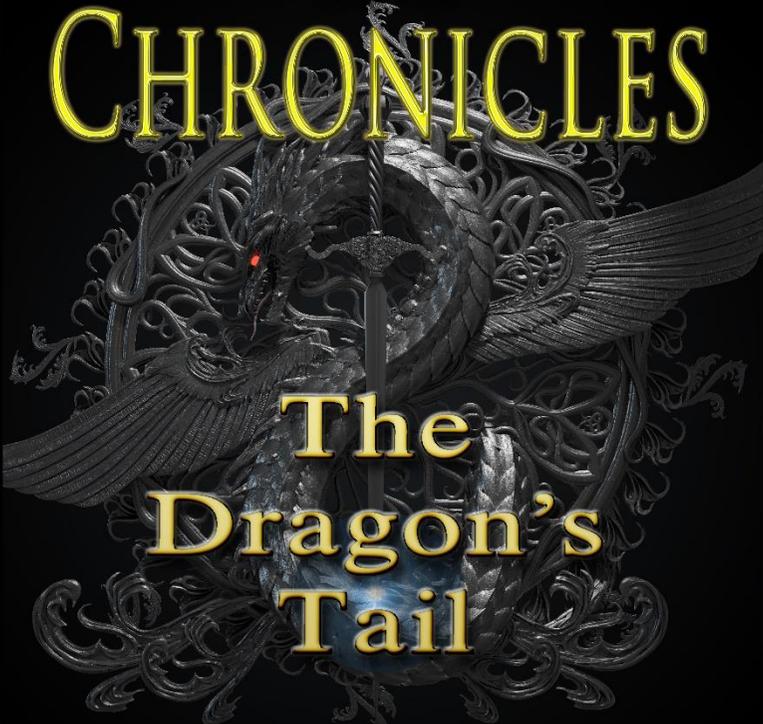


NIERGEL

Book Four

CHRONICLES



The  
Dragon's  
Tail

D. I. HENNESSEY

# THE DRAGON'S TAIL

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NIERGEL CHRONICLES  
BOOK FOUR

D. I. HENNESSEY



*“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his  
friends.”*

*~ John 15:13*

IMPOSSIBLE VICTORY

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*Flashback, Earlier today...*

A terrible wailing fills the air. Ghostly black creatures have begun to surround Jeff in a vicious swarm, filling the room and choking the breath from his lungs. He is fighting desperately, dispatching the monsters, one after another with brilliant flashes of light — but can feel that his dwindling strength will soon be exhausted.

“LEAVE!” he shouts to Genie, “SAVE YOURSELF! I CAN’T HOLD THEM OFF!”

Before she is able to respond, great numbers of the hideous creatures swarm toward her in an overwhelming and brutal attack. Jeff watches helplessly as she is repeatedly stricken and tossed by the violent onslaught; she thrashes at them in vain, but her formidable fighting skills are useless against the murderous ghostly beings. Jeff vainly blasts the creatures off of her time and again, only to see more of the beasts quickly take their place.

“NOOOOOOOOO!” he screams as they smash her against the

floor, crushing the air from her lungs. His last blast is expended, and his heart sinks at the sight of an endless throng of the hellish beasts still flying toward them. Hundreds more are swarming across the castle grounds below.

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THE IMAGES in Jeff's dream flash in a vivid nightmare, forcing him to relive the terrifying ordeal. He cries out in his sleep, his body shuddering violently.

Hunahpu comes near his great-grandson's hospital bed and places a reassuring hand on his shoulder, breathing a prayer for holy calm to displace the fearful dream. He waits prayerfully as Jeff grows quiet once again while a nurse wipes the beads of sweat from Jeff's forehead.

The old man moves back to his seat, lifting his Bible from the table beside him and reopening it. Before long, however, Hunahpu's eyes grow heavy and he stares blankly into its open pages, drifting into a dream of his own as he finds himself reliving the momentous day...

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*"... Join us here as soon as possible; it's best t'be below ground..."* he overhears EB urging Jeff from the underground Lab.

*He won't be coming...* Hunahpu recalls thinking to himself. He already knew that his great-grandson would not heed EB's warning; he had sensed it. The approaching menace bore an evil much more dangerous than mere bombers. Hunahpu knew that it was Jeff's charge to face that evil — it pained him to know that there was nothing he could do to help his young heir.

Except to pray, that is. Quietly retreating to an empty room beside the Lab, he kneels at a chair, using the room's solitude as a makeshift chapel in which to urgently lift Jeff in intercession. In his pocket a single seed from the ancient Shepherd's Staff suddenly draws his attention — this one was born from the leaf he had claimed from the

Staff on the day Jeff was chosen by it. He feels oddly compelled to reach for it, holding it in his hand as his heart groans in an unctio that can only be fathomed by the Spirit of God who inspired it.

He loses track of the time, as is often the case when he loses himself in prayer. The rumble of a gigantic explosion rouses him, so great that it shakes the air violently and echoes in the underground halls. He rushes into the Lab to see what has happened, hearing EB calling for Jeff on the radio.

*"..Jeff... Report... What is your status?"*

After a tense silence Jeff's voice is heard, sounding dazed, but offering great relief to the men underground.

While EB and Jeff are still speaking, however, Hunahpu feels a sudden foreboding of danger as he registers the distant sound of soldiers screaming over the radio channel.

*"I'll call you back!"* they hear Jeff say as his comm link disconnects.

Hunahpu senses that he must act quickly; slipping into the elevator, he immediately heads for the surface. Though he knows that he can not fight the Eljo himself — the Staff's power is Jeff's alone to wield — he still feels a great urgency to go to him.

The elevator doors open to a deserted lobby. Just beyond the castle's front doors, the sounds of a great conflict can be heard. Hunahpu rushes toward the Rotunda, surprised to notice Eugenia dashing across its white marble expanse far ahead of him. She vaults up the circular staircase, taking several steps at a time, and disappears before he has had time to traverse the great Hall behind her. As he ascends the staircase, he can hear the sound of fighting coming from the office suite, mixed with something else — a cacophony of unearthly sounds, like the eerie wailing of monstrous beasts. Bright flashes of light can be seen reflecting off the walls inside.

The sense of overwhelming evil is unmistakable as Hunahpu enters the outer office, causing him to drop to his knees. With great dismay, he discerns that the flashes of battle have ended, yet the overbearing presence of evil remains, increasing in ever-greater strength. He begins to lift Jeff urgently in prayer, raising his arms in a desperate plea to God.

Barely an instant later, Hunahpu hears Jeff crying out loudly in a voice that is hoarse and strained but nonetheless clear and forceful. It is not a cry of anguish but rather one filled with righteous anger and an immense Heavenly anointing.

“IMPERIUM CHRISTI, VENI VIRGAM DEI! By the POWER OF GOD”

Immediately the sound of a gigantic rush of wind fills the room where Hunahpu is kneeling, followed by a sudden roar of beastly anguish. It splits the air as hundreds of malevolent shadow creatures cry out in instantaneous unison before being snuffed out a split second later. It is followed by a concussion wave of Shekinah Glory that washes over him like a cleansing wind, completely purging the menacing evil that had filled the air moments before.

Hunahpu opens his eyes and climbs slowly to his feet, listening carefully for sounds of battle... hearing only silence. He anxiously makes his way to Jeff's office and finds a scene that resembles a war zone, with shattered glass, broken furniture, and strewn papers everywhere. Lying in the middle of it all, a few yards apart, are Jeff and Eugenia — appearing nearly lifeless.

He checks them quickly, finding in each of them a weak but steady pulse. Borrowing Jeff's comm link he quickly calls for help.

“Jeffrey and Eugenia need urgent medical attention — send a team immediately to Jeff's office!”

His request is quickly acknowledged with a promise that EMTs are on their way.

Hunahpu turns back to Jeff, looking at the ancient Staff still clutched in his outstretched arm. He carefully lifts it from his great-grandson's grasp and holds it reverently in his hands; then, thinking quickly, he moves it out of sight before the medical team arrives. Eugenia and Jeff are carefully examined, and then the unconscious pair are lifted onto stretchers while Hunahpu looks on and quietly whispers a grateful prayer.

Once they are safe, Hunahpu looks back to where he has hidden the Staff and retrieves it, studying its smooth surface of young wood in awestruck admiration. He knows what he must do, moving imme-

diately to the Library and boarding the secret elevator to return it to the security of its place in the Secret Chamber.

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“JEFF IS WAKING UP,” the nurse announces as she gently nudges Hunahpu, stirring him from his dream.

Hunahpu’s replay of the day’s events scatters as he opens his eyes, soon recognizing the sound of Jeff’s voice as the young man begins to finally awaken. He climbs to his feet and grips Jeff’s arm while the attending nurses quickly notify the doctor and check the readings on a myriad of gauges.

AFTER GROGGILY LOOKING AROUND to discern his whereabouts, Jeff’s first concern is for Eugenia’s condition and then the safety of the Shepherd’s Staff. Hunahpu assures him that both are safe and the Staff, at least, seems no worse for wear; the same cannot be said for Eugenia, nor Jeff, for that matter.

Jeff looks at his great-grandfather with an awestruck expression and confesses that he knows now where the Staff’s power comes from. It had only been in his own total surrender that its power was truly revealed.

After a short pause, he looks up with a concerned realization.

“They’re not going to stop trying to destroy us, are they.” Hunahpu understands that his great-grandson’s remark is not a question; he shakes his head in acknowledgment.

“Have they always been this determined?”

“Determined, yes,” Hunahpu answers, “but never as desperate as this. They are testing you, I’m afraid.”

Jeff sighs. As if the 90-day Challenge and learning to run the world’s largest corporation are not tests enough on their own.

Something that Semjaza’s ghostly apparition had said on the night it attacked him in the Secret Chamber suddenly strikes him; the words replay in his head...

*“...Such a worthless protector you were... proof that the great prophecy of the Tenth Mantle Bearer was but a lie.”*

It occurs to him that his uncle's letter had also mentioned the fact that he was to be *“the tenth bearer of this great mantle.”* He looks at Hunahpu, struggling for a moment with whether he should ask the question that burns in his mind.

“What happens if I fail?” He asks tentatively, “What if I'm not able to complete the Challenge. Why is the Tenth Mantle Bearer different from the others?”

Hunahpu looks at him with an understanding expression and places his hand on Jeff's shoulder reassuringly.

“You will not fail, my son... of that, I am certain.”

Jeff studies his Great-Grandfather's gaze questioningly, but the look in the old man's eyes shows no inkling of doubt.



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## MENDING

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*~ 10 days later...*

Jeff is staring at his office wall as he relives the past weeks' events for the countless time. Each time that they replay in his mind, the scenes become a little more vivid, revealing some new detail that he hadn't noticed before.

At the moment, he is considering Hunahpu's words to him at the hospital — wondering how his great-grandfather could be so certain that Jeff will not fail. Granted, it could have been an effort on his great-grandfather's part to encourage him, but something in the old man's eyes told Jeff that his words were based on a great deal more than empty wishes or blind faith.

Once again, the mere thought of faith triggers memories of the Shepherd's Staff and its stunning deliverance, now on two separate occasions. Could that be what Hunahpu saw in him — a special ability of some kind? Was it a hint of some sort of Divine anointing? Could it really be true that he is being called for some remarkable purpose?

He can't help feeling that he is an unlikely candidate for such a role. Barely a month ago, he didn't even believe in God! At least, that was what he had still been telling himself at the time. He realizes in hindsight that he actually had known that God was real all along — he'd only been in denial.

It was pretty remarkable that God had gotten through to him, as a matter of fact. That, in itself, was reason to believe God may have something extraordinary in mind. However, the thought of a special calling makes him nervous. He definitely doesn't see himself as the Old Testament Prophet type.

He quickly stands and walks to the office windows, trying again to clear his head. In the ten days since the attack, the office has been repaired, and its huge windows have been replaced with even stronger, bullet-proof glass. He surveys the room gratefully and then lets his gaze fall to the floor as he walks. His eye suddenly catches the reflection of a single bead of tempered glass that was overlooked by the repair crews. He picks it up, rolling it between his fingertips as it triggers memories of the horrendous events.

In his mind's eye, he is once again surrounded by swarming black Eljo as they pour through the shattered windows. Then the image quickly changes, and in an instant, the ghostly fiends are blown away like wisps of thin smoke in a hurricane gale. The clean, fresh air that takes their place fills his spirit like a deep cleansing breath. It seems so vivid that it makes him stop where he is and steady himself. The sudden sense of relief reminds him of the way he felt on that astonishing day in the Secret Chamber — when Hunahpu led him to the Lord!

That thought causes another to dawn on him: the only thing he's ever done to qualify for God's favor was that simple act of contrition. It was nothing more than a surrender. He didn't do anything at all except stop resisting. Yet the power that it revealed was so much greater than any he'd ever imagined — it shakes him to the center of his spirit as he considers it.

*Forgiven...* The word resonates within him, sparking near-disbe-

lief at God's capacity to forgive. He thinks of the years that he spent denying God's existence and convincing others to deny Him as well. Years as God's enemy. Yet all he has sensed from God in return has been unmeasured and unrestrained love.

A KNOCK at his office door prompts him to turn around, finding EB and Eugenia standing in the open doorway. Eugenia is still nursing her bruised rib and collar bone, with one arm in a sling. Jeff's sprained knee forces him to walk with a limp as he waves them in and makes his way to join them in seats near the fireplace.

EB ignores their injuries as he takes a seat and immediately launches into the purpose of their meeting — a briefing on the events they've missed.

"We shot down a Borgia drone just offshore. It was apparently gatherin' intelligence on damage from the attack. Flight recorders have been recovered from all o' th' downed bombers, which are bein' analyzed now."

Jeff nods approvingly. "What about their ships — do we know where they're being built?"

"Brandish is still tracin' the parts shipments. They've covered their tracks pretty well."

Genie leans forward, "Anything new from their communications chatter?"

"It's been especially silent since Dylen's account went dark. Whatever they're workin' on, it likely doesn't involve the rank-and-file. They must be workin' on it offline — possibly face-to-face."

Genie thinks about that for a moment before commenting soberly. "That either means they're back to square one or already makin' final plans for their next attack."

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ON MONDAY MORNING, Eugenia insists on continuing Jeff's fight training. Although neither of them can fight very well in their recov-

ering condition, especially her, she coaches Jeff in basic swordsmanship and stances. *Slow-motion fighting*, as Jeff begins to call it.

The slower pace doesn't mean that the training is less intense, though. Eugenia makes sure that Jeff's movements are precise and measured — making him practice over and over until she is satisfied.

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THEY SIT TOGETHER AFTERWARD, exiting the gym to find an empty bench outside on the castle grounds; it overlooks a stunning view of the ocean. Conversation comes easy to them, having spent a whole week recovering together in the hospital. The parallels between their childhood stories have formed a deepening bond between them.

"So, I never asked. Were you born here in Loch Harnan?" Jeff asks with genuine interest.

Genie pauses for a moment as a rush of memories washes over her. "Nae. It was in Erskine — back'n Renfrewshire in the Scottish mainland. It was a lovely little place of farms mostly.

"I remember lovin' to play in the glades an' pretendin' t'be a fairy princess an' whatnot."

Jeff's eyebrows raise, and he looks at her... "You? A Fairy princess?" he jokes. The stone-cold expression she gives him in return prompts a quick apology.

"I suppose I had my share of scrapes as well," she then concedes with a sly smile. "Guess I always loved fightin' a bit too much."

Jeff resists the temptation to poke at her last remark. "A farm, you say? Is that where EB is from?"

"Aye, t'was Shan'er's boyhood home. He an' Nanna had moved here t' the castle before I was born. My folks took the farmhouse — mainly fer raisin' me there, I suppose."

"I take it your parents weren't farmers."

"Maw did a bit o' farmin'. It was in her blood, I expect — she'd been livin' there all her life. But it was more of a garden, to be honest; they never sold any produce, as far as I could tell."

Genie grows quiet as her comment triggers other memories that are too painful to dwell on. Jeff doesn't probe; he's pretty sure he can relate perfectly to what she's feeling. They weren't much different in age when they each lost their parents. He skips ahead to help her past the painful memories.

"Moving here must have been a pretty dramatic adjustment."

"Oh, it wasn't so bad... the movin' part." Jeff watches his own familiar pain flash in her eyes as they share a kindred glance. "It was a big help having Nanna and Shan'er here to see me through the first few years." She looks up from her folded hands with a sympathetic expression... "It must have been so much harder for you... bein' all alone."

Jeff swallows noticeably before answering.

"I wasn't alone. I had my grandmother for that first year; my second parents gave me a loving home — I couldn't ask for more than that."

Genie leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees as she looks over at him, tilting her head curiously.

"She was Hunahpu's daughter — that's so amazing. You never told me what happened... to your grandmother. You don't have to talk about it if it's painful...if you don't want to... it's okay."

Jeff takes a deep breath and lets it out with a sigh.

"There's not much to tell, really. Just that she died in a commercial airline crash. She was on her way home from a visit to Peru."

"I was staying with Mom and Dad Samuels... they took me in and adopted me that same year. That's when we moved to Boston."

"It sounds like they loved you."

"Yeah... I never doubted it."

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THEIR CASUAL CONVERSATION continues while Jeff walks her back to her apartment. In her eyes, he catches the familiar glint of the swirling emotions that they both share. Neither of them is willing yet to

acknowledge the implications of those feelings. She nods to him with an awkward smile before ducking through her door.

Jeff glances at the floor as he smiles, then walks away. Their growing friendship warms his heart... he is feeling closer to her every day.



# The Dragon's Tail

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Niergel Chronicles Book 4

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