

Book I: Everterra

Chapter 1 — The Fire

(80%)

The Ninth Gate was never meant to be lived in.

Seraph knew that before the guards ever touched him.

“No.”

The word was barely sound—more breath than defiance—but it was enough.

“Move.”

The command came without heat or haste, spoken the way one spoke to doors or animals. Hands seized the back of Seraph’s robe and wrenched him forward. He resisted instinctively, boots scraping against stone, fingers clawing for purchase as the open doorway yawned before him. The air beyond it felt wrong—colder, heavier—as if the fortress exhaled only inward.

“Please,” he said, voice thin, fraying. “Anywhere else. I’ll clean anywhere else.”

The blow came from the side. A fist drove into his ribs, sharp and precise.

Pain flared—bright, familiar, survivable.

Seraph folded but did not let go. His fingers dug into the threshold, nails scraping stone raw, as if the doorway itself might offer mercy. He had learned, over years, which pains passed and which did not. Beatings passed. Interiors lingered.

“Inside,” a guard growled. “You know the rules.”

They peeled his hands loose one at a time.

The pain was manageable.

What waited beyond was not.

They threw him.

Seraph struck the stone on his hands and knees, the impact jarring his bones. Cold dampness soaked instantly into his palms and sleeves. Behind him, the guards laughed—not loudly, not cruelly, just mildly entertained, as men were when violence required no effort.

“Always this one,” someone said. “Acts like the walls are going to eat him.”

“Give it time,” another replied. “They usually do.”

The door slammed shut.

Silence followed.

Not empty silence. Not peace.

A pressure. A presence.

Seraph remained where he had fallen, forehead hovering just above the stone, breath shallow and uneven. His ribs burned where they'd struck him. His hands trembled—not from pain, but from knowing where he was. The Ninth Gate did not merely contain rooms; it collected them. It remembered.

He had been beaten before.

Beatings passed.

The interior of the Ninth Gate did not.

The chamber around him was vast, its ceiling lost to shadow far above. Water dripped steadily from unseen cracks, each drop echoing too long, as if the room were counting time. The air was cold and wet, heavy with mold, rot, and something older—something that had soaked into the stone and refused to leave.

Then hands touched him.

Firm. Certain.

“Easy,” a voice said close to his ear. Calm. Grounded. “I’ve got you.”

Seraph didn’t rise.

He was lifted.

Strong arms drew him upright before his legs could fail him, steadying him as the world stopped spinning.

“You’re shaking,” the voice said.

“I’m fine,” Seraph murmured automatically.

“You always say that,” the voice replied.

When Seraph opened his eyes, there were three of them in the room.

Hugo stood closest—a broad, solid presence carved from endurance. Though shorter than most dwarves, his build carried unmistakable density: thick shoulders, powerful arms, weight that did not waste itself. His red hair hung long and bound into a single braid, his beard worn the same way, threaded with early gray. His clothes were sackcloth and rags, but he stood like a wall, positioned subtly between Seraph and the dark.

Behind them stood Garr.

Silent. Still.

The orc’s presence was different—less weight, more balance. His frame was lean but powerful, muscle drawn tight beneath scarred skin. His movements were economical, deliberate. Long black hair fell loose down his back, untouched by ornament. His eyes were calm, observant, unreadable.

Seraph himself was pale even by Darkling standards—white skin stark against the gloom, black eyes reflecting torchlight like polished stone. Lavender horns curved smoothly from his brow, dulled by years of grime. A tear in his robe revealed the slow movement of a double tail, twitching with nerves he could not still.

Three figures.

Three breaths.

Together.

Seraph closed his eyes for a moment longer than necessary.

He had tried not to come this deep into the Gate. He always did. And the guards always made sure he paid for trying.

But he was not alone.

He never was.

The chamber they had been assigned was enormous, far larger than any task demanded of it. Once, it had likely hosted feasts or councils—stone laid to impress, to intimidate, to endure. Now it stood hollow and stripped, its purpose reduced to neglect. The walls wept constantly, thin streams of water tracing paths into slick pools along the floor. Debris lay scattered everywhere: broken furniture, shattered stone, rusted iron warped by age.

They began to clean.

Brooms scraped. Stone shifted. Old things were moved and burned. Work in the Ninth Gate was less about progress than obedience—proof that bodies could still be directed.

“We’ve been here for years, Seraph,” Hugo said, watching Garr move through controlled martial strikes against splintered furniture set upright like training foes. “And you still complain as if it will change our circumstances.”

“I don’t complain,” Seraph said quietly. “I hope.”

“That’s what I said,” Hugo replied.

Garr approached a solid oak table left inexplicably intact. He placed his palm against it, drew a slow breath, and struck downward. The table split nearly in half. Garr centered himself again, hands pressed together, breath steady.

By now, both brothers were accustomed to Garr’s silence. He had taken a vow nearly ten years earlier. Not even relentless beatings from the guards had broken it.

The scars along his back and calves told that story without words.

The work continued.

Stone shifted. Ash was gathered. Broken furniture was dragged closer to the fire pit and reduced piece by piece. The rhythm of labor settled back over them, familiar enough that Seraph almost

forgot the tightness in his chest.

Almost.

Seraph felt it first—an instinctive tightening in his chest, the faint prickle of being watched.

He turned just as something lunged from the shadows.

The rats came all at once.

They were enormous—each the size of a large dog, bodies swollen and corded with muscle, fur patchy and slick with filth. Their eyes burned with fever-bright madness, and their teeth clattered as they moved, too fast for creatures that should have been so heavy.

Seraph raised his hands, a glow of an attack grew from his hands but panic fractured his focus. His first strike went wide, a flare of pale radiance splashing uselessly against stone.

One of the rats slammed into him, knocking the breath from his lungs. Claws tore fabric and flesh as it snapped for his throat.

Garr moved.

He crossed the chamber in a blur, striking the creature mid-lunge. Bone cracked under the force of the blow. The rat shrieked once before collapsing, lifeless before it finished sliding across the floor.

More poured in.

Hugo stepped forward and became an immovable thing.

He planted his feet wide and met the swarm head-on, shouldering into the first two bodies as they slammed into him. His arm came down like a hammer, crushing skulls, boots stamping with brutal precision. He took the impact without retreat, absorbing blow after blow as if daring the mass to break him.

Another rat slipped past.

Seraph tried again.

Light flared brighter—but panic twisted it. The strike faltered, grazing instead of stopping the charge. Pain exploded across his ribs as teeth sank in.

He cried out and collapsed.

Garr was there instantly.

He interposed himself between Seraph and the snapping jaws, taking the bite meant for Seraph's throat. Teeth tore deep into Garr's calf. Blood spilled freely onto the stone.

Garr did not slow.

He twisted, drove his elbow down, and ended the creature with a single precise strike. He flowed immediately into the next motion, ending another rat before it could turn.

Hugo roared—not in rage, but command—and surged forward, holding the remaining rats at bay through sheer strength and refusal to yield. He moved like a wall, absorbing impacts that would have crushed a lesser man.

The last rat tried to flee.

It didn't make it far.

Silence returned abruptly, broken only by heavy breathing and the slow drip of blood onto stone.

Seraph lay shaking.

He dragged himself across the floor to Garr first, hands glowing faintly as he pressed them to the torn flesh. Healing came slowly, reluctantly, the cost settling deep in his chest. Sweat beaded on his brow.

Hugo knelt beside him next, clutching his own bleeding arm. Seraph healed that too—then turned the light on himself, sealing torn skin with trembling hands.

“Good thing to have a healer as a brother,” Hugo said hoarsely.

Seraph managed a weak smile. “It pays to have protectors.”

As the Father protects us, Seraph thought, but did not say aloud.

Garr prepared the rats without comment. He built the fire low and narrow, coaxing the flame down until it barely breathed. In the Ninth Gate, anything that burned too brightly invited attention, and attention was never given without cost. Meat turned slowly.

“Save some,” Seraph said. “For the others.”

Hugo hesitated, then sighed. “You're impossible.”

They ate.

When darkness fully settled, they lay close—not for comfort, but for certainty.

Morning would come whether they survived it or not.

Three bodies.

One warmth.

Held.