

When King Gilgamesh's renowned quest to The Far Away goes awry, the secret to immortality is stolen, beginning an epic battle between six heroes and ruthless villains in search of a treasure that will either save or destroy the world.

Pieces of the Puzzle

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# **Timekeepers Series**

Book One

## **Pieces of the Puzzle**

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## Prologue

Clouds had been gathering in the sky for the past three days. Not a drop of moisture had fallen from the billowing black mass, but now and then lightning streaked to the earth with ear-splitting waves of thunder. The time was close. Menachem had one more important task to perform before he and his family were sealed up in the bowels of the monstrous vessel they had been building for years.

The people of the surrounding cities thought Menachem was a mad man. It was safer for him to avoid them during the day, so he waited until dusk to venture from his home. Guided by the firelight of a small torch, he picked his way through the growing dark across fields until he came to the ravine. Here he had to be extra careful; one false step and he would find himself falling to his death. The trail down the rock was narrow and scattered with loose stones that could trip a man if he was not watching. Once his head was below the cliff-top, he could no longer see the city lights dancing some distance away. It was a long, laborious process, but a few hours later he had descended to the bottom of the valley. Now that it was the middle of the night, the air above the canyon walls had dropped to a frigid temperature. But down here it was still warm enough for him, heated after the exertion of the climb, to strip off his robe, leaving his chest and legs bare.

Menachem sought out the place he had been led to years ago. The stone of the cliff wall resembled a crouching lion. He thought it had been chosen because it looked as though the shape would stand the weathering of time and still be recognizable centuries, perhaps even millenniums from now.

For the person who knew where to look, there was a thin path, little more than scattered foot and hand holds, up from the canyon floor to one of the openings that made an eye of the stone lion. Menachem's movements upward were agile despite his age and the fact that he had to keep the torch in one hand. He reached the opening and pushed himself through. After crawling a short distance he was able to stand, and a few feet beyond that the roof opened up and he was in a huge cavern.

He strode across the room to a cup-shaped stone filled with a clear liquid. He dipped his torch to this and the liquid sprang into a brightly burning flame, throwing light on the pale walls of the cave.

Moving to one corner, he pulled aside a few stones that hid a metal box that had been entrusted to him when he was still a lad in his thirties. He had been told this box contained a treasure for the future, and he must take special care of it. At that age he had been disappointed to open it only to find it was filled with stacks of rectangular plates made from a strange metal and covered in markings he did not recognize. Still, he had been faithful to his charge to protect the box.

Now he would leave the chest behind as he embarked on the greatest journey mankind had known. The giant vessel, built to harbor his family when the waters burst up from the bowels of the earth and spewed over the globe, would not be carrying this treasure to a new land. There would be no place to hide the box safely for the months they would spend on board together. Therefore, he would leave it here. But first he took two blank plates from the chest. He would write clues to the whereabouts of the treasure on them and take this small token with him.

After he backed out through the narrow gap, he filled the entrance with rocks, shoving them back and packing them in so that it would take some digging to ever uncover the opening to the treasure.

When he was on the canyon floor once more, a flash of lightning lit up the rock wall and he saw that the lion was now one-eyed. Behind the closed eye reposed the box filled with a wealth that would not be found until the time was right.

Menachem thought of the era that lay ahead, when people would have to start over. The world was about to begin again, and some things would be very different.

That thought caused him to reach involuntarily to the vial hanging from a leather strap around his neck, hidden under the folds of his robe. He had considered placing this other treasure in the box before sealing it shut, but something had stopped him. This vial had also been placed in his charge. Carved characters similar to those on the plates in the box spiraled down its surface. He did not know what the carvings meant, but he knew that the tube held another priceless treasure.

The era of long lives was ending. In this new world men's lives would be short, and it would be better that way. Nevertheless, this one small vial would remain. It contained a liquid from a fruit that had grown on the outskirts of the Great Garden. It was not *the* fruit, the one that would change a man in such a way that he would live forever, bound to an eternity in this life with all its darkness and shortcomings. No, mankind was protected from that endless misery. But there was another fruit that would make a man strong and extend his life indefinitely, although it would not protect him from accident or eventual death. Menachem and his wife had partaken of the sweet nectar and the years between them totaled to more than a millennium. Because of this, their children would live long lives, but the span of their descendants' lives would quickly shrink.

He was uncertain if the bush bearing this fruit would survive the coming calamity. The vial would most likely be all that would remain. He fervently hoped it was fated to serve some important purpose.

### **150 Years Later**

Menachem awoke with a sense that something was going to happen. He stroked his long, grayed beard and looked out at the bright sky. Even at over seven hundred years in age he felt he had a couple good centuries left in him. Still, he was feeling the effects of aging, one of which was an overwhelming need for these afternoon naps. The view out his window showed little activity at the few other buildings clustered in the village. His large, stone home was set apart from the rest of the houses. It was a quiet and secluded existence that he and his wife had chosen here in the north, away from the growing crowds that were filling the sunnier southern parts of the land. Only a mere handful out of the huge multitude of their posterity had joined them. Growing conditions were sparse, and life had to be scratched out of the soil. Aside from the giant aged trees that shaded the south side of the village, there was little vegetation growing in the rugged mountain air.

Menachem felt the creaking in his bones as he struggled to stand. Slowly and carefully he made his way along a narrow trail that descended gradually from his door along the banks of a fast moving mountain stream strewn with boulders. After walking for a time he had to stand for a moment, leaning with one hand pressed to a tree

trunk to steady himself. His heart made strange vibrations before settling back to a regular beat. Taking up a walking stick, he moved forward toward the point where the stream met the seashore.

The salty black water made lapping noises as it rolled up the rocky shoreline and down again. Another sound on the water reached his ears, and he peered through the parting mist. There it was again, the splashing of a pole lifting out of the water and then plunging in once more as someone maneuvered over the waves.

A smile lit Menachem's face. Although he had sequestered himself here intentionally, he did enjoy contact with the outside world now and then.

"Urshanabi?" he yelled toward a darkening shadow breaking through the haze, thinking perhaps this was his ferryman friend who came a couple times each year to trade with Menachem and his small community.

"Hello," an unfamiliar voice replied. A flat boat came fully into view, and Menachem saw that it was his friend's boat, but it was being poled along by two powerful looking strangers.

Menachem waited until the men had pushed the boat with scraping sounds up onto the shore.

"Welcome, strangers," he said, noting the full, tangled beards and tattered clothing. He waved a beckoning hand. "Come, you look as though you have had a difficult journey, come refresh yourselves at my home."

The larger of the two men leaped lightly from the short vessel onto the ground. "Thank you, kind sir, but I am eager to complete my quest. I am seeking the Far Away, Utnapishtim."

Menachem raised an eyebrow. "You must come from far to use that name. What is your purpose?"

"He and his wife know the secret to eternal life. I wish to be immortal, as well."

Menachem frowned. "My children have completely corrupted everything I taught them. Like all men, you seek the impossible. It has been decreed no man shall find immortality in this life. Men are weak, and it is a blessing that our lives here are temporary. Everything we gain here is as naught when we pass on. I have seen more life than any man on earth today, and I know it would be a curse to choose this immortality you desire."

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The stranger looked closely at Menachem. "Are you Utnapishtim, then?" he asked incredulously.

"That is one name I am known by," Menachem answered with a smile.

The man could not hide his dismay. "But you are old!"

Laughter shook his aged frame. "Decay is a fact of this life. Eventually all succumb, no matter how much it is delayed. This is why it would be foolish to choose immortality here."

"I would choose it over death," the stranger replied.

Menachem's gaze wandered to the other man still standing on the boat. His straggling beard was thin and his face was intent and fox-like. The old man turned back to the first man. "Only those who have lived poorly need fear death."

The stranger drew himself up proudly. "I have lived a very superior, prosperous life. I am Gilgamesh, king of Uruk. I have slain the fearsome Humbaba of the Cedar Forest. I have been desired by more women than you can count, including the beautiful Ishtar. I have killed the sacred bull of heaven, and have known a friendship deeper than most men will love even their own wives or children." Here his voice choked up. "But now even my mighty friend Enkidu has died, and I have come face to face with my own mortality."

"If all you say is true," Menachem said gently, "then you have lived a full life and should be at peace with going when the time comes."

Gilgamesh shook his head vigorously. "I do not want to die!" His voice dropped the prideful note and became pleading, "I can't die."

Menachem looked out to sea in deep thought, both hands resting together atop his walking stick. Finally he gazed back at Gilgamesh. "There is a test, to see if you are strong enough to deserve immortality. But it is not easy."

"Anything!" Gilgamesh breathed excitedly.

"You must sit here upon the shore, for six days and seven nights. But you must not fall asleep. If you can do this you have the power over your body that is required of an immortal."

Gilgamesh snorted. "Is that all? I accept the test." When Menachem made no reply, the king seated himself on a flat rock beside the water.

"Night comes soon. I will return at the end of the seventh night," Menachem said.

Gilgamesh's companion in the boat spoke up for the first time. "And what shall *I* do during this time?"

Menachem looked at him distastefully, but said kindly, "Follow me; we'll get you a warm meal and a soft bed."

With the other men out of his sight, Gilgamesh began to feel the endlessness of the time that stretched before him. As if to mock him, the scene around him was unvarying. Gray water stretched out as far as he could see to meet the steely clouds of the horizon. To either side extended gray, rocky shoreline, and behind him rose the gray, rocky cliffs climbing to clouded mountaintops. The only sound was the rhythmic surging of the waves and now and then a calling sea bird. The air was thin, and his body had been pushed to its limits in his drive to get here.

His eyelids grew heavy. No matter, he thought sleepily. The old man will never know if I drop off for just a few minutes. His head fell forward and the sound of lapping water mixed with the dreams in his mind.

"What is your name?" Menachem asked his companion as he took small steps up the path to his home.

"Chantu," the man answered curtly.

"And are you a friend or a servant of Gilgamesh?"

"Travel companion. I joined him when he came through my city of Catal-Hoyuk."

Menachem nodded. "But you don't share his desire for immortality?"

Chantu shrugged. "If there were such a thing. I have my doubts."

"So it is just the excitement of the adventure that brings you all this way?" asked Menachem.

"We'll see," was the abrupt reply.

The small village came into view, with Menachem's larger house on the farthest side. A thin wisp of smoke drifted from a hole in the roof, and the smell of meat cooking carried to them on the wind. Menachem's wife, Naamah, heard them coming and met them at the door. Like her husband, she seemed indeterminably ancient.

After introducing Chantu, Menachem asked Naamah if she had any fresh baked bread.

"It will be out of the oven in a short while," she replied.

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“When it is done, my dear wife, you and I will hobble back down to the shore and feed a friend who is waiting there.”

“You will feed yourself first, you crazy old man,” she teased.

“She calls me ‘old man,’ yet she forgets she is eighty years my senior,” Menachem said to Chantu. The man’s dark eyebrows rose as he looked closely at Menachem to see if he spoke the truth.

Dinner was a thick, well-seasoned goat meat stew with steaming bread generously spread in goat-milk butter. Chantu grabbed at the food greedily, bits of stew dripping down his snarled beard. When he had eaten his fill he leaned back among the soft pillows his hosts had given him. Soon his snores echoed through the room.

Naamah gathered up a loaf of warm bread in a spotlessly white cloth and the old couple headed down the path arm in arm. As they walked, Menachem told his wife the events of the afternoon. Naamah shook her gray head.

“He will surely fail the test. But how will you prove it?”

With a gnarled finger tapping his forehead, her husband answered, “It’s all right here.”

When they reached the bottom of the trail, they could see Gilgamesh seated down by the shore. Even from behind they could tell the king was asleep. They walked closer, and as Naamah gazed at him, the mothering look came to her eyes. He was handsome, this grandchild of hers (she did not know or care how many generations removed). There were lines of a hard life on his face that even sleep did not wipe away.

Menachem was chuckling to himself. “I didn’t think the test would end this quickly.”

“Well, he’ll be hungry when he wakes. Shall we leave the bread?”

Menachem nodded. “This is the way he will know we saw him asleep.”

“Very wise, my old man.”

It was almost dark when they returned to their home. There was a chill in the air, and Naamah went to the back room to fetch their wool cloaks. She hesitated in the doorway, feeling that the room was somehow different, as if things had been moved slightly, but there was nothing obvious. She shrugged and grabbed the robes.

The next five days all passed the same. After rising with the sun to do his chores, Menachem spent his mornings trying to converse

with the taciturn Chantu. Following the afternoon meal the old couple would walk down to the shore with another warm loaf of bread. None of the previous loaves had been touched. Each time Naamah would shake her head in motherly concern.

“He will be so disappointed,” she would say. “You will have to do something to help him.”

And each day when they returned to the house, Chantu would still be sleeping off the dinner, yet Naamah could not shake the feeling he had been through their things while they were out.

The sixth and last day ended differently. When they returned from their daily walk to the shore, the couple found their house in total upheaval. Desperation had driven Chantu to search with wild abandon, tossing furniture and household objects to the side. Then he had left the house before their return. Naamah shook her head and pursed her lips.

“That man needs a good spanking.” She turned to her husband and was surprised to see the depth of concern in his eyes. “There’s nothing broken here that can’t be replaced, and nothing messed that can’t be cleaned,” she reassured him.

With a sigh the old man replied, “He found it. It was the reason he came.” Then he shook his head. “He couldn’t have known. No one knew about it. He wanted—something else,” here he unconsciously reached for the vial hidden under his robe. “It was just a lucky find.”

Surprised that there had been anything of value in the house, Naamah knew better than to press him for details. She set to work straightening things while Menachem sank heavily onto a stool and sat brooding. He fingered the wooden tube that always hung from his neck as if pondering something. His eyes closed and his lips moved in quiet prayers.

Finally he stood. “Well, tonight is the final night of our young king’s test. I shall go wake him.”

Moonlight lit the shore. Menachem again shook Gilgamesh’s shoulder, and finally the king opened his eyes with a tired groan. As his gaze lit on Menachem, memory of his test returned and he sat up with a start.

“I only fell asleep for a moment,” he insisted. “I can still pass the test!”

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Menachem pointed out the loaves of bread. The new loaf from today was still soft but the others were tough and in different states of decay, with the oldest covered in a fur of black mold. Gilgamesh's shoulders slumped.

"How could I be so weak," he said mournfully. He shivered, "Now I will never escape death!"

Menachem carefully lowered himself to sit beside Gilgamesh.

"I'm sorry, son. There was no way you could have passed the test. You are only a man. You were destined to fail. I wanted to teach you of your own weakness, because only then can you be strong. But we have no time to dwell on your failure. I have an important task for you, another quest if you will. Your friend is gone, he left today and I see he took your boat. He also took something of great value from me. You must try to retrieve it and protect it. Chantu is a dangerous man, and I have decided to give you this to help you." He reached into his robe and pulled out the vial, lifting it up so the leather strap it was attached to came up over his head. He held it out to Gilgamesh.

"What is this?" Gilgamesh asked curiously.

"It is the nectar of a flower that was used by all men before the great flood. Now this is all that is left. It makes a man younger and extends his life to great length. It is not immortality, but it is the closest thing you will find here."

Gilgamesh's eyes were wide. "You had this all the time."

"It is not a thing to be taken lightly," Menachem said firmly. "I would not be giving it to you if I did not put the utmost priority on you living long enough to retrieve the thing of which I speak. The fate of mankind may be in your hands. You cannot stop until you have regained the stolen object."

"I should drink this?"

Menachem nodded. "Drink a small amount. It is very potent after sitting for so long. But there are a couple of things you should know. You will not be invincible. You will not die naturally, but you can be killed. Also, some natural abilities and talents may be enhanced in the person taking the liquid. And finally, though it does not seem to follow the laws of nature, the liquid has a bizarre feature—if you father children after drinking the nectar, some of the potency will go to the child, leaving less in your own veins."

"Is this another trick of yours?" Gilgamesh asked.

“No. But I give you this charge. If this falls into the wrong hands, promise me that you will correct any crisis that is caused by the neglect of your duty.”

Gilgamesh held the vial cautiously. “I will take this home and test it on one of our old men to see if you tell the truth.”

“There is one more thing,” Menachem said. “What is on the outside of the vial is as important as what is inside. Protect it with all your might.”

Gilgamesh agreed without enthusiasm. Then a sudden thought hit him. “But how will I leave here?” he asked.

“When your friend returns the boat to Urshanabi without you, Urshanabi will come to see what has happened.”

“That will be many days,” Gilgamesh said unhappily.

“Yes, and I only hope it is enough time to convince you of the significance of your mission.”

Menachem had been right. After several long days, Urshanabi poled his flat boat over the dangerous seas just to check on the missing Gilgamesh. The king was anxious to be gone, and he waited impatiently for Menachem and the ferryman to finish the days they spent eating and conversing. Finally they were off across the water.

It took several days to cross the black water, but it was just the first stage of a long journey home for Gilgamesh. His mind was far ahead, in his city of Uruk, where he would try the liquid from the vial on some of the old men there before trying it himself.

On the fourth day at sea, they were surprised to see another vessel rolling on the waves. Urshanabi was used to being the only sailor to venture this far north, but someone had brought a village fishing raft into the dangerous water.

As the raft approached a frown etched itself across Gilgamesh’s rugged face. “It’s Chantu,” he said.

The raft drew alongside, and Chantu leaped across to join the other men on Urshanabi’s flat boat. The raft tried to spin off empty, bobbing away over foaming crests, but Chantu held it by a rope which he quickly tied to the boat. His smile was meant to be friendly, but it came across as a leer.

“You finally got away from the crazy old man?” he asked.

“No thanks to you,” Gilgamesh growled. “You left me stranded.”

“I was coming back for you, see?” he said pointing at the raft.

“Why did you leave in such a hurry?”

“I found something at the old man’s house, something you will want. It leads to the greatest treasure of mankind.” He held up a pair of flattened, rectangular sheets of metal etched with writing. Gilgamesh reached out for them, but Chantu pulled them back. “Not so fast,” he said with a harsh laugh. “If you want to see these, you’ll have to trade something of value to me.”

“You stole those.”

“They were of no use to the old timer. Besides, fair is fair, he was playing games with us. We earned it. Now, what will you give me?”

“I traded off everything I brought with me for food on the journey from Uruk. I have nothing of worth left.”

Chantu’s eyes narrowed. “Now you are playing games. You wouldn’t have left without the secret. I want it.”

Gilgamesh wanted to reach up to the vial that was hanging from his neck and slip it beneath his tunic, but he dared not draw attention to it. But it was no use, Chantu had seen it already.

“How about that?” he asked, pointing.

“It’s an old family heirloom, worth nothing,” Gilgamesh lied.

“Well, it might be worth something to me,” Chantu said. He lunged forward and snatched it up. The cord held, and while Chantu pulled at it furiously, Gilgamesh crashed his fist into Chantu’s chin with a stunning blow. Soon the two men were rolling across the deck in a wild fight. The plates went spinning across the wood planks, and Urshanabi had the presence of mind to grab them. Chantu finally managed to wrest the cord from around Gilgamesh’s neck, and he scurried to the other end of the boat while Gilgamesh was still lurching to his feet. With one quick motion, Chantu put the stopper to his mouth and jerked it free with his teeth. Then he upended the vial and let the liquid spill down his throat. Gilgamesh charged into him, and the two men fell back to the deck. The vial dropped and precious liquid seeped over the boards.

Chantu wiped his mouth with a grin and grabbing the metal plates from Urshanabi, he leapt to his raft and cut the rope free. Gilgamesh barely noticed as he busily sopped up the nectar with the hem of his robe, wringing it into the clay pot nearest to hand. The vial rolled across the planks and slipped with a quiet splash into the salty water.

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Gilgamesh had been in Uruk for a month, but his advisors found him silent and gloomy. He was little use as king, spending his time walking the grounds lost in thought. They were certain it was the failure of his quest for immortality that left him morose. He had told them that Utnapishtim had given him a flower that would make a man young, but while traveling back across the sea an evil snake had stolen it.

He had hidden the remainder of the liquid that he had managed to salvage in a green stone jar in his bedchamber. There were a few small mouthfuls left, and he was torn between trying the liquid himself or wasting some on a small number of old men.

One day he called his general and asked for a group of skilled soldiers to be sent in search of a man named Chantu who had stolen something on the quest. The men were gone for a year and a half, and when they returned they went immediately to the king.

“Did you find that snake?” Gilgamesh asked the line of men standing at attention before him.

Their leader, a large man with a gold band around his right wrist stepped forward. “We did not. We started in the city of Catal-Hoyuk, as you commanded. There we found that he had been to his home there but was gone. We climbed down into his mud-brick house and found that he had recently painted a map on two of the plastered walls. We dug up every inch of the plastered floor, but discovered only the bones of his ancestors. From there we followed his trail westward, but we lost all sign of him.”

Gilgamesh’s shoulders slumped. He dismissed the men and tried to focus on his duties as king.

He began to dread the night. He was haunted by dreams of Enkidu, his dead friend. Then he would hear Utnapishtim, the Far Away, reminding him of the quest he had been given, to retrieve the metal objects, and to right any wrong that had been caused by his neglect of the lost vial and its nectar.

Again and again he sent new parties in search of Chantu. And year after year they returned with no success.

Then the tenth year the leader with the gold wrist band stepped forward with a disciplined smile.

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“Your Greatness, we have pleasing news to report. We followed a lead on your man to the land of Canaan. We finally located him near the brackish Dead Sea. He was killed trying to escape us. We searched his body and belongings and found these.” The man held out the metal plates Gilgamesh had seen once before.

A sense of relief flooded over the king. He had fulfilled his sworn duty. He had retrieved the objects and the death of Chantu had righted the wrong of letting the vial out of his hands.

He reached out for the plates and held them up, his eyes scanning the writing on them. The two pieces fit together like a puzzle, and as they came together, there was a strange warmth given off. “Did anyone else know of the plates?” Gilgamesh asked.

“No one seemed to,” the captain replied. “But it is possible he mentioned it to his wife or children.”

Gilgamesh looked up quickly. “Children? What children?”

The captain’s face grew guarded. “Young children, of no consequence.”

Gilgamesh rose to his feet. “Of no consequence? You fool! How old are they?”

“There were six children; I would say the oldest was a mere eight or nine years in age.”

“And where are these children?”

The man spoke reluctantly. “We had them in our custody, but they—they escaped. We could find no sign of them.”

Gilgamesh dropped back onto his throne, his mind spinning. The damage was not undone. His duty went on.

Suddenly he was tired, exhausted. The death he had feared so long seemed to be calling to him, begging him to come rest his bones and forget his troubles. With a weak wave of his hand he sent the men out.

The day passed, and when servants entered with food or to bring him to bed he sent them away as well. When the sun rose the next morning, he had decided on a course of action. First he summoned all his wives and their children to come before him.

He walked back and forth among the ranks of children. First he singled out the sturdy dark lad borne to him by his Egyptian beauty. Next was a girl with one thick black braid who looked him squarely in the eyes and told her father her name was Ling. Four more children

were chosen from the group, and then all the others, the mothers of the chosen children included, were asked to leave.

Gilgamesh told the children to sit on the floor while he went out the door behind the throne. It led down a short hallway that opened to several rooms. The end room was his bedchamber. From there he retrieved the green stone jar with the precious liquid inside. Back in the audience hall he went to each child and, dipping his finger in the pot, dripped some of the liquid down their throats. They stared at him curiously but did not say a word.

Finally he sat back on his throne and looked them over. He cleared his throat, then spoke in his “decree” voice.

“You six have been chosen for a special purpose. You will be educated strictly and trained physically, and when you are older I will send you out into the world to be educated in the ways of men. When you are old enough, I want you to remember this day, and the words of your old father. I have a mission for you, but you are too young at this time to understand it. When the time is right, you will be called home to learn your duty. Until that day, you are to learn to be brave, noble, wise, and honest as befits a child of Gilgamesh.”

Next Gilgamesh called for the men who had been designing his tomb from the first day he became king. He ordered them to write down exactly what he wanted inscribed on the walls and sarcophagus. He would not live long enough to teach his children, but surely they would visit the tomb of their father.

Last he called in his wise men. Their charge was to design a talisman that would be linked to all six of these children. When one discovered it, the other five would feel called to it. The white bearded men hurried away talking excitedly over this new challenge.

Tiredly Gilgamesh told his children to leave him. He had done all he could to discharge his duty. The rest was up to his children.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Chengdu Plain, Sichuan, China

Ling stooped gracefully, bending her lissome body down to the water to swish out the clay bowl she had been eating from. The river was wide here, and she was doing her washing in a clear stream that fed into it, the water burbling over rounded stones. She stood in a semicircle of willow trees that screened her from the shore in a leafy tent. It was shadowy, letting her see deeper into the stream.

Her eyes followed a trout as it darted into a circular, still pool formed by the roots of one of the trees. The fish swam a quick loop before retreating into a dark, watery hole in the bank. Ling was staring absently at the empty pool when she noticed the water begin to glow. Small points of white light danced on the tranquil surface, then the points seemed to shatter into the colors of the rainbow, brilliant reds and oranges and pure violets and blues. The radiant colors rose off the water into the air above it.

Astonished, Ling watched the lights merge and focus into an image hovering in empty space. She could see the transparent figure of a hooded person in a dark cloak.

A female voice came from the projection. "Ling, we have an important message for you. You must find the treasure before it falls into the wrong hands. You must protect it. We will help you all we can, but we cannot make too many imprints on the stream of time or we will be discovered and all will be lost. We would protect the treasure ourselves, but we cannot reach your level except through these projections. You have been chosen for your ability to know things, where you should go and whose acquaintance you should make. For now you must watch for the Cat's Eye, and then seek out the other five Timekeepers chosen from among your siblings."

The voice grew even more serious, "Be on guard against the children of Chantu." The images of six faces flashed through the light, four men and two women. They were all attractive but somehow left a chill on Ling's skin. She noticed that they shared one distinctive trait, piercing green eyes.

The voice fell silent, and the hooded figure stood unmoving.

Ling's mind was in confusion, but she grasped at one question. "Who are you?"

The figure did not respond. The light flickered and then the message repeated, word for word. After another moment the figure turned and began to walk away; the lights broke apart and fell back to the water and the image disappeared.

Ling stood stunned for several moments, her mind replaying the visual show she had just witnessed in an attempt to firmly ingrain every spoken word into her memory. The vision itself did not shock her. In her long life, she had experienced many things that normal people might consider paranormal. No, what shocked her was the responsibility the ethereal being seemed to be placing on her. She had always wondered what her specific purpose was in walking the land many lifetimes over. As the experience faded and she came back to an awareness of her surroundings, Ling noted the arc of the sun in the west and wondered how many more days of traveling before she reached some sort of civilization.

She continued on across the plain, following the river as it meandered southward, the rich alluvial soil soft beneath her feet, past bamboo groves, fragrant cassia or cinnamon woods, and copse of litchi trees, richly dressed out in bright coppery red leaves. Ling's mouth watered as she imagined the trees as they would be a few months later, heavily laden with pinkish red fruit, whose sweet white flesh could quench the deepest thirst. Realizing how thirsty she had become, she knelt by the river's edge and cupped the cool clear water to her mouth, her mind going once again to the vision she had seen in the pool.

Suddenly, a tinkling sound of laughter broke the silence of the late afternoon. At first, Ling thought it was the prelude to another vision. When the brilliant light show failed to commence, she turned her head toward the sound. Two young girls had emerged from a bamboo grove and were dashing about picking wild flowers. They didn't seem to notice the stranger at the river's edge, or if they did, they showed no interest. Ling stood slowly and turned toward the girls, gently lifting a hand in greeting. The girls stood still as statues, then turned toward one another and began talking quickly. Afraid they might run, Ling gave a big smile and her best "I'm not going to hurt you" wave. Rather than run, the girls crept boldly forward, clasping hands, and chattering up a storm. Ling met them halfway,

then knelt down to talk to them. Though the girls seemed to be normal sized ten-year olds, Ling knew from past experience that her unusual height might be intimidating. Up close, she realized the girls were identical twins.

“You’ve found some very beautiful flowers,” she said.

The girls held their bouquets out and smiled fabulously. “Here, you take these,” the first girl offered. “There are plenty more.”

“Why thank you. You must be picking these for someone special.”

“Our grandmother,” the second girl spoke. “She is dying.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Ling replied, puzzled by the girls’ joy.

“Oh, don’t be sorry. She is happy to be dying,” the first girl assured.

“Where is your village?”

“Through the bamboo and out the other side.” Ling looked at the river curved around the bamboo grove, relieved that she had finally reached some type of civilization. “Come, we’ll take you there.” Each eager young girl grabbed one of Ling’s hands and skipped off, pulling her homeward.

It was a bit farther than just beyond the bamboo, but what met Ling’s eyes was more than she had expected. Rising from the plain, and running parallel to and even straddling the river, was a large settlement, at least 200,000 square yards, surrounded by a high earthen wall. As they reached the wall, Ling saw that it was covered with tiny pebbles, a feature she assumed was unique to the area, having never seen it before.

Once inside the settlement walls, the twins led Ling directly to a rectangular house made of bamboo and earth, identical to the many other houses in the village. Their eager shouts brought several people running outside from not just their own house, but the neighboring ones as well. They abruptly dropped Ling’s hands and ran toward a tiny twig of a woman standing just outside the door, her face all scrunched up in an apple doll smile. They thrust their few remaining flowers toward her, then pulled her toward Ling.

“Look what we brought you,” the twin who Ling could now see was just a scant bit taller than the other, declared. She smiled at being thought of as a gift, gazing down at what had to be the shortest adult

she had ever met. This ancient figure was just as short as Ling was tall.

“It’s the lady from your dreams. The one you told us about,” the shorter twin proclaimed. At this, the crowd closed in and Ling’s smile faded.

The woman walked around Ling several times, scrutinizing her up and down, then finally stood back and gave a definitive nod. “It is her. Now I can die.”

Ling grew alarmed. The whispered conversations going on around her were deafening. In all of her travels this seemed the strangest welcome she had ever received.

Noting Ling’s discomfort, the old woman threw her arms up in a shooing motion and told everyone to go back to their own homes, then she told Ling to follow her inside. They were joined by the twins and the other inhabitants of the bamboo dwelling: the twin’s parents, an uncle, a couple of aunts, and three small cousins. They all sat on the mats scattered across the floor. The setting sun filtered in through the doorway, casting shadows. The old woman immediately began her story, which started when she was very young. In little time Ling realized where the girls got their chatty natures. The story went here and there with no apparent point.

Ling found her attention drifting off to her left where the uncle was seated against the wall and tried not to stare as he began to do strange things with his feet. She forced herself to focus on the woman’s story, but the uncle was pulling his feet up behind his head. The man was a contortionist! She gaped as he sat twisted in an unnatural form. No one else seemed to notice; in fact they were all riveted on the grandmother’s tale.

Ling had just brought her full attention back to the storyteller when the two-year old boy cousin came running up quick as lightning and tried to hit her in the side of the head with a stick. Equally quick reflexes pulled the stick from his hand and she held back the urge to give him a hard swat. Again, no one else seemed to take notice of anything other than the grandmother. Not two minutes went by before the little boy ran over to the contortionist uncle and gave him a hard shove. The poor man toppled over onto the hard packed earth floor and seemed unable to get back up. Ling wondered if he might have better luck if he first removed his feet from behind his head and suppressed the urge to tell him so. She looked around to see if anyone

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were going to help the man to an upright position or quell the tornado in child form swirling around the room. Shrugging and joining the collective obliviousness, she tried listening once again.

The room grew darker and finally the mother of the twins slowly stood and lit some lamps. Ling's stomach growled and she wondered how much longer the woman could possibly talk. Finally, after two hours, the dream sequence was addressed. Unbelievably, everyone in the room was on the edge of their mat in eager anticipation. No one but she and the two-year old had ever lost interest.

"That's when I had the first dream. It was spring time, and we were enjoying a rare sunny day, the clouds lifted back to their mountain top homes. The drear gray days of winter were finally behind us. The fields were abloom in flowers (Ling thought maybe she was embellishing just a little here) when a stranger came from out of the mountains. A giant. A giant woman." All eyes were again on Ling. "She came to our home and that is when I gave her the cat." Silence.

Wait, Ling thought. She talks for over two hours and then the most important part of the story, the part where I come in, is reduced to a mere paragraph? Giant? True, Ling was very tall for a woman, standing over six feet tall, but she took objection to being called a giant!

Then the old woman got up and shuffled over to a clay pot sitting on a shelf high in the far corner of the room. She had to stand on her tip toes to reach it and even then she wasn't tall enough. Ling waited for someone to make a move to help her and when no one did, she stepped forward herself. As she took the pot down off the shelf, her eyes met the woman's and she was moved by this person who was a relative babe in comparison to herself, though her eyes were rheumy with age. The woman cradled the pot against her narrow hip and removed the lid, awkwardly tucking it under her arm. Then she reached inside and pulled out an amulet. As she held it out to Ling, the light caught the polished jade surface and Ling stifled an expression of shock. It was a jade lion, and catching the glint of the lamplight was a chink in the surface, right on the side where an eye would be. Ling took the amulet in her hand and ran her finger over the jagged indent of the chink. Then, turning it over, she saw markings etched into the surface. Although she could read the individual words, they seemed random and made no sense

collectively. Again she rubbed the chink. “Cat’s Eye.” Hadn’t the image in the pool told her to find the “Cat’s Eye?”

“Where did you get this?” she asked in an oddly reverent tone.

“It’s been passed down in my family since they came across the mountains. We were always told that we were just protecting it for its rightful owner. That someday we would be rid of it.”

“You say that like it’s a curse or something,” Ling mused aloud.

“Curse maybe. But whoever has held the amulet has had ill luck befall them.” Ling looked around the room at the odd mix of people and thought maybe it was more than the amulet causing their bad luck. “Why didn’t you just rid yourself of it?”

“Why does one not just rid themselves of an unwanted child,” the old woman spoke sagely. Ling was sure she had cast an eye toward the contortionist, now standing on his head as if that were the proper way to stand. “When something is placed in your trust, you keep it, good or bad.”

In desperate need of fresh air and an opportunity to free herself from the odd energy surrounding this family, Ling put the amulet around her neck and excused herself for a while. Once outside, Ling thought to walk beyond the settlement walls, but the gate was heavily guarded. Curious, she asked one of the guards if they really had a need for such tight security.

“Tensions are high between the dragon and sunbird clans. Our enemies, the Sunbirds, have been raiding other villages that have not taken security measures. It is just a matter of time before they decide to come after us. It is said that we have the best farm land on the plateau. If they can drive us off, they stand to gain much.” As if an omen had been spoken, an owl flew low overhead and perched in a nearby tree, its screech sending an eerie chill down Ling’s spine.

When Ling returned to her host family’s home, the air was thick with the scents of a late evening meal. Tired from a day full of surprises, she was anxious to eat and settle in for the night.

Ling had been asleep for less than an hour, when shouts aroused her. Out of habit, she reached for her walking stick which lay beside her and jumped lithely to her feet. The shouts came from outside and grew louder by the second. Instantly, the entire house was wakened and fumbling through the dark to see what the commotion was.

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Just across the road, a woman was screaming for help. In a flash, the thatching on her roof was ablaze. The bright flames lit up the night sky, and Ling could make out several dark figures spreading through the neighborhood. Up and down the street were the sounds of breaking doors, angry and fearful shouts, and more blazes. Taking stock of the situation, Ling determined first to rush across the road and make sure no one was in the burning house. A small family huddled a safe distance from the smoke and flames. Though the mother was sobbing uncontrollably, she was able to reassure Ling that everyone had made it safely out. As the village became fully awake, a great mob of angry citizens took off in the direction the mayhem seemed to be spreading.

Hesitant, Ling stayed back. There could still be trouble in this section of the settlement. Best someone stayed behind. Curiosity drew her back toward the gate where she had talked with guards earlier that evening. The burning houses lit up the night and she saw two bodies lying prone. The others must have run for it when they saw they were outnumbered, she reasoned.

Pressing her back against the wall, she stealthily made her way to the outside, keeping to the shadow of the wall. She strained her ears and thought she heard a cough in the night air. It was hard to tell with all the noises rising from behind. There it was again. Yes, it was definitely a cough. Keeping to the shadows, she made her way toward the sound, near a grove of willow trees leading down to the river. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness beyond the firelight and she crept boldly forward, her stick gripped tightly and pushed horizontally in front of her. When she reached the trees, she pressed up against one, her heart hammering in her chest. She craned her neck and concentrated, but heard no more noises.

Then a hand reached around the tree and grasped her shoulder. Swinging around fiercely, she planted her feet and swung the stick in a crisscrossing motion, hitting nothing but tree. A fleet lunge to the left and another thrust with the stick, and this time she hit her mark. She powered her way forward, swinging the stick wildly, yet skillfully, while a tall, darkly clad human figure avoided further blows by backing hastily toward the village. Suddenly, the retreating figure tripped over a tree root and fell backwards, beyond the cover of trees and into the brightness of firelight.

Quick as a lynx, Ling dropped to her knees and pressed her stick over the throat of her would-be attacker. An expression akin to recognition washed over both faces as they each got a good look at the other. A strange sense of déjà vu gripped Ling and she heard the figure in the pool's words again, murmuring them aloud. "Be on guard against the children of Chantu." The man's jaw dropped in surprise at her words, then his face contorted in an angry paroxysm of rage. He pushed up against the stick with superhuman strength, catching a still surprised Ling off guard as he burst from the ground and threw her over in a reversal, crushing the stick down across her chest. Suddenly shouts rang out.

"Ji, we're done. Let's go, we've given them a good scare. They'll leave for sure this time." The man's voice was dripping with diabolic excitement. "Village by village, we'll control the entire plain."

"Burn it all," he growled, glaring down into Ling's exotic green eyes.

"What?"

"Destroy the entire village. Leave them no reason to stay."

"But they're all up and alert. We don't have the numbers to fight them now."

The man, Ji, turned in a blind fury. "I said do it!" he shouted.

Ling seized the opportunity and bit down hard on Ji's wrist, the coppery taste of blood giving her renewed strength. He yelped and reached for her throat with the other hand. The pressure from the stick gone, Ling rolled out from under him and pulled herself to her hands and knees, Ji's large hand still squeezing her throat. She managed to bring her elbow back into his abdomen, buying her enough time to jump to her feet. Desperate fingers pulled at her neck as she jerked away. Free from his grip, Ling sprinted into the darkness down to the river bank and dove into the icy spring waters, disappearing into the black current.

An angry Ji chased her to the river's edge, shouting into the darkness but unable to see a thing. In angry frustration, he retreated toward the village. He was dealt a double blow when his men came running scared from the settlement gate, an angry mob of citizens brandishing sticks and stones in retributive pursuit.

He returned once more to the darkness of the trees, momentarily uncertain what to do next. Then he felt the object cutting into his palm. Loosening his grip, he stroked its smooth surface, wondering

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over the etchings. When Ling had pulled out of his grip, his fingers had clung to the object hanging from her neck. He held the amulet for several minutes, musing over his encounter. *After all this time, I finally meet one of Gilgamesh's brood. So it begins.* He threw back his head in sinister laughter before setting off into the waning night, alight with renewed purpose.

When King Gilgamesh's renowned quest to The Far Away goes awry, the secret to immortality is stolen, beginning an epic battle between six heroes and ruthless villains in search of a treasure that will either save or destroy the world.

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