

Cresthaven: The Shattered Path:

Chapter One

written by A J | April 11, 2025

Crossing the Threshold

The Crossroads

It began not in the village square beneath the flickering lanterns of Cresthaven, but days earlier—at the crossroads west of the Ironspine Range, where ancient pines leaned close as if to eavesdrop on destiny. The forest stood sentinel here, as it had for a thousand years, its dark boughs heavy with secrets whispered only to the wind.

The morning mist still clung to the earth like a forgotten memory when Kaelen Stormchaser crested the ridge, boots crunching against frost-kissed gravel. His breath clouded in the chill air, the weight of his greataxe familiar against his back. The weapon was a family heirloom, its handle worn smooth by generations of Stormchasers who had carried it before him, its blade etched with runes that seemed to shimmer in the half-light like living things. Though it weighed as much as a small child, Kaelen carried it with the ease of one born to bear such burdens.

Behind him, Aelinthir walked silently, her pale cloak trailing like mist on the wind, her gaze distant—turned inward, as it often was when dreams still lingered. The elven sorceress moved with the quiet grace of her kind, each step deliberate yet light enough to leave no impression on the soft earth. The morning light caught in her silver hair, creating a halo effect that only enhanced her otherworldly appearance.

“The dreams grow stronger,” she murmured, more to herself than to her companion. “Each night, they pull me deeper.”

Kaelen grunted in acknowledgment. He was not one for many words, particularly in the morning hours, but he had noticed the dark circles beneath Aelinthir’s eyes growing more pronounced with each passing day. Whatever visions haunted her sleep were taking their toll.

The road ahead forked in three directions—north to the broken Watchtowers where the ancient order of the Shield Wardens had once kept vigil against the terrors of the Blighted Lands, east toward the Trade Spine that connected the merchant kingdoms, and south, into the valley’s cradle and the village nestled there: Cresthaven. At the center of the fork stood a weathered signpost leaning slightly, as though the years had tired it. The carved names of forgotten towns had worn smooth, but on the lowest plank, recently scratched in with a blade or claw, a single word remained legible:

“Cresthaven.”

Kaelen tilted his head, storm-gray eyes scanning the treeline. His hand drifted to the hilt of the dagger at his hip. "We're not alone."

"Something watches," Aelinthir agreed, placing a hand upon the crystal orb affixed to her belt. It pulsed with a faint blue light at her touch, responding to her magic. "Not with malice, but... curiosity. Caution."

A rustle in the brush to their left preceded the sudden appearance of a shape—small, swift, and low to the ground. In a blur of motion, a cloaked figure leapt from the foliage, landed on the signpost with feline grace, and crouched, twin blades in her hands and eyes gleaming amber in the morning light.

Thimara Quickpaws blinked slowly, tail flicking behind her. Her fur was the color of burnished copper, though patches of it had been dyed with intricate patterns in indigo and gold. Small gold rings adorned her pointed ears, and a necklace of tiny bones and feathers hung around her neck. "You're late," she said, her voice a purr that barely disguised the steel beneath.

Kaelen arched a brow. "We weren't expected."

She grinned, sharp teeth flashing. "You're not from around here, so I'll forgive the poor sense of drama." Her daggers disappeared into the folds of her cloak with practiced ease. "But when the stars themselves arrange a meeting, punctuality is the least one can offer."

Aelinthir stepped forward, tilting her head slightly. Her pale eyes, the color of winter skies, fixed on the Catfolk with sudden intensity. "You've dreamed it too, haven't you?"

Thimara's grin faded, and something flickered behind her eyes—recognition, and perhaps a touch of fear. "A path made of shattered crystal. A village lost to time. A man with no face who stands in the grave of the gods."

"I thought it madness," Aelinthir whispered, her fingers tightening around her crystal focus. "But every night, the same."

The Catfolk dropped from the signpost with the effortless motion of one who trusts every sinew in their body. She landed soundlessly, her tail swishing once for balance. "I came from the Hollow, beyond the Whisperwood. When the trees started whispering things I understood... I knew it was time to leave. I followed the raven."

Kaelen frowned, lines deepening on his weathered face. "A raven?"

"Black as pitch, with eyes like stars," she said, gesturing toward the sky with one clawed hand. "It led me here. Then vanished. Just like in the dream."

Before any of them could answer, a steady, measured footfall echoed from the path behind them, accompanied by the clink of armor and the rhythmic creak of leather straps. A squat, broad figure approached, smoke curling from the pipe at the corner of his mouth. His beard bristled with metal beads and

runestones that clicked softly as he walked, and his warhammer gleamed as though freshly polished despite the mud on his boots.

Durim Emberstone gave a grunt of acknowledgment and spat into the grass. The dwarf stood no higher than Kaelen's chest, but his presence filled the clearing like a boulder. Around his neck hung a heavy medallion bearing the symbol of the Mountain's Heart—the divine forge from which his god, Moradin, had shaped the first dwarves. The runes on his armor were ancient—dwarven script that predated the Sundering Wars. "This the path to Cresthaven?" he asked, his voice gravelly as stones tumbling down a mountainside.

"That depends," Kaelen said, studying the newcomer with cautious respect. "Who's asking?"

Durim came to a halt, letting the weight of his gaze settle on each of them in turn. His eyes were the deep amber of forge-fire, and they missed nothing. "Someone who's had the same damned dream for two weeks straight. Someone whose ancestors spoke to him from the mountain's bones and said: 'Go east.'" He tapped his pipe against his boot, dislodging ash. "I do not care for riddles. Or companions. But when the dead start calling out your name in your sleep, it's wise to listen."

A silence fell then, heavy and not unfriendly. Around them, the forest seemed to hold its breath. The wind died, and even the birds ceased their morning chorus, as if nature itself awaited their decision.

And then, as if to answer their unspoken agreement, the raven returned. It landed on the signpost again, cocked its head, and let out a low, warbling caw that seemed to echo longer than natural sound should. In its beak it held a withered flower—pale, translucent, and not of any kind that grew in these lands. It resembled a lily, but its petals were crystalline, as though carved from ice or glass.

The bird dropped the bloom. It drifted to the ground and crumbled into dust that glittered briefly before fading into the earth.

Without a word, the four turned and began down the southern path, the road that twisted toward the mountains and the secret heart of Cresthaven. None acknowledged the pact they had just silently formed, but all felt it—a binding as tangible as chain, as inescapable as fate.

The Village

They had followed the raven's path, each step guided by visions and instinct, until the forest gave way to open sky. The rugged hills of the Ironspine Range rolled away behind them, and before them lay a patchwork of cultivated fields—small, scattered, but neatly kept. Here and there, a plow rested beside the furrowed earth, or a scarecrow stood sentinel over sprouting rows of barley and turnips.

"Farmland," Durim said with distaste, as though the very concept offended him. "Give me stone and iron any day over things that grow and die with the

seasons.”

“All things grow and die, Master Dwarf,” Aelinthir replied softly. “Even mountains, though their seasons span millennia rather than months.”

Durim harrumphed but did not argue further. The journey had been long, and debates on the nature of permanence could wait.

Beyond the fields, the village of Cresthaven waited. It nestled in the valley like a child in a protective embrace, surrounded by sloping hills and backed against the first steep rise of the mountains proper.

It looked, at first glance, unremarkable. Modest wooden homes lined narrow, hard-packed roads. Stone chimneys puffed thin columns of smoke, and the sturdy brown walls of the buildings bore the scars of wind and time. Yet there was a comfort to it—a sense of quiet perseverance, like a candle still burning in a world turned dark.

Thimara’s nose twitched. “Something smells... wrong,” she murmured, her tail lashing once, twice. “Beneath the wood smoke and fresh bread. Something sour.”

Kaelen nodded, his hand once again finding the hilt of his dagger. “I feel it too. A heaviness in the air.”

As the four travelers approached, a tall, broad-shouldered man in a green tunic and straw hat stepped out from beside a low stone fence and raised a hand in greeting. His beard was thick, his smile broad, and his brown eyes twinkled with practiced warmth. A leather satchel hung at his side, and a small silver badge pinned to his chest caught the light.

“Welcome, welcome, travelers!” he called, striding forward with open arms. “I am Jonas, the official greeter of Cresthaven. It’s my job to give you a warm welcome and help you get settled in.” His gaze swept over them, cataloging their weapons, their strange grouping, the wary set of their stance.

The group slowed, exchanging wary glances. Something about Jonas’s enthusiasm felt forced, like a mask worn too long and beginning to slip. Durim’s eyes narrowed, but he kept his peace.

Jonas, undeterred, continued cheerfully. “Now, before you go exploring, I should let you know that we take our laws very seriously here in Cresthaven. Our Lord Bakkus doesn’t take kindly to troublemakers or thieves, so be sure to keep your noses clean.” His eyes lingered on Thimara as he said this, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his features before the smile reasserted itself. “And if you need help or have questions, don’t hesitate to ask me or any of the other villagers.”

“Lord Bakkus?” Aelinthir inquired, her voice soft but penetrating. “I was not aware this region had sworn fealty to any lord.”

Jonas’s smile tightened just a fraction. “Oh, he’s been our protector for many years now. Keeps the bandits away, ensures the harvest is bountiful.

We're quite fortunate."

"I'm sure," Kaelen murmured, his tone making it clear he was anything but convinced.

Jonas gestured toward the village proper, where chimneys smoked and distant laughter echoed from behind shuttered windows. "If you're looking for a good meal, I recommend the Cross Arms Tavern and Inn. Mistress Elara makes a venison stew that would make a king weep. And if you're in need of supplies, Mitchell and Son is the place to go. Adventuring types? You'll want to speak to Sir Wolfsbain at the guild. Just... be careful. It's a dangerous world out there."

"That it is," Durim agreed, his hand unconsciously touching the holy symbol at his chest. "Full of dangers both seen and unseen."

Before Jonas could reply, the mood shifted.

A single scream cleaved the afternoon like a sword.

It came from the center of town, near the Cross Arms Inn—a woman's scream, high and raw, the kind that leaves the throat bloody. It was followed by the crash of breaking glass and the sound of wood splintering.

Jonas froze, his genial smile dropping away like a mask. The blood drained from his face, leaving him ashen. "What in the—?"

Then they saw her.

A young woman, no more than twenty winters, staggered from the inn's doorway, one hand clutching her shoulder, her blue dress torn and stained with greenish light that pulsed like a heartbeat. Her hair streamed behind her like a banner, midnight black against the paleness of her skin, and her eyes were wide with terror.

"Help me!" she cried, her voice cracking with desperation. "Please—help! He's—he's come back!"

Behind her, a shape stepped out of the inn's shadows—a man of middle years, dressed in fine but dirt-matted burial clothes. His skin sagged in pallid folds, drawn tight across sharp bone, and his eyes glowed an icy blue, bright and cruel in the growing dusk. Where his fingers should have ended in nails, long, bony protrusions extended like claws, dripping with a viscous fluid that smoked where it touched the ground.

A gasp escaped Jonas's lips. His hands began to tremble, and he took an involuntary step backward. "Gods preserve us... that's Elara's father. He died last month. We buried him. We buried him!"

The figure lurched forward, mouth opening in a silent moan, fingers flexing as if yearning to grasp, to tear. A green light pulsed in its chest, visible through the tattered fabric of its burial shirt—a light that matched the stain on Elara's dress.

Around them, the village seemed to hold its breath for one terrible moment—and then chaos erupted. Not outward, but inward. Windows slammed shut. Doors banged closed. The sound of bars dropping into place echoed across the previously peaceful square. Where moments before there had been the distant sounds of village life—laughter, conversation, the clatter of work—now there was only silence, broken by the shuffling footsteps of the walking corpse.

The villagers knew what to do. They had seen this before, or at least, they knew enough to fear it. Hide. Lock the doors. Hope the horror passes you by.

Kaelen stepped in front of the group without a word. His greataxe slid from his shoulder with the groan of steel and leather, and the runes along its edge flared faintly as though they, too, sensed the dead walking. The weapon seemed almost eager in his hands, a living thing awakening to its purpose.

Aelinthir's voice was low, nearly a chant. Her hands moved in complex patterns, leaving trails of silvery light in the air. "Necromancy. This stinks of old magic—old and rotten. The kind that breaks the barriers between life and death."

Thimara slid into the shadows without hesitation, knives appearing in her hands like extensions of her will. "I've seen this before," she hissed. "In the Hollow. When the winter came early and the hungry season stretched too long. The desperate turn to darker powers."

Durim's face darkened with righteous anger. The dwarven cleric reached for the holy symbol hanging at his chest—an ornate hammer-and-anvil pendant cast in silver and gold. "An abomination," he growled, his voice deeper now, resonating with divine authority. "The soul has departed. This is but a shell, animated by unholy power."

Elara collapsed near Jonas, who caught her with trembling arms. Blood seeped through her fingers where she clutched her shoulder, but it was the look in her eyes that spoke of the deeper wound—the horror of seeing a loved one returned not as themselves, but as a mockery of life. "He's come back," she sobbed, her words tumbling out in panicked bursts. "Father... but not Father. The man with the book. The one who came last month—he did this."

Kaelen looked to the others, eyes like thunderclouds. In that moment, they were not strangers brought together by dreams and ravens, but comrades bound by purpose. "We end this here. Before it can go any further."

The corpse lunged forward with unexpected speed, claws raking the air where Kaelen's face had been a heartbeat before. The warrior stepped back, pivoting smoothly to bring his greataxe around in a whistling arc. The blade connected with the undead's shoulder, biting deep—but instead of blood, a viscous green fluid sprayed from the wound, and the creature didn't so much as flinch.

"Steel alone won't fell this abomination," Durim shouted, moving to the center of the square. "Stand back!"

The corpse's head snapped around at the sound of Durim's voice, its jaw unhinging like a snake's to reveal rows of needle-like teeth that had not

been there in life. It let out a gurgling hiss and charged the dwarf with unnatural speed.

Durim did not retreat. He stood his ground, feet planted firmly on the earth as if drawing strength from the stone beneath. With one hand, he raised his holy symbol high; with the other, he gripped his warhammer. The medallion began to glow with a warm, golden light that grew in intensity with each passing second.

"By the hands of Puh-Tah, Divine Architect and Maker of All Things Worthy—return to dust, for you defy the sacred design!" Durim's voice rang out like a hammer striking stone, each word echoing with righteous purpose. "There is no place for corruption in the artistry of life!"

The light from his holy symbol flared like the sun breaking through storm clouds. It washed over the village square in a wave of radiance that seemed to cleanse the very air. When it touched the undead creature, the corpse let out a keening wail—the first sound it had made since its appearance.

The unholy blue light in its eyes flickered, dimmed. The green glow in its chest pulsed erratically, like a heart failing. The creature staggered, its movements becoming jerky and uncoordinated.

"By the Forge that shaped us all," Durim continued, his voice building with the cadence of ancient liturgy, "by the Flame that purifies, by the Hammer that creates and destroys—I break the bonds that bind this shell to unlife!"

The corpse convulsed. Its claws raked at its own chest, tearing at the burial clothes to expose the source of the green light—a small, crystalline shard embedded in dead flesh, pulsing with sickly radiance.

Thimara darted forward, quick as thought. "There!" she called. "The anchor!"

Kaelen moved in concert with her, his greataxe raised. "Hold it, Durim!"

The dwarf's eyes blazed with inner fire as he channeled the power of his deity. Sweat streamed down his brow, dampening his beard, but he did not falter. The golden light from his holy symbol intensified, holding the creature in place as if bound by chains of radiance.

"Now!" Durim commanded.

Kaelen's axe swept down in a precise strike, not at the creature itself, but at the glowing shard in its chest. The blade connected with the crystal, and there was a sound like breaking glass magnified a hundredfold. Green light exploded outward, momentarily blinding them all—and then was gone.

When their vision cleared, the corpse lay motionless on the ground. No unnatural light animated its eyes, no unholy power moved its limbs. It was once more merely a body—a shell without the spark of life or the taint of corruption.

Durim lowered his holy symbol, his shoulders sagging slightly with the effort

of channeling such power. "May your soul find peace in the halls of your ancestors," he murmured, not unkindly, to the fallen body. "And may the earth receive what was always hers to claim."

Silence fell across the village square, broken only by the heavy breathing of the four companions. Kaelen lowered his greataxe, its edge still smoking faintly from contact with the necromantic energy. Thimara wiped her blades on her cloak, her amber eyes studying the now-still corpse with wary respect. And Aelinthir stood very still, her attention focused on something in the distance, as if listening to voices only she could hear.

"What manner of evil is this?" Jonas whispered, still cradling the sobbing Elara. "What has come to our village?"

Kaelen knelt beside the now-still corpse, examining it with a warrior's practiced eye. "Not what," he said grimly. "Who. Someone called this poor soul back from beyond, bound it to their will. And I'd wager they're not done yet."

Durim tucked his holy symbol back into his tunic, though he kept one hand resting on it. "Necromancy," he spat the word like a curse. "Blasphemy against the natural order. A perversion of the cycle of life and death."

"The binding was powerful," Aelinthir added softly. "Ancient. Not the work of some hedge-witch dabbling in forbidden arts."

Thimara crouched beside Elara, her amber eyes full of questions. "You mentioned a man with a book. Who was he?"

But before the young woman could answer, the sound of slow, deliberate applause echoed across the square. All heads turned toward the sound.

At the far end of the village, silhouetted against the setting sun, stood a tall figure in a hooded cloak. Though they could not see its face, they could feel its gaze upon them—measuring, calculating.

Then, without a word, it turned and vanished into the lengthening shadows.

The battle was won, but their quest, they all knew, had only just begun.

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