

Excerpt from *Swords of Destiny* by Bryan Kolar
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To aid His children in their settling of Dimbor, The Great One cast down two seeds of augustness. One fell in the northern plains of Tungala, the other in the woodlands of Valussar. The seed of Valussar bloomed and flourished, and the people held it sacred. But the Tungalian sprout was swallowed up by darkness, black water feeding its roots, and it became deathlike and menacing on the face of Dimbor.

EXORDIUM: THE BUILDING OF THE PROPHECY

I. The Sacred Isle

The winds blew fiercely out of the cold, ebony sky. An angry sea resounded with thunderous crashes of foam. It became a vast, chaotic wasteland. No things not born of the sea or sky could survive in it. Swirls of wind and wet consumed all without roots to this place, and yet, over a rolling shoulder of water, a tiny vessel appeared.

It was a wastrel of a ship, tossing and tumbling over the waves. It seemed to have a destination nonetheless, although not quite sure of the direction amidst the churning of the water beneath it. Impenetrable clouds lingered overhead so as to allow no help from the stars.

Two forms of life could be seen on deck. One of them had the helm gripped tightly with both hands. A grey cloak concealed him. Another in a white cloak stood at his side. With keen, blazing eyes he scanned the roving waters. His long, white beard was drenched with rain. After penetrating the misty veil before him he spotted the reason for his search.

A black-sailed ship was in the distance, bound for a land called Dunland; a land virgin to the ways of mysticism, unscathed by the effects of its corruption; a land of green rolling hills and golden sunrises; a land with shores beseeching the lonesome vagabonds of the sea; a land whose people lived ignorant of evil in its pure lucidity. The skies above Dunland were uneasy that night. Towering breakers crashed against its solemn shores. The terrible thunder shook the mountainsides, and many great trees were bent and uprooted. There were a few of this land who were deemed as soothsayers, though the source of their wisdom could not be determined without doubt. These men and women felt ill about the atmospheric turmoil, and many took their own lives.

The next morning, after the temper of the sea had subsided, the small ship drew up its sails and hitched the wind. Andoben Valucius it was named, but more commonly it was called The Andoil, or "Twilight Wanderer". Its passengers could be seen more frequently now, for they all began restlessly to wander on deck. The youngest of them was Cerinth. He was a squatty man, nearly thirty, who made his living as a soldier. He wasn't especially keen in battle, being one with an analytical brain and an open mind. But his main purpose here on this ship was not for his fighting skills. Cerinth was quite an effective writer, and it was necessary to have someone documenting the expedition.

He was recommended for this voyage by his friend of many years, Aron. They were from Simbionishi, a province in the country of Valussar. Aron was tall, broad, and fierce. His skills as a warrior were legendary. As the two stood at the helm on this morning, staring out at open sea, Valussar seemed ages away.

"Whom have you queried thus far, Cerinth?" Aron asked in his deep, booming voice.

"Only you," Cerinth answered. "I've been waiting for the right time."

"That time is now. We are closer than we've ever been. You should interview everyone today, before they withdraw into their rooms and start that meditating."

"You're right," Cerinth said with a bit of a shake in his voice. "I'm just not sure how to approach them."

"Don't be coy," Aron snickered. "You've dealt with wizards before. They're just people. They've a different way of seeing the world, that's all."

"It's not the wizards so much as that fellow Odan," Cerinth said. "I heard him talking to himself the other day. His door was open partially, and I peered in. Someone was in there, Aron! Someone I've never seen before."

"Pay it no mind, Cerinth. Just begin your query. I should like to read it tonight when I am relieved from the helm."

The man with the long beard that nearly touched his toes stood motionless at the ship stem. His name was Emperelus the Highest. He had been announced the leader of this party, and he had said hardly a word to anyone since their departure, save directions to Aron or Celandrus. He stood peering out over the waters at the dark speck on the horizon. Cerinth approached him cautiously, for he was elusive and one could never predict his mood.

"Excuse me, Emperelus?" Cerinth held his journal before him as if it were a shield. "If I may, I should like to question you now of your outlook on this journey."

For a moment the elder did not answer. Then, suddenly, he blinked and turned to Cerinth, as if he had only just noticed him. His hair was almost as long as his beard, and just as white. His eyes were smoky grey and very penetrating. He stood here in his robes leaning on a long wooden staff. Cerinth knew he was very old, but he did not show his age with wrinkles about his face or a slow, careful gait. He was elven, and so he was immune to the atrophy that many years bestowed upon men.

"Of course, Cerinth," he said gruffly but kindly. "Your journal. Yes, that is quite a necessity. Ask me what you will."

Cerinth sighed with relief. He found an empty page and set his inkbottle on the rail, thankful that the sea was calm that day. He dipped his pen and said, "To begin, I would like to know a little about you, sir."

The wizard's eyes flashed. Cerinth swallowed. But as Emperelus saw this he looked away, softening his countenance. "I am called The Highest by the Council of Mitheanaris. Mitheanaris, as you know, is also known as the White Tree. It is from that great tree that this staff was forged. The Council has existed for millennia. We believe that the source of our magik is the Great One Himself."

Cerinth's pen danced. "But what of Orodun, this man we pursue? He has great powers too. Are his magiks also given by Arnum?"

"Certainly not!" the elder erupted. Cerinth jumped. "He calls on The Nameless One in his quest for self indulgence! He releases devils and foul beasts from their otherworldly confines in exchange for secrets best left unknown. What he did in Dimasar was hideous and sacrilege, and now he runs. He runs not only to escape our retribution but to exploit the untouched lands of Tungala."

"I'm sorry Emperelus. I didn't mean to offend. I've just heard so many explanations for that which you call 'magik'."

"Quite, quite," The Highest agreed. "Forgive my temper. I realize you are merely being objective, and for one in your position that is admirable. No doubt you will hear other views from Celandrus and Zaranon. Why should you subscribe to mine?"

Cerinth sensed that he had the elder's trust, and perhaps respect. "There's been some disagreement over our responsibilities here. If Orodun seeks refuge in Tungala, a land which does not even exist on Valussaran maps, is he still within our jurisdiction?"

"He is," the elder grunted. "He is our responsibility wherever he goes. It is our knowledge that gave him the power he has. It is only due to our dimensional scouts that we know of Tungala. The people of Tungala have never discovered the portal, so they know nothing of our world."

"Is it possible that the people of Tungala are equipped to deal with him?"

Emperelus paused. He raised his eyebrows at Cerinth, and even seemed to smile. "I've lived a long time, Cerinth. I've seen many things that defy reason. The scouts that have been to Dunland sensed no use of magik there, though it was very thick in the air. If that is the truth then I see no way anyone there could defeat Orodun."

On the way to the forecastle Cerinth ran into Silandra. She was an old, wise woman, though as Cerinth looked at her he could not tell. She looked to be no older than he. Her long,

brown hair was pulled away from her face, revealing very smooth skin and elven ears. She stood and looked at him for a moment, somewhat disdainfully.

"I thought I would get your viewpoints for the journal," Cerinth stammered.

She smiled wryly. "My viewpoints are hardly of consequence, dear Cerinth. We follow The Conjurer because that is what we must do. When evil springs forth we go to extinguish it. It is a never-ending task."

"You are an exorcist. Your belief is that demons are among us, and sometimes take control of us. If that is true, then what would Orodun need with conjuring abilities?"

Silandra considered this. "That is an interesting observation, Cerinth. I had no idea you were one of such sagacity. Let me tell you this. Many evils can not be controlled or exorcised. They normally do not exist on our plane, lest someone calls on them. They are beings of great power and wisdom. Orodun deals with demons of this kind. I have experience with the worldly spirits; those that are born out of the evil of man and elf."

"So you aim to cure Orodun?" Cerinth asked.

"If that can be done, yes."

Celandrus took a long while to answer the door. As Cerinth stood in the hallway of the forecastle he suddenly became irritated. He told himself he would endure no more condescension, or he would discontinue the interviews altogether. At length the door opened.

"I'm sorry, Cerinth," Celandrus said. "I had some trouble putting out my pipe. It seems to want to smoke itself. Please come in."

Cerinth walked in slowly. The room was very unkempt, and there was a peculiar smoke in the air. "I just want to ask you a few things for the journal. I've heard of your teachings of animism, and I wonder how you feel about coming along on this voyage, since it seems out of character for an animist."

Celandrus laughed. "At first glance I suppose it does. Do sit down, please. I believe in a balance of all things, Cerinth. Orodun's conjurations killed many a people in Dimasar, and though I believe in letting events run their course, I don't think Orodun's doings should go unabated. He has set the course of nature off-balance by breaching our reality."

"Aron thinks we will catch him by nightfall. What should be done with him?"

"Yes, if the sea is willing we should catch him soon. He will not go willingly, so I suspect we'll have to kill him."

"I think Emperelus agrees, but Silandra seems to think Orodun can be cured."

"That's an interesting thought," Celandrus spoke, "a devil-infested man conjuring devils. But I don't think that's the way it began. The essence is a powerful, seductive element. It can be used however its master sees fit. Too often a mage will grow tired of keeping himself in check, and will begin to indulge in selfish alterations. He will slowly become accustomed to using power in this manner, and before long he is self-serving, or evil, as Emperelus would say."

The next person Cerinth spoke with was Zaranon. He had been very pleased with Celandrus' hospitality, and Zaranon was no different. Though he was a bit more quiet than the others, he received Cerinth warmly and showed quite an interest in his writing.

"So little emphasis is given to history," said the wizard. His features greatly resembled those of The Highest, but his hair was gray and his face was much softer. Cerinth noticed he did not carry a staff. "Many a time one will adopt a certain philosophy, thinking it one of his own, when in fact it is as old as alchemy. What would you like to know, Cerinth?"

"It's evident Orodun's powers are a threat, but how did he come to obtain them?" Cerinth asked.

"He was Emperelus' student, who later became his apprentice," Zaranon said with a touch of regret. "He grew weary of the old teachings, and sought out new secrets. Some he

obtained from the teachers of the Black Arts, and some he asked of devils after summoning them.”

“If Emperelus was his mentor, can we not expect he will best Orodun easily?”

“Emperelus practices what is known as the White Faith. He believes his magik comes directly from Arnum, and should not be altered from its original form. He believes that any wizard who does tailor magik to his own needs is guilty of blasphemy. Arnum will not serve those who commit blasphemy so they must turn to another power, The Nameless One. It is impossible to say who would prevail if the two were pitted against each other. For each power one has, the other has its negation. They are simply two different forms of the same person. But do not ever repeat this to Emperelus.” Zaranon chuckled.

“Emperelus said you’d have a different belief on the source of magik. Is that so?”

“I believe that the forces we call magik are simply part of all we see. We can observe their effects just as we observe the tides. We can predict its outcomes just as we predict the coming of the seasons, or the flooding of rivers. Magik is not divine; it is natural, and it is measurable.”

“If magik is so easily understood, why can’t a man like myself master it?”

Zaranon smiled. “You *can* master it Cerinth. But it takes many years of devotion. Some learn faster than others. The mistake many make is expecting the powers to come to them. The powers of magik are everywhere, you need only get a foothold.”

“Go away,” Odan Durik called in answer to Cerinth’s knock. His voice was calm but slightly edged.

“I would like to get your words in the journal, Odan,” Cerinth said with no sign of fear. “Please, everyone else has been very helpful. I need only interview you and Talfen.”

“Zandor.”

Cerinth wasn’t sure what Odan had said. “I beg your pardon?”

“You shan’t have it. His name is Zandor.”

“Oh, I see,” said Cerinth, frowning. “It will only take a moment. I want to finish the queries tonight.”

“You are wise to be hasty at this point, Cerinth,” Odan said. “Very well, come in.”

Cerinth entered, and froze. The room was almost black. A single candle shown beside Odan’s bed where he lay. Cerinth heard whispering around him.

“Sit down here,” Odan said, pointing to a chair beside him. “They won’t harm you.”

“What are they?” Cerinth asked as he moved to the seat.

“Don’t you know, Cerinth?” Odan sat up a little. His hair was shortly cropped, and his ears were gilded with rings. An empty flask lay at his feet. “They are my spirits. Have you not heard that I am a necromancer?”

“I have heard,” Cerinth said. “I did not know what to make of it.”

“Let me enlighten you, my friend. I am no better than this putrid swine that we seek so fervently. I call upon beings greater than I, and ask things of them that the living do not know. The dead have access to many secrets, some even more delicious than those harboured by devils. You see, devils see only one side of existence, the evil side. Arnum’s forces can only envision the outcomes of good. These spirits which you sense in this room are neither good nor evil, and so they may look upon the string of reality with unclouded eyes. They see the truth, Cerinth. They may look into the distant past or the distant future.”

Cerinth cast his eyes about the room. “Why do they tell you these things? What do you do for them?”

Odan laughed; a harsh, shrill sound. “You are not a common soldier, Cerinth. You have a curious mind like me. What do I do for them? I keep them imprisoned. I capture them with enchantations and clip their wings. They pretend not to mind, for they have an eternity to wait, but they hate me for it. They’re very cheerful today, however, for their wait is almost over. Isn’t

it, Malachia?" He grabbed the flask and flung it into a darkened corner. He then collapsed again on the bed.

"Have you asked them how our journey will end?" Cerinth inquired. "Surely they must—"

"Ask the rest of Zandor," Odan cut in. "I have told him everything." He closed his eyes as if to sleep.

Cerinth stood. Something in Odan's words made him hesitant to leave.

"Get out!"

He shuffled quickly to the door, eyes fixed on the shiny knob. He was a learned man, but he had grown up in a superstitious home, and he feared to look into the face of a ghost, lest he be struck dead.

The door to Talfen's room was open. Cerinth looked in carefully, and found the wizard sitting at a small table in muse. His staff was propped against the table, and emitted a light which filled the room. He sat facing the door, but did not see Cerinth.

"Excuse me, Talfen. I wish to speak with you if I can."

The wizard looked up from the table, and now Cerinth could see he had been reading something. His face was troubled.

"I'm sorry. Do you call yourself Zandor?"

Talfen stared for a moment. Suddenly, he smiled. "Cerinth! Come in. Come in. I don't know where I was just now. Sorry."

"I wanted to speak with you about our search for Orodun," Cerinth said as he approached the table, "and get your words in the journal."

"Of course. No, I don't go by Zandor anymore. I don't know why Odan insists on using my old name. Have you talked with him already?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Cerinth said with a laugh. "I couldn't comprehend much of what he had to say, or why he said it. It just didn't seem appropriate."

Talfen's face looked somber. "What did he tell you?"

Cerinth grew uneasy. He brought a chair to the other side of the table and sat. "He spoke something on the topic of necromancy, and little else. He said I should ask you, for he had told you everything."

"I see," and with that the wizard's face brightened. "Well then, Cerinth. Ask me what you dare!" he said, smiling.

Talfen and Zaranon were both from Dimasar, which neighbored Simbionishi, so Cerinth had heard something of the two. Zaranon was respected greatly by the people of Dimasar, but shunned. His teachings were complex and intimidating. He believed in a systematic universe, and few shared his beliefs. Talfen, however, was adored. He spoke of the limitless power held by Arnum, and how this power could be transferred to any man who believed enough. He was approachable, and those who had dealt with magik adepts fully appreciated this. Seeing him here now, Cerinth felt the wizard was destined for great things.

"You have studied under Emperelus, is that correct?" asked Cerinth.

"Yes. Emperelus only teaches those who believe in the White Faith. I spent fifty years under his tutelage."

Cerinth straightened in his seat. "Surely you must have learned all there is to know."

"No, I doubt that can be done. The alteration that opened the portal was something I could not perform. Only Emperelus and Orodun know that secret."

"So, if anything happens to Emperelus we have no chance of getting back?" Cerinth asked.

"True. But we were sent to ensure that nothing happens to him. We will prevail, Cerinth. Orodun's strength is in strategy, and we have left him no time to prepare for us. We will overtake his ship by tonight and end this."

"All hands on deck!" came Aron's voice from the helm.

The two jumped up quickly and met Zaranon and Celandrus in the hall. They hurried to the foredeck, where Emperelus, Silandra, and Aron stood. The sun sat on the ocean's shoulder, and the ship with black sails loomed a hull's length before them.

"The ship is anchored, my lord," said Talfen.

"So it is," the elder murmured. "Three of you take a boat to search the ship."

Instantly they were swarming the vessel. No one was found aboard. They came back quickly to report this.

"It is as I feared," Emperelus said to his crew. "This was meant to divert our attention and slacken our pace. The seed may have already settled on yonder soil. When you go to your beds tonight prepare yourselves to wake in a mood of battle!" With this said he retreated to his room for the first time in many nights.

They stood there on the foredeck watching the black ship as Aron hoisted the sails once more and they began to move on. "There should be an island sitting a few leagues northward," Celandrus stated. "It's the southernmost part of Dunland, according to the maps. No doubt Orodun is there."

"If Emperelus suspected this I wish he had told us," said Silandra bitterly. "Where is Odan?"

"He considers himself exempt from these meetings, most likely," scoffed Zaranon. "I tell you, I don't know what his use is on this venture."

"I'll bring him here," Silandra said. "He needs to be aware of these proceedings." She then disappeared into the forecastle.

"How did he escape us?" Cerinth asked. "He couldn't have taken a boat."

"Many things sleep in the sea's dark depths," said Celandrus. "Orodun must have awakened something, something that could bear him away to land."

"The stars indicate we are very close to the island you speak of, Celandrus," Aron said.

"I'll take the helm from here," said Celandrus. "You must rest, Aron. Your sword will be much needed in the near future."

A few moments passed before they heard Silandra scream. All but Celandrus rushed inside to see Odan's door fly open, and Silandra falling out of it. Talfen reached her first, and touched her shoulder lightly. "What has happened? Are you all right?"

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked. "Just let me be!" She jumped up and ran to her room, closing herself within. Zaranon followed after her.

Talfen went into Odan's room, and his blood froze. Odan lay dead on his stomach, having driven his own sword through him. His spirits bent beside him. As he approached they stared up at him with blue, lifeless eyes.

"Fly," Talfen said. "This man restrains you no longer."

"Nay, Zandor," they chanted, "it is you who is restrained." And with that they took flight and soared up through the ceiling and into the dark, limitless sky.

Cerinth and Aron looked at each other in disbelief. Cerinth leaned against the wall to steady himself. He felt he might retch. Just then Emperelus entered the room.

"Talfen, what has happened here?" he asked. Then, as he saw, "Arnum save us. Done by his own hand?"

"Yes, Highest," Talfen answered. "This is his saber. Silandra found him this way."

"I've never known Silandra to be faint of heart," Emperelus said. Aron and Cerinth thought they heard an accusing tone to his voice. "This would not frighten her. Did she see something else?"

Talfen turned to his master. "His spirits were here. Perhaps they showed her something."

The elder left brusquely and went to Silandra's room. Zaranon stood over her as she lay on her bed. "Help Talfen see to Odan's body," Emperelus told him. As Zaranon left he knelt beside her. "What did you see, child?" Only Emperelus could rightfully call her a child.

“Nothing. I saw nothing.”

The Andoil sailed on into the night. Cerinth and Aron, who shared a room, found sleep difficult to acquire. They sat up in their beds.

“This is very good, Cerinth,” Aron complemented of the journal. “I had no idea they all had such diverse beliefs.”

“He warned me, Aron. He said ‘their wait is almost over.’ I could have told someone.”

“You are not intended to look after these folk, Cerinth. Odan was a queer fellow, rarely understand by even his own kind. How could you have known what he meant?”

“I wrote it,” Cerinth mumbled, “but I told no one.”

“If you had told someone it would have done no good,” Aron insisted. “You heard the way they talked about him. No one ever heeded what he said.”

“He told me to ask Talfen for the rest. I don’t think he told me everything. Our interview was cut short.”

“Sleep, Cerinth,” Aron said sternly. “We may not get a full night of it for a while.”

Talfen sat alone in his room, staring down at the parchment. He thought of the first time he had met Odan. It was many years ago, when a letter was sent to the Council from a wealthy merchant asking for assistance. He had purchased a mansion in Palanthus that happened to be haunted, and he asked that someone drive the spirits away. Talfen, then named Zandor, was sent to the mansion, but none of his spells would affect the spirits. On his second night in the house there came a knock at the door. It was Odan Durik, who asked if he could make an attempt. Zandor watched as Odan brought forth a set of vials which he opened and placed around the house. He screamed a series of chants and clapped his hands. One by one the spirits fled into the bottles, and while chanting Odan corked each one. He asked for nothing in return, just thanked Zandor and left.

A knock came at the door. Talfen opened it to find Emperelus standing before him. Swiftly the elder came in and closed the door.

“Her mind is locked,” Emperelus said, “and I will make no attempt to break through. You know something of this, Talfen.”

“Here,” Talfen complied, holding up the parchment. “Odan gave me this. It makes little sense to me, but I believe the first part speaks of our deaths. The spirits must have given Silandra a glimpse of this prophecy.”

The elder read the parchment slowly, then handed it back to Talfen. “Rubbish,” he growled. “He had no right bringing these things aboard, frightening the others with his drunken predictions. Forgive my abruptness, Talfen. You were right not to bring this forward. It deserves our attention no longer. If you’ll excuse me, I shall now return to my bed.”

An hour later Talfen received another visitor. Silandra burst in, slamming the door behind her. “How dare you hide this from us!” she hissed. “They told me you were given a parchment written by Odan. They said all but two of us will die-”

“They cannot be trusted,” Talfen interrupted. “Odan had them imprisoned. They said those things only to drive him mad and escape his grasp.”

“They showed me what will happen,” Silandra said as she began to weep. “I saw our deaths. But you lived.” She reached to her belt and brought something forward. “Take this,” she said, and in his hand she placed a dagger. The jewels of its hilt glittered like tiny stars. Talfen started to say something in protest but she quickly left.

He looked down at the weapon. “The Tooth of Durilcar,” he thought. “Surely an item not easily acquired, and yet she gives it to me so readily.”

Celandrus steered by the stars, his eyes wide in anticipation. The air and water were still about the ship. Suddenly he saw lightning clawing the horizon. He heard distant thunder. A good while later he saw, by the flashes of light ahead, an island. He quickly roused the others.

“Excellent, Celandrus,” the elder praised. “You’ve held our course nicely.” He noticed that Silandra had tears in her eyes. “You and Silandra stay with the ship. The rest of us will go forth to retrieve Orodun. Quickly!”

They dropped the small boat to the sea, and descended into it one by one. Emperelus turned to the lady. “Fear not, dear child. Soon we will be on the way back home. You need not feel more than grief for the departed.”

And she answered, “It is for Talfen that I grieve.” The elder looked strangely at her, then turned and climbed down into the boat.

As they pushed off from the ship Cerinth thought about his journal. It was lying on his bunk, and he wondered if he should have kept it with him. This thought troubled him greatly.

Emperelus asked for the swords of Cerinth and Aron. He blessed them, so that the blades would prove deadly against the flesh of devils.

Making their way toward the shore was slower than they expected. The island was very small, but the shores they approached rose sharply to the foot of a great mountain. Smoke crept down toward them and clouded their vision. Lightning struck the summit, and they all believed they could see a man silhouetted there, high above them. They reached the shore and drew swords. Emperelus led the way up the cliff, the other four spread out behind him. They said no words to each other, merely climbed. The way was fairly easy at first, then the walls of the mountain grew steep. Suddenly from the summit burst forth fire and dazzling light. Their ears were assaulted by a terrible series of screams. They were not screams of pain, but delight; and they were not human sounds.