

*DUTY of GUARDIANS*  
*Earth's Bane*

**CHAPTER 1**  
**A Fistful of Darkness**

**WHERE** the slanting sunlight touched his flanks, the dainty feline's fur shone like antique gold. Faint rosettes of a darker hue spotted his sides. His face, dominated by twin emerald eyes, was an exquisite golden mask topped by large triangular ears tipped with long white tufts of fine hair. The creature crouched at the opening to a small cave beside a shallow pool of clear water, his eyes fixed upon an untidy bundle on the shadowed sand of the cave's floor. From his throat, a small plaintive mewl issued! The bundle moved slightly and sunlight reflected from the pale face of a child. A face which seemed to mirror that of the cat in its fine boned delicacy and too large eyes. Green eyes met green eyes exchanging special secrets that only eyes could know.

'Hello Kitty-cat.' The child spoke softly in a voice rusty from lack of use. 'Where did you come from, little pretty?'

The cat glided to the child. Pressing his head against her cheek he said, 'I have been looking for you everywhere!' The child flinched from the contact, struggling to sit in the confined space. Beneath the dirt and the bloody gouges her body was that of a fragile girl-child a step away from puberty. Hugging her knees, she stared at the little cat who, with his tail wrapped neatly around his forefeet, stared back in silent communication. With cat patience he waited until finally she stretched out her hand to softly stroke his face.

‘I must be hallucinating.’ Her voice was still soft and sweetly musical although more confident. ‘I thought you spoke; but that’s silly . . . cats don’t speak, even beautiful little darlings like you. However, I’m so glad of your company pretty kitty. I just wish you had brought some clothes and food from wherever you came. I’m very hungry and very, very cold.’

The cat pressed against her again. ‘Cats can too speak!’ He declared indignantly. ‘Well, we can communicate quite well once we have Become; until then I need to touch you before you are able to understand me.’

‘Now I know I am hallucinating. Maybe I’m dying and you have been sent by The Mother to keep me company in my passing.’

The cat jumped lightly to her shoulder and pressed a claw into her skin. ‘Does that feel real?’ He demanded.

The girl flinched again before wonder dawned in her eyes. ‘You are Cat’alyst, like my mama’s Cous!’

‘That I am, my Princess. Your Cat’alyst.’ The little creature responded, sheathing his sharp little claws.

‘No, not mine! I am not like my mama. Who sent you?’ She demanded, her voice shrill with anxiety.

‘Well, The Mother would not send a cat for your passing. She would send a Fisher. Nobody sent me. You called me and I am here, and now we must go. The bad things are getting closer. I have called Thorn, but until he finds us we must keep moving.’

The girl scrambled from the cave, the little cat somehow keeping his precarious perch on her shoulder. Her bare feet were a bloody pulp and across her chest a long gash oozed blood. She stumbled tearing open her hand on a sharp rock as she tried to save herself. Her eyes, searching the surrounding terrain, were glazed with abject horror. ‘The Darks are here?’ She whispered fearfully ‘I have to go! I must run! They must not find me!’

‘Hush. They are some way off as yet. Be calm!’ Commanded the cat. ‘First, you must wash off all the blood. They can scent you on the air. Get into the water heart of my heart. Wash yourself!’

The girl stumbled to comply, automatically obeying the firm direction. She flung herself into the water, almost taking the cat with her. He prowled the water’s edge anxiously while she scoured her skin with sand. When eventually she stood and moved towards the bank the cat leapt once more onto her shoulder. ‘Stay in the water. Move downstream quickly now. Perhaps we can lose them.’ He directed.

‘Clever cat’ she whispered, holding the little creature to prevent him from falling as she moved swiftly down the shallow waterway. Any noise made by her passage through the water was masked by the sound of the water itself, and she ran slightly bent placing her outline below the banks of the stream.

Her steady lope ate up the distance but gave no respite to her poor tattered feet. She ran until she fell, gasping for breath, dumping herself and her companion into a shallow pool.

‘Sorry!’ She gasped, scooping the bedraggled feline from the water. ‘I do not think I can go on for much longer.’

‘Only a little further. There are herdbeasts ahead.’ Her companion offered.

‘Herdbeasts? How can they help?’ She asked with doubt evident in her voice.

‘They will screen us. Their scent is strong. They have young and will be very protective, and The Darks may not risk their anger.’

The girl spluttered as she regained her feet. ‘So you think they will not be a threat to us, little cat? Do you think us invisible then; or will they simply invite us into the herd in mistake for one of their own?’

She continued to move downstream, but more slowly now as the thought of running headlong into a gathering of angry mother herdbeasts added to her fears.

‘They will protect us!’ The little cat assured. ‘Stop here and wait!’ The girl stopped, and as her breathing steadied she could feel a vibration through her feet. The ground trembled with the weight of a vast herd of gigantic quadrupeds moving swiftly to intercept them at the stream. As the herd neared the water they slowed, milling around the refugees until the stream and its banks for a great distance in each direction was awash with the immense grey bodies of the beasts. She stood rigidly, hardly daring to breathe, as a battle-scarred old cow blew gently on her face. The beast stood over two metres to her shoulder, her sturdy body covered in a pelt of soft hair two hand-spans in length. The shorter hair on her legs and face was nearly white. Her eyes were as large as the girl’s hand. Again the cow snorted softly, nearly blowing the cat from his perch. She took a pace away, then turned her head back as though bidding the girl to follow.

‘Stay with her.’ Said the cat. ‘She is the Matriarch. The herd will take us towards Thorn.’

The girl stepped into the shadow of the herd’s leader and the entire herd moved slowly away from the stream. As they moved, grazing across the flats, many calves worked their way into the centre of the vast mass. Without jostling each other or the girl, they seemed to take turns in approaching her, a brave few reaching out with soft nose to sniff and gently touch her. She reached up in wonder and placed her hand on the shoulder of one of the smaller calves and was rewarded with an encouraging croon from the matriarch and a gently nudge from the calf. She giggled and hugged the baby, which stood as tall as herself.

‘I don’t understand any of this.’ The girl spoke quietly, afraid of startling the calves. ‘It is as if they knew we needed help and

came to rescue us; but herdbeasts are just animals. How could they know?’

‘Well, for a start, it’s a good thing they cannot understand your speech, for they would be very offended to be thought of as *just animals*. Like all creatures created by The Mother, they are caring and thoughtful of all with whom they share the earth. They understand much and will do anything to thwart the minions of The Dark One.’

‘But they were bred as meat animals.’ The girl protested. ‘How can we eat them if they are our allies against Bane?’

‘In the same way that the herdbeasts eat grass. That is the purpose of grass, and the purpose of the herdbeasts is as food for the people. They know their purpose and are not distressed, for to them it is only natural. The herds are culled sensibly, their sick are tended by the beastmasters and the ones who are chosen are given a swift and humane death. It is the way of The Mother. One is born, one serves one’s purpose and one dies; or in the case of the herdbeasts, one dies and *then* one serves one’s purpose.’

It was the longest speech the little feline had made, and left the girl deep in thought for some time as she limped in the shadow of the matriarch. While they moved slowly with the grazing herd, the Cat’alyst studied the small girl whom he had traversed half a continent to meet. Delicate and graceful, not really a child but not yet a woman, her skin was unnaturally pale where the sun had not seared it to angry redness. Her hair, a tangled mass of curls framing her delicate features, spilled like liquid amber shot through with strands of gold around her nakedness. Impatiently she pushed it back and away from her face with a practiced flick of her hand. The cat was enchanted by her dainty beauty. He sprang once more to her shoulder.

‘There is so much I don’t understand, little cat. So much I need to know. These beasts are a wonder, but you are an amazement. Who are you? Where did you come from and why?’

Who is this Thorn we go to meet? ..... And are the berries on that little bush ahead fit to eat ..... if I don't eat soon I will fade away from hunger!

'The last shall be first, my princess,' intoned the little creature pompously. 'You may not eat the berries ..... but wait and I will provide.' So saying, he dropped lightly to the ground. With nose scant distance above the soil, he trotted this way and that between the cloven hoofs of the herdbeasts. When he stopped suddenly and began to scratch at the ground, the herdbeasts made a clear path between the companions through which to girl stumbled. She dropped to her knees and scraped away the earth.

'For what are we digging, oh great provider?' She asked, her eyes twinkling with humour. Her fingers touched something crisp and warm. She carefully dug around it, exposing an object the size of a small bowl. As she lifted it, the cat resumed its place on her shoulder.

'It is a pie fungus. Perfectly good to eat and quite tasty. Go on Princess, tuck-in.' He suggested. She bit through the crisp skin of the fungus and her mouth filled with a rich creamy sauce.

'Gosh!' She exclaimed, juice running down her chin. 'It's wonderful! It tastes like heaven and it's lovely and warm.' She arose at an impatient snort from the matriarch, whose vast bulk overshadowed her. 'Sorry Mother Herdbeast!' She mumbled around a fresh mouthful of the savoury fungus as she clambered to her feet, 'I can eat and walk as you do, Old Mother, if you will just lead on.' As if she had understood the words, the beast swayed into movement, snatching a swath of lush grass as she went.

'And now for the balance of your interrogations. Who I am is Paxotamil. What I am is Cat'alyst to Makkhailla the Magician and I came from a far place because I was called to attend the Becoming. Thorn is Fisher who comes to take us to a place of safety. Does this clarify your position?'

‘Paxot..... Pax ..... yes, Pax will do, since the rest seems too much for so small a creature. I am not much wiser I fear. I am called Makkhailla, but I am truly no magician. Your answers create more questions, the answers to which will probably create more confusion, so go slowly dear little Pax and enlighten me fully.’

‘Pax will do nicely, Makkhailla the Magician, which title you *will* acquire when we have fully Become. Becoming is the bonding of Magician and Cat’alyst to form an entity of power, my princess. Already our bond is firming. You feel, as I do, that to be parted from each other now would be less desirable than death. Is this not so?’

Without pausing to consider, the girl answered in the affirmative. She was shocked to realise that after knowing Pax for less than an hour she could not consider living without him.

‘But Pax, what ....’ Her voice was drowned by a bellow of rage from the matriarch. From throughout the herd, other beasts roared in response and suddenly the herd was milling in apparent turmoil.

Only the centre of the herd, where stood the matriarch, the calves and the companions, remained calm. Makkhailla felt a gentle nudge from the old one’s scarred head, pushing her towards the smaller babies, and as the matriarch trotted briskly towards the rim of the herd, the calves closed in around the girl and the cat. The herd ranged itself in concentric rings, babies in the middle, then larger calves, then their mothers and the heavily pregnant females. Immature bulls and unmated females formed the penultimate ring, whilst the first line of defence was made up of those mature cows that had declined to breed this season, headed by the matriarch. Makkhailla craned to see over the backs of the intervening beasts to no avail. ‘What is going on, Pax?’

‘Something threatens the herd. I think ..... Yes, it is the dark ones I sense. They are skirting the herd, probably looking for a weak point of entry.’

‘Then they have found me.’ She wilted in despair, haunted by visions of the horrors that would follow her capture. ‘Ma told me that no one escaped from there. I should have believed her.’

Pax brushed her cheek with the top of his head. ‘Do not give up yet, my princess. They may simply be hunting a meal. Even so, if they try anything, they will wish their chosen repast had been other than herdbeast. The old Mother has withstood enemies to make this mangy pack of darklings seem like kittens.’

The girl chuckled weakly, but still she trembled in fear while the Matriarch bellowed in defiance of the hunters, as she paced to keep abreast of the circling band. Had Makkhailla been able to see past the barricade of beasts, her eyes would still have been troubled by their disability to fully perceive the enemy. They numbered six or seven ..... or possibly eight ..... so difficult were they to focus on. They were man-shaped, mostly running erect, but occasionally appearing to drop to four legs to lope like dogs. Their bodies were obscure, as though covered by a filmy grey fabric, and at times shrubs and rocks appeared to be briefly visible through them. They ran in a pack, twisting and bending about each other and as silent as the mist they resembled.

The pack veered closer and split. One group rushed toward the Matriarch whilst singly the remainder tried to breach the wall of herdbeasts. These were driven back time and again, but those harassing the old mother were slowly drawing her from the herd. They lunged and retreated, dodging her lashing hooves and slashing horns whilst their claws left weeping red slashes on her hide. Unable to attack through her thick pelt, they concentrated on her head and legs, and where their fangs connected, the punctures smoked and bubbled. Suddenly, four old cows broke from the herd and raced to her aid, whilst the young bulls surged forward to fill the gap. The old mother, quick to take advantage of the distraction, skewered a darkling on her horn and rammed it against the earth.

Her bellow of triumph as she tossed the grisly trophy high,  
was answered by a mighty roar.

The wraiths stopped as one entity .....faded ..... And were  
gone