

CATHADEUS

BOOK ONE OF THE WALKING GATES

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PROLOGUE

Sunlight touched the southern peaks of the Dragon's Spine as Thrag completed his patrol. The morning was cold and snow still covered the ground. The exposed parts of the dwarf's face were chilled and steam appeared whenever he breathed—but he didn't care. He loved being in the mountains, and the sharp biting feeling on his rough skin was preferable to the heat in the mines.

Wiping the ice crystals from his beard, he lit his pipe and took a long draw before exhaling. The light crept into the clearing, and he turned to leave but stopped abruptly. A dozen yards away, barely visible in the snow, a dark shape broke the pristine white. Thrag covered his pipe and checked about. Convinced he was alone, he retrieved the small object and rolled it around in his hand, feeling the rough cuts from the crude instrument that shaped it. Even before he looked down, he knew what it was. A totem.

Moving quickly to the nearby river, he scouted its banks. He picked up a trail and followed it until he smelled their campfire. Two large, muscular beasts stood behind the flames and slightly to one side, another lying further back and to the left.

Minotaurs.

They occasionally entered the Spine to hunt, wearing totems for protection that never worked, and his kin always defeated them. There hadn't been any significant intrusion in almost six hundred years—not since the Breath of the Dragon wiped out their valley.

“So what ya doing in the mountains?” Thrag mumbled to himself, studying their bull-like faces. They had furs and leather jerkins covering their human bodies, and their weaponry was too advanced for a hunting party. *Sentries*, he concluded. *But for what?*

He needed to find out and report in, and they were too dangerous to be left alone. Unstrapping his giant battleax from across his back, he loosened the throwing weapon in his belt. Clenching his jaw, he readied to charge, then stopped. He couldn't see into the trees. Normally, he wouldn't care, but this time he had to be sure. Someone had to report, and something about this already had his beard on edge.

Turning around, he put his back against the boulder where he hid and called. A long, peaceful sound echoed among the rocks. He knew the Mins would hear it, even though he was downwind, but he wasn't worried—he'd been a ranger for more than sixty years and could imitate nature's calls. His sound was strong and true, riding the wind between the mountain pines and craggy valleys before fading away. He repeated it a few more times, then waited. As expected, the Mins ignored it. Minutes passed, and he watched the trees. Then a branch moved. Against the wind. His companion was closer than he'd thought, as usual.

Time to go.

Thrag burst from the rocks, hurling his smaller ax at the Minotaur on the right as he sprinted across the clearing. The weapon hit the beast square in the forehead, felling him. The other Min grabbed its weapon and brayed loudly. Thrag leapt up onto a stump directly opposite the fire, using the smoke to obscure his approach, and launched himself at the beast. He came through the screen with his battleax held high above his head in both hands, yelling as he appeared. The creature raised its halberd to block the strike, but Thrag's ax smashed into it, splitting the shaft in two. The Min stepped back to steady itself, but the dwarf wasn't slowing. He landed in front of it, bringing his weapon around and striking diagonally across, hitting the Min below the knee and severing its leg. The creature bellowed a horrific call,

falling onto its newly formed stump. The third Min was up now, a spear in hand and coming to the fight. It pulled its arm back preparing to skewer the dwarf, but a dark form hit it from behind, sending the creature hurtling past Thrag. The dwarf ignored it. He thrust the top of his weapon straight up, hitting the crippled Min under the chin and jolting its head back. Raising his battleax again in both hands, Thrag struck down with his formidable strength, burying the blade deep into the Min's chest, killing it.

He turned to look for the remaining beast. It hung from the massive jaws of a giant, sleek, charcoal-gray leopard standing eye level beside him.

"About time you helped," Thrag admonished, looking into his companion's enormous eyes.

The leopard gently lay the dead Min down on the ground without making a sound and stared back at the dwarf.

Thrag rocked his head from side to side. "Well . . . thanks," he said.

He cleaned his weapons and searched the camp, uncovering more tracks. Following them through the trees, he found another trail leading to the old ruins.

Crossing the flattened outer wall at dusk, Thrag hid among the long shadows and intricately carved broken stone buildings that had been cut from the mountain. He moved carefully between the fallen rocks, stopping at an open courtyard. Giant columns circled the perimeter, portions of the ceiling they once supported visible among the snow. Three heavily armed Mins stood in the center, their backs toward him, facing a man dressed entirely in black armor. Beyond them, two smaller servants waited, hoods covering their faces.

". . . finish preparing yourselves. We attack at first light," he heard the man say over the Mins' heavy breathing.

It would take Thrag two days to return with reinforcements. *Not enough time*, he thought. He'd have to stop them himself.

He crept closer, then signaled to the leopard, and charged.

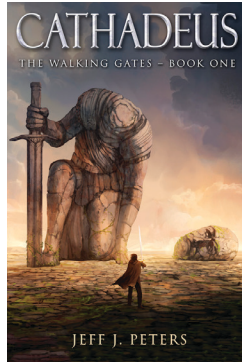
Throwing his ax at the middle creature, he hit the brute in the back of

the head, splitting its skull and knocking him down. A brief feeling of pride flickered across his thoughts at his consistent throws, but he pushed it aside as the leopard shot past him, grappling the Min on the left. Thrag raised his weapon, preparing to strike the last beast when a crackling filled the air. Green light hit his body, encircling him and clouding his vision, freezing him in place.

Magic, he thought as his muscles shuddered. He could resist. He knew how—but this was strong. Then he realized his mistake; the figures behind the man weren't servants. They were witches.

A sudden, intense cold penetrated his chest as a curved sword pierced his body. Thrag yelled out in pain. The man in black stood before him, smiling wickedly. *Not a man*, Thrag scowled. *An elf*. Two black eyes stared back at him with malice.

The elf withdrew the sword from Thrag's chest, and the dwarf fell to his knees. He signaled for his companion to flee. Then the elf struck again, a single quick and deadly motion that severed the dwarf's neck, dropping his body to the ground.



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