

Path of the Outsider

The Chronicles of Jericho Lyons: Book 1

They should not be here and will most likely die for their affront to the Prophecy, but the dozen, bone-weary men, though none could have even ventured a guess as to their number should there have been anyone capable of even conceiving of such a question, continued to pull and tug on the network of ropes surrounding the jagged segment of the enormous stone cover-plate. There were no ornate decorations with intricate carvings or colored

mosaic or inlaid metals; there were no inscriptions describing its purpose. Indeed, the lack of such adornments proclaimed its true nature – to hide what lay beneath.

The men had traveled for consecutive Cycles, through both eerily darkless nights; pushing to near exhaustion to reach this precise location. Their heavy leather armor was soaked through with sweat and provided little protection against the unseen forces of this desolate, foreboding place, as evident by the many that had died along the way. Their number, which of course, no one knew, had been twenty. Those who remained knew that what little chance they had of surviving, rested solely upon their ability to open the passage and enter the forbidden facility below... assuming it contained the abominations their leaders expected. They were fully aware of their fate, and had been upon the start of their journey; nonetheless, to a man, they were honored to have been chosen for this task. Few have traveled this expansive area of *Ureth*, known

simply as the Barrens, and even fewer have ever returned to proclaim such a journey.

Above the dried, baked earth, the cloudless blue sky held a bright, scorching sun, as ever so slowly the stone cover began to surrender to the group's efforts. As it lifted slightly, a pale mist and the putrid odor of death escaped. They had expected this and were prepared. Each wore a protective mask comprised of layers of damp moss, crushed bone and powdered, wood charcoal, which was held tightly in place by leather straps.

The first pair of men dropped their ropes in order to maneuver a long, hand sculpted stone roller into place. As one of them stood to regain his place among the ropes, the hem of his cloak caught under the roller and he fell back down, brushing his face across the cover and carelessly knocking off his mask. He gasped with fear as he quickly tried to replace the protective device. The others stood by and watched, as it seemed to take an eternity for him to maneuver the mask safely back into place.

Once accomplished, he pulled himself free of the roller and took several steps back, awaiting his fate. The wait was not long. In mere moments, the man felt his muscles start to spasm. His legs weakened and he collapsed to the arid, sun-baked crust of the ground – dead before he hit.

“He is gone,” Li Yuan shouted through his mask. “If we do not soon get that stone moved, we will all be joining him.”

The men resumed their efforts, ignoring their fallen comrade.

Li Yuan carried himself with an air of dignity and strength that demanded attention despite his lack of physical stature. He was dressed entirely in red, with baggy cloud-fiber pants that ballooned around the straps that secures his red leather leggings and flapped in the ever-present dry, blustery wind. Likewise, his tunic was of similar fit and fabric. Over the leather torso armor, he wore a hooded cloak to protect him from the killing power of the pounding sun. The hood covered a thick mane of wavy, black hair and framed a narrow, pale face

with dark, deep-set eyes. The mask concealed a hooked nose and thin, pink lips. His face held an emotionless glare.

He turned to the man standing next to him, dressed in a similar fashion but whose garments were a yellow-orange, saffron color. Li Lao-tzu was tall and thin, and even though the two men were the same relatively young age, his hair had already turned completely white. Beneath his hood was a shaded, pale face with narrow, gray eyes that displayed a deep intensity. He stood a pair of hands taller than his red-clad brother. In his right hand he held a large, transparent globe filled with sand. A small whole in the bottom allowed the sand to dispense at an even rate.

“How is our time?” Yuan asked, looking at the globe.

“We will be fine if we can remove that cover soon.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Our Manipulations are useless against that structure. We will have limited power once we are

inside, and only as long as they do not touch anything. So I guess if we wish to aid our men, we will have to put our muscles to work.”

Yuan shrugged, and the two brothers walked to the rope network and began pulling.

It took less time than they had feared to move the section of stone far enough to make an opening sufficiently wide that they could squeeze through. They dropped ropes down to the floor below and lowered a small lighted candle to ensure that the air, once properly filtered, could sustain them; then they carefully slid down into the darkness. Once inside, Lao-tzu conjured up a glowing ball about the size of a mendella melon that provided enough light for them to proceed.

The band followed Lao-tzu down an angular stairway, cut into the sandy rock subsurface, which seemed to go on forever. The unnatural and ancient design troubled even the most dedicated of the group.

“Relax, everybody,” Lao-tzu said, sensing the group’s tension. “We will soon be at the bottom. There we will find a large hollowed-out salt dome, and, according to the Prophecy, what we seek should be waiting.” Glancing at the timing globe he added with a hint of encouragement, “We have plenty of time before the masks are depleted.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs only to find the entrance into the dome blocked by a stone door. A pair of the guards pushed and pulled on the large stone slab to no avail. It quickly became evident that it could not be dislodged by mere physical, human efforts.

“We do not have this time to waste,” Yuan said, and approached the door.

“Careful,” Lao-tzu warned, “we do not know the impact our spells will have in here.”

“Do we have a choice?”

Yuan reached the door and raised his arms.

The others watched in silence for the response.

Nothing.

Another attempt proved equally futile.

“Lao-tzu, help me.”

Together they cast a combined spell intended to move the door... and again failure.

Lao-tzu looked at the timing globe and saw that it was not yet half empty. They have time.

“I am going to cast while in contact with the door,” Yuan said.

“That would not be wise, Brother,” Lao-tzu said. “If the Eye can reflect your Manipulations, you could be killed. It is too dangerous.”

Yuan turned and stared intently at his brother. “More dangerous than crossing the Barrens and traveling through a cavern filled with poisonous gas?” he asked sarcastically. “I have studied and planned and suffered too long to give up now. I want the Eye.”

Lao-tzu cocked his head. “You mean you want to destroy the Eye, do you not, Brother?”

Yuan’s expression softened. “Of course, my Brother – that is exactly what I mean.

“What are a few more risks to our safety when weighted against the security of *Ureth*?”

Lao-tzu reluctantly bowed his head in recognition of the logic, and motioned for him to proceed.

Yuan stroked his fingers across the palms of his hands. In any other place but here, they would have been moist with sweat, but in these environs Yuan found them to be dry and cracked. He placed each on the stone blocking their entrance and began to cast.

Lao-tzu and their guards waited breathlessly as they prepared to assist Yuan should the Eye strike, although none had the faintest conception of what aid they could possibly render should the Eye respond.

Yuan concentrated on his efforts to influence the door, without success. He dropped his arms listlessly by his sides and moaned softly.

“Brother. Are you injured?” Lao-tzu asked, as he quickly stepped forward.

Yuan motioned for him to stay away and shook his head. “Stay back... I will try again.”

Breathless moments passed, but the outcome was the same, and Yuan fell to one knee, exhausted.

This time Lao-tzu rushed forward, not waiting or caring what his brother wished. “What happened?”

Yuan took in a long, shaky breath. “It is as if a demon is sucking the life from me. I have never felt anything like it, but I also sensed a weakness. It can be breached. I will make a *last* attempt.”

Lao-tzu did not like the choice of words his brother used, particularly his emphasis on the word ‘last’. “No, Yuan, you cannot. You are too weak.”

Yuan pushed Lao-tzu away and struggled to his feet. “I *will* have the Eye,” he shouted, and slapped his hands against the door.

For several moments nothing happened. Then suddenly they noticed the door starting to glow. At first it was a barely perceptible pale yellow, but it quickly brightened and shifted to blindly white. Yuan

screamed and released his contact. A breath later, the glow faded and the door collapsed in on itself into a heap of fine powder.

Yuan turned to his brother and smiled – then he too collapsed.

Lao-tzu caught his shoulders and eased him to the ground. He cast a spell to determine the extent of his brother's injuries and found them not to be life threatening. Another spell was cast to speed his recovery.

Yuan opened his eyes. "You must hurry, Brother."

Lao-tzu turned to the Captain of the guards. "See to his needs," he said, then stepped into the newly opened chamber. He commanded the glowing ball to brighten, and stood in stunned silence.

The chamber was not hollow as expected, or more accurately stated, was no longer hollow. Ages upon ages ago the structure had been a nearly empty, hollow space, but over those same ages, even in such a desolate place, there have been

instances of rainfall, perhaps only a single occurrence every generation or so, but enough to cause the scene before him. Extending from the curved ceiling were handfuls of tapered, salt columns. An almost equal amount was reaching up from the floor towards them. In many cases they were joined and formed a solid column from floor to ceiling, as thick as a man's thigh at their widest, narrowing to no more than a thumb's thickness where they joined.

Lao-tzu had seen similar structures in the bitter-stone caverns in the Northern provinces, but those had been relatively smooth – these were definitely not. Extending from each column was a thin, delicate network of salt lace, which in some cases completely covered the space between the columns, creating a delicate, maze-like interior.

Lao-tzu clinched his hand into a fist and carefully touched the edge of one of the lacy formations with his leather backing. The delicate salt structure crumbled and fell to the floor, but not before it had sliced through the tough leather as

effortlessly as the edge of an oar slices through water.

The Captain, who had been attending to Yuan, approached. "Your brother is resting comfortably," he informed Lao-tzu, then looked into the chamber.

"Great Ancestors! What is that?"

"Trouble," Lao-tzu answered.

The two brothers quickly formed a plan, but Yuan was unhappy. "I should be the one who enters," he demanded, but the weakness in his voice provided all the reason Lao-tzu needed to ignore him.

Lao-tzu stood naked before them, save for his mask. He was ghostly pale and several welts were visible where the straps that had held his leather amour had rubbed through his skin. He closed his eyes and slowly brushed his hands across his smooth, muscular body, moving from one ancient pressure-point to another, pausing briefly at each to allow time for the skin-hugging spell to form. Slowly he covered his entire body with the invisible,

protective shield. He felt his energy start to drain as he prepared to enter the chamber. The Eye was sucking the life from him, as it had his brother's, but he was confident he would have time to complete his task.

He entered the chamber carrying the glow-ball and a wooded case constructed, as the Prophecy had described, to encase the Eye. The Prophecy had not been entirely clear as to proper dimension, using terms that could not be translated, so they had constructed numerous cases of varying size. Lao-tzu had chosen a mid-size case. The lace glistened in the white light of the glow-ball, their edges sparked with rainbows as the light struck. The light did not fill the space, but rather formed a disorienting mixture of light and rainbows, with dark shadows where the rainbows crossed, making it difficult to follow the maze set up by the lattice network.

Many of the passageways were narrow, and it was for this reason Lao-tzu did not redress after applying his spell. He feared the loose-fitting clothes would catch on the lace. He had donned his leather

boots hoping for some additional protection from the shards of lace and myriad of tiny, needle-sharp stalagmites that covered the floor. He quickly realized that had been a mistake, for the soles of the boots were already shredded and hindered his walking. The protection the spell provided had proven to be somewhat incomplete; as he could feel the tiny stalagmites slice into his feet. He looked back and saw that he was marking the trail back with bloody footprints. He ignored the pain and focused on keeping the spell tightly wrapped around his body.

As he carefully maneuvered around a large column, he saw the object of their long quest perched before him. The sight was literally breathtaking, as he felt the drain on his energy marked increase. He stared motionless in stunned disbelief.

His way back to the entrance was much faster than the journey in, thanks to his bloody trail, but when he reached the entrance, he once again was stunned into disbelief. Most of the guards stood

cowering at the far side of the hallway, but a few were laying on the floor moaning, while another lay dead in a pool of blood and innards, having been sliced nearly in half. Lao-tzu stared at Yuan, who stood holding a short staff, encrusted with lace shards and dripping with blood, against the neck of the Captain.

“Yuan? What are you doing?”

“I am doing what I came here to do. I want the Eye, Brother. I assume you have it,” and nodded toward the wooden case.

“Yuan, you do not understand, the Prophecy was wrong –.”

Yuan tightened his grip on the Captain and shifted his makeshift knife along his captive’s neck. “Open the case, Brother!”

Lao-tzu sighed, lowered the case to the floor and carefully removed the top covering, revealing a fist-sized jewel of astonishing beauty floating above a stone encrusted, wooden base. Several salt-lace shards had embedded themselves into the wood.

The multi-faceted gem glowed faintly from within. The glow intensified as it moved toward the center of the Eye. At the very center, a tiny black speck, barely visible, appeared to float in the sphere of blue-white light.

Yuan's eyes smiled. "The Eye of God," he whispered.

He motioned to one of the guards. "Close it up and bring it to me."

The guard looked at Lao-tzu, who nodded; then did what he was ordered, placing the case next to Yuan and moving away.

"You cannot do this, Brother," Lao-tzu pleaded. "The power of such an object is too great for a single man to control. You will destroy all of *Ureth*."

Yuan's laugh was muffled by his mask. "Granted, there are risks. It will take some time for me to learn how to safely control its powers, but being that the Eye grants me immortality, I will have all the time I need to succeed.

"Speaking of which... time that is, you are running out of yours," glancing at the nearly empty globe.

"What do you plan to do? Kill us all?" Lao-tzu asked.

"I could never kill you, Brother – but then, I do not have to. I am certain this godforsaken place will have no qualms about accomplishing that task for me. Now drop the ball."

Lao-tzu released the glowing ball, which immediately extinguished, plunging them into total darkness. Instantly Lao-tzu was knocked to the floor, as the Captain, or perhaps his lifeless body crashed into him, nearly knocking off his mask.

Lao-tzu struggled from under the Captain, who, he was pleased to discover, was not dead, and quickly repositioned his mask. He then conjured another glow-ball and started racing up the steps, climbing only a few when he heard and felt the crash and rumble of the cover-stone dropping back into place. Yuan had sealed them inside.

Lao-tzu hesitated for a moment and then continued up the stairs, hearing the footsteps of the following guards. When he reached the exit, he dropped the ball and placed both hands on the stone cover.

The Captain approached. "Can you remove it?"

"Eventually," Lao-tzu answered, "but the Eye is hindering my efforts. I do not believe I can succeed in the time that remains."

"I understand," the Captain said, standing next to Lao-tzu in the darkness of their would be tomb.

"Take this," Lao-tzu heard the Captain say in a clear, unmuffled voice, as he felt something being pushed into his hand.

Lao-tzu stood silently for a few moments, not certain what he held in his hand; then quickly created a glow-ball. He stared into the unmasked face of the Captain and then to the mask in his hand.

"Stop him," the Captain said, as he collapsed... dead.

When the other guards saw what had occurred, and understood their Captain's sacrifice, they too removed their masks and tossed them to the floor at Lao-tzu's feet. Lao-tzu stood naked and in stunned silence as he watched his cherished guards sacrifice their lives to buy him the time he needed to survive.

He knelt and cradled the Captain's head in his arms. Tears rolled off his cheeks and splashed softly onto the dead man's face. "I have shamefully challenged the ancient Prophecy and tempted Fate to save *Ureth* from its impending doom, only to become its unwitting tool that may have hasten that which I so desired to prevent. This is my punishment for ignoring the teachings of the Path and surrendering to my unbridled ambitions.

"I will stop him, my friend. My brother cannot accomplish what he most desires alone... nor can I. It may take a handful of lifetimes to succeed, but when the time comes, I pledge to you – I will be there to stop him."

Lao-tzu stared down the stairway, over the bodies of his fallen guardsmen, towards the lattice-filled chamber below, and wept.