

## DART - (Excerpt – Chapter 1)

### 1

*Don't look down!*

Isn't that what they say? If you don't have a head for heights. If the sight makes your head spin, or worse, tugs at you, makes you feel like you can fly...

Dart kept his eyes shut and pressed his cheek against the crumbling rock. Above him, on the edge of the cliff, the hovart bellowed and stamped its feet. Dust and pebbles showered Dart's head and shoulders.

*Don't look!*

The hovart fell silent. Waves broke against rocks, a long way beneath Dart's feet. A gull cried, startlingly close, answered by a chorus of its kin. The air smelled of the sea, tainted by a faint, rancid wisp of hovart.

The thin ledge under Dart's right foot gave way and his knee banged against the cliff face. He scrambled for purchase and the remainder of the ledge sheared off with a sound like a snapping twig. Dart held on by his finger tips.

A scraping noise came from above and more debris rained on him. Dart tilted his head back and opened his eyes. The sharp edge of the cliff severed a bright blue arc of sky. No sign of the hovart. The scraping resumed and directly above, the cliff edge changed shape, bulged outward...

*Oh, crap!*

Dart let go with his right hand and twisted to his left. A jagged rock fell past, missed him by a finger's width. His left hand slipped as his wrist turned. He bent his knees, scraped the heels of his boots down the steeply sloped rock face. His right leg straightened but his left boot caught on something solid. *Held.* Dart pushed back against the rock, stared at the sky, gasping while his heart tried to punch a hole in his chest.

A white pebble bounced off his head and disappeared towards the waves. He fought the temptation to follow it. A second pebble struck him. Dart looked up. The hovart stared down at him, eyes black ellipses set in circles of gold. It bared an impressive row of pointed brown teeth.

"Had enough, yet?" Dart asked.

The ellipses narrowed, widened again and the hovart grunted. The tip of a pointed blade slid out between its teeth, followed by a gout of blood. Warm droplets spattered Dart's face and he turned away, blinking. When he looked up again, the hovart's eyes were closed and the blade had disappeared. A coil of rope flew out over the cliff's edge, straightened and fell, struck Dart's shoulder.

"Who's there?" he called.

Gulls squealed in the distance and waves rumbled at the foot of the cliff but no one answered. Dart caught the rope and tugged. It held.

"I'm coming up."

He looped the cable-vine rope around his wrist, held tight with both hands as he swung around to face the rock. The climb was no more than fifteen feet but by the time his head came level with the hovart's, his knees were shaking and drops of sweat hung from his nose and chin. He reached over the edge, grabbed a handful of thick, yellow hovart pelt, dragged himself up and rolled onto his back beside the massive, stinking carcass.

He took a few moments to catch his breath before he propped himself up on his elbows. Knee-high blue moss grew to within a few feet of the bare rock at the cliff's edge. A scar-line of broken, black soil led through the moss to a cluster of boulders—probably where the

hovart found the rock to drop on him. A few paces beyond the boulders a dense growth of tall dapplewoods marked the beginning of the forest. Dart stood up and turned a full circle. He was alone with the dead hovart.

Dart knelt beside the corpse, breathing through his mouth to lessen the stench. One end of the rope he'd climbed was bound to the hovart's leg, the knot a double hitch that would have taken only a few seconds to tie. Something caught his eye and he bent closer, heart pounding again. The strands of cable-vine were cleverly woven, leaf shapes worked into the surface of the rope every few inches along its length. His hand slid to the empty scabbard at his hip and he cursed under his breath. The urge to look around him was overwhelming, but he forced himself to stare at the ground.

Dart freed the rope, looped it and slung it over his shoulder. He stood and walked past the hovart. A leather strap lay half-buried in black soil and crushed moss—part of the travel bag he'd thrown at the hovart as it rushed him, bought himself the moments he needed to scramble a few feet down the face of the cliff. Several minutes searching among thick blue tendrils of moss were rewarded when he recovered his water flask and his throwing knife. He slid the knife inside his boot, all the while careful to avoid looking at the forest.

Dart stood for a time, staring out over the ocean but concentrating on the sounds of the breeze rustling leaves behind him. His mind worked through a tangle of contradictions. *Sylthen rope*. Surely that meant his rescuer was Sylth—but that made no sense. He drank from the flask. The water was warm from lying in the sun but Dart hardly noticed. He tied the flask to his belt and turned. Eyes fixed on the ground, he walked towards the forest.

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You can run a long way with a hovart chasing you. Two of them can really make you travel...

Dapplewood shadows stretched in front of Dart when he stopped at the edge of the clearing.

*The sun climbs high,  
in the western sky.  
In the east sets the sun,  
when the day is done.*

His lips moved to the childhood rhyme but the words sounded only in his head. He remembered dashing across the same clearing a couple of hours before, the raging hovart close behind him. Bright sunlight had flooded the area and he'd ignored the whipper-weeds. Now, wherever shadows touched, waist-high plants waved from side to side. A pandionfly, silver-veined wings larger than Dart's hands, flapped into the air from the carpet of dapplewood seeds at the forest's edge. The nearest whipper-weed straightened, black petals parted on its single flower and a barbed, golden whip lanced from within, tore through the pandionfly's bloated thorax. The whipper-weed bent to feed.

If he still had his sword, Dart could have made it to the other side. *Most likely*. Whipper-weeds were damnably quick. But his sword was a few hundred yards beyond the clearing, jammed in the throat of a dead hovart, one of the pair that had attacked him. The knife tucked in his boot was too short to deal with the weeds safely. He'd have to go around. Dart moved off to his left.

A hint of movement between patterned tree trunks in front made him stop mid-stride. He turned and headed in the opposite direction. A few steps, a whisper of sound to his right, then something flitted behind hanging branches, straight ahead. Dart cursed. Keeping his eyes on the ground, he returned to the spot where he'd started.

*Sylth or whipper-weeds?*

He glanced up at the darkening sky then looked at the clearing again. It was the best part of fifty yards across and the whipper-weeds grew in clusters all over. The shadows seemed to lengthen as he watched, already close to the trunks of the dapplewoods on the far side. He bent and pulled the throwing knife from his boot, spun it into the air and caught it in a cutting grip.

*Better than nothing.*

Dart stepped between the bole of a dapplewood and the snagging leaves of a tanglethorn bush. A few paces to either side of him, black flowers swiveled to face him. He leapt forward, rolled as he landed, came up with the knife arcing past his face. Two lashing, golden whips parted as the blade caught them mid-strike. Dart was already gone, dashing past the cluster of weeds. He slowed, turned, stepped sideways between two larger growths of the deadly plants, flinching as the barbed whips from dozens of straining black flowers straightened and cracked, inches from his legs.

*Half way.*

Ahead of him, weeds barred his path, spread across the whole of the clearing. Black flowers burst open, spitting poison-tipped coils. The air filled with a continuous death-rattle of cracking whips. Dart stood still. A few steps to his right, fading sunlight fell on an area about four or five feet wide but extending to the trees on the far side of the clearing. The weeds within were stirring but their flowers were still closed. Dart ran through the sunlit path at a dead sprint. A large cluster of weeds to his right erupted, launching golden coils as he passed. He lashed out with the blade, felt pain as a barb tore the back of his hand.

*One! One won't kill me...*

Five paces short of the trees, Dart slipped, stumbled sideways, felt two more stings, this time on his leg. He staggered under the branches and fell on his knees.

*Three.*

There were stories about people who'd taken one, maybe two whipper-weed stings and lived. Dart looked at his calf. Two red-stained puncture marks on his trouser leg where the weeds had got him. The back of his hand wasn't bleeding but there was purpling around a red sting-hole, just above his knuckle. It was beginning to swell.

*Congratulations Dart! Two nine foot hovarts, a thousand foot cliff and the damned Sylth can't manage it—then you get yourself killed by vegetation!*

His forehead burned and the back of his throat felt parched. Dart took a swig from his flask, leaned his head back and passed out.

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If you think a live hovart smells bad, try killing one and leaving it out in the sun for a while...

The stench brought Dart back to his senses. He was still alive; the smell was real, and close. His shoulders and thighs were sending messages of pain, over and over, to a mind that received them with increasing awareness. Dart's head hung forward, his chin resting on his chest. He couldn't feel his hands or his feet. Gray light filtered past his lashes when he opened his eyes. It took a few moments for things to come into focus. He was looking down on the corpse of a hovart. Cause of death wasn't hard to work out. The familiar hilt of Dart's sword jutted from the hovart's throat.

*Why am I above it?*

Dart turned his head, the movement surprisingly difficult until he understood what had been done to him. Cable-vine rope stretched from his wrists and ankles to trees on either side.

He was suspended, spread-eagled and more or less upright, about three feet above the ground. He looked down again.

*Naked, too.*

“Surprised to be alive, hovart-slayer?”

The voice was scarcely louder than a whisper, directly behind. Impossible to tell whether it was male or female.

Dart licked his lips. “Life’s full of surprises.”

“The poison from the weeds was enough to kill you. I healed you, hovart-slayer.”

“Much obliged. Now, if you’ll cut me down and give me back my clothes, I’ll be on my way.”

Dart felt something cold touch his scrotum. He looked down and saw a gleaming, silver blade, its face worked with a pattern of leaves, jutting between his legs.

“Tell me your name.” The voice had hardened.

“Darthanil Black. My friends call me Dart.”

“You have no friends here, Darthanil Black.” The blade moved up and down, lifting his balls in cadence with the words. Dart strained against the ropes binding his wrists, tried to lift himself higher. His balls made a similar effort, all by themselves.

“Why don’t you tell me what you want? This isn’t doing it for me.”

The blade disappeared. Dart tensed, half expecting its point to burst through his chest. Moments turned to minutes. Flies buzzed around the dead hovart’s eyes and a clinger slap-slapped along a branch somewhere above Dart’s head. The adrenalin buzz the blade had caused started to fade and most of his world centered on the pain in his limbs.

“Are you brave—or foolish?”

Dart would have jumped, if he could have. The voice was closer, clearer. He was certain now that it was female.

“I’m naked and I’m hurting. Cut me down.”

“What makes you think I will do that?”

“You could have let the hovart get me at the cliff. You could have let the weed stings finish me. If you wanted me dead, I’d be dead. You want something from me.”

Dart heard footsteps, sensed movement to his right. He snapped his eyes shut. The voice came again, this time from in front of him.

“You may look at me, Darthanil Black.”

He shook his head. “You’re Sylth. I’m a Former. If I look at you, you *will* kill me.”

“As you pointed out—if I wanted you dead, you would be.”

*Hard to see how things can get much worse.*

Dart opened his eyes.