

Delver

S. A. Bolich

© 2014 by S.A. Bolich

Published by Sky Warrior Book Publishing, LLC.
PO Box 99
Clinton, MT 59825
www.skywarriorbooks.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people is purely coincidental.

Cover art by Mitch Bentley
Cover layout by M. H. Bonham.
Publisher: M. H. Bonham.

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter One

The dream woke Athuun even before the ground began to shake under the bed. Flashing impressions jarred down his nerves: rock cracking, falling. Myriad startled eyes like moon globes glowing blue in the lantern-lit darkness of the deep mine shaft. The sharp whiff of wet stone sliding in some secret place far underground. Deep-throated shouts of surprise, the queasy unsteadiness of the tunnel floor under his boots, and under it all the long, rising rumble of earth shifting, roaring, shattering—

Athuun jerked upright with a gasp, fighting to drag air into lungs locked tight on panic. “Out, out!” he cried hoarsely, his inner sight filled with the blue, frightened winking of Delver eyes all turning toward him, hunting a way out of the crumbling mine. Then his vision cleared. The dim outlines of bedposts and a slender chair, both silhouetted against the sullen, banked smoldering of the fire caged on the hearth, brought him out of nightmare into this rented room in Medram Vale.

But the whole inn was still shaking.

Caught in the devastating nowhere place between dream and reality, Athuun stared at the cheap porcelain washbasin on the sideboard chattering its way across the polished wood, clinking toward destruction. The pitcher, slopping water at every jink, bounced and swayed a frenetic jig with the sideboard. The sideboard in turn danced a strange tapping dance with the stone floor, an arrhythmic clatter and thunk of wooden legs. He watched for a full two seconds in a bewildered daze before his brain woke up with a jolt that snatched the breath from his lungs once more.

“Mother of All, don’t,” he whispered in horror, but the quake continued.

He flung back the bedclothes, cursing as his legs tangled in the sheets. Still trapped in the fear and grief of the nightmare, he cursed and fought his way out of bed. Bare feet hit the shifting floor with a thump that shook the room. He did not notice, trapped in memories of a tunnel carved deep under the Black Mountains with the lanterns winking out and deep, frightened voices roaring around him.

But the voices were not in his memory. With a shock he realized they were real, a cacophony of screams and shouts thundering through the quaking walls around him. Athuun jerked upright, dragging in air to shout back—and cracked his head against the low ceiling beam of a room not built to Delver scale.

“Sand and stone!” he howled, reeling back onto the lumpy mattress. The whole bed slid across the trembling floor and thudded into the whitewashed stone wall. Grimly Athuun pushed his way up again, hunting the elusive door in the reddish dusk of

firelight in the unfamiliar room. Finally, in desperation, he threw back his head and raised a voice trained to out-shout an avalanche.

“*Out!*” he roared, to the quake, to the people panicking outside his room, to the demon of bad luck that even now dogged every step he took wherever he went. “*Outside!*” For he could feel the sturdy stones of the inn beginning to creak and whine in protest, their stout mortared joins shaking apart in puffs of dust that smelled to him of the deep and secret mazes where they had been quarried.

The room went on shaking. Athuun swore and jerked open the door, dodging bits of falling plaster. The corridor was full of people running for the stairs, staggering crazily as the floor rocked underfoot. He spared a glance for the doors up and down the hallway, but they were all open, and a pale-haired man stood at the top of the stairs shouting, “Up! Up and out if you value your lives!”

Vaguely impressed by such steadfast courage in the face of Earth Mother’s tantrum, Athuun squinted through confusing bars of lamplight falling through doorways. Through the shifting press of bodies he could just make out Wyth ak’Kal’s lean, snowy face, still looking as though something had soured in his mouth even as he risked his life to get people out of the inn. Athuun swept up a small boy screaming for his mother and chivvied two adults ahead of him, half-crouched over them in the low corridor.

“Go!” he roared when they cast fearful looks up at him. “Wyth! It’s coming down! Go!”

Wyth, Fifth Rank master of the Windrider Clans and a full-fledged member of their Storm Council, neither blinked nor budged, only nodded coolly and lifted his hands, his long, pale fingers laced and pointing down the stairs. *Does he think he can call Wind inside a building?* Athuun thought incredulously, taken right aback by such arrogance, even in a Fifth Rank. But an intricate twirl of those joined hands and a ripple of clear notes like the glittering fall of a wintry stream staggered Athuun under a rush of air sucked from the very depths of the shuddering rooms behind him. A stout woman balking at the top of the shaking stairs shrieked as Wind pried loose her two-handed grip on the railing, forcing her to take a step down or fall. Wyth gave her a deft shove, his cobwebby hair streaming around his face in the blast. She scurried down, wailing, and out the door into the shouting mob outside.

“Now you go!” Athuun shouted at Wyth, for the stairs were clear of folk and the very roof was cracking overhead. He reached to shove the Windrider after the woman.

Wyth turned his head for one last look back. Ice-blue eyes widened, the first crack in that disdainful composure Athuun had witnessed in the four weeks since they had become traveling companions.

“Athuun! The wall—”

Wyth’s hands came up again, long-fingered and pale as clouds, though what he thought Wind could do to stop the shaking, Athuun had no idea. A great rending *crack!* behind him announced the death of the upper floor; Athuun grabbed the Windrider as he went by and hauled him bodily down the steps, clutching the screaming boy under one arm and Wyth under the other. His long legs cleared the steps four at a time; three great bounces and he landed running in the common room, vaguely aware of writhing

red worms snaking across the floor from the hearth, of chairs and tables alight and an absolute rain of stone and debris cascading through sagging ceiling beams. Athuun ducked his head and charged for the door, ignoring Wyth's indignant demands to put him down.

A ceiling stone bounced off his shoulder; another narrowly missed his head. Wyth stopped struggling suddenly. The boy shrieked like a winter storm and kicked Athuun in the knee. He staggered, cannoned off the doorjamb, and reeled out into the rocking, star-shot spring night. He caught one dizzy impression of houses swaying, people running, a confusion of shadows and yellow tongues of light and flame, before his own name rocketed out of the night on a man's tenor voice, laden with fear and relief.

"Athuun! This way!"

Blindly he turned to his left. Hands tugged at the boy under his left arm. A different male voice shouted, "Jaimi! You're safe! Delver, let go, I have him. Let go!"

Athuun let the boy go into unseen arms, only then aware that he was still carrying Wyth. More voices babbled around him; more pale heads appeared, reaching to take the Windrider from his grasp. A small hand slid into his, closing firmly around his first two fingers.

"This way, Athuun ak'Kal," a very young voice piped.

"Let me down!" Wyth's cold, peevish voice said over the child's. "I am quite capable of walking."

Athuun, his right shoulder smarting from the stone, let him drop. Wyth landed on hands and knees, disheveled and barefoot, wearing only a pair of sky-blue trousers. Three other Windriders reached hastily to help him up, the lot of them as bedraggled as Wyth—or Athuun himself, for that matter. Acutely aware of his bare feet and legs protruding from his half-buttoned shirt and the chill breeze exploring his knees, Athuun turned away, following the tugging of that small hand in his. He had taken two steps before he realized that the shaking underfoot had stopped, that the weird groaning of distressed earth and the clatter of falling stone had ceased. He halted, peering back down the street toward the inn and the hills rising black against a moonless sky at the far end.

Three houses and the inn were on fire, a crackling confusion of light and shadow and leaping tongues of flame licking eagerly toward buildings huddled on either side. Athuun stiffened as a long whip of fire snaked out from the farthest house, snatching at a sagging roofline. Before it could cram the exposed beams into its maw, a whirling man-shape, its gleaming black hair knotted up at its neck, leaped high in the street, both hands raised in an imperative denial. The fire lashed backward, thwarted and angry, roaring its discontent in a gout of smoke and gush of flames pouring through ruined windows across the street. Athuun watched the Firedancer shove it backward with open palms and spin on his way, lithe and graceful as shadow, scarcely bound to the uncertain ground underfoot. Admiration touched Athuun, an instant's appreciation before the little hand clutching his first two fingers gave a mighty yank.

"Ak'Kal! Are your wits awash? This way!"

Astounded by the clear, liquid quality of the voice as much as by the words, he looked down into Hannahth's small, earnest face, crowned in sun-gold hair that gleamed in the flickering light. She peered up at him, scarcely thigh-high to him and quite unaware that she had shaken him more than Earth Mother had this night. In two months of traveling with her clan, he had never heard her speak.

Bemused, he let her tug him on toward a little knot of people standing watchfully well clear of walls and trees, gathered around a slight woman sitting rather stiffly on an overturned watering trough that had served thirsty cart beasts before this night. The leaping light warmed a youngish face cast in shades of gold deepened by the firelight, gleaming under a crown of black hair tumbling below her hips. It matched the long braid on the Firedancer silhouetted against the sinking flames farther down the street, its very length a defiant challenge to Fire to come take it. The firelight caught also the great mound of the child growing in her belly, the only thing in all of Metrenna that could chain Jetta ak'Kal, the greatest Dancer of her generation, to this spot and leave her partner to face Old Man Fire alone.

Beside her, a younger woman with hair catching silver from the stars stood tense and anguished, her hand on Jetta's shoulder. Her eyes, too, were locked on Settak ak'Kal dancing his fearsome, lonely dance in front of a house collapsing into an inferno of yellow flame and swirling smoke. But collapsing nonetheless, its fires beating at invisible barriers that kept their malice confined to a building already doomed.

"We are all here," Hannahth announced to the night at large, drawing a half-score of astonished gazes. Unperturbed, she let Athuun go and settled quietly at Jetta's feet, wafting her hands above the mud puddles left by the overturned trough. A very slight breeze fanned Athuun's bare ankles, chuckling contentedly as it dried the mud.

"Well," a clear tenor voice said behind him. "If ever there was doubt that you are part of this company, Athuun ak'Kal, let there be none anymore."

He turned. Five lean, pale-haired men stood ranked in the rubble littering the street, half-naked, most of them, limned in the ruddy light of hungry fires that caught odd gleams from alabaster skin. Their hair alternated from dark gold to cloud white and flowed like Wind herself down past their shoulders, jeweled with red points of firelight. Wyth stood in the middle, but it was Sheshan ak'Kal who had spoken, leaning quietly on the beautifully carved walking stick that supported his crippled right leg. His sky-blue eyes, shadowed to darkness by the night and the uneven light, lifted to Athuun's face an arm's length above his head. What Athuun could see of his expression held a sort of quiet delight, reflected in the smile playing about his lips.

Athuun sniffed and drew himself up straight, taken all sideways still again. He had joined this odd company of talented folk because they had a common enemy to fight in Old Man Fire, and he was the only Delver available. It had not made really him *part* of anything but a nasty battle at the headwaters of the River Melth and a continuing search for a way to keep fire from overrunning all of Metrenna.

"I hardly knew the child could talk, let alone pronounce judgment," he said, stiffly hiding his confusion. "She is what? Six?"

“Soon,” Wyth said, his voice a glacial contrast to Sheshan’s warmth. “Accept the truth or not. You have been and are welcome, and have my thanks for your—rescue.”

He turned away, a painful duty accomplished. Athuun stifled a snort; thanks came hard to himself as well. His amusement faded as the shivering energy of waking to crisis began to let him go, leaving behind the old, empty sense of dislocation, of being part and not part of his surroundings. The admiring eyes of the Windriders just made it worse; they, too, were vagabonds, at home nowhere, wandering Metrenna at the heels of the great storms that howled down now and again with all the malevolence that Wind’s angry sister, the Hag, could bring to bear. And now he wandered with them, caught up in a quest with no end that he could see, a stranger among strangers.

He nodded awkwardly at Sheshan and lifted his gaze over the Rider’s head, ignoring the stares of the three younger Windriders flanking him. Down the street, the fires were sinking; nearer at hand, the shrieking had subsided into a brisk rumble of folk trying to find each other, patch up hurts, or assess the damage. Others stood stupidly about in clumps, staring at Settak ak’Kal dancing the dance of fire alone, saving their houses while they gaped in useless wonder. Nearer at hand, fire in the inn was shooting up unchallenged through the great hole Earth Mother had knocked in its roof. That, apparently, was too much for Jetta.

She stood up with determined dignity, shaking off the hands that reached to grab her back. “I am with child, not dead!” she snapped over the roar and crackle of flame. “Nes, Settak will not dance better however you worry. How about you coax whatever small stream that fed this trough into better service than making mud for Hannahth to play with, eh?”

The silver-haired young woman turned her head, her expression caught between surprise and outrage. “But he—”

“Is a Firedancer,” Jetta said to Settak ak’Kal’s newly pledged lifemate, and looked up at her own beloved standing beside her, leaning on his walking stick with a certain air of resignation. “Shan, I can’t just sit here.”

“Did I say a word?” Sheshan stepped aside, leaving her peering up at him uncertainly, unneeded arguments quivering on her parted lips. “By all means, Dance, if you would rather our child be born here rather than in Annam.”

“I swore I would not Dance again before the birth!” she snapped. “But I will not leave the Old Man gloating over that inn.”

She stamped past him, graceful despite the ungainly bulk of the child within. Athuun jerked upright anxiously, caught himself, and stepped back into the shadows of an intact house behind him, frowning and confused. These were not his people; he was not required to care about them. *I have done my duty by this village tonight*, he reminded himself. But the villagers were not this odd gaggle of folk he had traveled with for weeks now, through a tangle of danger and mingling of Clan talents such as he had never imagined in all of his forty-three years. His hand still tingled from Hannahth’s anxious clutch. And Jetta looked so small...

From habit he reached up for the little pickaxe that usually rode his left shoulder, seeking comfort from the symbol of a rank hard-earned among the crags and

unforgiving mines of his own people. His fingers brushed chill cloth, awakening him to the unpleasant knowledge that his pick lay with all the rest of his things somewhere in the fire-shot rubble of the inn. He stiffened, aghast. The oldest Fifth Rank in all the Stone clans had given him that ax on the first day he had pinned on a master's badge, himself only a Second Rank then, but still entitled to the proud ak'Kal after his name and all the earned respect that went with it.

I've looked long for a master who could waken her again, old Ennunn had told him, still as broad as the mountains through the shoulders for all that his bush of a beard had more of snow than earth left in it. *Use her well.*

Instead, he had left the repository of a great master's power to burn in an inn abandoned in panic. *Rattled by an earthquake that would hardly ruffle a journeyman's worst day,* Athuun thought, writhing in shame.

He took a long step after Jetta, scarcely seeing the fires, the milling people, the knee-high mounds of broken stone in his path. Ennunn's ax was all he had left.

Someone's hand caught his arm. Long fingers dug in sharply when Athuun tried to shake it off; he gave it a fierce glare and tried to pull away, but Wyth hid surprising strength in that willowy frame.

"Where are you going, Delver? Jetta ak'Kal needs no help and will not thank you for getting in her way."

Athuun glared down at him. Wyth stood only chest-high to him for all that the Rider's own lean height towered in turn over most other people not born Windriders. To Delver eyes, Wyth looked like a sapling to a tree, pale and spindly, but though he had to tilt his head back to meet Athuun's eyes, there was nothing ridiculous about him. The chill of mountain winters lay on him, the same indifference to the frustrations of lesser beings that glaciers gave to the rock they ground to powder in their inexorable passage. His face, caught clearly by the firelight, held nothing but a cool assessment.

"Mind your own affairs, Rider." Since Wyth had not paid him the courtesy of his rank, Athuun felt no need for manners, either.

Wyth smiled a thin, cold smile and let him go. "I thought you had greater sense. It seems I was wrong."

Without another word he turned away toward the water trough, where young Nes was valiantly trying to ignore what Settak was doing and call Water up as Jetta had bade her. *What a gaggle we are!* Athuun thought venomously, arrested by Wyth's contempt, with nowhere to put his frustration but onto his companions. Poor Neshuaas, lately an unranked daughter off a River Clan ship, now torn between a Dancer who would not leave his partner and the glittering promise of a status only the barest handful of her people ever achieved. Seaborn. Immense talent lurked in her but she had barely begun to learn how to use it, as witnessed by her current frown as Water flowed serenely out of a broken pipe running back through the hill, untroubled by Nes's efforts to divert Earth Mother's laziest child.

A River daughter, Firedancers, the broken remnants of a Windrider clan attacked by their own element... *Aye, a veritable gaggle indeed,* Athuun thought sourly. Yet even that thought rankled, jarring like a jibe thrown out by some ignorant sot sitting in an inn

stone-built by Delvers and safely warmed by fires tamed by Dancers. An unwilling shiver of awe walked up his back as Jetta walked out of a shadow and stopped in front of the inn, clad only in the black breastband and scanty hip guard of a ranked Dancer and a silver chain glinting around her throat. The great curve of her belly made mock of her slight frame, yet, like Wyth, there was nothing laughable about her. Fourth Rank at an age when most still struggled to master the Second, she stood unflinching in the ravaging light of Old Man Fire as he fought his way up from his prison at the heart of the world, trying still again to claim the open air and all that breathed it.

She did not dance. She had promised Sheshan. But her bare foot lifted and stamped onto broken stone, light, imperious, drawing every eye. Her arms came up in a graceful curve that mimicked the shape of flame itself, framing the fire in an arch of flesh. Her chin tilted up as she peered through it, her jaw set in lines of adamant.

Five full seconds she stood there, simply looking at the fire, which roared and spat at her, drawing itself up and up, fueling itself frenziedly with all the contents of the common room and whatever it could snatch from the fallen rooms above. Athuun's cheeks prickled under his beard; the skin crept on his neck, for she looked so impossibly small facing flames that were turning palest gold at their edges, trying to form themselves into a *hysth*, intelligent fire that was the doorway for a worse enemy yet. *She must dance*, blew through Athuun's head, for he had seen what happened when *hysths* succeeded. He had seen the white molten fire of the Ancient crawl up through those doorways, malevolent and hungry, the eldest of all Earth Mother's children.

And currently in open rebellion against her.

Then Jetta brought her arms down in a slashing sweep as though cutting the night itself, slicing the village away from the grip of the fire. Athuun gasped in a sharp breath of air heated by flame and tasting of smoke as the fire shied back. Reaching red fingers dissolved into a confused swirl of curling flames and smoke, spinning into tight columns that somehow fell into one immense column in the center of what had been the common room. Jetta twirled on one foot, slowly, deliberately, one arm over her head, the other palm out toward the fire—all the fires, even the ones gleaming through intact windows from hearths that had been rattled but not breached. The glow in a score of windows winked out like snuffed candles. Down the street, the three fires nearly subdued by Settak ak'Kal faded abruptly to sullen coals casting red gleams over blackened walls. He gave a last leap and spin and ran to join her, not without one startled look over his shoulder at the vanquished flames.

People crowded back from the towering column of fire in the inn with bleating cries of astonishment and alarm. Some tripped over each other and fell; no one leaned down to help them up, more concerned with the showers of sparks and gusting black smoke raining from the inn. On Athuun's right, Wyth gave an irritable click of his tongue and lifted his hands. Athuun spun toward him incredulously.

"Are you mad?" he blurted, all but staggering under a consuming memory from scarcely a month back, of fire writhing on the back of a gale wind, howling its glee. "You'll set the whole village alight!"

Wyth looked down that long, pale nose of his. "Will I?" he asked tonelessly, and flicked the fingers of his right hand toward Jetta.

Screams rocked the night again. Athuun swore and leaped to snatch a tottering woman out of the way of another general rush backward as flame suddenly leaped skyward, spinning into a thin finger of malicious red light. Needle trees and brooding black houses leaped out of the darkness, limned in firelight that spun and flickered in mad circles. The whips of fire shook out sparks and shredded bits of flame, grabbing desperately at anything and everything. But the air Fire craved belonged to Wind, and Wind answered to the inborn talents of the Windrider clans. She spun gleefully into a whirlwind that moved not a hand-length out of the ruined center of the inn, and all the infant flames died still seeking a foothold. Myriad red worms of fire winked out mid-air as Settak danced a wild, improvisational dance around the inn, his bare feet spurning the rubble as though the streets of Medram still stood intact and freshly swept.

Jetta never moved, watching her partner dance the tower of flame into a mound, and then into a sullen pile of coals, and then into ash. But Athuun, standing frozen in open-mouthed disbelief, felt the power swirling around her, a connection to Earth Mother herself that ran all the way down to the deep caverns where the Ancient sulked in its prison. The Old Man submitted to her, and to the Dance, and departed, leaving only the acrid stink of smoke drifting under the thin white light of stars bowing to the dawn just opening a thin, sleepy eye above the hills.

Wyth opened his hands. Even the choking pall of smoke shredded to nothing as Wind romped away with it, shaking the needle trees as she swooped off to play with the clouds gathering gold in the east.

Awe prickled down Athuun's skin, sly, unwanted, demanding acknowledgement. He refused. Folk born to talented clans *should* be able to wield such craft; why else had the Mother gifted Firedancers, Windriders, Waterborn and Delvers with the power to call her errant children to heel? *We exist to keep Wind and Water and Fire from destroying the world*, he thought coldly, and rubbed the rebellious hair back down on his arms.

Still, it had been well done.

Better than any effort of his to stop the Mother's tantrum.

Belatedly he remembered that he had made no attempt to establish a connection of his own with the Mother, more intent on the cracking stone and the screams. A small voice inside whispered about nightmares and sleep-muzzled reflexes; Athuun shook it off. *Wyth* had kept his wits, hadn't he? And young Settak, and Jetta?

He ground his jaw down on shame and looked around at the remains of Medram village emerging from the shadows. For a moment he could not take in the changed outlines of buildings that had nestled so cozily into a natural hollow in the northern foothills of the Karth Mountains. Most of them were Delver-built; it should have made them proof against both fire and quake, but the smoking remnants of the inn's stout beams were a sharp reminder why Firedancers lived in every village in Metrenna. The wilderness of broken walls and mounded rubble up and down the street dealt an unexpectedly sharp blow to his own pride. Uniformly black, shot through with an occasional pale flaw of windstone, the scattered containment stones that had once been

walls spoke of a careless power that shocked him. *His* clan had been created to check even the Mother herself—by the Mother herself.

But she had ignored his demand to stop as she would a bug trundling across her thick skin, too inconsequential to make an impression.

Athuun could not meet the eyes beginning to shift toward him, seeing accusation and betrayal struggling out from the shock. He turned away, ignoring the questions beginning to mutter around him. *How could this happen? Those stones were Delver-joined! How? Why? What has roused the Mother?*

He found Jetta in his path, smoke-stained but serene, and stopped before he thought. She, too, was looking at him, but he could read nothing in her face. “I would not go into the inn, Athuun ak’Kal,” she said courteously. “The stones will be hot for hours yet.”

Only then did he realize that he was but two steps from the blackened doorway, his whole being yearning toward the room that had been his and the small pickaxe that was all he treasured in life.

“I—” He stopped, not without a yearning glance at the smoking pile of ruined tables and benches and beams fallen from the ceiling. Part of the staircase still stood intact against the back wall. Maybe his room had survived as well. “I have things I value in there,” he muttered.

“As do we all,” Jetta said, her voice sharpening. “They will be there when the place is safe to search.” She started past him, looking all at once tired and very small. “Let us rest until then.”

“You did well,” he blurted, unaware that the words had been lurking behind his tongue until they were already out. “I thought you needed the Dance to control the Old Man...”

His face heated; he sounded like a first-rank apprentice on his first day outside clan walls. But she had failed the only other time he had seen her face fire, stopped by the Ancient crawling inexorably up from the deeps while she, too swollen and weary to Dance, had watched, trapped and helpless.

Jetta stopped. “The Dance evolves,” she said, with a strange smile and a glance at Settak ak’Kal, who was now safely ensconced in Nes’s arms, black head bent toward silver, the pair of them speechless in the simple joy of touching. Athuun looked, and winced away.

“You are saying it is a matter of will? Making it what you need it to be?”

She looked up at him coolly. “It is *all* about willpower, ak’Kal.”

An imperious shout spared him the trouble of finding words. “Ak’Kal!” rang through the smoky dawn, seemingly addressed to every master of every clan and trade in the street. Everyone in earshot stilled in surprise, even the frightened children still sobbing about the sudden overturning of their lives. Athuun jerked around toward a man striding through the frozen tableau, as broad as he was tall. Unlike nearly everyone else present, he was fully dressed, brown from narrow feathered hat to tall boots, with only the wink and flash of gold at his shoulder to mark him still another master in this crowd

of them. He ignored the common folk, however, his furious green eyes locked on Athuun.

“What do you mean dragging Metrenna’s troubles to Medram Vale? Get out! *Now!*”