

Book One:
The Orbit Scrolls

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



To God, Creator of all that exists.
To Jesus Christ, Savior of all who ask and believe.
To my wife Annie, who never gave up on me.
For the sunrise of your smile each day.
To my daughters, Heather and Nikki.
I have loved and cherished you from your first breath of life.
To my sons-in-law, Brent and Shawn.
Honorable men. Trustworthy husbands. Exemplary fathers.
To my grandchildren: Kelci, Blake, Caleb and Jackson.
Intelligent, respectful of those they meet on their life paths, and oh so eager
to charge headlong into life.

May *The Orbit Scrolls* furnish a glimmer of what makes Poppy tick.

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Contents

Epigraph ix

Prologue x

Part One: Readers

1	Reader	2
2	The Road	11
3	Playground	18
4	Village	24
5	Academy	28
6	Curriculum	34
7	Vengeance	45
8	Mirror Resolution	50
9	The Haunted	52
10	A Charted Course	58
11	Stalking the Nightmare	61
12	Barren Odysseys	64
13	We Call It “Tripada!”	69
14	Discovery	77
15	Deception	82
16	Disappearance	95
17	Concerning Gods and Men	98
18	The Next	100

Part Two: The Gathering

19	Rendezvous	113
20	Procession	119
21	Legend	123
22	When Monarchs Collide	127
23	Hunters	137
24	Trapped	142
25	Tracks	153
26	Wounds	156
27	Concerning Loss and Determination	161
28	Sacred Ground	166

Part Three: Scroll Night

29	Nightfall	176
30	The Ridge	179
31	Visions	183
32	League of Heralds	191
33	Ignition	195
34	Dawn	199
35	Sword and Shield	202
36	Torch	205
37	Warrior	209
38	Undercurrent	215
39	Colors	221
40	Crown	231
41	Robe	235
42	Ember	240
43	Shadow	248
44	Gem	253
45	Dream Wings	256
46	The Great Race	260
47	Phantom	264
48	The Door	269
49	Tightrope	272
50	Liberator	281
51	The Gift	286
52	Golden Thread	293
53	Mirror	298
54	Transition	305
55	Horizons	310

Glossary	315
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Maps

The Pelanjian Archipelago	321
World Map Pre-Red Sun Disaster	322
World Map Post-Red Sun Disaster	323

About the Author	324
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*Character is the sculpture you create,
from the choices you make,
and from the values you cherish.*

*Reputation is the shadow cast by your sculpture,
as Life shines upon it.*

Prologue: Introduction to the Treatise

Pelanja—Empire and Myth

Investigating legends invites risk, for the passions of skeptics and believers alike run soul deep. Consider just these few:
Wraithaven—reigning for eight millennia at least, is humankind’s most enduring myth.

Legend declares that a yet undiscovered mountain range—the Shield—is both a desolate abode of eternally warring “gods” and a vast mountain prison for demonic spirits bent on exterminating all human life. Location: Somewhere beyond the continent of Tripada’s western horizon.

The *Mascarene Treasure Caverns*—secret mountain lairs filled with gold and gems plundered from ancient kingdoms by mythical dragons. Locations: Unknown, but for enough gold coin, “authentic” maps can always be secured.

Glynac—the living sword that kills or heals at its owner’s discretion. Forged by the gods (of course), but stolen by a legendary boy-king. (But are not “magic swords” always stolen by some prophecy-linked waif?) Location: Unknown, but sworn to exist by “credible,” albeit long-dead, eye witnesses.

And let us not forget the *Spring of Perpetual Youth*. Location: Either deep in the unexplored heart of Mascarene, insolently labeled the Dark Continent by most Embricans, or in the vast Unknown Region of unmapped western Tripada, where it competes with the equally evasive Wraithaven. The common thread running through all legends is that they always seem to exist in the allegedly pestilent, forbidden interiors of unexplored regions.

How convenient. With barely one-third of our planet’s surface mapped, and with no explorer intrepid enough to

circumnavigate our world, most legends will continue to enjoy their unenlightened sanctuaries for centuries more.

One enduring myth, however—second only to Wraithaven—can now bathe in the light of at least some measure of reason. I speak of the Pelanjian people, extinct now for over two thousand years. Colleagues caution me to avoid the subject, lest it taint my academic credentials. I appreciate their concern. Yet, I contend that no human legend, myth or superstition, however fanciful, is without some grain of truth. No legend springs into existence unfounded. No superstition creates itself from nothing.

Within that context, lies both the audience of skeptics who decry most of the unfounded embellishments attributed to the legendary Pelanjian Empire, as well as the fewer, but equally fervent defenders claiming that Pelanjia was the most superior empire in human history.

As for me, having researched and listened to the oftentimes deafening opinions of both sides, I find I must align with the defenders of Pelanjian myth, despite the skeptics and their superior numbers. In that regard, I confess to being swayed by fragmentary legends over equally fragmentary history.

Despite often fantastic embellishments that twenty centuries of unchallenged history have added to the Pelanjian myth, some original truth must remain of what we know, or what we *think* we know, about Pelanjia today.

The eleven-island archipelago of Pelanjia does, in fact, exist. That it was once inhabited is also without question. Sakora's dig at Erytheia nine years ago, Gaetano's at the re-discovered Port of Salacia on the Itherian Peninsula five years ago, and my own dig (underwritten by this university) at the Isthmus of Gianna four years ago all confirm through clay tablets that Pelanjia was the ancient world's primary hub for the spice trade.

Logically, as a spice hub, Pelanjia might well have been the wealthiest nation of its time, as legend declares. Another myth assertion, that the island nation was unsurpassed as a military force, is highly likely. Wealth breeds jealousy; and given humanity's history of greed-inspired warfare, how could a small, wealthy nation, especially an island nation, *not* have been a target of larger, aggressive nations? Yet, Erytheian tablets confirm that Pelanjia

remained at the peak of world influence for over four centuries—an impossibility for a weak nation.

Tablets at Gianna and Salacia both document thirteen invasion attempts in those centuries—roughly one per generation. In all translations, the invaders were “crushed,” not just repelled. Does this confirm that Pelanjia was a population of battle-hardened, fanatically trained warriors, as legend declares? Quite possibly, yes. But were the invaders slaughtered by “ghost warriors who killed in cold silence and with supernatural stealth and skill”? Not likely.

History is also unsure from whence came the art of glass-making, the firing of ceramics, the invention of the telescope, the invention of the compass or the sextant. Legend, without hesitation, credits the artistic, inventive Pelanjians.

For a moment, allow reason to lean in the direction of legend. Would not island dwellers be skilled mariners? Could Pelanjian mariners have actually created the Pelanjian spice hub by establishing new trade routes, rather than waiting for the rest of the world to find *them*? That alone suggests an adventurous, collective purpose as a people. National intent at this level pushes the boundaries of exploration, of invention. How could such a master sea-faring people *not* invent the instruments of seamanship—the compass, the sextant? Why would glass-making not evolve into lens-making, and thus make way for the invention of the telescope or of ceramic firing?

Could our modern seaports today, and rediscovered sites shrouded by the dust of millennia, have been seed colonies of the Pelanjian expansion? Legend declares an emphatic “yes!” An interesting, but unproven theory thus far.

Did vastly superior Pelanjian “dragon” ships fly across the waves as myth enthusiastically contends? Certainly not, yet Sakora’s unearthing last summer of the north wing of the Caladian central palace in Erytheia offers a tantalizing consideration. A huge, magnificently wrought mosaic, nearly fifty feet in length (but damaged) depicts a harbor scene—Caladia at its presumed peak. Thick-bellied, blunt-bowed ships of verified Caladian design are depicted berthed at docks and under sail.

What tantalizes Sakora’s team most, however, is the damaged lower portion. Fragments of remaining tiles suggest a

single ship of outlandishly streamlined design in comparison to the ungainly Caladian vessels. Possible remnants of wing-like horizontal sails augment much taller masts adorned with unconventional sail design. Expert opinions on site are as diverse as they are heated.

The first proof, defenders declare, of a Pelanjian ship under sail. Not so, equally qualified skeptics counter. Not a ship at all, but a fanciful depiction of a mythical sea beast entering the harbor. I reserve my personal opinion, for now.

The sea-faring aspect aside, rabid supporters of Pelanjian superiority assert that Pelanjians valued education above all, including their famed military prowess. They allegedly held to a strict code of honor of some sort, and their knowledge of the healing arts, of medicinal herbs, and surgical techniques was unsurpassed even to this day. Their life spans were allegedly three times the average of the day, perhaps more. They were splendid artists, poets, and musicians. They allegedly invented the concept of libraries, which were superb and numerous, despite the fact that not a single known Pelanjian scroll or book survives today.

I view such hand-me-down embellishments without evidence as fanciful wishes by folk so un-empowered by current existence that they dream of perfect worlds beyond past horizons. Yet, even the lack of evidence has justification. The legal and business transactions of that era were etched upon clay tablets or wooden slats. Such artifacts are relatively common today, but only under perfect archeological conditions.

And what of Pelanjian records, skeptics ask? Easily explained, proponents argue. Pelanjians used neither method. Pelanjians invented not only parchment writing, but paper as well. Allegedly. If so, only a miracle would preserve such fragile evidence for two thousand years. Thus continues the perpetual loop of argument—logic versus the fanciful.

The struggle to separate truth from Pelanjian legend may well prevent the world from ever knowing even a fraction of the complete story; but at the very least we must consider these points: We know historically that after the Pelanjian disappearance, humankind declined into the era history labels the Dark Millennium.

It was during the Dark Millennium that unmeasurable damage was wrought to civilization. Entire tribes, nations, even empires ceased to exist when ejecta from simultaneous volcanic eruptions somewhere in the uncharted Void Region west of Mascarene blanketed the globe for decades. Under sunlight-robbing skies that seemed blood red at sunrise and sunset, agricultural output and its international trade was essentially eradicated worldwide.

Once-thriving Embrican and Mascarenean nations (many allegedly spawned by Pelanjian explorers) dissolved back into warring tribes bent on slaughtering each other over this fertile valley or that strategic mountaintop.

The last official assembly of the then fifty-five-nation World Trade Conference achieved but one objective as the coming one hundred year Starvation War began to ignite its horror. The delegates elected to replace the two regional calendars of that era, the Valerian Record (V.R.), and the Imperial Chronical (I.C.), with a worldwide calendar designated the Year of the Red Sun (R.S.).

Yet, from that new starting point, one cannot help but conjecture whether our current level of technology is nothing but an incomplete re-emergence of that which the ancient world once enjoyed pre-Dark Millennium. Is the level of advancement we boast of today only a shadow of what once was? Defenders of the Pelanjian myth declare emphatically, *yes!*

For example, Embrican historians credit the invention of paper to Altherian monks five hundred years ago. Does this support the argument that the art of making paper ceased *exactly* with the Pelanjian disappearance? Did it really take the world—and the Altherian monks—fifteen hundred years to *recreate* it?

Also, if Pelanjian explorers had truly circumnavigated the globe and thoroughly mapped it two thousand years ago, again as legend claims, why have we not done so yet today? Does our vaunted level of human civilization today retain naught but flawed remnants of the greatness that was the Pelanjian Empire?

Lastly, how, by all that is logical, could such an allegedly advanced race disappear so completely from the face of the earth? What was the chink in their armor? Did Blood Plague exterminate them, as legend proclaims? If so, why have we not found even a shred of their everyday existence, their artistry, or their power? No

shards of Pelanjian pottery exist. Archeologists have unearthed no broken Pelanjian sculptures, no corroded Pelanjian weapons.

Yes, modern civilization still has just cause to fear Blood Plague. Every few centuries, different seaports reignite the devastation again as in 742 R.S., 938 R.S., and in 1312 R.S., when one in three Embricans died. And true, a small island nation serving the world's shipping trade would be most vulnerable to a ship-borne outbreak. Our terror remains fresh thanks to the outbreak only eighty-four years ago that killed hundreds of thousands along the eastern coast of Mascarene.

Still, no human being has dared set foot on the Pelanjian Archipelago for two thousand years! Historical assumption of their demise has devolved into an ingrained generational fear paralyzing academic curiosity to this day. Myth declares that the deadliest form of Blood Plague still awaits the unwary after defeating even the legendary healers of Pelanja. Did the entire population die in their beloved islands? Did their advanced dragon ships rot into nothingness as would lesser vessels left moored and unattended in their berths? Has twenty centuries of time, storm, and tide dissolved what must have been a vast wharf complex back into the sea?

Consider the possibility if we were brave enough to explore the Pelanjian Archipelago. Might we find Pelanjian bones overgrown by twenty centuries of unchecked jungle growth?

By the gods, what really happened to these people?

In closing, I submit below an engraved quote from a small marble tablet unearthed on the Isthmus of Gianna just over two years ago, on 24 Andril, 2034 R.S. The language is definitely Caladian. The syntax is definitely not.

The site is what remains of a small Caladian monastery leveled by an earthquake during the approximate time frame of the Pelanjian extinction. I have reproduced the quote in its exact form and presentation, and have translated it as accurately as our Embrican language can interpret it. Is it truly "Pelanja's Prayer," as the first line declares? Or is it merely a supplication raised by a monk sympathetic to the invasion-beset Pelanjians? As of this date, 19 Mairche, 2036 R.S., we simply do not know.

Pelanjia's Prayer

*We teach our children what our fathers taught us.
We teach them the ways of war as centuries of fathers have taught
before us.
To survive, our children's children must do the same.
We pray for your deliverance from war, oh Lord.
We pray for peace.
Teach us how a seed begins life, how to glean a poet's vision.
Teach us the mysteries of Your tides, not how to slay an armada.
What might our people become, oh Lord, if the slaying was no more?
If our honor was not tainted by constant warfare?
If the energy of our people created instead of destroyed?
Show us please, Great Creator, another path.*

Sincerely,

Mezentius Telemon
Professor d'Antiquities' du Literatum
Académie' d'Embrica d'Lang-Sha

Part One: Readers

*W*e are all individual threads of varied hues woven into Wraithaven's collective tapestry. Threads of Pride, of Honor, of Discipline reinforce the threads who are: Teachers, Healers and Guardians. Our historical threads, our cultural intentions, bind our Scientists, Artisans and Priests to our Pickets, Mariners, and Farmers. Our Warriors and Poets, our Youth and our Elders, are all integral to the same dynamic tapestry.

Yet, of us all, our culture's strongest threads are Readers. They reveal the Orbit Scrolls to our children. They guide us all upon the loom of Nung-Cha. They blaze the trail that is our Necessary Path.

—Wraithian Adage

Reader

Early autumn 4287 M.C.
Scimitar Province, Wraithaven

Five hundred years old, the cottage, nestled within a sloping copse of blood-red flame maples, was relatively new compared to many in the province. The large hay barn and smaller outbuildings common to properties cultivating vineyards and orchards were centuries older. Walls of fitted limestone blocks anchored them all fast against Wraithaven's fierce winter blizzards. Gray slate roofing tiles clad each structure like a warrior's armor.



The instant Taggart Kayne awoke, he knew the day would not follow its normal routine. Having awakened two hours before dawn was the only thing typical.

He lay still at first, absorbing the subtleties of the morning. A chilly autumn breeze out of the northwest whispered through the half-opened window in the north wall of his bedroom. His breath frosted into faint clouds before dissipating. The small cast-iron stove in the bedroom's corner rested dark and silent now. No oak logs burned, crackling orange and happily behind the grating of the little hinged door. The wood had cooled to ash hours ago, leaving naught but a hint of oak coal scent to ride the breeze to his nostrils.

Faint rhythmic ticks of the mantle clock in the adjacent gathering room sought his attention. A great-horned owl hooted in the forest beyond the hay barn. The weight of the heavy quilt drawn up to his chin conspired with the scents of wool and the cedar-lined trunk it had lain in to keep him warm and comfortable right there. But on the seventy-one-year-old man's left side where Alina, his wife of forty-seven years, should still be cozying next to him, his

left hand sensed only her residual warmth clinging to the mattress. She had started their day without him.

He slipped out from under the warm quilt and donned simple leather sandals and his *dra-ki*—a black-streaked, light gray martial arts uniform consisting of a heavy, long-sleeved, cotton jacket and loose-fitting trousers. He looped a long black cotton belt twice around his waist, securing the belt with a square knot at his navel. Both ends of the belt hung precisely twelve inches below the knot. An embroidered, six-inch-long red dragon decorated the left belt end, signifying Master Dragon rank in empty-hands combat and in seventeen different martial arts weapons. A similar dragon wrought in gold and blue thread graced the right belt end, a second Dragon-level rank in stealth and covert tactics. Wraithaven had no higher martial rank.

Upon leaving the room, Taggart took his scabbarded *Dai-ryu* (Great Dragon) single-edged long sword and his *Kai-ryu* (Small Dragon) dagger from the oak wall pegs above the headboard on his side of the bed. He slipped the weapons into his belt, but despite the darkness of the room, he noted the empty pegs on Alina's side.

At the back door, taller even than Taggart's rangy 6'4", stood the weapons cabinet of burlled oak. Inside the exquisitely carved 850-year-old heirloom, all seventeen pairs of weapons, from spiked war hatchets to chained wheat flails, hung neatly on wooden pegs.

We were to practice staff and scon-ki, (wheat sickles), this morning, Taggart thought, shutting the double doors. No moon hung in the cloudless, black sky, but the backyard was dotted with a dozen, knee-high, seemingly randomly spaced points of yellow light—tiny candle lanterns obviously lit by Alina. The scent of eight-foot-tall dwarf apple trees, their supple branches heavy with ripening fruit, silently welcomed him. Two different gravel paths led from the back door to a waist-high stone wall fifty paces away.

Two paces wide, the main path meandered with a shallow *S*-curve to a low cedar gate in the wall. A narrow meditation path branched to the left off the wider path, before looping tightly back upon itself, crossing the main path seven times until blending with it again at the gate. In places, the little path crossed over tiny

gurgling springs on low teak bridges. In others, flat slate steppingstones served as crossings.

Beyond the wall, a diffuse yellow glow backlit the fruit trees just enough to define their shapes. Even in total darkness, Taggart could have negotiated either path without a misstep.

This time of morning, only one path would do. Taggart paused to appreciate the aroma of apples wafting through the orchard, noting tonal differences where the light breeze hissed through distant spruce needles, or shouldered past the stouter apple leaves. Then, clasping his hands at his belt, he bowed his head, and stepped reverently upon the narrow, winding trail. His mind entered *Nung-Cha, The Necessary Path*.



Past the stone wall lay the Kayne arena, a twenty- by thirty-pace rectangle of flat, perfectly joined slate pavers. At the northern edge, precisely at the center, rose Enkia-Entae, the Prayer Stone. The seven-foot-tall natural obelisk of gray granite was so named in the ancient Mindoccean tongue meaning “to reach.” Crowned with patches of gray lichen, its northern side be-robed with delicate dark-green moss, the great stone loomed like a vigilant, eternal guardian. Calloused feet of thirty-five generations of Kayne warriors had worn the slate smooth from boundary to boundary.

Spaced evenly around the perimeter, a faint yellow glow from oil lanterns washed just enough light across the slate to define the boundaries. On any other day, Taggart and Alina would have lit them together.

The slender, six-foot-tall woman knelt in silence before the Prayer Stone. Her legs were folded beneath her. Her back was straight. Her head was bowed with eyes closed. Her slender hands rested on her thighs.

She was, in Taggart’s artistic mind, as perfect as a marble sculpture. He absorbed the flickering lantern light as it played across her gray-streaked brown hair drawn to her mid-back in a single warrior’s braid. His own brown hair, just as long and just now beginning to streak with gray, was plaited into an equivalent shape. Where path met arena, Taggart stepped out of his sandals next to

Alina's. He placed his sheathed sword and dagger in the wooden rack next to her weapons. Fists at his sides, he bowed toward the Prayer Stone and entered the arena.

Alina's breathing was slow and calm. She did not acknowledge Taggart when he knelt precisely two paces to her right and mimicked her pose.

Silently, Taggart began his meditation.

I revere the truth this stone symbolizes. As it is bound to the earth. So too am I. As it reaches toward my Maker. So too do I.

Father Creator, with gratitude I begin this day, Your gift of life to me. May the orbits of my soul honor You. May I commit no harm to Your creation this day.

I give thanks for . . .

Taggart envisioned his life's treasures: Alina, their marriage, their children and grandchildren, their health, his profession as master sculptor, his apprentices so bright with promise laboring at the quarry miles away, the latest crop of Twelfth-Harvest children who anxiously awaited his and Alina's arrival, and many other blessings. Completing his prayer of gratitude, he stopped and began to exhale slowly and softly.

Detecting the end of his meditation, Alina matched her breathing to Taggart's. Eyes still closed, they raised their heads to synchronize into the *Final Eleven*. They inhaled for a slow count of four, held for four, exhaled for four, and held again for four before beginning the next cycle. Completing eleven such cycles, they touched their foreheads to the slate before the Prayer Stone.

Then, as if joined by invisible bonds, the couple stood up, and executed a precise about-face before walking in step to the south end of the arena. Only when Alina stood did her martial rank reveal itself. One red dragon and a second blue-and-gold dragon emblem stood out in bold relief against the black of her belt.

Silently, for a quarter hour, they followed a progressively intricate routine of stretching and warming-up exercises. Upon completion, they bowed to each other, turned to face the stone, and then snapped into aggressive combat stances, fists raised, knees flexed and ready. What followed fused grace, power, and extraordinary fluidity based upon the characteristics of seven different animals.

The millennia-old, advanced Dragon-level combat forms of Wraithaven's martial arts system, known as *Nung-Cha*, began with *Ice Cat Slaying*, a powerful dance of low crouching movements characterized by quickly executed, lengthy stances. Hands clawed in tight, blurred defensive circles too fast for an untrained eye to follow. Bone-crushing hammer-fists mimicked the killing strikes of Wraithaven's most dangerous predators—saber-toothed felines as large as oxen.

The perfect synchronization of the couple was made possible only by a half century of disciplined practice, by having pushed their bodies to fifty thousand repetitions of the advanced forms. Both remained silent, not punctuating the more explosive points of the form with loud shouts as Outsider martial systems taught. Climactic strikes, killing blows, were punctuated with explosive exhalations of breath at the focused, pantomimed strikes of fist, foot, or elbow.

To a non-Wraithian observer, the strenuous ritual might be perceived as overzealous acts by rare adherents to such an activity. This was not the case here. Across the length and breadth of Wraithaven, the morning entry to *The Necessary Path* started the day's activities. School children and the elderly, tradesfolk and militias, healers, teachers and families all began their days thus. Villages and schools held mass *Nung-Cha* gatherings. It had been so for over two thousand years. To do otherwise was unthought-of.

With the final strike of *Ice Cat*, they paused for a count of four. Rising to the attention stance, they took three measured breaths.

Descending Crane followed, allowing them to recover from the vigor of *Ice Cat* through deceptively graceful spins and the narrower stances of the form. High snapping kicks to the front and side, blurring spear-hand jabs, and axe-like chops of the hand's knife-edge mimicked the hunting techniques of the silver crane. The only obvious noise was the whip-like snaps of their trouser cuffs and jacket sleeves.

The beguiling subtlety of *Hunting Serpent* immediately followed. Tight, looping blocks and wide, circling deflections masked iron-fingered strikes to the throat, eyes, and heart of imaginary opponents, delivered so quickly naught but advanced practitioners could differentiate the moves.

The fourth, *Wolf Pack Playing*, simulated defense and attack against multiple opponents. Strikes of fist, elbow, and feet were three times as numerous as any other form and demanded unfettered speed during execution. The rigorous form taxed both practitioners, but decades of practice made the intricate violence seem easy. In not one strike, parry, or leap did they break their fluid synchronization.

But that was not to say the moves were performed mindlessly. Even after decades of practicing *Nung-Cha*, Taggart was never unaware of the origins of the *Wolf Pack* form. *It was created to epitomize the predicament plaguing our ancestors*, he thought. *Multiple nations often declared simultaneous war upon our Pelanjian ancestors. Combined fleets attacked multiple times in every Pelanjian generation intent on invading the home islands, determined to exterminate every man, woman and child. Always outnumbered. No allies to help. Always alone. Learn to fight! Or die!*

His reverie came and went quickly. It had to.

Iron Shark followed, the most fluid form of all. They spun from low, sweeping crouches, lashing out an extended leg in one direction then another to sweep an imaginary opponent's feet out from under him. Killing blows of knife hands and crushing blows from a foot heel always followed such "iron broom" techniques. They delivered deadly strikes from upright stances, from low crouches, and lastly even from flat on their backs. Upon ending, they kicked back to the upright attention stance like acrobats.

Awakened Dragon, significantly slower and less flamboyant, was the most demanding of all. Straightforward fist strikes, rising palm heel "neck breakers," and forearm blocks were delivered with slow, exaggerated tensing of every muscle possible. *Awakened Dragon* was a strength builder, designed to reinforce the speed of a strike delivered in actual combat. The final strike, a low, kneeling stance punctuated by a straight downward blow of the right fist, left sheens of sweat glistening on their brows.

The two rose for what should have been a ten count state of preparation for the seventh and final form, *Crag Lord Defender*. Without a word, Alina typically led the form by distancing herself two additional paces from Taggart, which he would then match. This

morning Alina didn't move. The ten count came and went. So did another.

She's distracted, Taggart surmised, not looking at her, just waiting her out.

A sneering voice whispered in Alina's mind. Again. *Two thousand years of peace and still we enter The Necessary Path as if it was needed.*

And it isn't! She threw back. *Hasn't been for centuries! Our cultural paranoia feeds upon itself!*

Forgotten about Cathmore? The Voice sneered. *So soon?* It was ready for her reply. Again. As always.

How could I forget? Ever! And then, as quickly as it had appeared, the Voice abandoned its playground.

Silently, Alina forced herself to move the required two paces. Taggart followed.

Crag Lord was the most elegant form of them all, combining the swift, circular clawing techniques of *Ice Cat* with high aerial spins and kicks more flamboyant than the confined movements of *Descending Crane*. The entire arena was required for the wide, circling arm blocks and the long-distance attacks unique to the form.

It was no accident that *Ice Cat* began the seven forms or that *Crag Lord* ended them. When ancient explorers first set foot on Wraithaven's pristine soil, two of the many wonders of the New World had made lasting impressions.

No predator in the known world matched the size and unparalleled ferocity of the immense saber-fanged felines that prowled Wraithaven from her glacier regions to her fog-shrouded valleys. As for the crag lords, no other name seemed appropriate for the huge, golden-brown eagles that patrolled the timberline country on twelve-foot wingspans.

After studying both creatures for a hundred years, ancient *Nung-Cha* masters created the two complex forms for the Dragon rank. As the New World had absorbed the folk who began to call themselves Wraithians, the two new forms were absorbed by the ancient five first created millennia before in the home archipelago. That meant little to Taggart and Alina. The two "new" forms were nearly two thousand years old before either of them were born.



Crag Lord was a favorite of the couple. Falling back into the lead, Alina found the sublime rhythm of the form after the first few moves, abandoning the Voice as completely as it had abandoned her. Sheer pleasure from executing the precise, demanding movements began to radiate from the pair now. Eyes sparkled, smiles refused confinement, surfacing despite, or perhaps *because* of the concentration, the effort. *Crag Lord* was beautiful, as much dance as martial art, and the beauty of dance begets joy. It simply does.

At the last movement, a strongly executed, low front stance, accentuated by snapping, double-fisted strikes to the front, the pair stood up, bowed to the Prayer Stone, then to each other before relaxing. Only then did they speak.

“Good morning, my sweet,” Alina said, catching her breath enough to greet Taggart with a lingering kiss. “Captured by the quilt this morning?”

“Hardly, love,” he said, cupping her face with big, calloused hands. “More like a poor husband abandoned by his impatient wife.”

“I never sleep well before a Reading.”

Taggart slipped his arms around her. “I attribute that to your youth, girl,” he said with a grin.

Married when he was twenty-four and she was nineteen, the five-year difference inspired occasional quips.

“Old men certainly don’t seem plagued by restlessness.”

“It’s not our first Reading,” he said, stroking her lower back.

“I know, Tag. I just sense an unclear darkness awaiting us this time.” Taggart did not dismiss Alina’s apprehension. She possessed an uncanny knack to sense danger, or something beyond normal routine. He could only surmise that her inherent eye for detail that characterized her complex tapestry designs, empowered her during the traditional mounted stag hunts of late summer. She was often the first rider in a stag pack to detect game sign.



At age fifty-nine, citizens who seek Wraithaven’s most honored social rank as a Reader may apply for an intensive, year-long course

of study in the national capital of Conclusion Bay. Once qualified, the now Sixtieth Harvest Readers conduct the annual threshold-crossing ritual known as a Reading. For Twelfth-Harvest children, the three-day autumn campout in Wraithaven's remote valleys introduces them to the *Orbit Scrolls*. For married couples who wish to serve as a team, a younger spouse can enter Reader training with the older one, as did Taggart and Alina.

After returning from their two-year tour of duty as Pickets in northern Cathmore, Taggart had reached sixty-three harvests, and Alina, fifty-eight. They have Read twenty-one times thus far, occasionally conducting multiple Readings in a single year when the number of eligible children in their sector required it. They live for the Readings now, marveling each time "transit children" shed their child's mantle.

Upon the completion of a Reading, the wooden practice sword carried by every Wraithian child from the age of seven is replaced by a real, but shorter version of the steel sword carried by adults. A Twelve-Harvest child can own property, and virtually always receives a first acre as a gift from family the week of the Reading. In return, Twelve-Harvest young ones are expected to choose more sober adulthood over childish behavior.



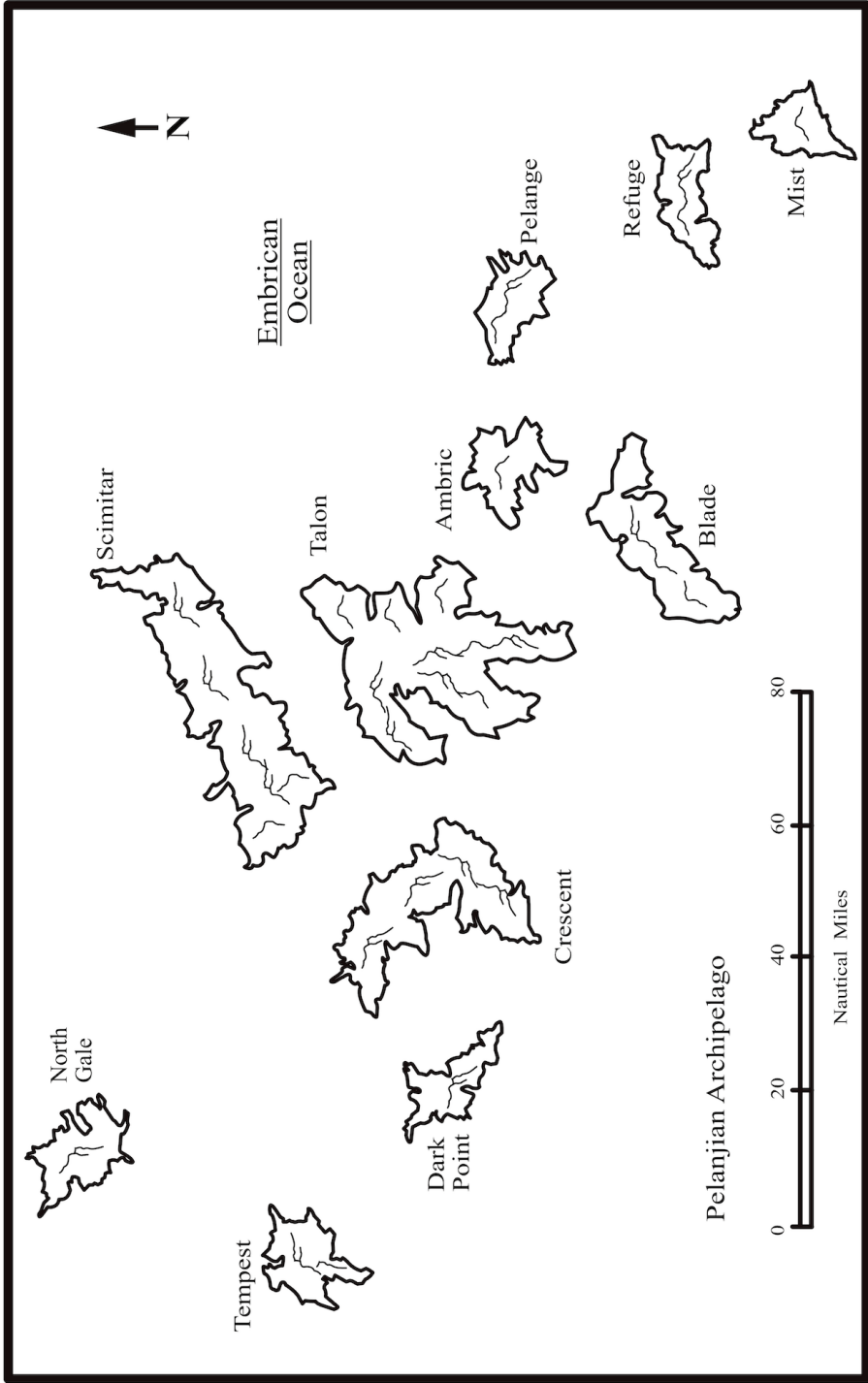
"So, love," Taggart said, "we don't seem to be sparring." On any other day, one-on-one sparring followed two full cycles of the seven forms. Weapon drills then followed, with a five-mile run to the quarry and back completing the exercise for the day.

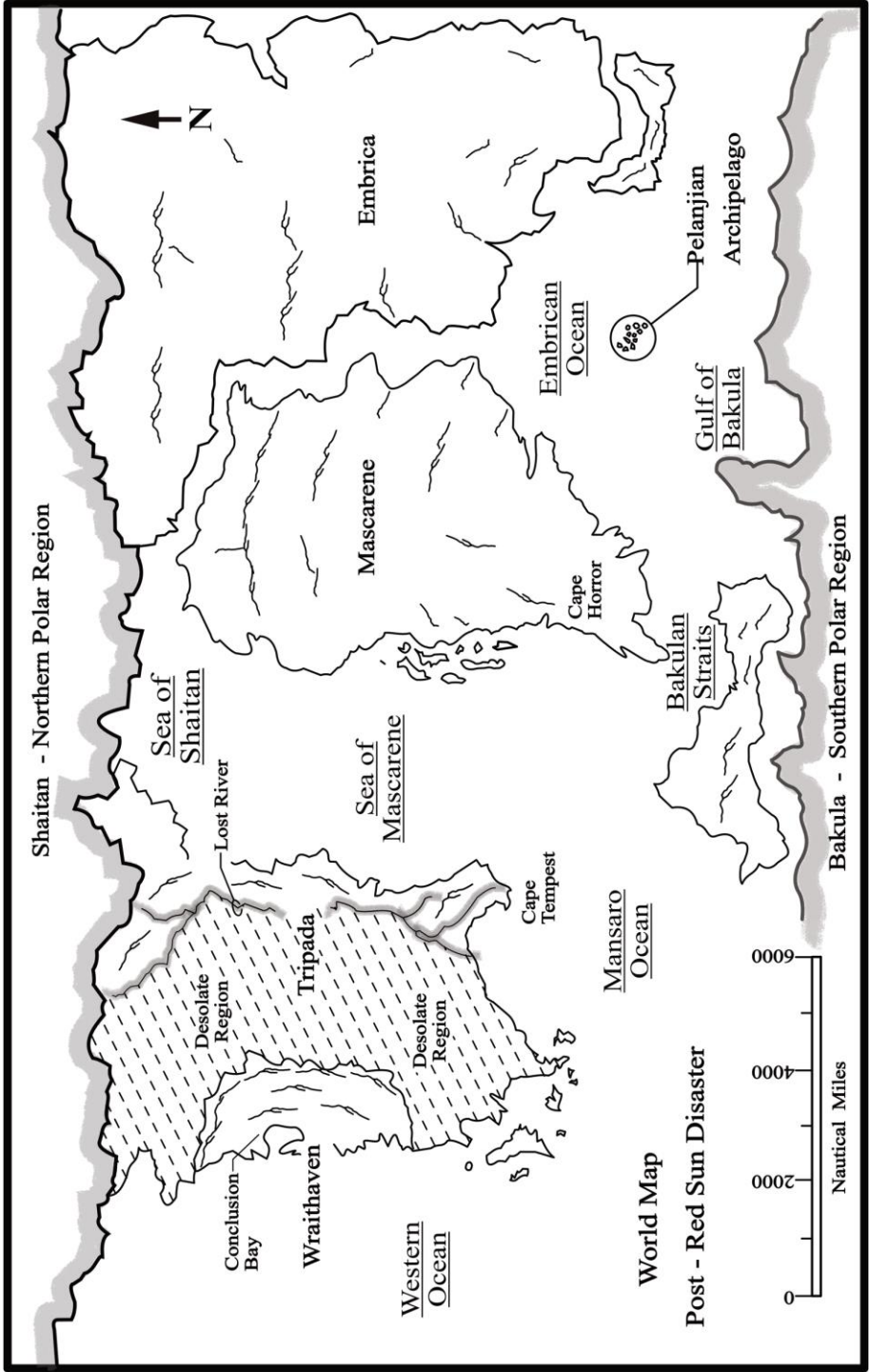
"No, we don't," Alina whispered huskily against his ear.

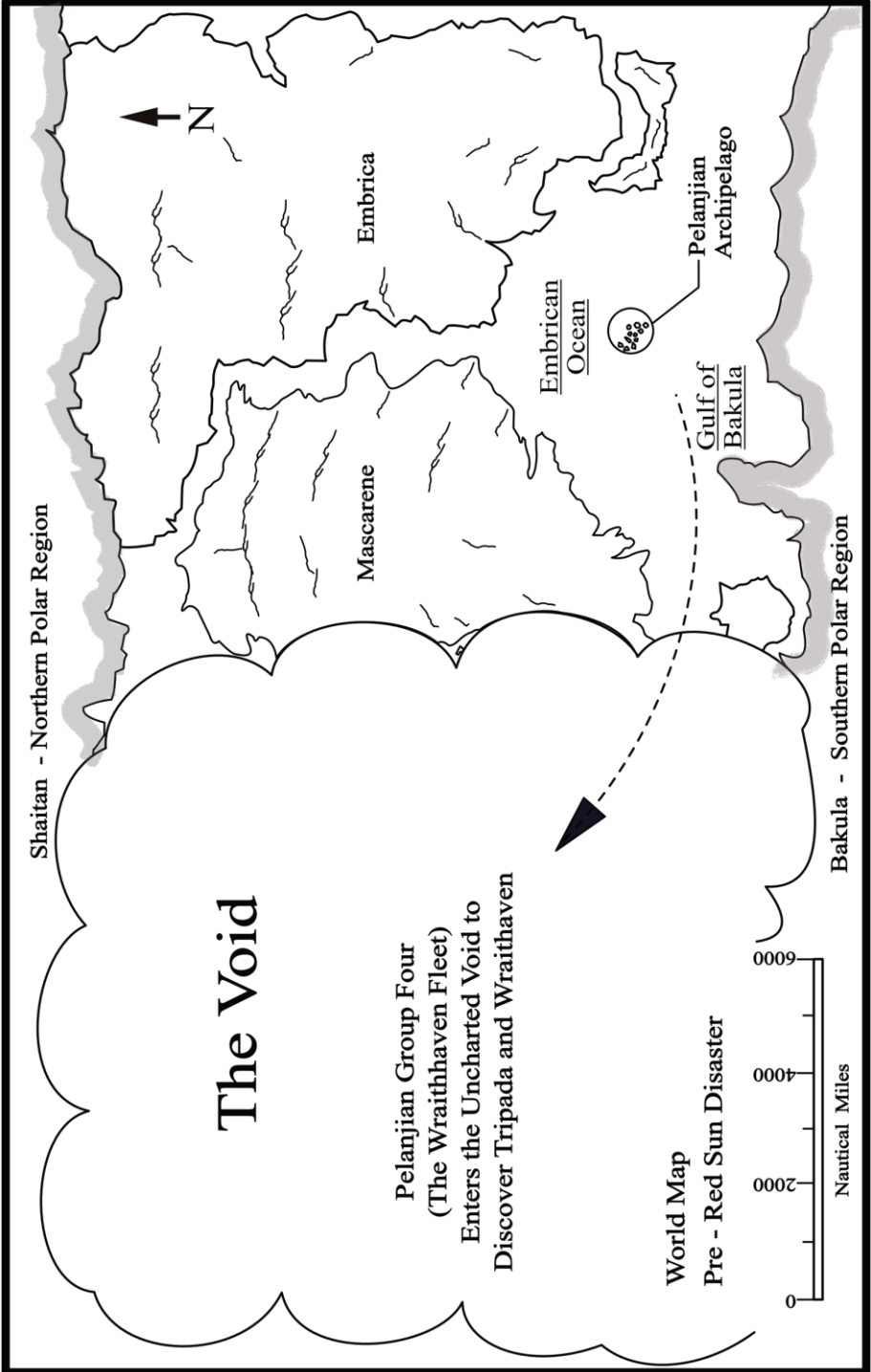
"Then dare I predict that we shall not run, either?"

"I think not, old man. Readers and Dragons need their rest, especially *old* Dragons." She ran her fingertips slowly down his chest. Her left hand took the ends of his belt as she backed slowly away from him, her hazel eyes holding his of gray. As his right hand slid over hers, the intricate dragon tattoo looping around his thick wrist and hand covered an identical tattoo on her smaller hand.

Rest indeed, he thought as they strolled back to the cottage, using the most direct path.







About the Author

Bruce W. Davis spent his early years in Indiana, New Mexico, and Colorado before ultimately settling in Texas. As an Eagle Scout in Colorado, his fondest memories recall majestic night canopies crowning remote mountain ranges, and the serenity of campfires flickering under countless stars.

He attended college in Colorado and Texas. He labored on steel mill maintenance gangs in East Chicago, and on longshoreman crews on the docks of the Houston Ship Channel before discovering the drafting rooms of Texas engineering companies. In Texas, he met and married Annie, the anchor of his life.

His combat tour as a Marine tank commander began with the bloody Tet Offensive in Hue City, Vietnam, and ended thirteen months later after uncountable engagements. He returned to Annie with a Silver Star commendation and that same inexpressible soul darkness all combat veterans across history have brought home from every war ever fought.

He resumed his career as a designer of electrical systems for the Alaskan pipeline, offshore platforms in the Gulfs of Mexico and Thailand, and petroleum facilities in the Middle East. While in Abu Dhabi, the word “mystical” introduced itself to him as cool desert winds slithered in from night-shrouded dunes like tan streamers of smoke. There, in the midst of those perfect, cathedral-like dunes, as sand grains sang against his boots, he recorded each and every sensation because he simply could not help himself.

The itch to write led to his discovery of Rice University’s Novel Writing Colloquium in Houston, and the many accomplished writers engaged in writing passions of their own. Time eventually taught him what “catharsis” meant, after countless words had fallen free, liberated by pen and paper. Darkness dissolved under God’s forgiving light, under Annie’s unfading love, and from the

incremental healing summoned by all those cathartic essays, impressions, and stories. How the contrast of light versus darkness, Colorado skies, and the savagery of Southeast Asian battlefields could ever coalesce with songs sung by Abu Dhabi's mystical dunes to produce *The Orbit Scrolls*, he'll never know.

But they did.

He writes from the deck of his lake house now, absorbing the scents unique to lakes and forests, and the sound of whitecaps lapping against the shoreline. He feels blessed to admire the sleek grace of otters at play, and to listen to the lonely, eerie songs that only loons can sing.

All four of his grandchildren caught their first fish from that shoreline he is proud to say. Novel chapters, essays, and short stories still fall from his soul as if summoned, but every now and then, he wonders, "*Where did that come from?*"