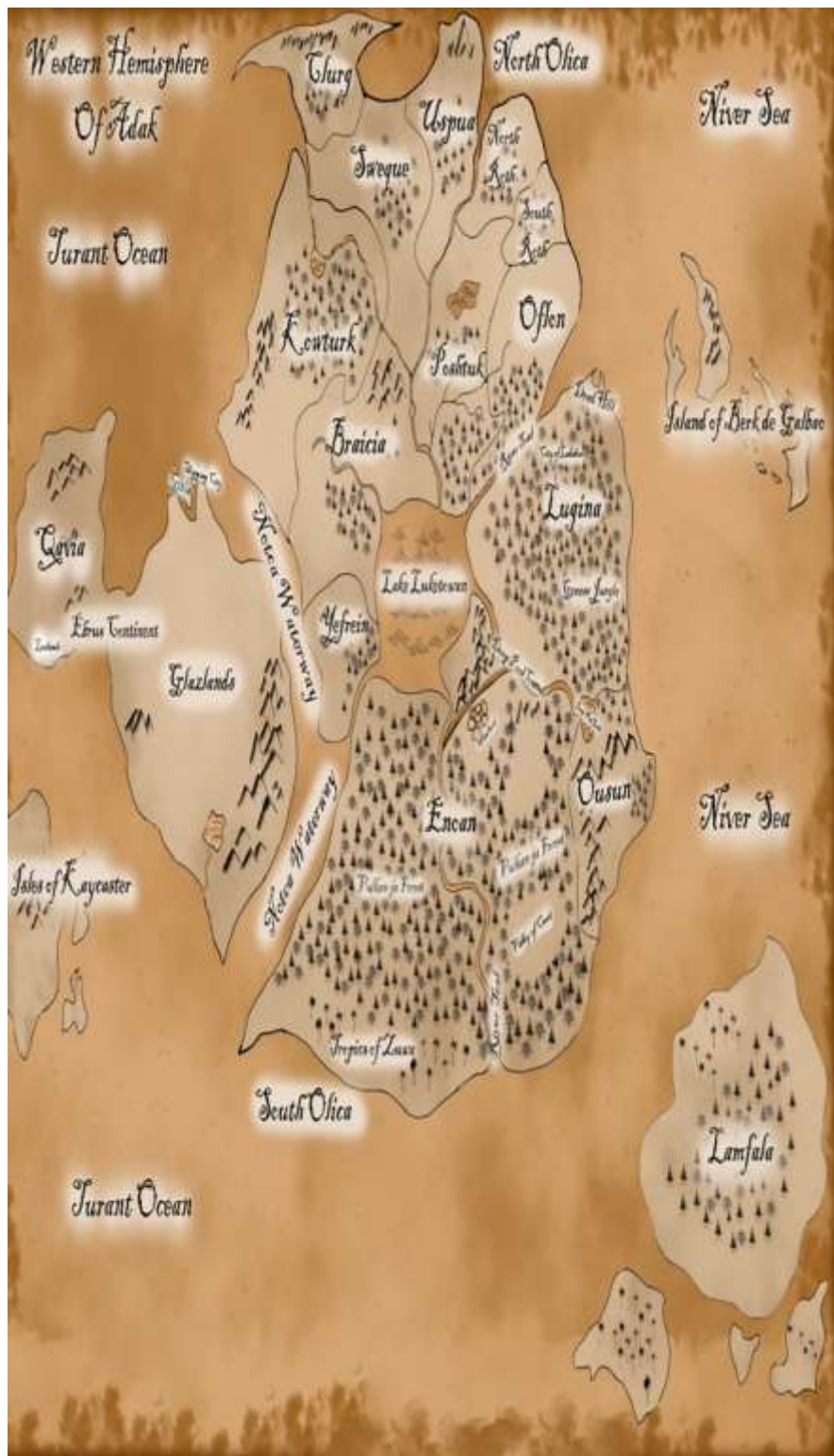


Cycles
A Cut Through Time

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(Book One)





Cycles
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Adak was once a beautiful, thriving world—until the final cycle came and destroyed it all. Altered by the festering magic that transformed rivers into sludge and fertile soil into ash, no part of the planet was spared from destruction. Not the sky, once blue and now turned a sickly green, nor the oceans that had teemed with aquatic life but were now vast vats of oily liquid.

Even the outer planes seemed affected, for the stars no longer shone, as though they had been snuffed out one by one. The sun had become a cold speck in the distance, wary of the world upon which it had once bestowed warmth and light.

All life that hadn't perished during the cycle was condemned to endure pain and mutation, playthings for the dark magic that slithered across the globe, reveling in what it had accomplished as it devoured the world piece by piece.

Not many structures still stood. Towns, villages, and cities had crumbled into ruins long ago. Anything that remained could only be described as skeletal forms of decay.

And yet, on a patch of harsh land where the terrain was nothing but jagged volcanic rock overlooking the black sheen of the ocean, rested a small dwelling carved from the earth by a pair of bleeding hands. Within this aboveground cave house sat the last fighter who had failed to prevent the cycle from coming.

Draven scribbled in a makeshift book he had assembled from scraps of parchment, thin cuts of wood that hadn't burned, and leaves he had plucked before the trees disintegrated into dust.

With no ink left to use, he had resorted to writing with his own blood.

Hardly a stitch of clothing covered him anymore. Worn away by time and harsh living, it was a wonder the cold nights hadn't driven him mad—if he wasn't already. After all, here he was, writing instructions on how to reconstruct a civilization that would never exist again.

The swelling in his hands throbbed daily, as did his gnarled fingers that could barely grasp anything, much less the slender stem of a quill. The shabby thing had come from a bird he had killed for food—his last meal.

Still, he wrote in his crude tome, pushing through the aches and pains, ignoring the pus oozing from the blisters covering his near-naked body.

His only companions rested on the planks that formed his desk: three skulls that had once belonged to his friends and fellow warriors.

Three skulls—one of them, a half broken one, he believed, was Leilatha's.

He remembered the day they made the mistake that cost the world everything . . .

“We can't do this,” Draven argued, following Leilatha toward the tower.

“They're dead!” she shouted over her shoulder. “We have to!”

“It isn't our place,” he fired back.

She ignored him and kept going. Behind them were the siblings—warriors like him and Leilatha. Soldiers who had trained for many seasons to be where they were now. Top fighters for the Ecclesiastics, whom they had each failed to keep alive. Now Leilatha had appointed them all to recite words that were never meant to pass through the mere lips of lowly servants like them.

Evening had come, but the fires burning the village to ash lit up the night. The screams were swallowed by the wind, stirred by the dark magic that had come to reclaim its captive part.

They entered the tower—a wide, circular building constructed of sodalite stone, with four pillars holding up the tall, arched ceiling. In the center stood statues of ancient deities, each with a large jewel buried in its chest. Leilatha led them to the statue with the only jewel glowing with the essence imprisoned inside.

We shouldn't be doing this, Draven thought.

Yet who else was around to speak the words? The Ecclesiastics had been butchered, and no one but their personal guard—these warriors—had been present when the ritual was practiced and when they ultimately captured a piece of the dark magic.

But it went wrong.

So horribly wrong.

Draven and the other three soldiers were supposed to be immortal. That was the deal when they signed up to battle the dark magic. But they all died, consumed by the very enemy that currently festered in Draven. Soon enough, it would overtake him just like the others.

But for now, he sat and he wrote and illustrated as he had done to help the next population evolve and rebuild.

Holding onto the slightest hope that someday someone would use the knowledge to replenish the world and restore it to what it was before.

Draven scribbled his words and images in his blood.



The Discovery

“We’ve yet to lose so long as we have a piece of you imprisoned! Without you being whole, you cannot lay waste to this planet! No more cycles!”

“No more cycles!”

“What are you doing? You must say the—”

“It didn’t work!”

“What have you done? You’ve killed us all!”

What the explorers found inside the cave would invite the worldwide threat to begin all over again.

Tok and his small team had discovered the cave days earlier after encountering a massive sinkhole. Using rope, each of them climbed down one at a time. When they reached the bottom, they found a cavern teeming with life.

Animals and plants—usually found above ground—were somehow surviving in the darkness. Thick, damp moss covered the ground, with tiny colorless flowers sprouting from it. The community of underground life stretched deep into the grotto.

Water crystals had formed along the walls and ceiling, creating a tiled effect that shimmered whenever light touched them. These formations usually developed only in caves with a copious amount of moisture, where the humidity could become so intense that spelunkers risked drowning in their own air, their lungs slowly liquefying. Yet this cave carried no such threat, which puzzled Tok.

Shallow pools of glimmering blue water dotted the rocky floor. Tok recognized the glowing phenomenon as reef pods. When the pods reached maturity, they would burst open, expelling illumination seeds that eventually planted themselves in the seabed and grew into coral.

Tok knelt beside a pool and dipped his hand into the water.

“Freshwater,” he muttered after withdrawing his fingers from his mouth.

Of course it had to be fresh water. They were miles from the nearest shore. There was no coral in sight either. Perhaps the glow came from something else entirely. Tok couldn’t be certain.

Despite the glowing pools, they kept their lanterns lit.

The tunnel was cool and sweet-smelling, and a strange energy in the air made the hairs on Tok’s body stand on end. Underground rodents and the abundance of edible plants provided the explorers with a reliable food source. This unexpected blessing allowed them to remain inside the cavern while conserving their rations.

Tok and his companions belonged to the Pudicus race who, aside from their hoggish noses that granted them a powerful sense of smell, looked similar to the Apex.

There were several races of sapiens, with the Apex dominating most populations. Each subspecies had distinctive features. Over a thousand seasons ago, a war between the races had nearly wiped out the Esins tribe. Nowadays, those wild sapiens lived mostly in distant communities far from known civilizations.

“How far do you think this tunnel goes?” Riniya asked. “We’ve been exploring for two days.”

“We’ll find out eventually,” Tok replied. “It’s the most unique place we’ve ever seen, that’s for sure.”

Tok glanced over his shoulder at Riniya, Kabbal, and Floy trailing behind him. Each of them was driven by curiosity, constantly searching the world of Adak for hidden wonders. They often sold their discoveries to fund their endless expeditions.

“Up ahead,” Kabbal said excitedly. “Look!”

The cave tunnel finally opened into a vast chamber. It was almost like stepping into an underground mansion. Moss and pale flowers continued to carpet the floor. Rodents bounced in every direction on long hind legs, the lantern light reflecting in their bright eyes. More glowing pools appeared here, only deeper and wider than the puddles in the tunnel.

Massive stalactites hung from the high ceiling, some stretching down far enough to meet the ground and form towering columns.

“There are statues over there,” Floy announced.

Across the chamber stood four ten-foot-tall figures carved from sodalite. The various blues, whites, and blacks swirled across them like frozen winds.

On their journey through the forest, Tok had noticed many sodalite stones—some as large as boulders. Several had even formed square shapes, as though they had once been chiseled into massive bricks. The closer they had come to the cave, the more frequently these colorful stones appeared.

Each statue sat cross-legged with its hands resting on bent knees, their backs facing one another. Vines had grown around them, wrapping tightly along their forms. Between the vines were markings etched along their arms, sides, and legs. The designs appeared tribal, but none resembled anything Tok had ever seen among the clans.

He approached, sniffing cautiously. His snout-like nose twitched as he tried to catch a scent.

He detected nothing.

Embedded in each statue’s chest was an uncut stone the size of a coconut—jagged jewels of deep blue, emerald, and crimson.

“Could this cavern belong to an ancient civilization?” Riniya asked.

Tok considered the possibility as he stopped before the sculptures. “It’s possible. But where is everything else? This is the only artificial structure here.”

Kabbal pointed at one of the embedded stones. “Should we take them?”

Tok slipped off his rucksack and climbed onto the leg of one statue, grabbing a vine for balance.

“They would make good trinkets to sell later on.”

Tok withdrew his knife and dug the tip into the sliver of space between the statue and the crystal. Since he didn’t expect to gain any profit from the stone, he was crude in his excavation. Sprinkles of granite fell as he tried to pop the thing out, jabbing the blade in and twisting it before pushing against the handle. The crystal was wedged in so tightly that Tok wondered if it was part of the sculpture itself.

Then the knife caught perfectly, making the gem shift. His skin rippled with excitement.

I got it!

The object moved again.

“With a final yank, a crack sounded.

“I almost have it!” Kabbal exclaimed happily, still working to pry out his own keepsake.

Tok chewed his bottom lip as he kept pushing on the handle. A gentle rumble vibrated throughout the grand chamber. Too engrossed in his quest to obtain the artifact, Tok failed to notice it immediately.

With another loud crack, the gem came loose. Tok grabbed hold and plucked the stone from its former home. It weighed heavily in his hand.

A second violent shake nearly caused him to lose his footing.

“It’s a land shake!” Riniya yelled in panic.

Tok held onto the ivy, hurrying to shove the stone into the satchel strapped around him, when a more powerful tremor forced him to release it and grab the vines with both hands. The entire place rocked madly, loosening sections of the cave ceiling. Clumps of rock fell and landed hard, adding to the jolting.

Floy screamed, but his cries were short-lived when falling rubble crushed him.

The shaking stole Tok’s grip on the vine, knocking him off. When he hit the ground, he spotted the gem nearby. The rocky foundation cracked, and the jewel teetered on the edge of a rapidly expanding opening.

A faint glow materialized inside the stone and then dispersed into tiny dots of light. A few speckles shot off like shooting stars. It looked as though a whole universe lived inside the stone.

The stone dropped—on its way to being lost forever.

Then it wasn’t.

Tok seized it and pulled it safely away from the pit. He drew it close and pressed it against his chest. A warm comfort coursed through him. The tranquil feeling came from the stone itself.

But how?

The quake intensified, causing Tok to bounce a few times. A huge piece of ceiling crashed directly onto the statues, breaking them apart. Severed pieces remained entangled within the clinging creeper vines. Chunks of rock continued to collapse, smashing into what remained of the four figures.

Tok was so certain he wouldn’t be harmed that he didn’t even shut his eyes. Instead, he watched what felt like the entire world ending. Large stones rolled around him, some of them pieces of the statues themselves. Falling boulders blotted out the faint light from the pools of water, and soon everything went dark.



After the darkness took over, the chaos subsided.

When everything was still, Tok rose and groped through the air for his rucksack when Kabbal yelled, “Tok!”

“I’m coming,” Tok called back. “Hold on.”

He found his pack and rummaged through it until he located his spare lantern and a box of firestones. He scraped them together until one ignited. Once the firestone lit, he set it inside the lantern.

With the light to guide him, he climbed over the rubble. “Kabbal! Are you all right?”
“I’m fine, but Riniya is hurt.”

When Tok reached them, he saw Riniya’s leg trapped beneath a rock. Kabbal’s head was bleeding, and cuts covered his face. It seemed only Tok had escaped without injury.

Tok’s heart sank when Kabbal asked, “Where is Floy?”

Unable to say that Floy had died, Tok only shook his head and released a crestfallen sigh.

With Tok’s help, he and Kabbal lifted the heavy boulder enough for Riniya to pull her leg free. Once she was released, it was clear she wouldn’t be able to walk on her own. Her blood-drenched calf had shards of bone protruding from where it had been crushed. Riniya was also barely conscious, which, given the extent of her injuries, was a small mercy.

Tok and Kabbal patched her up as best they could, fastened her leg into a makeshift splint, and fashioned a stretcher from Tok’s bedroll. Together, they carried Riniya away. Tok only hoped the cave shaft remained accessible.

“It amazes me that you don’t even have a scratch on you,” Kabbal said.

“Yes,” Tok agreed, glancing at the satchel where the stone was now stored.



Days after the stone was taken, someone woke up.