

BEYOND THE  
TEMPEST GATE

By Jeff Suwak

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To Kim.

Thank you.



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## PART ONE

The Tempest Gate was visible on the horizon long before Gabriel sailed into it – a black vortex of roiling clouds, pulsing and veined with lightning, churning over the sea like newly erupted volcanic ash. For five hundred years sailors had been changing course at the very sight of that unholy deluge, but Gabriel, Holy Knight of the Church of Dunrabian, headed straight for its very heart. He had come to destroy the demon Elezear sleeping within its elemental walls, and he would complete his quest or die trying.

The roar of the Gate enveloped him as he drew near. Sheets of rain cascaded from the sky and pounded into the sea with a thunderous din like thousands of warhorses charging over a battlefield. The sound rattled his teeth and sent a bolt of panic running through his spine. Biting down hard against his fear, the young man held steady to his course.

He had no right to cowardice. His mission was to rid the world of the evil that was Elezear, and that task was more important than his own life. Victory over the demon would require absolute conviction. There was no room for hesitation or doubt. Sneering with disdain at both the Gate and his own weakness, he trimmed his ship's lone sail and sped headlong into the wall of storm.

The first winds splintered his mast and sent the sail fluttering into the water like a ruined kite. Stinging rain lashed

across his face like needles. Darkness enveloped him so completely it was as if he had been struck blind, able to make out the raging, insane seascape around him only in periodic flashes and bursts of lightning. Waves crashed and exploded against each other, splitting the air with the blasts of their impact. Gabriel picked up the oars from the hull of the boat and rowed.

Whipped back and forth, spun around and several times nearly capsized, the knight quickly lost sense of what direction he was headed in. He was simply fighting to stay afloat, balancing the little vessel against the ocean's malevolent will.

Gabriel laughed. All of his twenty-five years of life had been building towards that moment. Countless hours of training, sacrifice, and prayer had all been spent in preparation for the battle that lie ahead. He shouted at the sky, "It will take more than a warm breeze and some mist to turn me back."

As if in response to his impudence, the winds raged harder, the rain turned to hail, and a towering form rose in the distance, its silhouette impressed upon the curtains of precipitation in a lightning burst of illumination. Gabriel at first thought a mountain had come within view, but then the lightning cracked again and revealed the black shape in its entirety. It was no mountain. It was a wave, and it was moving his way. The knight pulled the oars inside the boat, gripped the sides, and held on.

The impact smashed the ship to splinters and sent him flying into the ocean. He recovered from the shock to find himself sinking like a stone into the soundless, underwater darkness, his body growing numb and unresponsive in the frigid cold. Unable to discern direction in the lightless depths, he swam against the sinking feeling, hoping he moved upwards.

He kicked off his boots and shed his tunic to rid himself of their weight. The sword sheathed in his belt was heaviest of all, of course, but he would drown before he gave that up, and if it

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became lost, he would die chasing it into the depths. It was the Sword of Dunrabian, and he was nothing if not its Arm.

The breath he'd taken was quickly used up. His diaphragm strained and heaved. Hypoxia lights floated before his eyes as he clawed at the water like a falling climber grasping for a handhold, lungs ready to explode as he fought his body's reflexive attempts to take a fatal breath of air that was not there. Gagging on nothing. Mind fuzzy and spinning. He did not know if he was moving closer to the surface or farther away, but there was no other choice.

*Don't let me fail now, Dunrabian, he prayed. Not when I'm so close to fulfilling the purpose you created me for.*

It seemed that his prayer would go unanswered and he would drown alone in the frigid darkness, but just before he lost control of his lungs, he broke through the ocean's surface. It took three full breaths to clear his mind enough to grasp the fact that he was no longer submerged. His relief was fleeting, for he quickly realized that his situation wasn't much improved. Waves pummeled him on every side. Torrents of rain splashed off the ocean's roiling surface so that he choked on water every time he breathed. His muscles were fatiguing, and the numbness created by the cold continued to spread. He could not swim forever.

A flash of lightning illuminated something bobbing in the water. Lunging for the object, Gabriel thrashed about in the darkness trying to find it. To his amazement, he found himself grasping hold of a section of his ship's shattered mast-pole. Clutching the spar close to his chest, he rested his head upon it. "Thank you, Dunrabian," he whispered. "Thank you."

Floating atop his makeshift raft, the knight scanned the horizon for some indication of the direction he needed to head towards. There was no room for error in the next move he made. His energy was almost entirely spent. Exhaustion and cold would soon overtake him. If he made a mistake, there would not be an

opportunity for another.

A glimpse of light appeared in the distance. It was there only for a moment, and then disappeared just as quickly behind the rollicking waves. It was gone so fast that Gabriel was not certain he had seen it at all, but with no other choices left to him, he headed in the direction of the illumination.

He did not know how long he swam. There was no sun to mark time, and no landscape features to gauge distance. He only knew that after what felt like a very, very long time, he still had not located either light or land. His legs began to fail him. He willed them into motion, but they did not move him far. Eventually, they did not move him at all. Pedaling uselessly in place while waves tossed him about like driftwood, Gabriel howled in defiance.

He did not fear death. He only feared failure in his quest. If he had to die, he prayed that it was not there in the water, but in battle with Elezeer.

The ocean swelled beneath him. A wave swept him up and sent him surging through the hail, rain, and darkness. It grew higher and higher as it went, towering over the sea. At the moment of the wave's apex, Gabriel saw light in the distance again. It seemed closer than before, though how close, he could not be sure. The wave broke. Holding the spar close to him, the knight prepared for impact.

The force of the crashing wave sent him shooting and spinning into the cold depths. He reached out to catch the spar as it was ripped from his arms, but was not quick enough. As he watched the wood disappear into the nebulous deep, it occurred to him that he could see again.

He stopped swimming and looked about in mute wonder. No longer cast in darkness, a faint light now permeated the water all around him. Not the flashing radiance of lightning, but instead a persistent glow. He searched around for the source of the light when a powerful current caught him, twisted him about, and

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smashed his head against something hard. There was a crunching sound, a brilliant explosion of pain, and then he fell into a different kind of darkness altogether.

*Jeff Swak*

## PART TWO

Only weeks earlier, Nimphus had tried to talk Gabriel out of challenging the demon. The aged priest never came out and ordered him to remain at home, but Gabriel could see the doubt and the fear in the old man's eyes as he sat facing him across an ivory table within the windowless Prayer Room. As always, hundreds of white candles burned along the walls of the voluminous chamber. On any other night, an attendant would have walked up and down those rows, replacing each light before it had a chance to burn out. But, on that night, there was no such servant. There was only Gabriel, Nimphus, and the battle being fought in the unspoken words between them.

"I hear you've begun preparations for your journey across the sea," Nimphus said, attempting a wan smile on his thin, pale lips.

"I've only ordered the building of a boat, Esteemed Father," Gabriel answered, feigning nervousness at a possible rebuke, "in interest of being ready for when the time comes to depart. I would not begin the outfitting of my journey until I had your consent."

Nimphus laughed. That mirth, at least, seemed authentic. The old man always did adore deference and humility. "I am accusing you of no ill intent, my son. I am merely asking you about the news I hear. It's a hard habit to break, you know, after

so many years of rescuing you from your own courage.”

Now it was Gabriel’s turn to fumble with an awkward grin. “I certainly have had the easier half of our relationship, Esteemed Father.”

“Yes,” Nimphus said. “But I’ve had the happier half. It’s always more enjoyable to watch a boy grow into a man, than to watch a man decay into a fossil.” The priest laughed, but his eyes looked sad and wistful.

Gabriel’s fake chuckle tripped over itself and fell flat, leaving the room in an awkward silence. He hated the tension that had grown between them. Nimphus was the High Ecclesiastic, head of the Church of Dunrabian, which made him the most powerful man in the Five Kingdoms. More importantly than that lofty position, Nimphus was like Gabriel’s second father. The man had nurtured, encouraged, and mentored the knight for twelve years of his life. Gabriel had taken a sacred vow to die in his service, if necessary, and he had meant every word that he said. Yet, on that evening, he found himself restraining anger at his benefactor while they played a deceitful game of politics.

“I wish we could sit and talk for hours as we used to,” Nimphus said, signaling that the time had come to end their pleasantries and get to the real business at hand. “I wish I could hear about all the things that you were learning from your tutors, and all the skills that you were picking up from the warrior monks. But, as you know, Church business must always take precedence over family.” He studied Gabriel for a long moment. “Especially in a matter as grave as the one you bring before me.”

The use of the word *family* was no accident, Gabriel knew. It was an attempt to win over his sentimentality. He was fully aware of this, but took no more offense to the emotional ploy than he would take to a punch thrown in a game of fists. For all the honest affection between the two men, they each had a role to play in this game, and both intended to win.

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The biggest advantage that the knight had was the fact that Nimphus very likely imagined that his opponent was oblivious to their contest. It was not that the priest ever accused him of being dimwitted throughout their years together, but he often teased him for his hardheadedness and lack of intellectual finesse. The old man still saw the boy that Gabriel used to be, and could not possibly have known all the noncombat skills he had been picking up while traveling in foreign lands, and taking lessons on the nuances of diplomacy. His studies had led him into some rather loathful company, for sure, but it was his duty to do anything and everything necessary to ensure the completion of his mission. He had foreseen that night's conversation in the Prayer Room long before it ever happened, and had been preparing for it.

"What matter do you wish to discuss, Esteemed Father?" Gabriel struggled to keep his tone conversational, as though oblivious to the real matter at hand, a naïf caught up in matters beyond the limitations of his temperament. Direct confrontation with the High Ecclesiastic would go badly, and a more circuitous strategy was called for. "Do you have any ideas you'd like to share for my journey to the Tempest Gate?"

"I have not approved that journey yet," Nimphus said, his tone becoming more firm and authoritative. "Have you not already said as much yourself?"

"Of course," Gabriel nodded, understanding that they were now fully embroiled in the negotiation. "I simply imagined that it was a foregone conclusion, and that approval was but a formality."

"What would make you think such a thing?"

Gabriel paused for a moment before answering, forcing a quizzical expression onto his face. "Well, the fact that my mission was ordered by Dunrabian, Esteemed Father."

Nimphus squinted. Suspicion lighted in his eyes for a moment, as though wondering for the first time just how much

his adopted son had matured in the years they'd grown apart.

"Of course," the High Ecclesiastic said, careful not to sound as though he might doubt a divinely issued command. "We must always honor Dunrabian's will." He leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling, nodding to himself as though in deep contemplation. It was a technique Gabriel had seen him use many times before, in order to buy himself time to prepare the proper response to an unexpected statement. No one dared interrupt the High Ecclesiastic in the midst of thinking.

Gabriel had intentionally used a religious decree to put Nimphus on the defensive, and it had worked, but he felt no pride in the success of his subterfuge. He would not have undertaken the conversation in the first place if it was not absolutely necessary to his mission. As unpleasant as the exchange was bound to become, it was essential to his plans.

If Gabriel had been anyone other than the Holy Knight, he knew, Nimphus would have denied his request without a moment's hesitation. It was not the pair's close, personal bond that made a difference. No, the only thing that complicated the priest's refusal was the fact that Gabriel's reputation had grown to such great proportions that not even the High Ecclesiastic could lightly dismiss it.

At only twenty-five years old, he had already led the Church's armies to victory over the heathen tribes of the south. He had challenged the pagan giant Emir, and left him dead in the snows atop his mountain. He had hunted down every last dragon in the civilized lands, rooted them out of their dens, and snuffed them out completely. He was hero to royalty and commoners alike. A single utterance from his mouth would divide the Church's armies in half, drawing tens of thousands of men to his side, eager to fight and die in his name. Nimphus was the High Ecclesiastic, but in the eyes of the soldiers, that position garnered little more respect than an aristocrat's would. Gabriel was a

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warrior and a knight. More than these things, he was the very Arm of the Sword of Dunrabian. He'd earned the soldier's respect in the manner that they respected most – with blood, sweat, and courage on the battlefield.

Seemingly unable to come up with an appropriate riposte, Nimphus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose wearily. “The Tempest Gate has guarded us from Elezeur for five hundred years,” he said. “The demon has not afflicted us in all that time. Why disturb it now? Why tempt that battle?”

Despite his advanced years, the willowy High Ecclesiastic normally possessed a boyish energy and enthusiasm that made him seem untouched by time. But in that moment, he looked every bit his age, if not many winters older. With his drooping face, dark circles around his bloodshot eyes, and his back hunched over as though broken beneath a heavy burden, he looked like nothing more than an exhausted relic.

Gabriel looked steadily into Nimphus' eyes. “I must destroy the demon, Esteemed Father, because that is the task that our god appointed to me. It was commanded in the Vision. It's the whole reason I was made for this world.”

Nimphus sighed. He looked down at the ivory table before him, absently stroking the topaz ring on his finger as though polishing it. The nervous habit was something that Gabriel had witnessed many times, and long despised for the lack of discipline it revealed. This time, the knight was glad to see the compulsive motion. It meant that Nimphus recognized the trap he was in – the trap that Gabriel had planned on exploiting long before he actually stepped into that room. Not even the High Ecclesiastic of the Church of Dunrabian could argue against the law of the Vision.

Hundreds of years before, the Seers of the Book prophesied that a boy would be born who would one day become the Holy Knight. He would lead the Church to new glory, and be

blessed with the power to destroy Elezeaz. This boy would be visited by a vision sent directly from Dunraban, and would thereby be marked as the one selected to be lead the Church's army.

The details of that Vision were concealed from the public, passed down in utmost secrecy amongst the highest ranks of the Church, waiting for the day when the child would appear that would describe it in perfect detail. No one outside of a small, select circle knew the contents of the epiphany, which meant that only the authentic, chosen boy could recite it.

Gabriel, born of peasant stock, was the one that emerged from the fields and stunned the Church with his story. He recited every detail in perfect clarity. Nimphus himself verified the recounting of the Vision, though his face had been filled with hesitation throughout the ordeal. Later, he was also the one to knight Gabriel and place the Church's armies under his leadership.

"Only now," Nimphus muttered into the air, caressing the ring, "as the actual undertaking of this quest draws near, does the grave reality of its implications strike me." He looked at Gabriel through sallow eyes. "You petition me to bless an action that could very well mean the destruction of the world. How am I to make such a decision?"

Gabriel gripped his hands into fists and hid them under the ivory table. The subtleties and sleights of diplomatic conversation were distasteful to his nature and roused an instinctive disgust. Everything within him said to pick up his sword and go, to charge headlong into the Tempest Gate, but this situation demanded more restraint. Even knowing this, and despite all his preparations, he ultimately failed in concealing his temper and hammered a fist down on the table. "You should make this decision the same way that you make any decision, Esteemed Father. With faith."

Nimphus looked startled for a moment, eyes growing wide at the experience of being spoken to in such an authoritative

tone. He opened his mouth as though to reprimand the young knight, but only sighed and shook his head before slumping further into his seat.

Gabriel saw the fear in Nimphus' eyes, and simultaneously hated and pitied him for it. A fierce love for the man still burned in his heart, but the calling of his destiny flamed brighter. For Nimphus, the Book always came second to the Church. His secular duties always outweighed his sacred ones. Gabriel could not allow the conflict in the old man's heart to delay his quest to destroy the demon.

As much as Gabriel loved the man, the fact was that Nimphus lacked the unbending resolve of a true disciple. The priest wished to deny Gabriel his quest because he lacked perfect faith that the Holy Knight would prevail. If it were not for the fact that Nimphus was equally afraid of the ramifications of denying Gabriel, he already would have refused him, but such a denial would threaten the credibility of his own position as High Ecclesiastic. It could erode the very foundations of the position.

For Nimphus to deny the divine mission of the Holy Knight that he himself had ordained would be to deny the validity of the Vision. To deny the validity of the Vision would be to deny the Book which prophesied the Vision, which would then be a denial of the very source from which Nimphus drew his authority in the first place. Refusing Gabriel's quest would be refusing his own Church, and subsequently, his own position as its leader. It was a paradox that Gabriel already anticipated, and planned to use long before he ever stepped foot in that room.

As if coming to terms with his powerlessness, Nimphus straightened in his chair and ceased the nervous massaging of his ring. "Of course you must go," he said, trying to fill his voice with a stern resolve that clearly was not really there. "It is Dunrabian's will."

The old man hesitated a moment, squinting into the air as

though searching for something to add. “First, you must take three days of meditation on this matter. It has been many years since you had the Vision, Gabriel. You were only a boy. Make certain that Elezear’s destruction is still what Dunrabian wants of you.”

He fixed Gabriel with a sincere, almost pleading gaze, as though begging the knight to release him from the game he was being forced to play. “There is still so much work for you to do here, Gabriel. Important work. The Church is reaching new heights, and I want you to be at the helm while we rise.”

“I will take those reins of my duty, as always, with the utmost honor and humility,” Gabriel said, “after I have destroyed Elezear.” He got up from his chair and knelt before the High Ecclesiastic. “Thank you for your blessing, Esteemed Father.”

Nimphus sighed, probably disappointed that his final entreaty to Gabriel’s restraint had failed. “Meditate for three days,” he said, a slight quavering audible in his voice, as though the words were barely holding back more forceful, or fearful, ones. “Think all the good you can do here, at home.”

“As you command, Esteemed Father.” Gabriel stood and backed out of the chamber.

On his way back to his room, he laughed at the High Ecclesiastic’s words. He would take three days of meditation, as commanded, but there would be no deliberation. He’d made his decision long ago, and nothing could sway him from it. Nimphus lacked enough conviction to gamble the lives of the world against the glory of their god, but Gabriel did not suffer from such weakness or doubt. He had all the faith he needed for such a quest. All that, and much more.

