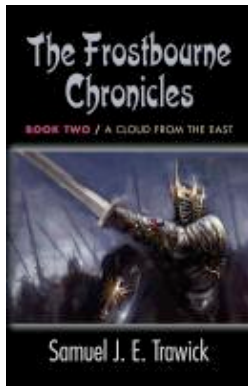


The Frostbourne Chronicles

BOOK TWO / A CLOUD FROM THE EAST



Samuel J. E. Trawick



*The Empire is in full swing as it blazes across the plains enveloping all who dare to stand before it. Teppia takes to the daily grind of running the stronghold while Daenar heads west in search of new allies. Gauwfn heads underground with the help of Ahnela the Fairy Paladin to enlist the help of his kin. The gathering of strange allies at Frostbourne builds to the inevitable confrontation with The Empire. See also: **THE FROSTBOURNE CHRONICLES: Book One - A Fool's Errand***

THE FROSTBOURNE CHRONICLES

Book Two

A Cloud From The East

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The Frostbourne Chronicles

Book Two

A Cloud from the East

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Chapter 1

“Who do you think it is?” Daenar asked.

“I can’t tell, they are still too far out.” Teppia replied.

“Well, can’t you do one of those sending things that you do?” Teppia shot her young love a reproachful glare.

“No, I can’t. It would be too dangerous; we still don’t know what’s out there or what’s here even. You will just have to ride out and greet them. Take Sutibain with you. They are still a long way off.”

Sutibain stood up at the mention of his name; he had been quietly patching the tarps to at least give them a few less leaks overhead if it began to rain.

“Excuse me Teppia, but we have just the one horse and I really don’t think he likes me very much.” As if on cue, Icewind appeared and nuzzled the young man from the East. Sutibain reflexively stroked the great beast’s nose.

“I’d say he likes you just fine.” Teppia replied.

“Oh sure, he likes me now, with people around! Besides, what would it look like to have the two of us riding bareback on this thing when we run into whoever it is out there? Not sure that’s the proper first impression we want to make.”

Teppia nodded in agreement and whispered something into Icewind’s ear. The great horse has bristled at the term “thing”, perhaps “godlike beast of glorious magnitude” would be more appealing he thought.

Daenar was walking away, still mumbling his disapproval of the whole idea of being in charge, when Gauwfn popped around a crumbling wall.

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“Hey there lad! I found somethin’ ya might be wantin’ ta take a look at. There be magic at work and I can’t get close to the stuff.” Daenar followed after the Dwarf, glad to have something else on his mind.

“What do you mean magic?”

“Oh, ye be seeing shortly lad.” Gauwfn led him out the back of another long ago collapsed structure and onto a little spit of land that jutted perhaps fifty or sixty feet out into the encroaching swamp.

The pair made their way to the edge of the fetid waters, but Daenar still didn’t see what the Dwarf was talking about.

“Right there, can’t ya see it?” Gauwfn was pointing at a clump of brown reeds.

“No, but I’ll take your word for it.” Daenar strode purposefully towards where his companion had pointed.

“Easy lad! I be tellin’ ya there be magic at work!”

Daenar ignored the Dwarf and pushed through the reeds. The dry leaves made a harsh raspy sound and the ground was becoming soft underfoot as Daenar found what had so interested the Dwarf.

“Oh, here it is, looks like a lockbox or something.”

Straining as he picked up the oversized chest, Daenar had to admit he was a bit curious about its contents as well. He made his way through the reeds and back to where Gauwfn waited.

“What does it look like lad? I cain’t seem ta focus on it. Dern thing must be ensorcelled er some such.”

“I’m not sure.” Daenar replied. “It’s heavy, that’s for sure.”

He sat the iron bound chest down as soon as he was on solid footing.

“Now if I can just get it open.”

Daenar had the corroded latch in his hand before Gauwfn could say anything. The Dwarf gasped as Daenar lifted the locking mechanism.

“Hmm, it’s stuck.” Gauwfn breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good thing, I been about ta...” With his shoulder muscles bulging from the strain, the young Barbarian took the latch in both hands and forced the trunk open. They were incased in a blinding light. Neither could see nor hear for a moment. It took a few seconds for them to realize they had fallen victim to a hold trap that had been placed on the box.

“Great, this just be flippin’ great!” Gauwfn complained as he blinked his eyes trying to regain his sight.

“What, this is my fault?” Daenar asked. The Dwarf could hear the edge that crept into his companion’s voice and thought it best not to press forward.

“Naw, seems we done run afoul of a wizard’s trap. I hate them twinkle finger types. I mean not like the Missy, I like her, I mean them other folk what do that stuff.”

Daenar was a little annoyed with Gauwfn’s chatter, annoyed with being held in place (again...), and annoyed with himself for having opened what they were pretty sure was a magic box in the first place. He could already hear Teppia giving him what for. Daenar’s thoughts were interrupted by a large shape emerging from the water. He was instantly filled with fear which was an unusual feeling for him.

“Gods lad, what is that?”

“I don’t know, but if we weren’t already frozen I’d say don’t move.”

The figure emerged slowly and moved directly to the pair. The creature, for Daenar had no idea what it was, stood a good head higher than the Barbarian, with sloped shoulders and long hanging arms that ended in huge clawed hands that extended to just below its knees. It hesitated as it felt the other’s eyes upon it, then moved forward again to the chest.

The creature was fat in a bulbous way and seemed a bit twisted. Daenar noticed large uneven fangs protruding from its

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impossibly wide mouth. Wet greenish gray skin covered the creature, and long matted hair tangled with twigs and leaves hung from its massive head.

Daenar was amazed to find himself fighting back a chuckle as he noted the similarities between the creature and Gauwfn. He only hoped the creature didn't have the same appetite as the Dwarf.

"Whatcha be on about lad?" Gauwfn whispered.

"Shhh!" The creature looked up and slowly turned a baleful eye on the two. It stepped close to Daenar and bent slightly.

"Umday sorry 'bout spell Big Chief, Gud Chief. Umday bring present, want meet, but scared. Umday think Big Chief, Gud Chief think Umday monster and run away or try kill Umday."

The creature turned and looked directly at Gauwfn. "Big Chief, Gud Chief not like little round one, little round one mean. Big Chief, Gud Chief be friends with Umday. Umday bring present."

Again the creature turned to Daenar and he felt quite certain it had tried to smile through those fierce, dagger-like teeth.

"Umday go, hope Big Chief, Gud Chief like present, oh, you move soon."

As the creature had appeared, so too was it gone; engulfed by the dark waters of the fetid bog. The hold spell seemed to dissipate as Umday sank out of sight. Able to move, Gauwfn had his crossbow in hand and his finger on the auto-fire. Daenar waved him back.

"If that thing wanted to hurt us I'm sure it had the opportunity while we were paralyzed!" he hissed. "Put that thing away!"

Gauwfn lowered his crossbow, but decided to keep it handy. Never hurt to be prepared, especially when there be monsters a foot.

“You ain’t gonna touch that stuff ‘er ya?” Gauwfn asked in astonishment as Daenar reached into the still slightly glowing chest.

Umday had gone to a lot of trouble to get it to them and to speak with them so he thought it best to at least see what was inside. Daenar drew back before his hands touched the treasure. His hesitation alerted Gauwfn who once again had his bow ready to fire.

“What is it lad? Step away and we’ll get Teppia to check it out.”

“It’s beautiful.” Are the only words he could utter as he pulled out an ebony dagger shot through with veins of silver and red.

That was enough for Gauwfn and he shouldered his way around Daenar to the chest. Inside there were several more blades of varying design, all as unique and beautiful as the next. There were daggers, fine edged swords that would match nicely with the couple of shields they found, a couple of rather nasty looking spears, and even a short hafted axe or two.

The Barbarian sighed, the presents were indeed wonderful, but what he was hoping for wasn’t here. Gauwfn blew out a slight whistle when he uncovered the piles of jewelry.

“There you are.” Teppia found the two looking through the chest on the edge of the swamp. “Sutibain and the horses are ready, what are you two doing?” Teppia stepped closer and snapped at them. “Drop it now! Step back!”

The shrillness of her voice broke their mesmerized daze and they both dropped everything.

“Get away from that chest!” She cried.

Teppia wasn’t sure where the chest came from, but she had a good idea. A brief touch and she knew the contents as well as the box that held them were heavily coated in magic.

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She ushered the others away to what she felt was a safe distance. She turned on Daenar.

“Where did it come from, where did you get it?” It wasn’t a question; it was a demand for answers. Daenar stared rather blankly at her not knowing how to respond.

“It been me.” Gauwfn spoke up. “I found the consarned thing and had the lad tote it over here ‘cause I couldn’t get close to it.”

“What do you mean “couldn’t get close to it”?”

“I knew it be ensorcelled and the magic been causin’ me ta go a bit blind, thought maybe the lad would be unaffected.” Teppia stared in disbelief and finally just stormed away if only a short distance.

On reflection Gauwfn realized how it must have sounded to her. Thinking about it he realized how it sounded to him. He wasn’t trying to hurt anyone; he just wanted to see what was in the box. Darned ensorcelled thing had probably put a hex on him, that’s what it was! A hex, a hex that made him do stupid stuff. As Teppia turned to vent some more fury on him, he hoped she would buy the hex story.

“Gauwfn, how many times have I told you not to endanger Daenar.” At this point they both felt like toddlers being admonished by their mother. Gauwfn dug at the soft ground with the toe of his boot.

“I be hexed I tell ya, that box tried ta done for...ah, ferget it. I done messed up. Ya be telling me lots not ta get the boy in harm’s way.”

“That’s right, and what did I say would happen to you if you did this again?”

“Ya ain’t gonna be feedin’ me ta the cat are ya?” Teppia couldn’t help but smile.

“No, but I should, now go. I need to figure this out.” Gauwfn hurried away, leaving Daenar alone with her. Daenar looked up sheepishly.

“We still have to be very careful. We know very little about this place and even less about the stuff in that box.”

Daenar sighed, he knew she was right.

“Now, where did Gauwfn find it?”

The chastised lad pointed to the spot where he had retrieved the chest and recounted what had happened.

“A creature?” Teppia’s eyebrows arched.

“Yeah, it was taller than me and slimy, I don’t think it meant any harm, it said they were presents.”

This all sounded like Alurial’s doing, it was just like her. Teppia tried, but could find no trace of her essence. She turned and grabbed Daenar’s dragon skull, no gleaming, no trace, Alurial hadn’t done this. If not her, than whom, or in this case what? She listened again as Daenar told the story making sure no details were left out.

“Ok, well, I need to check the stuff out and see what it is. I’m sure it will be useful if the creature was indeed friendly and a deadly menace if not.

Umday watched from her hiding spot as the thing that looked like a young girl went through the gifts she intended for Big Chief, Gud Chief. Umday wasn’t sure if the girl should touch presents that did not belong to her, but Umday understood. Small girl thing was only looking out for Big Chief, Gud Chief. Umday sighed and ducked under the dark water without so much as a ripple.

Teppia felt something as the creature departed and she turned to look. There wasn’t even a gurgle to betray where Umday had been. She continued to sort through the box. Several of the treasures were indeed priceless. Judging from the different auras, there were two healing rings that could cure any

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disease and save its wearer from all but the gravest of injuries. Another ring seemed to add strength to the wearer while yet another promised to confuse enemies by making the wearer shimmer and blur as they attacked with increased speed.

After going through the rings and other jewelry Teppia turned her focus on the weapons. She had sent Daenar a short distance away where he was now joined by both Gauwfn and Sutibain. She had given him express orders not to let anyone near until she said it was safe and he was doing just that. The weapons too were valuable beyond measure, anyone of the blades would bring a fortune, but these were not to just be sent out into the world, there was a reason they were here.

Still sorting through the marvelous blades, most of which seemed to be imbued with some elemental form, Teppia drew up quick and stepped back from the chest. Barely able to hide her surprise and horror, she simply pointed.

“Where did that come from?” Daenar glanced into the box and retrieved the thick bladed ebony dagger he had seen earlier.

“This? It was in here with the rest of the stuff.” He started to hand it to her and she shrank away.

“Get that away from me!”

“What?” he asked, “It’s just a dagger.” He looked at it; the blade was of incredible design, intricately carved and quite elegant looking with silver and blood- red traces running through it. The handle was long enough to be held in both hands and golden dragon wings protectively engulfed the wielder’s hands. Daenar didn’t understand what was wrong with Teppia, but she sure didn’t like the blade. He shrugged and stuck it back in the box.

Teppia regained her senses and calmed down a bit.

“No, it’s ok, take that knife. Take it and keep it with you always. It will protect you when you need it most. It might even deliver your vengeance in a time when that is all you have.”

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Daenar tucked it safely into the matching golden sheath he found underneath it and tied it to his belt. She was convinced now more than ever that the old iron bound chest had a purpose. The blade that Daenar picked up was mixed with Dragon's Bane; it was the last remaining Dragon Dagger.

Chapter 2

Icewind was no longer waiting patiently. In fact, he was quite annoyed. He was annoyed that he was wearing this ridiculous get up. He was annoyed that his older, yet smaller brother (something he often pointed out) was here. He was annoyed that he had to carry Daenar on some pompous mission of showing. Most of all he was annoyed because Teppia was keeping him waiting.

Daenar couldn't believe it was the same horse. Icewind was fitted with a shiny black saddle and harness. His body was adorned with black and silver leather and mail. On his head he wore a faceplate that sported a long sharp spike. Icewind looked ready for battle.

In fact, Daenar was so astonished by Icewind's new look that at first he didn't notice the other, slightly smaller horse that was decked out in similar fashion.

"Did you hear what he thought?" Icewind chided his brother. "Slightly smaller, heehee."

"Shut up you...you...just shut up!" Winter's Bite sent back.

"Where did..." Daenar fell silent as Teppia simply shrugged. He knew he wouldn't get a straight answer and decided no answer was even better.

Sutibain didn't even bother to ask. He hopped up onto the smaller horse.

"His name is Winter's Bite, they are brothers." Teppia told him. Sutibain nodded, seemed like a good name.

"It is likely to be dark soon. I don't think this is a good idea, what if there are more? If we can see them, they can see us." Daenar argued, still not sure they should go.

“True enough and if they can see us then they know we can see them and are making no move to hide.” Teppia replied sweetly.

Daenar opened his mouth and then let it fall shut. She had a point and he was certain he would lose the argument.

“You should be upon them before dark. Find out who they are and what they need. Bring them back here if you can. This fortress is to be a place of hope.”

Gauwfn looked around and snorted.

“What’s that?” Teppia asked sharply.

Gauwfn suddenly found an interesting piece of rock on the ground that he gathered up for further study.

Winter’s Bite looked at his little brother after the Barbarian had mounted.

“Are you sure these Humans are worth it?” He sent.

“Only time will tell, but the big one isn’t so bad. Besides, we have our orders.” Icewind replied.

“Did you hear that?” Sutibain suddenly asked. He sat high on his stirrups straining to listen.

“What?” Daenar asked.

“I could have sworn I heard something.” Sutibain settled back down in his saddle. Icewind cast a quick glance at his brother and smiled.

Out on the plains the approaching group noticed the departure of their greeting party and seemed to speed up their gait a bit. This move was not lost on Daenar and he turned to Sutibain. The look on the Eastern man’s face was confirmation that he too had noticed the quickened pace.

“What do you think?” He asked Daenar.

“I don’t know, maybe they just want to get to us before dark, let’s pick it up.” They urged their mounts forward a little faster.

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Icewind rolled his eyes; this would be so much easier if they could just fly. He chuckled silently to himself imagining the reaction their riders would have if they both sprouted wings and leapt into the air. The thought pleased him immensely and he shared it with his brother.

“Do you think we could? Wouldn’t we get in trouble?” He asked.

Winter’s Bite had to admit it sounded like a blast. However, Icewind assured him there would be trouble if they did such a thing, not to mention that their riders would be freaked out. The two horses continued at their slightly quickened pace with their new trappings jingling as they came close to a canter.

Back at the camp Teppia and Gauwfn were talking a bit more about what it would take to turn the ruins into a viable fortress.

“Well, once we figure out what’s what with them there visitors, I’ll be getting’ on and bring back a couple of hefties that I know. We can at least be getting’ the water out o’ the foundation and such, bad fer bugs.” Gauwfn looked around, half expecting a creepy crawly to be upon him. “Then we be seeing about how ta make some o’ this place somewhat habitable.”

Teppia nodded as she stoked the cooking fire. She wanted a hot meal ready when their guests arrived. She wasn’t sure who they were, but she felt certain they needed each other and was determined to meet them with hospitality.

Gauwfn cleared his throat before he spoke, not sure how to bring up his next topic of conversation. Teppia turned from adding the fresh chunks of meat, provided by Bristy, to the pot at the Dwarf’s obvious question.

“Um, ain’t there a way you can, you know, use yer powers ta help fix this place up?”

She smiled.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t have that knowledge or that kind of power. I can use some limited healing arts and a few defensive as well as offensive spells, but I am designed for something else.” As she spoke Gauwfn noticed she was staring off in the direction that Daenar had gone.

“Designed fer what missy, if I ain’t being too bold?”

“Not at all, I was designed to be a lover and a mother; to be a particular mother and lover to be precise.”

Gauwfn thought on this as he smoked his pipe and sipped on his third beer. Teppia continued to work on dinner and was kneading a fine dough that, if her timing was right, would become biscuits just as their company arrived. She had her hair up as she normally did when she cooked. A few wisps had come loose and strayed into her face. She had the traces of her floured fingers on her face where she had pushed aside the offending locks. Gauwfn studied her a bit longer, finding her quite pleasant. Teppia looked up from the pot.

“What? What are you looking at?”

The Dwarf blew out a thick cloud of blue smoke.

“Wahl, seems ta me that ifn’ you be supposed to be a lover and a mother you would have been designed a bit...different.”

Teppia looked down at her small frame.

“Oh, you mean with huge tits and a big ass?” She replied acidly.

“Wahl ya.”

“I guess that would depend on the type of man, the type of father, I was trying to attract.”

“Fair enough, and ya know I mean no disrespect, ya be a fine lass in every aspect, just a little skinny is all I’m sayin’.”

Teppia flung a small ball of dough at the Dwarf. He caught it and popped it in his mouth.

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“Delicious! That reminds me, when ya gonna make some more o’ that cinnamon bread?”

Teppia sighed and got back to stirring.

“Can you make them out yet?” Daenar asked. It was getting dark and Daenar liked this less and less. There was no way to tell if they were riding into a trap.

“No, but they are heading straight for us. What do you want to do?” Sutibain, though not as alarmed as his Barbarian companion, was growing more uncomfortable.

“You’re the tactician, I would never have come out here, would have waited in a strong place and made them come to us.” Sutibain cocked his head at the young Barbarian.

“Really? You wouldn’t go charging head long at them, wildly swinging your axe overhead?”

“Well, that really depends on my mood.” Daenar replied. Sutibain smiled.

“I tell you what, let’s split up, I’ll veer out to the right about a hundred yards, and you do the same to the left. Do it slowly though, it should at least give them something to think about.”

The tactic worked as obvious confusion in the approaching party caused them to slow and then stop all together. Daenar was close enough now that he could distinctly make out four riders. There seemed to be something floating in the air just behind the right shoulder of the rider in the lead. Daenar and Sutibain were closing in fast, but had no way to communicate now. Daenar reigned Icewind back to the left and hoped Sutibain would do the same.

They met back up with less than two hundred yards between them and the other riders. They hesitated and then the head rider waved to them and called out.

“What did he say?” Daenar asked. “I’m not sure, I know I heard friends, but I couldn’t make out the other part.”

The Barbarian suddenly urged Icewind forward. He turned back to Sutibain.

“Come on, it’s Abednego and they need help.”

Sutibain cantered after Daenar the last short distance between them and the Paladin. The sun was setting now and darkness was falling, turning the sky a flaming red. He couldn’t help as they rode but wonder what type of help they could possibly offer Abednego. He was a healer after all, a Paladin of the Southern Monastery. Sutibain tried to shake the feeling that this was a trap, but was unable. He hurried after his companion.

By the time they reached them, Abednego was pacing nervously and two of the others held and comforted a third lying on the ground.

“My friend!” Abednego greeted Daenar. “It is good we have found you, we are in need of assistance. My companions and I have traveled far with no food or water, and little rest.”

The dark skinned knight shook Daenar’s hand quite vigorously as he spoke.

“It is Rena; she was injured in the forest where we searched for you. We were trapped between an Empire skirmish party and some rather angry Elves.”

Abednego, his heart and head heavy, paused before he had the strength to continue.

“The Empire had been hot on our trail, two of our brothers had fallen in an earlier encounter, there were just too many. We made for the trees and were greeted with a hail of arrows and forced to turn north and skirt the forest for some distance before we could enter. The Empire quickly lost interest in us as they engaged the Elven patrol. It wasn’t until we were in the shelter of the forest that we realized Sister Rena had been struck.”

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Daenar moved to where Rena lay. Her eyes fluttered open and she managed a smile as she saw him for the first time.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Her voice was dry and she ended her sentence with a cough that wracked her torn body.

Daenar quickly knelt beside her as one of the others wiped the flecks of blood from her lips.

“It is you we have come to see.” She whispered in his ear before falling back into a restless slumber.

“I don’t know how I can help, I’m no healer, can’t you help her?” Daenar’s voice was pleading.

The sight of the injured girl and the realization that he was the reason they were here, and quite possibly the reason they were attacked by the Elves was more than he was ready to deal with.

“I wish my brother, but we are all weakened by travel and hunger. Our gifts and skills were spent trying to heal those that are no longer with us. It shames me, but we have none left for her.”

Daenar turned to Sutibain. “Go back to Teppia, tell her what has happened, tell her we need help.” Sutibain nodded, still on Winter’s Bite. He placed a comforting hand on Abednego’s shoulder.

“Do not fear brother, we will save her!”

With that he charged forward, back toward the camp. Soon the thundering sound of his horse’s hooves seemed to play as a steady thrum as they flew through the night.

Icewind had walked over and nudged Daenar hard enough to almost knock him off his feet. The Barbarian turned a reproachful eye on the intruding horse and then noticed the open saddlebag. Of course, there must be something in there that could help! Icewind rolled his eyes as he intercepted Daenar’s thoughts. Of course there was something in there to help...he was magical after all.

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His search of the bags was rewarding. Daenar pulled out a cloth that was wrapped around several biscuits, two full skins of water and four chunks of meat from Bristy's earlier kill. The meat was raw and Daenar set about getting a fire going. The food would help at least. He handed everything to Abednego. The knight thanked him and hurried to Rena's side. She did not respond to his touch, but he dabbed her lips with a little of the water hoping she would drink. She had passed that point. Abednego passed the skins around to the other Knights that still held Rena's fading body. They refused.

"No brother, you drink it. You drink and eat it all. You must eat to regain your strength; your powers are greater than ours. You are her only hope now."

Abednego thanked them and turned away as he drank deeply. He knew their thirst was as great as his and it would not do to drink in front of them. As Abednego walked a short ways from the small fire stuffing biscuits into his mouth. Daenar was surprised by a tiny voice that came from behind his shoulder.

"Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to startle you."

Daenar blinked. There in front of him, hovering in the air, on beautiful wings that would shame the grandest butterfly, was a tiny Fairy.

"I'm Ahnela, I'm Abednego's friend and now I'm your friend too!" Ahnela giggled delightfully as she darted forward and kissed Daenar on the cheek. Daenar rubbed absently at the spot she had kissed.

"It's um; it's nice to meet you." He smiled as best he could.

Winter's Bite didn't like what he was sensing up ahead. There were men hiding, waiting for them. Empire men from what he could gather. His first impulse was to change and greet them all with his true form. That had of course been expressly

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forbidden, and he knew better. This Human, his rider was not the one they were to assist, but he had spent much time in Sutibain's thoughts and found him quite agreeable.

As he headed closer to the ambush Winter's Bite had made up his mind to only reveal himself if it meant saving his rider's life. Satisfied with his decision, he thought briefly that Icewind would be so proud of him, not that he cared what his little brother thought or anything.

The rope had been strung right across the path they had taken earlier. Although Sutibain couldn't see it, Winter's Bite could and at the last second he ducked his head, letting the rope snatch his rider from the saddle. Sutibain landed in a dusty heap, the wind knocked from his body. He reached for his weapons as dark figures moved closer; he was still fighting to breathe. As he tried to unsheathe one of his blades, a heavily booted foot pinned his arm to the ground.

"Well now, looks like we caught ourselves a traitor."

The smell of the roasting meat was torture on the others. Abednego had introduced the two attending Rena as Brother Daven and Sister Patrice. They had all lived together at the Monastery and were on various missions and pilgrimages when the Empire laid waste to their home. There had been two others that were lost along the way, but Abednego didn't call them by name. They feared now that they may be all that remained of their order.

"I see you have met Ahnela." Abednego said around a mouthful of half-cooked meat. He smiled when the little Fairy proudly presented herself at the sound of her name. She bowed low as she hovered; still brandishing her tiny sword and shield that she had been showing Daenar. It was hard not to smile when Ahnela was around.

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“Yes, she was telling me of your adventures and that she too was trained at the Southern Monastery.”

“It’s true, and do not discount the blade or shield. The little one’s specialty is enchantment and that sword hits as hard as mine and the shield blocks like any other.” Abednego assured him. “The Order is open to all, though it is unusual to have a trainee from the Woodland Realm. Ahnela here is not the first and I hope she will not be the last. That is if there is still an Order to be had.”

Daenar uneasily placed a comforting hand on Abednego’s shoulder.

“Well, you are still here, they are here. The Order still lives, it’s not just a building is it?”

He felt the Knight stiffen under his touch. He pulled back immediately. “I’m sorry, I, I’m really no good at this sort of thing.”

Abednego smiled.

“It is not you or your touch friend, believe me. It is me I fear, my beliefs are being truly challenged and I’m afraid my faith grows thin.”

Ahnela fluttered over and lit softly on the disheartened Knight’s knee.

“It’s ok Brother Abednego.” She said in her crystal tinkle of a voice. “We all wonder from time to time, this challenge will only serve to make us stronger, you’ll see!”

Abednego had eaten as much as he could and bade the others come share what was left. Stuffed, he lay down and prayed that he would have the energy soon. Within moments he was asleep and the powers were returning to his body.

Sutibain was roughly hauled to his feet.

“He’s not the escaped Paladins, but he’ll do for now.”

A Cloud from the East

A jagged blade was jammed under his chin.

“Tell us exactly what a man of the Empire is doing in the company of the enemy.”

It was too dark to see, but Sutibain knew these weren't Empire men, at least not men from the East. He knew it was quite possible that they were mercenaries or local recruits like the ones he had been sent for while he was still a pawn of The Empire. Either way, it didn't change his position in the least.

“You better start talking or you're going to start bleeding.” The nasty blade was pressed harder under his chin and Sutibain felt a trickle of blood roll down his neck.

As soon as he regained his bearing and had evaluated his predicament, Sutibain decided it would be best if he didn't speak at all. The tactic would stall and enrage his captors; perhaps they would make a mistake.

“Well boys, looks like this one is a bit tight lipped.” The speaker slugged Sutibain in the stomach, dropping him to one knee as he gasped for air.

“Heh, couple more like that ought to loosen his t...” The man's voice was cut off in mid-sentence. There was a slight rustle in the bushes and he was simply gone.

The other ambusher's looked around nervously.

“What happened to Jimmy? Somebody find him!”

The speaker left Sutibain bound and still gasping as they looked for their missing companion. Unguarded, he quickly rolled onto his knees and then hopped into a standing position only to be rewarded with a kick to the back of his knees.

“You just lay right there traitor, we'll get back to you in a few.” Again he found himself on the ground and this time he was roughly handled and hog tied, forestalling any further attempts.

Another man screamed as he was taken from behind. This time somebody had seen something.

“What was it!? Was that what got Jimmy?”

“I don’t know, it was huge whatever it was.”

“Hey! Where did that horse get off to?”

One of the others pointed and was about to speak when the huge white head of a cave lion burst from the darkness removing the man’s hand, arm, and most of his right side.

The others, seeing what they were up against, scattered. Bristy brought down two more before the remaining few faded into the darkness. She would have given chase, but Sutibain was her first concern. Winter’s Bite had sensed her prowling not far away when they were attacked. He had simply touched her mind and called her in. Bristy was more than happy to oblige, she hadn’t seen any action since the forest and was looking for a fight. Rabbits just weren’t that challenging.

With a single rake of the cat’s paw, Sutibain found himself free and able to stand. Bristy stayed close in case he needed to lean, she wasn’t sure the extent of his injuries.

“It’s ok girl.” Sutibain rubbed the cat’s massive head. “I sure am glad to see you. Yes I am. You’re such a good girl!” At this point Bristy rolled over, forgetting she was a Dwarf, and let Sutibain tousle her mane before clubbing him lightly with her paws.

It was all Winter’s Bite could do to keep his equine mouth from hitting the ground. These had to be the strangest beings he had ever encountered. Why was the Human talking like that and why was the Dwarf responding that way? It was beyond him, at that moment he knew he would never get it.

When he felt he had given them ample silly time, the white charger walked in between the two when they took a break from rolling to separate them so they could continue their journey. Sutibain stood up, dusted himself off, and mounted his horse as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

A Cloud from the East

“They should have been back by now.” Teppia was starting to pace and that was making Gauwfn nervous.

“Now calm down lass, ya know they ain’t in no real danger.”

She stopped for a moment and thought about it. No, they weren’t in any real danger, at least not from the riders, but there were other things out there.

“Look, can I at least be helping meself ta some o’ that stew? I be starvin’ over here and ya won’t let me have a bite!”

“Oh fine!” Teppia flung a large wooden spoon at the Dwarf. He caught it and retrieved a bowl from the makeshift table. He inhaled the heavy aroma coming from the bubbling cauldron.

“Ahh that be more like it!”

Teppia didn’t stop pacing until her mind was touched by Winter’s Bite.

“We are coming.” Is all he said.

That was good enough, she could relax. Teppia made herself comfortable on one of Gauwfn’s chairs before realizing what was missing.

“Oh, the biscuits!”

She jumped up from her resting place and stuck the heavy covered, iron pan full of raw dough in the glowing embers of the cook fire. Within minutes they would have hot fresh biscuits to offer their guests as well as the thick stew.

Sutibain jumped from his mount the moment Winter’s Bite slid to a halt.

“Where are the others? Where is Daenar?” She demanded, suddenly on the verge of panic. Bristy sauntered in and flopped down by the fire and began to clean herself.

“He’s fine.” Sutibain was still out of breath from the encounter and headlong rush back to the camp. “Abednego is there, he is the one leading the riders.”

“Abednego, the Paladin with them twitchy fingers?” Gauwfn asked.

“The same. One of their members is injured and they are too weak to heal her, Daenar sent me back to tell you.”

Teppia found herself pacing again. “What about you, you look like you’ve been in a fight. Is that blood on your neck?”

“Well yes, there is that. On the way back I was ambushed by Empire mercenaries, or scouts, or something. They weren’t Empire born or Empire trained. Either way, I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Bristy.” The great cat purred loudly as Sutibain extolled her battle prowess and recounted her night attack.

“We must go to them at once! Gauwfn! Put down that pan!” The smell of the fresh baked biscuits had been too much and the Dwarf had fished the covered pan from the fire and was trying his best not to burn his fingers as he helped himself to a couple. Teppia’s sharp outburst caused him to jump, almost losing the lot.

“Dern missy! Ya almost made me drop ‘em!” Gauwfn set the pan down with a sigh. “Alright, jest give me a sec.” Sutibain interrupted their hasty preparations.

“I don’t think we should go in the dark. Whatever was following them is now in between them and us as the ambush verified. We should wait until morning.”

Teppia dropped the small pack she had gathered up. Bristy still lay stretched in front of the fire and Gauwfn was trying to stuff yet another biscuit in his mouth without being noticed. Sutibain was right and she knew it. It would be too dangerous to go now. They would have to wait until morning.

“We’ll wait.” She said. “We’ll wait, but I don’t like this. Not one bit.” Unseen eyes blinked in the darkness and then

A Cloud from the East

crept back into hiding. Orlentia's daughter was smarter than someone had given her credit for.

Chapter 3

Abednego woke with a start.

“My friend! How long have I been asleep?” The Paladin struggled to stand on unsteady legs.

“Not long.” Daenar assured him. “The others are resting though they refused to leave Rena’s side. Even little Ahnela slept for a few moments.” Rubbing at his eyes and forcing himself to focus, Abednego roused the others.

“It is time; we shall see what powers The Maker has returned to me.” The Paladin closed his eyes and steadied his breathing, preparing to channel The Maker’s divine healing might.

Daenar hadn’t had the time to finish what he was saying and was concerned for Rena as well, but he thought it best to interrupt. Abednego’s eyes flew open at the interruption.

“I’m sorry, but there is more you should know.”

The Paladin relaxed and loosed his grip on the channel.

“What is it Brother, the time to do this is now.” Abednego looked pleadingly at his fallen companion.

“While you and the others slept, our camp has been surrounded.”

“What, how can this be?” The Knight was truly alarmed.

“I don’t know, but that is the way of it.”

Abednego gave a furtive glance to the surrounding darkness.

“So be it. I have to save her. If they come, they come. I will not abandon her while there is still hope. It would be an honor to die saving the life of another.”

Daenar nodded as he joined them.

A Cloud from the East

“You do what you have to; nothing will get through, not while I live.”

Abednego quickly found the channel and sought the healing powers. The others waited, weapons drawn. In their weakened state Daven and Patrice bravely held their places to either side of Rena. Daenar was joined in his protective stance by the diminutive Ahnela.

“Don’t worry.” She giggled. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Daenar smiled.

“I know you won’t.”

The thugs that had surrounded the camp during the night were almost ready. Their last few members sent to ambush the lone rider had returned.

“Where are the rest?” the leader hissed.

“We’re it, the rest are dead.”

“And the rider is he at least dead?”

“He must be.” Another from the ill-fated ambush chimed in. “That beast had to have gotten him as well. He was all tied up, a perfect snack.”

“We were attacked by the biggest lion I’ve ever seen! The thing just tore into our ranks, got Jimmy first.”

“Oh, really? Jimmy’s gone, that’s too bad. Well, anyhow, they are all awake now and the black one is trying to save one of his bitches. Try and keep the big lad alive, kill the rest!” With his final command they charged out of the darkness.

“Hold the line, they come from the north!” Daenar barked orders the way Sutibain had taught him.

“It is imperative that you have effective communication in a battle. You will be the one in charge and you must keep the others informed so they know where to attack or defend. Without clear concise orders a battle will quickly devolve into a mob brawl.” Sutibain had told him.

In this particular case it made little sense. There were really only two defenders, two in reserve, and two that would be sitting this one out. Even so, his strong voice of command reassured the others.

Daenar braced and prepared for a whirling Two Bears axe attack. Ahnela crossed her sword over her shield, closed her eyes and shouted out a channeled aura.

“Strength!” A golden glow radiated from the tiny Fairy and enveloped the young Barbarian.

Daenar’s muscles surged with energy as the first of the attackers was upon them.

“Remember,” called out the enemy leader, “try and save that Barbarian youth, but swat that fly!”

The first attacker managed to side step Daenar’s wild blow. The swing had been designed to cut the man in half, but had gone a little high. He winced as he saw the attacker’s blow falling hard, aimed right at his winged partner. At the last second Ahnela brought up her tiny shield. The ringing sound of metal on metal was almost deafening.

“Sparkle!” she commanded as she arced her tiny, now crackling, sword in front of her. The attacker dropped without a sound other than a slight sizzle, he had been split from groin to throat.

He didn’t have time to marvel at what he had just seen; Daenar had his own attackers to worry about. Using all he had learned in his tiny village, the young Barbarian twirled and snapped out his heavy axe, catching one man in the face and driving him back into another. Tossing the axe lightly from his

left to his right hand, he neatly removed the other man's head before turning in one fluid motion, ducking under an attacker's blade, and plowing through two others.

Ahnela moved as if she and Daenar were one. Those that stumbled away from or survived the Barbarian's initial onslaught were quickly dispatched by the vengeful Fairy. Her blows rained from every angle as she and Daenar crushed those that dared stand before them.

Even though the pair had driven the attack back with their growing fury, there were just too many. The enemy was starting to get through and was closing in on the wounded Rena. Daven and Patrice stood shoulder to shoulder, he with his broad-bladed sword and she with a heavy-headed mace. They crossed their shields protectively over their leader as he was lost in the channel, fighting for the very life of their companion.

"I don't know if I have anything left." Patrice's voice never wavered which would have betrayed the fear in her heart.

"Be of good cheer Sister. This is not the day we die! The Maker is with us even now. See her glory reflected in the savage savior she has sent us!"

They turned to watch the Barbarian storming the field, but even as Daven spoke those words the enemy was upon them and he stepped strongly forward on his right foot pivoting his hips and cut a slashing horizontal blow that caught the first attacker in the gut. The man gasped as he realized what had happened, and then fell to stir no more. Two more were on them before the first fell.

"Flee!" Patrice called out a simple spell. The two attackers paused briefly, perhaps confused or maybe the spell only had a slight affect. Either way they didn't live long enough to tell. The bloodied axe of Daenar descended with crushing force, with the thick head still inside the first victim the Barbarian snatched the blade sideways, ripping through the freshly hewn corpse and

into the living flesh of the other. So furious was Daenar's attack that the Paladins fled away in horror.

The full fury of battle was upon him now and Daenar was having a hard time discerning friend from foe. Ahnela, sensing his fury stayed behind his shoulder and continued to bathe his body with her strength giving aura. Soon, Daenar stood apart from the others, panting, with the bodies of the enemy scattered around him. More than a few had been hacked beyond recognition in his rage. Although none of the others had ever seen the fury take someone, they had all heard about it. The stories were nothing compared to what they had just witnessed.

Daenar reacted to movement off to his left, there were others to kill. Ahnela sensed the trap and whispered in his covered ear.

"Rest." Instantly the young Barbarian felt at ease and was able to focus. He turned and blinked at tiny Ahnela.

"We are alive?" He asked, smiling even as the blood of battle dripped from his chin.

She giggled, happy to see him as himself again.

"We are!" She exclaimed in her delightful voice. "The ones that still live have run away, but I fear they will return.

"I don't care what you say; I ain't goin' back in there!" one man declared.

"Yeah, how we supposed ta fight that?!" demanded another.

"Look, I don't know what you all are on about, but I ain't leavin' here 'till I avenge Jimmy!" The speaker hefted a heavy crossbow.

"Rules have changed boys, they all go down!" The others cheered as they retrieved bows, crossbows, throwing axes, and knives; a few even picked up spears.

A Cloud from the East

With the rousing speech, nobody bothered to point out that none in the camp had anything to do with the death of their beloved Jimmy. The fact that they had a lot more weapons than people to use them was never mentioned either.

Slowly Abednego rose from the channel and glanced first to Rena. Seeing that she slept a natural sleep he nodded, satisfied. He turned his attention to the others.

“You are all well?”

“Yes Brother, we are fine, thanks to your friend Daenar and Sister Ahnela. Surely The Maker sent him!”

The Fairy bowed deeply as she presented Daenar in all his gore covered glory.

“We are fine, the survivors have run away, but it sounds like they are coming back.”

Just as Daenar finished speaking a crossbow bolt slammed into the ground by his foot. It hadn't been long enough since Sutibain's arrow had nearly ended his journey for him not to take this attack seriously.

“Shield!” Ahnela and Patrice cried in unison. Sister Patrice only hoped that she was lending some strength to Ahnela's spell. It wasn't really in either of their specialties, but they had to try something.

The first volley fell harmlessly away, blocked by the spell. Daenar stood in amazement; he had never seen such magic. Soon however, the bolts and arrows started passing through the glowing barrier as it began to fail. Both Patrice and Ahnela wilted under the strain of maintaining the shield, they were exhausted and this was really Sister Rena's specialty, but she was fast asleep.

Mindless of the arrows that passed through the barrier, Abednego strode to the middle of the camp, muttering under his breath. Daenar moved to intercept him, but Brother Daven stopped him.

Samuel J.E. Trawick

“He is searching for the channel. We can only pray he can reclaim it in time. The black Paladin, massive two-handed sword held before him, tip to the ground searched his soul and found the divine channel that connected him to The Maker.

As the shield collapsed and a hail of arrows descended on them, Abednego cried out the words for all to hear.

“DAWN’S FURY!”

He held his mighty sword high as he called for The Maker’s blessing of purification. A rolling wave of golden fire burst forth from the faithful follower, bathing all in a blinding light. When they could see again, the party was alone and quick on the road to recovery. The arrows, bodies, and the living enemy were all gone, simply vanished in the cleansing light.

Icewind stood blinking, trying to adjust his eyes.

“Great heavens!” he thought. “One should really be warned before being subjected to something like that!”

Abednego lay where he had collapsed. Daenar rushed to him.

“I am ok my friend, help me to my feet.” The strain had been too much. Healing Sister Rena had been more than most in their Order could do, but to turn around and call forth the searing light was unheard of.

“I’m afraid we lost our mounts during the fight, only Daenar’s is left.” Daven reported.

“Then we will walk, at first light we move out.”

Abednego stumbled as he tried to take a step. Daenar caught him in his massive arms and supported him gently. The Knight seemed uneasy at the Barbarian’s touch and Daenar let him go, but stayed close should his gait fail again.

“What was that?!” Teppia sprang from her seat as the fiery glow erupted in the distance. Gauwfn too found his feet, having

A Cloud from the East

been lightly dozing by the fire after getting a belly full of stew and biscuits, not to mention more than a few extra ales.

“I don’t be knowin’ lass, but it don’t look too good.”

“No it doesn’t!” She snapped back. “That’s it, we’re going!” Gauwfn sighed.

“I kinda figured you be sayin’ that. Hold on and let me be getting’ a thing ‘r two.”

She waited impatiently with Bristy as Gauwfn got his crossbow, axe, and shield. He shrugged off her impatient glare.

“Ya never know. Hey, where’d that horse get off to?”

Winter’s Bite had returned home. His job was done for the time being. He felt somewhat concerned that his first time out he had so willingly decided to go against all of his instincts and change to help those Humans, well, one in particular. It was a strange yet wonderful sensation. Truth be told, he could hardly wait until he was called on again.

“Let’s go!” Teppia felt herself on the verge of panic.

She was losing control and wasn’t sure she wanted to fight it. Teppia knew that in her true form it would be a simple matter of two beats of her mighty wings and she could aid her beloved. The others were ready and fell in line behind her lead. Either one of them would have been happy to take the lead position, but knew better than to try and reason with Teppia when she was in this kind of mood.

“We really should slow down.” Gauwfn had no trouble walking all day, uphill and down, pack filled to the toppling point, but one thing he couldn’t abide was running, and that’s what Teppia was making him do. He puffed to a stop.

“I be needin’ a sec ta catch me wind.” He stammered, sucking in air between words.

“He’s right.” Sutibain added. The pace didn’t bother him at all. One thing the Empire was very strong on was physical

training. “We should slow down; I would hate to walk into another trap.”

Teppia agreed, but sent Bristy ahead so they could at least keep a fast walk going. Gauwfn was still breathing heavy, but at least he was breathing. They continued across the rocky fields with the great cat now in the lead. Soon the Dwarf was breathing normally again and he sent a silent prayer of thanks to The Maiden for saving him.

Bristy touched the edges of Teppia’s mind. She held up her hand and the others dropped into a defensive crouch, weapons at the ready. Bristy sauntered back to the group with her massive head low to the ground and a snarl on her face. She was too angry to share her thoughts intelligibly with Teppia, but she got the message of trouble across.

Teppia shook her head; she simply didn’t have time for another delay. She would end this quickly. Before Gauwfn or Sutibain could even react, much less protest, Teppia took off like she had been fired from a bow. The men looked helplessly at each other and took off with Bristy leading the charge.

It was no use, Teppia moved with a speed they simply did not possess. They were soon far behind and getting even farther. At first she sensed nothing, and then there it was, just at the edge of her mind.

Her course changed slightly north, leaving the others even farther behind. As she came closer to the three men in hiding she sent a mind blast that killed one of them out right and sent the other two into a drooling stupor.

In fact, the men posed no danger. They had gotten separated from the others after Bristy’s attack and were simply seeking shelter until the light of morning. A few more steps and Teppia was on the stunned men. With a strength that belied her size, she snapped the necks of the two remaining men with a sickening crunch. Satisfied, she waited for the rest of her party.

A Cloud from the East

When Gauwfn puffed into view bringing up the rear of the party, he glanced about. He nodded approvingly, still breathing too hard to speak.

“Are you ready?” Teppia asked.

Gauwfn held up a stubby finger asking for just a moment, but she had already started moving away to where they thought Daenar and Abednego were. The Dwarf took a mighty gulp of air and followed along as best he could.

“Somebody’s coming!” Tiny Ahnela had been flitting around the perimeter of the camp. She darted back to Daenar, a move that was not lost on Abednego.

“They are almost here, quickly!” The Barbarian gained his feet.

Only he and Ahnela were able to stay upright. The party of Paladins was all but spent; it would be a few days before they were at full strength again. Abednego struggled to his feet and then toppled sideways.

“Forgive me Brother, I am too weak.” He collapsed.

“Don’t worry about it, the little one and I will handle it.” Ahnela giggled as she fell in next to the massive young man from the north.

Daenar had put a good face on it, but he knew if there was another attack like before they were done for. He stood strong as Ahnela pointed to where the next attack would come from. He was determined to die with honor, like a man of Two Bears. He smiled at his winged companion and she darted forward to kiss his cheek.

“It’ll be ok.” She assured him. He gripped his axe tightly and steeled himself for the fury that would once again take him, perhaps for the last time. At the last second Bristy burst into the circle of reddish flickering light cast by their campfire. Daenar

let his axe fall to the ground, dropped to one knee, and embraced the mighty cat.

“Lady Teppia!” Abednego once again struggled to his feet, this time supported by Daenar’s massive shoulder.

“I am so happy to see you!” He held on tightly to Daenar’s arm as he was lowered back into a seated position on the ground. The Knight wept openly.

“We have made it to you.” Teppia placed a soothing hand on his stubbly head; it had been sometime since his scalp had felt a razor.

“I am here Abednego, thank you for coming to us. Our need is great, or it is about to be.”

She turned to Daenar, without hesitation he snatched her up and crushed her to his mighty chest.

“I’m glad you are here. I did what I could, but I don’t know anything about this kind of stuff, healing and such.” The emotions that filled Daenar confused him. When he set his love down he noticed his own eyes were wet.

“Do not believe him Lady Teppia. He fought like the right hand of The Maker herself and saved us all!” Ahnela fluttered over and bowed. “I’m Ahnela and I’m very pleased to meet you!”

Teppia bowed low.

“I’m Teppia and thank you for taking care of Daenar; I know he can be a hand full.”

Ahnela’s high pitched giggle rang out in the cloudless, moonlit night.

“The sun will be up in a few hours.” Sutibain noted. “We should let them rest a little before we make the return journey.”

Gauwfn sank to the ground.

“I couldn’t be agreein’ with ya more Suti. That be a fine idea.” The Dwarf looked around, afraid to meet Teppia’s gaze.

A Cloud from the East

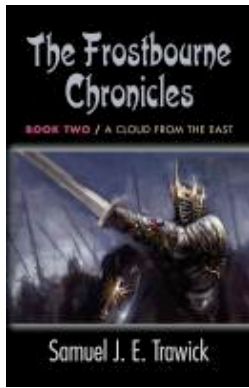
“I mean, we gotta let the lad rest a little, he been in a big ol’ ta do after all!”

She chuckled in spite of herself.

“Fine, we’ll rest a little. You and Sutibain take watch.”

Gawfn grumbled about not being able to watch anything in the dark as he struggled back to his feet.

“Well, I be sleepin’ jest as soon as we get back I do!” He grumbled loudly as he stalked off to take up first watch.



*The Empire is in full swing as it blazes across the plains enveloping all who dare to stand before it. Teppia takes to the daily grind of running the stronghold while Daenar heads west in search of new allies. Gauwfn heads underground with the help of Ahnela the Fairy Paladin to enlist the help of his kin. The gathering of strange allies at Frostbourne builds to the inevitable confrontation with The Empire. See also: **THE FROSTBOURNE CHRONICLES: Book One - A Fool's Errand***

THE FROSTBOURNE CHRONICLES

Book Two

A Cloud From The East

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