

QUEST for CELESTIA

*A Reimagining of The Pilgrim's Progress*

Steven James



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*Quest for Celestia: A Reimagining of The Pilgrim's Progress*

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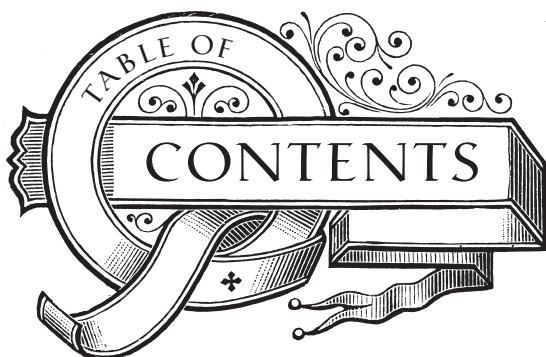
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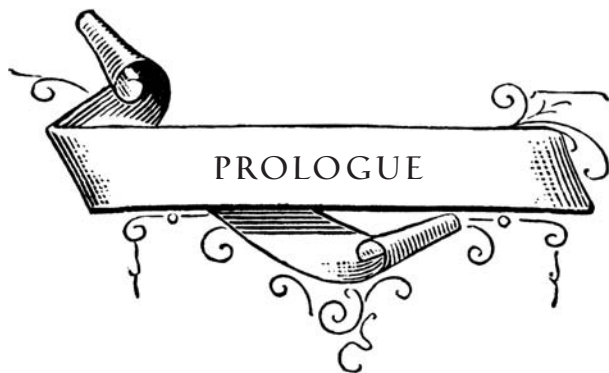
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*The Pilgrim's Progress* was the second-best-selling book in the world for over two hundred years, trailing only the Bible. When John Bunyan wrote his classic during his prison term for preaching the gospel without permission, he undoubtedly had no idea it would impact the lives of billions.

In this book I've tried to reimagine John Bunyan's tale, not through the eyes of a theologian, but through the eyes of a storyteller. Rather than offer another paraphrase of his original, I've taken the liberty of fleshing out the story and the characters that I see at the heart of his narrative. Bunyan's themes and images and fragments of thought have certainly found their way into this story, but so have my own imagination, my own journey, my own story.

Stories live only as long as they're retold or remembered. My hope is that this retelling will let John Bunyan's story live on in the imaginations and souls of a whole new generation of readers.



*Time is a sea, breaking upon the shore of this moment; and with every ripple, with every wave, I remember.*

*I dream.*

*A tale unfolds, rising out of the mists. My story overflows before me. Ripple after ripple.*

*Sometimes when I think of that place and my journey and the things that happened to me in that land, it all seems so real, so true. Other times, everything seems like a distant dream. The images overlap and blur across each other like a pile of leaves that the wind is slowly blowing away.*

*I look around and I tell myself that this—this—is real. Here is where I am. Now is when it is. And yet . . . somehow the past gets tangled up with the present. I wonder if time means anything anymore.*

*Sometimes the scenes from the story seem like only a moment left over from a nightmare, lingering on the edge of my awareness and then simply fading away. Sometimes my dream seems like an entire lifetime. And this is how it began. . . .*



Chapter One

# THE WIZARD



I open my eyes. My breathing is fast. Sweat clings to my forehead.

*Something happened, I think. Something bad.*

Shouting in the streets has shaken me awake. Angry shouting. As far as I can tell my parents are still asleep. I decide to see what's going on, to find out for myself. I slip downstairs and out into the night.

Packs of frenzied villagers comb the streets. "He's been sighted!" someone yells. "Over by the livery!"

"Find the wizard!" cries a woman nearby. "Protect the children!"

So it was a wizard.

This wasn't the first time a wizard had been sighted in our town. Every few years there would be rumors of someone from the Scaldian Mountains making his way down into our village. The elders claimed the wizards were trying to recruit new apprentices, seduce young maidens, and spread their dark magik. I wasn't sure what to believe.

I'd never seen a wizard. But, like all the young men of Abaddon, I was curious.

I decided to see if my friends Erikon and Terrill were up and would search with me. I slipped along the edge of our house toward a side street.

A pale crescent moon ruled over Abaddon that night. Bats skittered about on the edge of the light cast by the torches and lanterns. A few faint stars peeked down but seemed to keep their distance as if they were afraid to come any closer. It was unseasonably chilly even though it was still summer.

I passed another row of houses. Only two more streets and I'd be at Terrill's house.

A few people rode past on horseback, but mostly folks moved on foot in small clusters, carrying pitchforks, scythes, and knives. Most of the faces I glimpsed in the moonlight looked afraid.

I decided to take the shortcut between the blacksmith's and the shoemaker's shops. As I neared the alley between the two buildings, I heard a voice: "There you are."

I froze. "Who's there?"

A tall man with a snowy white beard stepped out of the shadows. I didn't recognize him as one of the men from our village.

"You're Kadin, aren't you?" He spoke with a smooth confidence that was almost hypnotic. "I was sent to find you." He wore a foreign-looking tunic of strange, tightly woven fabric. "You've been chosen," he said.

My heart began hammering inside my chest. I thought



of running, but he'd stepped closer, blocking my path. I thought of fighting him, but if he was the one I suspected, that probably wouldn't be a good idea.

"Who are you? What are you talking about?" I tried not to sound too scared, but each word stuck in my throat like a solid object.

He looked briefly to each side to make sure we hadn't been seen. Nearby, on the adjoining streets, I could hear the calls of the armed villagers searching for him.

"Young man, have you heard of the city of Celestia?"

"In tales," I said, "and legends from the ancient days."

"They're not legends," he replied. "And those days aren't as ancient as they seem." He pulled me toward him then, farther into the dark recesses of the narrow alley. The shadows seemed to retreat to give us room to stand. "I'm Alcion," he said.

"Get away from me!" I exclaimed, backing away from him and into a wall. "You're a wizard!"

He laughed softly. "I doubt that, but call me what you like. The stories of Celestia are true." Urgency threaded through his words. A wild fire burned in his eyes. "Take this." He handed me a brown, leather-bound book, old and worn. On its cover was a drop of crimson.

It was a Book of Blood. A book of sorcery.

I'd heard of them. We all had. My parents and teachers had told me all about them, warned me about them. The elders of Abaddon had long ago banned these books, for, as my father told me, they were filled with "dark tales and strong magik."



I stood paralyzed in fear as the wizard slipped the book into my hands. The leather seemed warm, like it was alive. And it throbbed in my hands like a beating heart.

"No!" I sputtered, dropping the wretched thing into the dusty street. "It's a book of death! I've heard of these. Keep it away from me. Get away from me!"

"It's a book of life," he whispered, reaching for the book. But before he could find it, the crowd had found us.

Torches flickered at the edge of the alley. "There he is!" cried one of the men, waving a pitchfork in our direction. "Get him!"

Alcion leaned close and whispered one word: "Soon." Then he stepped back into the shadows and disappeared into the folds of the night.

I was stunned and breathing fast. I stared down. The book was in my hands again. I couldn't remember picking it up. I'd dropped it, but now I was holding it again.

The villagers swarmed into the alley, but since I was deep in its shadows, I doubted they could see me. I edged away from them. I could feel the pulse of the book beating between my fingers. A drop of glistening blood dripped from the cover and landed softly next to my boot.

My hands were trembling.

I had met a wizard.

*What kind of book is this that bleeds? that breathes?*

I threw it down and ran off.

I heard it sigh as it hit the ground.

"Catch him!" screamed the townspeople behind me. "He was with the wizard!"



And with my friends and neighbors chasing me, I ran for my life toward home.



I was quiet the next morning at the breakfast table, but my parents weren't. Talk of the wizard dominated their conversation.

"I heard they almost got him," said my father. "Had him cornered like a rat, but then he cast a spell on them and ran away. Coward. Tried to turn all the people there into snakes!"

"Oh, my," whispered my mother. "How terrible."

"I heard he just disappeared into thin air," I said.

My father shook his head. "No, I tell you, snakes, my boy! Wicked spells! He's a wizard! Conjurer of darkness! Sorcerer!" Then he leaned over the table. "I heard they saw someone with him. An apprentice, no doubt."

My mother's eyes became really big. "An apprentice?"

My father nodded grimly. "A boy. They'll catch him, though. And when they do—"

I interrupted him. I didn't really want to hear what would happen to the young apprentice when they caught him. "Um, what's so wrong with the wizard? I mean, what's he done?"

"What's he done? He's a wizard!" he exclaimed, shaking his fork at me. "And don't interrupt me, boy. I'm your father. Now as I was saying, he tried to turn 'em into snakes. Started muttering his magik words. I tell you, he came to poison our minds. To poison us all!"



“Oh, my,” gulped my mother. “Poison us all!”

I didn’t say anything else. After all, what would have been the point? They could believe what they wanted, but I knew what I’d seen. The wizard hadn’t been threatening anyone. He’d been searching for someone.

For me.

After breakfast I headed upstairs to my room. As soon as I opened the door, I froze.

The Book of Blood lay on my bed.

I had left it in the alley the night before. I *knew* I had.

But yet, here it was.

I looked around. It didn’t seem like anything else in my room had been disturbed. The window was too small for a person to fit through, and I couldn’t think of a way the wizard could have made it into our house to leave it here. The only other explanation—that the book had found its way into my house by itself—was, of course, impossible.

But yet, here it was.

I avoided going into my room all day. I couldn’t stand the thought of being close to the enchanted book. But that night, when it came time to go to bed, I knew I had to do something.

After gathering my courage, I carefully wrapped up the book in one of my shirts. I snuck outside and tossed it, shirt and all, into the forest. I knew I could never have worn the shirt again anyhow. Then I hurried home and crept back to my room.

When I arrived, the Book of Blood was on my desk.

During the next few days I left it outside in a feeding

trough, tossed it into the river, and even buried it in a shallow grave near the stables south of town. And each time it was waiting for me when I returned home. Almost as if it were chasing me. Pursuing me.

*What kind of magik is this?* I thought.

I considered burning it but was rather afraid to try. I thought it might find a way to get back at me.

And so at last, after two or three days of this, I decided to open it up and take a look inside the forbidden book myself. Maybe then it would leave me alone.

I closed the door to my room and locked it. Then I took a deep breath and picked up the Book of Blood.

My hands were shaking as I flipped open the cover. Immediately I recognized the script in the first half of the book. It was the one I understood, the language of our valley, our people. Slowly, I paged through the book, glancing at the delicate script and elaborate illustrations of dragons and caverns and palaces made of light. The pages felt more like skin than paper.

The second half of the book, however, was written in another language. I believe it was Serecean, the language of the hills—Wizard's Tongue, we called it. That section appeared to contain a number of elaborate maps.

Once I was familiar with the layout, I turned back to the beginning of the book and began to read.

The content wasn't at all what I'd expected. The book wasn't filled with dark spells of death or incantations of destruction, but rather with stories and poems of great mythic adventures. A storyteller had penned this book,

not a demented wizard. He told tales of distant kingdoms, giants who lived on the edge of the world, and a prince who would dare all to save his land.

The book also spoke of an ancient evil that had taken up its lair on the edge of the Scaldian Peaks—the very mountains that overlooked our village. As a child, I'd heard bedtime tales of such a creature, but the book spoke the story as history, not faery tale. I couldn't understand all of the details, but it seemed that the fiend was lying in wait and would one day be unleashed upon our town.

The next morning while I was getting dressed, I glanced into the mirror and saw a black lump resting on the base of my neck just above my left shoulder. In horror I reached up and felt it. The skin was scaly and rough, almost reptilian.

A chill rippled through me.

I felt the lump again.

"The book," I whispered. "The book has done this to me."

The growth appeared to be infected and rooted deeply into my skin.

When I tried to show it to my parents and ask them about it, they looked at me strangely and shook their heads. "There's nothing there," they said.

Even the doctors wouldn't believe me. My mother took me to the finest physician in our town. "Nothing wrong with you, young man," he said. "You're just going through a stage. Be patient. Wait it out."

I nodded. "Okay." I didn't tell him that he had one

growing out of his neck too. I didn't tell them that they all did. They would have called me mad, perhaps even burned me at the stake as a condemned wizard. There was a pole in the middle of our village for just such a purpose.

Maybe I *was* going mad. Maybe I *was* seeing things.

Or maybe—just maybe—they were all mad, and I was the one slowly growing sane.



I knew I couldn't get rid of the Book of Blood—I'd tried that already—but I could stop reading it. So that's what I did. For three weeks I didn't even open it. I kept it closed, hidden under my bed. But during that time, the growth became worse and worse until I could barely stand the pain.

My dreams became darker in those days as well. I was haunted by memories of things I'd done over the years, as if opening that book had opened a gateway in my mind that all the shame of my past was pouring through.

My back, my body, my soul throbbed with more pain each passing day.

*You were never meant to live like this. There is another place—there must be another place, another way.*

At last I couldn't stand it anymore. I thought that if the book had started this torture, it could end it. I opened it up again and read. And the truth is, studying the stories in the Book of Blood did relieve the pain in my neck.

I spent the next couple of weeks poring over the ancient pages, devouring the stories, trying to make sense of them. However, as time went by, the book continued to

bleed, and my growth continued to grow, becoming more and more painful. I had to be rid of the wretched thing. I had to! But nothing I tried could remove it. Cutting it. Burning it. All of these only made it bleed and scar. Only made *me* bleed and scar.

People began to whisper about me, the young man who'd been seen with a dagger, slicing into his own shoulder and neck, mumbling.

Even my friends Terrill and Erikon began to avoid me. I tried to explain it all to them—and to my parents, too—but they wouldn't listen. I told them about the land of the ancient kings and the mystical city of Celestia and how it held out the promise of healing and hope and freedom, but they just laughed. I told them of the ruler of that land, King Kiral, of his wisdom and power and mercy, but they just shook their heads. I warned them about the evil hidden in the hills and the impending danger it posed, but they sneered.

The more time I spent with the book, the stranger and more alive and more desperate and more free the world seemed. It was as if a giant riddle were unfolding before me, drawing me deeper into its heart. With every breath I drew in I felt like I was tasting a truer flavor of life.

The book was changing me.

The longer I stayed in the village the more the book bled. The more my wretched growth ached. And the more I understood that I had to leave.

Autumn came, and with it, my nineteenth birthday. Normally I would have been considered a man on that

day. But instead, I was considered something else entirely. Rumors had taken over Abaddon. Some said I'd become a wizard's apprentice. Others said I'd been cursed, bewitched. I even overheard people talking of the stake in the middle of town.

No one—not even my parents—believed me. And so, with my birthday came my decision.

The leaves were beginning to turn sickly yellow and drift to the ground that day when I finally told my father I'd decided to leave Abaddon for good and travel through the mountains to Celestia.

He scoffed, "You've been deceived by the magik of that book. If you leave, you'll never come back. You'll die up there in those peaks."

"I can't stay," I argued. "Either the people will kill me or this infection will. I can't live here anymore. It no longer feels like home."

My father looked at me coldly. "That's because it's not," he said at last. "Tomorrow morning I want you out of this house, wizard. Where you go and what you do are up to you."

"Yes," said my mother. "Out of this house, wizard." Then they both walked away

That was the last time my parents ever spoke to me.



That night I wrote my parents a note telling them how much I loved them. I included directions to the hills in case they ever decided they wanted to leave.

While I was finishing my letter, Erikon and Terrill showed up at my house, and my parents pointed them upstairs to my room.

I told them about the conversation I'd had with my father and they listened quietly. Finally Terrill spoke. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

He shook his head. "What happened to you, Kadin? We've been friends ever since we were kids, and now all of a sudden you think you're better than us? Our town's not good enough for you anymore? You go around Abaddon telling everyone they've got these infections on their backs—"

"Necks. The infection is on their necks."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, on their *necks*. How could I get that mixed up?"

I turned to Erikon. "You believe me, don't you?"

He was quiet. Finally he asked, "Is it true you've become a wizard?"

I shook my head. "I'm not a wizard. It's true that there are wizards, though. Dark forces. Demons and hobgoblins and dragons. The book speaks of them—"

"The book speaks of them," scoffed Terrill. "Yeah, I'll bet it does."

"We're worried about you, Kadin," said Erikon.

"Don't worry about me," I said. "I'll be okay. You need to worry about yourselves. If the book is right, everyone in this town is in great danger! An evil being will be unleashed. According to the book—"

“The book!” cried Terrill. “All you talk about is that cursed book!”

“It’s helped me, really,” I said. “I know there’s a better life out there, in the city of Celestia. And that’s where I’m going.” I looked into the eyes of my two friends. “And you two should come with me.”

Terrill just laughed at me. “You’re crazy!”

I knew Terrill. There was no changing his mind. I turned to Erikon. “What about you? What do you say? Walk with me, just for a while. We can travel there together! I’ll tell you more about what I’ve read. There are maps in the book. Maps to a land where no one dies! Where you live forever!”

Erikon hesitated for a moment.

“Come with me,” I begged him. “My parents won’t come. They think I’m crazy. But you believe me, don’t you?”

Terrill grabbed his arm. “Come on, Erikon. Let’s get out of here before people see us talking to this wizard.”

“Okay,” Erikon said finally, but he was looking at me when he said it. “But just for a while. Just to see.”

“Great,” said Terrill. “Now there’s two of ’em.” Then he cursed under his breath as he stomped out of the room.

“You won’t regret it,” I said, clasping Erikon on the shoulder, making sure I didn’t touch the infected growth on his neck. “I’ll see you first thing in the morning.”

And so, on the day after my nineteenth birthday, carrying a forbidden book and leading my friend toward a

mystery, I took one last look at Abaddon and started on my journey toward the mountains.

The wind tugged at my hair. Erikon followed a few paces behind me. And the words of my father rang in my ears: *"You've been deceived by the magik of that book. If you leave, you'll never come back. You'll die up there in those peaks."*

A voice somewhere deep inside me told me he was right.