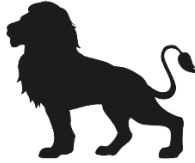


FREE PREVIEW  
Part I of 'The Spoken Books Uprising:  
The Acktus Trials

By D. T. Kane



Eremita Publishing

## Prologue

The roof of the Great Library's tower was gone, destroyed by a spell that had surely sowed centuries of turmoil across all of Oration.

Pront vi Lextor, Librarian of Tome, Prefect of Saltz, Keeper of the Inks, Protector of the Sheafs, scowled at the open sky. The wind had been whipping at the pages of his Book, making writing exceedingly difficult. But he expressed his frustration only for a moment before leaning over the volume and continuing to scribble. One volume was already complete, but he still had this second to finish, and time was running short. Far below him, in the Library's bowels, he could hear the voices.

They were coming.

He finished the final words and tossed his quill aside. Where he was going he wouldn't be needing it. He was, however, careful to stopper the vial of ink he'd been using. It glistened with an array of colors as light refracted off the glass.

Just as he was casting sand over the final page to dry the ink, a sound like distant church bells caused him to leap from his chair. He spun, colorful robe billowing in the wind that blew through the tower's ruined rafters. Preparing to defend himself, he raised both hands. Each of his fingers bore a ring, the rings of each hand connected to one another by fine lengths of chain.

Pront vi Lextor calmed as soon as he identified the sound's source, smiling at the creature floating through the air towards him. It had a body like that of a giant serpent, twisting in the wind as it alighted onto the floorboards of his study. The beast was all white, tufts of fur running down the length of its spine and over its fore and hind legs. It had a face like a dog that had run into a wall one too many times, snout too small for the rest of its body. A mustache hung below its nostrils and moved about as it exhaled, and two

enormous eyes considered him with intelligence rivaling that of the smartest men Pront vi Lextor had ever known.

But Pront vi Lextor had always deemed the creature's hide its most spectacular feature. Shaved of the white fur that lined its back and legs, the beast's skin was covered in writing, words in each of the Trinity's languages written in colors representing each of the five elements. The creature was one of his greatest successes.

"Ah, my good Book Dragon," Pront vi Lextor said, lowering his hands and permitting himself the smallest of smiles. "You come at a most opportune time."

The dragon regarded him with an expression of utmost distress. "My brothers and sisters have each taken away as many Books as they can carry. Can carry." It spoke in an ethereal way, words seeming to float on the air, rather than reach the ears directly. And it had a curious habit of repeating the final words of sentences. "But there are still so many. So many. We could have saved more, but the Fire Breathers fled. They are lost. Are lost."

Pront vi Lextor patted the Book Dragon's head, keeping his face calm, though the news of this betrayal disheartened him.

"Do not lament, my friend. I know you have done what you can."

"It is not enough. Not enough." The Book Dragon rotated in a tight circle just above the floor, anxiety plain in the movement. "My oath is broken. The shelves have fallen. Have fallen."

"Yes," Pront vi Lextor said, voice growing soft. He heard his age in the tremulous tone. "The shelves have fallen, indeed." He stared off into the distance for a few moments before shaking his head and forcing confidence back into his words. "I've one final task for you. This volume must find its way safely to Fortune."

Pront vi Lextor shut the Book he'd just finished. The dragon had a leather collar about its neck with a pouch large enough to hold a small library's worth of Books. It was

already full to nearly bursting, but Pront vi Lextor approached the dragon and managed to squeeze the volume in.

“You are the only one I trust with it. Now go. There is little time.”

“The only one...” The Book Dragon trailed off, massive eyes glistening. “What of Leamina and Helfax?”

“They fell. Together.” Pront vi Lextor’s voice became strained. “Holding off the threat while the Scriveners escaped.”

The Book Dragon’s ears drooped. “What about you? Won’t you let me take you from here? From here?”

Pront vi Lextor had to blink several times before answering with the confidence the Book Dragon needed to hear. “I have trapped our foes for now, my friend. But their bonds are yet weak. I must return to Under Tome and finish the job.”

The Book Dragon let out a low moan.

“Don’t mourn for me,” Pront vi Lextor said, forcing his words to sound stronger than he felt. “I may be weakened for a time, but I shall return. You must protect the Great Library as best you can in my absence, and ensure that the great work continues.”

The Book Dragon looked as if it wished to protest, but eventually bobbed its massive head, eyes glistening. “I will do as you say. You say.”

It floated upward without further comment, though its eyes stayed locked on Pront vi Lextor until he lost view of the creature. With a deep sigh he took up his staff from a corner and began his descent into the bowels of the tower. The voices grew louder the closer he got to the ground, until they were a terrible roar of sinister intent in his mind.

Their appearance had been an unexpected setback. He’d been so close to achieving a great victory for all mankind. Now he would have to cleanse the city in fire and imprison his enemies in shadow. He just hoped the volume he’d given the Book Dragon fell into the right hands, that

the land of Oration would be led out of the darkness he had caused.

The voices grew louder still.

SAMPLE

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Part 1



# Chapter 1

“Reading Books can get you killed.”

Baztian stopped midsentence, the Words turning oily and stale in his mouth, and glared up from the Book his brother had set in front of him. They were sitting cross legged across from each other on the cold, stone floor of Torchshire Library’s Speaking Room.

“You say that every time, Yeltax. I get it, all right?”

Tax pursed his lips. He hated being called by his full name. “I repeat it because you don’t really get it, Baz. It’s not your fault. You can’t, until you’ve seen what it can actually mean. Do you remember Dad?”

Baz looked away. Of course he didn’t. He’d only been three when it had happened. Perhaps he possessed a recollection or two of the tales Dad had used to tell of sailors braving the Ocean Vast, but even those might just be invented memories from how many times Tax had repeated those stories in the years since their father’s death.

“Sorry,” Tax said, running a hand over his shaved head, the only hairstyle permitted to Speakers. “I know, you were too young. But the fact remains. He *couldn’t* Read, and the Readers still killed him because they suspected he was beginning to grasp the basics of the Scribes’ grammar. He’d never even laid eyes on the text of a Spoken Book. You have to be careful.”

Baz huffed out a sigh. “You spend as much time warning me as you do teaching me. I know the Readers are cruel, but if this is really so dangerous, why are we doing this at all?”

Tax’s brows dropped over his probing green eyes. Unlike most Speakers in the dreary city of Erstwhile, Tax had olive-toned skin, accentuating the brilliance of his eyes. Baz had similar eyes, but his complexion was pale as a ghost compared to his brother. Whereas Tax’s eyes looked like a fortune of emeralds, Baz’s were more like pea soup in dirty porcelain bowls.



“Because,” Tax said, voice gaining an edge, “I promised Dad I’d take care of you, and a man always keeps his promises. That’s what sets us apart from the Readers, Baz. We keep our word. Don’t forget that.”

Baz nodded, shifting uncomfortably. Why did Tax always have to be so serious?

“And,” Tax added, “someone ought to be able to stand up to them. There’s power in knowing the Words, Baz. I can’t think of a better way to watch out for you than to give you some of that power.”

Baz sighed. Power and knowledge, power in knowledge. Tax was always talking like that. A quiet determination that he’d had for as long as Baz could remember, and one that Tax was set on passing on to him.

Baz was slightly less concerned with such lofty goals, and more with setting things on fire. He was, after all, a Destroyer. One reason he and Tax were allowed time alone at all was because Tax was a Tri, able to call forth the power of any of the types of Spoken Books—Creation, Destruction, and Influence. Only one in a thousand Speakers had such talent, and it made him extremely valuable, so he received extra privileges. Now, that didn’t mean the Readers treated him as an equal. He was still a slave. All Speakers were. But among slaves, it’s a great freedom to have even small parts of your waking hours to yourself, and Tax was given an hour a day for “rest.” He was supposed to take the time to relax in silence, give his voice a chance to recover after all the Speaking that was required of him each day. In reality, he spent most of that time each day with Baz, and recently they’d spent that time poring over the Spoken Book he’d hidden under a loose flagstone in the Duke’s Speaking Room.

The room was as spacious as it was cold. It was at the end of a long hallway, set apart from the rest of Torchshire Library, as were all Speaking Rooms. It wasn’t common, but Speakings could go terribly wrong if a Speaker mispronounced a significant word, or a Reader was sloppy

in his or her recitation to the Speaker. The Speaking Room at Presciot Library had been entirely razed by a Destruction spell gone awry about ten years ago, shortly before Baz had been born.

At one end of the room upon a raised dais was a shelf about half full with Spoken Books. It was one of the smaller Libraries in Erstwhile, but still enough Books to be considered a grand fortune. The shelf was, of course, protected by locked, iron grating, the space between its cross-hatched bars so minimal it was difficult to read the titles inscribed on the Books' spines. The only other furnishings in the room were a lectern made of polished mahogany and a single chair behind it. Those were for the house's Readers, of which Torchshire had ten, plus a few children in training. Speakers were never permitted to sit while they repeated the Words of the Books. Bad posture made for less powerful Speakings, or so the Readers said. Baz wasn't convinced.

Tax had never told Baz where he'd gotten the Book they were now Reading, but it could only have come from this room. Books never left it without close scrutiny, and a Book in the hands of a Speaker was grounds enough for immediate execution, so Tax certainly hadn't carried it into the Speaking Room from elsewhere. It'd likely been left on the lectern after a Reading and Tax had nabbed it during one of his "rests." That had been maybe a year ago. Baz could vaguely recall the Duke being in a rage over a missing Book, questioning all the Library servants on suspicion one of them had stolen it. Such things weren't entirely unheard of. If one could find a buyer, the price of a single Spoken Book would be enough for a common Illit to retire on. Of course, in practice a Book in the hands of an Illit was about as illiquid an asset as they come. Might as well wear a sign saying you're a thief.

"Well," Baz said, "I won't be able to do much standing up to anyone if you never teach me anything."

"Patience, Baz. Patience."

“Gah! Come on. I was nearly able to light the candle last time. Let me Read and try again.”

Tax’s jaw set to a stern line for a moment. But then his face softened. He looked down and to one side for a moment, a small smile momentarily crossing his lips. Baz hated that look.

“What?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Tax said, still smiling. “It’s just... Nothing. Come, you’re right. Caution only gets us so far. I must actually teach you something.”

“Great!” Baz said. He bent back over the Book, placing a finger on the page at the beginning of the string of Words that would call forth flame. They were strange, curly characters, with the occasional sharp edge thrown in for good measure. He opened his mouth and—

“Wait,” Tax said. “Did you bring your heat source? As you gain ability, you’ll be able to pull power directly from the elements in the ink, but you’re not there yet, and it’s cold as the Icy Heights in here. You’ll need some sort of starter.”

Baz looked over his shoulder to hide a grimace. He ought to have thought of that. It’s just, he was so excited! Delirious, the Duke’s son, never let him do anything interesting like create fire! Baz leapt up and hurried over to the dais, where he’d left the small brazier of coals he’d brought with him from the small room in the Library’s basement he shared with Tax. Careful not to burn his hands, he picked it up and brought it back over to where Tax was sitting.

“Good,” Tax said once he’d returned. “Now remember. What’s the most important thing for a Destroyer to remember?” Tax pointed to the Destroyer’s mark branded to Baz’s forehead.

Baz sighed. Would Tax ever let him get around to actually Speaking?

“The Stop Rune,” Baz said, rolling his eyes. He jabbed a finger at the symbol in the Spoken Book that he’d once more propped in his lap.

“Good,” Tax said. “And *why* is it important?”

Baz wasn’t going to fall for *that* trick again.

“Actually, there’s *two* reasons it’s important, Tax.”

His brother nodded, that same smile touching his mouth as before. “Go on.”

“First, it locks the Reading, tells the Book to only cast the spell the one time I Speak it. That way, someone can’t repeat what I say and cast it again. And second, if something goes wrong, I just have to Speak the Stop Rune, and the power will cease to flow, and I can start over.”

Tax nodded again. “All right. Now focus your intent in your mind. The Words are vital, but Reading and Speaking must be done with purpose. Careful with your diction, and don’t be afraid to Speak the Stop Rune a second time if you feel the Words slipping away from you. Better to start over than have to explain a singed mouth to Delirious. Or worse. The Duke.”

This time, Baz was unable to hide his grimace. That had been a near thing, a few weeks prior. He’d been so close to completing the Speaking for minor fire. But then he’d slipped over the line’s final syllable and...

Well, that wouldn’t happen again. Taking a deep breath, he focused on the text, then uttered the Stop Rune and plunged into Speaking the sentences that would summon fire and light the candle that Tax had produced from within the folds of his robe.

One who has never heard the words of a Spoken Book uttered might think they have a good idea of what it would sound like. Just like talking, except reciting words from a page. Right?

Wrong. Each of the three languages of the Trinity are distinct from the common speech, and each is as distinct from the other as water is from flame is from earth. Baz had once heard a Conservator compare the language of Creation to a doe lapping water from a creek, and the language of Influence to the drumming of marching men’s steps, steady and inevitable. Destruction, however, wasn’t nearly so

straight forward. Some of its syllables were like the menacing snort of a bull, others a falcon's high screech, and still others like the refined, sharp edges of a lion's roar.

As Baz spoke the Words, he could feel their power building. His mouth began to grow warm, the coals in the brazier steaming as if water had been poured upon them, their heat dissipating, though not into the air above the brazier, but into the syllables, then words, then sentences that flowed from Baz's mouth. His lungs began to burn, but he resisted the urge to breathe. Breathing in the middle of a Speaking was dangerous—unless you were absolutely certain of your timing, you'd pay a price, and Baz certainly couldn't afford scorched lungs. Even Tax wouldn't be able to explain *that* to the Duke.

Finally, he gasped out the last syllable, feeling a tang on the roof of his mouth as it didn't leave his tongue quite right. Baz ignored it, instead focusing his will on the wick of the candle in Tax's hand. The air between them glimmered with heat, popping beads of sweat onto both their foreheads.

The candle burst into flame!

Baz sucked in a breath of air, shuddering at the heat of it. But it was just the ordinary warmth of the air that had been heated by his spell, not the burning of a misuttered Speaking. He threw both arms into the air.

"Yes! Finally!"

"Well done," Tax said, a broad smile illuminating his eyes. "I couldn't have done better myself."

That was a blatant lie. Tax could have Spoken the Words three times as fast and lit ten candles in the time it had taken Baz to light the one. But that didn't matter. The praise still felt like sunshine on a cloudy day.

"Let's do another one!" Baz said, flipping ahead several pages in the Book. "Maybe I can try the one that heats metal to orange! I can try it on the brazier."

"Whoa! Hold on, Baz. Let's not get ahead of—"

The large double doors to the Speaking Room suddenly swung open.

“Yeltax, are you in here?”

They both froze, eyes meeting in horror. Two Speakers alone with a Spoken Book? Father had been killed for less. Slowly, their eyes turned in unison to see who had discovered them.

SAMPLE

## Chapter 2

“I say, Yeltax. Where are you?”

Standing at the now open doors was a pair of legs topped by a heaping stack of Books. A wide-brimmed hat with a purple feather sticking from the top poked from around the stack’s edges. Though his face was blocked, it had to be Deliritous Torchshire, first of his name, heir to the Torchshire Library. No one else would, or would be permitted to, walk about the Library carrying many fortunes’ worth of Spoken Books in such a haphazard manner. Some would say his status as heir wasn’t by choice, but necessity, as he was the Duke’s only living child.

While Baz continued to gawk, Tax moved into swift action. Muttering a few words, the candle snuffed out. There was no residual smoke, and only the most observant would have noted the slight shake in Tax’s hand. There’d be a burn there later, where he’d transferred the candle’s heat. He placed their special bookmark in the Spoken Book, then slid the tome and candle into the hole exposed by the loose flagstone and set the stone atop it.

Just as Tax was nestling the final corner of the flagstone into place, Deliritous’s face emerged from behind the stack of Books he held, yellow hair half-covering his blue eyes. He was thirteen years old, and while he’d begun to grow, he was shorter than average yet at that awkward stage where clothes didn’t fit him no matter what the tailors did. The pile of Books in his hands wobbled. Tax yanked his hand away from the stone, a small corner still poking unevenly from the rest of the floor.

“Tut, tut, Yeltax. I don’t let you keep your eyes for gawking. It’s so you can help me in times such as these. Here, take these books. Father will be letting *me* do this afternoon’s Reading, and I was practicing. Those hard *acks* of Destruction? The ones that come from the back of your throat? Ah! Get me every time. My tonsils are still sore.”

Baz had to bite his lower lip to prevent a grin. Deliritous had been Reading for years and still could barely pronounce most words of the Trinity.

Tax hurried over to take the Books from Deliritous. There was no suggestion of rebellion in him when Deliritous was about. Calm subservience was the only sentiment Tax ever emoted around him. But that was just the way of things. Readers led and Speakers followed. Baz didn’t like it, but unlike his brother didn’t see a chance of it changing any time soon, even if young children like himself did learn how to Read.

“Don’t worry yourself, Master Deliritous,” Tax said. “The dictions of Destruction are too harsh for a man of your generous constitution. I’ll understand what you mean when you speak the Words to me.”

“Ah, that’s better,” Deliritous said, relieved of his burden. He made his way up to the dais. “Well, I suppose you’re right. It’s not as if I’m the one who needs to be perfect after all, yes? It won’t be *my* mouth that burns if I misutter the Words.”

He smiled as if he’d made a joke. When Tax didn’t laugh and instead busied himself steadying the stack of Books he’d been handed, Deliritous cleared his throat and smoothed his velveteen tunic, though there were no wrinkles in it. Baz openly glared at Deliritous, partly over his insensitivity, partly because



it was plain he still hadn't even noticed that Baz was there.

"Well, never mind my diction. We must go on regardless. Come, join me on the dais and we'll prepare before the first of the Illits arrive with their supplications. I expect Father will have left me nothing but common sniffles and broken brooms, but a Reading is a Reading, after all. Father said I didn't even need supervision this time. And... oh, Baztian. I didn't see you there."

Baz quickly blanked his face and gave a curt bow. Tax was afforded certain liberties, a tolerance for his freely speaking to Deliritous among them. But Baz, along with the vast majority of other Speakers, was expected to remain silent unless a question was directed to him or he was actively repeating a Reader's words from a Spoken Book. As often as not, a Reader would assume that a Speaker who opened his mouth out of turn was attempting to cast a spell. And if a Reader believed that? Well, Speakers were far less expensive to replace than a Reader.

"Hmm," Deliritous said, looking around the room as if there might be some place he could hide Baz. Of course there wasn't. The Speaking Room was completely unfurnished save for the shelves, lectern, and chair on the dais. Just a large, open space in which supplicants could wait as the Reader listened to their entreaties and granted them as he or she saw fit. Apparently coming to this realization, Deliritous gave a smile that was half a grimace. "I suppose you can turn the pages. Just don't say anything, all right? My fingers still tingle at the thought of what happened the last time I let Yeltax talk me into letting you perform a Speaking."

Baz's face reddened, and he looked away from Deliritous, equal parts shamed and furious. The Torchshire heir grimaced at the reaction he'd caused.

"I'm sor—" But Deliritous stopped himself before he finished and coughed loudly.

*Property isn't something to which you apologize*, Baz thought, still looking away to hide the anger he knew must be showing in his eyes.

"Well, anyway," Deliritous said. "Rox always gets cranky when I make him turn my pages. Prefers to be free to watch the supplicants for signs of danger. *Sworn to protect me* and *Words mean what they mean*, and all that nonsense he's always saying."

"One's nonsense is another's Truth," a voice boomed from the hall beyond the Speaking Room's doors.

Deliritous rolled his eyes. "Oh, Rox. Always so droll. If I understand one thing in ten you say, I count it a grand day."

Rox moved into view. He made the tall oaken doors seem small. Shoulders nearly as wide as the entryway, he towered over Deliritous by a good two feet, and Deliritous wasn't particularly short. He was dressed all in gray, save for the faded leather jerkin that strained across his massive chest. Even his skin was an ashen color that nearly matched his clothing, causing him to blend into the Library's stone walls. Compared to the rest of his body, his head seemed disproportionately small, though that may have been just an illusion caused by the leather mask he wore around his mouth and nose. Narrow slits allowed for breathing and permitted one to just make out the movement of his lips when he spoke. He was entirely

bald, though his hairless pate showed several scars, badges of his vocation.

Rox was Deliritous's Harbour. His sworn protector. Bred and raised solely for the purpose of protecting Readers, Harbours were regarded as frightening killers, and Rox was no exception, save for one thing: he was a native of Enigma, one of Oration's three cities, and the one that specialized in the third branch of the Trinity, Influence. He couldn't Read, of course, but it was said all Enigmans had a peculiar way of speaking. They could take any sentence and make it mean whatever they wished, and not only that, but make *you* believe that's what you'd meant. The Duke had won Rox in a bet with an Enigman trader shortly after Deliritous had been born, and Rox has been his Harbour ever since, watching over him since he'd been in the cradle.

"M'lord?" came a voice from the hall, somewhere behind Rox. Before Baz even realized someone had spoken, Rox spun, weapon in hand. A Harbour's weapon is like no other. Whereas ordinary men use axes or swords, Harbours are trained in the razor. In its compact form, it is a serrated blade, slightly longer than an average man's forearm, with a straight handle along the back allowing it to be wielded with either one or two hands. At first glance, it doesn't look like much more than a woodsman's saw. But in the hands of a Harbour, the weapon can wreak havoc on human flesh in close quarters. And if the Harbour's target is farther away? A snap of the wrist engages a hinge to one side of the handle, extending the blade out and more than doubling the weapon's reach, exposing a straight, cleaving edge opposite the serrated teeth.

Rox used this latter function as he turned, razor extended in one hand, its jagged edge coming to rest at the neck of a slightly hunched woman dressed in a worn and faded dress, though it seemed freshly pressed. She was carrying a basket of chicks, their fuzzy yellow heads poking above the basket's rim. As she flinched away from the Harbour, one of them toppled out of the basket and scurried between Rox's legs into the Speaking Room.

"Stupid giant," Baz muttered, pouncing on the chick and scooping it up as gently as he could.

"Rox!" Deliritous snapped. "Put that murder stick away. It's just one of the supplicants. Though I would like to know who's supposed to be guarding the Library's side entrance. You are a bit early, ma'am." Deliritous turned an apologetic smile to the woman, though her wide eyes were still focused solely on Rox, who had folded up his razor and taken a step away from her.

"It must be the gap in the guard at the lunch hour, Master Deliritous," Tax said.

"The gap in the..." Deliritous slapped a hand to his forehead. "Yes, of course. Ever since we caught that fellow stealing the silver last week and cast him out. Father's been looking for a replacement, but finances being as they are and..."

Deliritous suddenly appeared to realize that the woman was listening to him. Her eyes were growing even wider than they had when Rox's razor had been at her throat. Deliritous's cheeks reddened noticeably.

"Oh, don't you worry, good woman. Things were a bit tight there for a while after Father's injury, but the money's been coming in again these past few years. I'm sure that—"

Tax cleared his throat to stop Deliritous's rambling. The woman's jaw was at risk of falling from her face onto the floor.

Deliritous flushed. "Well, that explains the missing guard, anyway," he muttered. "Yeltax, put those books down and draw back one of those curtains. Let's get some light in here! I'm sorry for the trouble ma'am, and the Torchsire Library's apologies for how cold it is in here, but no fires in the Speaking Room. Not good for the books, after all."

The woman appeared speechless for a moment, whether over being directly addressed by the heir of one of Erstwhile's nine Libraries or still from the shock of Rox's defensiveness, it was difficult to say. She shook her head, blinking her eyes several times.

"It's all right, m'lord, I'm sure. But, if I might be so bold, where is the Duke? I came for a Speaking. My chicks, you see. They're sick. And I need them. The eggs, it's how I make me money."

Baz might have just been imagining things, but Deliritous seemed to draw himself up a little taller.

"I'll be doing the Speaking today, good lady. And I see no reason to wait. Why don't we begin?"

"Oh," said the woman, bending her head to one side, as if imagining the Duke might be hiding somewhere on the dais behind Deliritous. "Are you certain, m'lord? I could come back another day if—"

"No, no," Deliritous cut in. "It's quite all right, wouldn't want to inconvenience you. Come Yeltax. Attend me on the dais for the Reading. You too, Baztian. If I recall right, the spell we'll need for this woman's chicks spans multiple pages. Killing's a prolonged process, even if it is only killing an illness.

Lady, if you'd just give your offering to Rox there, we'll get started in a moment."

The woman opened her mouth as if she wanted to say more, but shut it again, and handed over a few coins when Rox held out a hand. The Harbour's hand wasn't much smaller than the basket she carried, and the woman tossed the coins into it, rather than risk touching him. Baz gave the chick he'd corralled a final pet and handed it back to the woman, giving her a look of commiseration. She smiled and took the bird, though her eyes darted away when they landed upon the Destruction brand on his forehead. Baz turned away before she could see his scowl, heading for the dais. Deliritous was rummaging in the shelf of Spoken Books, which he'd unlocked with a large gold key with a glimmering sapphire set in its handle.

"Now Yeltax, which Book of Creation is that healing spell for poultry in?"

Baz shot his brother a quick look, eyebrow arched. Tax just shook his head. *This* was what the future of the Torchshire Library depended on. Tax cleared his throat and leaned close to the youth, speaking quietly. "Pardon me, Master Deliritous. But if the lady's chicks have an infection, you'll be wanting a Book of Destruction to kill the disease. That one, I think." Tax pointed to a tome twice the size of the one Baz had been Reading prior to Deliritous's arrival. It was bound in red leather with golden letters of Destruction etched on its spine.

"Right," Deliritous said. "Just testing you out, ol' Yeltax. You passed, of course."

Baz rolled his eyes at Deliritous's turned back. A grunt that sounded more like the sneeze of a giant boar startled Baz so that he nearly stumbled off the

dais. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed Rox towering over him. There was no way the Harbour could have seen the derisive expression Baz had given Deliritous. But still, he wiped all condescension from his face. No one made friends with a Harbour, but you could certainly lower your chances of a Harbour using his razor on you. Insulting the Harbour's Reader was not such a method.

Deliritous removed the tome Tax had indicated and nearly dropped it as he made his way to the lectern. The lady twisted her hands on the basket's handle and looked sidelong toward the door, as if calculating whether she could make it there without Deliritous noticing.

"Right," Deliritous said, flipping through the Book's pages once he'd gotten it settled on the lectern. "We seem to have used this one a lot lately, old Yeltax. Ink's starting to fade. Make note that we'll need to send it to the Conservators soon for restoration."

Tax glanced at the Book. "As you command, Master Deliritous. Though, if I might be so bold, it appears there's enough elemental ink there for several more Readings before the Book will lose its power."

Deliritous stopped flipping pages for a moment. Baz held his breath.

"Don't let me catch you looking at a Book's Words again, Yeltax," Deliritous said, quiet enough that the woman waiting for the Reading couldn't hear.

A twitch at the edge of Tax's mouth was the only outward admission of error he showed. "Of course. My apologies."

Deliritous began flipping through the Book again. And kept flipping. Then began flipping back the other way.

“Why, good Yeltax,” Deliritous said, an edge of frustration replacing the warning that had been in his tone, “are there so many Words in a book that holds so few spells? This one can’t have more than a dozen, and the longest doesn’t have more than but a few pages of Reading.”

Deliritous often complained of this, and Baz knew by now that he didn’t expect an answer. A simple spell might require only a single Spoken sentence, and even the most complex rarely required more than a few pages of text, but the rest of the Book provided guidance on pronunciation and enunciation, detailed history of the spells’ origins, and suggested uses. Also, unless one was using a starter, all that elemental ink was needed to provide sufficient fuel to power the spell. All things that Deliritous ought to have been committing to memory, rather than complaining over.

“Here it is,” Deliritous finally announced. “Well, no need to dally. There’ll be other supplicants here soon. Ready, Yeltax?”

Tax took a deep breath and nodded. For all that he said against the Readers in private, he always took his job of Speaking seriously. Even if he was a slave, his Speakings helped Illits like the poor woman.

“Move just a bit closer, Yeltax. Don’t want you straining.”

Tax’s lips thinned. He was only a handful of steps away from Deliritous and the Book before him, easily close enough to draw power from the elements imbued in the Book’s ink. But arguing was pointless, and he shuffled a step closer.

“Very good,” Deliritous said. “Now, Baztian, be ready with the page turn.”



Baz nodded, making the incredibly stupid mistake of repeating Tax's earlier error by looking down toward the page Deliritous had stopped on to see the last few words written there. A growl from a wide-eyed Tax was all that saved Baz from a whole lot of explaining. Or worse.

"I say, Yeltax. Are you quite all right?"

"Fine, Master Deliritous," Tax said, taking his eyes from Baz. "Just a new exercise to warm up my vocals is all."

"Hmm, well I don't like it, but do what you must if it helps. Let's begin. Just hold out those chicks a little closer, my good woman, and we'll have them cured in a jiff."

Without waiting to see if the woman complied, Deliritous stooped over the Book like a gargoyle. He opened his mouth to begin, but once again Rox, who had moved to stand behind Tax, one hand on his razor, cleared his throat like the crash of a wave.

"Yes, yes, Rox," Deliritous said, exasperated. "The Stop Rune, though I don't know what Yeltax could possibly do to me with a spell designed to cure chickens of a runny nose." He ran his finger over the page for a moment before apparently finding the Rune and uttering it aloud. There was actually a third use of the Stop Runes that Baz hadn't given to Tax earlier. The Readers used them to ensure that the Speaker didn't cast the desired spell, then turn and Speak it again, targeted at the Reader. It was rare, but not unheard of, for a disgruntled Speaker to attack his or her Reader in such a manner, which was why Rox had moved to where he had. Any indication that Tax intended to turn the spell on Deliritous, or failure to utter the Stop Rune, and Baz would have a front row

seat to the damage Rox's razor could inflict upon a human body.

"Satisfied, Rox?" Deliritous asked.

"Keep you from harm is the oath I swore," Rox rumbled in reply. "The words mean what they mean."

Deliritous shook his head like he'd heard that dozens of times before. Which, of course he had. In fact, *Baz* had heard Rox say that dozens of times. Surely Deliritous had heard it thousands.

"Good, then let's start with the Words that actually matter."

Deliritous began Reading in the guttural tones of Destruction. His pronunciations were all off. Voice moving like silk over what ought to have been hard consonants, rolls of the tongue that ought to have been snaps. For a lesser Speaker, such incompetence would have been a disaster. But Tax was one of the best Speakers in all Erstwhile, and he ignored Deliritous's floundering, repeating the words that came stammering out of Deliritous's mouth with perfect diction. Baz followed the movements of his brother's mouth, admiring his skill.

Deliritous snapped his fingers, then stopped speaking a moment later. An instant too late, Baz realized that had been the signal to turn the page. He fumbled at the page, but only managed to give himself a paper cut. Deliritous cursed, and Tax yelped out in pain as Baz felt a rush of power leap from the altar, straight toward where the woman stood with her chicks. Several sickening pops were quickly followed by a scream. Baz looked up in time to see the lady trip over backward and fall to the Speaking Room's stone floor, some of the splattered remains of her chicks

staining her dress, face, and, Baz noted with particular chagrin, her hair.

“Baztian you...” Deliritous half raised a hand to strike him, then appeared to reconsider and instead just shook his head in disgust. “Rox, get over there and help her. I’m sorry, good woman. But these things do happen. I’ll see you receive recompense from the treasury for this mishap.”

The woman looked horrified at the prospect of Deliritous giving her any more “help.” She managed to get herself up before Rox reached her and ran from the Speaking Room without a backward glance. She left the ruined basket behind on the floor.

On the floor. Right next to a displaced flagstone she must have tripped over during her fall. Rox bent over the exposed hole.

“What’s this?” he boomed, leaning over and coming up with the Book Tax had placed there. The Book from which Baz had been Reading right before Deliritous had entered.

“Why, that’s the missing Book of Destruction. Burning take me! Father had three servants executed because he suspected they’d taken it. And it’s been here the whole time.”

“Hmmm,” Rox rumbled. “That’s not all.” The foreboding tone of the Harbour’s voice sent waves through Baz’s already roiling stomach. He looked to his brother, but Tax was standing rail straight and staring straight ahead.

“There’s this.” Rox plucked the Bookmark from the Book and handed it to Deliritous. It was a thin strip of leather, perhaps two fingers wide and about as long as a book was tall. The symbols of each of the three branches of the Trinity were burned into

it with dark brands: the trees of the Creator, Leamina Fortune; the dragons of the Destroyer, Helfax Erstwhile; and the scales of the Enigma, Pront vi Lextor. The same three symbols were branded on Tax's forehead, marking him a Tri.

"Why," Deliritous said, turning the Bookmark over in his hands, "this is..." His eyes widened as they darted over to Tax. He took a step back. "This is your father's marker, Yeltax. I remember my own father gave it to you after your father's, er, retirement. It was you who took the Book?"

Baz opened his mouth to cry a defense of his brother, but the sudden blaze in Tax's eyes snapped Baz's mouth shut. Deliritous looked away from Tax, continuing to turn the Bookmark over and over in his hands, as if it would give him some answer.

"You've been Reading, haven't you? Father warned me you might be too smart for your own good, but I told him you'd never do such a thing. Shows how much I know."

"Master Deliritous," Tax said, voice unbelievably calm, "I'm not sure how that Book got there, but I assure you—"

"He wasn't going to hurt anyone!" Baz blurted, certain that saying something would be helpful.

Tax's mouth hung open midword for several seconds, then slowly closed. Deliritous's stayed open for much longer. The sad smile Tax gave Baz would be imprinted in Baz's mind for the rest of his life.

Silence stretched for some time. Baz yearned for his brother to say something smart that would cancel this whole thing out. Show it for some great misunderstanding. It had been Baz who'd suggested using father's marker in the Book. "Let's put it to its

intended purpose,” he’d told Tax. Tax hadn’t wanted to initially, but finally he’d agreed after seeing how happy it made Baz. Now look where that stupid sentiment had gotten them.

“Well,” Deliritous finally said, voice a whisper, hard and sad all at once. “There’s only one thing we can do to a Cuss, Rox. Kill him.”

“No!” Baz cried, turning on Deliritous. “No! I won’t let you!”

“Baz, stop,” Tax said. “Don’t make this even harder than it’s already going to be.”

“Come, Rox,” Deliritous said with an urgency in his tone, as if this were somehow hurting *him*. “Get on with it.”

Baz’s eyes darted to Rox, as if the massive man could hold any hope for him. But the giant actually seemed to be hesitating.

“A threat to you he is not,” Rox said.

“Not a threat?” Deliritous’s voice came out a shrill whine. “A Cuss could lay waste to this Library, Rox. And if the other Libraries hear we let one go unpunished? Torchsire would be no more! Every Library in the Triumvirate would send assassins in a matter of days. How *safe* do you think I’d be then?”

Rox turned his head to one side as if considering, then exhaled in what might have been a sigh. “I hear Truth. The words mean what they mean.” He began to walk toward Tax.

“Keep breathing, Baz,” Tax said, standing tall in the Harbour’s shadow. “Keep surviving.”

Baz never forgot the sound of his brother’s screams.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

## THE ACKTUS TRIALS

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