

GATHERING STORM



- The Salvation of Tempestria Book 2 -

GARY STRINGER

The Salvation of Tempestria

Shifting Stars
Gathering Storm

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Book 2

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Chapter 1

The Council of Wizards was in crisis: wizards were going missing.

There was no obvious pattern relating to faction, power, ability or involvement in Council affairs, so there was no way of knowing who might be next.

Exactly when this started, gentle reader, it was difficult to say. Missing people were an unfortunate fact of life, in ways both ordinary and extraordinary, such as demon attack. These disappearances were different, however. It wasn't always possible to determine precisely where they were when they disappeared, but where it was possible, investigations revealed an energy source of higher planar origins.

This was new: beings from the higher planes had never before shown any interest in taking mortals. They were often collateral damage, caught in the crossfire, but never deliberately attacked. If that had changed, and the shadow warriors were now kidnapping innocent Tempestrians for who-knew-what purposes, what could be done about it?

My mother, Catriona, already knew Aunt Dreya's views on the matter. She had shared her intention to kill Daelen StormTiger not long after Cat had moved in, and current events, more than two years later, as the Tempestrian chronometer flies, compelled Catriona to share something that had been puzzling her about it.

"Why Daelen, specifically?" Catriona asked her. "Why not Kullos, or that other one...the dark clone. The one that looks a bit like Daelen but isn't...has anybody heard that one's name, by the way?"

"Not that I know of," Dreya replied. "Anyway, what do you care which one I kill?"

"I don't, especially," Cat shrugged. "They're all about as dangerous as each other, as far as I can tell. They've got no business fighting their war here, and I'd be quite happy to be rid of the lot of them. Which is precisely why I ask the question: Why Daelen, specifically? Why do *you* care which one you kill?"

Dreya frowned. She'd never really questioned it. Daelen was a self-proclaimed Protector and seen as a hero to many, trying to save them from Kullos, who was generally viewed as the villain. Recently, though, there had been growing, popular support for the reverse sentiment. Dreya the Dark agreed with Catriona that there was little basis for either view, but that only further highlighted her question. Surely it wasn't a matter of killing Daelen because of his hero image or because he was famous. Those were not worthy motivations for Dreya the Dark. Yet, something was nagging in her brain, almost like a voice, her own voice, telling her he was the one she should go for. It was important.

'Kill Daelen StormTiger,' said the voice, *'and take his power.'*

The voice kept telling her to ignore the reasons why, but that wasn't how Dreya operated. She didn't do random violence. She didn't attack without cause.

"I don't know," she admitted, finally, "and I don't like that I don't know. If I didn't know better, I might suspect some kind of mental attack or a post-hypnotic suggestion, but my shields prevent any such thing."

Her shields were intact. From the day Dreya claimed the Tower, the only magical signature that had ever passed through her defences, apart from Catriona's, was her own. Still, the point was chiefly academic for the foreseeable future. Dreya knew she wasn't ready to take on a being from the higher planes. Not yet. Besides, she didn't even know how to find them if she wanted to. Nobody knew where the shadow warriors went, between battles. Dreya suspected the answer lay on some other world, but her best efforts to probe the cosmos with her magic had so far failed to prove their existence.

"Anyway, it's a moot point at the moment," Dreya told Cat, dismissing the issue. "After all, it's not as if Daelen StormTiger himself is going to come knocking on my door."

Cat laughed, "That's true."

And so, she let the subject drop.

Returning to their original topic of conversation, Dreya needed to share some news that she knew Catriona was not going to like.

"Cat," she began, "I just came from an emergency Council meeting."

"I know," Cat nodded, "you told me this morning, remember?"

"Yes, but I didn't tell you why it was called."

“About all those wizards disappearing, I presumed.”

“Yes, but the situation’s got even more serious for your faction in particular, though it affects everyone, really. Cat, I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but the latest wizard to vanish is Mistress Justaria.”

For one of the Triumvirate to disappear was a severe blow to the whole magical community. If Daelen or one of his kind were proved to be behind it, that could be seen as nothing less than a declaration of war.

Catriona liked Mistress Justaria. The leader of the Red robes of Balance had been fair-minded at Catriona’s Conclave, and the druidess had always taken to heart the conversation they’d shared afterwards. Justaria had been absolutely right that the college was entirely the wrong place for her, and in many ways, her encouragement to seek knowledge elsewhere was a key reason why she was now living and working in the Black Tower. More than that, she felt she owed an enormous debt of thanks to Justaria for her hand in events that had led to her close bond with Dreya the Dark. The chance to see the person behind the mask, the woman beneath the black velvet robes. The opportunity to come to know and understand Dreya in ways no-one else did.

Dreya had visited many of the known disappearance sites herself, but she understood Catriona well enough by now to be completely unsurprised when the druidess declared her intention to investigate this one personally.

A red-banded falcon alighted in Justaria’s garden. It wasn’t large, but it was well maintained. Flowering plants were blooming in a wide border between the fence and the lawn on the right-hand side as she faced the white cottage at the end of the gently meandering path. Over to the left, the Red robe leader had gone for a different approach, with a blanket of buttercups and daisies encircling a sycamore tree.

Catriona reverted to her natural form and breathed deeply. She could immediately sense the signature of higher planar energy that had got everybody so worked up. But there was something else not quite right about this place. A spell of wizards had been all over

Justaria's garden, probing with their magic and in their wizardly wisdom, turned up absolutely nothing.

"Wizards!" the druidess muttered to herself. "Can't see past their own spellbooks."

She sent a sympathetic apology to Dreya, with whom she was linked.

'*Not wrong,*' came her reply.

Barring a few footprints where wizards had trodden carelessly, the garden was beautiful, but not immaculate. It didn't look like a professional job to Cat. More of a constant labour of love. Clearly, Justaria spent a lot of her free time planting, pottering and pruning, tinkering and tidying her garden. So why were the daisies bent over? If they had just been stepped on, why was it just the daisies and not the buttercups? And why all in one direction, towards the tree? Cat stepped lightly around to the far side of the tree where the trunk was in shadow. On the ground was a trowel with a sharp metal point, which had obviously been used to carve words into the bark:

RHYNAS

DESERT

The druidess wasn't sure where that was, apart from being somewhere overseas, but by concentrating hard, she was able to project an image of the words to Dreya, sympathically. In return, Dreya sent '*Meeting*' and '*Map,*' which Cat took to mean she would meet up with her and show her on a map.

Looking around Justaria's garden once more, there was no other evidence that Catriona could detect. It was a wonder the sorceress had found time to do as much as she did. She could almost picture the scene: whoever had come for Justaria, she had found out where they were taking her and delayed them long enough to leave clues.

At her Conclave, Cat had seen Justaria use delicate magic to make a pen inscribe words on a page with barely a glance. In principle, using a floating trowel to scratch words into a tree was no different. As for the daisies, they were just more evidence of Justaria's deft touch with magic. Still, it would have taken time, which told Cat something else: unless Justaria's case was different

from all the others, wizards were not being kidnapped as everyone assumed. If it were a simple grab and teleport job, there was no way Justaria could have done what she did. She must have kept them talking, and if they were talking, it wasn't kidnapping, it was persuasion. Recruitment. That said, given the lack of reports of wizards saying 'no' to this recruitment, it was likely the sales pitch boiled down to 'join or die,' but still, recruitment for what?

As she was puzzling over that one, someone arrived who had the answer.

The wind suddenly picked up, and Cat was instantly alert. Storms didn't just start like that. Not natural ones, anyway. There was a flash of equally unnatural lightning, creating an outline of a member of the big cat family: a tiger.

Cat shifted to her tawny owl form, quieter through the air than the falcon, approaching the new arrival stealthily from behind. She changed in midair and stood on one of her Windy Steps.

"Daelen StormTiger," she said, scowling indignantly, arms folded. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Chapter 2

It all began on another world.

Daelen StormTiger woke, suddenly, coming face to face with an unexpected visitor.

Actually, gentle reader, though I say, ‘face to face,’ he couldn’t actually see her face. Overall, she seemed to defy analysis, protected from even his powers of detection, save for a vague impression of a female figure with a white aura. This was Aunt Mandalee in her role as White Guardian of Time and Magic, conducting a completely legal and necessary Time Intervention to correct an anomaly. In terms of her personal Timestream, this was several months before she made herself complicit in my illegal plan to bring Daelen to me here.

“Oh, you’re up, at last, I see,” his visitor observed, then when Daelen got out of bed, failing to catch the bedsheets in time, she quickly turned away with a small scream, adding, “And now I’ve seen far more of you than I ever wanted to. Put some clothes on, for pity’s sake!”

“Who are you, and what are you doing in my home?” Daelen demanded, though he did comply with her clothing request.

“Can’t tell you that, not the first part, anyway,” Mandalee answered, apologetically. “You haven’t even met me yet. It would probably blow a hole in the cosmos the size of the Black Tower, which might not seem that big in comparison to the size of the cosmos, but it would be big enough to let some pretty important stuff fall out. Well, the Black Tower, for a start, I suppose. That would cause all kinds of anomalies. Look, are you dressed yet?”

“Yes,” Daelen assured her.

She turned around, although Daelen wasn’t sure how he could tell that, given that she seemed to shimmer in much the same way, whichever direction she was facing.

“Thank gods for that. Sorry, rambling there, trying to distract myself from what I just saw. Of course, that means I’ve seen both of you naked now, so my brain’s going to be coming up with all kinds of weird stuff. Dear gods, I need a drink!” At last, she paused for breath.

“Finished?” Daelen asked.

“Haven’t even started yet,” the figure replied. Taking a deep breath, Mandalee began again. “You’ve overslept, Daelen.”

“And since when were you my Timekeeper?”

“I’m not, although you’re pretty close with the title. Anyway, it’s not your fault – someone’s been messing with your head and interfering with events that really ought not to be tampered with any more than they already have been. Which means now someone’s got to tamper some more to get things back on track.”

“Are you going to start making sense anytime soon?” Daelen asked.

“I ask myself that question all the time, so probably not, which means you’re just going to have to pay more attention. Listen, you need to get yourself over to Tempestria right now. Events are moving there, and you’re out of the loop.”

Daelen shook his head. “I get an alert whenever there’s higher planar activity, and right now everything’s quiet,” he disputed.

“That’s because this time the activity is quiet. At least for now. I can show you telepathically better than I can tell you, if you’ll let me,” the visitor offered.

Although Daelen could sense his visitor had powers perhaps to rival his own, he was convinced she was no threat, so he agreed to give her limited access to his mind.

“Very well, shroud your powers. Absolute minimum level and follow me. We’re going on a little astral trip.”

The shadow warrior’s consciousness left his body and followed his visitor where she led. They swept across the face of Tempestria so fast, even his senses couldn’t make out more than a blur. Eventually, the image slowed and zoomed in. It appeared to be one of Tempestria’s deserts, but things are not always as they seem. There was a wall of energy there that was a commonplace sight on the higher plane he once called home. It had no place here. The wall was curved, forming a vast dome. Slipping through the barrier, Mandalee showed him the interior. There, arrayed before him, concealed within the dome, was an army of demons from the planes of hell. Mortal wizards, warriors and clerics were there alongside them. More recruits arrived as he watched, but what really drew his attention was a fortress in the middle of the camp. It fairly resonated with power – a power with which he was all too familiar.

“We must go carefully now, Daelen,” the visitor warned him. “We don’t want to alert him to our presence. That would be very...awkward.”

Daelen didn’t need to ask, “him who?” for the answer was obvious. She was right to be cautious, because there was always a chance, albeit slim – that he could detect them even when they were only a projection and not really there. He was a dark, shadowy figure, sitting on a throne on a dais, in the centre of a chamber, in the heart of the fortress, in the middle of the camp, like an enormous spider in a city-sized web. He was Kullos.

“How is this possible?” Daelen whispered. “Kullos has never done anything like this, before. Why would he suddenly start building an army?”

“Because he thinks you are.”

“What?” the shadow warrior demanded. “Why would he think that?”

“Because someone’s been messing with his head, too,” she explained. “Be very still and watch.”

Daelen took her advice and remained absolutely still. The shadow warrior thought he could sense something. He wasn’t sure what, but he didn’t dare unshroud his power, so he simply waited. He didn’t have to wait long before a new figure materialised, standing beside Kullos. Daelen had seen this being only once before, and then only briefly. This was the being Michael had described as a ‘void-creature.’ All he knew about it was that it had nearly killed Michael permanently and devastated an entire Quarthonian Faery community before some other unknown beings chased it away. Daelen could feel its power and malevolence, and it scared him. He, a mighty shadow warrior, was afraid of what this unknown creature was and what it might be able to do.

“Seen enough?” Mandalee asked. She sensed him nod.

Slowly, carefully, she pulled them back outside the fortress. They passed through the dome shield and then accelerated until they were back in their bodies where they had been standing all along.

“I’ve seen that void-creature before!” Daelen breathed. “It—”

To his astonishment, his visitor seemed to put her fingers in her ears and sing, “La la la! Can’t hear you! Please stop talking!”

He complied, and Mandalee relaxed. “Whew!” she breathed. “That was nearly an even bigger hole in the cosmos. Daelen, there’s

a lot of Time manipulation going around at the moment. Most of it has already been accounted for, but this is new. I don't know anything about this void-creature, as you call it, and learning about it from you could create all kinds of trouble.”

She was right, gentle reader. Gaining information from someone in the past in this way is hazardous.

Imagine Scenario 1: Nobody else in her time knew about the void-creature, either. That could indicate that Daelen never told anyone.

Scenario 2: Daelen *did* tell someone, that information was available in Mandalee's time, and it was just that Mandalee *herself* didn't know. In that case, Mandalee could simply tap into the years of research on the subject that was just sitting there waiting for her to find. But if Daelen told Mandalee directly at that moment, he might then decide he shouldn't share it with anyone from his own time, in the interests of preserving the Timeline. All of a sudden, we've switched back to Scenario 1. Now, when Mandalee returned to her present, the research that would have been done in Scenario 2 never happened. Such are the hazards of Time Intervention.

This is another reason the other Guardians are against my actions, but to me, the key point is that we *should* have known about this void-creature the instant it appeared in our time. The fact that we didn't is, in my opinion, reason enough to seek that information from the past.

“Dealing with that creature will have to wait,” Mandalee insisted. “I'm just here to fix the Time damage. That creature is a future problem, and you need to focus on Kullos. It's too soon for anyone to be messing around with you. Except me. I have to mess around with you but having too many people messing around with you at the same time is bad. Dear gods, now that I've seen you naked, I just want to go back up my own Timeline and rephrase all of that.”

“I see, so you're some kind of Time fixer,” Daelen suggested.

“Oh yeah,” Mandalee agreed, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “that’s a great title. I’ll propose the change as soon as I get back.”

“Well, whatever you call yourself, you travel in Time. I recognise the signs; I’ve done it myself.”

“Don’t I know it!”

While Mandalee continued to grumble about the trouble he caused through blundering about in Time, the shadow warrior wasted not a moment, scribbling a quick note which he left by his beside. He prepared to open a Prismatic Sphere portal to Tempestria, but his exasperated visitor yelled at him to stop.

“Daelen! Just wait a minute, will you? Dear gods. And they call *me* reckless. You’re rushing to face down an army, and you don’t even know where it is!”

Daelen shot her a confused look. “I assumed you’d tell me when we got to Tempestria.”

“So many problems with that. One, I’m not coming with you – as I say, you haven’t even met me yet. Two, I’m not just going to tell you everything, because it’s too soon for you to know – I’ve told you only as much as you would have figured out yourself by now if you hadn’t been tampered with. And I really need to find a better way of saying that. Three, you don’t even know if what I showed you was the truth. I might be an enemy lying to you.”

“I don’t think you’re an enemy. You have a very trustworthy aura.”

“That’s all part of my cunning plan to gain your trust and then betray you, or at least it could be. As it is, I’m not here to help you as such, just get your Timeline back on track. Fortunately, this Time meddler is obviously new at this because he’s left me with a straightforward Intervention.”

“Oh, so you’re not a Time fixer, you’re a Time intervener. Time interventionist?”

“Seriously, Daelen, one more crack like that and I’m going to come over there and knock you into the middle of next week and to hell with your Timeline! Look, this is what you need to know: wizards are going missing.”

“Why should I c—”

“—Care about that?” Mandalee finished for him. “Isn’t that a lovely sentiment from our so-called Protector? I’ve shown you why. Kullos is building an army.”

“What’s an army of mere mortals and demons to me?” Daelen asked, dismissively.

The arrogance of the shadow warrior was really challenging Mandalee’s self-control, now. Her fighter’s instinct was pushing her to show him what even one ‘mere mortal’ could do to him. But she maintained her composure, refusing to let him goad her into a mistake.

“If you want to find Kullos, you have to find his army,” she explained with exaggerated patience. “To find his army, you need to find out where the wizards are going. To learn the answer to that, there’s someone you need to meet. Now, I’m guessing you’re not up with current Wizards’ Council politics.”

“Hardly!” Daelen scoffed.

“Tell me you at least know where the Council building is.”

Daelen nodded, so Mandalee continued.

“Then go there, find a wizard – any wizard – and ask directions to the home of Justaria. Tell them you’re investigating her disappearance. You might want to assure them that you didn’t do it, while you’re there, but that’s up to you.”

“Wait, you want me to just roll up to a wizard who might think I’m there to kidnap him, and ask directions?” Daelen was incredulous.

“That’s right,” Mandalee replied, acidly. “Daelen StormTiger is going to have to have a difficult conversation with a mere mortal for the first time in centuries. How will you ever cope? Well, you’ll just have to. Find Justaria’s place, Daelen, and find it quickly. Your adventure starts there.”

Without another word, Daelen’s visitor vanished.

The shadow warrior could only wonder at who she could have been, as he quickly stepped through a portal and headed for the Council of Wizards in Walminster, Elvaria’s capital city and seat of power.

Once there, he managed to get directions, and now he was here, where some mortal girl seemed to be trying to wind him up.

Chapter 3

Daelen, unsurprised, didn't bother turning around. It took more than that to sneak up on a shadow warrior. Still, there weren't many mortals who would try. The typical reactions were either awe or terror. After the one he'd spoken to, earlier, this was two unusual mortal reactions in one day. Perhaps there were signs of change in this world, after all.

"If it helps," he offered, "I promise I didn't abduct Justaria."

"Well, obviously you didn't," Cat agreed.

"What makes you so sure I'm telling the truth?" Daelen wondered.

"Three reasons: First, she may have left under duress or threat, but she wasn't abducted at all. Not as such."

"And how do you know that?"

"Ah, you see, I have a special ability. It's called paying attention. Speaking of which, what are the chances of you turning around and paying attention to me? You really shouldn't keep your back to me like this. I'm running out of rude faces to pull at you."

Daelen smiled and at last did turn around to see the mortal girl, not levitating or flying like him, but casually standing on thin air as if it were solid ground.

She smiled and waved. "Hi, I'm Catriona Redfletching. My friends call me...yes, well, let's just leave it as Catriona for now, shall we?"

"Catriona," Daelen acknowledged. "What happened to pulling rude faces?"

Cat shrugged. "I ran out."

When it became clear she wasn't planning on saying anything else, he reminded her, "You said there were three reasons. What's the second?"

Cat shook her head. "Nope. Not like that. I'm an information trader. You don't get anything more from me until I get something from you. Like I said: what the hell are you doing here?"

Now that he was facing her and not looking at the garden, she had a quiet word with nature to subtly erase all trace of Justaria's message. She had a suspicion she already knew the answer to her question and intended to use her knowledge as leverage. After all,

she didn't have the power of a shadow warrior, but information was a different kind of power. It could be a weapon or a shield, depending on what she needed. Thanks to their shared sympathetic link, Dreya could pursue things her way, alerting the Council and using her form of power. That left Cat free to pursue her own independent line of enquiry.

Daelen confirmed her suspicion. "I need to find out where the wizards are being taken."

"Why do you care?"

"Hang on," he protested, "is it not my turn now?"

Cat gave a facial shrug, conceding the point. "Can't blame a girl for trying. OK, second reason: you just said you need to find them. If you were involved, you'd already know."

"But you couldn't have known that when you said there were three reasons. I hadn't told you, yet."

"So I guessed," Cat admitted. "The point is I guessed right. My turn: why do you care?"

"You won't believe me," he warned. "You'll think I'm crazy."

With a dismissive gesture, Cat replied, "All kinds of people don't believe me about things I've seen and accuse me of being crazy. I'm not so quick to judge."

"Alright," Daelen accepted. "A woman from the future woke me up, told me there was some kind of interference in Time and showed me what's going on."

"And what exactly *is* going on?"

"You're trying to have two turns again," Daelen admonished her.

"Whoops, so I am. Sorry. Your question?"

Daelen was surprised how much he was enjoying this. Who knew mortals could be so entertaining?

"You're not as innocent as you make out, are you?"

"No, I'm not," Cat concurred, "but just to show you how nice I can be, rather than count that as your next question, I'm going to volunteer my third reason." She could let him have this one because his reaction would tell her much. "The third and main reason why I know you had nothing to do with Justaria's disappearance – and by inference all the others – is that the signature of the higher planar energy that still lingers around her home is completely different. It's not that dark clone of yours, either. Presumably, his signature is

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