

WELCOME TO THE TEMPLE OF VALOR

About a fourteen-hour journey east of the village of Homestead, the Temple of Valor sits atop a strange geological anomaly called the Oracle Mount. This geological anomaly can best be described as the remnants of an ancient crater, possibly a meteoric impact, from thousands of years in the past. The Oracle Mount consists of a rising round hill in the center of the crater's ridge. The whole site, as seen from above, resembles a circle inside a circle, about four miles in diameter. In between the crater's high ridge and the Oracle Mount in its center, a valley of lush grassland divides the two areas. Rising gently from the valley, the Oracle Mount levels off to a flat top. There an ancient temple, rumored to have been constructed by the ancient acolytes of the Goddess Ehlona, is where we find the Temple of Valor.

TEMPLE OF VALOR

THE THIRD BOOK

OF THE

ASTAR'S BLADE SERIES



AN EPIC FANTASY

JOE LYON

Temple of Valor

Astar's Blade: (Book 3)

An Epic Fantasy Adventure
Written by Joe Lyon.

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THE WORLD SETTING



ONLINE VIEW OF MAP:

[Map of Odessa – Astar's Blade \(astarsblade.com\)](http://astarsblade.com)



THE WILDS

THE GREAT MA...

THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

HUSKARD
ST. BILGAS

CASTLE
ODISS...

MIDVEGUARD PASS

HOMESTEAD...

CONNER...

MID-RUN V...

SANGUINE FOREST

CASTLE
WILD...

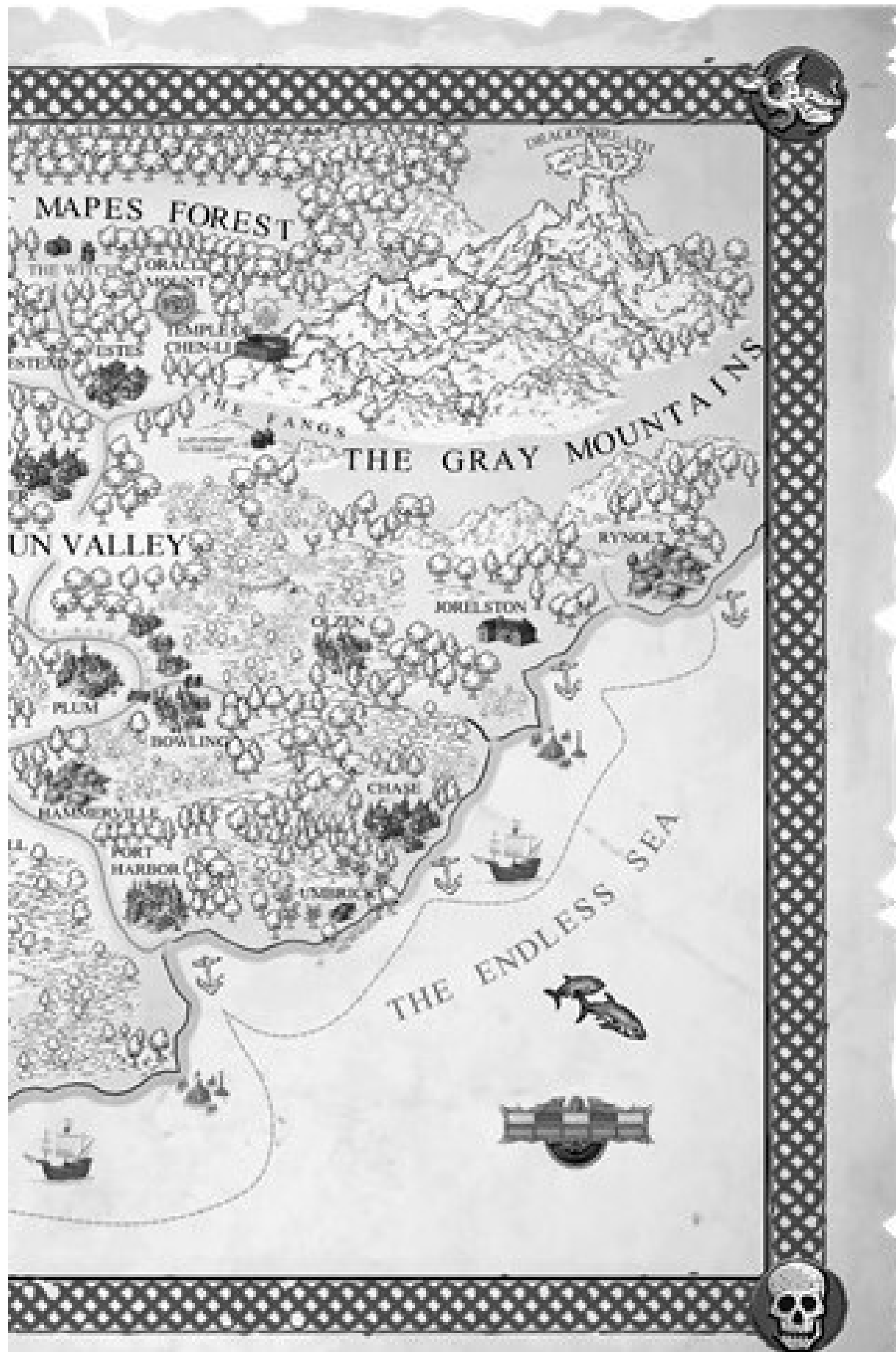
NOMAD
CAMP

DARBY

BLAVERHILL

BLAINE





DATE: 862 Human Recorded Time (HRT)

THE VILLAGE OF HOMESTEAD

Astar's birth had been heralded by the Star of Ehlona, which shone for a year. Now no longer a child, Astar has grown well into his eighteenth year. Since the death of his mother, Gilglad, who perished in a house fire fourteen years ago, Astar has been raised solely by his disabled father.

Amtor, now barely ambulatory, is a far cry from the man he was in his younger days. Once capable of bloody violence as a fierce warrior, he has become a sensitive, patient, and caring single parent. He provided Astar with a good, if not overly protected, childhood.

As for the boy, Astar's rogue memories and strange thoughts had not always been entirely his own. Likewise, over the years, he exhibited strange powers he could not understand or control. Powers that occurred mostly in his dreams.

But times are changing.

Time is the sudden movement of her skin
She turns around to face me with a morning smile
~ Excerpt from *The Witch's Songbook*

Prologue



Dreams of Astar

VILLAGE OF HOMESTEAD

The door opened.

What time is it?

Does it matter?

Shh! Quiet. Don't wake the boy.

He heard the whispers. Then silence. Too much silence.

Astar awoke. The clock had stopped ticking, its pendulum defied gravity, impossibly frozen in the upward position. He realized he was observing the clock *and* the door simultaneously. The problem was, they were on opposing walls. When he moved his head, a third perspective came into view. In this one, he was looking down at his body. He could see all of these perspectives, all *three* of them, at the same time.

Looking down, he observed he now possessed five arms: three on the left, two on the right. Farther below, he saw he had three legs, two stretched out straight, while a third bent comfortably in a ninety-degree angle.

He lifted his hand and rubbed his face, and a new sixth arm touched his head—*heads*. There were now three of them. Each head framed a perfect copy of his face, each pointing in a different direction. One face was turned toward the door—the one that had opened its eyes on its own. Another face watched the clock on the south wall, its pendulum frozen. Astar's third face was angled down examining the condition of his body.

All of Astar's extra appendages—the arms, legs, and faces—functioned independently, yet simultaneously, and according to the choices of what he willed them to do. All of his parts were valid personas of himself. All of them made up the whole.

Astar had stopped time again. Realizing what he had done, he started it back up.

As soon as time began once again, the clock started ticking. Its pendulum, unfrozen now, swung back and forth to keep the time current.

Fully awake now, he chose a single persona to merge into. The other forms moved toward the one. His one chosen form accepted the other altered versions of himself. A quick slurping sound followed as all the Astars absorbed into the one likeness of himself like watercolors. What remained was a single Astar, one he decided upon, selected by the will of his own choice. For no particular reason, he selected the aspect of himself facing in the direction of the door.

It was at that moment that he realized the door had not opened on its own. Rather, he had just opened it while in another version of himself. Now that form of himself was gone, merged into the one Astar, along with all the other spare versions. He realized the voices that had awakened him had been his own. He had been talking to other versions of himself.

This was not the first time this phenomenon had happened. He had stopped time before many times over the past eighteen years or so. As he got older, the power to do it increased. When he stopped time, his thoughts became movements; he left traces of these movements behind. Moving from here to there with time stopped resulted in his being in multiple places at once. He was not sure how the phenomenon worked or even whether it was real or not. But to Astar, and all his mysterious perspectives, it seemed real enough.

When Astar was just a young boy, stopping time had only worked while he was dreaming, but that was changing. As he grew, this power, and the control of that power, was increasing. He could stop time even during his waking hours now.

Was that a dream? he thought as he listened to the ticking of the clock. *What was it about this time?*

Before rising from bed, he tried to remember what he had been dreaming about. It must have some significance since he spawned off so many copies of himself. He struggled to remember, as the stoppage of time always distracted him, but then, it all came back.

Oh, yes, he remembered. He was flying. Behind him the darkness followed, and complete impenetrable black slammed the scenery shut as he floated by. As he flew forward, he shone a great beam of colored light in front of him. Under his own control, he levitated along illuminating the trees and hills, making them look surreal and dazzling in colors of red, yellow, and green.

But he was not alone. Menacing shapes propelled by large wings came up from the trees to meet him in the air. These dark creatures hated his light and despised being bathed in the colors. They angrily engaged him. These were frightening creatures, growling in their throats,

large snouts and stout, boulder-like bodies, like the very stones of the world had come alive to threaten him.

“Stay away!” Astar warned with an outstretched palm. “Don’t you know I could destroy you with a wave of my hand?”

But they did not listen. Instead, the creatures circled him. Astar frowned to think he may have to destroy such incredible creatures. He warned them again.

“You are being far too aggressive. Look, I’ll let you live, just leave me alone.”

But they kept pressing. They continued to fly around him, swiping so close Astar had to duck to avoid being hit. They would not stop on their own. They only wanted to hurt him. As bad as he didn’t want to do it, Astar waved his hand, just as he had warned he would. The shapes began to burn like embers of charcoal. They burned and they blurred, until ultimately, they dissipated into wispy clouds of black smoke.

“See what you made me do?” Astar said. “I really would have quite liked your company, and to spend some time with you. But look at you now. You made me kill you all and now I am alone.”

As he thought more about the dream, he remembered hearing a loud boom. He could not tell if this was part of the dream or if the noise had been real. Then he remembered hearing more booms but not understanding if they were real or imaginary. That was when he stopped time and multiplied himself to go see. More booms came. They got louder and nearer...until they were gone.

Maybe it was the demons again, he thought.

Over the course of his childhood, the demons had come for him before. But his father, Amtor, always the fearless warrior, managed to keep them away.

As the memories of the dream faded away, the real world returned. He was left with a new threat.

Something was under the ground—something menacing, moving closer and coming to the surface. Something that would soon be revealed.

ACT I

WHAT COMES OUT UNDER THE GROUND

I can feel the world tearing apart

Yes, I can feel it

It is breaking my heart

Tear it apart

~ Excerpt from *The Witch's Songbook*

The Skeletal King had been waiting for him to return. Now, he stepped closer.

~ Excerpt from *Kilmer's Ghost* (Chapter 1)

The Night of the Devourers



GREAT MAPES FOREST

A heavy boom disrupted the serenity of the Great Mapes Forest. The sudden noise sent birds flying from treetops. Deer lifted their heads, rabbits rose on hind legs, all scanning the landscape for signs of danger. Then another boom sounded, louder this time. This one rattled the ground, swaying the trees. The woodland creatures scurried away.

More booms followed. They were coming from underground. A steady pounding against the ceiling of the world below. They were getting louder. The hammering more forceful. Something, it seemed, was moving closer to the surface.

The first fractures of stone formed from a central point, appearing suddenly like a spider's web of cracked ground. Yellow-and-red steam hissed out, venting from the molten underground. Fragmented rocks collapsed under their own weight down into the depths below.

The smoldering hole formed a glowing cavity, a steamy portal into the underworld. Casting shadows across the forest, the glowing vapors exhaled and gave the branches a sinister appearance in flickering light. The hole itself looked like a breathing monster with a noxious mouth completely opened.

Then the pounding stopped.

Deep within the pit something stirred. Movements disturbed the smoky beams of uplifting light. A three-fingered hand, black as the darkest shadow, reached out of the pit and struck the ground, clamping down hard outside the rim. The other hand followed, trailing with it a fleshy purple forearm and elbow. Leveraging against the ridge, the beast endeavored to lift itself out.

The creature came out of the pit and firmly stood on legs of wrinkly flabby skin. The beast, silhouetted against the yellow glow, hissed steam and lifted its head. The motion revealed two round eyes, black as obsidian. Its snout, upturned and rodent-like, jutted up above the thing's shiny eyes. Out of its nostrils came a snort of warm vapors in twin columns. Below its snout, and across the entirety of its body, its enormous mouth stretched in a wide downward frown that ran down in a great arc, nearly touching the ground at its lowest point on either side.

The creature, lumbering slowly, stepped away from the rim of the pit with pounding steps. With another snort of hot air, the massive colossus shook its bulbous head, again exhaling vapors in the cold night air.

Behind the first creature, another pair of dark arms reached out of the pit. A second huge Devourer began climbing out of the steaming crevasse. The second one was an exact duplicate of the first. The thing rose out of the hole and stood beside the first, silhouetted in billowing yellow-and-orange fumes.

The first Devourer leaned back and lifted its arms to stretch. As it did, it untucked a pair of veiny, leathery wings and opened them fully. The wings were connected in segments, sealed over, and supported by spindly rods. They resembled long smooth shields accentuated by sharp

edges like unforgiving sharpened knives. Swinging its wings out quickly with only the slightest flap, it hurtled dirt and leaves off the ground back into the ashes. Then once stretched, it neatly compacted its wings, folding them under and away. The creature turned and considered its twin. Then they both paused and waited for yet another to climb its way out.

The second Devourer yawned, exposing a wide gaping mouth that opened the entirety of its body. After a series of smacks with a purplish tongue, thick and covered with sticky clear slime, it closed its mouth into a morose frown. It watched the third shape rising from the steamy underground. Just as the other two had, the new creature labored to climb its way up to the top of the hole. Finally, the third Devourer was born.

Three Devourers stood in front of the glowing billowing steam. Their eyes shimmered like wet obsidian with the slickness of the oiliest black. Upon instinct, they opened their wings and turned into the wind. One by one they took to the sky. With their massive wings pumping the air, they gradually rose in incremental flaps. Soon they were riding the air currents above the trees of the Great Mapes Forest. Into the night they rose, becoming nearly invisible as black on black in the darkness. Reaching the extent of their elevation, they effortlessly moved through the night. They followed one another circling overhead into a triangular pattern. They were scanning the Mid-Run Valley below. The land stretched out before them, revealing its secrets to their unique vision. Nothing escaped their sight in any direction.

They glided down now. The ancient trees were thick and strong enough to support their weight. They silently came to a rest with a gentle, but heavy, landing on some low-hanging branches. There, they sat motionless for a long time, using all their senses, driven by an instinctive need to feed.

A pair of young lovers had stolen away from the watchful eyes of their parents. They rolled in an adolescent embrace, kissing and laughing softly—tempting targets to the Devourers. But the young lovers were not what they scanned for and not what they craved. So, the lovers went about their lovemaking, unaware they had been passed over.

The Devourers looked beyond. A glen appealed to them, a distant cow pasture, where a herd of animals lay asleep. One by one, the living wood sprang away, as the Devourers pushed off the branches. Catching the air in a mighty pull of their wings the creatures rose into the night again. After climbing high and gaining the desired elevation, they dived in unison, reaching incredible speed, soaring toward the ground, toward their unsuspecting prey.

The Devourers struck with taloned feet, and three cows let out startled screams. The surviving bovines scattered as quickly as they could, running for their lives.

The Devourers opened wide yawning mouths, revealing row upon row of triangular teeth that spiraled in circles down deep purple throats. Each monster, in turn, enveloped half of their animal with the elastic skin of their enormous mouths. Then they tightened, and with a series of jerking, crunchy bites, the cows were severed in half—the uneaten half falling to the ground like a wet bag of sand from a single lethal bite.

The black creatures munched until the meat was gone. Afterward, they remained silently still in the darkness, like giant insentient monoliths. There, they waited for their meal to settle and digest. As the hazy dawn blended orange light through the dark blue, they waited.

The hours passed. Then, the Devourers started to stir again. One lifted a wing and preened underneath with a claw, satisfying an itch that disturbed it. Then, each in turn rose on

their three-toed feet, unfolded their wings, and took to the skies. They glided back to the waiting branches of the Great Mapes Forest.

The dawn did not bother them. As the sun rose, they remained perched upon the high branches of the great trees. No observer would be able to recognize them from some distant shadow in the branches. Here, they could watch, invisible in the treetops. The only suggestion they were there was the ever unblinking, ever watchful orbs of their greasy black eyes.

The surrounding lands had brightened into a new day. The lovers had gone long ago, never knowing how close they had come to death. But the Devourers were not sent up from below to punish the wicked. They had another purpose entirely, one even more sinister.

Finally, the dew burned away, and the day revealed hazy shapes in the village below. The townsfolk started to move about in the open, intent upon doing their business, unaware of the danger lurking above.