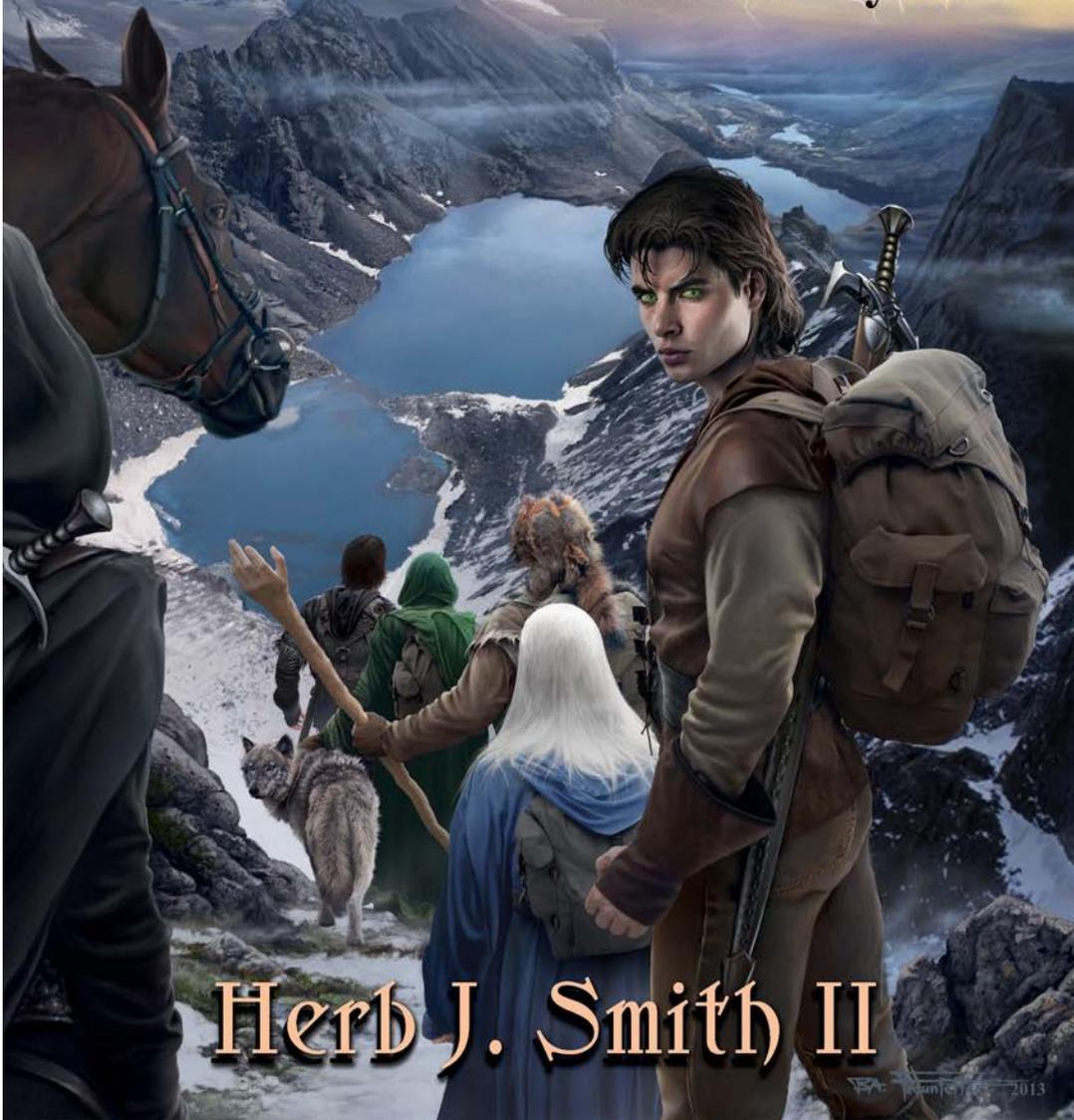


Keepers of the DAWN

Book One of
The Dawn Cycle



Herb J. Smith II

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IMPRISONED BY TEETH



For two thousand years the Teeth have stood, three immense barriers of divine light rising high into the heavens, encircling the world, dividing it from Paradise. Like others of the Penitent world, Dreen and his telepathically impaired son, Bartu, cling to a dream. A dream that one day a savior will arrive to fell the imprisoning Teeth. Unlike others, however, their dream rests on more than mere faith. It rests on the promise of an artifact that came to their family centuries ago, a holy relic that is key to a future savior's success.

To keep the relic safe, Dreen and Bartu must keep it secret. A task not easily accomplished in this world of telepaths. Making the task even more difficult is an obscure prophecy that foretells of the sacred artifact. A prophecy that Rue-A-Kai, the Destroyer, knows well. With the strength of a hundred wizards, the reincarnated savior of the Vile hordes imperils not only the Penitent kingdoms he now threatens to overrun, but also the promised arrival of a true future savior. Were the demonic Rue-A-Kai to acquire the holy relic, his perverse interpretation of prophecy would transform the relic from a device of deliverance to one of damnation, ensuring that the Teeth never fell, that the world never saw Paradise.

Yet the relic remains safely hidden, as it has for centuries. And there is no reason to believe it will not continue to remain so for centuries to come. No reason at all, that is, until the accident. . . .

Keepers of the Dawn (Sample)

by
Herb J. Smith II

Book One of The Dawn Cycle



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Pronunciation Guide

Sometimes the pronunciation of a name is not entirely clear from its spelling. Simple phonetic codes are used below to show the proper pronunciation of selected names. (Note that roughly half of these names refer to minor characters and historical figures that are mentioned only once or twice.)

Phonetic Codes and Examples of Their Use

| aa | past: paast
| ah | uhr | father: fah - tuhr
| ahr | far: fahr
| aw | law: law
| ay | fate: fayt
| ee | feed: feed
| eh | met: meht
| ih | nip: nihp
| iy | mind: miynd
| ks | aa | axe: aaks
| oh | know: noh
| oi | ih | uhr | destroyer: dih - stroi - uhr
| oo | tool: tool
| ow | sound: sownd
| uh | run: ruhn
| uhr | ay | later: lay - tuhr
| uu | room: ruum
| yoo | mute: myoot
| zh | ih | uh | vision: vih - zhuhn

Pronunciation of Selected Names

Ahzhag: ah - zahg
Ammen-Uld-Drak: ahmehn - uuld - drahk
Bartu: bahr - too
Cursed Lands: kuhr - sehd laanz
Guaxel-Um-Jah: goo - ahksl - uum - jah
Habach: hah - bahk
Hulta-II-Uld: huul - tah - ihl - uuld
Huyest: hoo - yehst
Imaryia: iy - mahr - ee - ah
Jahwel: jah - wehl
Jarah-Och-Whum: jah - rah - ahk - whuum
Kalifai: kaal - ih - fiy
Kalifain: kaal - ih - fayn
Kaun-Ib-Quoi: kahn - eeb - kwoi
Kulga: kuhl - gah
Lugaro: loo - gahr - oh
Luhre: loouhr

Montaho: mahn - tay - hoh
Montahoian: mahn - tay - hoh - ee - uhn
Musta: moo - stah
Muta: myoo - tah
Nevona: nuh - voh - nah
Penay: peh - nay
Penu: pay - noo
Penu-Um-Brah: pay - noo - uum - brah
Pulgot: puul - gaht
Pytre: pee - tuhr
Qifo: kiy - foh
Robivan: roh - bee - vahn
Robivanite: roh - bihv - uh - niyt
Rungolve: ruhn - gohlv
Ruwast: roo - wahst
Stensew: stehn - soh
Teipat: tay - paht
Teygruben: tay - groo - buhn
Trebald: treh - bahl
Tyre: teer
Ullet: oo - leht
Vogaun: voh - gahn
Volar: voh - lahr
Wellaena: weh - lay - nah
Wequenna: weh - kwehn - ah
Woot-Alim-Tahn: woot - ah - leem - tahn
Xakeeb: zah - keeb
Xercanna-Ut-Iben: zayr - kahn - ah - oot - ee - buhn
Yitre: yihtree
Yutren: yootrehn
Zaxenes: zahk - seenz

Map of the World



[\(larger version of map online\)](#)

Prologue

Yields not, the essence of our plight,
But obscures from all dawn's blessed light,
Blinding the world by limiting its sight,
This cursed shade, barrier of light.

—Book of Wounds, the Apocrypha

The old man slowly rose from his elbows and reached up to remove his hat. A sharp snap rang out above his ear, his fingers stung by a sudden jolt. He yelped and jerked his hand away. The lizard he had spied remained sprawled across the cabbage leaf, unperturbed, basking in the hot sun. The old man again raised his hand to the brim of the hat and tapped it twice with a finger, as though it were a hot poker fresh from the fire. This time the sharp nip of the Teeth did not bite. His eyes remained fixed on the lizard as he cautiously removed his hat and set it on the sandy ground beside him. Amid his damp matted locks, a scattering of stray hairs stood straight out on end as if drawn by the tug of an invisible hand. He took to all fours and crept toward the creature. As he neared, it cocked its head and peered up at him. He stopped and shifted his weight to his knees. The lizard leapt from the leaf and darted across the furrow. The old man lunged. A flash of brown slithered through his fingers, raced across the dirt, through the carrots, and into the beets four rows over.

The old man lingered on his elbows, noting the place where the lizard had disappeared. After moments, he sat up and patted the dust from his threadbare shirt and trousers. Beside him, the bottom of his pail wriggled with a collection of tomato worms, beetles, grubs, and other assorted insects. The old man eyed the beets. From his stomach came a longing, but he steeled himself against the temptation. To give chase in such heat was the height of folly. With a last wistful look in the direction of the beets, he retrieved his hat and returned to his weeding.

Coming to the end of the row, the old man settled back on his haunches. He clasped his hands together and stretched his arms high above his head, arched his back, and groaned. A welcome crack issued along his spine. The old man lowered his arms, unfastened the bandanna from about his neck, and wiped the perspiration from his face. Twisting tight the cloth, he wrung its moisture out onto the parched earth. The ground eagerly drank in his sweat. He turned and peered east, squinting as he cupped a hand over his eyes. Out across the blinding plain two miles distant, rising high out of the parched and blasted earth, shimmered the Teeth of the Nameless-One.

The Teeth, its glowing pulsating face towering thousands of feet into the heavens, extended from north to south as far as the eye could see. The Teeth did not just span the horizon, it defined it. Great veins of multi-hued lightning erupted all along its length, crackling and hissing, like huge emaciated serpents rearing to strike at the sky, while along its base dust devils whirled,

propelled by the static discharge of the Teeth's arrhythmic pulsing. Strawn before the Teeth lay the detritus of life—bone, fur, desiccated leaf, and root—remnants of that which had strayed too near its divinity. Nothing of the earth penetrated the Teeth—not worm, not rock, not blade of grass. Nothing of the earth penetrated the Teeth—not even its pleas.

The Teeth was one of three preternatural barriers that had spontaneously erupted into existence two millennia before. Raised by He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless, the three barriers of Teeth were His response to humanity's defiance of Holy Law. This, the Eastern Teeth, partitioned the kingdoms of earth from the eternal kingdom of the Nameless-One. The Western Teeth, that which defined the western horizon, divided the earth's ocean from the Sea of Paradise. The Southern Teeth, spanning the width of the world from east to west, separated the land of the living from the gateway to Sheol, subterranean world of the dead. The earth bounded on three sides by impenetrable, forbidding Teeth. And to the far north, a trackless frozen waste. Impossibly frigid. Impassible.

The old man gazed at the resplendent colors arcing across the face of the shimmering Teeth. In his heart he embraced its divinity. Better to beg mercy beneath His incessant glare, he reasoned, than to flee the fury of His gaze and give in to a life of despair. Each day the old man toiled in that desert was but another day he proved his devotion to the Nameless-One. Another day he proved himself worthy to pass through that divine barrier.

Centuries ago, on the very site where the old man now lived and labored, she had also made a home. But He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless had judged the Sainted Prulista too good for this world. In a moment of sublime grace, He lowered His Teeth and accepted her into Paradise. She alone, of all humanity, He forgave.

The old man found hope in Saint Prulista's absolution. Hope that perhaps humankind had not been condemned to eternal exile. Hope that the audacious prophecy would one day prove true. That one day a Savior truly would arrive and convince He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless to again lower His Teeth and accept into Paradise not just one sainted soul, but all of the righteous Penitent children of earth. The old man knew it a desperate prayer, but in that arid desert of hope, prayers were all that a Penitent had.

The old man turned from the Eastern Teeth and again peered west. The distant dust cloud had grown noticeably larger since last he had checked. He sighed as he struggled to his feet. He knew the dust carried with it prayers of another sort, prayers meant for he himself to answer. What the makers of dust did not know is that he had no answers to give them. He never had. He had only confirmations. And those the makers of dust were less eager to hear. No one who traveled so far into the wilderness ever sought just that. So most carried out of the desert more than was actually given them. And thus his fame grew.

The old man lifted the pail of squirming insects and started for his cabin. Judging by their speed, they would arrive shortly. He hoped they would bring meat.

The sun was nearing the horizon when the seven riders reigned up before the old man's cabin. It had been more than a decade since a commoner had come calling at his door, so the regal bearing of this group was not unexpected. Yet still he was surprised to see the woman who dismounted amid six well-armed guards.

"Your Holiness," he greeted, removing his hat and bowing low before her.

The middle-aged woman, dressed in a yellow, travel-stained habit, smiled as she and the captain of the guard approached. "Well met, goodman. I am High Priestess Woot-Alim-Tahn."

The old man straightened. "I am honored."

"It is I who am honored, Oracle."

The oracle bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Will you and your guard take refreshment inside?" he asked. "I regret I have little to offer, but you are welcome to all that I have."

"Perhaps some water for our mounts and a bit of land on which to make camp. We would like to stay the night."

"Of course," the oracle replied. He turned to the captain. "There is a spot near the well that should be suitable. It is mostly free of stones and the little pricklies. Just over there," he said, pointing.

"Yow!" a voice cried.

The three turned to see one of the guards shaking his hand as if stung. The guard looked over at them. "Forgive me," he said, bowing his head.

The oracle smiled. "Not to worry," he replied. "It is just a nip from the Teeth." He turned back to the captain. He saw the man was also smiling. "Tell your guard to be particularly wary of metal. It seems to arouse the worst bites."

The captain chuckled. "Yes, I do recall that, Your Worthiness. I shall be sure to tell them."

"And Captain," the priestess said, "have the oracle's gifts brought inside."

The captain nodded and turned back toward his command.

"Salted beef, two sides," the priestess informed the oracle, "as well as ten pounds of salt and a smattering of spices. The Holy Mother regrets She could not send more, but we are rushed and could not afford to carry much."

"It is a rich gift," the oracle said. "Give the Holy Mother my thanks."

The priestess nodded. "Shall we make our way inside? This heat is most oppressive."

The oracle turned and led the priestess through a low doorway, into his one-roomed home. Through the gloom, the priestess saw a narrow bed resting against the facing wall. Above the head of the bed was a window shuttered against the hot afternoon sun. Rays of sunlight pierced cracks in the shutters to fall on a small table in the center of the room. Amid the intruding rays sat a pitcher and two cups. Two rickety chairs bracketed the table, while in the corner a crudely wrought cupboard stood. A few feet from the cupboard sat a small iron stove. Next to the stove, an open door led down a short flight of stairs. The barest hint of a breeze wafted up the stairs from a small cellar belowground.

The oracle laid his hat on the bed and motioned the high priestess to one of the chairs. As she sat, two guards entered carrying the man's gifts. He directed them to the cellar and then turned to the window and opened the shutters a space. Hot air drifted in. A shaft of sunlight fell across the center of the table. "I regret I have no wine to offer," he said, taking a seat. "Only water."

"After nearly six weeks in the saddle," the priestess replied, "fresh water is as welcome to the palate as the best of vintages."

The oracle lifted the pitcher, filled one of the cups, and handed it to her. Then he filled the other for himself. The two guards emerged from the cellar and made their way outside, closing the door behind them. The cabin was thrown into darkness, save for the bright shaft of sunlight dividing the table between the oracle and the priestess.

The priestess reached within a wide leather pouch she carried and withdrew a scroll. She handed it to him. "From the Holy Mother. Proof that I am the instrument of Her inquiry."

The oracle examined the red wax seal. Indeed, the seal was a Seal of Awakening. The absence of a crest in the upper right quadrant marked the seal as that of the Holy Mother. Only Her seal lacked the identifying crest of a given holy office. He peered across the table at the priestess. "I fear I do not know the way of words. I recognize the Holy Mother's seal of course,

but beyond that . . .”

“The Holy Mother has not forgotten. Break the seal.”

The oracle ran a yellowed thumbnail along the seal and opened the scroll. He smiled. On the parchment had been sketched a scene. It depicted a young man in worn clothes together with an even younger woman dressed in an immaculate robe. The two sat next to each other on the ground. Cacti and tumbleweeds surrounded them, while a few feet away a roadrunner danced about a snake. The oracle shook his head. It was just as he had remembered the meeting. Even down to the roadrunner and snake. “We were so much younger then,” he said. “She had just been appointed primate of a Castellinian province.” He rolled up the scroll and set it aside. “But that was a long time ago. It was the last I ever spoke with Her.”

“The Holy Mother regrets not having had an opportunity to visit with you in the many years since,” the priestess replied. “Be assured, Her absence was not due to a lack of desire.”

The oracle raised his hands in contrition. “Forgive my awkward words, Your Holiness. I did not mean to imply that I felt offended. One morning’s conversation with Her more than thirty years ago scarcely entitles me to take offense.”

“No need for apology. On the contrary, the Holy Mother is pleased the renowned Desert Oracle would deign to meet with Her envoy.”

The oracle bowed his head. “I am honored She regards me so highly.”

The priestess smiled. “And who does not? Your name is known to king and commoner alike. But you are well aware of this, I am sure.”

The oracle smiled politely.

“Forgive my abruptness, but our time is short and our need urgent, so if we might . . .”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

“Again, I give you thanks for your indulgence. As you have no doubt guessed, the Holy Mother is desperate for answers She can find nowhere else.”

“I understand.” The oracle raised his cup and drank deeply. Then he set it down and stared evenly at the priestess. “And you are pressed for time.”

The priestess nodded.

“Ask me Her questions then, let the talent speak as it may. What flows through me now is beyond my reckoning. I am but a conduit for that which follows.” The oracle closed his eyes and bowed his head, resting his elbows on the table and placing his fingertips against his temples. He took two deep breaths, holding the last. After several moments, he slowly let it out. Then he whispered, “Ask.”

The priestess took a sip of water. The heat was stifling, but that was not what caused her mouth to suddenly go dry. Hunched over the table before her was the most renowned oracle of the age. The answers he now provided could very well change the course of history. And she would be the one to pose the questions. Her hands shook slightly as she took them from the table and hid them away in her lap.

Before leaving Ivory City, the Holy Mother had warned her to be concise in framing her questions. She was to take nothing for granted. *The oracle answers only what you ask him*, She had told her, *not necessarily what you meant to ask him*. The priestess gathered herself and launched into her first question.

“Two moons ago, our compellers were probing the ether deep inside the Cursed Lands, gathering long-range intelligence for our crusade. During one of their probes they happened to sense a life force of terrifying power. Unfortunately, they caught only a glimpse of it before it disappeared back behind an impenetrable mind-shield. Our compellers were left puzzled. For all

of its apparent strength, the entity seemed utterly bereft of earthly intellect and emotion. Not since the Vile-Penitent war had such an entity been perceived. This has led our compellers to a disturbing conclusion. A conclusion with which many of the Holy Mother's advisors agree."

The priestess took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "This, then, is our question. Has the demon Destroyer been resurrected? Is the entity that has been detected in the Cursed Lands truly the same Rue-A-Kai whose head was taken at the Battle of the Claymouth Pass twenty-two years ago?"

The oracle did not hesitate. "It animates him still."

"It?"

"It is the same as it was. He is the same as he was, but different."

"The same but different?"

"He is the same in spirit, but not in flesh."

The priestess stared at the oracle. "So Rue-A-Kai has taken possession of another body?"

"He is the same but not the same."

The priestess nodded. The tone of the oracle's reply indicated she would get no further clarification. She took another sip of water. The implications of the oracle's answer were troubling. It suggested that Rue-A-Kai might be able to escape even a dead host to take possession of a living one. That perhaps the Holy Alliance had not killed him at the close of the Vile-Penitent war after all. That he might, in fact, be invincible! Her hand trembled as she set the cup back on the table.

"We have a second question," she continued, "and it is this. The Holy Alliance's victory in the Vile-Penitent war was costly, leaving the ranks of the five kingdoms sorely depleted. More than two decades later, the imbalance of power that arose out of that conflict has only grown worse. Old feuds and disputes have risen anew as stronger kingdoms seek to take advantage of weaker ones. And all of this just as events in the Cursed Lands have forced the Holy Mother to issue a new Call to the five kingdoms for holy warriors. So the Holy Mother now asks: Do the tensions among the five kingdoms endanger our efforts in this crusade?"

The oracle mumbled something. The priestess leaned closer. He mumbled again. Still she could not make out his words. She was just about to repeat the question, when the oracle spoke in a quiet but firm voice.

"The Holy Mother's fear is rightly placed. Ask your question."

The priestess was puzzled. She asked again. "Do the tensions among the—"

"*Your* fear is rightly placed," he interrupted. The priestess's eyes widened. "Ask *your* question."

The priestess sat contemplating the oracle's bowed head, uncertain of how to proceed. After moments she said, "I do not understand. I have asked our question."

The oracle did not respond.

The priestess considered. There was one question that underlay all of the many questions she had been directed to ask this day. A question that would render all of those other questions moot. It was an obvious question, a question that should be asked, yet the Holy Mother had not directed her to ask it. She had not even acknowledged that such a question existed. The priestess took another sip from her cup. Perhaps the oracle was right. Perhaps the Holy Mother had not directed her to ask the question, because the Holy Mother feared to ask it. And what of herself? Should she ask a question that she had not been specifically directed to ask? The oracle was right there too. Her own fear was rightly placed.

The oracle had put her in a difficult position. It was clear he would not answer the question

she had put to him. It was hard to say if he would answer any of her remaining questions, save for the one she feared to ask. Resist too much the direction the session sought to take and the mystical link could be broken, the trance disrupted. Then what answers would she get?

The priestess lifted her cup, drained it, and set it on the table. She placed her hands back in her lap and leaned forward, peering at the oracle's bowed head. She decided. She would not leave without the answers they needed. Whether authorized to ask the question or not, she would ask it. They had to know. She had to know.

The priestess began again, speaking slowly in measured tones. "For centuries scholars have struggled from afar to study the ways of the Viles—their religious beliefs, their demonic rituals, their blighted and perverted culture. Of all their discoveries, however, the most troubling by far has been the realization that their religion is but an odious mockery of our own. So similar yet so twisted. So . . . profane." She paused a moment, pondering exactly how to phrase what next she had to say. After moments, she continued. "We know the Viles also wish to see the Eastern Teeth fall. We know too that they realize Paradise lies on the other side. Yet the Viles seek a different path to Paradise. Not a path of penance, as the Penitent world follows, but rather one of force. My question, then, is this." The priestess swallowed hard. "Do the Viles believe Rue-A-Kai can indeed fell the Teeth? Do they intend to follow their dark savior out of the Cursed Lands so as to assail the Eastern Teeth by force?"

The oracle sat quietly. The priestess stared at him, awaiting an answer. She noticed she had clenched her hands into fists. She relaxed them and brought them up from her lap, laying them palms down on the table before her. The oracle sighed. The priestess listened intently. At last he spoke.

"From out of the trembling earth, from out of shuddering mountains, borne on wings of pain, the Book of Ancient Power reveals itself to a Fateful Few. Be quick Few who hear, for the Book is as a cloudburst in desert, here then gone without trace. Aid Him—the one possessed of many lives, fell with secret power of the Ancients—for only with Book and Stone can one alone hope to assail the wall to Paradise and free the enslaved. Then shall the vile persecutor, jailer of millions, flee in terror before our monstrous horde. Then shall we reclaim the Paradise of our forebears. Then shall we truly be free!"

The priestess frowned. "Book and Stone? I do not understand."

"Prophecies unknown to the Penitent fire the passions of the Kalifai." The oracle appeared as though he was about to say more, then he fell silent.

The priestess was even more puzzled than before. She failed to notice she had again balled her hands into fists.

The oracle groaned. Then he again spoke. "The Kalifai believe the Destroyer has the power to fell the Teeth. They will follow their dark savior wherever he leads them."

The priestess slumped back in her chair, her arms falling limply into her lap. The Desert Oracle had just confirmed the Church's greatest fear. The audacity of the Ancients had nearly destroyed the world once, bringing humankind to the very brink of damnation. Two thousand years later the Penitents still stood at that brink, struggling for redemption from the sins of their long-dead progenitors. Now the Viles, led by their demon savior, Rue-A-Kai the Destroyer, would defy Him yet again. If they succeeded in reaching the Eastern Teeth, then humanity's damnation would be assured, for to assail the Eastern Teeth was to assail Him! It would not matter that they had no hope of bringing down the Teeth. Merely confronting it would be enough. This time there would be no reprieve. He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless would ensure that the souls of Penitent and Vile alike burned in the Eternal Fires of Sheol.

The priestess leaned forward over the table. With trembling voice, she asked, “Will they succeed?”

The oracle was quick to answer. “Their quest to fell the Teeth is doomed.”

The priestess shook her head impatiently. “That we know. But will they succeed in reaching the Teeth?”

“They can, yes.”

The priestess felt the blood drain from her face. Her hands shook. Her voice cracked. “Can they be stopped?”

The oracle did not answer.

The priestess’s eyes filled with tears. “Can they be stopped?” she nearly shouted.

The oracle’s head dipped slightly. After moments, he replied. “One of the Church’s children is filled with fear. He struggles against the Holy Mother’s embrace, even as his brother approaches him with knife unsheathed. He is trapped! He feels he cannot escape his brother unless he can first escape his Mother. If he runs from Her, there is no chance. Her arms tighten about him. Even now he trembles and plots his escape.”

The priestess quickly wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “The Church’s children, they are the five kingdoms, no?”

The oracle did not reply. But the priestess needed no answer. She already knew who and what the fearful child was.

She shot a thread to the captain’s mind. The captain took it up. “*Your Holiness?*”

“*Mount up. We ride!*”

The priestess sensed momentary confusion. But the captain was a good and loyal servant. His hesitation was fleeting. “*As you command.*”

The priestess closed the link.

The oracle was still in the midst of his trance when the high priestess extended her thanks and hurriedly took her leave.

By the time the oracle again came to himself, the shaft of light on the table had turned to shadow, and the sliver of sky in the space between the shutters had gone to russet. He made his way outside, massaging his temples. His head ached horribly! He looked up. In the distance he could just make out seven figures shrouded in dust. They were riding hard, riding as if to catch the setting sun. “Hmm,” the oracle wondered aloud. He thought the sun beyond them.

The oracle put a hand over his stomach as he turned back to the door of his cabin. He found he had just developed a hunger for some salted beef.

Chapter One

Out of the west a spark arises,
Setting ablaze the world at night,
Unveiling the glory of primal dawn,
Hidden so long behind the light.
—Holy Book of Prophets and Seers

The three-year-old watched as red sparks slowly ascended the night to take their place among the stars. His finger traced the gray wisps of smoke as they followed aloft, heeding the silent call of infant embers. All about him in the darkness, furtive glances sought his face. The face of the mentally afflicted mishappen with the strange and unsettling eyes. Yet while those eyes stole glimpses of him, his eyes remained fixed on the splendor of the moment. Full-irised and white-less, like those of a cat, his bright emerald eyes saw only the wonder of a night sky in autumn.

A strong hand on the child's back reminded him of home and bed. He yawned widely and laid his head in his father's lap. For a time he played peek-a-boo with the night, until at last his eyelids grew too heavy. The low chatter of voices receded into silence as he passed into a peaceful sleep.

Above the coastal mountains, the harsh glare of the Western Teeth shone like an immense halo, its distant light competing with that of the harvest moon and the blazing bonfire burning in the village green. In the light of the bonfire, the village blacksmith sat cross-legged gently rubbing the back of his emerald-eyed son. On the blanket beside him sat Janna, his son's brawny nursemaid. Her red hair danced in the cool breeze, its fiery highlights reflecting in the smith's dark eyes. All around the three buzzed the excited voices of friends and neighbors and those who had journeyed to the village from the surrounding hamlets, hills, and mountains. The gathering was the largest to grace the community of Mithaven in many a year. The ether churned with expectation.

"I believe it is time, Dreen," Janna said, nodding toward the front of the assembled. The smith looked up.

Deacon Vogaun, the village healer, strode to the front of the dais, as a figure in a scarlet habit took a seat behind him. The buzzing fell to scattered whispers and then to silence.

"Friends," Vogaun began. "The Church honors us tonight with a visit from Her Grace, Priestess Quoil." The priestess smiled and nodded to the gathering. "Priestess Quoil has traveled all the way from Seapoint to speak with us on a matter of grave concern." Scattered murmurings rose from the gathering. Vogaun raised a hand for silence. The gathering quieted. "Before we hear from Her Grace, however, I have a few words of my own."

Vogaun looked out over the crowd. "Now when the Church launched this latest crusade

against the spawn of Muta, many of us thought it would not last past the fall harvest. Yet here we are in the midst of our fourth harvest since that time and still the crusade rages. This has given many of us cause for concern. I know it has me. And whenever people are concerned, rumors spread. One need only monitor the ether on a given evening to know that.”

Sporadic laughter rose from the crowd.

“Now, friends, I am here to tell you that much of what you hear in the ether these days is nothing more than rumor. Let me assure you that no Vile has escaped the Cursed Lands, so you need not be overly concerned about your neighbor on the blanket beside you whose face you cannot quite make out in the darkness.” Scattered chuckles carried across the common. “I would not have you thinking the danger is not real, however. It is. One has only to look to the example of the lost Kingdom of Imaryia to see that. Evil, as centuries of history has taught us, is not easily conquered.

“Now many of you have heard one rumor in particular and have obsessed over it. I know, for many of you have approached me with your concerns. I told those of you at the time that I did not believe this rumor to be true, not for an instant. My arguments convinced many of you, and you left my home disbelieving the rumor too. But this afternoon I was enlightened.” Vogaun projected a wave of concern out over the gathering, preparing them for what was to come. “My friends, the Holy Mother now knows why Muta’s children have battled so hard in this crusade. Why She has been unable to bring it to a quick conclusion. Most of the rumors we have heard are false. The worst of them, I fear, is not.” Vogaun took a deep breath as he looked out over the concerned faces seated before him. “Rue-A-Kai, the Destroyer, does indeed live again.”

The gathering erupted, a thousand tongues struggling for voice at once.

“How can that be?” the brawny nursemaid exclaimed, turning to the smith. “The Popess Herself carried his head back from the Claymouth Mountains more than twenty years ago.”

The smith shook his head, concern clearly etched on his weathered face. In his lap, his sleeping son stirred.

“Countrymen, citizens, peace, I beg you!” The healer raised his hands in an appeal for silence, as he projected mental intonations of restraint out over the crowd. The gathering soon quieted. The healer lowered his hands. “Priestess Quoil would speak to you now on this and other matters. I ask that you attend her. Priestess.”

The priestess stood and stepped to the front of the dais. Vogaun took a seat behind her.

As the holy woman advanced, the crowd sketched the Sign of the Fall. The priestess returned the gesture. Then she laid back her cowl, exposing her short-cropped skull to the autumn chill. “Fellow Fallen, rejoice!” she cried. “For the Nameless-One has given us yet another chance to prove ourselves to Him.” The priestess swept the crowd with her gaze, taking in each of the more than one thousand faces in a glance. Smiling, she raised her arms heavenward and in a rising crescendo proclaimed, “By returning the infidel to the world, He shows that we remain in His thoughts. That He has not forsaken us!”

“Redeem us!” erupted from the darkness. “Praise the Redeemer!”

“Yes, Fellow Fallen, rejoice! For the Lord-of-All again looks in our direction. He sends to us a challenge fit only for the most faithful of His subjects. Only through prayer and trial may we atone for our sins and those of the Ancients. Praise Him for giving us this opportunity. Praise the Holy Mother for Her wisdom in seeing His divine design!”

Shouts of praise rose from the darkness.

“We are right to glorify Her guidance, for without it we would surely be lost.” As the diminutive figure in scarlet habit continued on, lauding the divinity of the Nameless-One, the

wisdom of the Holy Mother, the righteousness of the Church, her words became more and more passionate, more intense, more heated; until soon it seemed she had become flame itself, her uplifted arms like twin tongues of holy fire spewing forth searing words of conviction high into the night sky, licking the very stars with their molten heat! Fueled by the shouts and passions of the crowd, the intense flame erupted into a seething inferno, striving in its fury to erase all darkness from the night sky—from all night skies—forever! As the inferno grew larger and brighter, so too the retreating night grew darker; the light drawing strength from the darkness, the darkness drawing strength from the light—each feeding upon the other—until finally, no longer able to sustain its strength, the inferno stubbornly relented. Slowly the twin tongues of fire waned, lowering themselves down and down, dragging with them the mingled voices of the gathering, until at last all lay still and silent before the scarlet glow standing fixed upon the dais, its arms crossed amidst the flickering shadows of the bonfire.

Long moments passed. Slowly the smoldering flame cooled and calmed and became priestess again. The gathering relaxed.

“As Scripture tells us, Fellow Fallen,” the priestess resumed, “‘Humanity is imbued with a base nature.’ In the habit of this base nature, sometimes we commit sin. Oh not necessarily a great sin, mind you. Not the breaking of a commandment, not blasphemy, no. Sometimes we commit but a small sin. A sin that creeps up on us in the most mundane of situations. A sin that finds us on our bad days when the children are with colic or the wagon is mired in the mud. These are the times when we gnash our teeth, look to the heavens, and cry, Why me? Why has this happened? Why today of all days?” The priestess looked toward the night sky and threw wide her arms in exaggerated frustration. “What next?” The gathering chuckled nervously and nodded. The priestess smiled. “We have all done this, have we not? But do you know that by doing so we are committing sin?” The priestess looked around the gathering. “Even now many of you are unaware of what that sin is. I am not surprised, being that it is such a small sin. Small sins are easily overlooked, difficult to recognize. And that, good people, is precisely their danger. As Scripture teaches, ‘Unrecognized, the small sin grows.’”

The priestess clasped her hands before her. Behind her the bonfire popped and crackled and threw sparks high into the night sky. “To illustrate the dangers of a small sin,” she continued, “Scripture chronicles for us the coming of the Ruin.” She smiled as she peered at the faces before her. “Now I know what many of you must be thinking. The Ruin, a small sin? Is she touched? Was not the Ruin the greatest catastrophe humankind has ever known? Did it not lead to humanity’s exile from Paradise and to the raising of the Teeth? Well of course it did. But the Ruin did not begin with a multitude of great sins. No. It began with but a single sin. A small almost insignificant sin.

“Scripture tells us that in the time of the Ancients, Paradise was open to all of the righteous. In those days, Sheol contained no Vaults of Eternal Slumber to house our waiting dead. No, in that time Sheol was home only to demons. And there the demons remained, imprisoned within the bowels of the earth.

“No one knows the name of the man responsible for summoning the first demon from Sheol. That, like nearly everything else from the time before Ruin, has been lost to history. But knowledge of the man’s deed has been saved for us. Saved in Scripture.

“‘And the spirit of the Archdemon came unto the man, disguised in sumptuous raiment. With him he bore a wondrous device made all of darkness and shadow. The Archdemon tempted the man, saying, ‘Build this device from the materials of the earth, and the wealth of the world shall be yours!’” But the man answered the stranger, saying, “I am but a man of simple tastes and

have all the wealth I need.” And so the Archdemon departed. The next night the spirit of the Archdemon came again unto the man, disguised in vibrant raiment. With him he bore a wondrous device made all of light and color. The Archdemon tempted the man, saying, “Build this device from the materials of the earth, and all the praise of the world shall be yours!” But the man answered the stranger, saying, “I am but a man of simple manner and do not covet the praise of others.” And so the Archdemon departed a second time. The next night the spirit of the Archdemon came unto the man, disguised in tattered raiment. With him he bore a wondrous device made all of shadow and light. The Archdemon tempted the man, saying, “Build this device from the materials of the earth, and all the world shall know of your goodness.” And the man answered the stranger, saying, “Yes. Yes, I shall build this device from the materials of the earth, for I am a good man and care not if all the world knows it.” And the man took the wondrous device of shadow and light and fashioned a copy of it from the materials of the earth and set it down before the Archdemon. Then the Archdemon called forth from Sheol one of his many minions and placed its spirit inside the device, saying to it, “Through this device you shall work your will, for this is a vehicle for evil, set loose upon the good earth.””

The priestess peered down from the dais into the faces gathered below her. “Thus, out of the man’s conceit were sown the seeds of Ruin.” She smiled. “That was his small sin.” The priestess swept the crowd with her gaze. “So what of our small sin? Whatever it may be, surely it cannot compare with the sin that led to the Ruin?” She stepped to the edge of the dais and spread her arms wide in question. “Do you now know the sin of which we are all guilty?” She examined the faces staring back at her. The priestess nodded knowingly. “Let us revisit Scripture. The Holy Book of Chronicles.

““And the earth choked and vomited and spewed forth all manner of vileness in response to the evil devices. But humanity was blinded by the Archdemon’s promises and did not heed the earth’s distress. And more devices were built. And more demons conjured to direct them. And when He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless saw what His children were doing, He became enraged. From the four corners of the world He awakened the mighty Titans of Genesis, the four who had helped Him to construct the earth. And He said unto the four, “Go forth into the world and destroy all of the evil devices everywhere, for they house the spirits of demons and must be destroyed if the demons are to return to Sheol, their rightful home.” And the Titans went forth across the earth to do His bidding. But the kings of the world confronted the Titans and begged them to stop, for their people had become reliant on the devices and refused to let them go. But the mighty Titans lent them no ear, for the Lord-of-All had charged them with a sacred duty.’

“It was then, Fellow Fallen, that humanity conspired with the Archdemon and his demonic minions to defeat the builders of the earth. With every device the Titans destroyed, the Ancients built two to replace it, and two more demons were conjured to direct them. Soon, there were so many devices and so many demons that not even the Titans themselves could withstand the demons’ fury, and so they were overwhelmed and defeated. But that proved no victory for the Ancients. For through their own vehicles of evil, the Archdemon now had the strength necessary to defeat the Ancients as well.

““And the Archdemon turned the power of the diabolical devices on the people of the earth themselves and on the lands of earth and on the waters and skies of the earth and on all the living things of the earth, until all of the earth reeked of death! Then did the world become as Sheol: the Ruin utter and complete.””

The priestess sensed shame and loathing radiating from the gathering. She continued. “And what of the small sin of which I have spoken? Do you know it now? The sin that we all commit

when we gnash our teeth and rent our hair and look to the heavens and cry, *Why me?*” The priestess’s eyes narrowed. “Do you know it? No? Then I shall tell you. It is the sin of insolence, Fellow Fallen. Insolence! For how dare we think we deserve better than we are given. What right,” she fairly screamed in sudden rage, “do we have to question any part of His grand design? Was it not humankind who brought forth the demons? Was it not humankind who helped defeat the Titans, builders of the earth? Was it not we who plunged the world into Ruin? *Why me?*” The priestess’s face burned red in the flickering light of the bonfire. “Why not me? Why am I not tormented every moment of every day for what my ancestors, the Ancients, did? Do I not bear their stain? Is not the burden of their sins also upon my soul? Why not me? Being human, I deserve nothing of His good earth. Yet still, in His benevolence, He allows me to partake of the world’s goodness.”

The gathering sat silent, waves of anger and remorse emanating from their minds. Long moments passed before the priestess again found her voice.

““And His name shall not be uttered,”” she began slowly, quoting Scripture. ““Not in the street or in the shop or in the home shall it be spoken, for humankind is not worthy of such, and now must face the Ruin of its own making.’ Scripture tells us, Fellow Fallen, that before the Ruin He gave of His grace freely and lovingly, and that the grace of He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless filled every heart. But humanity proved prideful and wicked, unworthy of His divine grace. Through its actions, humanity brought down the Ruin upon itself and all of the world. To punish humankind, He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless cordoned His kingdom away from the world, denying us His Grace.

““And He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless moved across the face of the earth, driving all of the demons before Him. All, save the demon Muta. For those whom he had spawned hid his spirit away in the Cursed Lands so that it could not be found and driven from the world. Then He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless passed His hand over the earth and took away all memory of His name. From the former resting places of the four Titans, builders of the earth, He anchored the ends of the three Teeth and raised them to the heights of heaven, thereby partitioning the earth from His kingdom. And when the children of He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless saw that the Teeth had separated them from His Glory, they crawled from their hiding places and cried out in fear and shame. He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless heard their lament and it filled Him with pity. He said unto them, “I shall provide you with a taste of my grace so that you shall not forget what it is you have lost. I shall give it even unto my priestesses so that they, as the organ of my benevolence, may disseminate it to all of the Penitent.”””

The priestess swept the gathering with her gaze. “So it is that I now offer you, Fellow Fallen, a taste of His divine grace. Open your minds and receive unto yourselves that which is of Him.”

The priestess closed her eyes and began the silent mental chant that would summon forth, harness, and focus her mind’s incredible telepathic energy to its single purpose. Years of study and discipline worked their magic as that most awesome and holiest of gifts slowly elevated itself to her consciousness. From behind a sturdy mind-shield, the priestess amplified that raw emotion, allayed its harshness, and then radiated His divine grace out over the crowd.

The very young, having weaker mind-shields, were the first to receive the offering. Then the rest of the assembled relaxed their shields and accepted into themselves the waves of benevolence radiating from the dais. Each of the more than one thousand minds received the gift and rejoiced. Each of the more than one thousand minds, that is, save one.

Awakened by the whispered exaltations of those around him, the child raised his head, a

chubby fist in his eye. His sudden movement broke the smith's trance. The smith relaxed his smile and looked down at his emerald-eyed son. "There now, Bartu," he said, "lie still and sleep. It is not yet time for green-eyed boys to be up and about." Sleepily, Bartu looked around him. Then he laid his head back in his father's lap and again closed his eyes on the world.

The smith stroked the three-year-old's flaxen hair. Gently he reached out, attempting to touch his son's mind. As countless times before, he sensed nothing—no thoughts, no emotions, no mentas of any kind. The smith frowned as he bent his powerful frame over his afflicted son and kissed his forehead. Then he turned his attention back to the dais.

Having completed the Holy Rite of Grace, the priestess now stood with her head bowed and her hands clasped before her. After moments, she lifted her head and again spoke.

"The gift of His Grace reminds us of two things, Fellow Faithful. It reminds us of humanity's crimes against Him. A taint we all must bear. But it also reminds us that we may one day find forgiveness for those crimes. A hope we must forever keep. Yet to be forgiven, we must first prove that we are worthy of forgiveness. And that is what brings me here before you tonight."

The priestess smiled as she looked out over the gathering. "As your most able deacon, Vogaun, has already told you, the demon Rue-A-Kai has, indeed, again arisen." Worried whispers coursed through the gathering. The priestess shook her head. "Do not lose heart, do not despair. Now is not the time for that. No. Now is the time for retribution! For vengeance upon the demon and his Vile hordes!"

A great shout went up from the crowd.

"No, Fellow Faithful, I have not forgotten the Vile-Penitent war. Two decades is not nearly long enough to erase my recollections of that dark time. Do you recall the carnage? The atrocities? Can any one of you who lived through that time forget the terror and sorrow of those twelve years?"

"No!" the gathering shouted.

The priestess surveyed the crowd with shrewd eyes. "Do you fear it will happen again?"

The crowd fell silent.

"It need not be as it was before," she nearly whispered. "We can avert such a tragedy from ever happening again. But we must be brave. We must be resolute."

Suddenly the priestess flung wide her arms and in a loud voice proclaimed, "The Nameless-One gives His followers a task not easily accomplished. He gives us a righteous challenge! I ask, who among you will now answer that challenge?"

Many leapt to their feet, devotion and allegiance spilling from their mouths like spittle from the muzzles of slavering hounds. Others, caught up in the moment, also stood and found voice. Soon the entire assemblage was standing and shouting their adoration to the dais.

"It is good and right that He bring the demon Rue-A-Kai before us again!" the scarlet-clad figure shouted, broadcasting sensations of zeal. "For we shall once more prove ourselves to Him through our triumph, and come to lay the Destroyer's head—all of his heads!—at the feet of the Holy Mother!"

The crowd erupted as one, their exuberance splitting the night like a thunderclap. Their voices united, rising as if from the throat of a single creature, a single brute of a thousand tongues and one mind, a devoted, baying beast restrained solely by the power of that solitary figure stationed high upon the dais.

Throughout the remainder of the evening, and well into the night, the priestess played the howling beast's tether like an expert huntsman, jerking the animal to attention when need be,

relaxing her hold and letting it run when appropriate. She used just the right rhythm, just the right touch. In the eyes of the gathering, she was the voice of the Holy Mother, the Nameless-One's interpreter on earth. She was unquestioned and unchallenged. All listened to her inspired words. All leapt at her inspired commands. All, that is, save the emerald-eyed child. For he did not stir, nor did he awaken. And his sleep remained undisturbed.

In the failing light of the waning bonfire, the Call went out for warriors, defenders of the faith. Fully one hundred answered the Holy Mother's Call. Fully hundreds more would have had familial duties not prevented them. Nonetheless, it was a good showing. The hundred assured that the small community of Misthaven would be well represented in the Holy Mother's expanding crusade.

Chapter Two

“People, listen! I say only this: Question everything. There is no truth beyond that which you yourself find. All else is merely faith.”

“Heresy! Do you not know that faith is truth?”

—Trial of the Heretic, Book of Wounds, the Apocrypha

Zandow would not be denied. In one fluid motion, he gathered up his three-year-old in his arms and pushed past the young kineticor.

“You cannot go in there!” the kineticor called, chasing down the corridor after him. The blue-robed intruder ignored the young man as he marched toward the large ornate door fifty feet away. “No one may enter when the Gray Council is in session. If you do not stop, I shall be compelled to use force!”

The threat rang hollow, but after camping in the countryside for nearly three weeks waiting for the council to convene, Zandow was in no mood for even an idle threat. He stopped and turned on the man. His blue-gray eyes blazed.

“Do you not see this?” He pointed to his close-cropped, silver beard. “And this?” He ran a hand through his great mane of silver hair. “I earned my color when I was but half your years, and now that I am twice that, it follows that I have four times your talent.” The young kineticor gawked at the mage. “If my arithmetic confuses you, young one, then persist in pestering me, and I shall convey upon you a reckoning the like of which you shall not soon forget!”

The young man, mouth agape, stumbled backward a step. Zandow turned from him and continued down the corridor. The youth hurriedly broadcast a warning to the council chamber beyond. The two receptors posted outside the door stepped aside, offering no resistance. The wizard, with his mishappen child in his arms, shouldered open the heavy door and disappeared within.

Zandow strode to the center of the council chamber amid a gathering of surprised looks. Before him sat fourteen men and women arrayed around a large crescent-shaped table. Each wore a blue robe and exhibited the same silver hair as he. Among them was the Lord High Wizard to the Royal Court of Robivan, along with wizards belonging to the courts of at least half a dozen Robivanite dukes and earls.

A young member of the council rose angrily from his chair. “Hear! What is all this?”

Zandow set the child down and drew himself up to his full height. In a booming voice, he declared, “If it takes me to my dying breath, I swear by all that is holy, the Church shall come to know of this council’s treachery!”

“Treachery?” The chamber walls rang with cries of surprise and outrage.

“Treachery to be sure!” Zandow bellowed. “The very spirits of Ghetid and Pytre quake with

the knowledge of it.”

Zandow’s mind reached forth into the surrounding ether. The two receptors posted outside the door were there to dampen stray thoughts and emotions, to keep them from escaping the chamber into the greater ether beyond. But here within the chamber, closer to the source, Zandow knew that dampening each emotion that escaped a poorly disciplined mind-shield the instant it escaped it was nearly impossible. That was precisely what he was counting on. His mind immediately sensed a muddle of confusion, exasperation, and anger—all the responses he had expected to find. Embedded within these, however, he also sensed faint wisps of alarm. He smiled to himself as he quickly withdrew his mind from the muddle of emotion.

“Who are you?” demanded the young council member. “And *what*,” he asked pointing to the child, “is *this*, this mishappen creature you bring before us?”

Zandow placed a reassuring hand atop the head of the dark-haired three-year-old standing beside him.

“Speak! We demand an answer.”

“Jahwel.” An aged woman rose from her place at the center of the table and motioned dismissively for the young man to sit. The young wizard glared at Zandow. “Jahwel!” the aged woman repeated in a stern voice. Reluctantly, Jahwel retook his seat. The woman turned to Zandow. “After all these years, I see that the great Zandow has yet to lose his flair for the dramatic.”

Zandow barely noticed the astonished looks his name elicited in Jahwel and two younger members of the council.

“Even stooping to the use of a poor mishappen child for effect. A child that would doubtless be better suited to the care of the Church than to your shadowy machinations.”

“If I still occupied a seat at that table, Kulga,” Zandow replied, “I would be much more concerned with the attention the Church attaches to this council’s crime than I would be to the attention it should attach to this child.”

“This is absurd!” a middle-aged woman spat, rising to her feet. “I should turn you to a pillar of flame where you stand!”

Zandow regarded Terlaheem coolly. It seemed time had done little to soften her feelings toward him. “You should try,” he goaded.

“Stop encouraging him! All of you!”

Zandow recognized the withered old man seated next to Kulga as Pulgot. The years, he noticed, had not been kind to the elderly wizard.

“What does it matter what this scoundrel says?” Pulgot chided. “This child, his accusations—it is all a trick designed to inflame us. Can none of you see that? Simply call for the guard and have him removed. We cannot afford to waste time on such foolishness. Crime indeed!”

“It has been years since you forsook this august body to pursue your own self-indulgent interests,” Kulga stated. “It was as big a blow to this council’s prestige as it was to your own reputation. It should have been obvious to you then, Zandow, that you would no longer be welcome here or in any of the other five Councils of Gray. For the good of all, we ask that you leave this chamber now and not return. You only shame yourself here.”

Zandow reached into a pocket of his robe and withdrew a small lead box. The box fit easily in his palm.

“What now is this?” someone asked, as Zandow opened it. “More chican—”

The room suddenly fell silent. Each member of the council regarded the open box in quiet

amazement as each sensed the power emanating from it, a power not unlike a life force.

Zadow reached a thumb and forefinger into the small box and withdrew a dazzling clear crystal that looked for all the world like a large diamond. Within the perfect facets of the crystal, tiny flecks of preternatural rainbow-colored light winked in and out of existence. Zadow levitated the brilliant crystal above his palm for several moments. Then he floated it away from himself and along the length of the table, slowly rotating it in the air before each council member in turn. Eyes widened as the mysterious crystal glided its way slowly from one end of the table to the other. Upon reaching the far end, Zadow flicked a forefinger. The crystal came rushing back to him. He caught it deftly in his hand, placed it back in its lead box, and closed the lid. The emanations of power vanished. A momentary pall descended over the council. The power of the crystal was so like that of a life force that its sudden concealment recalled to one the sorrows of death. The sentiment was fleeting.

Fourteen wizards stared at Zadow as he went to one knee and placed the box on the floor before them. "Myth is one thing," he said as he stood and nodded at the small box, "while reality is quite another. This is indeed a Powerstone, as I am sure you have all guessed. More importantly, somewhere out there in the wide world there exists at least one other." He paused a moment, scanning each of the fourteen faces. "There are those among you who know the true significance of this myth brought to life. It is to you that I now put this question. Where does scholarship end and treachery begin?" The fourteen sat silently staring at him. "When you discover the answer to that question, you will have plumbed the true depth of this council's crime."

Zadow reached down and lifted the dark-haired child in his arms. With a last look at the fourteen, he turned and exited the chamber.



It was late afternoon, and Zadow and the child had ridden a number of miles, when at last he felt the familiar sensation of contact. He picked up the thread. "*Kulga*," he communicated, "*so nice to hear from you.*"

Irritation flowed over the link. "*Meet us at the old Tournament Grounds. I assume you can reach there by nightfall?*"

"*Anything for you, Kulga.*"

"*Leave the quips in your saddlebag, Zadow, I have no stomach for them today.*" The link terminated abruptly.

Zadow gently took the mule's reins from the three-year-old who sat bracketed in his arms. "Here, my Shadow," he whispered to the child, "let us turn Jondée this way. I believe our expensive little gambit might have paid off after all."

Night had fallen and the large harvest moon loomed high when Zadow and Shadow finally rounded a sandstone butte and entered a flat, arid expanse. The distant glow of two horizons clashed harshly with the pale moonlight overhead. Here in this southeastern kingdom, the distant halos of both the Eastern and Southern Teeth shone brightly in the night sky. If one were to travel but a fortnight southeastward, one would come to the point at which the two Teeth met, forming the southeastern corner of the world. It was a journey Zadow had made once in his youth when he still called the Kingdom of Robivan home.

Ahead of them lay the old Tournament Grounds. A century and a half earlier this expanse had been the site of a great tournament, hence its name. Kings from three of the then six

kingdoms had sat in attendance here, along with their respective legions of lords, ladies, knights, and retinue, not to mention representatives from each of the other five Councils of Gray. Hosting the tournament had been a great honor for the Robivanite Council, as well as a great success. To this day, each spring the locals held a weeklong celebration here in observance of the lasting honor bestowed upon their tiny corner of the kingdom. The symbolism was not lost on Zadow as he and Shadow rode up to three mounted silhouettes.

He had, of course, expected to see both Kulga and Pulgot there. After all, they were the only two members of the council old enough to have known the missing wizards. Terlaheem's presence, however, was a surprise. He wished now that he had not parted with her under such unfortunate circumstances all those years ago. Truth be told, it was not the first time he had wished that.

"When did you become such a staunch defender of the Church?" Terlaheem asked, as Zadow reined up before the three.

"Would not anyone be a defender of the Church given the opportunity?"

"Humph," Terlaheem replied. "Anyone else, perhaps, but not you."

"What do you want, Zadow?" Pulgot asked.

"Oh, but how I missed your curtness, Pulgot."

The old man was not amused.

"First, I would like my Powerstone back."

Kulga reached within her robe and withdrew the small lead box. She tossed it high into the air toward him. Zadow took control of the box and floated it to his hand. He stowed it away in a pocket of his robe.

"Now I want information. Details."

"Information concerning what?"

Zadow shook his head wearily. "Come, Pulgot, do we really need to play bait the bird here? Is not your time more valuable than that?"

"How can we give you what you want if you do not tell us what that is?" Terlaheem asked in exasperation.

"They know what I want," Zadow said. "And I suspect you do as well or you would not be here."

"Perhaps we do know," Kulga replied. "But if we give you what you think we have, what will you give us in return?"

"Obviously, I will give you my assurance that I will not disclose the council's crime to the Church. Is that not enough?"

"You would not expose us to the Church whether we gave you anything or not," Terlaheem said. "You have never been a friend of the clergy."

"This has nothing to do with friendship, Terlaheem."

"Seems I have heard those words before."

Zadow's gaze softened. "Ah, Terlaheem, now that is unfair."

"I am curious, Zadow. Did you ever find it? Did you ever find that thing you have spent your youth searching for?"

"It is a thing not easily found, Terlaheem. Not easily found at all."

"What is that thing? Do you even know?"

Zadow looked down and smoothed the child's hair. "I know now," he said. "Since finding Shadow here, I know."

Terlaheem looked away. "I see."

“Not that, Terlaheem. I did not mean that.” Zandow suddenly felt uncomfortable with the tenor of the conversation. Old instincts took hold. He steeled himself and hardened his tone. “It is true that at first I did not know what I was searching for. I only knew that whatever it was, it did exist. Over the years, as I began to exhaust my contacts, the roads, and the libraries, I fell into despair. Not only was I unable to find this thing my soul longed to find, I was unable even to define it. Then, three years ago, I forsook the roads and took to the wilderness, searching there for the answers civilization could not provide. It was while in the western wilds that I found an infant, this child whom I have named Shadow. But I will not regale you with the details of that. Suffice to say that through caring for the foundling I happened upon the object of my search, and subsequently found my destiny as it were. The search has now matured into my life’s work. A work that is dearer to me than anything else I can conceive.”

Terlaheem studied Zandow in the pale light of the harvest moon. She could nearly make out the face she had once known in her youth. Nearly, but not quite. “The information you seek from us,” she said, “that is a part of this work of yours?”

“Yes. A very important part.”

“You think it important enough to jeopardize the council then.”

“Terlaheem, I think it important enough to jeopardize the world.”

Even in the moonlight, Zandow could see Terlaheem’s troubled look. He did not need to employ mentas to know what she was thinking. Many over the years had thought the same of him. He had grown used to it. Still, it pained him to see that thought exposed so starkly on her face.

“So,” Kulga said, “now that we have established your commitment to this endeavor of yours, tell us, what do you need from us to ensure your silence?”

Zandow turned his attention to the older woman. “First, I would like to hear your account of Ghetid and Pytre’s disappearance. I suspect I know much of it already, but I want to compare the details of your telling with my own understanding. Second, I would like access to any supporting documentation you might have concerning their expedition: maps, journals, devices, anything of that sort.”

“I just bet you would!” Pulgot cocked his head and glared at Zandow. “You do not fool me for an instant. You are running a bluff.”

Zandow stared at the man.

“That show in the council chamber,” Pulgot continued, “that was all staged to get a reaction. By catching the council off guard, you thought to snatch some wayward emotion out of the ether, catch a clue to some mystery you believe you have uncovered. If any wizard had the talent to detect an undisciplined thought it would be you, would it not? But the question is, did you catch the stray clue you were fishing for? Did you learn enough from your chicanery to continue this bluff of yours?” Pulgot’s eyes narrowed. “I am betting you did not. I say you knew nothing when you came here, and that you know nothing now. I say you should take your ridiculous accusations to the Church, let the Holy Mother hear them. Then let Her laugh you out of Her presence. It would not be the first time someone has done that, now would it?”

Zandow favored the old man with a smile, though it was far from what he longed to give him. It irked Zandow that the old man had so easily guessed his charade. Guessing at it and calling him on it, however, were two very different things. “Why, Pulgot, I am flattered. I do believe you have been keeping tabs on me.”

“Zandow, no one need keep tabs on you. Your name is known far and wide. Your exploits are . . .” Pulgot waved his hand in a grand flourish “. . . legendary!”

Zadow's anger got the better of him. "As is your wit, old man!" It was a stupid remark, for several reasons.

Pulgot bowed derisively.

Zadow regained control. It was clear Pulgot was not going to give in easily. Whether Zadow was running a bluff or not, at this point the issue was rendered virtually moot, and they all knew it. The mere fact that the three had deigned to meet with him confirmed that they knew something that could prove damaging to the council. Still, Zadow had yet to win his prize. And Pulgot was far from conceding it. As long as Zadow gave them some nugget of fact, some kernel of assurance that he knew enough to warrant their divulging their secret to him, then they would divulge it. They would have little choice. The problem was he had neither fact nor assurance to offer. All he had was supposition. Threat had gotten him to these Tournament Grounds, he thought. Now supposition would have to carry the day.

Zadow regarded the three. "Perhaps Pulgot is right. Perhaps I am running a bluff. Perhaps I am the greatest charlatan the world has ever seen! For who else could convince fourteen of the most powerful wizards in the world that a mere lump of worthless quartz is indeed a mythical Powerstone? A feat worthy of the Great Orren himself, if I may be so bold. But perhaps he is right. If so, then I will need to be much more cautious when advancing my bluff to an audience less gullible than the council." Zadow perceived a wisp of indignation course through the ether. "If I were to make my case before such an astute audience as the clergy, let us say, then I would surely need to lay a credible foundation upon which to erect this deception of mine. But how to proceed? Hmm."

Zadow paused as if thinking. "I know. I could begin by recalling the legends of old. Legends that date back two thousand years, to the very time of the Ruin itself. Legends that tell of Powerstones ten times the size of my small lump of quartz. That would grab their attention, would it not? Particularly when told from the viewpoint of a wizard. After all, what could be more tantalizing to the clergy than envisioning such a Powerstone in the hands of an accomplished adept?"

"Humph!" Pulgot snorted.

"From legend I would launch into history. I would remind my audience that for centuries wizards have dreamt of finding a Powerstone. Not just a Stone the size of my small imitation, but one of truly inordinate dimension. One the size of those described in legend! I am confident this would be no secret to my audience of holies. I would wager that they could recall the name of every long-dead wizard who ever went in quest of such a Powerstone. But then, unlike us, the clergy have yet to resolve the issue of Powerstones. Like a handful of other relics, their origin remains an object of great dispute among them. Can you imagine, after all of these centuries still debating whether the legendary Powerstones are natural gemstones of the earth or evil Artifacts fashioned by the Ancients? One wonders what course the debate might take if they were ever presented with a real Powerstone."

Zadow sampled the ether. The tension level was high, but beyond that he sensed nothing. The thoughts and emotions of the three remained well hidden behind their mind-shields. Zadow continued.

"Yet I would need to somehow wed all of this with the concerns of today. Otherwise, what worth is any of it? For that, I would turn to events of recent history. Specifically, to the strange disappearance forty-five years ago of Ghetid and Pytre from your own Council of Gray. And to another strange event that occurred only a few years later. The sudden rise of a hitherto unknown threat to the Church and the world. The sudden rise of Rue-A-Kai the Destroyer, dark savior of

the Vile hordes.”

A sudden eruption of dread flared through the ether. Like a hot emotional cinder popping out of the hearth of a troubled mind, it blazed fiercely for a moment and then quickly vanished back behind its mind-shield.

Zandow nearly gasped aloud. For all of its brevity, the intensity of the sensation was numbing. Escaping a well-disciplined mind-shield, as the sensation had, indicated a level of surprise bordering on shock. No doubt the others had sensed it too. From which of the three minds the emotion had escaped he could not discern, but it did not matter. He was now certain his supposition was correct. Even so, the realization made him marvel anew at the implications of it. Guessing was one thing, but having your guesses confirmed in such a sudden and intense manner

Zandow struggled to keep the mounting excitement from his voice. “As we are all aware, forty-five years ago Ghetid and Pytre abruptly gave up their long-held seats on the Robivanite Council of Gray and dropped out of sight. Except in the case of illness, only one other wizard in the past three centuries has voluntarily given up a seat on that council. And that wizard stands before you now. Unlike me, however, these two were never heard from again.” Shadow shifted in the saddle. Zandow wrapped a gentle arm about the child’s shoulders. “I find it a curious coincidence, a quirk of history even, that it was only a few years after their disappearance that Rue-A-Kai should first appear in the Cursed Lands.”

The ether was alive with tension. One would have to be deaf not to have sensed it.

“It is a coincidence I think the Holy Mother Herself might find interesting,” Zandow continued. “Particularly in light of the proof I now hold in my pocket. Proof that Powerstones are more than mere myth.”

Zandow peered hard at Pulgot, trying to discern his eyes in the moonlight. “What think you now of my bluff, Pulgot? Do you think it convincing enough to fool the Holy Mother?”

Zandow felt, more than saw, the malice in Pulgot’s stare. He had guessed right. His supposition had carried the day. Even Pulgot had to admit it.

In the dim light, Zandow saw the three turn their attention away from him. He knew by their silence that they were mind-speaking. He watched the three as they sat quietly astride their mounts. They could be conversing among themselves, or with someone back at the Gray Tower, or even with someone half a world away. It was impossible to tell. Zandow, however, doubted they were speaking with anyone too distant. The three may be among the most powerful wizards in the world, but their receptive abilities, like those of all but the rarest of kineticors, were far from exceptional. Farspeech was an uncommon talent. Among those who employed it, few were so skilled as to prevent others from *overhearing* their conversations. He doubted that these three dared trust the subject of their discussion to the vagaries of a modest talent.

After moments, Kulga spoke. Her tone was serious. “In case you are wondering, Zandow, we have been discussing your . . . future survival.”

Zandow smiled. “I know,” he replied as he calmly stroked Shadow’s hair.

“I would not be so glib. You may have carried our little impromptu vote, but it was not unanimous.”

Zandow was not surprised. He thought death a real possibility. But he also felt certain that what he stood to learn was worth the gamble. Only the thought of Shadow’s well-being had given him pause. In the end, the advancement of his work had overridden even that concern. If recent years had taught him anything, it was that the work could be a merciless master.

“We also disagree on the value of your word,” Kulga continued, “but we ask for it all the

same.”

Zadow peered through the moonlight, seeking the eyes of each of the three as he spoke. “I give you my word, then, that I will not disclose to Church or king, or to the servant of either, anything I know or am about to hear concerning this subject. This I pledge.”

“If you do disclose it, any of it,” Pulgot warned, “I will see you dead! Then we will see how your precious work proceeds.”

“Believe me, Pulgot, I have just as big a stake in keeping this a secret as you have.”

Pulgot grunted. “Be assured. Now you do!”

Kulga extended her hand. “Along with your word, Zadow, we would also have the Powerstone.”

Zadow frowned. He fully expected this, of course. In fact, he had counted on it. No wizard worth his color would have failed to have made the attempt. But he did not want them to know he thought it possible he could lose the Stone. Or, angels forbid, that he expected to! He shook his head. “Kulga, I think this a treasure far greater than that which you have to offer in trade.”

Kulga reluctantly withdrew her hand.

It was a lie, of course. If they truly had what he hoped they did, he would gladly have given them his Powerstone and the moon and the stars and done all while merrily standing on his head! Furthermore, he knew they would have executed their end of the bargain with equal zeal, for they had no conception of what they held, if indeed they held it. But then, how could they know? How could anyone who had not prowled the slopes of that strange distant mountain where he had found Shadow know the value of what those two wizards had apparently carried with them into the Cursed Lands? Unwittingly jeopardizing a treasure beyond price in hopes of finding a priceless treasure. The irony was maddening!

Still, when trading away an invaluable treasure, it is only sporting one should haggle. Besides, the last thing Zadow wanted to do was arouse Pulgot’s suspicions. The old wizard’s skepticism was as well honed as his art.

“Your Powerstone lends more credence to your accusations than they deserve,” Kulga said. “Without the Stone, your accusations are . . . well, just the ravings of an eccentric. We realize you have given us your pledge, but as I have said before, your pledge is of questionable worth here. The Powerstone merely provides us a proof against that pledge. It is a simple matter really.”

“A simple matter for you, perhaps, but not for me.”

“You gave us the Powerstone before,” Pulgot said. “You abandoned it there in the council chamber. Why are you so reluctant to give it to us now?”

Zadow smiled his assurance. “Because I left it in the council chamber knowing full well you would meet with me and that I would get it back.” He lied.

“What if we had not met with you?”

“Then I would have disclosed my accusations to the Church. In support of them, I would have revealed that the council was in possession of a Powerstone, albeit a small one. It is only natural the Church would have come looking for it. Once found, my accusations would prove true. The council’s fate would be sealed.”

“How do you know they would have found it? We could have hidden it. We could have destroyed it even.”

“Destroyed it, Pulgot? I doubt you could have gotten the council to agree to that. Even so, if one is to believe the legends, a Powerstone cannot be destroyed. As for hiding it, you know as well as I that the Church is not above employing the Eye of Truth to discover what it wants to

know.”

Even in the dim light, Zandow saw Terlaheem shiver at the mention of the invasive, mortifying Eye.

“Perhaps what you say is true,” Pulgot conceded. “But,” he raised an arthritic finger, “without the Stone could you even persuade the Church that your accusations were worthy of notice? The Church might dismiss all that you say without even approaching the council.”

“And would you be willing to gamble that I could not persuade them?”

Of course Pulgot was not.

Kulga had been sitting quietly, considering Pulgot and Zandow’s exchange. Now she rejoined the debate. “By holding your Powerstone, Zandow, we thought we could maintain a hold over you. It appears now that we were mistaken. That puts us in a most uncomfortable position. It makes me wonder if we should not reconsider our previous vote.”

Zandow thought the wizard making a perverse joke. At least he hoped she was. Now it was his turn to consider. All evening he had been holding one card in reserve as a last proof against failure. He thought now a good time to play it.

“Do not be so sure you do not have a hold over me,” Zandow replied. “Although perhaps not the hold you imagine.”

“What do you mean?” Kulga asked.

“The allure of the Powerstone is strong. It has a way of inspiring thoughts in one that one might not otherwise entertain. Some of these thoughts may even now be rumbling about in the heads of your fellow council members.” No one objected to the inference. “In truth, I am not certain how I would react were I put in their position, for the Powerstone truly is all that it appears to be. To hold it in one’s hands, to marvel at its curiosities, to study its amazing attributes, to bask in the glow of its power—it truly is a treasure beyond compare.” He paused a moment, allowing the image of the Powerstone to form in each of their minds. “That is why I present you with an offer. At the conclusion of our business here, I shall lend the council my Powerstone for study. In the interest of shared scholarship.”

A warm aura of appreciation flooded the local ether around him. His gesture touched the three more deeply than he had expected.

“Your offer is beyond generous,” Kulga replied. “Speaking for the entire council, I give you thanks.”

Zandow bowed in his saddle. As he arose, he kissed a nodding Shadow atop the head. “I can do without the Powerstone awhile if it ensures our safe return home. We yearn to see our far-off mountain again, and it would not do to be waylaid on the way back to it.”

“Yes, and I yearn to see my bed again too!” Pulgot said in a voice not quite as gruff as before. “Kulga, perhaps you should begin the telling of Ghetid and Pytre’s doomed adventure. Terlaheem and I can jump in where necessary.”

Kulga nodded. “Very well. But before I begin, I will tell you, Zandow, that I believe Pulgot is right about you. I do not believe you know a tenth of what you claim to know. That, however, is neither here nor there now that we have come to an agreement. Personally, I think you will be disappointed with our tale. It is much shorter than you seem to expect.”

Zandow did not like the sound of that. But the tale was only a small part of that which he hoped to attain this night.

“To begin, there were more members on the expedition than just Ghetid and Pytre, as you might imagine. There was a wizard from the Montahoian Council of Gray, whose name we shall not give you, and two other wizards whose names we do not recall. One of these was from the

Castellinian Council and the other from the Imaryian. I suppose with a little research you could discover who the three were, since none of them returned from the expedition either. Accompanying these last two wizards were three acolytes. We know nothing of them whatsoever. These eight and a few pack animals comprised the whole of the party.”

“What, no porters? No warriors-at-arms? No receptors?”

“Only the eight kineticors. We leave it to you to draw your own conclusions as to why.

“The expedition left in late spring when the mountain passes would be clear of snow. Pulgot, I, and a few others were there to see them off. Ghetid was dear to me and to Pulgot too, if I am any judge.”

Zandow glanced at Pulgot. He could discern little of the elderly wizard’s expression in the moonlight.

“Pytre was well known to both of us as well, but he was not much liked by us or anyone we knew. He was a harsh man who kept mostly to himself. It was he who had the map.”

“The map?” Zandow asked.

“Yes. An Ancient map.”

“A map actually fashioned by the Ancients?”

“A true Artifact of the Ruin,” Pulgot joined. “Or so Pytre claimed. Of course, that upset the few of us who knew about it. Even knowing that one possesses an Artifact is enough to get you excommunicated. That did not seem to bother Ghetid and the others, however. They were too excited to let a small thing like the possible deaths of their souls stop them. It was as though a sudden madness had seized them all. Whatever was contained within that map certainly had them convinced they could find a Powerstone. And not a small one like the one you have either, but one like in the legends.

“As for me, I found it hard to believe that a map two thousand years old would not have crumbled to dust long ago. But Ghetid and the others were convinced it was authentic. And who was I, a newly seated member, to question them?”

“Before you ask,” Kulga interjected, “there is no surviving copy.” She turned to Terlaheem. “I am correct in this, am I not?”

Terlaheem nodded. “Pytre left no copy.”

Zandow struggled to conceal his disappointment. The news was devastating. Even so, he was intrigued that Kulga would defer to Terlaheem on the point. “So they left no record at all of their destination?”

“Would you have left a record knowing where they were going?” Terlaheem asked. “If the map had not gotten them excommunicated, entering the Cursed Lands certainly would have.”

Zandow shook his head. “I cannot believe any member of the council would have sat by and done nothing while his colleagues sauntered off into the land of the Viles.”

“What, you think we knew?” Pulgot asked angrily.

“Someone must have known. I mean it is clear that the three of you know now.”

“Now, yes, but at that time no one but my mother knew their destination,” Terlaheem interjected. “Not even Kulga and Pulgot knew it before today.”

“I do not understand.”

“We may not have known it,” Kulga replied, “but over time we grew to suspect where they had gone. We imagine many others on the council did as well. Of course, no one is going to voice a suspicion like that though.”

“Yes,” Pulgot agreed. “Over time, the others died off leaving just Kulga and I. We assumed once we were gone there would be no one left to speak to the issue. Then you come along.”

Zadow looked to Terlaheem. "But your mother knew? She was not even a kineticor."

"She knew," Terlaheem said. "And I discovered it years ago, even before you resigned from the council. Ironic is it not?"

Zadow arched an eyebrow.

Terlaheem answered his unasked question. "My mother knew because Pytre was my father."

"Your father?"

"Yes. I never saw the man myself. I was born a few moons after he left. Mother later united with the man I grew up to know as my father. But Pytre, my true father, did not leave me empty-handed. He knew the expedition would be dangerous, so he left a small journal in my mother's keeping for when I got older. He wanted me to have something of him should he fail to return.

"I daresay that the only surviving record of that expedition lies in that journal, in a few hastily scrawled lines written the night before he left. It is not much. You are welcome to read it if you care to."

Terlaheem reached into her saddlebag and withdrew a sheaf of crudely bound pages. The package looked even more fragile than her expression.

"Kulga and Pulgot saw it for the first time earlier this evening. I figured you would want to see it too."

Terlaheem walked her horse over to his and handed him the bundle. As Zadow reached for it, their eyes met. For a long moment each sat gazing at the other, each with a hand on opposite ends of the worn journal. Then Terlaheem let her hand fall away. With reluctance, Zadow turned his eyes from her and to the sheaf of worn pages. He immediately began leafing through them.

In the dim light, he could make out little. He closed the journal and held it in his right hand. Then he raised his left palm to eye-level and concentrated. Moments later a dull glow appeared. The glow quickly grew in intensity, coalescing into a bright ball of white light suspended above his hand. He raised his palm above his head, lifting the wizard-light with it. As he brought his hand back to the bundle, the light remained suspended above him.

Zadow turned to the last quarter of the journal and began leafing through it, quickly skimming through entries meant for the eyes of a beloved child. At last, he found the entry of which Terlaheem had spoken. It was only a page long. As he read it, his disappointment grew.

As one might expect, the short entry contained much more sentiment than fact. It confirmed most of what had already been said. Despite the Church's blanket prohibition, the expedition had been bound for the Cursed Lands. Further, the entry hinted that they would be traveling deeper into those lands than any of the Church's many crusades had ever penetrated. There was not much else in the entry: a plea for forgiveness and an expression of hope and love for an unborn child. That was about all.

Zadow extinguished the wizard-light with a flick of his wrist. He closed the journal and handed it back to Terlaheem. She placed it gingerly in her saddlebag and then turned her mount and returned to her place beside the others.

Zadow listened as Kulga finished her account of Ghetid and Pytre's expedition. As she had said, there was not much to tell. All that he had previously heard were all the facts there appeared to be. None of the three had any knowledge of any other maps, journals, or devices that might have been taken on the expedition, or of anything else even vaguely pertinent that might have been left behind. All in all, Zadow found it quite a disappointing end to his lengthy journey.

As Kulga concluded, Zadow raised a question. "I take it, then, that you do not believe Ghetid and Pytre ever found a Powerstone."

“Who can say?” Kulga replied. “Whether they found it or not, it did them little good, for they did not make it out of the Cursed Lands alive.”

“But someone found it.”

“There is no evidence of that,” Pulgot countered. “We are not even sure a Powerstone of that size even exists outside of legend. Let alone that one was ever found.”

“Then how do you explain the sudden rise of Rue-A-Kai? Of his incredible power? You both fought against him in the Vile-Penitent war. You saw what he could do.”

“The Church has already addressed that,” Kulga replied. “Rue-A-Kai is a demon with all the power of Sheol at his command.”

“You believe that? After banishing the demons from earth two millennia ago, you believe the Nameless-One would suddenly allow them back? That goes against Holy Scripture. It contradicts the Church’s own teachings.”

“The Church does not contradict itself,” Pulgot argued. “You are simplifying the Church’s position and you know it. Only this one demon has been released. And it has not even truly been released, for it can only wield its power through a host body. And, yes, the Church’s explanation of the Destroyer’s existence makes as much sense as someone finding a giant Powerstone in the wastes of the Cursed Lands. More even.”

“The timing does not trouble you, Pulgot? Pytre’s expedition enters the Cursed Lands in search of a Powerstone and disappears. A handful of years later, Rue-A-Kai arises out of nowhere with a power so great as to rival that of the Ancients. Does that say nothing to you?”

“It says something to me, certainly. It says that if the Church thought for a moment that an expedition of kineticors was responsible for the rise of Rue-A-Kai, then there would not be a corner in all of the five kingdoms that any of us could hide!”

Zadow considered. “Well, I do believe you are right there.”

“Pray, do not forget that little fact when you ride away from here tonight.”

“Nevertheless,” Zadow said, “I believe Pytre’s Powerstone was found, and that it was Rue-A-Kai who found it. What I wonder is, where is that Powerstone now? And more importantly, who has it?”

“Well there,” Pulgot said. “Your very questions invalidate your theory. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that a Powerstone was the source of Rue-A-Kai’s power. Would it not have been found on his body twenty-two years ago? Not a single Vile made it out of the Claymouth Pass alive that day. If he had it, it would have been left where he fell. Yet no one found it.”

“Perhaps no one found it because no one was looking for it. As you yourself have said, Rue-A-Kai’s power is believed to come from demonic sources. And Powerstones are a myth.”

“I believe this a subject better debated another time,” Kulga interrupted. “Just remember, Zadow, whether what we have told you this night helps you in your quest to find this supposed Powerstone of Pytre’s or not, we still expect you to uphold your end of the bargain.”

“I have not forgotten Pulgot’s threat,” Zadow replied. “Or my pledge to the three of you.”

“If you are contemplating an illicit journey to the Claymouth Pass to examine the spot where Rue-A-Kai fell,” Pulgot warned, “I would remind you of Ghetid and Pytre’s experience in the Cursed Lands.”

Zadow smiled and bowed his head in acknowledgment of the ribbing.

“Here is one more bit of advice,” Terlaheem joined. “Something a bit more pragmatic. Leave for home as soon as you can. If you do not make for your home straightaway, you are liable to find yourself in the midst of a war.”

Zadow sensed a momentary spark of astonishment flicker through the ether. He took note

of it as he waved away her concern. “I already know of the Holy Mother’s latest Call. Believe me, I have no fear of blundering press gangs out to make some quick coin.”

“No, not that.”

“Terlaheem!” Pulgot admonished.

Terlaheem turned on the old wizard with a surprising ferocity. “He carries a child with him for angels’ sake!”

Pulgot clenched his jaw. His eyes flashed fire, but he did not prevent her from telling Zandow what she was intent on revealing.

She continued. “The meeting you interrupted today was called to discuss the ramifications of an impending war. All six Councils of Gray are meeting to discuss it.”

“What do you mean *an impending war*? The crusade has been underway for more than three years now.”

“I am not speaking of the crusade. Now that the Holy Mother has made Her Call to the five kingdoms, it appears that another war is destined to break out.”

Zandow was surprised. “What does the Call have to do with war? And who would be warring anyway? It is madness to go to war in a time of crusade.”

“It is indeed. But that is just a start to the madness. It gets worse.”

“That is enough, Terlaheem!” It was clear the old wizard would not be cowed a second time. Pulgot turned to Zandow. “As your former friend here advises, it is best you return to your home as soon as you can. If not for your sake, then for the sake of your mishappen child. You have been warned.”

Zandow was still puzzled, but he knew he would get nothing more. He nodded his acknowledgement of the warning. Then he reached into his pocket and withdrew the small lead box in which the Powerstone was housed. “As per our agreement.” He tossed the box high in the air toward the three.

Kulga took control of the box and levitated it to her hand. Slowly she opened the lid. The Powerstone glistened and sparkled, casting rainbow hues out into its tiny corner of night. She closed the lid and stowed the box away in a pocket of her blue robe.

“Good journey to you and your mishappen child,” she said, reigning her horse around. “I would not tarry on your way home.”

Zandow and Terlaheem watched as Kulga and Pulgot rode southward out of the Tournament Grounds, back toward the Gray Tower. Then Terlaheem turned to Zandow.

“You know, it took me years to stop hating you, Zandow. Years I could have spent better.”

Zandow gazed silently at her. He could not blame her, of course. Although he wished he could. It would have made it all that much easier.

“What do you think you would have done with that Powerstone of Pytre’s had you acquired the means to find it?”

Zandow smiled. Would she believe him if he told her the truth? If he told her that Pytre’s Powerstone was the least of what he had hoped to find this night? He doubted she would. “Ruled the world perhaps,” he answered. “Or perhaps just freed it.”

“Freed it?” Terlaheem frowned. “I could never tell when you were making a joke and when you were being serious.” She gazed off into the moonlit night. “Had I been better able to tell, perhaps I would never have gotten tangled up with you to begin with.”

Zandow’s expression softened. “Terlaheem, you were never a joke to me. Not then and not now. It is just that—”

“I know, I know.” She turned her gaze back to him. “Your work.”

Zadow peered at her from across the night.

“Promise me this, Wizard,” she said, fighting back tears. “When you finally complete this great work of yours, promise that you will return here. If only to allow me the opportunity to congratulate you.” She raised her hand and swiped angrily at the tears easing down her cheeks. “And to curse you!” With a jerk, she reined her horse around and galloped off after the others.

Zadow watched her ride away, watched until well after her silhouette had merged with the darkness. “I promise,” he whispered.

The sentiment of the moment harshly underscored the failure of his quest. Had he but found a map to the Powerstone’s hidden lair, had he but found some clue to the whereabouts of the Ancient device that could unlock that lair’s secrets, perhaps it would have justified the opening of old wounds. Perhaps.

Zadow felt Shadow squirm in his arms. He looked down and smiled as the child awoke. “We are heading home now, little one,” he said as he turned their mount. He gazed behind him a last time in the direction of the receding hoofbeats. All he saw was the distant glow of the Southern Teeth. “We have been away too long.”

He turned and looked forward. “Close your eyes now and sleep. We will need to put many miles behind us before next we stop. There are others on the council who will guess that we are not nearly so mad, or half so stupid, as to have given away the world’s only known Powerstone. And they we do not wish to meet on our journey home.” He bent and kissed Shadow atop the head. “And, too,” he said, his weary eyes moving to the long, dusty road before them, “there is this mysterious war.”

Chapter Three

Having surmounted the great Eastern Teeth, the Archangel Arrcrof descended the heavens astride a mighty stallion, bringing to a blessed few the gift of mentas. And He said unto them, “This gift is given you so that He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless will know you from the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky, and the fish of the sea. Go forth and multiply. Repopulate the earth with your kind.” And the faithful did just so. And within six of their generations, all of the true peoples of the world became known to Him.

—Holy Book of Chronicles

The two princes, aged fifteen and sixteen, sat watching their instructor as he paced the floor before them. The boys were both tall for their age, with dark wavy hair, dark eyes, and athletic builds. Palinoe was the heavier of the two, Braxon the more muscular.

Their instructor, Volar, was middle-aged with dark hair, dark eyes, and dark skin. He was slightly shorter than average and, while not exactly obese, his ample girth did betray a fondness for the table. As Royal Healer to the Court of Nevona, he was responsible for instructing the king’s three children, a duty he dearly loved. Although, at the moment, one would be hard-pressed to recognize that fact.

“We have spent half the morning on this already,” Volar chided. “You are both bright young men, you can get this. Now, let us review once more and then we will do another exercise.

“Point one. You have to control your mind-shield as you farspeak. If you do not, your thoughts will leak out into the ether for anyone to pick up. Point two. You must focus on your target. Focus, focus, focus. If your thread is not taut and focused, it will wander right past. Even should it find its mark, a loose or ragged thread is not secure. And what is an insecure thread?”

“Embarrassing at best, dangerous at worst,” the princes replied in unison.

Volar noted Palinoe’s less than enthusiastic response. “That is right. Believe me, you do not want your thoughts and emotions bleeding all over the ether. Come, young nobles, I am not telling you anything you have not heard before. Now, point three. When you take up a thread, do not assume. Right? Any farspeaker worth his salt will ensure his thread is secure when he extends it, but you cannot rely on this. Check the connection yourself. Every time. It takes but a moment. After a while it will become as second nature to you. You will not even need to think about it, you will just do it. Now, if you find yourself uncomfortable with a connection and cannot strengthen it, what should you do?”

“Drop the thread and let them try again,” Prince Braxon replied.

“Drop the thread . . . and . . . let them try . . . again,” Palinoe repeated half-heartedly.

Volar stopped his pacing. “Forgive me, Palinoe, am I keeping you awake?”

Palinoe met the healer’s gaze.

“Perhaps your lessons would come easier if you retired earlier rather than staying up to the cock’s crow playing dice.”

“Dice is Braxon’s game.”

“You had better know it!” Braxon replied. Then he shot Volar a thread. The healer picked it up. “*He was drunk again, Volar. I think he has a hangover.*”

“*I know what he was doing, Braxon. No tattling. You are much too old for that. And no furtive conversations in front of your brother either. It is rude.*” Volar dropped the link.

Prince Palinoe remained oblivious of the mental exchange.

“Pay attention, the both of you.” Volar resumed his pacing. “You do not realize how lucky you are to be blessed with such a gift as farspeech. Most people can speak no farther than a few miles. Some even less than that. You should take pride in your abilities and work to hone them. Once you become proficient, there are some interesting tricks I can show you.”

“Like linking with multiple farspeakers at once?” Braxon interrupted.

“That,” Volar replied, “as well as others. But first you must become proficient in the basics. Now, let us review the procedure for communicating over a properly established link. First you need to—” Volar felt a familiar thread brush his thoughts. He stopped pacing. “Ah!” he exclaimed. “Theory put to practice.”

A quizzical look crossed the boys’ faces.

Volar chuckled. “A farspeaker seeks to converse with me,” he explained. “How coincidental. Makes one wonder if she was not eavesdropping on our lesson.”

“Really?” Palinoe asked.

“No, not really,” Braxon scoffed. “What, you think someone can hear a verbal conversation through the ether? He was joking.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“Give me a moment, lads,” Volar said.

“I meant that maybe our thoughts bled over into the ether as we were speaking and—”

“Maybe yours did, Palinoe. You are so stupid sometimes.”

“Braxon!” Volar berated. “Do not call your brother stupid. He has a point. Your shielding could be better. Now quiet while I pick this up.”

Palinoe smiled smugly.

“The only point you have is under your cap!” Braxon whispered to his brother.

Volar gave the princes a withering look. The adolescents quieted. Volar picked up the link.

“*Well met, Curate.*”

“*Well met, Volar. I have news.*”

Volar sensed a hint of tension flow over the link. It was not hard to guess the nature of her news.

“*The Holy Mother is calling a meeting of Her Highs the first of next week. In that meeting She will be informed that official notification of Her Call is nearly complete. I estimate the king will have no more than a fortnight to comply. Probably less time than that.*”

“*I see,*” Volar projected. Then verbally he said, “Palinoe, Braxon, we will continue our lesson tomorrow. Go now. And Palinoe, try to get some rest tonight, all right?”

Palinoe hurried out of the chamber. Braxon rose and ambled to the door. Volar returned to his conversation with the curate.

“*I had expected to hear this news from Her Grace, Woot-Alim-Tahn. I take it she has yet to return from her sabbatical.*” Volar saw Braxon standing in the doorway. He motioned for him to leave. The prince reluctantly exited the room.

“We expect the high priestess back in Ivory City in a little more than a week. Before she left she asked that I get this news to you in the event there was such news and she had not yet returned.”

“So she will miss the meeting?”

“It seems it could not be helped.”

“I understand. My thanks to you, Curate. And, if I might impose, I would appreciate if you would get word to the high priestess to contact me upon her return.”

“I will give her the message.”

“Again, my thanks.”

“Good day, Healer.”

“Good day, Curate.”

Volar stepped to the window and peered through the pane at the courtyard below. The sky was gray and overcast, the apple trees were dropping their leaves, and the flower beds were brown with dead and dying flowers. Fall had fully arrived and with it the harvest. The Kingdom of Nevona had just run out of time.

Volar feared what the king might do next. Since the Holy Mother’s Call a moon ago, King Bukteel had been lobbying the Church hard to broker a nonaggression pact between him and the Kingdom of Montaho. It was a pact the king knew he must have. Absent his holy warriors, his depleted army stood little chance against the Montahoians should they attack. And that they would attack seemed a certainty. All feared that once Montaho’s king tasted blood, he would not stop at just the retaking of the disputed Huyest Territories. Although it was not entirely unprecedented for a king to foment war during the time of crusade, the prospect of such an act was universally frowned upon, particularly by the Church. That, at least, lent some credibility to King Bukteel’s appeal. Nevertheless, Volar doubted that this fact alone would persuade the Holy Mother to intervene on Nevona’s behalf.

For centuries, holy doctrine had decried any intervention of the Church in secular affairs. It had always been felt that the politics and disputes of earthly kingdoms were below the Holy Mother’s exalted station. King Bukteel was hoping, however, that in this specific instance events would persuade the Church to view things differently. Although arguably imprudent, the king’s appeal was well leveraged. The heretofore unspoken threat was that if the Holy Mother did not agree to broker his pact, the king might do what no sovereign in history had ever done. He might defy Her Call. If the king did that, then the Church would have little choice but to suspend the crusade while it brought the Kingdom of Nevona to heel. That would cost the Church valuable time. Time it could ill afford to lose. It was precisely this costly prospect that King Bukteel was counting on.

The crusade stood at a critical juncture. This latest incarnation of Rue-A-Kai was growing stronger by the week. Viles were swarming to their so-called savior from all over the Cursed Lands, and many feared that if the Church did not confront him quickly, he might soon become too strong to contain. Waiting even until spring to strengthen Her forces threatened to escalate the holy crusade into a second Vile-Penitent war. It was this threat that had prompted the Holy Mother to issue Her Call for those holy warriors currently in service to the five kingdoms. Yet none of this appeared to matter to King Bukteel. Neither these dangers nor the risk of excommunication seemed to concern him now. Volar knew if the king felt he had no choice but to defy the Call, then he would defy it. He would not sacrifice his kingdom for any reason, be it the welfare of the Church or the salvation of his soul.

Volar sighed. He watched the branches of the apple trees tremble and shake at the touch of

the chill autumn breeze. It was not that the king wished to denigrate the Church. He did not. Despite his illness, the king's faith remained strong. What King Bukteel failed to recognize, however, was that the survival of his kingdom depended upon just such a denigration. Only through Rue-A-Kai and his forces of darkness could he keep at bay the Holy Mother and Her forces of light. And only through the Holy Mother and Her forces of light could Rue-A-Kai and his forces of darkness be kept from Nevona and the rest of the world. The survival of his kingdom depended upon a careful balancing of the two.

Volar stepped away from the window and sank into a nearby chair. He strongly suspected the king would lose his gamble. If so, what then? Volar knew the Holy Mother could not turn Her back on centuries of Church doctrine and accede to the wishes of a secular power. He knew She could never acknowledge weakness in the face of an earthly king. Yet if She did not broker a pact, and King Bukteel did in fact defy Her Call, then Her only option would be to strike at the king with Her holy army now and forgo the threat of Rue-A-Kai until after She had quelled Nevona. Volar shook his head. Equally troubling was the knowledge that Rue-A-Kai and his Vile horde would continue to gain strength every day the crusade was deferred. Defer too long, and Rue-A-Kai might become strong enough to break free of the Cursed Lands. Defer too long, and the Vile Night warned of by Scripture might actually come to pass! Volar raised his eyes to the sky. He watched as the sun struggled to break through the gray overcast. He was not optimistic of its chances.

Despite the recklessness of the king's decisions of late, Volar could not blame the man. No thoughtful person could blame a man so hopelessly ill. If anyone was to blame it was he, the royal healer. After all, he was the one charged with maintaining the royals' health. Many of Volar's detractors would not have disagreed with the sentiment, a sentiment that had recently found new voice in growing rumor. Perhaps he should have taken the easy way out and blamed the root of the king's affliction on the queen's death or some other dubious cause. But he was not that sort. Whatever its cause, the final cruelty was that King Bukteel's madness appeared on the verge of dooming them all.

"Volar?"

Volar started from his thoughts. He turned in his chair and saw Braxon standing in the doorway of the chamber. "Braxon. Is anything wrong?"

The young prince crossed the room and took a seat next to his mentor. "By your expression, I should ask you that question."

Volar smiled. He reached over and patted the prince's hand. "You were always so perceptive, even as a child. I am all right. Run along. I am sure you have better things to do than sit here in this musty, old room. Enjoy your day off. You do not get many of them."

"I would rather stay here and practice my farspeech with you."

"You have been working hard these last weeks. Take some time for yourself."

"I feel I am behind."

Volar smiled. "Do not worry, Braxon. You are not."

"Volar, I do not feel I am getting anywhere. We spend all of our time reviewing things I learned moons ago. Palinoe is too slow. He is holding me back."

"You are not missing anything, Braxon. We will get to it all in good time. Besides, the review will do you good."

"I think you should be teaching us separately."

"Now, Braxon, we have been over this. If we alienate your brother, he will just give up. Then what will he learn?"

“I do not think he is learning anything now. He does not even seem to care.”

“You should encourage him, maybe then he will try harder. Follow your older brother’s example.”

“Lugaro is crown prince. Palinoe listens to him. To me, forget it! If I even try to suggest something to him, he brings up the line of succession. He says a king does not take advice from his subjects. Because I rank third in line and he ranks second, he says he does not have to listen to a word I say. The only people he ever listens to are Father, Xakeeb, and Lugaro. And he does not even listen to Father that much anymore. Not since . . .”

“I know.” Volar sighed. “I know.”

The two gazed out the window. Traffic on the road to the city gate was heavy. Farmers were busy bringing in the fall harvest and laying in stores for winter.

“So what was the message you received?” Braxon asked.

“It is a political matter. Nothing that need concern you.”

“I bet I know what it was.”

“This is not one of your dice games, Braxon.”

“It was about the Call was it not?”

“You are too young to be involved in politics. Best you steer clear of such nasty business until you are older.”

“Xakeeb does not think Palinoe too young. He is always telling him things.”

“Yes, and the chamberlain knows I do not approve of that either. There will be time enough for all of that later when you are both a little older.”

“I think Xakeeb likes having Palinoe as his protégé. I know Palinoe likes it. He is always hanging on to the chamberlain’s coattails. It makes him feel important.”

“Yes, well we all have our favorites. I suppose Palinoe is Xakeeb’s.”

“I thought Lugaro was his favorite.”

“Lugaro is everyone’s favorite. Heirs apparent usually are.”

“Even yours?”

Volar chuckled and reached over and playfully mussed the prince’s hair. “If you have not guessed my favorite by now, young man, then you have been woefully inattentive!”

Braxon smiled as he smoothed his hair back into place. “So am I right about your message?”

Volar’s smile vanished. He stood and stepped to the window. “I do not know how I am going to tell your father. I know he still believes he has time.”

“Why not give the message to Xakeeb? Let him tell Father. He is chamberlain after all.”

Volar peered down at the floor. “Perhaps if the king were not so ill.” Volar sighed. “But the message came to me. It is my responsibility to break the news.”

“You are probably right. Besides, if Xakeeb told him, he would just twist it around in some way to make you look bad. Xakeeb always seems to do that.”

“Yes, he does seem to have a talent for it.”

“I think he is jealous of you.”

“I doubt that is the reason.”

“Why? You are a first order receptor, while he is but a deaf—”

“Braxon!” Volar snapped. “We are not to discuss that.”

“But there is no one—”

“Not even in private. By rights you should not even know of that. Just put it out of your mind. You know what your father has said.”

Braxon nodded. “I know.”

“Now, would you like to help me? I have a job for you.”

“All right.”

“I am about to prepare a soporific for your father. We will put it into his tea, as before. Just make certain that when you take it up to him he is alone. Once he has drained a mug, call me. I will come and tell him the news. He should be better able to handle it that way.”

“Better politics through pharmacopoeia, heh Volar?”

“This is not a time for jokes, Braxon. Your father is ill, and we need to make things as easy as we can for him. Now get down to the kitchens for that tea. I will have everything ready when you return.”

Volar turned his gaze back to the window. The prince dutifully rose from his chair and headed out the door.



END OF SAMPLE

Note to Reader

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Visit Herb at www.HerbJSmithII.com to learn more about *The Dawn Cycle*.