

## PART ONE

### The Gates of Dia

#### Chapter 1

The land on which the rain fell in unrelenting torrents thrust like a thumb from the fist of the western shore. It occupied an unenviable position geographically, not far enough into the northern climes to be dismissed as uninhabitable, and not enjoying the warmth of the south and the long growing seasons the southern lands might bring. It suffered brutal summers and equally brutal winters. Everything that existed on the land was a reflection of this duality, and stronger because of it.

The people, the Antellyn as they called themselves, had come to this land in the First Age after the Remaking from their homeland across the sea. In their first land only one of their world's two moons had been visible. But the sky of their new home held both lanterns, Themis the first watch and Femos his mate, a fact that had completely upset their previous nocturnal religion and defined a new religion for these Antellyn in the new world. It took all of their will to survive in that First Age. Many of the people wanted to move on.

Why didn't they migrate south? They were from lands by the sea, and felt that their new home should also be near the sea. Looking to the east in those first months from

their place of landing, to the great body of land that the thumb belonged to, they could see no trees, just rock and barren plain. When they finally ventured to the main body of land it was found to be a desolate and inhospitable place, flat in three directions to the horizon, with nothing living at all. Nothing good could come from that direction, they decided. They had made the right decision to stay. Their thumb had trees, and soil, and rock, and sea; for all of its handicaps, it would be their home.

The western world was a great continent, mostly wild and unexplored and sparsely inhabited except the west coastal portion where the Antellyn lived. It was called Hugnchoil by those indigenous peoples there before the Antellyn, but for those who migrated there they called it nothing because they had no idea of its dimensions. The Antellyn added greatly to the humanity of Hugnchoil though they did not seek out others of their species. They were content to have a place of their own.

The continent lay mostly above the equator of their world and extended to the pole. There it joined another continent, Andopoliol, a much smaller body of land not inhabited by man or animal. The peninsula, this thumb, was called The Antellyn, same as they called themselves because the inhabitants considered themselves one with the land, in name and in spirit. They were the Antellyn and their land was The Antellyn, a sliver of land in sharp contrast to the barren and infertile western coastal plain. These people were careful populators and an industrious folk, farmers and fishermen, craftsmen and storekeepers, people who ordered their lives and their land. The eagle saw the difference. A

gleaming emerald jewel extending to the west of the great peneplain.

The coast was rocky and severe with few places a boat could be brought ashore. A variety of fur seal appeared after the Antellyn, there to summer on the rocks of Cotshin and Poppel Islands. They played in the sea and raised their young without worry because the Antellyn were not hunters and adopted the animals as natural, although not continuous, cohabitants of their land.

The Antellyn didn't have a government as such, it was for political freedom that they set out eastward across the ocean in the second century of the Second Age, and they would have none of the trappings or potential power struggles associated with such. They existed for generations in their new land as independent inhabitants, all working in unison with the sea and the soil, all sharing the same beliefs and dreams. Two major towns developed on the Antellyn, if towns they might be called. Cephed, the unofficial capitol, and Posam, the site of the first landing. Cephed was the meeting place and a safe harbor for Antellynian ships in the Bay of Lyra. When the winter storms raged in the western sea and the land was in the throws of deep winter the when sailors had their ships well berthed in Cephed harbor, waiting out the season in the many hostels and public houses of the town. It would be there, around the fire and over a tankard of Gengard ale, that the songs of seafaring adventure would be sung. A trip to Cephed brought glee to children's hearts and excitement to all as a family would journey there once or more each year to see the carnivals and trade their wares. It teemed with life and activity in

contrast with the pastoral life of the countryside. Posam was not so sheltered on the north coast, yet it enjoyed some protection by Fingertip and Westdot from the winter squalls. A summer trip to Posam, to see the seals and feel the fresh sea breeze, ranked with the trip to Cephed as joyous occasions for Antellynian families.

The Antellyn was dominated by Mount Aabel and The Remove, a religious retreat and the repository for the written account of Antellynian history, both before and since the exodus. In addition to this peak the peninsula had two other promontories, Mounts Engano and Anel on the north coast, but this section, because it was rocky and had no soil covering, was left alone by the Antellyn save the herds of goats that were allowed to breed there. A small bluff rose above Cephed and provided a favorite spot for afternoon excursions to picnic and observe the bustle of boats in the harbor and bay.

The interior of the thumb was the greatest jewel, where the Antellyn built their farms and hamlets. Small tended fields of immaculate rows and luxuriant patches of grain showed these were people who tended their husbandry with earnest skill. Skill of stone and wood was seen in every field with walls and gates, steps and fences, ditches and culverts, and in their sturdy homes and barns. Neighbors worked side by side sharing in the bounty of the land, and in their common faith and ancestry.

Each of the two towns supported communal fields where the townsfolk would contribute to the economy of the area, but of greater importance, where they could continue their

communion with the land even though they chose to be city dwellers.

Oh, what days those people had! The land was so soft and fragrant and the air so sweet and fresh. It was a haven for all that was good and clean in the western lands.

But those ugly western lands, the ones that the precious Antelwyn hung to as a flower on a plant of poison, those lands were evil, with evil people. The Antelwyn would learn of those lands through pain and suffering, through a trial of their very fiber, and with the loss of most that they valued.

The Antelwyn were divided into houses, or related groups of individuals, though they might not live together in proximity. The houses were determined by the male lineage and once a woman associated herself with a man of a given house, she became of that house also. Some of the houses specialized, however. So the Fewlhands were shopkeepers, Biktops fishermen, Unkwards the bakers, Hatdys the farmers, and the Dia, well the Dia were warriors. It is about the Dia that this tale is told.

Lanaleu-Dialyn shuddered as the components of the land, and her own warrior's body lay under siege. The trees were bent and many were uprooted by the gale winds. Soil was washed across the land and into the sea, leaving nothing for the tender rootlings of the next spring to grasp. Rock itself was rent, torn from the land to be thrown into the sea. And the sea, the force that brought The Antelwyn to this land, willed them all gone, back into the sea and to another place. The wind hurled the sea nearly to the top of Mount Aabel making this the greatest test of the land, and of the Antelwyn, since the Second Age.

An ill wind blew, untimely and out of the wrong direction, not natural with no warmth of fall. It was as if Andopoloil, the messenger of winter, were breathing its breath across the frozen pole and down the western coast onto the Antellyn.

Lanaleu-Dialyn, Dia-woman and guardian, herald of the Chosen Seed, turned the corner of the fortress as she completed her rounds. Water poured off the wooden shake roof making the stone walls slick with its wetness. As lightning shattered the night they shone shiny and dark, waxed with a glaze that emphasized their strength. The wetness that covered the citadel and Lana was half from the clouds and half from the sea. The fortress Lana guarded was old, with a foundation set directly on the rock; its stone walls seemed to spring directly from the ground. Around the Fast the ground was smooth, the result of ages of wind-driven sea washing over this narrow strip of land.

She had drawn the outside rounds. It was far different from the times she could stand at the edge of the rock bridge and see Cyna and the Rookery to her left and the ocean beyond, the edge of the great plain in front of her, and the Bay of Lyra to her right. Before the storm she could take deep draughts of night air and hear the lergli calling out over the water. But not now. Now she checked for storm damage, trying all the time to keep her balance and not be swept over the edge and into the water. There was no damage that she could see.

Lana peered through the gloom, trying to catch a glimpse of the large body of land to the east. Her hooded cloak was heavy and wet, little protection in such a storm

and now a cold and unforgiving reminder of the loneliness of Dia-duty at The Gate. She could see nothing through the storm-imposed darkness. Her spirit seemed small next to its thrashing fury. Her faith was only a memory of a childhood filled with questions and hope for now she was a Dia-woman and not allowed such feelings. Lana finished her rounds outside and quickly sought the protection of the walls and the support of her comrades inside.

The citadel sat next to a path, or because the land was narrow at that point, the path had to run next to the tower. The terrain broke sharply to either side from a height surely enough to kill a traveler who might stray, or be forced from the path. There was no other way across the rock bridge other than beside the citadel and it was from this vantage point that generations of the Dia had defended their homeland and kept themselves separate from other peoples to the east.

The Dia served the Antellyn in two ways. First they manned, in turns, the lonely guardhouse on the narrow rockbridge that connected the peninsula to the mainland. They kept travelers from entering their land and were prepared to defend their position to the death. Second, they played the most important role in the Antellynian religion: they were to recognize and herald a messianic stranger who would be elevated to the highest position of adoration in their religion. Both of these charges the Dia had carried out on several occasions in the twelve hundred years since their first assignment.

The scree at the bottom of the bridge was always a reminder that the sea, over the past centuries, had slowly

claimed the rock. Now, the rock bridge was scarcely wide enough for two men to travel abreast. In another century the citadel wouldn't be needed to guard The Gates of Dia. In two, the Keep itself would be scree.

The Gates of Dia, as this narrow strip of rock was called, both blessed and cursed the Antellyn. It gave them security which at times was violently threatened, but it also kept from them all outside influence and help.

Who were these Dia of which Lana was a member? They were the guardians and the heralds, chosen primarily from the House of Dia in the Fourth Century before the First Seed and assigned then as they were now to a life of solitude and hardship at the edge of the sea. They were the heralds of the three Seeds and the first to fall when the hordes from the east poured down The Stairs.

Lana knew in an abstract sense who Seed and scourge were. Seed meant The Chosen Seed: A man would appear at The Gates of Dia and be recognized somehow by the Dia as being different from other men, professing no knowledge of his choosing, yet willing to be the only father of Antellynian children during his lifetime. It was a terrible burden for both the man and the people. Lana knew this from childhood, but she personally wouldn't be able to tell Seed from any wanderer at The Gates.

Scourge! Now that was something she could imagine! More than tales of a Chosen Seed, more than parables of hope, she and the other Antellynian children were told tales of eastern hordes, spoiling their fertile lands, leaving a trail of filth across a realm of beauty. They were taught to take the first on faith, but the other, the other was a fear that

made little eyes jump in real terror, young hearts drop with a suddenness that she could still remember. These were ghouls and goblins, evil men with wings and tongues like serpents with black hearts and souls, totally unlike The Antellyn, unworthy of the beauty of their land. The Chosen Seed, a man with ultimate control over Antellynian women - and their men - such a man she couldn't imagine.

Scourge would come, as it always had, and were the invaders strong enough, they would overpower the Dia at The Gates and rape and despoil Antellynian women, undoing the cleansing efforts of the previous Seed. Some of the Antellyn were descended truly from Seed - as Lana was. Signified by the "lyn" in her name, she had no scourge in her lineage. Seed and scourge in her past would have named her Lanaleu-Dialoc. A name of Lanaleu-Dialar would have meant no seed whatsoever in her past, yet they all were Antellyn, taught to welcome Seed and repel scourge.

Lana was cold, chilled by the rock reaching up its aged fingers, pulling her down, down from her envied humanity. It was a cold that even a Dia couldn't shake. Lana hung her wet garment on a hook downstairs and chose another. It too was cold and damp and offered little relief. Heralding a Chosen Seed or warning of possible invasion were the last of her thoughts as she dragged her once proud and supple body up the stairs to a cold and lonely, unrefreshed sleep.

For the past three generations the Dia had seen neither Seed nor scourge. Their faith and fear were being tested and the purpose behind the Dia, their reason for being at The Gates, had been nearly forgotten. For three hundred

years no Seed had appeared at this narrow strip of land and the Antellyn had been free from invasion and war. It would be soon that their faith would be truly tested.