

Verse of Valor Excerpt

What they could see of the landscape had changed significantly by the time they reached the area where the Veil began to “thicken.” Instead of scrubland and wide stretches of flat, semiarid plains, this area looked more like the pictures Nolan had seen of southern Colorado—the Garden of the Gods—full of odd rock formations made out of sandstone and limestone; eroded, broken ranges; hogbacks; flatirons; alluvial fans; towering escarpments—all growing more visible as their eyes adjusted to the starlight. The flora was flush with evergreens, and the cool night air smelled of pine and cedar. Nolan was just thinking of how pretty it all looked, when something spooked his arswyd. It stopped, cocked its head toward the sky, and huffed.

“What is it, girl, uh... boy?” he muttered to the Bird, not really sure which it was.

And that’s when the first flash of lightning lit up the sky, a purple forked tongue of raw power arcing across the eastern horizon behind them. The crash of thunder followed only seconds later.

Typical, Nolan thought sourly as he turned in his saddle to see the sky behind them heaving with black thunderheads as enormous as any mountain. Flashes of white and pink exploded among the clouds like blossoms of summer fireworks. And so help him, the underbellies of the storm clouds were *green*, even in the darkness of night.

“Okay, so yeah. That sucks,” Quinn said flatly, kicking her Bird forward to line up next to Nolan’s. “We’re gonna get wet, but ya smell like yore ostrich, Nols, so it ain’t all bad news.”

“That’s the Wolf,” Nolan said out of the side of his mouth as the rangy Awakened trotted to a stop beside them.

“Storms often come out of nowhere on the plains, especially when the topography changes so drastically as you get toward the mountains,” Molo said, pointing west toward a black range that probably coincided with the Rockies on Our Side. “Cold air from the mountains slamming into warmer air off the plains. Do they have tornadoes on your Side, travelers?”

“Yes—” Stanley answered as another bolt of lightning licked across the sky and the wind picked up fiercely, much colder than it had been moments before. “And I’m sure they’re not any more fun on this Side, either. Can we find some place to get out from under this?”

“Over there,” Ysgafn said, pointing toward a treeline down an embankment about three quarters of a mile away. “That seems to be closest. Let’s hurry.”

The storm broke over their heads just as they reached the line of evergreens, drenching them in seconds. One heartbeat, just wind and thunder; and the next, a torrential flashflood that turned the dirt into lakes of mud right before their eyes. As they raced into the trees, Nolan heard Ysgafn call out, “The Veil has grown dark! We have crossed the line!” The wagon just barely fit between the tight pines, and the eight arswyd pulling it were distraught, straining against the leaders, snapping at one another.

Okay, great, so we’ve reached the funky Veil, Nolan thought, though he was more preoccupied with not getting fried by a lightning bolt or being sucked away in a twister. The storm was bad enough, but it turned truly horrific when it started to hail. Marble sized pieces of dirty ice

slammed into the ground, sending up splashes of muddy water, while all around, pine needles came down in fits and sprinkles. Thankfully, the trees broke most of the hailstorm's fury, but they were still getting whacked every few seconds, which just agitated the arswyd even more. A painful welt arose after a chunk of ice plonked onto his wrist, causing him to yelp in pain.

That's enough! he thought as he clambered off the Bird and struggled to haul it over to a branch where he could tie off the reins.

"Look!" one of the Dogs shouted, pointing off to their left where the trees rose sharply up a hill of sedimentary rock. Nolan could just make out what he was pointing at through the semi-broken sheet of rain that fell straight down through the trees.

"Looks like a cave," one of Molo's boys added. "Unhook the coach, bring the arswyd!"

It took only a few minutes to round up the Birds, though driving them up the steep, muddy embankment toward the gaping mouth of the cave was a bit more difficult. Quinn ducked in first, followed closely by Fiorlen, then Stanley, while Nolan hauled Emery up with him last, leaving the Birds to the Kúon.

Once they were all crammed inside, flashes of lightning momentarily lit up the depressing gloom surrounding them. Molo cursed that his flintwheel was too wet to get a fire going, but Sweh kept his in his watertight kurrzha pouch, and soon he had set light to a bit of canvas that had been rolled up tight under his pack and was still mostly dry. He set the burning canvas in a crumpled pile on the ground, calling out for everyone to look for dry wood.

The cave ceiling was low, but the tunnel pushed back underneath the hill a long way, leaving enough room for the four human children, six Kúon, a stooping Greenman, his daughter, a Firefly, a Will-o'-the-wisp, and eighteen reeking arswyd. Well, "enough room" might have been somewhat of an exaggeration, but beggars couldn't be choosers, and Nolan was just thankful to be out of the pounding thunderstorm and the stinging iceballs. He looked around where he stood, fruitlessly searching for something that could burn; but Fiorlen's glowing eyes proved more successful as she spotted bits of brush and pinecones, and Molo hauled the smoldering canvas over to a rough pile of bracken. The sputtering fire was smoky and stung their eyes, but with all the tightly packed bodies, a flow of warmth soon spread out over the entire group.

"We havin' fun yet?" Quinn coughed, wringing out her blonde hair.

In the dim light, counterbalanced by flashes of lightning, Ysgafn looked down at his daughter and a flicker of concern passed over his yellow eyes. Nolan got the distinct impression they were speaking to each other with their thoughts, that strange way the Treefolk seemed to be able to communicate almost telepathically. Fiorlen nodded up at her father, though she seemed more puzzled than concerned, like whatever it was she and her father were "discussing" was something she'd never experienced before. She looked like she wasn't quite sure what to think.

"What?" Stanley asked sharply as he looked up at the Treefolk. Apparently he'd caught the silent dialogue as well. "Don't just talk in each other's heads, what's wrong?"

"It's about what's wonky with the Veil here," Quinn supplied as the Coedaoine fell back into their mental conversation. "They can't figure it out. It's here, but it's thick, so thick that it feels like it's tryin' to suffocate 'em."

“You can hear them?” Emery asked.

“Not exactly. ‘S like I can kinda *feel* what they’re sayin’, but it’s not words. Sorta like whispers in the wind or sighin’ through the trees.”

“That’s a little creepy, Quinn,” Nolan put in. Checking to make sure Unnamed was still sheathed at his hip, Nolan shoved around a few smelly arswyd tails, getting a small snap at his elbow in return, but he managed to push his way to the mouth of the cave. Wary of the pelting hail and forks of lightning, he hopped up onto a rock to get a better look.

Outside was a total mess. The thunderstorm was ripping across the earth, bending the smaller trees almost sideways. Nolan could hardly make out any details, though he thought he could see the wagon down below, and some boulders farther out in a kind of clearing where the flashflood was racing through a ravine.

Emery joined his brother on the rock and looked around. He pointed out into the storm. “There’s people coming toward us!”

“What?” Nolan squinted. His vision was better than Emery’s, but in the torrential downpour, he could barely see. Then with a flash of lightning, some odd movement caught his eye. “Hey, he’s right! There *are* people out there, beyond the wagon and the rocks. Maybe they’re looking for shelter like us.”

Stru, Sweh and Molo pushed their way to the front while the Maned wolf—whose name Nolan had never heard, nor had he even heard him speak yet, come to think of it—was calming the Birds.

“No, they’re being chased, look!” Emery said. “Wait, what is *that*?”

The group of people—maybe a dozen or so—were leaping from fallen tree trunks to boulders, trying to cross the flooded ravine, apparently oblivious to the danger, because something—something large—was tearing through the trees after them, ignoring the hail and needling rain.

“Awakened,” Nolan realized with a start. “Hey, guys, some Awakened are chasing after a group of Aossí out there!”

“I can’t get to the front!” Ysgafn called out, crunched over at the back of the tight cave. “Move aside, you wretched beast!” One of the Birds squawked indignantly and snapped a beak at him. Quinn, Stanley and Fiorlen managed to make their way to the mouth of the cave where they all stood, peering out into the storm.

“There isn’t room for another twelve bodies in here,” Sweh pointed out, spitting a stream of blacksmile onto the ground.

“That’s nasty, Sweh,” Quinn bit out, wiping her boot on the back of her jeans.

“My apologies, guardian,” he said, though he didn’t sound sorry, but still, he aimed his next stream out into the rain.

“I’m not worried about fitting them in here,” Nolan said, cutting them off. “I’m worried about those Awakened chasing after them!”

“The heck *are* those?” Quinn asked, squinting. The pursuers had reached the ravine and were scrambling across, barely acknowledging the impediment of the roaring water.

A stray arrow zipped through the night and struck the rock face of the hill not thirty feet from the mouth of the cave, causing everyone to jump back.

“Ysgafn!” Quinn shouted. “We need ya up front! Someone’s shootin’ at us!”

“Madán!” Stru grumbled, pulling some kind of morningstar out of its holster at his hip. Without waiting for the others, he jumped out into the rain and started stumbling down the hillside.

“Where’s he think he’s going?” Molo shouted. “Can’t see ten feet in front of his face!”

Sweh cursed as well and produced a battle axe from a sheath at one of the arswyd’s sides. “Oi, Vorn, you stinking son of an unwed mother! Your murderous services are needed at the front—quit playing with that oversized chicken and come help me kill something!” And with that he plunged out into the raging storm as well.

Well, at least we know the Wolf’s name now, Nolan thought, as Vorn pushed his way silently out into the dark, carrying a short, gleaming sword in either hand.

“They’re insane,” Molo declared, pushing back through the flock to get to his sons.

Finally Ysgafn’s head poked up near the children and he managed to take a quick glance around, his staff clenched in his right fist. “Move aside, children-wealth, and for the Composer’s sake, *stay here*. You too, Fiorlen.”

“Aw, blast it!” Molo shouted, reappearing with a crossbow and a pack of bolts as Ysgafn stepped down into the torrent. “Boys, watch over the humans. If I see a head poke out, when I get back, I’m giving its owner a whoopin’ you’ll never forget.” Then the Mastiff charged into the rain, cursing as he went. It almost sounded to Nolan like he was growling, but then again, he *was* a Dog.

Though it was still hard to see, the sounds of a battle soon reached the mouth of the cave. Shouting, the clashing of metal on metal, cursing, the sounds of pain, pandemonium.

“We’re stayin’?” Quinn asked.

“We promised,” Nolan returned with a shrug, and Stanley nodded.

“Don’t leave!” one of the Pups shouted from the back. “Dad’ll thrash the lot of us!”

“But we never listen to the adults,” Emery said. “They might need our help.”

“The boy has a point.” This came from Bassett who was glowing red over Fiorlen’s right shoulder.

“We’re staying!” Nolan reiterated when a flash of lightning lit the countryside like daylight, and Quinn screamed.

“There’s hundreds!” she shouted, and Nolan saw she was right.