

Quest for Celestia

by
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For J.P.

Thanks to Rick for giving this book a new home.

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Time is a sea, breaking upon the shore of this moment; and with every ripple, with every wave, I remember.

I dream.

A tale unfolds, rising out of the mists. My story overflows before me. Ripple after ripple.

Sometimes when I think of that place and my journey and all the things that happened to me in that land, it all seems so real, so true. Other times, everything seems like a distant dream. The images overlap and blur across each other like a pile of leaves that the wind is slowly blowing away.

I look around and I tell myself that this, this, is real. Here is where I am. Now is when it is. And yet . . . somehow the past gets tangled up with the present. I wonder if time means anything anymore.

Sometimes the scenes from the story seem like only a moment left over from a nightmare, lingering on the edge of my awareness and then simply fading away. Sometimes my dream seems like an entire lifetime. And this is how it began. . . .

Chapter One

The Wizard

I open my eyes. My breathing is fast. Sweat clings to my forehead.

Something happened, I think. Something bad.

Shouting in the streets has shaken me awake. Angry shouting. As far as I can tell my parents are still asleep. I decide to see what's going on, to find out for myself. I slip downstairs and out into the night.

Packs of frenzied villagers comb the streets. "He's been sighted!" someone yells. "Over by the livery!"

"Find the wizard!" cries a woman nearby. "Protect the children!"

So it was a wizard.

This wasn't the first time a wizard had been sighted in our town. Every few years there would be rumors of someone from the Scaldian Mountains making his way down into our village. The elders claimed they were trying to recruit new apprentices, seduce young maidens, and spread their dark magik. I wasn't sure what to believe. I'd never seen a wizard. But, like all the young men of Abaddon, I was curious.

I decided to see if my friends Erikon and Terrill were up and would search with me. I slipped along the edge of our house toward a side street.

A pale crescent moon ruled over Abaddon that night. Bats skittered about on the edge of the light cast by the torches and lanterns. A few faint stars peeked down, but seemed to keep their distance as if they were afraid to come any closer. It was unseasonably chilly even though it was still summer.

I passed another row of houses. Only two more streets and I'd be at Terrill's house.

A few people rode past on horseback, but mostly folks moved on foot in small clusters carrying pitchforks, scythes, and knives. Most of the faces I glimpsed in the moonlight looked afraid.

I took the shortcut between the blacksmith and the shoemaker's shops. As I neared the alley between the two buildings, I heard a voice. "There you are."

I froze. "Who's there?"

A tall man with a snowy-white beard stepped out of the shadows. I didn't recognize him as one of the men from our village.

"You're Kadin, aren't you?" He spoke with a smooth confidence that was almost hypnotic. "I was sent to find you." He wore a foreign-looking tunic of strange, tightly woven fabric. "You've been chosen," he said.

My heart began hammering inside my chest. I thought of running, but he'd stepped closer, blocking my path. I thought of fighting him, but if he was the one I suspected, that probably wouldn't be a good idea.

"Who are you? What are you talking about?" I tried not to sound too scared, but each word stuck in my throat like a solid object.

He looked briefly to each side to make sure we hadn't been seen. Nearby, on the

adjoining streets, I could hear the calls of the armed villagers searching for him.

“Young man, have you heard of the city of Celestia?”

“In tales,” I said, “and legends from the ancient days.”

“They’re not legends,” he replied. “And those days aren’t as ancient as they seem.”

He pulled me toward him then, further into the dark recesses of the narrow alley. The shadows seemed to retreat to give us room to stand. “I’m Alcion,” he said.

“Get away from me!” I exclaimed backing away from him, and into a wall. “You’re a wizard!”

He laughed softly. “I doubt that, but call me what you like. The stories of Celestia are true.” Urgency threaded through his words. A wild fire burned in his eyes. “Take this.” He handed me a brown, leather-bound book, old and worn. On its cover was a drop of crimson.

It was a Book of Blood. A book of sorcery.

I’d heard of them. We all had. My parents and teachers had told me all about them, warned me about them. The elders of Abaddon had long ago banned these books, for, as my father told me, they were filled with “dark tales and strong magik.”

I stood paralyzed in fear as the wizard slipped the book into my hands. The leather seemed warm, like it was alive. And it throbbed in my hands like a beating heart.

“No!” I sputtered, dropping the wretched thing into the dusty street. “It’s a book of death! I’ve heard of these. Keep it away from me. Get away from me!”

“It’s a book of life,” he whispered, reaching for the book. But before he could find the book, the crowd had found us.

Torches flickered at the edge of the alley. “There he is!” cried one of the men, waving a pitchfork in our direction. “Get him!”

Alcion leaned close and whispered one word: “Soon.” Then he stepped back into the shadows and disappeared into the folds of the night.

I was stunned and breathing fast. I stared down. The book was in my hands again. I couldn’t remember picking it up. I’d dropped it once, but now I was holding it again.

The villagers swarmed toward the alley, but since I was deep in its shadows, I doubted they could see me. I edged away from them. I could feel the pulse of the book beating between my fingers. A drop of glistening blood dripped from the cover and landed softly next to my boot.

My hands were trembling.

I had met a wizard.

What kind of book is this that bleeds? That breathes?

I threw it to the ground and ran off.

I heard it sigh as it hit the ground.

“Catch him!” screamed the townspeople behind me. “He was with the wizard!”

And with my friends and neighbors chasing me, I ran for my life toward home.

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I was quiet the next morning at the breakfast table, but my parents weren’t. Talk of the wizard dominated their conversation.

“I heard they almost got him,” said my father. “Had him cornered like a rat, but then

he cast a spell on them and ran away. Coward. Tried to turn all the people there into snakes!"

"Oh, my," whispered my mother. "How terrible."

"I heard he just disappeared into thin air," I said.

My father shook his head. "No, I tell you, snakes, my boy! Wicked spells! He's a wizard! Conjurer of darkness! Sorcerer!" Then he leaned over the table. "I heard they saw someone with him. An apprentice no doubt."

My mother's eyes became really big. "An apprentice?"

Dad nodded grimly. "A boy. They'll catch him, though. And when they do—"

I interrupted my father. I didn't really want to hear what would happen to the young apprentice when they caught him. "Um, what's so wrong with the wizard? I mean, what's he done?"

"What's he done! He's a wizard!" he exclaimed, shaking his fork at me. "And don't interrupt me, boy. I'm your father. Now as I was saying, tried to turn 'em into snakes.

Started muttering his magik words. I tell you, he came to poison our minds. To poison us all!"

"Oh, my," gulped my mother. "Poison us all!"

I didn't say anything else. After all, what would have been the point? They could believe what they wanted, but I knew what I'd seen. The wizard hadn't been threatening anyone. He'd been searching for someone.

For me.

After breakfast I headed upstairs to my room. As soon as I opened the door, I froze. The Book of Blood lay on my bed.

The night before I had left it in the alley. I *knew* I had.

But yet, here it was.

I looked around. It didn't seem like anything else in my room had been disturbed. The window was too small for a person to fit through, and I couldn't think of a way the wizard could have made it into our house to leave it here. The only other explanation—that the book had found its way to my house by itself—was, of course, impossible.

But yet, here it was.

I avoided going into my room all day. I couldn't stand the thought of being close to the enchanted book. But that night when it came time to go to bed, I knew I had to do something.

After gathering up my courage, I carefully wrapped the book up in one of my shirts. Then I snuck outside and tossed it, shirt and all, into the forest. I knew I could never have worn the shirt again anyhow. Then I hurried home and crept back to my room.

When I arrived, the Book of Blood was on my desk.

During the next few days I left it outside in a feeding trough, tossed it into the river, and even buried it in a shallow grave near the stables south of town. And each time, it was waiting for me when I returned home. Almost as if it were chasing me. Pursuing me.

What kind of magik is this? I thought.

I considered burning it, but was rather afraid to try. I thought it might find a way to get back at me.

And so at last, after two or three days of this, I decided to open it up and take a look inside the forbidden book myself. Maybe then it would leave me alone.

I closed the door to my room and locked it. Then, I took a deep breath and picked up the Book of Blood.

My hands were shaking as I flipped open the cover. Immediately, I recognized the script in the first half of the book. It was the one I understood, the language of our valley, our people. Slowly, I paged through the book, glancing at the delicate script and elaborate illustrations of dragons and caverns and palaces made of light. The pages felt more like skin than paper.

The second half of the book, however, was written in another language. I believe it was Serecean, the language of the hills—Wizard’s Tongue, we called it. This section appeared to contain a number of elaborate maps.

Once I was familiar with the layout, I turned back to the beginning of the book and began to read.

The content wasn’t at all what I’d expected. The book wasn’t filled with dark spells of death or incantations of destruction, but rather with stories and poems of great mythic adventures. A storyteller had penned this book, not a demented wizard. He told tales of distant kingdoms, giants who lived on the edge of the world, and a prince who would dare all to save his land.

The book also spoke of an ancient evil that had taken up its lair on the edge of the Scaldian Peaks—the very mountains that overlooked our village. I’d heard bedtime tales of such a creature as a child, but this book spoke the story as history, not faery tale. I couldn’t understand all of the details, but it seemed that the fiend was lying in wait and would one day be unleashed upon our town.

The next morning while I was getting dressed, I glanced into the mirror and saw a black lump resting on the base of my neck just above my left shoulder. In horror I reached up and felt it. The skin was scaly and rough, almost reptilian.

A chill rippled through me.

I felt the lump again.

“The book,” I whispered. “The book has done this to me.”

The growth appeared to be infected and rooted deeply into my skin.

When I tried to show it to my parents and ask them about it, they looked at me strangely and shook their heads. “There’s nothing there,” they said.

Even the doctors wouldn’t believe me. My mother took me to the finest physician in our town. “Nothing wrong with you, young man,” he said. “You’re just going through a stage. Be patient. Wait it out.”

I nodded. “Okay.” I didn’t tell him that he had one growing out of his neck too. I didn’t tell them that they all did. They would have called me mad, perhaps even burned me at the stake as a condemned wizard. There was a pole in the middle of our village for just such a purpose.

Maybe I *was* going mad. Maybe I *was* seeing things.

Or maybe, just maybe, they were all mad and I was the one slowly growing sane.

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I knew I couldn't get rid of the Book of Blood, I'd tried that already, but I could stop reading it. So that's what I did. For three weeks I didn't even open it. I kept it closed, hidden under my bed. But during that time, the growth became worse and worse until I could barely stand the pain.

My dreams became darker in those days as well. I was haunted by memories of things I'd done over the years, as if opening that book had opened up a gateway in my mind that all the shame of my past was pouring through.

My back, my body, my soul throbbed with more pain each passing day.

You were never meant to live like this. There is another place—there must be another place, another way.

At last I couldn't stand it anymore. I thought that if the book had started this torture, it could end it. I opened it up again and read. And the truth is, studying the stories in the Book of Blood did relieve the pain in my neck.

I spent the next couple of weeks poring over the ancient pages, devouring the stories, trying to make sense of them. However, as time went by, the book continued to bleed and my growth continued to grow, becoming more and more painful. I had to be rid of the wretched thing. I had to! But nothing I tried could remove it. Cutting it. Burning it. All of these only made it bleed and scar. Only made me bleed and scar.

People began to whisper about me, the young man who'd been seen with a dagger, slicing into his own shoulder and neck, mumbling.

Even my friends Terrill and Erikon began to avoid me. I tried to explain it all to them, and to my parents too, but they wouldn't listen. I told them about the land of the ancient kings and the mystical city of Celestia and how it held out the promise of healing and hope and freedom, but they just laughed. I told them of the ruler of that land, King Kiral, of his wisdom and power and mercy, but they just shook their heads. I warned them about the evil hidden in the hills and the impending danger it posed, but they sneered.

The more time I spent with the book, the stranger and more alive and more desperate and more free the world seemed. It was as if a giant riddle were unfolding before me, drawing me deeper into its heart. With every breath I drew in I felt like I was tasting a truer flavor of life.

The book was changing me.

The longer I stayed in the village the more the book bled. The more my wretched growth ached. And the more I understood I had to leave.

Autumn came, and with it, my nineteenth birthday. Normally I would be considered a man on that day. But instead, I was considered something else entirely. Rumors had taken over Abaddon. Some said I'd become a wizard's apprentice. Others said I'd been cursed, bewitched. I even overheard people talking of the stake in the middle of town.

No one, not even my parents believed me. And so, with my birthday came my decision.

The leaves were beginning to turn sickly yellow and drift to the ground that day when I finally told my father I'd decided to leave Abaddon for good and travel through the mountains to Celestia. He scoffed, "You've been deceived by the magik of that book.

If you leave, you'll never come back. You'll die up there in those peaks."

"I can't stay," I argued. "Either the people will kill me, or this infection will. I can't live here anymore. It no longer feels like home."

He looked at me coldly. "That's because it's not," he said at last. "Tomorrow morning I want you out of this house, wizard. Where you go and what you do is up to you."

"Yes," said my mother. "Out of this house, wizard." Then they both walked away. That was the last time my parents ever spoke to me.

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That night I wrote them a note telling them how much I loved them. I included directions to the hills in case they ever decided they wanted to leave.

While I was finishing my letter, Erikon and Terrill showed up at my house and my parents pointed them upstairs to my room.

I told them about the conversation I'd had with my dad and they listened quietly. Finally, Terrill spoke. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

He shook his head. "What happened to you, Kadin? We've been friends ever since we were kids and now all of a sudden you think you're better than us? Our town's not good enough for you anymore? You go around Abaddon telling everyone they've got these infections on their backs—"

"Necks. The infection is on their necks."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, on their *necks*. How could I get that mixed up?"

I turned to Erikon. "You believe me, don't you?"

He was quiet. Finally, he asked, "Is it true you've become a wizard?"

I shook my head. "I'm not a wizard. It's true that there are wizards, though. Dark forces. Demons and hobgoblins and dragons. The book speaks of them—"

"The book speaks of them," scoffed Terrill. "Yeah, I'll bet it does."

"We're worried about you, Kadin," said Erikon.

"Don't worry about me," I said. "I'll be okay. You need to worry about yourselves. If the book is right, everyone in this town is in great danger! An evil being will be unleashed. According to the book—"

"The book!" cried Terrill. "All you talk about is that cursed book!"

"It's helped me, really," I said. "I know there's a better life out there, in the city of Celestia. And that's where I'm going." I looked into the eyes of my two friends. "And you two should come with me."

Terrill just laughed at me. "You're crazy!"

I knew Terrill. There was no changing his mind. I turned to Erikon. "What about you? What do you say? Walk with me, just for awhile. We can travel there together! I'll tell you more about what I've read. There are maps in the book. Maps to a land where no one dies! Where you live forever!"

Erikon hesitated for a moment.

"Come with me," I begged him. "My parents won't come. They think I'm crazy. But you believe me, don't you?"

Terrill grabbed his arm. "Come on Erikon. Let's get out of here before people see us talking to this wizard."

"Okay," Erikon said finally, but he was looking at me when he said it. "But just for awhile. Just to see."

"Great," said Terrill. "Now there's two of 'em." Then he cursed under his breath as he stomped out of the room.

"You won't regret it," I said, clasping Erikon on the shoulder, making sure I didn't touch the infected growth on his neck. "I'll see you first thing in the morning."

And so, on the day after my nineteenth birthday, carrying a forbidden book and leading my friend toward a mystery, I took one last look at Abaddon and started on my journey toward the mountains.

The wind tugged at my hair. Erikon followed a few paces behind me. And the words of my father rang in my ears, *"You've been deceived by the magik of that book. If you leave, you'll never come back. You'll die up there in those peaks."*

A voice somewhere deep inside of me told me he was right.

Chapter Two

Bad Ground

We'd left Abaddon early, just after sunrise, thinking maybe we could make it to the foothills by nightfall. But as the sun rose high above us and the sweltering day dragged on, we didn't seem to be getting any closer to the mountains.

At first we'd been excited, rushing along the trail, jabbering and laughing, as we passed the clusters of sheep and goats that roamed the valley. But as the day wore on, our enthusiasm died down and we plodded along in sweaty, weary silence.

Near the base of the foothills, rivers that started high above us in unseen lands merged, drained down through the deep mountain gorges, and emptied here into an immense marsh that seemed to grow larger even as we neared it.

The ground became soggier with each step.

Erikon groaned. "It's almost like the mud is alive. Like it's tugging at my feet!"

"It's just your imagination," I said, yanking my foot up and slapping it down again on the mucky ground. "Keep going. There's nowhere around here to set up camp and it's starting to get dark."

"I can see that."

He was right about the ground, though. The earth, solid a few moments before, did seem to be gripping and tugging at us each step of the way. And it was getting souvier. Land became mud. Mud became marsh. And soon, pools of black water had swallowed our ankles and risen to our calves.

"I've never been this far from the city before," he said, looking around at the lonely marsh stretching before us.

"Neither have I."

"Are you sure this is the way?" He sounded uneasy.

I wanted to tell him that of course this was the way. Of course, I knew where I was going. After all, I had a map right here under my arm, didn't I? I had the book, right? But Erikon seemed more than just concerned as he glanced at the tangled trees and swampy water surrounding us—he looked scared. I sighed, and just to make him feel better, I said, "Let me check, okay?"

"Okay."

I pulled out the book and flipped it open. In the dimming light of early dusk I could see the tangle of squiggly lines and drawings and scribbles, but the maps were all in another language. I hadn't told Erikon that I didn't know the language, that I couldn't decipher this part of the book. Before we'd left I had thought I could just compare the maps with our surroundings and figure out which way to go. I'd simply told him it had maps to the lost city. And that was true, wasn't it? It wasn't as if I'd lied.

The knobby growth on my neck began to itch.

I tried my best to compare the ancient inscriptions with our surroundings; tried to orient the page to the landscape, to figure out which direction to go. But, of course, it was

impossible.

"I'm . . . I'm pretty sure this is the way," I said. "We just need to get through this marsh."

Something screeched in the twilight. I told myself it was an owl.

"I'm going back," he said, tugging hard at his leg. He looked like he was shrinking, getting shorter by the minute.

"What do you mean?"

"Something's not right here. And besides, I thought you said you knew the way."

"I do," I said, trying my best to regain his trust. He was definitely getting shorter. I could see that now. "I mean, I think I do. I'm just, you know, not used to using maps is all."

"Not used to using maps," he said coldly.

"That's right," I snapped.

He shook his head. "Then how are you gonna get us to the city, if you're not used to using maps?"

"I'll learn."

"You'll learn." More sarcasm.

Yes, he was sinking into the water.

"Um, Erikon—"

The ground had swallowed him up to his knees.

"—You're sinking," I said.

"So are you," he said stubbornly, as if that observation alone meant that he had won our argument. Suddenly, he raised a trembling finger. "Um, what's that, Kadin?"

"What's what?" I said, still angry. I followed his gaze with my eyes.

A few feet away, I heard a gentle slurp and saw ripples splashing toward my leg. Something had surfaced and then slipped beneath the water within a few feet of my leg.

"Ok. Let's go now," he said.

"Right."

But before I could move, the water all around me began to churn and swirl.

Both of us tugged at our legs and stumbled backward. Erikon's leg came loose with a squishy jerk, sending him off balance, plopping him into the brackish water.

In an instant, the water became alive all around him.

"Erikon!" I screamed, pulling my own legs free, rushing toward him.

As he scrambled to his feet, I saw what was making the swirls in the water. Arms, thinner than human arms could ever be, snaked up out of the water and grabbed the cloth of his trousers. Just arms, not bodies. Just arms, growing from the earth itself, or the water. Or maybe, something that had died here long ago. Grisly, slender arms, as black as charred wood and with a claw-like hand on the end of each of them.

He saw the arms just as I did. He would have screamed, but his scream stopped short. He was staring past me at the water.

"Kadin!" His voice slammed into me and I glanced down at the water. It had become a sea of grisly arms, black and scaly and wickedly strong. Dozens. Hundreds. Thousands, rising from the water now, slicing toward me. Cutting through the surface of

the marsh all around us. Curling, twisting, clawing, clutching hands.

Coming for me.

He leaped to his feet and we both took off running, or as near to it as we could, struggling through the thick, knee-deep muck. Sometimes the water became even deeper and we sank up to our waists. The hands clawed at us and we pulled away and ran. In our confusion and terror, we didn't head out of the marsh, but further into the heart of it. A mesh of solid branches lurked above us, deepening the twilight with shadows. The day was dying in that unholy place.

We stumbled and screamed and splashed aimlessly through the water, with the hands chasing us, snatching at us. Trying to pull us back. Trying to pull us down.

Don't fall! my mind screamed. *Don't fall down or you'll never get back up!*

Then, my foot caught on an invisible root, embedded in the mud at the bottom of the water. I teetered for a moment and then crashed down with a dull *thwap!* into the soup of hands.

"No!" I cried as I lurched forward.

They were all around me now, tugging me under, grabbing my legs, tugging at my hair. I tried to swim, but my face dipped below the surface and I gulped down a mouthful of the wretched water. The hands, like metal bands, gripped my arms and legs.

I felt something hard slip beneath my armpits and my mind screamed at me, *They're pulling you under!*

My head went under the water one more time, and then in a swirl of pain, everything went black.

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"Kadin," a voice was next to my ear. "Kadin, wake up. You're alive. It's okay." Maybe I was dreaming. Maybe I was awake. I couldn't tell.

I had a horrible taste in my mouth like I'd chewed on rotting meat. I shuddered and rolled to my side, spitting and coughing up all I could, trying to get rid of the taste.

It didn't work.

"Swallowed some of the water, he did," said a voice that was not Erikon's.

"Will he be okay?" asked the voice that was.

"Depends."

I blinked my eyes open. Obviously we were on a stretch of solid ground. Someone had dragged me here. High above me I could see the moon, round and bold glowing against the black night. Apparently I'd been unconscious for some time. And now there was another light. A torch. *We don't have a torch*, I thought, slowly coming to my senses. *Someone else is here.*

I sat up and turned. There in the torchlight I could see an old, grizzled man leaning against a long, crooked shepherd's staff. He held the torch in his free hand.

"Almost got ya, they did," he said. His voice was thick and juicy, like his tongue was too big for his mouth.

Erikon was nodding. "No kidding. Almost got me too. But we made it, didn't we? Now we can go back home."

The shepherd nodded and tipped his shepherd's crook my way.

"Go back home? What?" I still wasn't quite awake. I glanced at my arms. They bore the scratches of the horrible fingers that had tried to pull me down into the swamp.

"Home. Yes. Home," said Erikon. "You remember it, don't you? The village we grew up in? On the other side of the valley? Where hands don't suddenly rise out of the river and try to drown you. Home." Then he shook his head. "I don't know why I ever started following you in the first place."

"To go to the city," I said. "And to be rid of these horrible growths on our necks! You remember! To be healed! To be free!" I twisted my head to look at the bulbous thing that jutted up awkwardly out of my neck just above my left shoulder. In the torchlight it looked the same color as the arms that had appeared in the marsh.

"To be rid of what?" said Erikon, getting more and more angry. "You keep talking about that imaginary growth, that infection of yours, but there's nothing there!"

"There is!" I said, staring at the weird growth just above his left shoulder, deeply rooted to the base of his neck. "And there's one on you too."

He shook his head and grunted softly. "Here we go again."

"Indeed," said the shepherd.

Erikon brushed his hand against the center of it, feeling the thing on his neck. "See!"

"Yes!" I said.

"There's nothing there!" he shouted. I couldn't believe it. How could he not see it? Not feel it?

"I was willing to put up with you and all your idiotic ideas before, but not now," he said, motioning toward the swamp. "Not after this! I'm going back. Tonight."

"Indeed," said the shepherd.

His mind was made up. "If this is what lies on the way, I want nothing of it!"

"Indeed," said the shepherd again.

"Would you be quiet?" I snapped. "I'm trying to get him to come with me!"

"Oh, you wouldn't want him to do that," said the shepherd evenly.

Suddenly, our argument didn't seem all that big of a deal. Erikon and I both looked at each other and then at the shepherd. "And why wouldn't I?" I asked.

"He doesn't want to go."

Erikon sniffed. "You could say that again."

"Indeed."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Oh, it would be much worse for him to go if he doesn't want to."

"See? You hear that? It would be much worse for me."

"Indeed."

"Listen—"

"No, you listen," barked Erikon. "I'm going back while I still can. And if you were smart you'd do the same thing."

And then, without another word, he turned and walked off into the night. I think he headed toward the village, but it was hard to tell since I had no idea where we were.

When he left, he was walking blind. The shepherd held the only torch.

"Wait!" I yelled, suddenly remembering something I'd read in the book. "The book talks about this! It says there'll be many dangers on the way! This must be one of them!"

"Yeah, no kidding," he replied, his voice already becoming more distant.

"You'll get lost!"

"I'm already lost, thanks to you!" he called back. "Good-bye!"

And then he was gone.

"Indeed," said the shepherd, staring into the darkness that had swallowed my friend.

"Would you stop saying that?" I said.

Maybe Erikon was right. Maybe I should just go back. I'd never make it through the mountains alone. What was I thinking?

The shepherd glanced down at me suspiciously. "A long time, it's been, since anyone has left Abaddon. Half a year, maybe more. Some pass through, o' course." He nodded into the darkness in a different direction than the one Erikon had taken. "But few that are born there ever leave."

I tried to figure out what he was telling me.

"So? What are you saying? Are you telling me to go back too?" I said, getting exasperated. I pushed myself to my feet.

"Oh, no," he said looking very serious. "Just the opposite. Just the opposite."

Then he turned and ambled into the night, skirting along the edge of the marsh, leaving me behind in the darkness. I watched him for a moment, wondering who I should follow—him or Erikon.

The rippling sounds I heard nearby made the decision easy. I hurried after the shepherd.

"Hey, come back. Slow down. I'm coming!"

About thirty or forty paces later I caught up with him. We walked together in silence for a few minutes before I finally spoke up.

"Um, what kind of a swamp is this anyway?" I asked. I shuddered to think of what might have happened if he hadn't reached his curved staff around me and pulled me out. There had been terrible strength in those wiry, cadaverous arms.

"Flows down from the hills, it does," he said, gesturing with his staff toward the castle nestled high away from the village. The stone walls glowed ominously in the moonlight. Lights peeked out of the many windows of the high turrets. "Something wicked lives there, something evil. Affects the water."

I blinked. That was where our baron lived, the ruler of our valley. Evil? I made note of what he'd said, but pressed on about the marsh. "But those were hands! *Real* hands! They were pulling me down!"

"In these lands, here and up into the mountains, good and evil aren't just ideas."

"What do you mean?"

"They're real, son. Strong enough to take on flesh and form. Here evil has a face and a heartbeat."

"And hands," I said.

"Yes. And hands. And claws and teeth and scales and fangs and fur. Oh, you have good and evil in your village, but it's veiled. Good is muted, evil is hidden. Like the

moon during the day. But here it shines. Here, evil flaunts itself.”

“But how? Through magik?”

“Oh, no,” said the shepherd, chuckling a little. “Something far more powerful than magik lives up in these hills. That’s what lets good and evil run free.”

“More powerful than magik? But what is it?” I asked.

“You’ll find out,” he said. “If you don’t turn back, o’ course.”

I was quiet for a moment. I wasn’t really sure I wanted to find out. But if what he said was true—and I didn’t know why he would be lying to me—maybe that’s why the people of Abaddon were blind to the disease. Maybe that’s why the book helped me see—it’d come from the hills and was full of whatever lived there that was stronger than magik.

A few steps later I saw a hut emerge out of the night.

“Home,” said the shepherd proudly. Although it didn’t look like anything to be all that proud of. “Stay here tonight. In the morning, I’ll show you where to go to get started.” He paused for a moment and then nodded. “The longer you spend in the hills, the more you’ll see. Some of it’ll frighten you, some’ll comfort you. But out there—” he pointed toward the swamp—“the ground has gone bad.”

“No kidding.”

We stepped inside the dingy shack and I slid the pack off my shoulders. I stretched out my neck and rubbed my shoulder around the tender area where the wicked growth had imbedded itself. The thing was itching furiously and had started to ache so deeply that my arm was getting numb.

As I began to unroll my blanket the shepherd smiled. “Let me give you a hand.”

I gazed out the open window, across the marsh. “No thanks. I think I’ve had enough hands for tonight.”

“Indeed,” he said as he set his torch into a clasp in the wall.

I lay down and tried to go to sleep. But all I could think of was Erikon out there, alone.

Outside something screeched.

And I knew it wasn’t an owl.

Author's Note

The Pilgrim's Progress was the second-bestselling book in the world for over 200 years, trailing only the Bible. When John Bunyan wrote his classic during his prison term for preaching the gospel without permission, he undoubtedly had no idea it would impact the lives of billions.

In this book I've tried to re-imagine John Bunyan's tale, not through the eyes of a theologian, but through the eyes of a storyteller. Rather than offer another paraphrase of his original, I've taken the liberty of fleshing out the story and the characters that I see at the heart of his narrative. John Bunyan's themes and images and fragments of thought have certainly found their way into this story, but so has my own imagination, my own journey, my own story.

Stories live only as long as they're retold or remembered. My hope is that this retelling will let John Bunyan's story live on in the imaginations and souls of a whole new generation of readers.