

Chapter 2

The Flickering Candle

The chapel was one of the “new buildings”, constructed in the years following the Independence War as the Keep was converted from a hideout for desperate rebels to an academy for one of the new Royal Orders and not using any of the ancient foundations for its frame. At its center was a large, two-story nave with a flagstone floor and wood-framed, mortared stone walls rising to the wood-plank ceiling. The doors, made of iron-strapped oak, opened to the east and were flanked by narrow windows of blue glass squares. Four more such windows pierced the southern wall and a large tapestry of the Binding and Bleeding covered the north. Pairs of low candlestands abutted the north and south walls, each holding several candles and providing a kneeling area for praying. Only a few candles were lit, in remembrance of relatives that had passed.

The altar, now stripped of candles and covering cloth, stood in the chancel, raised above the chapel floor. Behind was the Bassinal, where the Bread and Wine were kept. On either side, separated by wooden walls, were two corridors. The left led to a stair and the passage through the outer wall connecting the chapel to Main Tower over the postern gate. The right led to the sacristy and the stair to Father Fastred’s second-story rooms. It was there that Xavier went after taking his leave of his friends.

He opened the door and peered in. Half of the sacristy was filled by a system of shelves stacked with the implements for a full year’s worth of masses, and much of the remaining space was occupied by the priest himself. Fastred Coreline was rinsing the chalice in the large washing bowl and happily humming the melody to the closing hymn, oblivious to Xavier’s presence.

The water came from a spigot near the floor. Like many of the buildings at Kern Heights, the chapel had running water, accessed by tapping the ancient pipes built into the walls. The water came from somewhere within the mountain and flowed through the western wall, which abutted the mountain’s bulk for two stories above the courtyard. It was always clear and cold, regardless of the season. A second set of

pipes collected the runoff from the grate beneath the spigot and drained to an outlet in the forest below, where it spilled over the feet of the trees. The exact specifications of the pipe system were unknown, however, since no one had been able to get inside the walls or mountain to see them. Fortunately, they seldom clogged, and when they did it was always near enough to where they could be accessed that the clog could be cleared.

“Is there anything that I can do?” Xavier asked after having waited several moments.

“Hmm? Oh, hello Xavier! I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that you were there. Well, let me see. You could put those candles away for me. They go up there on the shelf, next to the other ones. No, not those, those are for the Resurrection. The ones next to them, without anything painted on them.”

“Here?”

“That’s right. And knock off some of the worst of the drips before you put them away, otherwise they won’t fit.”

“Okay.”

“Just put them in that little container over there next to the plates. Once I get enough saved up, I have Peony melt them down and make new ones.”

“Oh. Um, so what did you want to show me?”

“What did I... oh right!” He shook the chalice off in the bowl and then began to dry it. “Well, I had intended to wait to say until Barton got here, and I can’t show you until he comes because we’ll be downstairs and I don’t want him to be wandering around looking for us since with the meeting and everything his time is limited—a pity that had to happen today, of all days—but he already has an inkling of what I found, so I suppose it doesn’t spoil anything to fill you in before he gets here.”

“Okay...”

A boyish grin split across his face. He was a few inches shorter than Xavier, thin and lanky like a scarecrow. His hair, which always threatened to escape the control of his comb, was dull brown with a hint of gray, and his face was dominated by a prominent nose, sparkling eyes, and a wide, thin mouth.

“So anyway,” he began, “yesterday evening Yemellian asked me if I could gather some mushrooms after mass—which means that we’re having mushroom-stuffed bread for our noon-meal, by the way. She’s always asking me because she won’t go down there herself; she loves the mushrooms, of course, but she’s afraid that she’ll be attacked by some ‘icky little thing’ or other. And she might at that, I suppose, if by attacked she means being crawled upon. But be that as it may.

“So, I was down there picking mushrooms over by the Harp-Sling, and by marvelous happenstance I happened to drop my glove on the floor. And lo and behold, when I reached down to retrieve it I noticed that there was a faint breeze disturbing the candle. Now under other circumstances that wouldn’t be all that strange and I would have thought nothing of it, save that the doors were shut as I always do to keep the bats out. As you may recall me saying before, there was one time where I forgot and left the door open all night, and some of the beasts got in and then ended up trapped down there with no way out and we kept finding their corpses lying around in out-of-the-way places for months afterwards. I have nothing against the creatures, of course, though I really hope that they won’t decide to come down out of the belfry into my bedchambers again; that was a real nuisance two years ago, so I always make sure to shut the doors now. And so... um, where was I?”

“Breeze on the candle,” Xavier reminded him patiently.

“Right. Of course. So anyway, there was a small breeze on the candle, making the flame flicker. Strange as that was, I was determined to find its source, especially since I knew it couldn’t be coming from the library on account of the door being shut. And here’s the really interesting thing—it was coming from the wall, around the Harp-Sling. It turns out that there’s a very small breeze that comes through the crack that runs along the entire left-hand side, except for a small portion on top, though of course you can’t tell unless you bring a flame very close and hold it very still. And I knew immediately that it could mean only one thing.”

“There’s a passage behind the wall!” Xavier finished for him. He grinned broadly. “That’s astounding!” He stopped and looked at the priest quizzically. “But why hasn’t anyone discovered it before?”

“Well, it’s not that surprising, really. I wouldn’t have found it this time either, had it not been for the glove. And as I said, you have to be very still. I probably wouldn’t have stayed put for long enough myself, save that a particular mushroom had caught my eye and so I stopped to look at it, and then I noticed the flame out of the corner of my eye. So, the circumstances were very precise. And if I had not closed the door, which up until three years ago I didn’t do at all—there’s something about being shut off underground from the rest of the world that’s mildly unsettling—even those circumstances would not have led to the proper conclusions. So it isn’t really so strange at all. We didn’t even start the mushroom farm until six years ago, and before that there was just a hook to hang your lamp on when you viewed the Harp-Sling, and that’s too far away for the breeze.

“But,” he added with a sigh, “we mustn’t get our hopes up overmuch. True, there may be a passage there. But it may also just be a small fissure that denotes nothing.”

“But coincident with the Harp-Sling?”

“I admit, it is very promising, but one never knows.”

Xavier nodded. The idea that they might find something that would shed some real light on the Ancient Builders was exhilarating. But Fastred was right; it might well turn out to be nothing. But still...

In addition to the foundations of the Keep, the Ancient Builders had constructed a vast network of tunnels beneath them, accessed by a stairway in what had become the chapel library, down the hall from the sacristy. In ancient days, it had been sealed with a great stone slab, but the slab was already broken when Kern took up residence, and when Kern Heights became the seat of the new Order it was removed altogether and the tunnels beneath were accessed by a regular door.

Below the stair, a long, not-quite-straight passage bored into the mountain for about eighty yards before exploding into a vast warren of interconnected chambers. This was a veritable labyrinth, made more so as some chambers were at different elevations from others, allowing people to walk two different paths in the same direction and reach the same endpoint without traversing the same ground. One could easily get lost in there, and after the initial orientation tour few knights or candidates went any farther than Kern’s Tomb, still easily

accessible from the opening passage. Indeed, Kern's Tomb was the only one of the many chambers that wasn't empty, for it was the resting place of those knights, and the resistance fighters before them, who had lived and died at Kern Heights. Their wooden coffins, overlooked by a stern statue of Kern himself, were a reminder of the sacrifices of the past. Kern himself was interred there, in a stone casket in the center of the room; the others were arrayed around him.

But for Xavier and Fastred the catacombs held other wonders. For, aside from the deep-carven figures over the gate, twin eagle-headed mountain lions that had given the order its name, the catacombs provided the only samples of the Ancient Builders' artwork, and only three at that. These were not just the only examples of this ancient culture at Kern Heights, but, to the best of Fastred's not inconsiderable knowledge, the only examples in Norwinon altogether, and perhaps the entire world.

These artworks were the Harp-Sling, the Bear-Boar, and the Double-Cross, three stone panels recessed into the walls of near-straight corridors amongst the warren of passages. Only the Harp-Sling was readily accessible; the other two were on the far side of the labyrinth. The panels' most notable features were the large carvings that dominated their surface, given their names by Father Colben, Fastred's predecessor, though each boasted a few other markings as well. In all, they made for a very tiny record.

"Did you try the other two?" Xavier asked after he had finished stowing the candles.

Fastred furrowed his brow. "No. I hadn't really given it any consideration. But of course we must do so. Perhaps when Barton has to leave. You have the morning off on Fastdays, correct?"

"Yes. No chores after a late watch, thank goodness."

"And I don't have to go to this meeting of theirs—it's for knights only you know—only the later one at eight. But we'll wait until after Barton... Oh, I think I hear something."

Fastred hastily put the cup on the shelf and rushed into the chapel, still carrying the towel, while Xavier followed. Barton had made it almost to the door, a basket in one hand and a bag of tools in the other.

Barton Fasearn was nearly Xavier's height, but broader and more muscular. His head, covered now with a sheepskin cap, was bald save for a rim of black hair around the edge, despite the fact that he was only in his mid-thirties. His face was thick and round, dominated by a black moustache and bushy eyebrows. When he saw them, he smiled.

"I brought breakfast," he said, raising the basket. "We don't have very long, though, so I'll eat my portion during the meeting. Amalian will send Toland over to tell me when it's time, so we don't have to worry about that. So, are we all ready?"

"Yes," Fastred said, then looked down at the towel in his hand. "Well, almost," he corrected. "Anyhow, we'd best get on with it."

The priest led them through the sacristy, grabbing a lamp along the way and throwing the towel onto the shelf—"I'll take care of it later," he said offhandedly—and into the library. This was a reasonably large room, but crowded with shelves and stuffed to the brim with books, scrolls, maps, artifacts of various sorts, and myriad loose sheets of parchment, stacked in haphazard piles both on and off the shelves and covering the table in the center to the point where it resembled nothing so much as a teetering heap of parchment. Only Fastred could make sense of whatever organization there was. For anyone else, finding something was about as futile as trying to guess a number between one and ten thousand without hints. Xavier secretly believed there was no organization whatsoever; he figured that Fastred just remembered where the most important papers were, and either spent hours searching if he wanted something else or just forgot about it. Behind one of the shelves was a wall and a door, reachable by a cleared corridor that circumvented the worst of the mess, and Fastred proceeded to it, opening the portal to reveal stairs descending into darkness.

A steep flight of thirty-odd steps ended in a comfortably wide tunnel, running west into the mountain. Starting a few paces from the stairs, the left side was dominated by shelves which smelled of dirt and rotting plants. In several places, mushrooms lifted their white and multicolored heads from the dark loam, waiting to be plucked and transformed into Yemellian's various culinary delights or sold to the citizens of Castlebury on market day. The visible part of the tunnel

was rough but regular, hewn out of the bedrock with care. Fastred had once tried to figure out how long it would have taken a team of ten men with average tools to excavate the entire tunnel network, but the calculations were too mind-boggling to contemplate. Lifetimes at the least, assuming he hadn't made any errors.

Some hundred feet in, near the end of the mushroom shelves, was the Harp-Sling. There Fastred hooked the lamp onto a ring driven into the shelf while Barton set his burdens on the floor.

The Harp-Sling was a stone panel, approximately six feet by six feet, rising from the floor to within a foot of the ceiling. It had been polished smooth so that it dimly reflected shapes and movement, and the figures had been gouged into its surface. The great Harp Sling itself consisted of a large curve open at the bottom, vaguely like a horseshoe or upside-down lyre (hence the "harp") with other curves coming out of either side that had reminded Colben of slings. But those were just the most salient features; the entire shape was filled in with various curves and lines, and what even looked like two human-like figures in the center, if one squinted one's eyes just the right way. Below the figure were twenty-six smaller, abstractly geometric shapes in two rows. Six of these repeated, both at the beginning and the end, and two others appeared twice in the inscription. The remainder were unique. Fastred had guessed them to be writing of some kind, and Xavier agreed, though all of Fastred's research had found nothing that could shed light on their meaning or origin. Fastred and Xavier had exhausted all avenues of speculation weeks ago, spending several hours of their free time doing so once the priest realized that his pupil had the same hunger for the mysteries of the past as he did.

Fastred stepped away as Barton sat on the floor and began looking for the breeze, pulling out a candle, lighting it, and placing it on the floor beside the crack. Then they waited, being sure to breathe into their hands so they wouldn't disturb the flame.

"Well," Barton said finally, "you're right, Father, though it's very faint. Now we'll see what we can do to improve it."

"Make sure you don't do any damage to the panel," Fastred warned.

“Don’t worry about that—not this time, at least. I’m just going to poke around the edge; there’s no time for anything else. The worst that could happen is that we lose a couple of chips. But we’ll probably have to tunnel if we want to get to the other side, either through the panel or under it. And even if we go under, I can’t guarantee that it will stay in one piece.”

“Just... please be careful. It’s one of a kind, you know. And even though I do have a rubbing of it, and I sent one out to the library at St. Hessaed’s Monastery, it’s still imperative that we preserve...”

“Xavier, could you hand me the claw-lever from my bag there? Thanks.”

“...its original state, so future investigators can have the chance to learn from it.”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing, and I’ll be careful.” And with that, Barton placed the claw-lever at the lower corner of the panel and slammed his boot against it. Fastred winced, as if struck, but nothing happened beyond a loud clang.

“Mmm. It went in a little, but I’ll need to move it some. Xavier, could you take the candle and move it a little to the right? Just a little more... Yes, that’s good. Father, the mallet, please.”

For the next several minutes, Barton worked up the crack, pounding the claw-lever in, moving it slightly, then prying it out and working his way up to the next spot. Over time, the barely visible seam in the rock widened until it was enough to slip a foot-long rule through without difficulty. He found no barrier within, and the breeze was now noticeable even without the candle, bringing with it the faint odor of dust.

Barton withdrew the rule and stood, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. He had long since hung his cap on a peg on the shelves, and his face was red and sweaty. “This is going to take an awfully long time, if we keep at it this way,” he noted. “There’s something back there all right, though. Even better, it feels like this thing’s meant to be opened, though how I couldn’t tell you. You can’t really tell by looking at it, but the whole panel has shifted over a bit, and that means that there has to be a space inside the wall here,” he tapped the stone on the opposite side of the panel from where he’d

been working, “for it to move into, though it’s awfully tight. I suppose they could have made it so they could put the panel in place rather than so it could be removed, but it amounts to the same thing. Either way, with enough work we ought to be able to pull it into the wall without breaking it, though I have no idea how we’d get it closed again if we did. We can always brick over, I suppose, if we find out that it’s a bat cave or something and we don’t want it to be open all the time.”

“How long, do you think?” Fastred asked.

Barton shrugged. “It’s hard to say—never predict the race before seeing the horses, as they say. But if I had to guess, and if it’s just me working on it—and you two helping, of course—then I’d say at least a few hours, but probably more, and maybe a lot more before someone can fit inside. A lot depends on how much space there is inside the wall, and how much resistance there is. I’ll see if I can find some time to ask Carleton if he can take a look at it. He would have a better idea of how to get in than I would.”

“So, now what?” Xavier asked.

“Well, I’ve got that meeting in a few minutes—I’m surprised that Toland hasn’t shown up yet, but maybe it hasn’t been as much time as I thought. But we can have breakfast while we wait.”

“And then,” Fastred declared, “Xavier and I can check out the other two panels.”

“Sounds good,” Xavier said. “So what’s in the basket?”

Barton grinned, stripped off his dusty gloves, and unwrapped the parcel. Inside were a small loaf of milk-bread, a clay jar of apple-mushroom-onion spread, a sealed flask with still-warm milk, and a knife and wooden bowls to eat it all with. For the next several minutes they busied themselves with their repast, until they heard footsteps echoing down the tunnel toward them and saw a faint glimmer of light.

“That will be Toland,” Xavier said through a mouthful of bread. He was relishing the spread—Yemellian had been particularly generous with it, and he was indulging in a most satisfying way. She added honey with the apples as a sweetener, and that combined with the tang from the onions made the whole experience deeply satisfying.

“Mmm,” Barton grunted as he stuffed a last morsel into his mouth and rose to his feet. He looked down at his trousers and gloves, then

shook his head at the sight of the layer of dust, which he proceeded to try to beat off. “I’m going to hear it after the meeting,” he said ruefully.

“Dad!” Toland called out, coming around the corner at a full run. “Dad!” He stopped and looked at the other two, furrowing his brow. “What’re you doing?”

“We are trying to get through the panel,” Fastred started to explain. “There appears to be a passage on the other side...”

“Really? Can I see?”

Toland Fasearn pushed forward to look at the panel and frowned. He was seven years old, and built more like his mother than his father, which meant thin and willowy. He had large, blue eyes, light hair, and his father’s small nose, which he was scratching now, perplexed.

“I don’t see anything,” he complained.

“There’s not much to see,” Barton said, laying his hand on his son’s shoulder, “not yet, at any rate. It’s going to take a lot of time to get through. But when we do, you’ll be the first to know, I promise. But I bet that we have to go now, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” Toland said, brightening up. “Mom says that we’ve got just enough time to get back, or we’ll be late and then they’ll start without you and you’ll be in big trouble.”

“She said that, eh? Well I sure don’t want to get in big trouble with your mother; we all know how that goes. I guess that I’ll be off, then. Could you make sure to bring the basket back to Yemellian? And just leave the bag here. I’ll take care of it later.”

“Don’t worry,” Xavier replied as he helped himself to another piece of bread that had been originally slated for Barton.

Xavier trotted back down the tunnel, having deposited the basket and Barton’s bag in a relatively clear spot on the table in the library and closed the door once again behind him.

“All ready?” Fastred asked as he approached holding the lantern.

Xavier showed him the extra candles he’d brought. “Yes.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

Fortunately, Father Colben had been a very organized and safety-conscious man, though his intentions in the chapel library had long since fallen to the wayside since Fastred’s nature was so contrary to

his. But his efforts in the catacombs remained: arrows and descriptions painted on the walls, showing the way to various places, all color-coded by destination. They chose the orange path toward the Bear-Boar first, as it was closer and the path was more nearly straight.

This panel was decorated by a strangely fluid representation of what could only be some kind of animal, vaguely resembling both creatures that had given it its name. It was hunched over but standing on two feet, and its back was a large hump. Its face was short, with overly-large eyes and two triangular tusks jutting forth from the line of its mouth. The space within its body was filled with patterns of lines and designs that gave it the look of something about to spring. At the base of the picture were thirty-eight more of the strange signs, some of which were the same as those found on the Harp-Sling.

They spent several minutes testing, and found that the candle did indeed flicker, but only when placed right against the left-most corner.

“This one’s almost completely immobile,” Fastred said, shaking his head, “but I’ll wager there’s something behind it anyway. We’ll have to check the other one too, but I’m pretty certain now that they’re all doors of some kind.”

“To what, though,” Xavier said. “That’s what I want to know.”

“We’ll find out soon enough, I hope,” Fastred replied.

The carvings on the Double-Cross consisted of two intersecting crosses, slightly apart from one another and set at an angle of about thirty degrees from vertical. Compared to the other two panels, it was surprisingly plain, and had only five other signs beneath it. No matter how much they tried with the candle, they were unable to find anything.

When they were done, Fastred sighed and leaned against the stone wall, turning to gaze at the ceiling above.

“I was thinking,” he said absently, “what could have happened to them?”

It was a topic they had explored several times before. “They probably left,” Xavier said, repeating his pet theory. “This was a stronghold. Maybe whatever drove them up here went away, and they returned back to the valleys.”

“Or maybe they died in here,” Fastred replied. “Maybe we’re opening their lost tombs, and all we will find is their bones.”

“Why are you so gloomy all of the sudden?”

“I don’t know, really. It’s just that no one’s ever found anything else like these anywhere... How could they just disappear like that? A people who could build a fortress of stone, who could dig this,” he spread his arms around, “and so long ago.” He shook his head.

“Tell me,” Fastred said, changing topics, “how far have you gotten in *The Chronicles*?”

“Not as far as I’d hoped. To the end of the Third Kingdom, so not too far into the ancient parts yet. Why?”

“There is a section, not long after that, where the chronicler delves into what is, to him, essentially prehistory, which means before the First Kingdom. That’s over 1500 years ago, before the Doudanni even came to the mountains, and before the Arcadrians took Arcadra. And if you read carefully, there’s mention of an ‘olden stone house’ at that time, one that had been there so long that the people couldn’t remember when it was. I think that it’s Kern Heights he’s talking about; it’s the right place, as far as his geography can be trusted. And it was ancient then. I didn’t want to ruin it for you, but you did ask.”

Xavier nodded. “And?”

“Well, it’s just that if it was around then, like it is now, ancient and dead, that means that the people here must have vanished long before. And this is all that’s left. Well over a thousand years, maybe many thousands, and so little to show for it. It makes you wonder what the reason is for it all.”

Xavier shrugged. “To give us a place to set up an academy, maybe? If it wasn’t here already, the Order certainly would not have built it here. And, going further back, Kern would probably have been captured and killed, and the Order would never have been founded in the first place. That’s something, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose, though it does make you wonder. But the Lord works in mysterious ways, they say, and I have every reason to believe it.” He smiled. “There certainly are a lot of things about life that don’t make much sense to *me*.”

Xavier smiled. “On that note, I think we had better be getting back. If I’m right, it’s got to be pretty close to half past the seventh hour.”

“Yes, you’re right of course. We’d better get back.” He looked down at his robes, which had become coated with dust. “I don’t know about you, but I would like to wash up a bit before this meeting of theirs.”

With that, he blew out the candle, Xavier picked up the lamp, and they walked back together through the tunnels, following the light blue arrows to the entrance.

“You know,” Fastred said brightly after they had left the straight stretch of tunnel that ended at the Double-Cross and reentered the interweaving network of chambers, “if there are any drawings or writing on the walls, I’ll be able to trade them for the *Glostbenton Histories* for sure. Ulstred has been holding out on me, complaining that it is one of only three copies and all that—not like I have ever lost a book on him, of course—but now! He’ll lend it to me for sure if I can promise to send him new carvings to look at! He might even have to come himself, when the weather warms.” Fastred smiled happily. “The sight of him—you’ve never met him, but the old monk looks like he’s never so much as lifted himself out of a chair, no offense to him of course; he’s a great mind—but coming here...”

Xavier smiled as Fastred prattled on, his voice echoing comfortingly through the vast, empty underground network.