

BOOK ONE OF THE DJED CHRONICLES

THE TWELVE TASKS

KATHARINE E. WIBELL

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The Twelve Tasks

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DEDICATION

To my sister, Sarah,
My fellow explorer of all these worlds for all those years.

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Blake, William, 1757-1827. The Tyger. [London]. Poets.org. Web. Accessed 22 October 2020, <https://poets.org/poem/tyger>.

I also want to thank all my childhood friends who joined me on many of these adventures throughout the magicked worlds. We were never really playing make-believe. Instead, we were building the infrastructure for the fantastical. Thank you!

THE TWELVE TASKS

PROLOGUE

He could taste blood.

His own.

Adrenaline coursed through his body, preventing him from feeling the pain of biting his tongue. Stumbling along the dimly lit corridor, he tripped over his own feet and collided with the stony floor. Scraped knees were of little importance now. People needed to be warned. The signal must be sent.

There was no pleasure in being the first to know, in interpreting the signs. A target was now on his back. He had not a chance for survival.

His frantic footfalls were the only echoing encouragement for this, his last, great mission. Their reverberating sounds masked his panting and his rapid heartbeat. He should have lit more sconces. He should have prepared more Wards. He should have done a lot of things. Would this last act of his be enough to redeem his soul?

The end was coming. For everything. If the Djed was not discovered and proven true, the scales would tip too far, the balance would be shattered, equilibrium lost. And along with it, all life.

A sudden catch in his side caused him to stumble once again. He must make it—yet he knew he was being hunted, and he knew he was slowing down.

The Darkness had awakened. And she was hungry.

Looking ahead, he could see his goal. The circular device was before him now, in his line of sight. Ancient as it was, it would work for him. It had to.

One at a time, he forced the concentric stone rings to spin. The runes and timeworn symbols on each ring must align in the correct pattern, or the result would be disastrous.

With each grinding click as specific sections locked in place, the room dimmed oppressively. Almost there. Almost there. Almost...

The room went black, sucking all light and the last hope of sight into its depths, leaving only two eyes that glinted like the golden coins used as offerings for Charon, the boatman of the underworld. No scream was heard as the dial turned for the final time.

The Darkness had claimed her first victim.

CHAPTER 1

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

The first breath alerted her that this was not Earth.

The air had a weight to it, a thickness. Breathing it was like breathing in water but without the gagging and sputtering from liquid in lungs. Her mind struggled to process the unnatural feeling.

Katie gasped. Her eyes darted about wildly for help of any kind, but she was alone. After several heart-pounding moments, her breathing slowed and then steadied. She tried to restore her fragile sense of calm. Afraid to look around, she instead focused on her breath.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. She trembled involuntarily. Sprawled on her back, she closed her eyes as her body labored to adapt to the atmosphere. She was not suffocating. She would be all right. But where was she?

Mixed with the subtle whirr of air was a sweet scent. She took a deeper breath. The gentle fragrance reminded her of honeysuckle and wildflowers and pleasant memories. In the slight breeze that teased the oppressive heat, sensations both wonderful and undefined came to her. If only she could experience this feeling forever.

Suddenly, a tingling sensation began on the right side of her stomach. The feeling elongated, spreading forward in a linear movement.

Eyes flashing open, Katie choked back a scream as she stared into another pair of eyes—tiny, black, and gem-like. A neon-green serpent flicked out a brilliant blue tongue, as if it picked up the girl's sharp fear. Unable to look away, she watched as the snake slithered over her supine body. Like a shimmering ribbon, the animal slid its impressively long, thin form over the living obstacle and disappeared among the blades of grass.

Once free of the threat, Katie leaped to her feet and ran a good distance away. Poisonous or not, the snake could surely bite. Only when satisfied that she was well out of striking range did she stop to take in her surroundings.

She was on a savannah—well, more like a meadow—peppered with what had to be trees. Yet these were not like the trees of rural Georgia. One

or two resembled pines but for their Caribbean-blue needles. Other, more broad-leafed species had star-shaped leaves; the smallest was as large as her own head. Katie was tall for a thirteen-year-old, which made the comparison impressive. The large, purple-and-white striped trumpet flowers hanging from those branches produced the sweet scent. Something—a hovering bird or a large insect—flitted among the flowers so rapidly she could barely focus on it. Before she could discern any identifiable characteristic, it flew up and disappeared.

This is not Earth. This cannot be Earth. Katie's body shivered as she stared at the orangey-blue sky that boasted two moons in addition to the scalding sun. This was impossible. How could she be anywhere but on her own planet? Surely, she was safe at home, asleep in her own bed, near her sister slumbering in the matching twin one. Why, she was even wearing her cloud-patterned nightclothes.

Katie gave her arm a sharp pinch. Hot pain shot all around the angered area. She released her skin immediately and rubbed the throbbing spot. Had she ever felt pain in a nightmare before? Since her thirteenth birthday, her dreams had become more vivid and fantastical. Mama said not to worry, that her body was just adjusting to puberty. But now she was more than just worried.

“Wake up,” she chastised herself, as if she could will herself back into her own bed. She squeezed her eyes shut so tightly that small specks of light flitted about behind her eyelids. “Just wake up.”

Feeling queasy, Katie looked about once more. The meadow stretched out on all sides. As far as she could see, she was the only person around. Everything else was grass and trees and sky.

“Come on,” she said aloud. Somehow it made her feel...what? Not safe. Not sane. Just better. “You can do this.”

Where should she go? What should she do? There was no point in panicking. Katie recalled what she had learned over the years. Once a week, her mama and sister, along with some of her friends, had been instructed on wilderness survival from a ranger at the nearby state park. They constructed a lean-to, boiled thin strips of inner pine bark to make “spaghetti,” and identified local fauna and flora. Not all of it stuck, but maybe what she could remember would be of some help.

Taking a deep breath of the thick air, she felt a bit calmer. Water. She needed to find water, that was the most important thing. A human can last

only seven days without water. Or was it five? Maybe she should have paid more attention to the lectures instead of to the daddy longlegs that had crawled over the picnic benches.

With the sun beating down overhead, Katie knew she had to move. The heat would only dehydrate her faster. A small cluster of trees huddled along the left horizon became her destination. Surely, trees meant some sort of water source nearby—a pond, a brook, anything.

The tall grass tugging against her cumulus-covered PJs reminded Katie of the snake. Keeping her eyes wide open, she made sure she did not step on any other creature as she made her way across the meadow.

The trees were farther away than she had thought. Without a watch or a phone to tell the time, she assumed that several hours had passed. At least the sun had shifted its position, just as it did on Earth. But did it move at the same speed?

When Katie finally reached the tree line, she was hot and sweaty. Her clothes clung to her sticky skin, and her fine, golden hair was unkempt and seriously tangled. Taking what respite she could in the shade, she soon discovered that water was not to be found. At least, not here.

Tears of frustration began to well up. Wiping her eyes on her sleeve, the girl sank down in exhaustion and leaned her back against the trunk of the largest tree. She refused to cry, but what was she going to do? How would she ever get home?

Sometime later, Katie woke up. When had she fallen asleep? Well, that really didn't matter; what *did* was the reason she had awakened. There had been a sound. Something had made a noise, and it wasn't her.

"Help!" she yelled, then slapped her hand over her mouth. What if the sound had been made by something not human? She had watched many nature shows about the African savannah. All sorts of dangerous predators hunted animals far larger than she. If this meadow boasted carnivores, had she just rung the dinner bell?

An avid climber, Katie ran to a moderate-sized tree. Shimmying up the straight trunk, she was just able to reach the lower limbs. They were far smaller than she would have liked. Would they hold her weight? They must.

There, in the lower part of the canopy, she waited silently. Although afraid, she was also curious to see whatever creature had awakened her. Time dragged on. A swarm of gnats took a liking to Katie's film of sweat.

She batted away the tiny intruders, hoping they would leave her be, but they persisted in causing havoc about her face.

Was she safe? What was safety in a place as alien as this? Surely, it would be away from pestering insects and back on solid ground. As she began her descent, she lost her grip and tumbled into the underbrush.

Collecting herself, Katie brushed off the soil that fringed some of the tears now ribboning her clothes. Her pants had taken the brunt of the fall, and only small scrapes stung her arms and legs. At least none of her friends had seen her make such a fool of herself. A typical tomboy and proud of it, she had worked hard and was known for moving swiftly from tree branch to tree branch. A clumsy tumble like this would call into question the status she had attained.

On the other hand, wouldn't it be nice to have somebody else with her? Somebody to find the way back with. Somebody to talk to. Where were her friends? How could she reach them?

With her bare toe, Katie nudged one of the roots buckling the surface of the ground. The feeling of dirt under her feet was familiar. She often ran barefoot through the cotton fields surrounding her house, only to be chastised when she tracked red clay-tinted footprints onto the carpet.

"Well." She spoke aloud as she tugged a clump of tree moss from her golden-blond hair. "I guess I should move on."

Aiming for another cluster of trees farther away, Katie re-entered the meadow. There was not a cloud in the sky, and waves of heat rose on the horizon. Did this place even have clouds? She would have loved a reprieve from the heat. Was it summer here? It was summer back home, wherever that was. She yearned for the chance to jump into the lake at the park and cool off by swimming underwater in the murky depths. Her mouth was so dry that she would have considered drinking the muddy water.

By the time she neared the grove of trees, her throat felt scratchy. This was not good. She needed to rehydrate. She needed shade. She needed...a cabin? Blinking, Katie rubbed her eyes with her fists to make sure it was not a mirage—for tucked along the tree line was a humble wooden structure. There was no yard or garden; no fence marked the property. Just a tiny house among the trees. A cabin meant people. Somebody to help her!

Half running, half stumbling the rest of the way, she banged on the rough door only to observe it creak open. There was no knob, just an inner

latch that had not been hooked. Pushing the door open farther, Katie called out, "Hello? Is anyone home?"

When there was no reply, she stepped inside. There were no floorboards, only swept earth so compacted over time that it had almost acquired a sheen. The ground felt smooth and cool under her feet. The wood-plank walls were bare, as was the ceiling's exposed timber. Light from the glassless windows illuminated a table in the middle of the single room. Two tree stumps served as stools, while a third acted as a bedside table near a low, lumpy mattress in the far corner. There was no discernible kitchen other than an area containing several cabinets.

Katie explored each one in hope of finding food. The thought of a meal made her realize how hungry she was. She knew stealing was wrong and that one really couldn't *borrow* food, at least not after one had eaten it. Yet, once she explained her situation to the occupant of this place, surely she would be forgiven.

The cabinets were bare of edibles. A few chipped plates and cups were stacked neatly in one; another held parchment and a vial of what appeared to be ink next to several goose feathers. A third contained a brush matted with short white hair and a sapling twig with one terribly frayed end. Nothing of use to her. Well, maybe the brush might come in handy. Her hair must be a terror to look at.

Grabbing the brush and stepping out to the front stoop, Katie sat down and began pulling clumps of hair out of the bristles; she watched the gentle breeze carry them aloft. They reminded her of the way her dog's fur tumbled away after she pulled a comb through its coat. The white tufts were coarse to the touch, far thicker than her own fine hair.

Satisfied with cleaning the utensil, she began to tug at the knots entangling her own locks. Some patches were so matted that she almost gave up. After many tears, she had managed to free every strand. Once again, the brush was riddled with hair, this time long and blond. She would clean the brush later, she promised.

Now, Katie explored the small grove of trees and spotted just the thing she needed: an old-timey well located behind the hut. Growing up in the country, she was used to well water, but not like this. Her family's well pumped water to kitchen faucets and bathroom sinks and showers. This one relied on the bucket-and-crank method.

Regardless, she needed water. Katie tossed the bucket into the well. Hearing a splash some way down, she began to crank the handle round and round to hoist up the bucket. Soon the wooden brim emerged. She grabbed the bucket's handle and scrutinized the water. It looked clean. Without retrieving a cup, Katie downed the liquid, happily gulping the lukewarm water as much of it splashed onto her chest and top. Wiping her mouth on her sleeve, she sighed with contentment. Thirst quenched, she returned to the cabin to wait for the occupant's return.

It was late that evening before she heard some grumbling noises from outside. She was seated at the table and looked toward the closed door.

Should she go out and wait on the stoop? It probably wasn't good to be discovered inside an unknown person's home. She might be considered an intruder or a thief. Well, she *was* the former, but that was out of necessity. Hmm. Waiting outside might be best.

Before she could make a move, Katie heard a horrendous roaring sound. Was that the owner, or some crazed beast hunting in the meadow? A new thought struck her. What if whoever lived here did not think kindly of children? Stories of child abductions and warnings from parents about strangers flooded her mind. She could be in huge trouble!

Whatever it was, it was making its way to the door. Katie eyed the latch. She should have locked it in place. Could she reach it before the thing out there did? Better idea: hide.

The bed was too close to the ground for her to slip under it. The only other hiding place was inside one of the cabinets. Scrambling low to the ground so not to be spotted through the windows, she crammed her body into one. Almost too large to fit, she had to tuck her knees uncomfortably to her chest.

Katie heard the sound of stamping feet on the stoop. She had only a moment to lean out and shut the cabinet door as someone or something entered the cabin.

Desperately trying to steady her shaky breath, she felt her heart trying to leap free. Terror would have frozen her in place were she not already stuck in one position.

A low growl was followed by the buzzing of a fly that flitted between the crack of the cabinet doors to pester the girl's face. She dared not move, even when the insect landed on her cheek and walked over to her nostril. Her nose began to itch. She was going to sneeze.

No, please, no. If she made any sound, whatever was out there would be alerted to her presence. Who knew what devastation might follow? Thankfully, the fly lost interest and flew back into the main room. One crisis averted for now.

Whatever was out there was huge. The tread was heavy. There was a thud, accompanied by short grunts and grumbles, as something was dropped on top of the table. None of the sounds were promising.

Katie peered through the sliver of open space between the cabinet doors, but she could not see the occupant. From her angle, she saw only the near wall and more cabinets. The fly buzzed past. Or was it a second one? Craning her head to follow the insect's path, she watched the little thing buzz up to the ceiling, where she noticed something she had overlooked before.

Three rows of large hooks hung from the ceiling. Several held strips of dried...meat? The fly buzzed a few times around one strip before darting out of sight.

Was this person a hunter? If so, what was his prey?

Suddenly, everything went black. Something had stepped right in front of the cupboard. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone.

Katie almost cried out. Swallowing her sob of fear, she tried to breathe quietly. She heard a drip, drip, dripping sound as red droplets splashed upon the ground in her line of vision. Above, skewered on one of the hooks, was a large rabbit.

Instantly, she knew she needed to get out of the cabin, and fast. She was in danger. She—

“Where are you?” a low voice grumbled. “I smell you.”

One of the tree stumps was shoved across the packed dirt. “I smell your sweat.”

There was a crash as the bed was overturned. “Show yourself!”

She could make a dash for the door and try to hide in the meadow's tall grass. She could—

The door of the cupboard was flung open, and a large hand grabbed Katie's arm. Screaming, she lashed out with her feet and her free hand as she was wrenched from her hideaway and tossed across the room.

Slamming down hard on the dirt floor, she rolled several times before colliding with the wall. Her vision swaying, Katie looked at the presence looming on the other side of the room. A seven-foot bear snarled as he

walked over to her on his hind legs. The huge beast was white except for a patch of blood-red fur over its heart. The brilliant crimson color matched the eyes that glared angrily at her.

Despite her blurred eyesight and throbbing head, Katie lunged for the door. She had barely taken two steps before a massive paw hooked her leg, and she fell to the ground again. All the air in her lungs was knocked out of her, and she gasped for breath.

The creature rolled her onto her back. It glowered at her, and as she stared back at it, Katie realized this was no bear. This was something far more monstrous.

CHAPTER 2

VALERE

From its upright stance, the creature's build was humanoid. Except for the layer of fur and the bear-shaped head, the body could have passed as a man. The monster was strong, with a barrel chest and powerful legs. It even wore clothes of sorts. A black vest fit snugly over large shoulders, while matching pants hugged a V-shaped waist.

Its red eyes focused on her, the beast circled. Was it trying to decide the best way to eat her? As one circuit followed another, Katie's fear turned to annoyance. Why was this happening? Had she done something? She was not bad. Well, maybe she wasn't always good, but she certainly was not evil. And yes, she could have harassed her sister a little less. But did she deserve to die? And if so, why drag this out any longer?

Out of pure frustration, Katie shouted, "If you are going to eat me, then eat me!"

The monster cocked its head back before snarling and leering down at her. Katie tensed, closed her eyes, and waited for the bite. She could smell its foul breath—the odor of rotting flesh mixed with pine. Her hair whipped about under its every exhale. Then she heard it lumber off.

Cracking one eye open, she spied the beast sitting down at the table and staring at a travel pack it must have brought. Getting up, it began to set its overturned bed to rights.

Now openly staring at the creature, Katie watched it light a lantern before moving toward her. Reaching down, the monster stretched out a large paw—well, not actually a paw, for it resembled a man's hand, with a thumb. Yet the underside had pads like any dog or cat, while its nails were long black claws.

Katie couldn't tell if he was huffing or just breathing heavily. She glanced at the sharp teeth under the flaps of his muzzle. Both her head and her heart pounded. Cautiously, she placed her hand in his and allowed him to pull her rather gently to her feet.

Monster and girl stared at each other in silence for a few moments before the beast pointed to one of the stools. Not wanting to question the creature, Katie took a seat. He sat opposite her. Then he dropped the brush onto the table, where it rocked slowly, her long hair still entangled in the bristles. The story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” popped into her mind. The comparison would have been comical had her life not been on the line.

“Speak,” snarled the monster.

“I would have asked, but I was alone at the time, and I—”

The beast growled as he stood and paced across the room. Was he angry at her? Was he going to hurt her? So many questions came to mind that the most logical ones—like, How could this being exist?—were crowded out by the others.

The creature returned to his seat and stared at her. “You are a cub. Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know,” Katie replied honestly. Her voice trembled.

“Where do you come from?”

He probably would not know the name Earth. That name was created by humans for their planet. “I don’t know.”

“What *do* you know?”

“I need help.”

The creature grumbled under his breath. Was he irritated with her? All things considered, she might be better off if he just sent her on her way. That is, if he was going to let her live.

“What are you called?”

“Katie.”

“Hmmm.” The beast looked upon her with his unnaturally red eyes. “I am Valere.”

“Nice to meet you, Valere.”

“You are injured,” he huffed, staring at her clothes.

Seeing the red blotches, she explained, “Just scratches. My head hurts, though. And I’m hungry.” She had not meant to sound so brash, but everything she’d said was true.

He sniffed. “Head will heal.” Going over to the hooks, Valere pulled off a strip of dried meat and handed it to the girl. It looked like jerky of some sort. Not wanting to insult him, she began to gnaw on one end. The meat was extremely tough and salty. Yet after the first bite, she ravenously finished the strip.

Valere watched her the entire time. “You wear the sky?”

He was studying the pattern on her clothes. His were rather plain.

“Yes.” She smiled, for he seemed to be trying to be polite. She decided to continue the conversation. “Why do you have one patch of red fur?”

“The mark that I am not albino,” grunted Valere. She sensed pride as he placed a hand—or was it a paw?—over the patch of color.

With the tension apparently broken, Katie felt far more comfortable. “May I ask what you are?”

“Ntr.” The word came out in a jumble of sounds.

“*Enter? Entier?*” Katie unsuccessfully tried to pronounce the word.

With an unreadable expression, Valere reiterated, “Ntr.”

“I have no clue how to say that, so I will call you Entier.” Gesturing to herself, she added, “I’m human.”

“Human?”

“Yes. You got it.”

“No!” roared Valere. He stood up so fast that his tree-trunk seat toppled over. “You cannot be human!”

“But I am,” she countered.

“No. No. NO!” Valere let loose an enormous roar.

Utter fear overwhelmed her. She felt as if her body were being dashed by a mighty wave. Shivering with terror, she watched Valere slash and snap at the air as he stomped haphazardly about the small cabin. Turning to the girl once again, Valere snarled, “How did you get here?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know where *here* is.” Katie muffled a sob as Valere’s eyes seared her. Shrinking down, she blubbered, “I’m sorry.”

Valere took several large breaths to calm himself. His eyes glazed over for a moment before he asked, “What is the help you seek?”

“I just want to get back home, wherever that is.”

“It is far. Too far.”

“You know where I come from?” Katie asked. A bit of hope hovered just out of reach.

“Too far,” Valere objected, shaking his head.

“Please take me home! Please help me!” she begged. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she was unable to control their flow.

“Not possible.”

“Surely there is a way. I got here somehow.”

Valere’s upper lip twitched. “Can’t help.”

“Then tell me how.”

“Can’t.”

Trying to prevent a full-on sob, Katie pinched her arm as she scrunched up her eyes, forcing them to stop tearing.

Valere’s voice finally caused her to perk up. “But...I know who can.”

“Really? Who?”

“Tomorrow. I take you tomorrow.” Grabbing another sliver of jerky, Valere swallowed it in one gulp. “Sleep. You must.”

Looking around the room, Katie asked, “Where?”

Grumbling, Valere gestured to his bed.

“What about you?”

Without answering, Valere moved toward the door. Looking over his shoulder for a moment, he strode out into the dark, leaving the lantern on the table with his pack.

Now alone, Katie climbed onto the lumpy mattress. There was neither blanket nor pillow. Curling up in the center of the bed, she could smell the stink of animal. Probably bear.



The dream came to her as it had every night since she turned thirteen. She was standing in a field by the edge of a canyon. Eyeing the sheer drop, all Katie could detect was descent into blackness. Bottomless. Hopeless.

Moving away from the ledge, she observed how the canyon cut the land in two. From one horizon to the other, the chasm stretched endlessly. It clearly divided what she assumed were two distinct lands.

On one side was a large palace, shimmering and iridescent, as if inlaid with pearls, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. The land appeared lush and vibrant and healthy up to the very edge of the canyon where she stood. On the other side of the abyss stood a castle whose crumbling fortifications had come under siege and been destroyed. The landscape surrounding it was barren. Not even the sickliest blades of grass survived. Although the contrast was surreal and impossible, Katie was happy to be on the pleasant side of things.

Suddenly, there was a sound. A voice.

Where did it come from? She could not tell.

There it was again, louder. A deep, dry, scratchy voice implored, “Come. Come to me. Katie, come to me.”

The genderless intonations continued to summon her. The words trailed on the air, and she could not tell if they rose from the depths of the canyon or drifted across from the castle ruins. Although strange and unsettling, there was something alluring about them. She realized she was moving toward the drop-off.

What was she doing? She did not know who was calling her, so why should she go toward the sound?

“No!” she screamed, and forced her feet to stop. She felt torn inside, as if her own sense of self were fighting something else, something that tugged her forward. “No!” she shouted again, and stepped back.

Suddenly, a dark blur crawled over the canyon’s rim. Like smoke, the presence appeared formless, but it did not dissipate in the air. Rather, it moved like a creature, aware and animated. Disjointed projections emerged, and it scuttled toward her, slowly at first and then more quickly.

“Come to me!” The voice emanated from the murky cloud as well as countless other points of origin.

Stepping back, Katie could not tear her eyes from the approaching apparition. Hooked, wisp-like limbs pulled the bodiless entity toward her. Before she could run, the thing swirled around her legs with the grip of something much more solid and strong. Then a multitude of voices cried out, “Come to us!”

As if on cue, the dense cloud retreated rapidly toward the canyon, pulling her with it. With no hope of any handhold, she fell into the black depths.

Katie jerked awake to the smell of cooked meat. Opening her eyes, she gasped when she saw Valere standing over her. To her dismay, she was not back in her own bed. The crushing reality of being alone and lost caused her to tear up again.

Valere hesitated, as if he did not know whether to retreat or stand his ground. Then he knelt next to her. “Girl, do not cry. Tell yourself to be strong. Tell yourself. Make yourself believe it. You *are* strong.”

“I am strong,” Katie reiterated as she dried her eyes. “I *am* strong.”

“Now, eat,” Valere commanded. He picked her up and set her down on a tableside stool. On one of the chipped plates was a section of roasted rabbit, a hindquarter if she was not mistaken. She could not guess how Valere had cooked it without a stove or oven. As far as she could tell, there was not even an outside firepit. Once again, these questions were not important, so

she ate her breakfast in silence. Afterward, she followed Valere outside and watched him fill canteens of some type before he gathered his pack.

“Come.”

“Where are we going?” she inquired rather perkily as they made their way through the meadow. The terror of the day before was now behind her, and she was excited about a new adventure. She wondered if this was how her favorite book characters felt when they began their own quests.

Valere looked down at the girl and paced his long strides to match hers. “To Ogdoad, the grand city.”

“What’s there? The Entier that knows my home?”

“Yes.”

“How far away is it?”

“Far...at your pace.”

Katie grinned ruefully, “I can walk faster. See? Though I’m better at running. I’m the fastest runner of all my friends. Some of them are years older than me.”

The corner of Valere’s lip curled up in a way that made Katie assume he might be grinning back at her. At least he thought her humorous. “We will get there right when we should. Be patient.”

“Okay,” she retorted. “But I *am* fast.”

The pair soon came upon a dirt road the width of a two-lane highway on Earth. They trekked along the path for hours. Stopping only for a quick meal, they continued on and on, without any end in sight. As evening approached, Valere’s distress became apparent.

“What’s wrong?” Katie felt the need to ask.

“We must find shelter. Soon.”

There were no buildings of any sort in the meadow, just the occasional grove of trees.

“We could camp. I like looking up at the stars.”

Valere eyed the setting sun dubiously. “No. You must be inside.” He continued to act strangely and quickened their pace.

Katie remembered how her younger sister still needed a night light in order to fall asleep.

“Valere, are you scared of the dark?”

Growling, he countered, “No. But *you* should be.”

“Why?” asked Katie. Her heartbeat quickened. “I’m not scared of the dark. Why should I be?” The Ntr increased his pace, and Katie had to half

jog to keep up. “Valere, why should I be?”

“Can’t say. But he will. *He* has answers.”

“Who?”

“The one we seek.”

CHAPTER 3

TROUBLE

The mysteriousness of the unidentified “he” stirred Katie’s curiosity, yet it was clear that Valere’s line of thought had refocused on the setting sun and the oncoming night. She would have to find out who they were searching for another time.

Valere had not slowed down. He cast his gaze over every dimly illuminated object in the distance. Exasperated, he growled, “Girl, get on my back.”

The Ntr dropped to all fours like a common bear and waited for Katie to scramble onto his muscular withers. Since he was not as large as a horse, she felt disproportionate and worried that she would be too heavy. Unable to find a comfortable perch, she complained, “The name’s Katie. Remember?”

Valere did not acknowledge her complaint. He began to lumber forward at a far faster pace than she could have maintained for even a short length of time. Katie was a sprinter; distance running was something else entirely. Her companion obviously wanted to keep something away from her. Something that must come out at night. The fact that he was worried about her safety was comforting.

Yet with every lurching movement, Katie felt her own fear grow. What was out there? Was something after her specifically? If so, why? Was that why the Ntr was so upset that she was a human? If something hunted humans, was he, too, now at risk? She hadn’t meant to put him in danger. Then again, she hadn’t wanted to be here in the first place.

“There,” the bear finally said as he picked up speed. Up ahead was a structure. This one looked even more like a shack than Valere’s cabin did. Although the building was no smaller, it was clearly constructed by someone who knew nothing about building or architecture.

A hodgepodge of wooden planks and logs was held together with rope bindings and a few nails. The roof was thatched, not solid like Valere’s. Outside, a small campfire smoldered, as if somebody had just doused it

with water or sand. The hut stood at the base of a low hill, almost hidden behind the slope. As they approached, Katie realized that the back wall was actually the hillside itself.

“Who do you think lives there?” Katie questioned suspiciously.

Valere remained silent as he deposited her and then banged on the door. Inside, someone shuffled toward the noise. As soon as the latch was lifted, Valere muscled his way in.

She heard a yelp, followed by the sound of furniture being overturned. Then a meek voice begged, “P-p-please. Please stop. I-I-I have n-nothing worthwhile.”

Feeling the impulse to intervene for the poor homeowner, Katie stepped inside. Valere loomed over a trembling figure. The thing had wings, for Valere was twisting one threateningly in his hand. Moving around to get a better view, she noticed it was another Ntr, though this one appeared to be a bat mix. The humanoid’s forearms were part of its wing structure. Extremely large ears flicked in all directions, and a piglike nose twitched rapidly.

The Ntr was terrified. “L-l-look around yourself. I-I-I have n-nothing.”

“We just need a place to sleep,” Katie chimed in. She knew how scary Valere could seem.

The bat Ntr looked at her for the first time. His mouth dropped open and exposed tiny fangs. “W-what is... Wh-what are...?”

“I’m Katie and I’m—”

Valere cut her off. “We need shelter for the night. That is all.”

The other Ntr eyed Katie and then Valere once more before saying, “M-m-make yourself at home. Th-th-the name’s P-P-Pip.”

Pip stood against a wall, allowing Valere and Katie a chance to look around. The place was as spartan as Valere’s, except this one did not even have cabinets or stools. Several small, cooked birds and a bowl of berries sat on a high table.

Noticing Katie eyeing the meal, Pip hastily spoke to Valere. “I-i-if you w-want them, y-you can have th-them.”

The aroma of roasted meat made Katie’s mouth water.

Valere huffed, “We carry our own food.”

“W-w-well, then, I h-hope you don’t m-mind i-i-if I eat?” ventured Pip cautiously.

“We aren’t going to hurt you, Pip,” Katie reassured him. “We just need a place to sleep. We will be on our way tomorrow.”

“To Og-Og-Ogdoad?”

“Yes,” Katie said. “Do you know it?” She heard the bear’s low growl behind her and realized that she shouldn’t be talking about their plans. She did not know Pip. Yet, how much did she know about Valere?

“I-I-I’m not m-much of a c-c-city p-person myself,” responded Pip. “I-I-I like open space. A-a-away from others. And e-excess n-noise.”

“Well, thank you for allowing us to stay,” Katie said even though she knew Pip actually had no choice.

As Valere handed her yet another strip of jerky, Pip leaped up and gripped one of the ceiling beams with his clawed toes, then swung himself upside down. The motion caused the bear to block Katie protectively.

“I-I-I w-wish n-n-no harm!” Pip squealed as he covered his face with his wings; one hung lower than the other.

“It’s okay, Valere,” Katie soothed. She placed a hand on his arm. The large Ntr glared at the quivering bat before stepping back. She turned to their terrified host.

“Pip, it’s all right now. Valere is just tired from our journey. We both are. And we do thank you. Truly.”

Pip slowly unfurled one wing, then the other. Taking several shaky breaths, he reached down to the table and grabbed one of the birds to gnaw on.

Katie admired the dexterity of Pip’s fingertips, which extended from the end of his wing. His skin was covered in thin, peach-colored fur, and his dark eyes sparkled with an intelligence far greater than that of his earthly counterparts. The tone of his voice suggested that he was a young male, probably comparable to a twentysomething in human years.

All three ate in silence before it was broken by a fourth voice. Male and spirited, someone was approaching the humble abode.

“Pip, you should see the hoard I looted today!”

With amazing speed, Valere moved around to the side of the door, all the while snarling dangerously at Pip. The poor bat knew not to alert his arriving companion. Katie watched in awe as the bear expertly grappled the newcomer to the ground before he knew what had happened.

There was a clatter, and a number of coins scattered about the room. The muffled cries of the stranger slowly quieted under Valere’s large arms.

Katie shouted, "Stop! Please, Valere."

"How many others are there?" the bear snapped at Pip, without releasing his grip on the new Ntr.

Pip squeaked out, "O-o-only h-him. He i-i-is m-my housemate, m-my best friend. Oh, d-d-don't kill him!"

Things were getting rapidly out of hand.

"Valere, stop!" Katie ordered. She punched the bear in the arm.

Valere let go of his captive and turned to her, a low growl reverberating around him. He stepped back from the newcomer but strategically made sure to block the door in case of an attempted escape.

"Are you okay?" Katie asked as the poor fellow slowly righted himself and stared wide-eyed at the large bear and her.

This Ntr had a dog-shaped head, Katie noted, as he hastily explained, "It's not stolen, if that's what you think."

"What?" she asked before realizing he must have meant the coins. "Oh, no. We aren't here because of those."

The Ntr began collecting the displaced goods that had rolled about the room. His hazel eyes kept glancing back whenever the girl moved. Valere stood still like an oppressive statue. Pip, still upside down, explained, "Th-th-they are c-c-crashing here t-tonight."

"By whose say?" his friend inquired.

Valere growled.

"Pip, did he hurt you?" the dog asked as he noticed Pip's drooping wing.

"I-I-I'll be fine."

Turning toward the bear, the canine Ntr snapped, "I don't want you in my house."

Valere leered at the smaller figure. "Too bad."

Stepping between dog and bear, Katie looked at the disgruntled homeowner. "Please let us stay. We will be out of your hair in no time."

The canine stared at her as if trying to figure out what she was.

"I'm Katie. What's your name?"

"Toff."

"Toff, would you please allow me and my friend," she requested, gesturing to Valere, "to sleep here tonight?"

At first, it appeared that Toff might deny her request, but he nodded reluctantly before returning to the job at hand, collecting the coins. With Valere on guard, Katie had time to observe their other host for the evening.

Toff reminded her of a wirehaired terrier. His fur was light brown, though he had a black patch at the back of his head and a black, saddle-shaped mark down his back. When he turned around, she noted that his sand-colored trousers had a hole where his nub of a tail stuck through. If he had a tail, she wondered, did Valere?

Like Pip, Toff did not wear a shirt, though there were several crumpled up in a basket near what Katie assumed was his bed. Like Valere, he walked barefoot.

Feeling bad about intruding and the trouble she and Valere had caused, Katie decided to help Toff. Under the table was one of the golden coins. Crawling on her hands and knees, she picked up the lost artifact and noticed the angular, canine-shaped head imprinted on one side. On the other was a triangle with several runes at each corner. She handed it to Toff.

“Here.”

He took it gingerly from her grip with his paw-like hand. Still eyeing her, he tentatively said, “Thanks.”

The strained peace that followed did not last long. When Toff made for his bed, Valere growled out, “The girl sleeps there.”

“Excuse me?” Toff retorted. “Who do you think you are?”

“Dangerous.”

“It’s okay,” Katie interjected. “I’m not going to take your bed, Toff.” Turning to Valere, she affirmed, “I’ll be fine.”

Toff curled up on his mattress, all the while watching the bear who, in turn, sat down in front of the door. Poor Pip clung to the ceiling beam, wrapping his arms about his face as a sort of shield. The distrust in the room was palpable.

Sighing, Katie sat down next to Valere. She was causing such a mess for all these people who would have preferred to have been left alone.

“I’m sorry for this,” she said softly.

Valere looked down at her. “The choice was not yours.”



Everyone else awoke before Katie. When she opened her eyes, she realized she had curled up under the bear’s arm. Her head rested on his chest. Though wide-eyed, Valere clearly had not wanted to disturb her.

Across the room, Toff sat on his bed with Pip by his side. Again, she could feel the tension. Katie sat up, ran her fingers through her unkempt

hair, and announced, "I'm awake." Stretching, she added, "We can leave soon."

Toff and Pip kept quiet and waited not very patiently to be rid of their uninvited guests. Valere seemed happy to be leaving as well. Scarfing down several more pieces of jerky, he passed Katie her breakfast for the road. As they left the hut, she heard Pip ask Toff, "W-w-what do you th-think she is?"

"Trouble," was Toff's abrupt response.

This morning, her companion insisted that Katie ride on his back. He could cover far longer distances at his own speed. Though terribly uncomfortable for much of the day, she obliged. They traveled through a countryside of grassy fields and groves of trees that was similar, yet so very foreign, to her own rural home.

Sometime during the sweltering afternoon, Valere slowed his pace. Taking a good look about him, he huffed, "You can get off now. Upon our approach, it would be better if you were seen walking."

"Are we close, then?" Katie inquired as she stood shakily. Her body felt as if it were swaying, even though she was on solid ground. She was still used to the bear's lumbering momentum.

"Relatively," he grunted.

Katie squinted, hoping to make out the city, but saw only a dark blur. The Ntr's eyesight must be far better than hers, and she had 20/20 vision.

Standing up, Valere waved. "Follow."

Soon Katie decided that his concept of "relative" was nonsense, for they had to have walked miles before Ogdoad finally rose before them. Unlike the metropolis of Atlanta, there were no skyscrapers, no multi-lane expressways, no steel or concrete. Yet this was clearly a large city, one that must house thousands. Buildings ranged from one to four stories and spread out in no particular pattern. There were no walls or signs to mark the borders. The only thing that dared rise into the atmosphere to play with the birds was something that caused Katie's heart to race.

"You can't be serious," she gasped. "That's a castle! A palace! Like in England or France."

Valere's expression was blank. Of course, he did not recognize names of places on Earth; he had never heard them before. How could he have? She would have to be careful of her choice of words.

“Wait!” Katie exclaimed. “Do you have a king? A queen? Would I be able to see them?”

As much as she hated to admit it, she was fascinated by the concept of royalty. Though when she was younger, she had refused to play the role of princess in all her friends’ games of make-believe, the idea of actually meeting one was thrilling. Scepters, crowns, gowns, and royal jewels. What amazing things were kept in the magnificent structure before them?

“That we have,” said Valere, who somehow sounded sad. “You will see all. Too soon, I think.”

The palace, for surely that’s what it was, boasted spires and towers that seemed to stroke the underbellies of the clouds. Built from a pale stone, it appeared delicate rather than defiant. Valere had to remind Katie to keep her eyes on the road when she began to stray. At last, they came to the first line of buildings.

A shiver of excitement ran down the girl’s spine. She felt as if she were exploring behind-the-scenes areas of a zoo that only zookeepers normally see. Ntr were all about, busy with whatever their occupations demanded. At least that is what she assumed, for surely in a city as grand as this, people had jobs.

Each Ntr had a different animal-shaped head with fur, flesh, or feathered coat to match. She spotted a frog, a tabby cat, a rat, even a pelican, whose bill was disproportionately large compared to the rest of its head. They dressed in vibrantly colored clothing, though each Ntr wore only a single hue. Some wore skirts, others pants or shorts, and an occasional individual sported a hat. If a Ntr had any length of tail, it stuck out. Though males seemed to have a choice, all females wore some sort of top. So, Katie thought, they did have some sort of propriety here.

Merchants were hawking all manner of strange goods and wares. Many of the street-facing shops had signs written in a language Katie could not identify. However, based on the images, she could guess which was a bakery and which a seamstress’s shop.

Stranger still were the citywide canals. Like a median in the middle of a highway, these inland waterways had been constructed in conjunction with all major and minor roads. Some merchants had set up their carts by the water’s edge. At crossroads, bridges arched over the canals. Katie had seen photos of gondolas in Venice but saw none here. Actually, there were no boats of any kind, and she wondered what purpose the canals served.

At first, Katie followed Valere through the bustle of the streets without much difficulty. But soon, the Ntr began to take notice of the strange, furless girl. They began to crowd around and gawk at Katie's odd features. The more Ntr who took notice, the more they reached out and tugged at her travel-stained nightclothes and golden-blond hair.

"Ow!" she cried, as someone yanked out a lock. Touching her throbbing scalp, she felt the moist trickle of blood. Would they tear her apart?

"Valere, help me!"

With a roar, Valere shoved the nearest Ntr away and shielded Katie from the others. "Away with you!" he snarled menacingly. "All!"

Those around them stepped back but continued to follow the bear-headed Ntr and the girl until they reached the gates of an inner wall that encircled the palace. Reaching around her, Valere pounded on the intricately carved doors.

The enormous two-story gates sported scenes carved in bas-relief. All sorts of creatures crawled, flew, or swam about; half of them were Ntr. Positioned in the lower center of the leftmost door, a youth about her age held a sword above his head. The carved beasts around him appeared to back away in awe.

Katie felt her jaw drop before she exclaimed, "He's human!"

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PHONETIC PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Aether ~ EE-thur
Afthonía ~ aff-THONE-ee-uh
Álfarian ~ ailf-FAR-ee-an
Alicorn ~ AL-i-corn
Allimondria ~ al-luh-MON-dria
Ame ~ AH-may
Amistat ~ AUM-i-stat
Aino ~ EYE-no
Aractaur ~ a-RACK-tar
Areion ~ are-EYE-on
Carwenhau ~ CAR-wen-how
Charon ~ care-RON
Claidheamh Soluis ~ CLAID-heam sol-OO-iss
Clk ~ CLICK
Crn ~ CRUN
Dagda ~ DAUG-duh
Djed ~ JED
Duat ~ DO-aht
Equus ~ EH-quis
Entier ~ en-TIER
Fae ~ FAY
Fenrir ~ FEN-rear
Fosite ~ FOE-site
Gerðora ~ grr-THOR-uh
Gleipnir ~ GLEEP-near
Goswhit ~ GOS-whit
Grimoire ~ grim-WAHR
Gullfaxi ~ gool-FAX-ee
Hi'ir ~ HIGH-ear
Hrarp ~ HRARP
(The sound of a rooting pig)
Ikuqu ~ eye-COO-you
Ilmatar ~ EELL-mah-tahr
Jautis ~ JOW-tis

Kírke ~ KEURK
Ljósálfar ~ YO-sail-far
Ljósálfarian ~ YO-sail-FAR-ee-an
Ma'at ~ MUH-aht
Maew ~ MAH-ew
Mímir ~ MEE-mir
Mímisbrunnr ~ MEE-miss-BRUN-ner
Mudrost ~ mud-ROAST
Mürk ~ MEWRK
Nayak ~ NAY-ack
(The 'k' is almost throaty)
Ntr ~ NG-tahr
(The 'n' sound is made deep in one's throat)
Ogdoad ~ OGG-doe-ADD
Orobon ~ OAR-oh-BON
Poahan ~ POE'AH-han
Pólemos ~ POE-ley-mos
Róin ~ ROE-in
Rozmiar ~ ROZZ-my-EAR
Sar'ra ~ SAUR-rah
Skai Naht ~ SKY NAH'T
Takama ga Hara ~ tah-KA-mah guh HAR-uh
Tu'ul ~ TWO-OOL
Tsuchi ~ SUE-chi
Tywy ~ TIE-we
Ucryzia ~ you-CRY-zia
Väinämöinen ~ VAY-in-AA-muin-en
Valere ~ vuh-LEER
Vasavi Shakti ~ VAH-sah-VEE SHAWK-tee
Vindbláin ~ vind-BLAINE
Xytka ~ ZY'T-kuh
Zaman ~ ZUH-mahn

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



As an author, writing the story is just the beginning. Next come revising, editing, formatting, proofreading, and marketing. Surprisingly, marketing requires a huge amount of time. If you enjoy an author's work and want her or him to publish more in a shorter time span, you can help! Spread the word on social media and by word of mouth. Post reviews on Amazon, Goodreads and other websites. Believe me, I would much rather write a new book than spend time promoting the one I have just finished. So go ahead—pin, tweet, post, review, and like.

Thank you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katharine Wibell's lifelong interest in mythology includes epic poetry like the *Odyssey*, *Ramayana*, *Beowulf*, and the *Nibelungenlied*. In addition, she is interested in all things animal whether training dogs, apprenticing at a children's zoo, or caring for injured animals as a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. After receiving degrees from Mercer University in both art and psychology with an emphasis in animal behavior, Wibell moved to New Orleans with her dog, Alli, to kick start her career as an artist and a writer. Her literary works blend her knowledge of the animal world with the world of high fantasy.

Wibell grew up in a rural town in Georgia, and this series was inspired by her childhood play with her sister. Together, they set up the groundwork for the twelve magicked worlds, the Djed, and the plethora of characters that come to life in this series.

<https://www.katharinewibellbooks.com/>

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LEARN MORE ABOUT THE DJED CHRONICLES

The Twelve Tasks is the first book in The Djed Chronicles followed by *The Vargarian Sire* among others. Learn more on my website KatharineWibellBooks.com and on [my Facebook page](#). Explore my [author's Pinterest page](#) and see how I envision each magicked world, Katie and her friends, and all the entities that exist in their vast universe!

LET'S CONNECT! CONTACT ME!

I remember the excitement I felt when I sent a handwritten letter to one of my favorite authors and received a response. Today, connecting is easy. Contact me on my website: KatharineWibellBooks.com or on [Facebook as Author Katharine E. Wibell](#). I'd love to hear from you! If you like, please leave a review. You can't imagine how much your support helps an author.

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Have fun with this! What might Katie, Sar'ra, Ikuqu, the Triumvirate and all the other characters look like? What about each of the twelve magicked worlds of the items of the Djed? Visit my [Author's Board on Pinterest](#) and glimpse of some of the characters of future books as well as those from **my other series including the Incarn Saga**. Have a suggestion for a pin? Contact me on my [website](#) or on [Facebook](#)!