

FIRST HERO

*The man turns and shouts back to my Chosen Rider.
“Get away! Hide! Find your mother. . . .”*

*Derthsin’s hand creeps to a sheath on his belt. He draws
out a long dagger.*

I struggle to get up.

*In two long strides Derthsin closes on the man. Moon-
light flashes on steel. The man groans as the blade slides
between his ribs. The thresher hits the ground.*

*Someone else approaches, stumbling down the road
from Forton. A woman, crying in anguish. She bends over
the stricken villager, cradling his head in her arms. A band
of jeering soldiers follows in her wake.*

*“Put her in the cart with the rest,” Derthsin orders. The
soldiers drag the screaming woman back to the village.*

*Derthsin picks up my Chosen Rider by his collar
and stares into his eyes. The boy struggles, legs and fists
flailing.*

*“I sense strength in your soul,” Derthsin growls. “But
death is stronger than you.” He raises his knife, pointing it
at the boy’s heart.*

*I turn my feathers the color of coal and silently take to
the air. I circle once and swoop at the murderous warrior.*

THE CHRONICLES OF AVANTIA

The boy's mouth opens in a silent scream.

I plunge my talons into Derthsin's shoulders and lift him off the ground. He drops the boy and roars as I carry him up into the air. I feel him writhing in my grasp, but I will not let go. Not yet.

Over the forest and plains I fly. Ahead I spy the glow of my volcano. He must know now where I mean to take him, for his roars become screams. Over the crater, the heat blasts us. In the depths, the pool of molten rock bubbles.

"You'll pay for this!" Derthsin roars.

With a victorious screech, I let him go. His hand grips one of my feathers, but I twist, and the feather tears away. It doesn't slow his fall. His body tumbles and spins as he plunges through the air. The lava swallows him, cutting off his screams.

I soar back to Forton, which is still ablaze. The soldiers are scattering, searching for their leader. Dark smoke billows across the road. The boy leans over his father. The smoke sweeps past him, but he doesn't seem to notice. Beside him is the Mask of Death.