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## **The Dragonheroes**

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# The Dragonheroes

Book One of The Birth of Terralax



Blake Garrett Anderson

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## Chapter 1

### Ledrelyen

Fluffy white clouds floated in the blue afternoon sky. Sparrows, robins, and jays chirped merrily in the trees below. Squirrels scampered across branches. Through the lush green grassland just miles west of the forest, the Ama'lonn River rippled and flowed, a furrow of sapphire in the emerald countryside. The pink amalin flowers that gave the river its name were in full bloom, strewn abundantly through the soft grass.

The elven princess Ledrelyen sat atop a turret's balcony of Castle Nathwenar, overlooking the land, her legs dangling over the parapet. She was only six, but she could still appreciate the wonder of her father's kingdom. Someone would likely have been upset had they seen her perched in this precarious position. Her mother probably would have screamed. The thought had not really even crossed Ledrelyen's childish mind. Everyone in the castle was far too busy these days to pay much attention to her, so it had made for a delightful game to steal furtively away from all the hubbub. Now she had escaped, and sat alone here in calm innocence, taking in the sweeping sight. She kicked her legs idly, stirring the hem of her emerald dress traced with delicate leaf patterns. A gentle breeze blew past her pointed ears and ruffled her long golden hair, which was adorned with a headband of solid diamond from her father and a flower she had picked near the river. It had been a few days since the young princess was allowed outside the castle, but the stalwart amalin flower still clung to its vibrant color, which was the most beautiful shade of pink at the base fading artfully up the petals to white edges. Something was happening outside, something she understood only to the extent that it was keeping her inside the walls of Nathwenar. She paid it little heed. Ledrelyen loved life in her blissful innocence, for her father, King Vamendrae, ruled in a time of peace and prosperity. Today this time would change.

From a high tower came the resonant sound of a silver horn, followed by the commanding voice of an elven captain. "Black ones on the northwest horizon! The Darrians have come! To arms! 'Tis the Black Legion! To arms!"

Ledrelyen leapt to her feet, standing now upon the very edging of the balcony, her hands upon the raised stone beside her as she peered out toward the horizon. Someone had told her several days ago which direction

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northwest was, but it took her a moment to rediscover it. Eventually her eyes, young but gifted with the keen vision of elvenkind, settled on the black mass a few miles away on the plain. A deep-set fear emerged in her mind, but her eyes were riveted to the scene. The wind blew against the folds of her dress as she stared out toward the approaching dark shape. Before long she saw that it was in fact a cloud of many shapes, thousands, the shapes of men marching over the grass. Black flags whipped in the wind above them, and their raiment was dark, darker than any she had ever seen. Minutes passed—or perhaps hours, time was not chief among Ledrelyen’s concerns—as the black-clad men drew closer.

*“Lara’nai!”* an elven captain yelled the order to fire. Quick sounds then came to her ear, almost like swiftly uttered whispers, as barely visible blurs flew from the battlements below her out toward the approaching army. Down upon the grass, men cried out and fell to the ground by the hundreds. Arrows...but they were more than just arrows. They were the legendary weapons of the elves. These dark men had provoked their anger somehow, and even Ledrelyen knew that they would now pay dearly for their mistake.

As the front ranks fell away, the flanks of the Black Legion split off toward the sides of the castle. One flank headed in her direction. More elves lined up on the walls to meet their advance. Then, near the rear of the black army, there came a great burst of flame, catching Ledrelyen’s eye as it seemed to gather in about itself and grow brighter. Ledrelyen could hear the rumble and then a great whoosh as the ball of flame surged up into the air. The cloud of arrows was lost to sight in the fire surging toward the ramparts some distance away to her left, and then it struck the wall.

The castle shook with the thundering boom. Ledrelyen screamed as she was thrown from her feet back onto the balcony, bruising her arm. She whimpered. Somewhere below the balcony she could hear an elf yelling. *“Ladders! They’re mounting the wall here! To my side--ah!”* He was cut short as a bow twanged from amidst the Darrians. The clang of steel against steel met Ledrelyen’s ears.

She started to push herself up from the stonework when suddenly the door leading back into the tower banged open. A man in ragged black stood with a longsword in his gloved hand. The blade was golden-hilted with a purple gem.

*“Well, what have we here?”* he said menacingly, stepping toward her.

Then from the doorway a feathered shaft imbedded itself in his back. Ledrelyen turned and gasped in relief when she saw an elven warrior standing at the door, longbow in hand.

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“‘Twill be the last time you challenge us, filthy Darian,” he said to the collapsing man in black. As the man died, the purple gem in the hilt of his sword glimmered with a mystic light for just a moment, before of its own accord the entire weapon broke into pieces that dissolved with a hiss into ashes and disappeared. Ledrelyen watched in shock, until the elven warrior’s voice caught her attention. “Come, princess.”

The warrior took her hand and rushed her away. Back through the door, down a flight of stairs and across the ramparts they went. Ledrelyen ran alongside him as fast as she could, panting and crying the whole way. She could hear swords clashing and the twang of archers loosing arrows...and here and there she saw that dreadful fire, its smoke rising to the blue sky. Where was Daddy? Where was Mommy? *What was happening?*

Finally the elf stopped. They stood at the edge of the battlements. The deep blue moat lay below. Another warrior elf ran out a tower door, sword drawn.

“The black ones are coming up, Aa’ren!” he said. “We must flee from this place!”

With a nod, the first elf grabbed Ledrelyen and jumped off the ramparts. The gray wall slid away behind them, and he used his body to shield her as they plummeted into the moat with a huge splash. Ledrelyen panicked as her vision was consumed in swirling bubbles and waves. She clung to Aa’ren with all her little might, but the moat tugged him from her grasp. She floundered underwater, frantically striving for the surface. Then someone hauled her up out of the moat into a small cramped longboat. Ledrelyen sat there for a minute in the stern, coughing up water and sobbing for breath. She could see that her boat was not alone. There were several floating in the moat, all cramped with elves and a husky dwarves. They shouted hurriedly amongst each other, pulling out oars and fitting arrows to bows. The boats began to sluggishly crawl out of the moat toward where it joined with the Ama’lonn River. A volley of arrows flew up into the air and came down on the small fleet. Ledrelyen gasped as the second elf that had saved her fell, an arrow lodged in his chest. Elves shot back at the Darian Bowman, now collecting on the castle walls. Dwarves frantically rowed. Accelerating, the boats cut through the water, barely evading volleys of arrows that nipped menacingly into the moat just behind. In moments they were out of range.

The cries and sounds of battle soon died down. Elves now crowded around Ledrelyen, concerned but unsure how to help. A dwarf pushed his way through, motioning for the elves to move back.

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“All right, lads, give the poor little maid some air,” he knelt beside the sobbing child, gently patting her back. “There, there, me lassie. Those blaggards in the black won’t be botherin’ us now, the pesky Darians. M’name’s Baltofus, but my little friends can call me Baltie.” Baltofus laid Ledrelyen down in his lap. To the girl the world seemed to calm again as the water rushed by along the sides of the boat and the dwarf stroked her hair tenderly, whispering to the elf warrior who saved her, “Look at that! She still has ‘er daddy’s diamond headband, and after all that! I tell yer laddie, God’s pertectin’ our little princess. She’s somethin’ special.”

As Ledrelyen drifted off to sleep in the dwarf’s lap, she thought of how much had just changed in those few, horrible, flaming moments of panic. She didn’t know these Darians, but someday, someday, she thought, she would put an end to them.

## Chapter 4

### Tell Me a Tale

It was calm. The summer dusk always had a soothing feel to it on the plain. The wind blew over the grass in a gentle breeze. It was ten years older now than it had been when it first caught the red wings of Ronn Battlestrong, ten years older and more than a hundred miles south and west from the mountains about Urga. It brushed the flickering tongues of a campfire, where an old man sat on a gnarled log, telling a story.

"And it came to pass," he was saying, "that the evil of Dulgrar Shadowdragon grew so great as to threaten all the world. His darkness spread over the lands of the innocent, and every man, woman and child lived in fear. To save all that was from doom, the Great Dragon Saedix, Lord of the Skies, summoned up all the forces of good...elves of ancient wisdom and skill, mighty dwarves and men of noble heart, warriors of legend and wizards of incredible power. Beasts of the wild flocked to their aid...eagles, wolves and lions proud...griffins even and dragons magnificent."

"And unicorns, Ashton?" a little girl asked, sitting in the front of the group. Parents too and other farmfolk had gathered about the fire to hear the old storyteller.

"Yes, lass," he said, with a tender smile, "many a unicorn as well. The Skylord led his great host deep into the Land of Shadow. At last they came to Nar'droká, the ancient Citadel of Darkness, and as the heroes of old clashed with the minions of Shadow, Dulgrar and Saedix met in the sky far above. Such a titanic duel there has never been before, nor ever since. Their roars shook the very fabric of the sky. The dark clouds flashed bright with lightning as Saedix brought forth his awesome magic and blue firebreath to match the terrible flame and black rage of the Shadowdragon.

"For days on end they fought, their eternal strength matched blow for blow. They grappled through the sky, through cloud, rain, lightning, darkness and light, ranging miles and miles east from the citadel, over the mountains to the north edge of the Dead Land. There Saedix summoned all his might and flung Dulgrar from the sky, and lo, the ground split in a great Rift before him, and the Shadowdragon fell deep into the earth...and the day was won."

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"What happened to Saedix, Ashton?" a boy asked eagerly, sitting near the edge of the group of children. Someone grumbled something about the questions rudely ruining the mood, but a young man in a hooded blue robe set a hand on the man's shoulder, and he fell silent.

The storyteller took a sip from his tankard of ale and stretched his shoulders. "Ah... the Great Dragon Saedix was wounded most gravely from the battle. He wandered off into the mountains of the Iron Crescent and has never been seen again...but..." The old man smiled subtly, enraptured in the story as much as every listener and relishing the suspense his pause left in their minds. "Saedix left a message, a warning to the peoples of this land. He spoke of a time when the Shadow would come again, of a servant of darkness yet living, invested with the terrible power of his master and entombed in secrecy 'til the age ordained when he should rise again and bring this realm to its knees. Against this great evil, Saedix set a prophecy, a prophecy of Five warriors that would arise to challenge the Shadow and defeat him...the prophecy of the Dragonheroes. And so we wait, as years by the thousand blow past and kings come and go. We wait. Dark things are coming, Darian invaders from the North with no land to call their home but that which they take from us. Why, just last year we had to give the Darrians more than half our crop. Dark times...but we wait...and start to wonder..." The storyteller's eyes twinkled in the firelight. "If maybe...finally...it's time."

"Now, however," said a farmer, setting burly hands on the shoulders of his two children, "much as it's sad to say, it's *bedtime* for ye little youngsters."

That began the dispersal of the crowd. Ashton finished his ale, waving goodbye to various children and parents. The fire was dying down. For a summer night, this one was cold. He glanced to find the supply of firewood had been exhausted. Then, strangely, the fire was glowing merrily, as if content again with the fuel it had. Ashton noticed the blue-robed young man was standing beside him now, eyes on the flames.

"You tell a rare story, sir," the young man said. He was tall. He had his hood up to ward off the night wind, so Ashton could see little beyond the dim outline of his face.

"Why, thank ya, lad," Ashton replied, rising to his feet and grabbing his trusty wooden staff. "Care to walk a while? I'll be headin' for the inn across town. It's a cozy place."

"'Twould be a pleasure." The boy's voice was intelligent and calm. He waited for the old man to start walking and then matched his stride.

"An' what be your name, pray tell?" Ashton asked.

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"Chronical."

"Strange sort of name..."

The lad shrugged. "It fits well enough."

The farming village was sprawled out over a range of gentle hills, and so the road to the inn pulled briefly free of cottages across a stretch of open grass. The light of the stars took charge where the village lanterns left off.

"You're right to wonder," Chronical said. "With the Darrians coming, it won't be long now before the days prophesied."

"You think they're part of this?" said Ashton. "Suppose it makes sense."

As they came to a clump of bushes, a silver-furred she-wolf slunk out onto the road, her eyes gleaming eerily in the moonlight.

"Careful, lad!" Ashton called, stepping back and brandishing his staff.

Chronical knelt calmly before the animal, stroking her head. His lips curved slyly as he glanced back at Ashton. "It's just a wolf." He stood again and the wolf loped off into the night. Ashton stared at him.

"You left out one thing, though," Chronical said, changing the subject.

"Eh?"

"In the story...you didn't tell them that the Five Dragonheroes would be very young, not even twenty years of age...only children in the eyes of the world."

Ashton waved his hand dismissively. "'Tis an old tradition."

"The whole story's an old tradition," Chronical said, gazing up at the moon.

Ashton swung his walking stick out before him for another ponderous step, watching it crunch against the pebbles of the path. "It's not all that important," he said, gesturing idly. "Besides, what could five mere children hope to do against the great Shadow, eh boy?"

Chronical gave no reply. Ashton looked up to realize the young man was no longer beside him. "Boy?" The road was empty, save for a few leaves twirling in the summer night's wind, its whisper joined by the distant howl of a wolf.

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