the right path. "Your accent is one of the southern shores. You speak Ballek quite well but I could hear it in your tone. Furthermore your facial features are narrow unlike the people of the Grey Plains."

"So it was my features and my voice?"

"Your mannerisms as well," Jacob added. "I have travelled to the Marsh Coast. It is a marvelous place. If my old body could make the trip I would return there in a heartbeat; such a beautiful land." Iman smiled upon hearing such kind words. Just her luck, that she would meet someone so familiar with her distant home. *Who is this Jacob, truly? Why did he travel to Valikaar?* She was intrigued by the look in his eyes when he spoke about her home. She could tell he had fond memories of Valikaar. It was rare to get outsiders as far south as the Marsh Coast. It was especially rare to receive travelers

from Three Warden or The Empire. She had so many questions she wanted to ask. Yet, she held her tongue. She knew that if she pried too much he might return with questions of his own. She had no desire to lie to Jacob; he has treated them so kindly. Instead she would stay her inquires.

She had not planned to stay in Unthar's Keep for more than a week. At the most they would stay a fortnight, but even that maybe too long. It would be nice to stay in one place for a while. All three of them were in heavy need of a good night's rest. Just the thought of sleeping in a bed or sitting down and having a real meal made her excited. She knew that they were no longer being hunted and could move about freely now. She missed interacting with others besides a child and Qoraag. Jacob was a pleasant distraction at least for the time.

"And here we are," Jacob said as he stopped in front of a two storied building. Above the swinging doors of the entrance was a wooden sign that read Ulric's Tavern and Inn. The yellow lettering on the sign was faded and the wood of the sign was splintered. From the outside; the Inn, did not look too appealing but then again she did not have the coin for nicer accommodations. Besides this will be the first time she will sleep in an actual bed for over two months. Narissa dragged Qoraag towards the swinging doors as she yelled for Iman to hurry. She was excited to say the least and did not hide it. Thus far Three Warden was vastly different from Valikaar. Because of this Narissa found excitement in even the smallest things. Iman called out to her and told her to wait before entering the Inn. Narissa frowned for a second then just began to fidget and bounce in place.

"Thank you for your guidance," Iman, said as she turned to Jacob.

"No need my dear. It was a pleasure." Jacob cleared his throat. "Excuse me." He took a second to compose himself. "If you don't mind I would like to check up on you after you have settled in. I don't mean to intrude upon you; I would simply feel better knowing that you are without need during your stay." Iman smiled but

before she could answer him the doors of the Tavern violently swung open nearly hitting Narissa in the face. Qoraag grabbed Narissa and pulled her aside as a tall bald headed man dressed in heavy midnight armor and a purple cape came storming out of the entrance. Behind him four soldiers dressed in black and purple leather armor followed. The large bald headed one who led the way was clearly upset. He wore a massive great sword on his back and sported a long brown goatee that was tied in a ponytail at its tips. Iman began to take a step towards Narissa but Jacob grasped her firmly by her arm and made sure she stood still. *How dare he*, she thought as she jerked her arm free.

"Narissa stay there!" She yelled out as she moved towards the startled girl. Before she reached her the behemoth knight stepped in front of her and grabbed her by the arm. "Release me!" She yelled as on goers starred but did nothing.

"You were heading into the Inn?" The knight questioned. "Where is the blonde one? Where is Alvin?"

"LET ME GO!" Iman screamed as she continued to struggle away from his grip. *The knife*, she thought as she began to reach for it with her free hand. It was hidden under her garbs and sheathed at the small of her back.

"Let her go," Jacob said firmly. The bald headed knight looked up and seemed to be taken aback by the sight of Jacob. *He is distracted*, Iman said to herself. She inched her fingers under her shirt and grasped her hand around the handle of the knife.

"Don't," the knight said. His eyes were focused on Jacob but Iman knew he was talking to her.

"Unhand her immediately," Jacob demanded. "She is a visitor here and does not know where Alvin is hiding. Furthermore you overstep your bounds. You men have no jurisdiction here. The huge knight let go of Iman's arm. Iman reached out to Narissa and Qoraag who both scurried to her. The group stepped back as Jacob confronted the knight. Iman was scared for Jacob's safety. *This is my fault*. Iman remembered how Jacob tried to stop her from running over towards Narissa. *He didn't want me to bring attention*

to myself. I over reacted. If not for me the knight would have just walked off wrapped in his own anger. Now Jacob is in harm's way because of me. This is my fault. She couldn't shake the guilt of what was about to happen.

"The Onxy Guard have jurisdiction everywhere old man," the knight said in response to Jacobs declaration. "I was going to come looking for you after I found this Alvin fellow. I have business with your boy."

"What business?"

"Is the Kaar yours?" The knight said as he motioned to Iman. "Is the little one your bastard?" The knight laughed. "You see that boys? His seed is still potent." Two of the soldiers behind him joined him in laughter. "She's kind of dark to be a half breed. I guess your seed isn't as potent as you would have us believe." He let out another chuckle.

"You call yourself a knight?" Jacob replied.

"Aye, a greater knight than you ever were old man." *He was a knight?* Iman was intrigued by this revelation but she can certainly believe it. Jacob stood firm never wavering in front of such a huge monster.

"If you see Alvin, tell him that running will only make things worse. As far as our business I have a job for your boy. Lord Eagon, wants to hire the Griffin Slayers. Pass the message along when you see Dalvin". The knight didn't wait for Jacob to respond before turning his back on him and walking away. His men followed suit. Iman looked at Jacob as he took a moment to regain his composure. It was brave of him to stand up to a knight twice his size and half his age. *He was intriguing*, she thought to herself. She could see Jacob as a brave knight in his youth. She wondered what happened to him? Knights were nobles and it was clear Jacob was no noble. That being said he was brave and Iman was thankful.

"You will want to stay away from them," Jacob said in a matter of fact tone. Jacob then took a deep breath then exhaled. "Now then let's see if we can get you settled in".