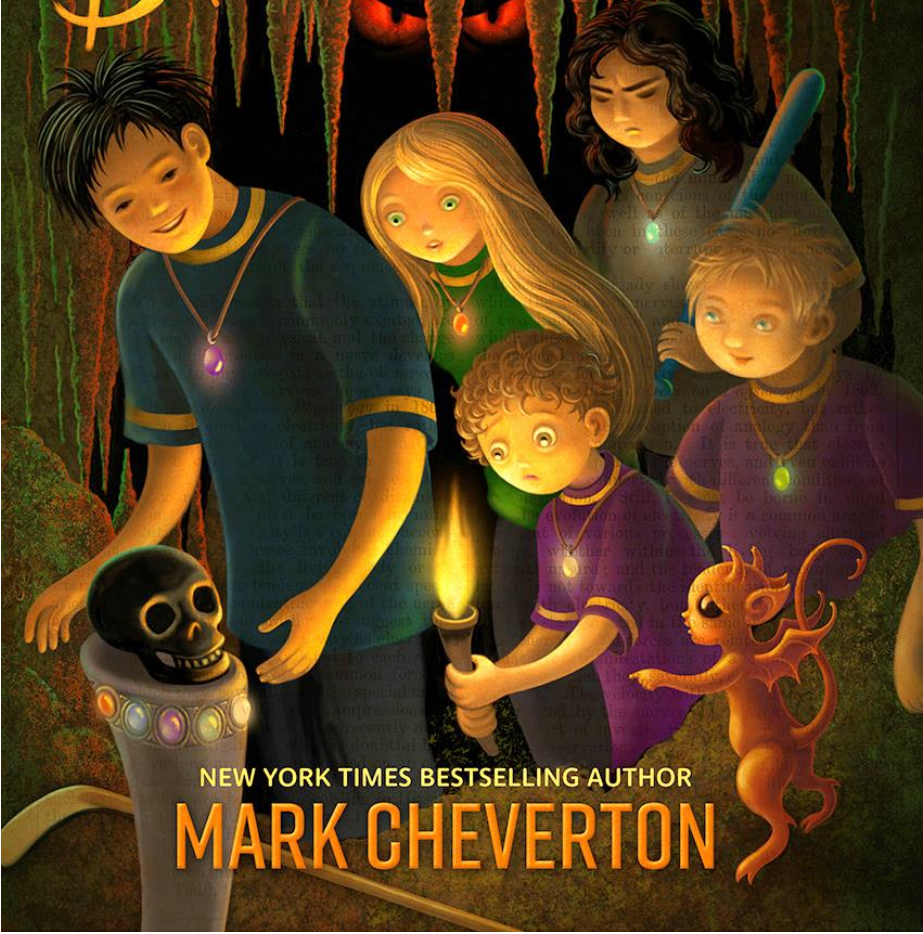


ORDER OF THE STONES BOOK I

FACING THE BEAST WITHIN

The ANXIETY of CAMERON POOLE

FLIPBOOK INSIDE!



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MARK CHEVERTON

FACING THE BEAST WITHIN

The ANXIETY of CAMERON POOLE
Book 1 in the *Order of the Stones* series

Mark Cheverton

Chapter 14 – Second Skull Key

We bolted through the dark tunnel, our feet pounding the rough ground. The sound of vicious snarls and hungry growls echoed off the stone walls, the monstrous voices filling the air around us like a terrifying melody of violence. My heart pounded in my chest like thunder from a hot summer storm. Each beat filled my ear with a frenzied thump. Sweat poured down my forehead in thick, sticky droplets despite the unnatural chill in the catacombs. I tried to wipe the moisture from my face but ended up smearing sweat into my eyes.

Bobby smiled, drawing a scowl from Karl. “We go to the left.”

“We need to . . . move faster,” I said, my voice cracking with fear.

“Less talking, more running.” Karl shoved Bobby forward. “Move, Blobby, before you become a hearty snack for those monsters.”

“Karl, be nice for a change.” Elisa put a hand on Bobby’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, Elisa,” Bobby said, then turned to Karl. “We can only be the person we believe we can be, and no more. Karl here believes his only choice is to be rude and offensive. It’s not his fault. He just doesn’t have faith in himself to be more.”



“You talk a lot, techie,” Karl growled. “Start running.” He pushed Bobby forward again, then glanced over his shoulder. “Are the rest of you ladies coming, or have you all become geeks like him?” Karl tapped his aluminum baseball bat on the ground with a pinging sound.

I scowled at Karl, as did Elisa and Leonard.

We ran through the passage, each listening for claws scratching stone. I glanced over my shoulder and watched for that red glow from the imp’s horns. We’d likely see that before we saw our pursuers.

“The map says it should be just ahead,” Bobby said, then glanced at Karl, “unless I can’t be trusted.”

Karl waved his hand as if shooing away a fly, ignoring the comment.

“The location on the map says *‘under the point.’*” Bobby looked closer at the map, then turned it so it was upside down. “But it also says, ‘A light step leaves no footprints.’ What’s that mean?”

“It’s a warning, I think.” I slowed and pointed my flashlight at the ground. “The hint is footprints; we gotta be careful where we step.”

“Right,” Leonard said. “Look for something pointed, but watch the ground.”

We moved cautiously forward, the sounds of monsters still percolating out of the darkness, their angry voices faint but growing. The passage grew wide, the ceiling too high to touch. Here and there, water dripped from the rocky covering, occasionally falling on our heads and forming puddles on the ground. Over centuries, the dripping water formed shapes on the ceiling and floor. Cone-shaped stalactites stabbed down from overhead like large, stone teeth, each dripping mineral-rich water onto a similar stony structure rising out of the ground. In some places, the stalagmites growing up from the floor met the stalactites hanging from the ceiling, forming a column of stones, water trickling down its side.

“We’re there.” Bobby folded the map and stuffed it in a pocket.

We scanned the area, aiming flashlights in all directions. Stalagmites and stalactites filled the chamber, creating a stone forest. All of them glistened with moisture, the mineral-rich water which formed them dripping from their rough surfaces. But of all the stalagmites and stalactites in the passage, one seemed curiously dry.

“Anyone see anything?” Bobby whispered.

“Watch your step.” I threaded my fingers through my hair.



“I don’t see anything pointed on the walls.” Leonard moved his light around, searching for the skull.

I stood back from the dry stalagmite and stared up at its companion stalactite hanging from the ceiling. “Notice these two are the only dry stalagmite and stalactite pair. Moisture covers the rest of them.”

“Why’s that such a big deal?” Karl asked.

“It’s not normal.” I pointed my flashlight at the stony pair. “Mineral water drips down from the stalactite forming the stalagmite on the ground, but there’s no water here; it’s bone dry.” I scanned my light across the rocky structure. “It looks like there’s a seam on the stalagmite growing out of the ground.” I ran my fingers over the stone, then glanced at Leonard and Karl. “I bet you two can push the top off.”

“Under the point . . . of course.” Bobby slapped the baseball captain on the back.

Karl turned and glared at the techie. “Don’t do that again!”

“Sorry . . . whatever.”

“Let’s see if that stone will move.” Karl moved closer to the rocky structure.

“Wait . . . the ground . . . it’s—” Before I could finish the sentence, Karl stepped forward. His foot landed on a dust-covered section, and suddenly the ground fell away right beneath him.

I reached out, grabbed the back of Karl’s jersey, and yanked. We tumbled backward with arms flailing as a hole opened in the ground. With a sickening thud, Karl’s body crashed into mine, knocking the wind out of my lungs. I gasped for breath.

Karl pushed off me, his bulk squishing me like a deflating balloon. He climbed to his feet, but instead of offering a hand to help me up, he just glared at me.

I took a breath, the dusty air calming the fire in my lungs. Slowly, I climbed to my feet, my body aching.

“What are you doing, you idiot!” Karl adjusted his shirt. His eyes narrowed as his anger turned to rage. “I had it under control and—”

“Look!” I pointed to the floor near the dry stalagmite.

A jagged hole opened into darkness right where Karl had stepped. I aimed my light into the opening but could see nothing.

“I don’t know how far down it goes, but it’s far.” I wiped the sweat from my forehead, the dust and dirt on my sleeve leaving a dark smear. A momentary feeling of pride pushed down the buzzing



hornets in my head as the realization hit me; I had just saved someone's life. I turned to Karl. "We must be careful."

"Umm . . . I can hear monsters," Elisa said. "And they're getting louder. I think they heard us."

The buzzing returned, the pride evaporating under a cloud of *ANTs* and *what-ifs*.

"Humans, I smell humans," a voice said, the scratchy words floating out of the darkness like a nightmare.

A chill slithered down my spine.

"We gotta hurry." Elisa's terrified words came out in rapid-fire.

"We can't hurry," I whispered. "Caution will keep everyone safe."

I can't let any of my friends die. I can do this; I can keep them safe . . . even Karl.

Kneeling, I blew across the ground, my mind focused on the problem and ignoring the *ANTs* for now. The fine dust floated into the air, filling our flashlight beams with a gray haze. Beneath the dirt and grime, I found a patchwork of square stone tiles three feet on a side, each one identical in size and shape.

"You see," I said, "here's the trap."

"Okay, *professor*," Karl mocked. "What do we do? Step on them one at a time and see what happens."

"No, but I have a better idea." I reached out to Karl. "Give me your bat."

"My bat, Number Three? I don't think so."

"They're getting louder." Elisa pointed her flashlight toward me, her voice frantic. "Hurry, please."

Leonard moved to my side. "Give him your bat, Karl, unless you wanna face an army of monsters."

Karl sighed, then handed me the bat.

Carefully, I tapped the nearest tile. The bat pinged.

"You better not scratch my bat."

Ignoring him, I hit the tile harder and then harder, but nothing happened. Turning, I glanced at Leonard. "Hold on to my backpack so that I won't fall."

Leonard moved behind and grabbed my backpack. "Okay, I got you."

Carefully, I put my weight on the tile . . . it held.

"Try the next one." Bobby pulled a piece of chocolate from his bag and smeared it on the tile. "This way, we know it's safe."



I nodded, then tested the tiles while Leonard held onto me. In a minute, I'd found all the stable and unstable tiles, a chocolate path keeping us safe.

I handed Karl his bat. "I think you two can now get to the stalagmite and push the top off."

Leonard turned to Karl and nodded. "Let's do it."

Karl glared, then tossed the bat back to me. "Hold this and don't do anything stupid with it."

Leonard and Karl hopped from tile to tile until they stood next to the rocky structure. Both athletes put their shoulders against the heavy stalagmite and shoved. With a loud, grinding sound, the stone inched sideways. The scratchy, gravelly noise reminded me of the gargoyle's voice.

A gremlin suddenly stepped out of the darkness, the creature fat and overweight. A wide leather belt surrounded its rotund belly, sharp stone knives attached along its length. In its left hand, the monster held a vicious-looking whip, this one black as night.

"Watch out." Bobby dove out of the way just as the whip cracked in the air where he'd been standing.

The monster turned to me and flicked his wrist. The whip shot through the air like a vicious snake. I raised the bat just in time to deflect the attack, the whip grazing my arm, stinging. Fear blasted through my mind as the vicious creature snarled, its hideous pointed teeth smacking together. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, making my head throb. The buzzing filled every crevasse of my mind, the *what-ifs* trying to devour me from the inside. The monster turned toward Elisa and raised its arm, readying for another attack.

I can't let that happen . . . I won't let it happen.

Something inside me snapped, and the buzzing in my head instantly went silent. The thought of Elisa getting hurt blasted away the *ANTs* and *what-ifs* in my head, leaving only rage. My fear evaporated as every thought went to keeping her safe.

Moving on instinct, I dropped the bat and charged, my entire being laser-focused on that evil gremlin.

The whip cracked, just missing Elisa's face.

I rushed toward the gremlin. As I ran, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a device the size of a cell phone, a static-stunner, two pointed barbs sticking out of the top. I flipped the power switch just as the gremlin dropped the whip and reached for



a stone knife. Sparks danced across the two barbs as I smashed into the gremlin. The sharp points stabbed into the monster's thick hide, bringing a shout of surprise from the Agarthan. Instantly, electricity danced across the gremlin's skin, and the monster shrieked in pain. Like tiny glowing spiders, sparks of electrical power crawled across the gremlin's flesh, muscles convulsing until the terrible creature fell backward, unconscious.

I glanced over my shoulder at Leonard and Karl. "You need to get it done, now!" My voice shook.

"They're almost done," Bobby said, his voice rising with excitement.

The sound of clawed feet scraping the rocky floor of the tunnel grew louder.

"Harder," Leonard said, his voice straining. "Push harder."

The top of the stalagmite moved faster, sliding and sliding until it fell over with a crash, revealing a hollowed-out section. Sitting within was an object wrapped in a tattered cloth. Leonard lifted it out and pulled aside the fabric. A carved skull the size of a cantaloupe stared at them, the surface a polished blue with splashes of white here and there, the same as the stone hanging around Karl's neck.

"That's the Skull Key." I held my hands out, and Leonard tossed it to me. "Let's get out of here."

"The Skull of Longing is near," a high-pitched voice shouted. "I can feel it."

"Fly after it, imp," a deep, scratchy voice said. "The Demon Lord of Agartha commands it. Imps, fly after the Skull of Longing. Destroy anyone or anything in your path."

"We need to get out of here." I wiped off the last bit of dust and dirt from the skull. "Bobby, where's the next key?"

Peering at the map, Bobby murmured to himself for a moment, then looked up. "We keep following this passage. Then we go to the—"

Suddenly, three imps and a gargoyle charged out of the shadows.

"Monsters!" Elisa shouted. She moved backward, firing her arrows at the airborne creatures, her shafts missing.

The buzzing exploded in my head. A storm of fear and doubt wrapped around me, suffocating my thoughts, hope feeling forever out of reach. I couldn't think or feel; fear paralyzed my body and mind. My Beast had me in its clutches and refused to let go, my thinking brain a prisoner to my anxiety.



Will this terror last forever? My thought made the Beast even stronger. It'll never end! I can't survive this.

My arms and legs felt suddenly numb, movement impossible. I tried to speak, but my bone-dry throat made it difficult. *What-ifs* surged through my mind, fueled by soul-crushing panic. I glanced around, looking for escape, but found none; I was doomed. My Beast had me.

“Everyone, fight!” Leonard charged at an imp, swinging his hockey stick at the creature.

The monster darted to the left, but an aluminum baseball bat streaked through the air and pounded the creature.

“Number Three hits a homer,” Karl shouted.

The imp fell to the ground unconscious, its horns flickering, then growing dark.

Bobby pulled out his slingshot and fired large marbles at the monsters. His projectiles struck the gargoyle's thick gray hide. It made the monster howl in rage. He fired again, aiming for the creature's head. The marble hit the gargoyle right between the eyes, dazing it for an instant. That moment was long enough for Leonard's hockey stick to come down on the creature's head, knocking it out. It fell to the ground with a thud.

An imp darted toward Elisa. She fired her arrows, but her arms shook with fear, causing each shot to miss. The imp extended a handful of claws, ready to swipe at her face. This threat snapped me out of my anxiety-induced paralysis. I dropped the Skull Key and activated the lightning-rope. I ran to Elisa. Throwing the end of the rope at the monster, the sparkling tip hit the imp. Painful shocks spread across the little creature, electric fangs finding flesh. Before the monster could respond, Karl hit the imp with his bat.

“Number Three hits another.” Karl smiled, pleased with himself. “One more left. Leonard, get the last imp.”

Leonard raised his hockey stick, ready to attack when more monsters emerged out of the tunnel, a half-dozen creatures: imps, gargoyles, and a huge demon in the shape of a gigantic half-man, half-raven. They charged forward. The demon leaned his bird-like head back and screeched; the sound turned my blood to ice and made my bones ache. A sense of evil radiated from the monster's dark and twisted form, making every cell in my body cringe. A cold dread spread through me as I stared at the demon's red eyes, fear . . . real fear blasting through me like a hurricane of sharp, jagged



things. This wasn't anxiety creating fear for something that didn't exist. No, this fear was genuine, igniting the fight-or-flight response. I definitely chose flight.

"DESTROY THE HUMANS!" the demon screamed.

"Everyone, run!" Leonard shouted.

He turned and ran, grabbing Karl by the arm and pulling him away from the monsters. Bobby fired one more marble, then turned and fled. He grabbed both Elisa and me by the arms and pulled us away.

"Wait . . . the Skull Key." I reached down and scooped up the skull, then followed Bobby.

I glanced over my shoulder. The muscular demon stormed into the passage, his eyes glowing a bright red. I shuddered, then turned and ran, following my friends.

The memory of the Demon Lord replayed itself in my mind. It was a thing that made nightmares afraid, and now its image sat firmly in my brain, ready to haunt me from within.

What if it catches us? How can we fight that thing? What if . . . impossible thoughts raged through my mind, my Beast reaching for my soul. I followed my friends, my body functioning on autopilot, but everything felt hopeless. Escape seemed impossible, but still, I ran, sharp claws and pointed teeth hoping for me to stumble.

