



RED SCREEN

You haven't lived until you've died...

DANIEL BURKE

Advance Praise for *Red Screen*

“Daniel Burke’s *Red Screen* takes the reader on an enthralling journey into the metaverse, where the forces of might and magic bleed dangerously into the real world of corporate malfeasance, deadly technical anomalies, and family dysfunction. Prepare for a wild virtual ride that will ensnare you in its spell!”

Regina Buttner, author of *Down a Bad Road*

“Following the finest tradition of stories such as *Dot Hack*, *Summer Wars*, and *Belle*, the line between the digital and real worlds becomes blurred, and events on both sides begin to affect them equally; Burke’s *Red Screen* takes you into a whirlwind of a thriller, jumping between both worlds to show you the consequences of greed. You won’t see online video game grinding, bug seeking and player vs player kills in the same light after reading this book. A must read for fans of thrillers, video games and virtual reality.”

Ricardo Victoria, author of the *Tempest Blades* series

RED SCREEN

- a novel -

by
Daniel Burke



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Chapter 1

The Anomaly

ANGELA HARDING, DIRECTOR OF World Simulation Development for Xperion, Inc., watched the team leads trickle into the conference room with coffee cups and laptops in hand for the Monday morning incident review meeting. The mostly young, scruffy-looking lot, indistinguishable from the college kids streaming into the classrooms of nearby Stanford University, was responsible for keeping the company's wildly popular Metaverse simulations running for its hundreds of millions of customers, a task that often meant long hours and sleepless nights, especially over the weekends when usage peaked. They took their seats, SIM Devs, short for simulation developers, on one side of the table—Angela's side—and simulation operators, the Ops Team, on the other. The Ops Team director's chair was unoccupied. Maxwell Morris, as usual, was running late. They would hold the meeting for him, and as she always did, Angela would hold her tongue.

She was never late, no matter how little sleep she managed after the all-night troubleshooting sessions that had become more frequent with the company's success. Angela was always the first one in the room and even the first one in the office, except for Marcus and Jasmine Day, of course. It was an unwritten rule—no one arrived before the company's founding couple. The lights in their corner office windows, Marcus's on the operations floor and Jasmine's, or Jazz as she was better known, on the development floor, were the first lit before dawn and the last extinguished after sunset. Even on the rare occasions when Angela arrived before them, she would sit in her car and wait for the lights in the founder's windows to signal it was acceptable for her to enter. Arriving before the Days would be like beating them at something, and the Days did not take losing well.

At 8:07, Maxwell Morris stepped through the door and after making his way around the table to acknowledge and exchange greetings with the attendees, he took his seat opposite Angela and flashed his knee-weakening smile. A tall, athletic man with gray-frosted blond hair and skin tanned and weathered from hours navigating his sailboat up and down the coast, Maxwell was as handsome as he was brilliant. He was also a company institution, the first employee not to have the last name of Day.

Angela returned his smile, all irritation with his tardiness gone. The son of a bitch was better looking at forty-five than he had been when she'd first met him ten years ago. It pained her to admit she was still as attracted to him today as she had been when she was a starry-eyed intern. Ridiculous, she thought, still pining for this man after years of nothing more than daydreams and lingering glances—hers, not his. Maxwell preferred men, boys really, and he always sailed with one or two twenty-something, hard-bodied deckhands.

“Okay, I think we have everyone. Let’s get started,” she announced and waited for all side conversations to stop. When the room was silent, she turned her attention back to Maxwell. “It’s all yours, Em.”

Maxwell thanked her, then addressed the room. “As everyone is well aware, the IPO is on track.” His smile turned into a wide grin. “I am looking at a roomful of soon-to-be millionaires. I expect to hear no more grumbling about working for worthless stock options.” Laughter and the claps from high fives filled the room. “I don’t have to tell you how important it is that we have no outages; nothing that can cause bad press before our ticker symbol hits the NASDAQ. I know your teams are all putting in long hours, but we must do even more to keep the SIMs online and performing.” Maxwell turned to the woman on his right. “Okay, Sangeeta, take us through the list of the weekend’s issues.” He turned his attention back to the room. “For every item, I want to know the resolution plan and timeline.”

Sangeeta tapped on her laptop, and the list of problems, crises, and near-calamities that had occurred with the company’s simulation systems since Friday evening filled the large monitors hanging on the walls above Angela and Maxwell. The review process was routine, and Sangeeta ran quickly through each item, calling on different individuals seated at the table

to answer Angela's and Maxwell's questions. Hardware and system configuration issues were addressed by the Ops Team, while software bugs, including a nasty one that caused the new soccer tournament SIM to suffer a full-blown world crash and reset, were handled by Angela's SIM Dev Team. It took Sangeeta forty minutes to go through every item on her list.

"That's all of them," she announced.

"Not too bad," Maxwell said. "Overall, it seems like we had a relatively quiet weekend." He fixed his gaze on a nervous looking Asian man. "Except the Soccer World crash. Is your team on top of this, Yen? We're just beginning to see usage growth in this SIM. Hate to interrupt that. Especially now. You know? With all our financial hopes and dreams hanging in the balance."

Yen nodded, his anxious eyes looking at Angela for help.

"We got it, Em," Angela said. "Leave Yen alone. His team will have the issue resolved by the end of the week."

Yen coughed and appeared even more nervous by her promise.

"Good enough for me, Angela." Maxwell winked at Yen. "Anything else, Sangeeta?"

"Yes, sir. We have the *other* thing to discuss. The anomaly."

At that moment, Jasmine Day appeared in the doorway and, like a curious echo, repeated, "The anomaly?" Every head turned to face her as if pulled by the same string.

"Good morning, Jazz," Angela said, feeling her pulse quicken. Hers would not be the only heart in the room beating faster. A surprise visit from Jasmine sent adrenaline pumping through the veins of all who knew her.

Xperion's cofounder scanned the meeting attendees before acknowledging Angela with a nod. She was a compact woman with dark eyes and long, jet-black hair that flowed down her back like liquid ebony. Age turned some women soft, but not Jazz. At fifty-two, she was as muscular and hard as twenty years ago when she had won the San Francisco marathon. She glided into the room with just the hint of a smile dimpling her high cheek bones and a hungry look in her eyes. Dressed all in gray and circling the table, she reminded Angela of a shark who had come upon a pod of seals in the bay and was looking for the tastiest one for her meal. The analogy was not unwarranted, as Jasmine Day was indeed a predator, though now part of an

endangered species.

She and her husband, Marcus, were some of the last of their kind, the Californian Tech Entrepreneur, a species once prolific in the coastal plain nestled between the Santa Cruz and Diablo mountains, now all but extinct, lost to a drought like so much of the California paradise, not one of water, though, but one of something just as precious—venture capital. Like the wildlife that fled the aridification of the Southwest for lush northern environs, the technical talent that had driven the innovations that created Silicon Valley had mass migrated to the Zhongguancun technology hub in Beijing, where investment money still flowed in torrents. This irony could not be lost on Jazz, whose parents had fled communist China for the opportunities of the American capitalist system, only to see the roles reversed a generation later with Americans now fleeing a stagnant entitlement system for the vibrance of the conquest-driven Chinese model.

“The anomaly,” Jazz prompted, coming to a stop behind Angela’s chair.

“Yes, ma’am,” Sangeeta replied.

“We’re talking about a player in the Land of Might and Magic that appears to have hacked the simulation,” Maxwell explained.

“The SIM *has* been hacked,” the gravelly voice of Jonathan Heinz, the company’s head of cybersecurity, responded. “There’s no doubt about it. Whoever this person is, they’ve found a way past our authentication systems and are either exploiting holes in our code or creating new ones.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible,” a senior development lead on Angela’s team named Rituraj objected. “This mythical hacker would have to get through the SIM security layers, and there’s no way to do that without leaving a trace. We’d see something in the logs, and we don’t.”

“He’s doing it,” Jonathan assured.

“You have no proof,” Rituraj shot back.

“Okay, okay.” Angela raised her hands to end the squabble. “What we know is there appears to be a character in the simulation who is bypassing the leveling rules, making himself...”

“Immortal,” Maxwell finished her sentence.

“Yes,” she said. “And by doing so, he’s wreaking havoc with

other players. He's killing everything he encounters."

Jazz folded her arms across her chest and asked, "Why can't we just remove the character?"

"Because we can't see him," Jonathan replied. "He's figured out a way to evade the logging systems. It's crazy." Jonathan glanced around the room. "It's got to be someone inside." His eyes met Angela's. "Someone on the SIM Dev Team."

Rituraj slammed the lid on his laptop. "No way. We would know."

"If we can't see this anomaly, how do we know it exists?"

Jazz asked with a hint of irritation in her tone.

Sangeeta tapped on her keyboard and a new list appeared on the monitors. "Customer complaints. Lots of them." She read from the list: "My level forty character just got trashed by some fucking gray monster. He cut the heads off three of us. All high-level characters. No normal player could do that. We couldn't damage him at all. It's bullshit. We're talking a lot of money to build these characters. Fuck you, LMM. I'm not coming back, and neither are my friends."

She read another one just like it and was about to read a third when Maxwell raised his hand to stop her. "We get the idea, Sangeeta. So far this hacker," he looked at Rituraj, "if that is what he is, is just cheating." He turned to Jonathan. "What's your take on the security risk?"

Jonathan grimaced. "Could be huge. If he can get into the main simulation engines, what's stopping him from getting into user profiles? Or financials?"

"Layers and layers of encrypted access controls," Rituraj practically shouted.

Jonathan looked at Maxwell and then at Angela while appearing to avoid Jazz's gaze. "If he figures out a way to shut down the simulation, he could hold us hostage."

"You mean demand a ransom?" Angela asked.

"Yeah, probably a big one."

Jazz made a loud "shush" sound, ending the speculation. She leaned on the table and slowly made eye contact with each of the team members. "LMM is our most popular SIM," she growled. "Over fifty million users."

Their attention upon her rapt, everyone nodded.

"You all understand what would happen to our IPO if

LMM goes off-line, even for just a day, right? The *Wall Street Journal* and The *China Financial Times* would tear us apart.” She slapped the table, causing everyone to jump. “We’d list 75 percent lower than we’ve planned. That’s quite a pay cut—one I’m not prepared to accept, and neither should any of you.”

No one spoke; no one even breathed. Maxwell raised his eyebrows and smiled at Angela. His unspoken words were clear: *she’s your boss, you deal with her.*

Angela swallowed and turned in her chair to face the agitated cofounder. “Finding the anomaly is our top priority.”

“I should hope so.” Jazz took a deep breath and let it out slow—calming herself or preparing to strike, Angela did not know which. The predatory smile returned. “I’m sure your people are doing everything they can.” She glared at Rituraj. “Sometimes, though, we have to find help from those who can do more.”

Angela prayed Rituraj would remain silent and closed her eyes when he did not.

“No one knows the LMM simulation better than my people. We just need time.”

Jazz’s smile turned dangerous. She had found her seal. “There is no time. I demand results immediately. I won’t tolerate complacency or mediocrity.” She stabbed her index finger into the table with a thud. “This valley is full of the rotting carcasses of mediocre companies.” Thud. “Xperion won’t be one of them.” Thud. “If the anomaly interferes with the IPO, I will reevaluate my technical leads, starting with you, Rituraj.” She spat his name. Then, Jazz turned her wrath on Angela. “I want you in my office in ten minutes,” she said and stormed out, leaving all but one seal relieved.

Chapter 2

The Mouse and the Monster

I T WAS EARLY, STILL several hours before dawn. A single lamp above her door filled the narrow brick and stone passage with an unnatural white light. The air was cool, and still, and quiet. The only sounds came from Musuka's pounding heart and the heavy breathing of the giant standing behind him.

Everything had gone as Musuka had planned. He had used the magic to blind the watchers, allowing him and Akandu to enter the tower unnoticed and climb the great stair. Then, with the watchers still blind, they had passed through the halls and found where she slept. All that remained was for Musuka to use magic to unbolt the door to her chambers and Akandu would slay her. But fear had taken hold of Musuka, and he was no longer sure he could go through with it. He closed his eyes and fought to control his urge to flee.

As if sensing his thoughts, Akandu placed one of his enormous gray hands on Musuka's head and squeezed, just a little at first, but enough.

"What is the problem, mouse?" The giant's low, rumbling voice shook Musuka like thunder.

Musuka tried to wiggle free of Akandu's hold, but the giant's grip tightened. It felt as if the powerful gray fingers were about to crush his skull. Musuka shut his eyes against the agonizing pressure that threatened to pop them from their sockets.

"P-p-please s-s-stop," Musuka begged, losing all control over his stutter.

"It hurts?" Akandu rasped. The skin on the back of Musuka's neck tingled from the giant's hot breath.

"Y-y-yes. I-I ka-ka can't take the pa-pa-pain. Please stop."

"Speak like a man or keep your pathetic mouth shut," Akandu growled.

“W-w-why m-m-must we k-k-kill her?” It was just the kind of question a miserable mouse would ask, and Musuka hated himself for asking it. He knew why. The witch sleeping inside the chamber knew his magic, knew how he passed unseen and opened doors that should not open. Killing in the dream world was no longer enough. If he was to become what he had to become, he would have to use the magic to kill in this world, and that meant she had to die. *Sh-sh-she had to.*

“Open the door, mouse, or I will put an end to our alliance.” The giant’s fingers tightened, emphasizing the manner of termination.

“We m-m-must be ka-ka-careful, or they will ka-ka-catch me.”

Akandu laughed a pitiless, menacing laugh. “Why do I care what happens to a mouse?”

The pressure in Musuka’s head was unbearable. He would lose consciousness soon. Akandu had done it to him before. Musuka took a deep breath and, summoning all his courage, he said in a clear, stutter-free voice, “Because without me, you’re nothing here.”

Akandu’s grip loosened, as if he was surprised by Musuka’s declaration and perhaps the boldness of its delivery. “Is that so?” he said with a rumbling chuckle. Then the fingers squeezed even tighter than before, causing Musuka to cry out. The world went dark, and just as Musuka was certain Akandu intended to kill him, the pressure stopped. The giant had let him go.

Musuka turned and looked up into Akandu’s black, empty eyes. He sensed the balance of power had shifted, if only for a moment, and he considered sending the giant away. He hated Akandu almost as much as he hated the queen, but like the giant had said, they had an alliance based on mutual need. Musuka needed Akandu’s strength and fearlessness, and Akandu needed Musuka’s magic to bring him into this world.

“Suit yourself, mouse,” Akandu growled. “I will go back to where I belong.” The giant spun and headed back toward the stairway.

Musuka called after him, “P-p-please d-d-don’t go.”

Akandu stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Open the door and stop wasting my time.”

Musuka bent over the chamber’s lock and waved the magic

box. The locking mechanism clicked, and the door opened.

The giant pushed Musuka aside and ducked through the doorway, drawing his great sword as he went. Musuka sighed, then followed him in and closed the door.

Chapter 3

Losing the Party

THE PATH ZIGZAGGED UP the steep mountainside, climbing high through the dense coniferous forest toward Jade Mountain's snowpack. The towering trees blocked most of the midday sun and what little light made it through took on a greenish hue as it filtered through the thick canopy of needles. Up ahead, the trees parted and blue sky appeared.

The ranger ran toward the light, wanting to escape the gloomy green twilight, but most of all needing to see what she'd come to see and get back to the party she'd left unguarded. Something scampered through the thick carpet of pine needles off to her right, and she spun to meet the sound, bringing her charged crossbow up in the same motion. A small deer darted between the trees and raced down the hill. Lowering the crossbow, she scanned the area, making sure the deer hadn't been spooked by something other than her.

Many creatures called the primal forest home. Most were animals, and other than the occasional hungry bear, were harmless. The trees did conceal dangers, though. Boarmen and Wargarian raiding parties prowled the forest paths, always on the lookout for defenseless travelers to ambush and slaughter. The ranger was anything but defenseless, as hundreds of Boarmen and Wargarians had learned over the years, but fending off raiders would delay her, and every minute the party was without her put them at risk.

She was the party's guide and leader. The other four members included two would-be fighting men, a useless cleric and an even more useless dwarf, all know-nothing *càiniào*, as vulnerable as infants. After agreeing on terms, they had set out from Staghead Gate four treks ago.

As was their agreement, she had led them on a training expedition, which included a few small experience-building

skirmishes and fabrication opportunities. She had taught them how to navigate, helped them develop their natural skills, taught them how to spot and appraise adversaries, and showed them how to use their weapons. She'd also taught them how to bury and reclaim their *Shēngmínglǐ*; not that that was something she encouraged. They had gotten their coin worth, as did all her customers. In just four treks, they were close to being able to range into the wilds between the gates on their own, far sooner than if they had stumbled around by themselves, as did most cheap *càiniǎo*. All that remained was to get them through the Jade Gate.

The path led to a rock outcropping that jutted from the western face of Jade Mountain like the prow of some enormous ship. The ranger walked to the edge and gazed out upon the valley several thousand feet below. The great pine forest covering the mountain gave way to an even greater forest of giant oak, hickory, and chestnut trees that stretched across the valley like a vast emerald sea until it broke against the distant snow-covered peaks of the White Mountains.

About a mile beyond where the pine trees surrendered to the hardwoods, the Jade River cut a north-south line through the forest. The rushing water formed a border separating the wild hill country from the relative safety of the flat lands. A road ran along the river's opposite bank until it veered west and cut its way through the trees heading toward the Jade Gate and the end of their expedition. All she had to do was get the party across.

Fording the deep and fast-moving river was possible with ropes. She'd watched Boarmen raiders do it, but she had not led the party here to lose them while attempting such a dangerous crossing. Luckily there was no need to try. Just before the road made its westward turn toward the gate, a stone bridge crossed the rapids. It was a short hike from where the party waited to the bridge, then another easy jog to the gate. At least, that's what she thought.

She retrieved her spyglass from her pack. Its polished brass interconnecting tubes gleamed in her hand. It was a remarkable instrument, and one of her favorite possessions. A smith on the other side of the world had fab'd it for her years ago. Moved by the beauty of the piece, the ranger had the smith engrave

her name, Darshana, on its outer barrel. She touched the script and imagined she felt the etched lettering. Of all the items she carried, only the glass bore her name. It seemed fitting. After all, Darshana was derived from *darshan*, which meant sight in the ancient language her mother had insisted she learn.

The bridge came into focus. Nothing moved over its narrow span. She aimed the spyglass at the road and followed it west all the way to the gate. It looked deserted as well. *Good.*

At full magnification, the distant gate's massive stone arch filled her view. All the gates in the Land looked similar, differing only by the type and coloring of the stone blocks they were constructed from. The Jade Gate was made of the same gray-blue granite that formed the bones of Jade Mountain. Nothing about the gate's appearance indicated it was anything other than a monument to some vain ruler's triumph. Although, a traveler with any sense might wonder at its placement in the middle of a remote valley forest far away from the nearest city or town.

Darshana refocused the glass on the bridge and followed the road south until it disappeared into the distance. Beyond the spyglass's range, she knew it continued for another ten miles until it reached the trading town of Vaux Hall, and the river went on for several hundred miles beyond that before draining into the Southron Sea. The road appeared empty in both directions. Yep. This was going to be an easy day.

She pulled the glass back to the bridge and trained it on the path that led up the mountain's western face. It was the same path Darshana had followed to the outcropping. The party waited for her about a half-mile below in a small clearing where the path that led down from the Jade Mountain pass met the path to the bridge.

The five of them had spent all morning climbing up to the pass from the east and then descending in route to the bridge. They had fought their way through several Boarmen raiding parties. She had let her charges do most of the fighting, only stepping in to assist when any of them got into trouble. Every engagement was an opportunity to learn techniques and gain experience. They'd thank her for it some day.

Darshana turned the glass toward where the clearing would be hidden by the trees and was alarmed to see a thin line of gray smoke rising into the otherwise flawless blue sky, mark-

ing the clearing's exact location. "What in the seven hells?" she muttered under her breath. "Morons!"

Returning the spyglass to her pack, she raced back down the path. She could think of no reason for them to start a fire and about two thousand for them not to. Every raider, treasure hunter, and predator in the area who saw the smoke would head toward its source, and if they got there before Darshana, she would lose her safe passage bonus. "Damn!"

The clearing was still a quarter mile away when she heard the shouts. The voices were familiar, Darian and Xu, the party's wannabe fighting men. Neither of them would last long against an experienced attacker. Darian was strong, but he was clumsy and slow with his sword. Xu was fast and better with his sword, but he was weak and would not withstand many hits. She'd almost lost him during their first skirmish not two miles from the Staghead Gate.

CRACK. A loud thunderclap drowned out the shouts. Ava, the cleric, had one attack spell, Lightning, and it sounded like she must have just used it. Darshana frowned. The spell was difficult to control. Cast by an inexperienced cleric like Ava, it made a lot of noise and light, but did little damage to who or what the party was fighting.

Another sharp thunderclap reverberated through the trees, followed by the metallic ringing of swords striking swords and then a long, high-pitched scream that could have come from Xu or Ava. Then silence. Darshana crept to the clearing's edge and almost gasped.

Xu and Ava's lifeless bodies lay on the ground near a small, smoldering campfire that still emitted the thin wisp of gray smoke that must have attracted their killer. A few paces from them, Darian stood holding his long, heavy sword. Its tip was pointed at the chest of the largest warrior Darshana had ever seen. Darian was tall—over six-three—but the man staring down at him, if it was indeed a man, was at least a foot taller.

The warrior was formidable. He—or it—had gray, almost blue, skin. Its massive chest and muscled abdomen were bare except for a heavy leather mantel that concealed half its brawny chest and covered its shoulders. Spiked armor plates fastened to the mantel protected the warrior's neck and shoulders from a downward blow, although it was difficult to imagine any foe

tall enough to deliver such a strike. A chain or cord encircled its neck, and there appeared to be objects dangling from it. They looked like ornaments, but she couldn't make out their shapes or colors.

What appeared to be a heavy steel helmet covered its head. Long, black hair, bound at several points by leather cord, flowed from under it. The helmet's brim cast a shadow, hiding the details of the warrior's face, and a metal strip descended from the helmet's reinforced brow, protecting the warrior's nose and further obscuring its features. The whites of the beast's eyes glowed within hidden sockets.

Its mouth was bent into a cruel smile, revealing fanged teeth that, like its eyes, seemed to glow against the black of its braided beard. It was a monster, and as she leveled her crossbow on its exposed chest, Darshana sensed it was too strong for her. If she got too close, she had little doubt it would kill her. The question was, would the bolt from her crossbow take it down or disable it long enough for her and Darian to escape?

She was about to squeeze the trigger and find out, when, moving faster than should have been possible for something that large, the warrior spun while drawing a longsword from a sheath on its back and cut Darian's head clean off. The head fell to the ground like a rock, followed a second later by Darian's body. The warrior wiped the blood from his sword and returned it to the sheath on his back.

Darshana holstered her crossbow. *So much for the bonus.* Keeping her eyes on the warrior who was busy picking through the party's few belongings, she eased away from the clearing. She turned to make for the bridge and spotted Falin peering out from behind a tree. The dwarf's reddish-brown cloak blended in well with the tree's trunk. He would have been invisible had it not been for his yellow beard. The dwarf was staring at the warrior and did not appear to see her.

Darshana crept toward him. Her feet found the forest floor without snapping a twig or rustling the mat of decaying pine straw. The dwarf only knew she was there when she wrapped her arm around his neck and clasped her hand across his mouth. She pulled him to the ground behind the trunk, out of the warrior's line of sight.

Falin fought her for a moment until he looked up and his

blue eyes widened in recognition. He calmed, and Darshana mouthed the word “quiet.”

She removed her hand from his mouth, and he blurted, “Where?”

Clasping his mouth again, firmer this time, she whispered, “*Quiet*,” and fixed him with a stern stare.

He nodded.

Darshana unclasped his mouth, and in a low whisper, the dwarf asked, “Where have you been?”

“Spotting the road.”

She unwrapped her arm from his throat, and they both looked around the trunk at the grisly scene below.

“Get your shovel out,” she said.

“Why?”

“You need to bury your *Shēngmìnglì*.”

He corrected her pronunciation. “Shun-ming-lee. I want to make it to the gate.”

“No way to do that now.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the all-powerful ranger? Go down there and kill that thing. That’s what we paid you for, isn’t it?”

Darshana ignored him and studied the large gray form bent over Ava’s and Xu’s bodies.

“What is it anyway?” he asked.

“Don’t know. Looks like some kind of mixed breed. Maybe part man and part—” she thought for a moment “troll?”

“Troll?” the dwarf scoffed. “I thought they only came out at night.”

“Not this one.”

“What’s it doing?”

Darshana took out her spyglass and trained it on the warrior.

“Cutting off Ava’s ears.”

“That’s awful. Why would it do that?”

She focused the glass on the cord around the warrior’s neck. The objects dangling from it that she’d thought were ornaments were in fact ears, and there were dozens of them.

“Looks like he keeps them for trophies.”

“Is that even possible?”

Darshana shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

Something moved behind the gray warrior, and she focused the glass on a giant black stallion with glowing red eyes and fiery red nostrils that looked as if they might actually spout flames. "Big man, big horse," she uttered, not meaning the comment for the dwarf.

"What do you see?" the dwarf asked through excited breaths.

"It's got a horse. A big one. Looks very fast and quite terrifying."

Darshana re-aimed the glass at the warrior. It tucked Ava's ears into a pouch attached to the wide belt wrapped around its waist. It paused like it was thinking or maybe sensing, then it looked straight at her and grinned. *Uh-oh*. She ducked behind the tree, knowing it was too late. Stuffing the glass back in her pack, she turned to the dwarf. "Listen to me. Unless you want this all to have been a waste, you have to bury your *Shēngmìnglì* now."

Darshana started for the path.

"Wait. What about me?"

"Get digging."

"How will you outrun the horse?"

"I won't have to. That man-troll will be too busy cutting your ears off to catch me," she said as she bolted for the bridge path.