



THE
QUEST
OF THE
THIRTEEN

JOHN DEFILIPPIS

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By John DeFilippis



MACABRE INK

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DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to my dear mother and father, my brother Jimmy, my nephews Matthew and Mark, and all my family and friends who have supported me throughout my life as I pursued my dreams. Now that I have finally accomplished my goal of becoming a published author, I hope that I can inspire all those who struggle in overcoming obstacles as they strive to make their dreams come true. It is never too late to be what you might have been, for failure is only postponed success as long as courage “coaches” ambition. The habit of persistence is the habit of victory.

Prologue

Life in the Kingdom of Mavinor had long been lived by the precepts of a set of holy documents known as The Scrolls. The Scrolls provided a set of rules and principles setting forth how the people of Mavinor should live their lives and had been written a long time in the past by men believed to be inspired by a deity known as The Author.

In these latter times, the people of Mavinor have begun to turn away from the precepts contained in The Scrolls. When they were attacked by the army of the neighboring kingdom of Xamnon, every copy of The Scrolls was destroyed. The content lived on in the minds only of those who had taken pains to learn it. This knowledge was passed down from one generation to the next, but over time, fewer and fewer remembered. The effort to rewrite them continues, but the task is incomplete in the time of the reign of King Onestus...a time when the king finds that he needs their guidance more than ever.

Part I

Chapter One

The sun rose slowly over the mountains in the east, its rays of light trickling down onto the surface of the sea directly south of Mavinor. They crawled across the sand of the shoreline and angled up the walls of Mavinor's majestic palace, sending light glittering along the mica-chipped surface of the stone. From a distance, the city appeared to rise from the sand and shadows like a mirage, shimmering in the heat of the new day.

From where Onestus lay, however, the warmth seemed a thousand miles away. He rested on a pile of pillows that somehow failed to prevent the aching in his bones; he was tucked in beneath a pile of soft furs and blankets that failed equally against the chill of the early morning air. He stared out the window, dreading the moment when he'd have to slide his legs over the side of the bed, entrust himself to servants, and dress for the day.

Onestus was a tall man, broad of shoulder and thick boned. His hair, once a magnificent dark mane, had mostly turned to gray. His eyes, still sharp and filled with life, were the focus of a weakened visage. They diverted attention from his failing body to his active mind and aided him with the illusion of health he sought to weave.

The aches were worse in the morning. By noon, he'd be able to stand upright and walk without a limp. Careful planning had removed much of the activity from his day, and his closest guards and attendants, the only others who were aware of his condition, were loyal and vigilant.

Despite all of this, Onestus knew that it was only a matter of time before the truth would have to be revealed. He was old, he was tired, and now he was ill. He would not be king of Mavinor forever, and without a new king—without the right king—the city might fall.

The door to his chamber opened, and a slender young man entered. He wore a simple dark tunic without adornment. His hair, the same gold as the sunlight, glimmered richly. Onestus caught his eye, and the boy smiled.

"Good morning, sire," the boy said. He held a tray of fresh fruit and bread, and he carried it to the table beside Onestus' bed. "I've brought your breakfast."

"Good morning Talmik," Onestus said. "I'm not really hungry."

"And yet you must eat," Talmik replied. "Today is important. Have you forgotten that you are scheduled to meet with the scribes? There are rumors of a breakthrough in the translation."

"There are always rumors," Onestus muttered. "They spread rumors so I won't question them incessantly on their progress."

Talmik stood silently and waited. Onestus sighed and pushed back the covers, bracing himself for the cool air. He was almost disappointed when he found that the

sun, just creeping over the sill of his great window, had warmed the air considerably. The chill never came, and a few moments later he was seated by that window, sipping hot tea, eating breakfast, and watching the city below come to life.

In the distance he saw two groups of soldiers drilling, some facing off against one another with swords and spears, others targeting man-sized bales of dried grass with bows and crossbows. He could hear their shouts floating on the light breeze. Armor and weapons glittered in the sunlight and flashed as the soldiers simulated battle after battle.

He caught sight of General Sicarius striding along the outer edge of his troops, their ranks a wash of brilliant red and gold, stopping now and then to commend a warrior on a particularly brilliant move or to redress some inconsistency or failure. Wherever the general walked, men stood straighter and weapons clashed with greater zeal. Eyes followed when he moved on. There were a lot of failings in Mavinor, but the abilities of the general in charge of her armies were not in question. He was a strong leader who would not tolerate anything less than perfection from his troops.

The kingdom's crisis had little to do with strength of arms or prowess in battle. Onestus was more than an administrator. His position was that of spiritual leader and guide. Those of faith remembered all too well. At one time, The Scrolls had resided within the thick and protected walls of Mavinor's main house of worship, The Author's Temple. Priests had studied those words and spread their wisdom. Kings and their armies had clear direction and shared purpose. So much had changed.

The Scrolls were being recreated. There was a careful oral tradition running through Onestus' people. While recreation was far from complete, a great deal of the ancient teachings had been recovered, transcribed, and stored. Onestus did not doubt their veracity; his own memory was clear, and he could recite long passages without hesitation. He had contributed to the reconstruction himself.

Now he faced an important crossroad. He was childless. With no heir to the throne, Onestus knew that he needed to appoint a successor, and soon. His health was failing, and he did not wish to leave Mavinor without a leader for fear of the confusion and turmoil that might result. There were passages in The Scrolls dealing the succession to the throne. He remembered them but not well enough to recreate the words, and anything less would be unfair to the kingdom. Any error in following The Author's guidance could lead to ruin. If he acted recklessly, trusting to his memory to guide him, he would be setting himself up to fail, and it was beginning to look as if this might be his last act as king. He had to get it right.

Onestus turned at the sound of heavy footsteps beyond the entrance to his room. Talmik crossed the chamber and opened the door. Four impeccably uniformed guards stepped through. A fifth man, Kenrick, captain of the king's personal guard, stepped forward, his helm in the crook of his arm.

"It is time for the council, Lord," he said.

Onestus nodded. He drained his tea, which had grown tepid, and stood slowly. Talmik stepped forward, as if to help him up, but Onestus waved him away.

"I'll be fine," the king said to his trustworthy aide. "Bring me my raiment."

Onestus stood still and held out his arms. Talmik quickly draped him in a robe trimmed in fur. It was a bit too heavy for the weather, but no one would question it. The extra warmth helped Onestus' joints, and he was going to need his wits about him for what was to come. If the scribes did not bring him what he needed, he'd have to find another way to save Mavinor. He wasn't certain he was up to the task.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I do not wish to be late."

He started for the door, and the guards filed in around him, Kenrick leading the way and Talmik trailing directly behind. If he stumbled or faltered, no one would see. For once their precautions were not necessary, but all of them knew it was a charade they could not keep up forever. They walked in silence, and none among them smiled.

The Great Hall was empty when they arrived. The guards spread out and searched the huge room, checking in alcoves and behind pillars. It was mostly a ritualistic precaution, but they took it as seriously as if they had a death threat in hand. Onestus stood and watched them from an antechamber at the bottom of the stairs that led to the Great Hall. He could only imagine the number of times he'd witnessed this same scene. When he was much younger, he'd watch the guards with impatience. Now it calmed him, seeing that they did not deviate from what they had been taught.

When the hall was cleared, Onestus entered and took his seat at the head of a long, glossy wooden table. During better times he'd taken that same seat to oversee sumptuous feasts. But now the room echoed when anyone moved, and he felt alone and lost in the center of it.

Not long after he was seated, hurried footsteps sounded. Onestus turned and watched as a small group of men entered the chamber. They were an odd lot, robed in brown and burdened with sheaves of paper, furred scrolls, and one enormous leather-bound tome. Onestus frowned. Normally his reports consisted only of the portion of The Scrolls that had been reconstructed since their last meeting. Sometimes there were many pages...other times the scribes produced no more than a paragraph from their research. They very rarely brought the source of their research before him, and his curiosity was piqued. Perhaps this time the rumors of a breakthrough had been true?

There were six in all: two scribes, two historians, and two priests. All were devout believers in The Author and in The Scrolls. All had dedicated their lives to bringing those holy documents back to their full splendor. It was tedious work. They constantly questioned the eldest and the brightest in the city, filling in missing passages, working their way from one subject to the next with painstaking care. Some passages from The Scrolls had been discovered in other works: passages recorded verbatim in epic poems