

THE ROAD TO  
**C H I D A R R A**

KEITH B. PERRIN

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## CONTENTS

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|                        |  |     |
|------------------------|--|-----|
| One                    | Journey Through Argonia.....                     | 9   |
| Two                    | Of Hags And Bones .....                          | 18  |
| Three                  | Suffer The Little Ones.....                      | 29  |
| Four                   | Powers Of Wind, Water, And A Touch Of Eden.....  | 48  |
| Five                   | Run, Run From The Moon, Thy Enemy.....           | 71  |
| Six                    | The Fall Of Sming And The Rise Of Turnskin ..... | 95  |
| Epilogue.....          |  | 109 |
| About The Author ..... |  | 112 |

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Dedicated to my friend, my Lord and my Master,  
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griffinjengel@gmail.com



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# ONE

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## JOURNEY THROUGH ARGONIA

The night was quiet and dark on the lonely, craggy, rocked mountainside. A heavy mist and thick fog draped over the land as far as the eye could see. Even far down in the valley below the forest of Argonia, it was unusually silent.

The moon is bright and aglow but shadowed by the overcast of clouds that cloak its light. One could not see two feet in front of them with the conditions of this night. There are very few trails through Argonia and fewer still who traverse these parts. There is not a town or village for many leagues, and only a few mountain folk or woodsmen call this place home, those who are rugged and adept at dealing with the many dangers lurking there.

There was a rustling through the forest, a faint glow of light moving up a wooded path. A hooded, dark-cloaked figure, with his face covered, suddenly appeared out of the misty darkness. An old gray bag with items of some kind rested behind his back, held up by a strap upon his shoulder.

A long old wooden staff helped to guide him through the misty forest until a worn and barely legible sign appeared. It was carved in the bark of a large tree at a fork in the road and was written in a strange, unknown language. The cloaked figure looked on and began softly humming a song as the fog began to dissipate around him just

enough to see a faint blue glow from an old stone marker on the ground to his left. Taking a deep breath, he began humming again. A strong wind blew, making a long dark but clear path off the trail and through dense overgrown brush keep lighted by more glowing stones spaced far apart on the ground. Holding his lantern in front of him, he walks on until he reaches a clearing, and he sees the side of a large mountainside illuminated by moon and starlight, with a long windy stone staircase carved out of the mount and speckled with glowing stones upon the steps to light one's way.

Taking a deep breath and putting the staff in his sash, he climbed the path until he reached a hidden crevice just large enough for a man to walk through.

The figure rested for a few seconds, picked up the lantern, and slowly walked through the dark and damp crevice. Strange markings and symbols were visible but faded on the floor and walls by the dulling light of the lantern. Deeper and deeper, he went in the mountain before coming to a room that the lantern barely illuminates. More dust and grime covered symbols, and writings are seen on the walls, with carvings of strange beasts and faces of men from long ago.

Putting the lantern up to the wall, the light reveals faded wall paintings of ancient kingdoms and battles that have now been forgotten, along with otherworldly creatures that would seem to be of one's fantasy or dreams, if not nightmare, as if to issue a warning for those who come across them. The figure wipes away dust and grime from the paintings with his hand to see a scratched, tarnished mural that showed a fierce giant battling a lone warrior and celestial beings dwelling among the stars.

The air became rank, and the figure decided to move on, looking for another path until he spied dust-covered stairs carved out of rock, spiraling upward. The lantern's flame began to flicker when he softly sang a hymn that echoed through the cavern. Suddenly ancient wall torches that used to light the way up and down the stairs in the days of old began to light up, thus paving the way for the cloaked figure to walk in light up and not darkness. Up he went until he reached the top, where the moonlight shone through the clouds and the mists began to recede. To the left was a small room carved out

of the mountainside, with a small window and rotted wood shutters that thick spider webs covered.

A small round stone table with old wooden chairs and a stone bench carved out of the mountain rock sat idly while in the corner near the window was a small fireplace with a lump of wood ash still in its pit and two fire prongs that rested on each side of the fireplace. The stranger put the lantern that flickered on the table, along with the rest of his goods, and then pulled out a small dagger from his bag. Then he walked outside to three white-barked trees with low-hanging leafy branches.

Taking the dagger, he cut down enough branches to make a soft bed. He then went over to bushes around the rocks and cut sticks and brush from them to start a fire. Walking in the room, he put the old dry wood from the chairs and the brush from the bushes into the fireplace. Then he opened a small bag on his waist and grabbed flint and steel to try to start a fire, but that didn't work, so he went inside the stairwell and grabbed one of the old torches and used it to light the fire. He gave thanks, warming his hands and face. Then he took the soft, lush leaves, made a bed out of them on the cold, damp stone floor, and fell fast asleep.

Night became morning and morning night again until after three days of sound sleep, he slowly awakened to the smell of broiled fish and hot bread wrapped in a white cloth. A flagon of milk, wine, and water each sat with the food on the stone table. Suddenly out of the corner of his eye, he saw three large ravens looking at him in the window. They quickly flew away. The cloaked figure looked at the fireplace to see it still burning strong and then slowly stood up and yawned, looking at the rotted, cobwebbed shutters lying broken on the ground.

Looking out the window, he notices two large stone figures holding staffs and wearing crowns, with both hands raised to the heavens, their bearded faces looking upward, covered in vines and vegetation. Betwixt them was a large stone altar that he did not notice in the dark. Yawning again, he slowly uncovers his head and disrobes, revealing a tall, brown-skinned, well-built form, his long black braided locks, tied in twine, reaching the center of his back.

KEITH B. PERRIN

His eyes were sullen and fierce yet full of wisdom, compassion, and purpose. Lastly, his beard was trimmed short and black.

The man took the water and washed his hands and face, then turning, he bowed his head, giving thanks for the meal and ate. When his belly was full, he gave his attention to his staff, which was lying by his sack on the floor. He held it in his hands and closed his eyes as if to sense something. Then he turned around and walked outside and was greeted by the dawn of a new day. The ground was wet for it had rained for two nights, but he had slept through the storm, warm and dry, without any sense of it. His sullen eyes beholding the rising of the golden sun, he hears in the distance the sound of rushing water.

Leaving the shelter, he walks around the mountainside on a path lined with rocks and rough foliage. There he finds a small waterfall, where the trapped clear rainwater rushed down the mountain.

The man began to undress and wash himself. He was aged, but this belied the stout and rigid frame that was of a man much younger. Scars etched deep upon his back, arms, and chest tell of past battles. While bathing himself, he began to heave deeply, and leaning against the stones, tears began to fall. They were washed away by the flowing water. He let out a wail that echoed long throughout the valley below, shaking the rocks of the mountain.

After this, he picked himself up and encouraged himself with a silent prayer and began to sing and sing and sing so loudly that the psalm overcame the heaviness within him. Then he stepped out of the cool water flow and dried himself off with a rag from his bag. Reaching for his brown tunic and pants, he washed them and let them dry on the rocks from the heat of the sun. Then he walked back and pulled out a cloak that was scarlet with silver trim and donned it until his clothes dried.

Reaching back in his sack, he pulled out a pair of leather boots that seemed to have special meaning to him, like the scarlet cloak, and wore them.

After his clothes had dried, the stranger put them on and covered his head with a long tasseled cloth. Kneeling down by the large rock altar, he spoke words deep within and would not look up.

THE ROAD TO CHIDARRA

Shaking and alone, the mysterious man started to utter deep groans, as if in travail or some distress.

Then in the warmth of the noonday, a cloud slowly came from the east against the wind. It overtook and surrounded him, and he began to see a vision. He saw lands, kingdoms, and peoples of various tribes toward the west, beyond these mountains and dark forests, bent on decay and driven to madness. The people seemed filled with terror and under cruel bondage. Then he hears a voice uttering dark sentences, but suddenly the vision stops. The cloud remains surrounding him so that half of the side of the mountain was hidden beneath it. Soft flashes of lightning without thunder flicker within the cloud as it darkens and becomes thicker in stark contrast to the blue skies and sunny day far above, illuminating the lands.

"Master," the stranger prays, "though strong in mind and body, I am worn beyond all measure in spirit. This journey has been long and hard, and I have not traveled here in many moons. The kingdom of Irvihiland and its outposts are long gone. Only Edeicia, this deserted temple of the mountain prophets of old, remains. And it brings deep sadness within me."

Then a voice responds, "That is not the only reason you feel sorrow. Go to the lands and peoples I will lead you to, for many of their cries reach my throne. Darkness has ruled these lands and the people there, but it is my wish to see them free and to know my name."

At this, the voice stopped and departed from his presence, along with the thick cloud, revealing the radiance of the sun.

Then the man walks over to the room and cleans it up, honoring those who once dwelled there. Looking around, he grabs his belongings and begins to walk down the long spiral stairwell. This was a dreary and lonely place, a long-forgotten relic of the past with dirt- and mire-covered steps. Large cobwebs and spiders move above, and he feels a strange wind pass by him. Eerie growls sound from below.

The old torches begin to weaken and flutter. The cloaked figure was reaching into his sack for the lantern when the torches flickered out. He grabs for his staff, and it begins to shine, changing into a

glowing sword that hums a faint song. Its light blazes a path so he can see.

His heart beating fast, he stands deathly still. He points the sword down so he can spy the winding staircase below.

A snarling creature of darkness, dreadful and terrible to behold, lurched up from the depths. Its eyes are large and black, and it is hairless, with greenish pale skin. A foul odor reeks from the beast, and it begins to howl and wail aloud. It was bred to see in the darkness, and the teeth that protrude grotesquely from its mouth chatter together, foam and blood oozing out, awaiting the taste of human flesh.

Suddenly the man is grabbed from behind by another beast the same as the first, and a mighty struggle ensues. The creature from behind him opens its mouth to bite him, but his sack keeps it at bay, and he grabs it by the throat and throws it at the first, making both of them tumble down the stairwell. However, the beasts have the advantage, for darkness is their friend.

As he hurries down the stairs, the light of his sword shows the true nature of the danger about him, for this place is full of flesh-eating creatures desiring to tear him apart. High-pitched howls and shrieks are heard throughout the chamber now, and he realizes if he is to survive, he must act quickly. The warrior's sword begins to crackle, and lightning bursts forth, burning the ravenous hordes beneath him and hurling them back.

Then he turns it above him to disperse the creatures, who cry aloud in pain. Again, he points the sword downward to see the distance and runs swiftly to the ground, where the hunched-over beings await him on the walls, ceilings, and floor. As he lands, they surround him, awaiting to feed with clawed hands open.

He cries out, "Tempest sing!"

Then Tempest, the great battle sword, bane of evil and the crack of doom, sings a loud hum as it leaves his hands and begins to swirl around and around, reaching great speeds, cutting in twain many of the creatures, leaving bloody half corpses and burnt bodies in its wake. Those left are blinded by the light Tempest shines on them, and they scurry off, howling into the darkness.

All becomes silent and still. The smell is nauseating, but at that moment, it matters not to him. He is back where he began, at the entrance of the stairwell where the old paintings and ancient artifacts lay coated in dust. The light of Tempest makes it easy for him to see what he missed earlier—bones of men long dead, ripped and torn books laden with dust, dried blood, and cobwebs. Around the corner was the great temple hall where holy worship was offered, but he feared to enter to see the condition of it.

On each side were long hallways and rooms carved out of the mountain that the sword's light barely revealed, but it was the old iron doorway at the base of the winding stairs that caught his attention. Slowly and carefully, he opens the creaky door to find many ancient tools instruments of worship and weapons encased in crystal. They were special and not to be handled lightly, needing to be encased so as to not enter the wrong hands. The warrior lays his hand upon the crystal and silently utters a prayer when it dissolves. Hearing more wails, he realizes he must hurry and grabs a shield, bow, harp, cloak, an ax, and a flute.

He sees a gold-colored bag hanging on the wall, and he puts the items in it, but strangely, the bag felt light, as if holding very little. After leaving the room, the crystal reappears and encases it once again. The brown-skinned warrior drapes the bag behind him and slowly walks to the great hall. It is cold and dark, and the stink is strong. Cautiously he enters, tossing Tempest in to float and light the way so he can see clearly. Tempest hums once again, shining very brightly. He can see a room with large pillars laced with gold, ivory, and silver and beautiful art that have become worn stripped and broken down. Claw marks are etched deep upon the pillars walls and armor of ancient guardians. A large crater rests in the floor, with eerie wails sounding forth from it. Desecrated, chewed-upon skeletal remains are sprawled everywhere. Destroyed tables chairs and temple artifacts made of precious ores and jewels lay melted and burned. A desperate battle had raged here. Then the altar shone far in the front of the sanctuary with a replica of the great Ark of the Covenant. Overhead the sanctuary hung large black leathery sacks, dangling



high in the ceiling and rafters. Evil reptiles and things unseemly slithered around, unfazed by his presence.

The place was charred with fire and ash, but he kept looking at the Ark.

"This shouldn't be," he said, fearing the state of the enigmatic Ark.

He walks over the bones of friend and foe alike as Tempest floats on ahead. It begins to shine brighter when he sees the true horror that has taken place. The black sacks are not sacks at all but immense, leathery bat-like creatures with dreadful red eyes, sharp fangs, and long thick barbed tails that begin to slowly stir and awaken. He then sees the Ark begin to move and shake and slowly open. A thick green smoke arose from it. Suddenly a tall, gaunt, powerful being from the nether realm that slept in the Ark to mock God and the memory of all that was once holy there took form. It was veiled in darkness and covered in smoke that hid its form from view. Only its shimmering yellow eyes could be seen through the smoke and the jewel-crested crown of flame and ash that rested upon its head.

Angered by what he saw, the warrior shouted, "Blasphemy!"

Then the hellish creature points its long, gangly, gnarled finger, speaking in a mocking whisper, "You are of the order of the ancient warrior prophets, are you not?"

The man says nothing as astonishment and rage grips his soul.

"You are the first to enter here since the ruin of this temple centuries ago. You should have seen the slaughter, the pain and agony on their faces when they called upon their deity for aid and none came. The looks of despair and cries of abandon were music to our ears. Oh, they put up a good fight, just not good enough, as you can see."

Then the creature floods the prophet's mind with images of what happened to those long dead—sights of blood and bones bathing the walls and floors throughout, burnings and tortures and the desecration of the holy temple and its sacred books and beautiful art, the large golden menorah that would no longer hold its light melted and spoiled. Not one soul was spared as legions of evil brought this place low.

The mountain shakes with loud heavy footsteps, and a roar of something large approaches from below, led by thick black smoke

and dust spewing from the pit. The prophet backs slowly, saying nothing as Tempest hovers between him and the creature standing upon the altar next to the ark. Tempest points its blade at the monster and lets out a flash of light as if angered by its taunts. "At least your blade has courage enough. I'd depart while I could."

"Come to me, Tempest." He beckons, and the sword floats back in front of its master, leading him out of the great hall and finally out of the lonely cavern. He left the dark creature that was mocking, cursing, and laughing at him while the mountain shook with roars of rage from whatever approached from the depths. Saying nothing, he ties the golden sack up and carries it down the long narrow path of smooth steps with peppered glowing stones concealed by the light of the sun, Tempest floating by his side.

His heart heavy, tears flowing from his eyes from the words spoken by the creature that dwells in the great hall where it ought not to, he reaches the ground and in somber thought, looks back up at the windy stairs to the mountain entrance, grinding his teeth, anger upon his face. However, he knows he is needed elsewhere, and vengeance upon that foul creature and his minions must wait for another day so the gleaming blade transforms back into the wooden staff in the hand of the prophet. He looks at the rays of the sun shining through the leaves of the trees. Covering his head, he begins anew his journey back through the path from whence he came.

As soon as he reached the fork in the road where the ancient glowing marker had been, the path was again concealed by trees, thick underbrush, and thorns with thistles that quickly regrew, making it undetectable and once again forgotten by nigh all, veiled in the mists of time.