

A Dragon's Gift

Volume One of **The Lost Prophecy** series

First Edition

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I. Title

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To my two wonderful and amazing daughters who, unknowingly (or maybe not), were two unlimited and polar opposite sources of material for the protagonist.

To my fun, witty, and clever fellow gamers for their creativity and sense of comradeship. Their uncanny ability to make mountains out of molehills gave the characters purpose and personality.

To Ernesto, who's soul streamed through my ears and heart, then soaked into every page.

To Laura Alexandria and Amy Tranchida whose discipline of editing and flair for content not only made the book bearable to read, but that much more enjoyable of an experience.

To my incredible support circle of friends and family who all patiently supported me through this first book. Most of whom survived the early drafts with constructive criticism and kept the rolling of the eyes to a minimum.

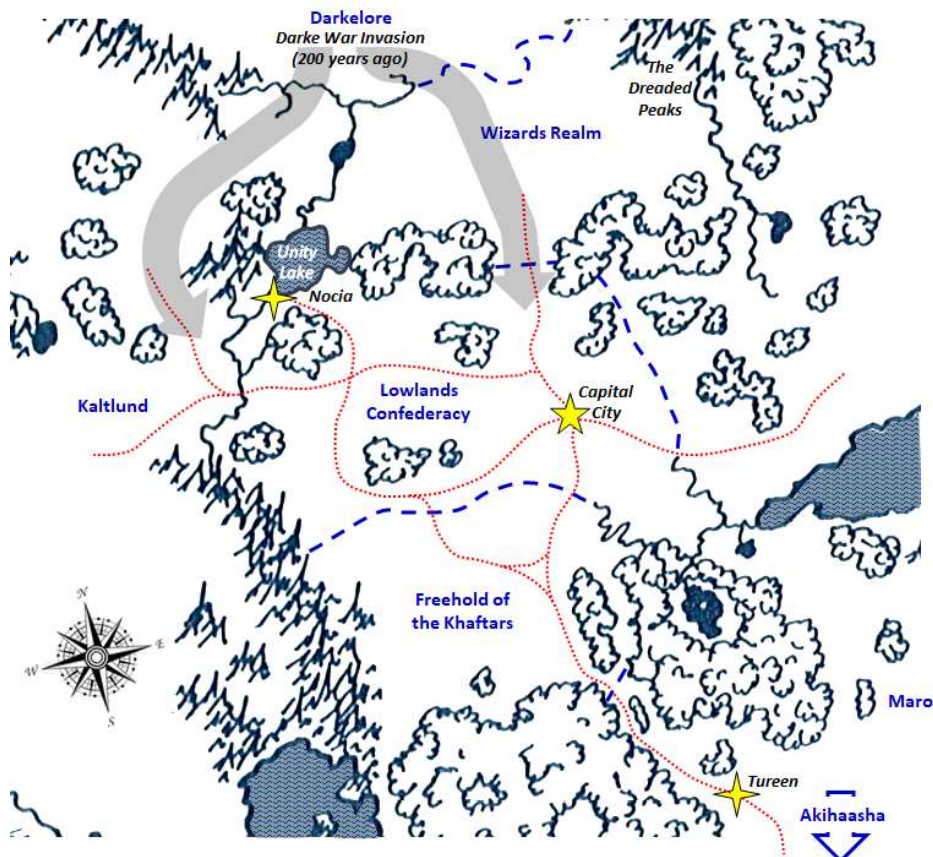
Foreword

Two-hundred years have passed since the Darke War. The Black Priest's armies scorched the world, left kingdoms in chaos, and impoverished millions of survivors. Though the war raged for only four years, it took decades for hope to return and for the land to revitalize. As the forces of good forged ahead, dwarves retook their mountains, elves reclaimed their woodlands, and humans rebuilt their cities. Even races who were previously dismissed in the old world, such as the wolf-like khaftars, forged a new respect in the war's aftermath.

As the years passed, the devastation of the Darke War faded into memory, and then into legend. Mortals soon forgot the past, races with longevity believed they were smarter than history, and restless dragons continued to meddle in all matters. Two-hundred years was plenty of time for those with ambition and power to scheme and conquer. Clashes erupted between new kings and old generals. Grudges were formed and fortified. Even the dragons found conflict within their own ranks, sparking two crusades that destroyed many alliances.

The new world, still tired from the old war, chose to ignore these pockets of conflict, and their complacency had allowed the very patient undead to expand into the shadows. Only a very few noticed the growing threat. They accepted the burden to protect an unknowing population and search for heroes to save it.

In *A Dragon's Gift*, book one of *The Lost Prophecy* saga, a young psychic sorcerer travels with her band of brothers: a warrior monk, an elven healer, a protective ranger, and a seasoned bounty hunter. They must think and work like a family to overcome bigotries, sinister plots, and moral challenges put before them by powerful beings—both living and undead.



CHAPTER ONE

Yesterday

Marella hesitates. She's exhausted. With her hands on her knees, she hunches over taking quick deep breaths. The effort she and her company have expended, outsmarting traps, finding, confronting, and now pursuing the thieves has left her physically and magically drained. She knows the thieves are just as tired and she can't quit now.

Marella looks down the dark cave tunnel where she left her companions behind. Ahead, in one of several tunnels, the bandits' torchlight fades. *We must get those priests' scrolls.* She brushes a palm of dust off a ledge and onto the smooth rock floor and then places her footprint into it. *This is for you, Ruce. We went this way.*

Using some of her dwindling magic, she forms a shimmering energy field over her body. The shadows embrace her as one of their own and Marella melds into the darkness. She stretches across the blackness as if part of it, passing unseen from crook to crevice in pursuit of the moving torchlight.

She releases the spell as she rounds a corner. Brightness surprises her. The thieves have abruptly stopped their flight. Fearful of discovery, Marella backs into a shadow. Fortunately, her prey is focused ahead and she goes unnoticed. One by one, the four thieves pass through a narrow crack in the jagged stone. *Ruce is good, but he'll never find this.*

Marella tears a small piece of cloth from her gambeson and snags it on a sharp rock. As the men's torchlight fades into the hidden passage, and before their shadows disappear, Marella uses the last of her magic and slips back into the darkness.

Today

The tavern is full, but not crowded, when Gundren steps inside. The locals take instant notice. His battle worn armor and intricately woven sword hilt draw most of the attention. At the bar, sitting between two empty stools, is a man that Gundren takes as a fellow outsider. He sits on light metal armor that drapes over the edges of his stool. A broadsword and longbow rest next to him against the bar. Gundren considers it good fortune to have found a kindred soul. *A ranger? Perhaps he, too, is heading north.*

The late afternoon sun cuts through the humid air, casting an orange hue onto the patches of wet and dry dirt that plaster the floor. Gundren's muddy boots add to the mosaic as he heads toward the bar. The patrons are in good cheer, as if celebrating some event. There are several groups sharing stories and laughter. A barmaid on the far side of the tavern catches his eye. She's a young red-haired girl of about eighteen years. She distributes drinks with a smile and dances through the place as if listening to a fine tune that only she can hear.

"You mind?" asks Gundren to the outsider, pointing to an empty stool.

The ranger, perhaps in his early thirties, glances at Gundren. He takes notice of Gundren's chain armor, the gear slung over his shoulder, and the ushala at his side. "Have a seat, friend." The ranger extends his hand. "Ruce."

"Gundren. Thanks." While he situates his things, Gundren can't help but watch the redhead across the room. She grips three full tankards in her right hand, balances a fourth on top, and carries a large platter of mutton in her left. She stops amongst the hustle, looks over her

shoulder, and makes eye contact. Her deliberate gesture leaves the veteran warrior uneasy. He turns his attention back to the bar.

Ruce has set a silver coin on the counter and has the barkeep's full attention. He points to his bowl of stew and empty tankard and then waves two fingers between himself and Gundren.

The barkeep nods.

"Where ya headed?" Ruce asks.

"North to Nocia. A city in the Confederacy."

"Through the khaftars' territory?"

"That's the shortest route," Gundren answers, happy to engage in conversation with the stranger. He takes note of Ruce's light metal armor, practical for both travel and speed in combat. The man's leather cloak offers equal comfort and protection from the elements. Gundren scans the ranger's weapons. The broadsword has several nicks but is otherwise in fine condition. His longbow bears the wounds of many repairs, and it, too, appears ready for service. *Good fortune, indeed. I wouldn't mind an extra sword through the dog-men's territory.* "And you?"

"Nowhere, yet," replies Ruce with a grin.

Gundren and Ruce turn their attention to a scuffle that has started between the redhead and a patron. She has an empty tankard pushed against a husky man's chest and seems to be standing her ground. The man and his friends are amused by the confrontation and the one in contention reaches around to grab the girl's behind. She slips away untouched.

Gundren finds this sly, young woman to be a pleasant distraction. "Oh!" he unintentionally says aloud. *Of course. You're the distraction. Now, where's your partner, the pickpocket?* Judging and categorizing people comes easy to Gundren. It serves him well as a bounty hunter. He looks at Ruce and quickly dismisses him as her accomplice. *No, it would be another local,* he considers.

Ruce pushes a full tankard of ale toward Gundren while taking a gulp from his own.

Gundren rests an arm on the pommel of his magic ushala, confirming that it hasn't gone missing. It's his most prized possession, given to him as reward for his services to a warlord in Akihaasha, a country to the far South. He brushes his boot against his gear under his stool. The barkeep delivers a bowl of mutton stew. Gundren discreetly looks around the room. *There's a thief in here somewhere.*

Near the entrance to the tavern, Gundren spots a man giving the redhead his full attention. He looks to be in his late-twenties. Other than the fancy pair of boots on his feet, the muscular young man carries no weapons and is dressed in simple braes and coat. *Found you.*

Gundren half-turns back to the bar and starts into his meal. "Thanks for the stew and drink. You been in town long?"

A sharp crack silences the room. The redhead has slapped the crude patron across his reddened face, after another attempt to grab her. With stupor-driven vengeance, he takes a swing but she easily dodges his drunken sway. His fist travels farther than he intended and lands in the belly of one of his friends. His unintended victim retaliates with a wild swing of his own and a small brawl ensues.

"A few days," replies Ruce.

Gundren watches the redhead slip into the shadows, unnoticed by the tavern's patrons. *Thieves all right.* From the corner of his eye, he sees the young man with the fancy boots methodically surveying the room. *He's lost sight of her,* assumes Gundren. The redhead's near-

invisible form glides like a cat under tables and around the distracted patrons. *A magic-using thief*, he curses.

The girl's translucent form melds into a shadow behind the bar. The cook and barkeep are away, trying to reconcile the brawl. The other patrons have become spectators, leaving Ruce and Gundren momentarily alone. The girl steps out of the shadow, approaches the counter, folds her arms on the bar and rests her chin on her hands. "You boys look thirsty."

Ruce slides his empty tankard toward her.

The empty mug floats away, as does Gundren's half full one. Both tankards hover under the ale barrel, taking turns being filled by the turned spigot. By the time they return to the bar and his hand, the girl is gone.

Gundren scans the tavern for the redhead's blurred outline. He realizes that the encounter is over when he sees her, and the young man with the boots, several yards out into the muddy street. Gundren confirms his ushala and equipment are where he left them and then looks to Ruce.

Ruce has added a couple copper coins to the pile on the bar.

"She's not really a barmaid, is she?" asks Gundren.

Ruce grins.

"Friends of yours?"

Ruce tries to keep a straight face, but chuckles anyway. "It's been almost twenty-four hours since she saved the city and she's already bored."

Gundren isn't sure how much truth is in that statement, but he's curious nonetheless. "From what little I've heard since getting here in Tureen, the rain only stopped yesterday. I saw the lower section of town underwater and many buildings flooded."

Ruce nods. "The priests got their scrolls back and could finally put a stop to the downpours."

"Ah."

"She likes you," the ranger comments.

Gundren looks at his full tankard. The commotion in the tavern is over and the patrons are settling back in. "She likes me, huh? Is that good or bad?"

"We shall see," laughs Ruce. "Let's finish our ale. If you're interested, I'll tell you more; and then, you can decide."

Gundren was hoping that the ranger would agree to accompany him through the khaftars' territory; but he's not looking to take on two thieves and mind his gear and coin over the next hundred miles as a condition of Ruce's consent.

"I have business north," Gundren says, taking a drink.

"So you said. Nocia."

"What about you? Is your ... is her business here complete?"

"Aye."

"So, you're looking for something new?"

Ruce takes another gulp of his ale. "We never have to look. Something new always seems to find her, and she found you."

The comment makes Gundren uneasy. "I'm just passing through. I happened into this tavern and chanced to sit next to you. I don't see how the girl had anything to do with it."

"Thinking about the how and why will mess you up and make you as crazy as that monk who walked out with her," Ruce says, shaking his head. "Or, you can be like me," he adds, lifting his tankard to Gundren, "just happy to be part of it."

They clank mugs. "I'm listening."

* * *

For over an hour, Gundren has been enjoying Ruce's company and stories, the latest of which has been about his group's business here in Tureen.

"So, by now they're on the run," continues Ruce. "Marella shadowed them, keeping them hustling and leaving us signs. We tracked the retreating band of thieves to their cavern hold out. When we arrived, they were spent and gave in. We turned both the thieves and the stolen scrolls over to the priests. Job done."

"I must say, I'm impressed. But, the 'we' part? I prefer to work alone, not to say that I don't welcome an extra hand sometimes, but for me, others tend to be more in the way than helpful. This monk, Telrynious, and Marella for example, how do a monk and a thief fit into the combat and politics you just described?"

Ruce laughs. "You caught me! That's just the highlights. Mostly *my* highlights." He pauses for a few seconds. "I truly care for those two. All of them, Vaera, too. We're a team. Any one of us would be less without the others. I know I would be. Telrynious and Marella are at their best when things are at their worst. Sure, Ella is stubborn and can be disruptive and independent during the idle times, and Telrynious can be a real pompous ass—but the truth is ... Ella sees things the rest of us miss, and I know I can count on her when a situation goes south. And Telrynious ... that monk can lay out a man faster with his hands and feet than I can with this sword. You would think those two opposites would annihilate each other, but they defy nature."

Ruce slides his empty tankard forward to signal the barkeep. "Telrynious is a rock. There isn't a man alive who could break his will or determination, yet that girl twists him around like a willow tree in a storm. He'll deny it of course. I don't think she even realizes it. It's the funniest thing I've ever seen."

"This monk and the girl, how does that work? The whole 'Oath of Celibacy' vow?"

"What? No. I don't know about any of that. Telrynious came to us soon after leaving a monastery. I believe he was there all his life. I'm certain that's where he learned how to fight."

Gundren has been observing the steady departure of patrons and the barkeep stares at Ruce's empty tankard. "Is there something going on I should know about?"

Ruce nudges his empty tankard further toward the barkeep. "One for the road?" All he gets is a glaring stare.

"I take it we're leaving?" says Gundren, adding another coin to the pile on the bar.

"The city's priests are about to address the citizens," says Ruce.

The swordsmen collect their things and head out.

* * *

From what Gundren can tell, the whole town has massed in and around the amphitheater. He and Ruce stop at the edge of the crowd. "It'll be impossible to find them in this," says Gundren, with a gesture.

"This way," Ruce says, heading into the crowd.

Gundren hesitates.

"Come on. Ella's whispering to me," the ranger says. "They're in this direction."

Whispering? The use of magic has always made Gundren nervous. *I don't like the idea of magic in the hands of a thief. Ruce trusts her completely. But ... that's Ruce.*

After traversing a couple hundred feet through the dense crowd, Gundren recognizes Telrynious and Marella ahead. A well-dressed woman accompanies them. Her gown is impeccably clean, despite the mud. *This must be the healer Ruce mentioned, Vaera.* Gundren notices the slight point to her ears. *Ruce didn't say she was an elf.*

"Vaera, this is Gundren," says Ruce.

The elf nods, then smiles.

He's taken by her elegance. "Charmed," says Gundren with a slight bow. She radiates an inner light and Gundren catches himself staring. It's then that he notices that her elven features are tempered, suggesting that one of her parents was most likely human. Terrible at guessing the age of elves, Gundren wonders how old the thirty-something-looking half-elf really is. Nonetheless, he finds her to be captivating.

Interrupting Gundren's gaze, the monk steps forward. "Telrynious," he says, extending a hand.

Gundren shakes it. "Ruce speaks highly of you. It's a pleasure to meet you." Gundren turns to the redhead. "Marella. Pleased to officially meet you."

"Good day," she replies with a smile. Vaera, who attempts to tidy her up, interrupts her attention. In contrast to Vaera's formal and pristine attire, Marella's simple street clothes are covered with everything from the street. The redhead fidgets as Vaera brushes blue energy from her palm across her. The mud and grime on Marella's clothing falls to the ground.

"Truly, dear," says Vaera, "a little effort?"

"Fine." Marella leans forward and with blue glowing hands of her own, she tussles her hair. When she swings her head back her gorgeous red hair falls clean, fluffed, and perfectly into place. Marella washes energy across her face with glistening hands. Finished, she looks to Vaera with raised eyebrows and hands on her shifted hips. "Better?"

Gundren watches the monk watch Marella's every move. *Ruce said it would be interesting.* "As I mentioned to Ruce, I have business north," begins Gundren. "If it suits you, your companionship is welcome."

Ruce's group cast their votes with shrugs and nods, while looking at Marella.

"Let's ride north," says the young redhead.

Not one of them have asked me of my business? Hmm ... interesting.

Against the backdrop of a setting sun, the high priest of the church emerges through the fancy pillars of the amphitheater, followed by several of his order.

* * *

An hour later, the priests are completing their address. Telrynious has been watching the anger build within his party and wonders when it will burst.

"... as we have year after year, we, your dedicated and powerful servants to the gods, have brought down to our humble city the favor of the great Pluviam to stop the rains!"

Marella turns to face the group. Disbelief is all over her face. "With the scrolls we returned to them!"

Ruce puts a hand on her shoulder. "We know. That's all that matters."

Vaera takes her arm. "Just another town, Marella. You should be used to it by now."

“... go home now, with the comfort of knowing the church of Pluviam will protect you. That we, the embodiment of that link to the gods, will protect you. Hug your children ...”

“I’ve heard enough,” says Vaera, turning away.

Ruce grabs Gundren’s sleeve. “Your turn to buy.”

Vaera, Ruce, and Gundren disperse with the exiting crowd.

Telrynious turns to Marella. “You’re surprised at the priests for taking the credit for our work?”

“Not really, but I am angry.”

“Good. The clergy did what I knew they would ... take all the credit and further embellish their role and worth within the community. You would do well to remember that people in power will work very hard to keep that power. The priests cannot afford to appear weak or incompetent to their people. We are no longer important to them.”

Marella forces an expression of indifference. “I should have realized that when they said, ‘Thank you. Here’s your gold.’”

“When others dismiss your efforts, it’s important for you to know that it is they who are weak. Not you.”

Marella beams a charming grin at Telrynious. “Already forgotten.” She takes his hand. “But, you’re very sweet,” she whispers, before turning on her heels.

Telrynious watches his purpose in life walk through every puddle in the street, splashing all the world's dirt onto her pure and perfect self.

Glossary:

- **Akihaasha:** a mostly isolated country in the Far South ruled by a militant government. Discipline, duty, and honor is their way of life, protecting and serving eons of tradition and superstition.
- **Black Priest:** an albino human whose actual origins are unknown. Who, as legend has it, cracked the barriers between the planes and melded energies that should never have been brought together. His monstrosities decimated the world's resources and fractured most every civilization on the continent, which came to be known as the Darke War.
- **Darke War:** 200 years ago, the Black Priest led a continent-wide invasion from Darke Lore in the North with created, summoned, and undead creatures. It lasted four years and decimated the civilized world of elves, dwarves, and humans. It failed due to the pockets of resistance that disrupted communication and supply lines and allowed the races to unite and organize.
- **Kaltlund:** a county to the west that was one of two conquered by the Black Priest, 200 years ago during the Darke War.
- **Khaftar:** intelligent and honorable wolf-like humanoid creatures that form in small, constantly changing communities. Their greater territory, the Freehold of the Khaftars, is recognized as sovereign by the other fiefdoms in recognition of their contribution against the Black Priest during the Darke War.
- **Maro:** a large country in the middle of the continent, divided by dozens of fiefdoms and ruled by a monarchy. Home to the city of Tureen.
- **Nocia:** once a pirate town conquered by the Black Priest during the Darke War 200 years ago, is now a prosperous city ruled by three city leaders known as the Ternion.
- **Pluviam:** the god of rain and storm.
- **Tureen:** a city in Maro where the story starts.
- **Ushala:** a chisel-tipped sword custom made for master swordsmen and nobles in Akihaasha, a country to the Far South. It bears a curved, single-edged blade with a circular or squared guard and long grip to accommodate two hands.