

RAVEN'S LADDER

A NOVEL

JEFFREY
OVERSTREET

AUTHOR OF AURALIA'S COLORS & CYNDERE'S MIDNIGHT

Praise for
Raven's Ladder

“Jeffrey Overstreet’s imagination is peopled with mysteries and wonders, and his craft continues to mature. Reading *Raven’s Ladder* is like staring at a richly imagined world through a kaleidoscope: complex, intriguing, and habit-forming.”

—KATHY TYERS, author of *Shivering World* and the
Firebird series

“A darkly complex world, populated by a rich and diverse cast of characters, in which glimpses of haunting beauty shine through. Sometimes perplexing but always thought provoking, *Raven’s Ladder* is the work of a fertile and strikingly creative imagination.”

—R. J. ANDERSON, author of *Faery Rebels: Spell Hunter*

“With *Raven’s Ladder*, Overstreet does what the best fantasy writers do: he opens a door into a new world—a beautiful, dangerous world and one that stayed with me long after I closed the book.”

—ANDREW PETERSON, singer, songwriter, and author of
North! Or Be Eaten and *On the Edge of the Dark Sea of Darkness*

“In *Raven’s Ladder*, Jeffrey Overstreet continues what he began with his first two novels, *Auralia’s Colors* and *Cyndere’s Midnight*, crafting a world rich in detail, purpose, and wonder. Each page reveals new threads of a complex, interwoven story that excites and entertains while provoking deeper thought. It has been a long time since I’ve read a series as captivating, meaningful, inspiring, and beautiful as this one.”

—AARON WHITE, writer and editor of
FaithAndGeekery.com

“*Raven’s Ladder* is a fantasy gem. The story is imaginative and truthful, the characters authentic and complex. Jeffrey Overstreet has given us a gift—a fully realized world teeming with life and wonder. It is a fully human tale, with a penetrating glory throughout. Here is a heaping portion of truth, beauty, and goodness.”

—S. D. SMITH, author of the *Fledge Chronicles* serial

“In *Raven’s Ladder*, Jeffrey Overstreet weaves a brilliant tale of intricate layers, inviting his audience into a story of deeper meaning. Not mere fiction that ends with the shutting of the book, it sneakily tiptoes into your thoughts, challenging you to ponder a little more.”

—ESTHER MARIA SWATY, *Seattle City Guide Examiner*

ALSO BY JEFFREY OVERSTREET

Fiction:

Auralia's Colors

Cyndere's Midnight

Nonfiction:

Through a Screen Darkly:

Looking Closer at Beauty, Truth, and Evil at the Movies

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P R E S S

RAVEN'S LADDER

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CAN AURALIA'S COLORS SAVE HOUSE ABASCAR?

In a dungeon beneath House Abascar, Prince Cal-raven befriended Auralia. She was only sixteen, but already condemned. Cal-raven's father, the king, had imprisoned her for breaking Abascar law and revealing colors only royalty were allowed to display.

But Cal-raven saw that Auralia was a visionary, a prophet. Her cloak glimmered with colors no one had ever seen—colors that spoke of undiscovered wonders in the world.

He was even more intrigued by her claim that the Keeper had sent her. The Keeper. A creature who brings children comfort in their dreams. A shadow who looms in the nightmares of adults who feel threatened by any power greater than their own.

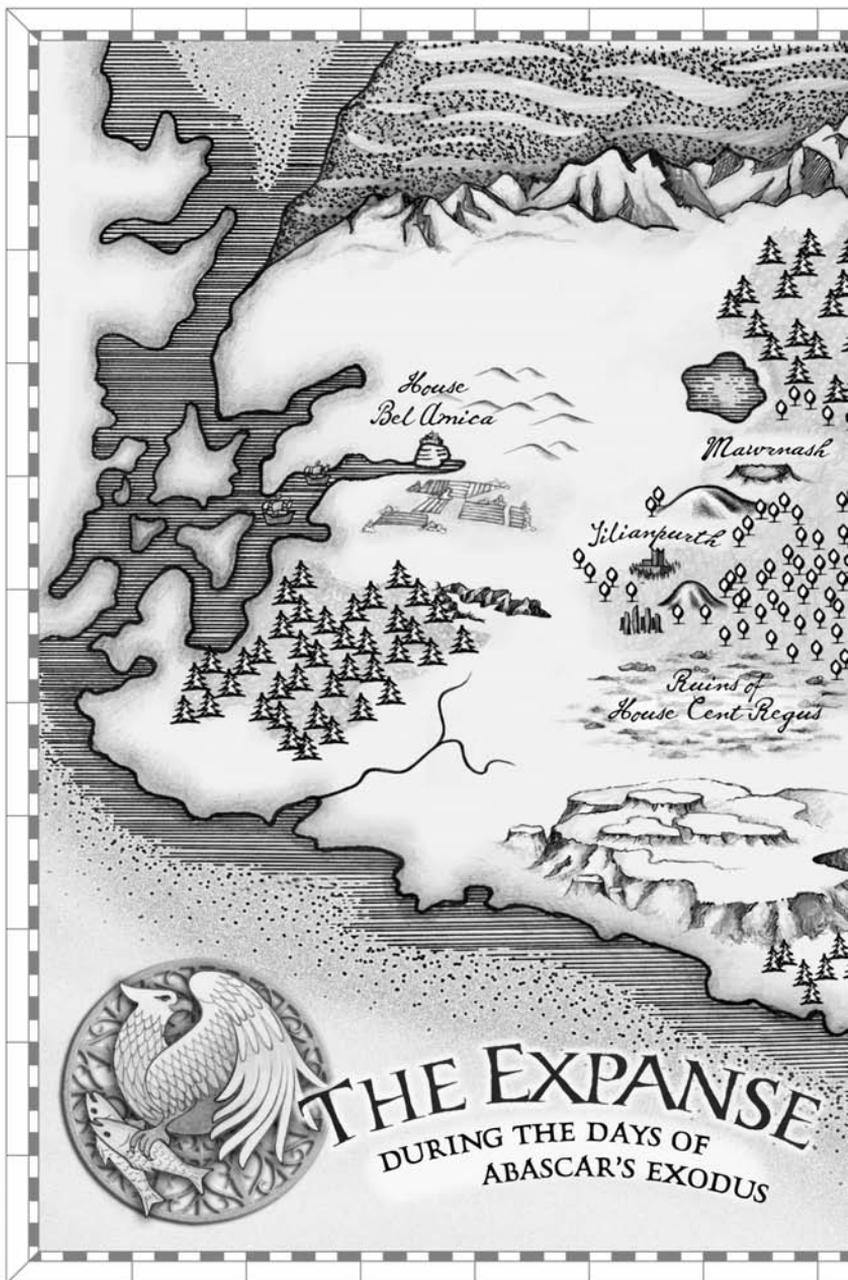
So the prince gave Auralia his Ring of Trust, a pledge of protection against harm. And a few days later House Abascar came crashing down, erasing Auralia—and the ring—from the Expanse.

Their home in ruins, their king buried in the rubble, the Abascar survivors followed Cal-raven into the wilderness, taking refuge in a stone labyrinth behind the Cliffs of Barnashum.

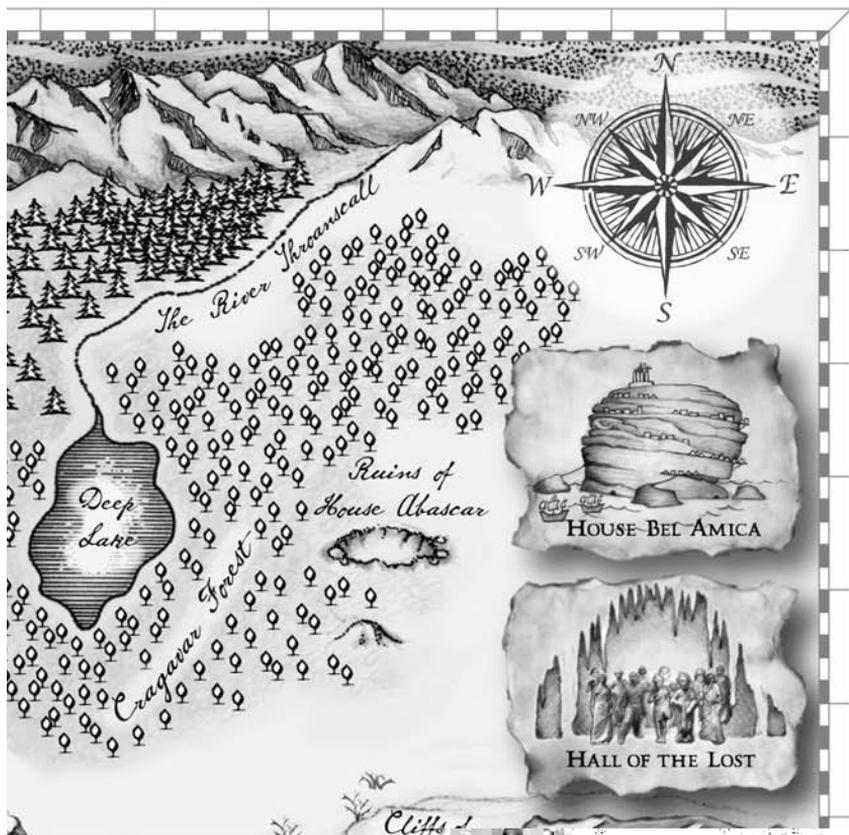
Now their king, Cal-raven has helped his people survive hardship and a siege by bloodthirsty beastmen. But he has never stopped believing that the Keeper is watching. And he has never stopped believing that there is a better home for his people, a place where Auralia's colors shine. So he follows the Keeper's tracks in search of New Abascar.

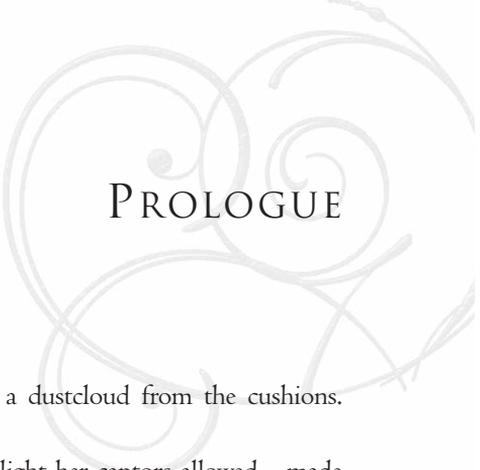
But the road is fraught with dangers. Beastmen. A traitor with murder on his mind. A deadly menace breaking through the ground. Wicked Seers from House Bel Amica eager to seduce and enslave his people.

There are also signs of hope. Cyndere, daughter of House Bel Amica's queen, is conspiring with Abascar's courageous ale boy and with Jordam—the one beastman whose heart has been healed by Auralia's colors—to rescue slaves from the beastmen and bring hope to the Expanse...



THE EXPANSE
DURING THE DAYS OF
ABASCAR'S EXODUS





PROLOGUE

Remembering, the Treasure rose in a dustcloud from the cushions. “Mustn’t be late,” she whispered.

A lantern’s frenzied flame—the only light her captors allowed—made of her a wild shadow on walls of clay and roots. She cupped a handful of ash-dry crumbs from the bedside bowl. Then she cowed her head in a dark shawl and fitted her feet into timeworn slippers—soldier’s boots she’d snatched from a passing pillage cart and trimmed to fit.

Touching the dingy rag-weave curtain she had hung on the windowless wall, she said, “I’ll come back.”

As if in answer, colors flickered about the curtain’s edges.

The iron-barred door of her cell may once have been a garden gate before the curse poisoned the people of House Cent Regus. Locked for years, it had been her only window. But she learned to ignore the distorted shadows lurking beyond the bars—beastmen come to ogle their chieftain’s favorite trophy.

One day Skell Wra had ordered the lock undone, for where could she go? Better to let his Treasure run loose. A ghost. A boast. A reminder of the fallen house his servants had pillaged.

But he could not have guessed that a spark still burned in the Treasure’s spirit or that it had been fanned into flame by the glory of her own secret treasure. She would surprise her captors someday.

In her years of incarceration, she had lost the rhythm of sunrise and sunset. But a vivid revelation had rekindled memories long buried in ash. In the light of a shining relic stolen from House Abascar’s collapse, she remembered the ancient songs that gave order to each day. And thus she fumbled her way back into habits that once filled those measured spaces. She established the simplest ceremonies—sweeping her cell, scrubbing her feet, cleaning stone fragments for makeshift dishes.

In recovering such common disciplines, she found strength and something more—the desire to investigate all that occurred beyond her misery’s border.

During one aimless meander, she had stopped at a startling sound. Harmony.

Up a rugged stair to a low-ceilinged cave, she had moved like a moth to a flicker of light. A host of slaves, hands joined, arms bruised from long days of tunneling for the chieftain, sang House Abascar’s Evening Verse. Its melody unfurled like a watchtower’s flag. The exhausted prisoners seemed to draw strength from that rhythmic ritual, prodding at the darkness until it bled hope.

Her own particular hope intensified as she crept to the gathering’s edge night after night. If these laborers had survived House Abascar’s fall, perhaps others were searching for them on the ground that she called a ceiling. Her husband, the king. Or her son.

On this night as the Treasure crept along corridors and braved cold mockery from the parades of fang and claw that passed, her only stars for navigation were torchflares at each corner; the only moon an occasional shaft of light from the world above falling through this syrupy fog.

The vapor, pungent as boiled weeds, emanated from roots that the slaves called feelers. As the captives swung pickaxes and opened tunnels, the feelers filled them, spreading beneath the Expanse, setting a snare-net for the world. She had witnessed those tendrils drawing down prey they had caught above ground—a bird, a deer, even a man or a woman. Like a host of prowling ghosts, the feelers’ cold mist crawled over her as she stumbled, shuddering, between the vein-lined walls.

When she arrived at the foot of the long stair, she heard new voices in the melodies that descended like glimmers of sunlight through a dark ocean. New slaves.

“Marcus?” she wondered aloud. “My love?” Speaking his name made the possibility seem real. “Raven? My son?”

The Treasure ascended the steps and slipped into the bowl-shaped room beyond but stayed outside the captives’ candlelight.

When the music was over, the prisoners passed around a dish—a supper

of scraps that might once have been seeds, nuts, weeds, insects—and began to whisper urgently, knowing they'd soon be bullied into silence. Stories rose in voices hushed and hoarse. Tales of a house busy with industry. Memories of childhood sweethearts, an elaborate prank on a duty guard, an incident with an ambassador's trousers in the midst of the king's court session, the death of a child to a winter plague. Tales of passions pursued, of dreams given shape, of creative inventions that flourished for a time.

Though these sadder stories worried the queen of Abascar like clouds of biting mosquitoes, she stayed.

"Enough." A woman's plea interrupted the man whose bitter tale of Abascar's last, vivid hours was only worsening the slaves' sorrow. "We know this tale too well. Let's hear from some new voice. You, boy...do you have the strength to tell us a story, to help us remember who we are?"

The question struck a solemn stillness.

As the boy stepped forward, the Treasure felt a pin pierce her heart. He was bent under a burden that no one so young should carry. He cast aside his outer cloak, took up the candle, and introduced himself as an ale boy. A day in his Abascar life had been a route through the whole wide house, up from the Underkeep breweries and into King Cal-marcus's palace. He took the tower stairs to the royal chambers, walked to the watchtowers on the inner and outer walls. He strolled the streets to the Housefolk, the officers' quarters, the gardens and farms, the stables and mills, and beyond to the fields, the orchards, and the huts where the Gatherers labored to earn the favor of the king. The Treasure followed the thread of his words back through passages she had made herself forget.

His small voice grew fierce and eager, for he was now describing a girl, an artist, a friend, and one who dared defy the laws that the Treasure herself had made.

Auralia, he called her.

"But the king's condemnation was a mistake," he went on. "For when they threw Auralia into the dungeon, the heart of House Abascar broke. The Underkeep collapsed—*krash!*—deep into the earth." As he spoke these words, he extended his arm and touched the candle to the edge of his sleeve. "And fire," he said, "rose up to consume what remained."

The slaves came to their feet in dismay. Some lunged forward, raising shackled hands. Too late. Flames cloaked the storyteller.

The Treasure fell backward, her arms across her face. So many of her dreams ended in just such catastrophes.

But when she opened her eyes, the boy still stood in their midst, arms raised, blazing. The people retreated as his shrill voice rose to a shout. "Don't fear. The Keeper was there, watching over, refusing to let Auralia burn."

His voice went on emboldened, his demeanor untroubled by the fire. Serpents of smoke slithered from his garments. His eyes shone. The slaves' urgent concern turned to bewilderment, then terror.

The boy began to spin, faster and faster—a small whirlwind flinging flecks of light. His hand shot out to grasp the edge of a heavy tarp, the kind the prisoners used to drag up sharp stones from their masters' mines. He cast it over himself. The cave's bright center dimmed to a faint ring of fire on the floor until the tarp stifled even that, and the light went out altogether.

The Treasure leaned forward. The cave grew quiet for long, worried moments.

Then the boy rose and cast away the tarp. Outlined in sparks, he walked in a circle. "Northchildren took Auralia from the ashes. They cloaked her in strange new skin. They gave her to the Keeper, and it carried her away. But before she left, she told me to seek the Keeper's tracks in the world. I've done so. And they led me straight to you. So listen to me."

Oh, how they obeyed him.

"I can't explain what brought our house down. Maybe the king dug too deep. Maybe it was a fire. Some have said there was something more."

"I blame that wretched queen," growled an old woman.

"But there's something else I can't explain," said the boy. "How'd anybody get outta there alive? How'd I find the Keeper's tracks in the smoke and trouble, to reach and help so many?"

"What of King Cal-marcus?" Nella Bye asked.

The boy met her gaze. His answering whisper ran through the Treasure like a sharpened spear. "He's gone, my lady."

"He...didn't survive?"

"I don't know. But he's gone." All glimmering and golden, the boy

touched Nella Bye's shoulder. "I can't explain it. But I've seen Northchildren. They're not monsters. They're helpers. They give relief to the dying. Wherever the king is now, he's not beyond their reach." He looked up at the survivors. "We're not either. Auralia was right all along. The Keeper will come for us, if Cal-raven doesn't first."

A laugh burst from the Treasure. As the slaves glanced in her direction, Nella Bye asked, "Cal-raven is alive?"

"He's Abascar's new king. In the Blackstone Caves, behind Barnashum's cliffs. He's making a plan to start again. To build New Abascar. Somewhere else."

The Treasure covered her mouth. It was a joke. Cal-raven was just a boy. He could not lead a berry-picking party, much less direct a great house.

"Does he know we're here?" someone asked.

The boy's eyes turned upward as if his gaze could penetrate the stone above them. "I think I'm supposed to prepare you for his coming."

"You?" another scoffed.

"The Keeper's tracks led me here."

The Treasure observed the hushed, haunted gallery of faces illuminated by the boy's spark-lit skin. No longer sullen as livestock waiting for slaughter, they looked awake, alive. She knew this awakening. She had felt it when that colorful weave—Auralia's colors, if the boy's story was true—had flared up in her cell. She had seen it quiet the bloodlust of beastmen.

The Treasure stepped from the corner's concealment. "I think I can help," she heard herself say.

Faces turned, afraid. She knew what they saw—a creature the sun had forgotten, her own reflection sinewy, fierce, and white as bone.

"You're that wretch the chieftain keeps to mock us." The voice belonged to a toothless old man. "You brought this on us."

"And I'm the one who knows a way out of here." In her voice she heard a familiar fury. "What is more, I know someone who will fight for us."

The old man went silent, mouthing at the darkness like a fish.

"Walk with me, child," she said to the storyteller. "I suspect there is more to your story. I want to hear it all."

For the first time the boy seemed frightened.

“Don’t trust her.” Nella Bye stood, her hair spilling down around her ankles.

But the boy drew his cloak back around his shoulders and moved forward as against a hard wind.

The Treasure led him out and down the stair. She could see in the ale boy’s smoky countenance that she amazed him—a woman free to wander the Cent Regus Core. But as this creature of courage and soot began to retell his story, his voice gained strength and fervor.

The ale boy told her of Auralia and how she flung gifts upon the Gatherers as generously as a cherry tree showers its petals. He told her of the Proclamation that had forbidden all colors and how Auralia’s revelation had thrown the kingdom into turmoil. She leaned forward. Her memory sketched faint impressions, as if the boy were painting in the rain.

She paused when a skulk of white rat-beasts—all five taller than she—rounded the corner like the groping fingers of a pale hand. One in the front pushed a wheelbarrow full of pickaxes and spades. She stepped between the boy and the rats, sweeping her outermost skirt behind her so that it settled over him.

The rat-beasts approached her, pink noses twitching and oozing. Their white fur was tinted orange in the torchlight, filthy as if it had been used to sweep cobwebs. Their red eyes examined her. “Treasure,” they whispered in reverence. One fell forward onto his hands and sniffed about the edge of her cloak. “Four...four feet?”

The ale boy leapt out. Anything the Treasure was ready to say was washed away by surprise.

The boy had become a little beastman. His face was painted with soil, and a mop of long, matted hair hung down over his eyes. His mouth was full of shiny fangs, and his hands were mittened in black gloves that thrust arrow-head claws into the air.

The rats blinked red eyes in disbelief.

And then he thrust his hands at them, which burst at once into gloves of flame. Painting fiery lines in the air, he leapt at them, fangs parting, and roared a horrible noise. A cloud of fur tufts filled the space where the rat-beasts had been.

The Treasure hastened on. Her little monster walked backward behind her, shaking his hands to put out their fire. He spat out the cluster of Cent Regus teeth he had glued together, and with smoking fingers he brushed away the wig of beastman hair. "That was very effective," he concluded. "I should make a bunch of these."

"Remarkable boy," she mused. "Pockets full of surprises." She shook her head. "I've some surprises for you as well, so listen close. I'll remember it as a kindness."

"If listening is all you need from me," he replied.

"This queen of Abascar once knew the very colors you describe. A merchant's young daughter she was, living with her family near Fraughtenwood. And then, on a red moon's night, a light came."

She lifted her hand, drawing in the air. "Sudden and strong, a light on the wall. Just after midnight. It flitted about and set the rat-catcher to pouncing. The girl thought she was dreaming. She rose and tried to touch it. The light appealed to her like nothing she had seen in her travels, like nothing her father and mother had ever offered or taken in trade. She laughed, and the sensation was like discovering she could play an unfamiliar instrument. She had never laughed like that before."

This made the boy laugh, and the sound gladdened her heart. Nothing thrilled her quite like her son's chirping flights of laughter.

"As abruptly as it had appeared, the bird of light was gone out the window. She felt a powerful desperation. She seized her bird net and ran into the night to catch it. But her father ran after her. He punished her."

She stopped and leaned against the wall. "The light didn't come again. She can still see it when she closes her eyes. She began to seek those colors in wildflowers, water, sunsets. She fashioned cages, collected bottles and vials, seeking anything that might capture the light if she found it."

The Treasure paused, eyeing a crossroads ahead. "When Cal-marcus ker Har-baron made her queen, he promised her anything she desired. She hoped to gain the power to capture those colors again. To keep them for herself. But nothing satisfied. So she abandoned Abascar and continued her search, until she was captured."

The boy took her hand, and his was hot in her cold grasp. She saw in

his attentive gaze the wild confidence of one who somehow knows more than he should. His face, so strange, wore not a whisker or a hair. He was a scorched thing, a sooty sapling after a forest fire. He did not even cringe at the tiny specks embering upon his eyelids.

"Raven," she said, her voice breaking. "Look at you, all made of stars. I thought I'd never see you again."

"I'm not Cal-raven, my lady."

She closed her eyes. "Be patient with me. My mind is in pieces."

He followed her rag-skirt as it swished down crooked stairs. She led him to a simple cell and through its open gate to a ragged curtain.

"You're stepping into my story now, ale boy. I found them. Or rather, they found me. They've nested in my chamber, too much to dream of holding for myself."

The ale boy stopped, eyes widening. Colors flickered about the curtain's edge. She smiled and drew it back.

He flinched. But the colors shone without any hint of deception, and he stepped into their influence.

The Treasure held out her hand, unfolding her fingers to reveal a crimson thread. "There is so much more," she said. "Shall I show you?"

"No," he whispered. "I remember." He strode forward, gathered it into his embrace, laid his head upon it as if it were a pillow, and said, "Oh, Auralia. They're alive."

The Treasure knelt. "Tell me, little Raven. Tell me more about Auralia. Where did she find these colors? Because I want to live where they come from."

He turned to answer, but the words stopped short, for they were no longer alone.

An enormous beastman was kneeling in the open gateway, eyes bright with Auralia's colors.

"Don't be afraid," said the Treasure to the boy. "This one...he's not like the others."

"I know," said the boy, and he went forward to take the visitor's hand.

"O-raya's boy," murmured the beastman, patting the boy on the head. "You have grown."

CAL-RAVEN IN FOUR KINDS OF TROUBLE

Auralia reached out to Cal-raven. As he approached, the flame of the candle he carried flapped like a flag in a hard wind.

Her smile was mysterious, just as he remembered it. That detail had proved most difficult. Other aspects had come easier as his hands sculpted the stone. Her humble stature. The tiny knob of her chin. Her feet—ten small toes emerging like a row of beads beneath a leafy skirt.

Cal-raven was not a tall man, and yet Auralia, slight for sixteen, had stood only to his shoulder. He could see her open hands pressing through the span of fabric that she offered to any visitor.

Almost a year had passed since he'd found her in the Abascar dungeon, wrapped in a magnificent cloak. Their fleeting conversation was burned in his memory more vividly than yesterday. Unflinching, Auralia had voiced her faith in phantoms dreamed and legends whispered—like the Keeper, that benevolent creature who haunted dreams, a silent guardian, a listener.

Cal-raven had sculpted, erased, and then reshaped Auralia's lips, her eyebrows with their question pinched between them, her whole face filled with trembling hope that others would receive and understand her vision. She had been more than human. Or better, she had been more fully human than anyone around her.

The king's hunting hound, his golden tail wagging, sniffed at the statue's ankles. "Hagah." The dog slumped down to the floor and sighed, resigned to wait.

That fabric the statue held—Cal-raven had not even tried to give it the

textures and colors of Auralia's cloak. How could he? Its threads had glimmered with colors no eyes in Abascar had ever seen.

"Tell the Keeper," he whispered, "that I don't know where to go from here." He ran his fingertips along the span that spilled like a waterfall from her upturned hands. "When I was a child, I'd have called out myself. It was easier then to believe."

Auralia's expression did not change; it would not unless he changed it. Her polished eyes would not return his gaze for, in the tradition of House Abascar portraiture, they lacked detail. While each statue in the cavern was distinct—the beloved and the burdensome, the wise and the foolish, the soldiers and the miscreants—they shared that same indecipherable gaze, an affirmation of something altogether unnamable, inimitable. The mystery of the heart.

Embarrassed at his habit of addressing this likeness, he knuckle-knocked Auralia's forehead. "Last visit. Watch over these worn-out people for me, will you?"

Something shifted in the cavern behind him. Hagah lifted his head and followed his master's gaze through the long rows of statues.

"Wynn?" Cal-raven waited.

Hagah's huge black nose emerged from flabby rolls of fur and sniffed. Then the dog set his chin back down on the ground.

"You'll catch our pesky shadow in a dream, won't you?" Cal-raven said, but he gave another look back.

Why am I so agitated tonight? he wondered.

Because some of them are turning against you, replied his father's ghostly voice. *It's been almost a year. You've mentioned New Abascar, but you still haven't shown them a plan.*

The statues that crowded the Hall of the Lost listened. These extravagant stone monuments gave shape to Cal-raven's promise that he would never let his people forget the lessons they'd learned and that they would build a new house to honor those lost in Abascar's cataclysm.

But the name *grudgers*, once given to those who had rebelled against their previous king's oppressive ways, now applied to people distrustful of Cal-raven. Grudgers objected to his embrace of the foolish along with the wise; his equal concern for the weak and the strong; his insistence that every person,

no matter how “useful,” be fed and shown the care of their healer. Moreover, grudgers grumbled about the way Cal-raven gambled their futures on possibilities revealed to him in dreams.

Tonight Cal-raven had taken the firewalk. Lesyl's turn had come, but he had offered to patrol the passages for her. He wanted to hear her sing the Evening Verse one last time before his departure the next sundown.

“I've written a piece that can only be played by two,” Lesyl had said when the firewalk brought him to the chamber of Auralia's gallery. Sitting against the wall decorated by an array of colorful weavings, she tuned the twelve-stringed tharpe, a formidable, sonorous instrument. She seemed relaxed, even happy, and oblivious that this was a farewell.

“Here.” She picked up a wooden spiral. “You remember how to play the hewson-pipe, don't you? Oh, come now, don't tell me you lack the time. You need the practice.” When he did not approach, she persisted. “Scared?”

“No,” he laughed. *Yes*, he thought.

He had torn himself away from that conversation to continue the firewalk for fear of losing his fragile restraint. *Not now. Not yet.*

So while she sang, he paced that routine progress, ensuring that torches would not spark any mishaps, that candles burned within the spheres prescribed, that everything was in its right place.

He had led these survivors through a hostile winter and a dispiriting spring. Just as they had begun to define a possible departure, a visit from the mage sent him scrambling in another direction. Tomorrow he would slip away and venture north to pursue the vision his teacher had given him.

The day will come, Cal-raven, when you'll have no choice but to leave Scharr ben Fray's imagination behind and live in the real world. His father's fury buzzed in his ear like a skeeter-fly. If you don't, the ground will crumble beneath you.

Facing his father's likeness, Cal-raven felt his throat tighten. “Whose inventions plunged into the earth?”

Listen to me, boy! You're too old for toys. Who will lead the people when I'm gone? Someone whose head is full of children's stories?

“Show me someone better prepared for the task,” he said. “I do not enjoy the burdens you've left me.” He took the shield from where it was draped over the shoulder of the king's likeness.

The statue's lips were parted, and a strange feeling of discomfort crept up Cal-raven's spine. He did not know what scared him more—the thought of the stone speaking or the thought that his dreams might prove false.

Hagah's inquisitive nose bumped the edge of Cal-marcus's shield, and he woofed.

"You're not waiting for him anymore, are you?"

A rough tongue exploded from the hound's expansive smile, and his tail thumped against the floor.

"You've given up on them both." Cal-raven's gaze strayed to the statue of his mother. The runaway.

It was a good likeness, or so he'd been told. Jaralaine's appearance seemed an echo lost in time's clamor. But troubled scowls from older folk told him that they recognized this imperious beauty. He did remember occasional tenderness and sighs of insatiable loneliness before her disappearance. He also remembered a fury against any suggestion of a will greater than her own.

He found himself suspended between the gravity of these statues and the forested world beyond, which called to him like a feast to a starving man.

"We're all ready to be runaways now, Mother. If we don't leave soon, the bonds that bind us will break."

Hagah sniffed the base of the queen's statue.

"No!" Cal-raven shouted.

Disappointed, the dog lumbered off through the rows to settle on the lanky figure of a hunter known by his nickname—Arrowhead.

Go ahead, Cal-raven thought. Arrowhead was a grudger. He threatened my father's life. Wouldn't hurt him to take some abuse for a change.

Hagah would have merrily complied, but the sound of something slithering sent him bounding back to Cal-raven's boots, fangs shining beneath his retracting lip. Cal-raven blew out and dropped the candle, held his father's shield close, and knelt to withdraw the throwing knife at his ankle.

There was only silence. Cal-raven tiptoed through the statues, Hagah stalking low before him.

The dog led him to the western wall, where a corridor ran along the inside of the cliff. Hagah put his snout down to a crack in the floor, noisily drawing in air. His tail stopped wagging.

"What have you found, boy?"

Hagah stiffened. Then he began to back away from the fissure, a low, rolling growl changing into a worried squeal.

"Something nasty?" Scars like burns from rivulets of hot oil marked the floor all about the break. "Let's go. This place is giving me jitters tonight."

A puff of wind touched his ear and then—*thung!* He turned to see an arrow embedded in the wall beside his head.

He sprang forward, leaping over the dog, and ran through the corridor. Down the stairs. Through tiers of tunnels.

In the distance Lesyl sang the Evening Verse. But his pursuer—pursuers, he could hear their footsteps now—did not falter.

Hagah turned around snarling. "No!" Cal-raven knew the dog was no match for an arrow. "Run, boy!" He pointed, and the dog bolted ahead just as he had been trained.

Cal-raven did not follow. He faced the rugged wall, placing his hands against the rock. His fingertips sought hidden inconsistencies, and finding those points, he applied pressure and heat in a way he could never explain.

The stone awakened, rippling in a sudden wind.

Cal-raven's body clenched like a fist, forcing energy out through his hands. Then he pressed himself through the wavering curtain.

A midsummer evening's breeze cooled his burning face as the sand sealed itself behind him.

The grudgers are out of patience. He brushed grit from his garments. It would not take long for his hunters to find their own exit. *They were watching. Waiting for me to be alone.*

"Keeper, protect me," he murmured. Crouching, he moved away from the cliffs into narrow paths through thorn-barbed thickets that blanketed the plains.

Several turns into that maze, he sat down to catch his breath. *I must get back inside where it's crowded.*

He thought about standing up and calling for the guards on the tiers above. But they would not see him here in the brake. And what else might come in answer?

A strange wind moved through the shallow sea of thorns. Bramblebugs

skrritch-skrritched across the plains. Something wriggled under his foot. He set his father's shield aside, tugged off his boot, and shook loose a rockspider.

He looked up through the brambled frame. A shooting star scratched a line across the night's black dome. As if excited by the mysterious sign, far-away wood dogs shrieked in song.

When he jerked his sleeve free of a bramble and stood, his rustling stirred up a cloud of twilight-suckers. These insects were always a help to hunters, for they uttered tiny shrieks of delight as they descended on fresh dung or carrion.

Sure enough, as the pest cloud dissipated, he saw two copper coins. He knew that reflective stare from a hundred hunts. A lurkdasher. A year ago the sight of this swift, bushy-tailed creature would not have surprised Cal-raven. Lurkdashers were common burrowers in beds of brush. But Abascar's best hunters had been catching little more than weakened scavengers, rodents lean for lack of prey. Across the Expanse the land had gone quiet, as if emptied by some mass migration.

If Cal-raven had been out for any other purpose, he'd have thrown his knife so fast the dasher would have fallen midsprint. But he stayed still. Something wasn't right.

The lurkdasher vanished. Cal-raven stood in the quiet, just another secret in this complicated night.

He could sense a presence, fierce and intent.

He turned his head slightly and drew in a deep breath. Only a stone's throw to his right an enormous animal, many legged, lurked in the thick web of boughs. He held that breath and waited, eyes slowly translating the contours of darkness and deeper darkness all around him.

Like a mighty hand, the creature clutched the ground, tensing knuckled legs. The bushes around it shivered as the lurkdasher stole away, and like a spider the creature raised two of its front legs from the brambles, bracing the other five against the ground. It was as big as a fangbear. Cal-raven felt a faint tremor. Then he heard a hiss, and the creature shifted its weight slightly, turning those raised limbs toward him.

Considering the sword at his side, he flexed his hand.

A crush of branches sounded to his left. His heart fluttered, a trapped bird, frantic. He turned and saw the second creature—the very same kind—with its feet planted as if it might pounce. In terrified confusion he saw the wind disturb a canvas that the creature drew behind it, a dark black sheet covering the thorns.

He did not know these monstrosities. They looked like they could outrun a viscorcat. And the forest was a long, long run ahead of him through a narrow, winding passage that he could not see clearly. But the cliffs—he might just make it back to the wall. The solid stone wall.

Ever so slowly he planted his hand on the hilt of his sword. He stepped backward, placing his foot down soundlessly.

The creatures stood as still as sculpted metal.

He took another step, drawing his sword half out of its scabbard. *No*, he thought. *The starlight. They'll see the reflection.*

At his third step the creature on the right planted its two raised feet down on the ground, digging in as if it might spring.

He heard movement behind him and felt a blast of air like a bellows. His feeble hopes went out. But something deeper than his mind, stronger than his will, unleashed a cry. He called out, as he had so many times in nightmares, for the Keeper.

The creatures leapt from the brambles and seized him. His sword never escaped the scabbard.

He had a moment to think of Lesyl, interrupted in her song, looking up to receive unexpected news, the hewson-pipe coiled beside her.

Hot limbs wrapped around him, and his feet left the ground. The creatures were shelled, bone-tough, their bellies cushioned with bundles of hair. He struggled, limbs flailing. He was falling skyward, upside down. The pressure did not increase. Nothing pierced or stung or bit. The ground, faintly chalked in moonlight, spread like the sky over his head, and beyond his feet the heavens glittered like Deep Lake at midnight. The creatures held him suspended, their vast canvases snapping in the wind as if they were wings.

And then he saw that they were wings, spread out from a towering creature.

His captors were not animals at all but hands. He hung unharmed in the clawed clutches of a monster and was carried up toward its massive equine head.

Its eyes, glassy spheres full of stars, were fixed upon the northern horizon. Flames lined its nostrils. Its mane wavered as if it were creating, not surrendering to, the night wind. And the scales on its golden neck caught more than moonlight.

A helpless toy in its hands, he watched its attention turn to him, and his fear turned to confusion.

He recognized this creature. This shape had been fixed in his mind since he first drew breath. It had moved at the edges of his dreams. In nightmares it had come when he cried out for help, and sometimes when he could not call at all. During the long days of learning, he had pillaged his father's history scrolls and hunting journals for evidence.

Nothing had prepared him for this. The creature drew in a cavernful of air, the shield-plates of its chest separating to reveal a soft lacework beneath. It held that breath. He knew it was reading him, reading the night, the skies. Then the curtains of its eyelids came down.

Are you kind? he thought. *Dreams. . . speak true. Let the Keeper be kind.*

The creature was stranger than anything he had sculpted when imagining its shape and dimensions. He felt embarrassed by his simplistic appeals, his feeble prayers. He was a mouse in the talons of a brace, and as the creature reared up on the pillars of its hind legs, wing upon wing upon wing unfolding from its sides like sails on a great ship, he waited for judgment.

A sound like deep recognition ran tremulous through its form. Cal-raven thought it spoke his name—not the name given by his mother, but the name given by the powers that had crafted him—and every thread of his being burned with attention. As the eyes opened again, the stars within were moving.

It exhaled a scattering of sparks, but gently. The sound was like the Mystery Sea, roaring as it received the river flowing out through the Rushtide Inlet.

The air about the creature shuddered. A wave of noise beyond the range of Cal-raven's hearing stunned him, conveying a word as clearly as if the crea-

ture had spoken. He would not, in the aftermath, know how to translate such a word. But it provoked in him an immediate resolve, a reverent promise.

He would follow. What else could one do when commanded by the Keeper?

Smoke and spice clouded the air and dizzied him. He was passed from clawed hands at the edges of the creature's wings to one of its enormous, rough-fleshed feet, which held him like a woman's hand cradling a bird. The creature set him down within a footprint on the path, and a wind whirled fiercely about him. Squinting up through the storm, he saw that the creature had taken flight.

In the space of a sigh, it was gone, a succession of lights darkening across the sky, northward over the Cragavar forest. Cal-raven lay helpless and numb like a discarded doll in the Keeper's footprint.

Breath burst back into his lungs. He heaved, folding and fighting, a bird shaking away the shards of a shell.

It came when I called.

Never more invigorated, never more single-minded in purpose, he smiled back toward the cliffs. He had been changed.

In that moment everything changed for House Abascar as well.



It began with a jolt, not a tremor.

Tabor Jan had been yawning as he reclined atop a boulder and counted the brightening stars. Sleep, out of reach for many nights, had seemed almost possible.

But then the ground beneath him bucked like a furious steed. He scrambled to the path, unsheathing his sword as if he might smite the earth in rep-
rimand. From deep within Barnashum came a sound like hundreds of drums. The shaking intensified. The refuge exhaled clouds of dust through shielded entryways.

"Not part of the plan," he muttered.

Rubble spilled down the cliffs in the quiet that followed, dust sighing into the thickets below.

“Cal-raven,” he said. Another name came to mind. *Brevolo*.

Then came a distant cacophony of voices. Rivers of people were rushing out onto the open ledges.

Even as he scanned the scene for the woman he loved, Tabor Jan pushed his way through the crowds, shouting to soldiers that their first priority was to find Cal-raven.

Hagah bounded suddenly into Tabor Jan’s path. The soldier seized the dog’s flabby neck. “Hagah—Cal-raven!”

Thrilled by the command, the dog turned as if jerked by a chain and almost threw himself off the cliffs. It was all the captain could do to keep up with him.

He found himself running toward the sound of triumphant yelps beyond the base of the cliffs. Dog had found master. The king was alive.

Kneeling among the brambles, Cal-raven embraced Hagah, blinking as if he’d been knocked silly by a falling stone.

“Are you hurt?” Tabor Jan scanned the shadowed ground.

“Didn’t you see it?” Cal-raven pointed north toward the Cragavar.

“See it? I felt it. I think they may have felt it in Bel Amica. We may have cave-ins. I’m taking you back.”

“No, not the quake,” said Cal-raven, exhilarated. “Didn’t you see it?”

Tabor Jan braced himself. “See... what?” Then the exuberance of Cal-raven’s expression triggered a spasm of alarm. “No! Don’t say it!”

“But Tabor Jan, I saw—”

“Swallow that story, my lord!” He would have preferred a beastman sighting. “Don’t speak of it to the people. Especially not tonight.”

“Not tonight! What could bring them more comfort than to hear—”

“If the grudgers hear you respond to this quake with some wild description of a phantom on our doorstep—”

“Grudgers attacked me tonight.”

“Did you see their faces?”

“No, but I became acquainted with their arrows.” He laughed. “I also became quite familiar with the Keeper. Nose-to-nose, in fact.”

Tabor Jan scowled. “I haven’t slept for so long I’m having nightmares while I’m awake.”

"It pointed me north, Tabor Jan! We've got to ride—"

"We'll ride tomorrow, Cal-raven. Just as you planned." He urged Cal-raven back toward the cliffs, and they clambered over piles of rubble newly shaken from the heights. A tumult of voices filled the sky.

Hurrying down a steep ridge, an enormous guard came stumbling to meet them.

"Bowler, how many are hurt?"

"Cave-in!" he wheezed. "Must...dig out...three people."

"I assume you've called for Say-ressa. Without her healing hands we..." Tabor Jan stopped, stricken as he read Bowler's expression.

He turned to Cal-raven, but the king was strangely preoccupied with the moon above the northern horizon.