

In attempting to return to the magical, holy land they once helped save, two friends are confronted by a mysterious messenger. This messenger speaks of a new danger they must overcome, and a mysterious price they will have to pay. How great will be the cost of their return?

THE POWERS THAT BE PART III: THE MAGIC RETURNS

by Thomas W. Brucato

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THE POWERS THAT BE

Part III: The Magic Returns



Thomas W. Brucato

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Chapter 1

The night appeared to be so serene, the trees swaying ever so slightly and being only dimly illuminated by the peripheral glow of streetlights and a crescent moon. Neither of those light sources was visible from this vantage point, however, as Michael Pierce sat on the corner of the small desk in his study and gazed out the window into the back yard. He liked that this window faced the yard, because he preferred the view of those majestic trees to that of the street, parked cars, and other houses that greeted the other windows of the house. There was no sign of civilization in the back yard; the view reminded him of another place he had been, one far more reliant on nature and its varied gifts. It was a place that filled his memories and his dreams, and yet with each passing day seemed less and less real.

The sounds of revelry from downstairs punctuated that growing sense of unreality. He hoped the music and the raised voices weren't too loud, because the last thing he wanted to do was create a bad impression for his new neighbors. He had lived here for only a few months, and new residents tended to undergo sometimes undue scrutiny from the "old guard." He did not want to make waves, and in fact preferred to make a favorable impression, and unfortunately he did not yet know any of the neighbors well enough to have invited them to this party. They had been his sister's neighbors, after all, not his.

He had been urged into throwing this celebration—a housewarming party—by his coworkers, most of whom had graciously brought food, drinks, and gifts along with them. Michael mused, however, that he considered most of those coworkers to be mere acquaintances rather than friends. Urges for the party had come when Michael had complained at work—repeatedly, he admitted to himself—that he had bought too big a house for himself, and his coworkers had offered to help him "fill it up." He suspected that those urges had truly come because the coworkers had sensed a fun party night and party spot for themselves. The gifts they had brought atoned well, however, and it was with a sense of amusement that he reflected on being convinced to go ahead with this shindig.

The house, in fact, he considered far too cavernous, and most of the rooms were largely empty. This study was a perfect example; Michael had never had a study before, had never needed one, and the desk and chair situated against the wall containing the window seemed far too small. There was an extra chair and a file cabinet, and plenty of space for something else,

whatever that something else might be. Michael had moved from a two-bedroom apartment into a four-bedroom, two-story home, for the sole reason that his sister had moved and had talked him into buying her house at a bargain price. It was with the prodding of her and her husband, as well as that of his own parents, that he had finally, albeit reluctantly, agreed.

And that was after he had steadfastly refused to follow their examples and leave Illinois. His brother-in-law had received a transfer to Cincinnati, one that had come with a promotion and that he had been unable to pass up. It was for that reason that Michael's sister, her promoted husband, and his now six-year-old twin nieces had left Chicago for the Ohio city and had abandoned this admittedly well-kept structure. Luckily the family had left a few furnishings behind, so the dwelling's spartan nature was not quite as severe as it might have been otherwise.

His parents had then surprised him by announcing that they intended to move from their own home in Moline to Cincinnati as well, the reason being that they had both retired early and would like to be close enough to see their grandchildren grow up. Michael's only surviving grandparent, his grandmother on his father's side, had passed away over a year ago, and hers had been the only other family presence in the state.

Michael, in fact, had actually been born in Sacramento, but no surviving relatives remained in California.

So he felt very much alone at present. And he reflected that that was not such a new sensation for him.

His family was not downstairs with the other revelers, but that was not their fault. Michael had not invited them, for the sole reason that he knew they would have felt obligated to attend and did not feel right in forcing them to make the five-hour drive from Cincinnati. Add to that the fact that this really was at the behest of his coworkers, who would have vastly outnumbered the family, and Michael did more or less consider it to be *their* party rather than his.

He did not blame his family for moving. Had he himself been offered a transfer with a promotion, he probably would have taken it as well. His extended family would certainly not have moved with him, but then, he had no wife and no children of his own. He could certainly not blame his parents for wanting to see their grandchildren grow up.

So there was no one to blame for anything, even his own loneliness. And the truth was, while Michael had left the seminary at twenty-one—now ten years ago—and then had struggled to find a woman with whom he felt he could share a future, for the past two years he had not tried at all. In fact,

for the past two years he had not even *wanted* to try. He had had no suitors and had pursued no one, and was not sure that he ever would again. Now thirty-one years of age, Michael was not sure how he felt about the future.

It was a rather confusing miasma of thoughts, memories, dreams, regrets, and even accomplishments that led to his current sense of melancholy while the party went on downstairs. Voices were raised in shouts and raucous laughter, bottles clinked noisily, and the floor of the study shook with a steady downbeat as Michael looked at the back yard, at the towering, majestic, beckoning trees and the soft glow that cast shadows upon them. It had been more than two years since he had been to the place filling his thoughts, and he clung tenaciously to those memories. He never wanted to forget that place. The place in his dreams.

Inner Earth.

He tried to imagine that that was it, right there, his own back yard. That there were rolling hills beyond those trees, and vast expanses leading to forests, rivers, and mountains. Of course, all those things were there if one ventured far enough, but first one had to negotiate the streets, lampposts, houses, shopping centers, and, in some cases, sprawling metropolises to get there.

Inner Earth had cities. Michael had seen none of them, had seen only the small, rustic villages, with very few roads and very few people. Yes, that could be it right there, except, of course, for the stars overhead. For some reason there were no stars, no moon, and no sun in Inner Earth. And yet the sky was bright during the day and dark at night. The people there simply accepted that fact for what it was, and never wondered about the scientific impossibility of it.

Michael had wondered about the exact nature of Inner Earth many times, had in fact discussed it on numerous occasions with the only person in this world—the Outer World—who had shared his experience. He and his closest friend, Dan Renhoff, had wondered whether it might be another planet. It had horizons, after all, and all the other markings of a planet—at least as far as the two non-scientists knew—and yet, a planet would certainly have afforded a view of stars, suns, and moons. They wondered if it might be a place within the planet Earth itself; but that seemed highly unlikely, given that outside truly *seemed* like outside, and certainly some kind of scientific study would have revealed the presence of a huge, open cavern within the planet itself. Probably. And the photosynthesis argument held no weight, because while it was unlikely that trees could grow in a cavern, there was, again, no sun in Inner Earth, either.

The two had concluded that it must be another dimension, something they had previously experienced only in fantasy or science fiction stories. It was something beyond space and time, or at least beyond the space and time understood by those who inhabited this world. It had some kind of powerful connection to holiness and evil...and that was as far as their discussions ever got them. Other, more fanciful explanations (if such could be imagined) fell flat in the face of contradiction piled upon contradiction. There were enough of those already.

Michael recalled that everything in the Outer World seemed magnified in Inner Earth. Time passed differently than it did in the Outer World. Language was never a barrier there. Magic was a real thing. And most of the occupants of that land possessed what they called sensemagic, an innate power that connected them to the health of their natural world and attuned them to the presence of holiness and evil.

Michael reached over and snatched an object off the top of his file cabinet. It had a brass-like appearance, was approximately eight inches tall, and was in the shape of an ornate cross. This was the reliquary he had bought upon his last return from Inner Earth. A glass case in its center displayed the relic of St. Anthony, a bone fragment, that he had brought with him to that magical place and that had constituted a Holy Presence.

A Holy Presence. That was a term he had learned in Inner Earth. It was a term for the most powerful magic in that land, the type of magic that could only be contained in an extremely holy object from the Outer World. It was the type of magic Michael himself had wielded there, reluctantly and disbelievingly at first, and then with increasing confidence and faith.

Michael gazed upon the bone fragment, recalling that he had bought it from a street vendor in Rome and initially did not believe it to be authentic. To his rather self-amused shame he had bought it as a gift for his mother, who had a devotion to St. Anthony, in spite of his doubts about its authenticity. After his two sojourns in Inner Earth, however, he had ultimately decided to keep the object for himself. He had a lot of history with it. Gently, reverently, he placed it back on the file cabinet.

Michael remembered the Crusade Medal, another object he had bought in Rome and carried to Inner Earth and that he had at first thought to be the source of the Holy Presence. It had turned out to be a mere ticket of sorts, a signal that he had been chosen to make that supernatural trek. He recalled his initial fear and disorientation in that world, his own fear and that of the people he had first encountered. He recalled his first view of demons and middemons, physical creatures of pure evil that inhabited that realm and

that had originally horrified him. He had overcome them in time, and had learned how to do so with commanding power. He remembered his original failure against Zar Meytha, the Demonspoil that constituted the most powerful Evil Presence in Inner Earth, and then his eventual victory over that creature when Dan had suggested they conduct a liturgy right under its figurative nose. Together they defeated and crushed it, in the process also destroying its stronghold known as Serach Cave and even shattering the Sceptre of Gehenna, the object that had imbued it with such evil might.

So in the end they had emerged victorious, and could be content, and more than content, in the fact that they had literally saved an entire world from the clutches of evil.

There had been a cost, of course. And Michael had even come to grips with the memory of those who had lost their lives for the cause, people like Gren, Ansayj, Horth, Erim, and others whose names he had not even learned. They had died nobly, for an unmatched cause of righteousness. Michael wished he could have saved everyone, but he had been only human, had done his best.

But *Tiva*.

At the thought of her name he instinctively gripped the ring on his right hand with his left, grasped it with almost savage intensity. A lump formed in his throat and he forced down a sob, refusing to let his emotions consume him.

Tiva.

He closed his eyes tightly, breathed deeply, fighting for control. He could not do this. Not with the party going on downstairs, not with a plethora of coworkers in his house. He *would* not do this, not *now*. He gritted his teeth, for a moment tightened every muscle in his body, tried to assert rigid authority over his mind and his heart.

Gradually, taking deeper and deeper breaths, he managed to come back to himself. He slowly opened his eyes, blinked away the smattering of tears that could far too easily become a deluge. He forced his left hand to relax, to release the ring on the third finger of his right hand. This happened frequently, probably far too frequently, but he would not return to the party with red eyes and a group of people wondering what he had been about.

Tiva Braythana. That had been her full name, and it meant Tiva, daughter of Braytha. She had been a magic-user from the village of Roilglen, had been the one who had convinced her entire village that the stranger in their midst was not evil. She had been the one who had convinced Michael that he bore and could wield incredible magic, had

convinced him that his faith was strong. She had accompanied him to Serach Cave not once but twice.

And she had become his world.

He had never met anyone like her. Although that statement could actually apply to most of the denizens of Inner Earth, in her case it had been a matter of seeing a reflection of his very soul. Or, more accurately, what he would *like* the reflection of his soul to look like.

Physically she had been petite, perhaps five-foot-two with medium-length brown hair, a slightly rounded face with cheeks flushed with a touch of rose, and bright blue eyes. Michael doubted she had weighed more than a hundred pounds. She had been fond of wearing white tunics and white leggings, belted at a very narrow waist. To his eye she had been the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

But her beauty went far beyond the physical. In spite of her diminutive stature she had been very strong, willing to stand up to anyone and anything. She had argued his case in front of her entire village, including some kind of court complete with three judges. He had fought side by side and back to back with her against hordes of demons. She had given him strength, had given him her very *faith* when his own had been lacking.

And she had never, ever stopped believing in him, even when he had doubted himself and even when he had failed utterly.

When she had spoken to him her voice had had an almost melodious quality. Unlike most of those in Inner Earth, she had spoken to him as Michael Pierce, as *himself*, rather than as an almost mystical figure constituting the bearer of the Holy Presence. She had seemed to see into his very soul, had seemed to share her very essence with him. And she had done so in a very tangible way when she had magically created a ring for him to wear, a ring that would allow him to sense both her feelings and her physical proximity.

Michael looked at that ring again. She had fashioned it out of a utensil during their first journey to Serach Cave. It had taken her almost all night to weave the spell, and it had once been a solid blue. About a shade darker than the color of her eyes, Michael mused, almost but not quite smiling. That was what he had thought when she had first presented it to him. The ring was gray now, having lost its color and its power with Tiva's death.

When he and Dan had returned from Inner Earth after defeating the Demonspoil, Michael had convinced himself that he was at peace and, given the salvation they had brought to that world, could live with the tragedies

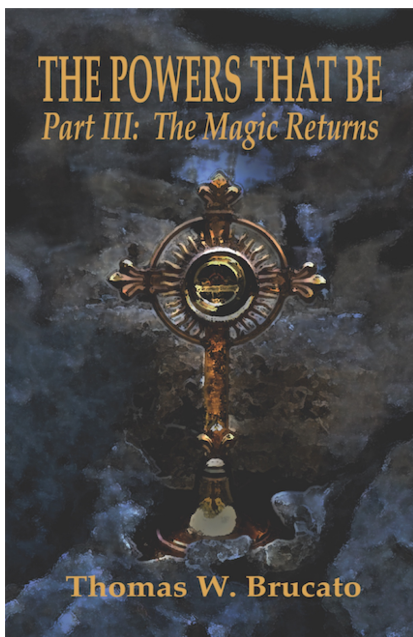
that had been the cost. He had even believed, for a time, that he would grieve normally and would be able to move on. *And* that he had not been responsible in any way for what had happened to Tiva.

But that was not true.

He and Dan had discussed the subject many times, as a matter of fact. Whenever their conversations turned to Tiva, they now followed a familiar pattern, leading Michael to think they may as well script them. Michael's eyes and tone would reflect obvious melancholy, Dan would recount the sequence of events that had led to Tiva's demise and that Michael could not possibly have prevented, Michael would lightly argue the point, Dan would press it home a little more strongly, and Michael would reluctantly but convincingly come to agree.

But Michael did not agree. Oh, he had tried to, at least in the beginning. Dan had tried to convince him and he had tried to convince himself. He supposed he was lying to Dan, in a sense, when he now said that he did not blame himself. But he knew that if he told Dan the truth, his friend would probably become extremely worried and perhaps even suggest that Michael go to grief counseling. Maybe that *would* be the best thing, Michael thought, but he was not ready to take that step. He did know that the average grief cycle lasted around three years, being different for each person, and that he himself was only two years into Tiva's loss.

But he doubted he was experiencing normal grief. And if Dan knew just how often and just how intensely Michael thought about Tiva, and just how angrily and forcefully he did berate himself for her death, his friend would have been worried indeed.



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