

⦿ATHKEEPER

ALSO BY J. F. LEWIS

Grudgebearer

OATHKEEPER

J. F. LEWIS



an imprint of Prometheus Books
Amherst, NY

Published 2015 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover image © Todd Lockwood

Cover design by Jacqueline Nasso Cooke

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19 18 17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lewis, J. F. (Jeremy F.) author.

Oathkeeper : Book two of the Grudgebearer trilogy / By J.F. Lewis.

pages cm. — (Grudgebearer trilogy; Book Two)

ISBN 978-1-63388-054-2 (paperback) — ISBN 978-1-63388-055-9 (ebook)

I. Title.

PS3612.E9648018 2015

813'.6—dc13

2015000807

Printed in the United States of America

This one is for all the moms out there and to one in particular, my wife, Janet.

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PART ONE
THE SACRIFICE PLAY

“Nebulous millennia in advance of the fate-fueled blow which wrought the destruction of the Life Forge and twisted the elemental magic of all Eldrennai save the Destroyer herself and those of Villok or Uled’s blood, the Test of Four had long been reduced to an empty, if grand, spectacle of coronation . . . a quaint remnant from a time before all Eldrennai youth were trained in the use of elemental magic. The Test of Four existed before construction of the Tower of Elementals and the practice of Ranked Elementalists visiting all newborn Eldrennai to test them and send them to the tower for training, to the Artificer’s Guild, or other less glorious fates.

By my father’s era, the Test of Four had lost all meaning as a measurement of ability, transformed into a demonstrative device each new king used to display not just his command of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water, but his creativity . . . his flair for magic. My father once described it as a myopic exercise in the flaunting of birthright and superiority—an opinion held, perhaps, because neither he nor any of his bloodline could pass it spectacularly or without artificial aid.

Such a simple test: light a candle four times, extinguishing it (once each) with air, earth, and water. For those who hold sway over all four elements: child’s play. Of course, the ancient rules officially require magic to be used only once in the test, coming as it did from a time before the successful merging of elemental bloodlines. . . . Not that the rules for the Test of Four were ever revised. A technicality, true, but kingdoms have fallen and mortals raised to godhood by technicalities.

They are never safe to overlook.”

From *The Kings of the Eldrennai* by Sargus

CHAPTER 1

ROYAL CONTINGENCIES

Night birds called in the outer dark, joining a chorus comprised of tent fabric shifting in the gentle breeze and the chirps, cries, and grunts of nocturnal creatures. Rivvek loved those sounds; even the sea lapping against the pier at Oot contributed to the unscripted opus.

Combined with the scent of stale air inside the tent and the snores of another person nearby, the sensorial collage conjured memories of brighter days camping with his father the king . . . even hunting trips with his younger brother before Dolvek had become so insufferable. Rivvek had hoped his brother's encounter with Kholster would be transformative.

If it had been, Rivvek couldn't see it.

Elsewhere in the ramshackle encampment, Oathkeepers and Oath-breakers alike slept soundly, dreams little disturbed by the Grand Conjunction's approaching end.

Their world is about to change in ways they cannot even imagine, he thought, blind to the turning of the gears in the great destiny machine.

The great destiny machine.

Rivvek smirked at the thought of it. Once he'd believed the gnomes worshipped a literal device that wove the skein of mortal fates. When he'd realized numbers were the gnomish religion and their great destiny machine merely a codified method of determining likely outcomes, he'd been sorely disappointed . . . and then, years later as he lay healing under the care of the Vael, he'd learned to do the math.

The gnomes played a game with triangular tiles: trigonom. Queen Kari of the Vael had given him a set during his convalescence. He had never learned to play well. Irka, Kholster's son—a perfect double called an Incarna—always beat him, but Rivvek remembered building patterns with the double-sided numbered tiles atop the stiff and pungent plaster in which the Vael healers kept most of him wrapped, and knocking them over to watch the trigonom fall.

The whole world was like those tumbling tiles if you knew how to look at it, and, eyes having been so painfully and thoroughly opened, Rivvek knew no other way.

My graduation approaches.

Rivvek considered his true education to have begun at the Grand Conjunction a hundred and thirteen years ago. It marked his thoughts then as

clearly as the scars he'd received afterward warped his flesh. Was it fair to hold the lack of such learning against his brother? An Eldrennai who still had his magic, whose body was whole and hale?

Prince Rivvek lay in the dark, incapable of slumber, stacking up the trigonoms in his thoughts, looking at them from every angle and doing the math. The first tile would be flicked over soon. It was a tile he would have given almost anything to protect, to place his hand over the tile and hold it in place safe and secure. There were three ways to stop it he could accomplish alone, but then the pattern changed, and the new designs woven into the great destiny machine spelled doom for the Eldrennai.

He wasn't sure why the Zaur hadn't started burning Root Trees yet. The math said they should. Perhaps his formulae were off in that regard, but his calculations, his own personal version of the great destiny machine, was far more accurate when it came to the Eldren Plains and the politics and machinations of the Eldrennai.

Those sums spelled destruction now. He had not yet been born when Uled had created the Aern, a race of warriors to defend against the reptilian Zaur and their magic resistance. For each new problem, it now seemed, Uled had created a new race and with each race, the path to doom had become more and more difficult to avoid.

Uled had wanted to restrict the Aern's ability to breed, creating them all male, thinking he could use low-born Eldrennai women with little magic and no connections as brood mares for his warriors, but bearing Aern, with their bone-steel and unique nutritional properties, rendered an Eldrennai female barren, often after the first birth.

Nine in ten. Rivvek saw the statistics in his head, marveling at how much cruelty could be concealed when suffering and evil were disguised as numbers.

To solve the breeding issue, Uled had created the plantlike Vael, their bodies designed to be both appealing to the Aern and easily capable of producing many Aern offspring, quite rapidly if the raw materials were available in sufficient quantities.

Two gallons of blood per infant to be awakened. . . . Words from Uled's notes haunted Rivvek, but he'd needed to know, to understand, so that he could get the numbers right. His predictive model required deadly accuracy.

On the page, everything looked like it would work, but chaos, the natural tendency for change, had not been accounted for in any of Uled's plans or designs. First came the appearance of female Aern, then male Vael.

Worse were the changes and complications brought in by individuals in

power. Enslaved by Uled's magic, unable to refuse a command, or break an oath, the Aern might have remained under complete Eldrennai control forever. Given the pride and arrogance so common to Rivvek's ancestors, in fact, the entire bloodline of Villok, Rivvek was still astonished it had taken as long as it had for an Eldrennai king to break his word to Kholster, First Born of Uled's Aern, thus releasing the Aern from the spells that bound them.

From there, even Rivvek's predictions would have been wrong had he been alive to make them. In prolonged battle against a magic immune warrior race in possession of nigh unbeatable warsuits, even in limited numbers, Rivvek would have projected a complete genocide for the Eldrennai. His calculations would have failed to account for the Vael's inborn desire for peace and mediation as well as the Aern's affection and respect for them.

The six hundred years of peace they had enjoyed had been a statistical anomaly. Rivvek wondered whether other Eldrennai comprehended how lucky they had been that the uneasy truce had lasted a year, much less six hundred. Even if Dolvek, Rivvek's brother, had not so stupidly broken the truce by moving the warsuits the Aern had left behind as part of the truce, it would have ended eventually. At that time, the oath made by Kholster to slay every Eldrennai would have come into effect, and the path upon which they now walked would still be theirs. Only the date had been variable.

But, as his own scarred body told the world, there are varying levels of ruination. One can be scourged near to death, be broken, and laid waste to and still heal to emerge from the flames, if not whole, then . . . still useful.

"Kings die," he whispered, his voice breaking, the words strangled. "Fathers die." He pushed on, forcing himself through a verbalization of the hateful truth. "Everyone dies eventually. It's making sure that death has as much meaning as . . . as . . ."

Optimize your life and you will be rewarded in the next. That was what the gnomes believed. Rivvek was certain Torgrimm, as god of birth and death, had made it happen. Would Kholster, in his new role as Harvester, do the same? For the gnomes? Rivvek did not doubt he would. For King Grivek?

Eyes closed more against that idea than the dark, Rivvek's ears perked up. His melted ear tugged against the tender flesh at his temple as he eavesdropped on the Kingsguard. Their appointed rounds kept them stationed far enough from the cluster of deiform statuary to avoid disturbing the Conjunction itself, but close enough that the brave Eldrennai could charge to their deaths in King Grivek's defense. Rivvek assumed their voices were overheard just as easily by the Vael and the Aern at Oot as they were by him.

“Now that Kholster’s dead,” a husky-voiced Eldrennai muttered to someone, “our King will make things right between the Grudgebearers and us. You wait and see, Dace.”

Was that Thalan speaking? Rivvek decided it must be.

“You think so, Thal?” Dace breathed.

“She’s not even half a hundred yet,” Thalan chortled. “You think this kholster Rae’en can out-negotiate an Eldrennai king with over half a millennium on the throne?”

This then, Rivvek thought, sitting up, is the peril of my people: arrogance unrivaled by any other race and self-deception enough to make Kilke himself blush.

“My prince?” Sargus stirred. Rivvek opened his eyes, making out the aura of Sargus’s life force more easily than he could his features in the night—another “gift” from his time beyond the Port Gates. When one stood too close to a Port Gate or wore armor made of Ghaiattri hide, one could see, as if through a thin veil, the creatures of the Ghaiattri’s realm. Rivvek’s sight afforded him a dual view of reality, particularly at night, the never-dark of that other place seeped into his perceptions. With it came a light that illuminated the spirits of sentient beings around him. Sargus shone as a whorl of colors, dark, rich purples wending through golds and blues shot through with the occasional bloody red or coal black.

When bending his mind to a problem, the black, red, and purple spread through Sargus, filling him up, the borders assuming jagged lines. Now he was mostly blues and golds. Colors Dolvek thought of as safer. He hadn’t been able to completely codify the internal palettes of others, but the inner black was not good.

Sargus had fallen asleep reading. Blinking to focus on the real world as much as he could, Rivvek barely made out the glint of the other elf’s goggles in the scant light that crept in from outside. A full moon.

“I’m sorry to wake you,” Rivvek whispered.

“I shouldn’t have fallen asleep,” Sargus answered. “Shall I—?”

“No,” Rivvek interrupted. “Let me do it. I need the practice.”

Rivvek heard an intake of breath as if Sargus had been about to object, but the Artificer held his tongue.

A prince still has pride, Rivvek chided himself, even a magic-crippled one.

Rivvek rubbed his eyes, clearing away scratchy motes of “sleep” from the corners. He took a long deep breath, held it, let it out again.

Mustering a supreme effort of will, Rivvek forced his inner power to its utmost. Veins stood out on his forehead. His scars grew hot then aching—pain a constant chaser to the savor of his magic now—and fire raged forth: a

gleaming white flame no bigger than the wisp atop the wick of a lit candle hovered above the tip of his index finger.

Warm illumination filled the tent, revealing the smiling face of Sargus where he sat in the strange folding-chair contraption of brass and leather that let him adjust the back to recline or sit up straight if needed. Rivvek didn't know how it could be as comfortable as Sargus claimed.

Thoughts focused on the bit of mystic flame, Rivvek crossed the tent and lit a lantern sitting upon a small camp table. Wiping a bead of sweat from his cheek, Rivvek scratched absently at his nightshirt, as the pain in his scars faded with the magic. The heat would take longer to dissipate, a side effect for which none had been able to provide adequate explanation.

"Find anything we missed?" Rivvek nodded at the leather tome open on Sargus's lap.

"No." Sargus closed the volume, shifting it from his lap to a nearby camp table. "We do still need to make sure we take care of the Stone Lord, just in case—"

"One son and two daughters," Rivvek interrupted. He waved to his left in the vague direction of the other Aiannai tents, the temporary homes of those who had followed him to Oot hoping their prince and their new status as Oathkeepers would save them from the Aern. "Each to inherit in an order we've already hammered out. They relayed their request via Caz's warsuit Silencer. I handled it on my last trip."

"Who took them in?"

"Is it horrible that I don't remember?" Rivvek yawned. "But with Lady Flame, the Sea Lord, Lady Air, and the Stone Lord . . ."

"That's all of the elemental council dealt with except for Hasimak." Sargus yawned despite himself. "He is more powerful than you realize. Were he to oppose us, he could still—"

"No." Rivvek pulled his nightshirt over his head revealing Kholster's scars upon his back: a diamond shape at the base of his spine with two parallel lines marking each facet, the right-angled wedges at each shoulder, and a thumb-width line along his spine. Far from the only things that marked his back, the scars of the First of One Hundred merely filled in the space not marked by the various elemental foci that dotted his back in winglike arcs in failed attempts to restore the full might of his magic.

Once . . . he cut the thought off ruefully and reached for his traveling clothes. *Once these clothes were clean and fresh.* They were rank from the multiple visits to and from Port Ammond, but he could get a change of clothes when he got there. A bath, too. He'd almost given in to the temptation to bring

a cleaning wardrobe, but doing so had felt too extravagant. “We’ll go with your strategy.”

“It’s risky. Even with the elemental lords and ladies siding with you, the people could still riot. Even if Hasimak is with us, he will never turn on his own people. If the citizens revolt . . . he has always been loyal to the crown. Longer than the crown has existed, actually, and there are far more non-magic-using Eldrennai than there have ever been. Aern have proved how much trouble opponents without magic can be. The plan is—”

“Not as risky as you think it is.” Rivvek heard footsteps outside his tent flap. Two steps took him close enough to throw them open. He smiled when doing so revealed Brigadier Bhaeshal, his personal Aeromancer.

“Just happened to be in the area, Bash?” Rivvek teased.

“Finally used to your new schedule.” She smiled. Dressed as Rivvek was in a traveling tunic, trousers, and boots, Bhaeshal would have made Hasimak’s nose wrinkle in dismay at her lack of formal robes, but they weren’t really all that sensible for long flights. “Lord Artificer.” She nodded to Sargus, the light from the candle reflected in the masklike band of steel that was her elemental foci. She looked back at him with those pale white crystalline eyes, and he returned her gaze warmly.

“Lady Aeromancer,” Sargus nodded back.

“Will you both be coming?”

“Perhaps I ought to stay and . . .” Sargus trailed off.

“Look after my father?” Rivvek smiled. “I wish there were something you could do to change his fate, but there isn’t. I need you with me . . . to stop Hasimak from taking the throne.”

“Please don’t even jest about that.” Sargus got up.

Rivvek tried not to let it worry him. Yes, Hasimak was the oldest living Eldrennai, but it was hard to imagine how he could be a threat to . . . well, to the Aern if it came down to it. No, Rivvek was forced to ask kholster Rae’en for assistance. It would be sad to see Hasimak go, but if that was the required sacrifice to save as many of Rivvek’s people, as many of the Eldrennai, as he could. Rivvek intended to make that sacrifice and any others the gods demanded.

“Don’t forget the book.” He gestured, and Sargus picked the heavy tome up off of the camp table.

“My prince . . .” Sargus put a hand on Rivvek’s shoulder and seemed momentarily surprised by the scars beneath his tunic, still hot to the touch even through the fabric. “Maybe she won’t kill him.”

“Kings die. A good king dies for his people when it is required.” Rivvek’s voice cracked as he whispered the words. Believing them didn’t take

dismiss their sting in the slightest. “You just promise me we’ll make his sacrifice mean something.”

They flew before dawn, sunrise catching up with them halfway to Port Ammond. The rising light lent the flowing myr grass a fiery aspect. Rivvek, carried by Bhaeshal’s Aeromancy, caught himself staring down at it and remembering another departure one hundred and thirteen years before.

*

He’d been scarless then, a haughty elemental lord with command of all four elements as was his birthright. A Flamewing, like his mother, when he worked magic wings of fire sprouted from his back. A glory to behold. It had been like armor, that pride, and Kholster had cracked it.

The Aern himself, First of One Hundred, stood in the last light of the third day of the Grand Conjunction, bone-steel mail—uledinium, his people had called it, but Rivvek would never dare to refer to it as that again—denim trousers belted at the waist with knotted bone-steel chain. Even those clunky boots had seemed grand to the prince. A Vael princess named Kari (not-yet-queen), her head petals cascading over Kholster’s shoulder as she leaned against him, watched Rivvek with sad, wide eyes.

“You are right,” Rivvek said hoarsely. “What you say is true. My father told me I should believe your version of any history you chose to share with me and, hard as it is, I do. But, Kholster, what would you have me do? How can I fix this? My people. My ancestors. There is no excuse for what they did to you. No excuse for my father’s order at As You Please. No excuse for the mistreatment of the Vael. Not for any of it. I came here ready to hate you. Maybe I did hate you at first, but now . . .”

“There is nothing you can do, Oathbreaker prince,” Kholster said, his voice gentle. “But I, or my representative, will return again in one hundred years for the next Conjunction if for no other reason than that you have heard and believed. You have my oath on it.”

Rivvek opened his mouth to object.

“Unasked for,” Kholster laughed. “I know.”

“I will find a way,” Rivvek answered. “I will find a way, not to make things right, but as right as they can be.”

Kholster laughed again. “Good hunting then, but I fear your quarry is long dead, if it ever existed.”

“Princess Kari,” Rivvek shook his head. “Is there anything I can offer the Vael other than my apology?”

“The Vael have no Litany to recite against you, Prince Rivvek.” Kari smiled pityingly at him. “You are guilty of nothing in my—or our—eyes. Keep it that way and we ask nothing more. If Kholster agrees, you are even welcome in The Parliament of Ages.”

Kholster nodded his assent.

“Such,” Rivvek answered, “is my intent.”

“No promise?” Kholster asked.

“I swear that it is my intent, but I cannot read what the future may hold . . . and accidents happen.”