

The Pearl of Anton

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By Gene Del Vecchio



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To Linda, Matthew, Megan, Angelo, and Madeline, for their endless support. To Jenny, who came to my aid in an hour of need. To Pelican Publishing Company, for the gracious support they continue to provide. And finally, to all Dels of noble blood, particularly those few who know of their true lineage.

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Introduction

For many years, my family lived in the quiet, comforting obscurity of middle-class cottages in middle-class townships in middle-class provinces. But it wasn't always so. Before Athens surrendered to Sparta or the Etruscan civilization began, before even the Halaf settled in the upper region of Mesopotamia, my family's name was prominent among the peoples that inhabited the known lands. That was long before the *Vecchio* was added to our surname, when we were known as simply *Del*, a handle without clear ethnicity or origin. It was also a time when the Races were true Races and not merely variants of Man, when great prizes were won and lost—and then won again.

The historical accounts of my family during those ancient times were committed to the glorious Book of Endur. I herein offer one story from that collection for your consideration. It is entitled *The Pearl of Anton*. It begins with a prologue written several thousand years before the account of the Pearl and then ends with an epilogue written a few years after the account. I hope you find it intriguing.

Gene Del Vecchio

Prologue: Tempest Slayer

*A History from the Book of Endur,
Submitted during the Watch of Tara*

In the closing shadow of the Second Age, I, Tara from the race of Etha, witnessed the last of the Great Beasts of Becus devastate nearly all of Eastern Trinity. The huge creature was scaly black, with leathery wings that could lift its massive frame in a graceful but deadly flight. Its elongated skull held two narrow eyes, each crystalline red. Below these cunning slits was a gaping mouth with two rows of glistening sharp teeth that sparked its death fire: a blaze of red that charred all that stood before it. If the creature's unfortunate prey did not fall by either fangs or fire, then it was sure to succumb to either the beast's ripping talons that extended well beyond its four muscular feet, or its heavy tail that swept before it like a whip. Though dragonlike, it was not a dragon, as it was much greater in evil and strength and probing mind.

The Races called it Tempest.

Its only purpose was to destroy all that was good, all that was living, all that was made by a god other than its own. But having ravaged the east, which was now but a barren and forsaken land, the wicked beast turned its attention toward the fertile west, final refuge of the Races.

During the early years of the Tempest's new quest, a boy

lived in obscurity along the western banks of the mighty Crystal River. His name was Matthew Del, last blood of the great Royal House. And within his possession, handed down since almost the Beginning, was the Wizard's Stone, brilliantly white and awesome in power. But the boy did not know the secret of its power, which troubled him greatly. Nonetheless, his heavy responsibility, also handed down through the countless ages, remained: to rid the land of evil.

At my urging, the boy carried out the plan as taught to him by his loving father, who mysteriously disappeared years before and was given up for dead. Matthew sparked the Tempest's hunger and lured it cunningly through the Ancient Forest of Oak. The strong trees would serve to constrict the beast's impatient, yearning wings. The lad was careful, his steps not so far ahead of the beast that it tired of the chase, nor so close that the creature could hurl its probing mind forth to touch the boy's thoughts and discover his plan. For Matthew was leading the Tempest purposefully to the long abandoned Circle of Wisdom, a granite slab measuring one hundred paces long and ten feet high. It was a place where a thousand Dels had perished before. But it was also at the Circle, Matthew knew, that the Wizard's *Trinket* was fabled to be at its most powerful and where he would find his only hope.

Matthew broke through the forest and sped across the great clearing, climbed upon the Circle, and gained the centermost position among the rubble. Even from the distance where I stood, I could feel Matthew's dread. The beast pushed its way through the restricting green and rose to the air, defiling the sky with its presence and gliding eagerly to the Circle to face the boy. With the closing of distance, the beast threw its probing mind forth to touch the boy's thoughts, which pained Matthew greatly. In so doing, evil discovered his plan. But the beast was not disheartened, for it uncovered a thought within the boy that was comforting to its purpose.

"I have felt your mind, foolish child!" I heard the Tempest shriek. "Now let me hear your words."

Matthew drew a steady breath, and thinking of his father, he spoke with brave words.

“I am the last descendant of the Royal House of Del. It is here that a thousand ancestors cry out in pain and death that your kind inflicted. And it is here that I will destroy thee . . . the last of the mighty Tempests.”

The beast was unaffected. It meticulously surveyed the horizon until it was content with the misty, gray silence that veiled the Circle. Only then did evil shriek again.

“Your mind betrays you. You possess the Stone, but not the knowledge needed to kill my flesh. The *Trinket* you carry is therefore useless.”

The words stung Matthew, for they were true. But his eyes steadied, for he still felt comforted that the Wizard's power would not forsake him.

“Today, demon, you will die. My stricken father said it would be so.”

The Tempest sneered. “Foolish boy. Tomorrow I won't even remember if your flesh tasted sweet or foul.”

The Tempest lurched upward. It then swooped down toward Matthew Del, the beast's cold shadow blocking the sun. A Tempest fire blasted forth. Matthew saw a blaze of red sizzle the air before him, growing closer. Trembling, he stood his ground as fear gripped his soul. He raised the gleaming, white Stone and, in his moment of need, the power rushed from it in a blinding flash. It prevented the demon's blast from scorching him. As the boy shook with power, the Tempest grew angrier but remained confident, knowing that the boy did not know the full secret of the treasure in his hand. As the beast turned and prepared for its next attack, it again examined all things upon the Circle and beyond. Again it was content. So again it struck.

Many times the Stone blasted forth to protect the boy, but Matthew trembled with worry, for the Stone rarely sought the Tempest's own flesh. Instead, it merely deflected the beast's fierce blows. After many encounters, the Stone appeared to

falter, and to the boy's dismay, the Stone's strength gradually seemed to recoil under the Tempest's might. In another fearsome blast of Tempest fire, the white glistening sphere, still clenched in Matthew's hand, was suddenly engulfed in the beast's blaze. At that moment, when Wizard's white magic touched evil's flames, an intense explosion threw Matthew back in a gale of blistering heat. The beast turned and landed.

At that moment, I knew that Matthew cursed Anton, the creator, for he believed now that the Wizard's Stone was not a suitable match for the power of evil. Could legends have been wrong?

The beast stood triumphant; its red eyes sparkled with pleasure. Dark-green saliva dripped from its mouth and baked the stones beneath it. It wrapped its tail about the boy and squeezed tightly to keep Matthew fixed. The beast then inhaled a mighty wind in preparation for its final death fire.

Matthew closed his eyes, even though his charred hand stayed aloft. The remnants of Wizard's magic danced about his fist. But it was over for him, he believed. He had failed Trinity. He had failed his father. He had failed himself. And so he waited to die. A moment passed, yet nothing happened. He heard the beast suddenly pivot, stumbling amidst the debris. Strange, the boy thought, but still he waited. And still nothing happened. The Tempest moved frantically again and began to wail. It uncoiled its tail, setting Matthew free.

The boy opened his eyes and saw the creature flailing and jerking in death's grip, its head and neck twisted in an attempt to reach something behind it. It stumbled farther away, and turned this time to reveal the shadow of a Man straddling its back, holding firm. The figure suddenly brandished a brilliant Sword. The Tempest snapped wildly, but it was no use. It was unable to reach the Man upon it. The Man then turned the Sword and drove it inward to where the beast's neck met its spine. The thrashing Tempest twisted almost into itself, but it could not unseat its attacker.

Matthew, still helpless amidst the rubble, continued to look

upon the sight with startled eyes. Who was this Man? Who was this savior?

The raging beast bolted upward for the safety of the sky, diving and circling. The Man held firm, plunging the Sword deeper and deeper into its lurching body. Then, when the blade was embedded up to its hilt, the rider shouted to the boy.

“Now! . . . The Stone seeks the Sword. . . . Now!”

And as those words rang out, the hand that held the Stone trembled and stretched skyward. Heat surged through Matthew's body. Then, a light, white and blinding, poured from his fist and rose to the sky, up through the belly of the Tempest to find the Sword. As the power hit, a great burst of energy rocked the Circle. The demon exploded in a rush of dazzling white power. Its rider was thrown clear. Matthew Del collapsed. As quickly as it came, the force that had come from the Wizard's Stone subsided and was gone.

I was near when the boy woke. A great calm hung in the air, though smoke and ash continued to filter a new day's light. A Man, battered and broken, knelt beside the boy, dabbing his brow with soothing water.

“You were brave, my son.”

Confused, Matthew looked up into the eyes of his father. Johnna Del spoke quickly.

“The secret to killing a Tempest, my son, is to form an alliance of two. The first to lure the beast to the Circle and to be protected by the Stone. The second to gain the back of the beast, its only weakness, and to thrust the Sword of Wizards inward. And finally, the first again to bring the power of the Stone to life.”

But a deep sadness gripped the boy.

“Why did you make me believe you were dead? For all those years . . . “

The words bit the father. “Remember, the evil reads the minds of those it pursues. If you knew how to kill it, or that I lived, the beast would know it also. Instead, it knew only what you knew to be true: verily, that I was dead, that you were

alone, and that you knew not how to kill a Tempest. It was the perfect trap . . . the only way.”

Johnna Del then lifted his son and followed me to a secret place within the Circle to heal his wounds. As Matthew groaned in his father’s arms, he sought momentary comfort in the Stone, still held tight in his blackened, charred fist. But no comfort was forthcoming. The Stone no longer glowed brilliantly white. Instead, it cast a strange, lifeless gray. It appeared to be emptied of its power. Nothing in Trinity, not even Tempest fire, should have affected it as such. This was not a transformation to be taken lightly, especially by my people—the Etha.

It has been written by my mother’s mother, however, that many ages will pass beyond the span of Matthew Del, Tempest Slayer. Each age will take a great toll on the Races, at times renewing their strength, and at times destroying their will. But nothing will compare to the darkest day, a day when two Great Evils—a Pure Evil and an Evil Less than Pure—will come to claim Trinity for their own. It is said that a Chosen One will spring from the Royal House to battle them both, wielding the Wizard’s *Trinket*, whose riddle he will resolve. And more. The Chosen One will seek and find the long-lost Pearl of Anton, its mysterious force adding mightily to the power of the Stone.

May our Lord Anton bless and protect the Chosen One from wherever he may rise. He is our refuge, our peace, our final hope for the Race children of Trinity.

Faithfully,

Tara

The Pearl of Anton

Chapter 1

School

The small stone-built schoolhouse seemed to have always been there, for no one could remember when it was not. Its longevity, so legend says, was attributed to a liquid-rock substance that was oozed between its rounded boulders until an ancient sun dried it tightly, fixing each stone smoothly and forever in place. Just outside the school sat a huge founder's rock, rising just higher than a full Man-height. And near the speckled stone's summit were deeply carved, intricate letters. While the words were now foreign to all who read them, their meaning, like the schoolhouse, had somehow survived the eons: *Children Five to Fifteen Learn Here.*

The inside of the schoolhouse proved as timeless as without. Forty small and well-worn desks were carefully aligned within, each made of the same heavy, knotted wood that comprised the school's massive double doors. The desks faced the front of the room, where a large fireplace lay comfortably embedded in the center of the stone wall. Other objects, carefully preserved, were hung about the small room in an orderly fashion: two paintings by a long-forgotten artist, a yellowing map of Trinity, strange metal etchings from foreign lands, even a few arrow points from wars long ago resolved. But the age of these items paled in comparison to the piece of furniture that rested to the right of the fireplace. It was another desk, huge in girth, that faced the small ones authoritatively. The grain of its

ancient wood swirled to form haunting images of earlier times: of People remembered, of Races forgotten, of events greatly remote in geography. The desk was also unbelievably heavy, made from a single cut of wood far too large to have ever passed through the school's doors. That led some in Meadowtown to speculate that the schoolhouse was actually built around the desk. Others, however, argued the point with some vigor. Regardless, there was a certain air about the desk, and everyone agreed that it was a special piece; an ancient seat reserved for authority and respect and knowledge.

It was a place reserved for Teacher, an Etha from the fortress city of Endur. As all that Race, she was eternally stern, a person devoted only to histories. Her rigid commitment, though, was in stark contrast to her beauty, also legendary among the Etha. She had deep-blue eyes, the pupils of which were a bit larger than a human's own, making them much more penetrating. They were framed perfectly by her silky white hair, which was always drawn tightly back into a bun, highlighting her smooth alabaster skin. While she looked to be woman of thirty, she had taught at the old schoolhouse considerably longer; in fact, she had been the teacher for nearly everyone in Meadowtown, making her years a common topic for inquisitive minds. Teacher wore the same garment daily: a forest-green robe, beautiful in design and detail. It fit her slender frame perfectly.

In the Fourth Age since the fall of the Beasts of Becus, school was in session. Some of the children were rather striking, with finely tailored clothes, well-groomed hair, and herb-scented skin. Others were less so. But in class, all were equal as they worked to complete their individual lesson plans. The younger ones practiced their alphabet. The older children were deep in mathematics: the conversion of weights, the figuring of sums, the ciphering of coins and barter. These were the calculations that would serve them well in later years as enterprising farmers or craftsmen.

Teacher knew them every bit as much as their own families did, some even better. She also knew exactly what they were

doing, whether she looked up from her own studies or not. Through the corner of her exacting eyes on this particular afternoon, Teacher saw a love note pass quietly from a young boy to an older girl. The girl smiled to herself when she read it, but managed to conceal her delight with an expression of indifference, thus crushing the lad who sent it. One obnoxious boy made a hideous face at another from across the room. The expression was returned twofold. Yet another lad drew an unflattering picture of Teacher, which he promptly, but discreetly, showed his neighbors. One chuckle erupted then vanished. Teacher knew that also. As the afternoon wore on and the students were nearing their exhaustion point, a hush fell over the schoolroom.

Then, a ten-year-old boy with dusty-brown hair and eager eyes began to rigorously wave his hand.

“Yes?” Teacher asked while she continued reading.

“May I add to the fire?” a boy named Squeki Joh asked from the last row.

Teacher glanced over her shoulder at the fireplace’s retreating flame. She nodded, and noticed restlessness growing.

Squeki rose quickly and sped up the aisle. He was small for his age and smart too. He was also the Mayor’s son, which often compelled the boy to act as class volunteer. It was a role that he cherished. But that alone could not protect him from the trials of being smaller.

A pointed leather shoe abruptly appeared from under a desk, tripping Squeki. He fell hard to the rock floor. At the sound of his stumbling fall, laughter erupted all around. With a spiteful gleam in his eye, Ben Wateri, one of the oldest boys in the class at fifteen, eased his foot slowly back under his desk. He continued to slump in his chair, twiddling his quill as Squeki rose.

“Enough!” Teacher said in a stern voice. The time had come for more order. She studied her students. “What happened?”

Squeki glanced at Ben. This was the price he paid for being the older boy’s *friend*. “Ah . . . nothing . . . just my own big feet,” he answered.

Teacher's eyes flashed at Ben and then back to Squeki.

"Then continue," she commanded, returning to her book and seemingly annoyed more at Squeki's answer than his accident. Squeki put a log on the flame and returned to his seat.

After a few moments, Teacher snapped her book shut. She rose gracefully from behind her massive desk, her delicate hands clasped before her.

"History," she said coolly. "What event concluded the Second Race War?"

The room went silent. Several of the children, particularly those in the back of the classroom, slowly positioned their heads behind the students in front of them, avoiding Teacher's questioning gaze.

"Ben Wateri!" Teacher called keenly.

Caught, Ben straightened in his chair. Teacher was one of the few people in Meadowtown who still frightened him. The boy cleared his throat and attempted a reply as his black, straight hair fell downward, hiding his scheming eyes.

"The Second Race War ended when some Major got everybody to sign a treaty . . . or something." Ben looked up.

A deep silence filled the small schoolhouse. The children waited. Would Teacher be satisfied? An icy moment passed.

"Who else?" Teacher asked as she began tapping her right foot.

Ben reddened. The big boy scanned the classroom, silently warning the others not to attempt an answer. Dozens of frightened eyes retreated to desktops.

"Who else?" demanded Teacher again, her voice more compelling. The question hung uncomfortably in the air. The fire crackled and popped loudly, sending red glowing cinders up the flue. But still they waited. And just as Ben began to feel some small triumph, a solitary arm began to rise timidly in the air. The leathery hand mirrored the boy's modest clothing. He wore a thick, loosely woven, gray cotton tunic that used assorted beads as buttons. It was tied off with a rope belt cinched tight. His brown pants were wool, worn and faded. His shoes, however,

were solidly made: the benefit of being a shoemaker's son. But most striking was his straight red hair that he tied back in a small tail, highlighting his sharp, green eyes.

The boy, also fifteen, tried to keep focused on Teacher, though he could not help but see Ben through the corner of his eyes. Ben subtly shook his fist. The red-headed boy shivered and jerked his hand down. But it was too late.

"Jason Del!" called Teacher.

His love of history had gotten the best of him again, Jason thought. He rose slowly to his feet, keeping his gaze downward. Maybe if he was quick about it, he reasoned, Ben might let him get through the rest of the day unscathed. He slightly trembled.

The children waited to see if Jason's answer would be better than Ben's. But they already knew. Jason knew a lot about history, plenty more than a shoemaker's son needed to know.

Jason cleared his throat uncomfortably, glanced about, and began to speak. And although his voice was soft and fragile, his love of legend sparkled in his eyes with a vigor that rivaled even Teacher's.

"As Elf and Dwarf armies were locked in battle with each other, Major T, leader of the Mountain High Battalion, marched with his army of Men for three days straight, without rest, through a frozen wilderness. He outmaneuvered the warring Dwarf and Elf armies and intercepted their food-supply wagons, until both of the Northern Races were nearly devastated by the winter. His strategy forced the Elves and Dwarves to sign the Triad Agreement, forged by the Great Tribunal, requiring that each Race stay within its separate lands. That was thirty years ago--almost to the day."

Jason had known this story by heart since he was a small child, having learned it, and many others, from his father, one of the remaining veterans of the actual battle. Jason always felt there was something rather special about the conclusion of the Second Race War. It was an inspiring ending because brave and rugged backwoodsmen banded together to end a war

between the Dwarves and Elves, a war that was not Man's own. This was a noble conclusion--if there is such a thing in war--that would allow it to live much longer than most stories--and, just perhaps, allow it to find its way into the realm of legends, along with the great Major T, who inspired Men to risk their lives to prevent the other Races from annihilating each other.

"Well done," said Teacher, almost proudly. "Well done."

Jason lowered himself back into his chair. He loved this room--the endless questions in search of answers, the paper that demanded its ink-- the mysteries that sought discovery. Everything within these particular four walls had order and a sense of purpose, a feeling of eternity that could never be erased.

Teacher continued to stare at him after he settled into his seat. The room remained silent. Jason began to fidget under the unwanted gaze. He noticed a thin smile reach her lips, followed by a subtle nod of her chin. These were signs of approval, he thought. This was very strange coming from an Etha. Jason wondered what it meant. A distant bell then rang out twice, signifying the close of business within the marketplace of Meadowtown, and with it the close of the school day. The children looked up at Teacher, waiting anxiously to be officially released, knowing that while the bell governed the craftsmen and farmers, Teacher still governed them. She continued to gaze at Jason. He squirmed lower in his seat. The students' eyes darted about, but Teacher still gave no notice of the bell's receding echo. A moment passed, then another. The children were about to explode.

"No lessons tonight . . . go!" she said, and then turned around to straighten up her desk.

There was a burst of energy as the children flew out the door.

"You be careful, Jase," Squeki Joh said to Jason. "You know how Ben can be."

A moment later, the little schoolhouse seemed suddenly cavernous as only Teacher and Jason remained. But Jason was in

no hurry . . . to run into Ben. And then he remembered. His mother had asked him to see if Teacher would be free to join them for dinner next week. He often looked forward to Teacher's visits and the stories she would tell. Maybe that was why he liked her so, despite the fact that, like everyone else, she always had a way of making him just a bit nervous. Jason approached her.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Mama wishes for you to have dinner with us next week," Jason said.

Teacher's eyes suddenly pierced Jason, freezing him with their intense gaze. "No," she answered, almost sadly. "I can't make it next week. Tell your mother thank you for me."

Jason swallowed hard. He wondered again if she was all right, but he was hesitant to question her on the point. It was not considered appropriate to be so nosy where an Etha was concerned . . . especially this one. So he nodded once, turned, and stepped toward the door. He peeked into the schoolyard to ensure that Ben Wateri had left the grounds. It was clear. So Jason drew a comforting breath and then dashed out the door and down the path leading toward town. Just out of sight of the school grounds, Jason was jerked about by a firm grip at his shoulder. His books flew.

"Making me look bad, eh?" Ben sneered as his best friend, David Grimm, watched with delight. Ben shook Jason soundly. His fingers ripped Jason's tunic.

"Look at you . . . the poorest kid in town," Ben said as he fingered the new hole. "So what if you know a little stupid history?" Ben growled. "Your brother is no longer around to protect you. And your crippled old father can't." Ben glanced over at David. The younger boy smiled.

Jason's mind reeled with fear, a familiar condition. He couldn't talk. His mouth went dry. He shivered. His nervous fingers cinched his rope belt even tighter than it had been, as though to protect him from a beating that he knew was near.

Ben suddenly hurled his fist at Jason's face, snapping the

boy's head painfully back. Blood spurted from Jason's lip. Ben threw his fist again, pounding it into Jason's stomach. The boy coughed and doubled over, falling to the ground. He tried to suck in air, but he was still winded. He swallowed blood instead. David rushed behind Jason and pulled him up, binding his arms behind him. Ben grabbed Jason's red hair and pulled it high so that the boy's head was lifted upward and unprotected. Jason went limp, dangling, conscious of both the fear and the beating, yet unable to conquer the former to help him stop the latter.

Snarling, Ben brought his fist far back in preparation for a final, memorable strike. He let it fly. Suddenly, a handlike vise caught his fist in midflight and squeezed hard. It then twisted his arm a full turn. Ben's knees buckled from beneath him and he fell to the ground in pain.

"Let me go!" Ben cried. Nervously, David relaxed his hold on Jason. The dazed boy fell headlong into the dirt.

"What have you learned?" Teacher asked coolly as she tightened her grip even further. Ben tried to tug his aching fist away, but to no use.

"What have you learned?" she repeated calmly.

"Nothing!" he yelled.

"A pity," she said. Teacher released his throbbing hand.

Ben stumbled to his feet, holding his aching hand, and quickly ran down the path toward town. Teacher turned to David.

"Go!" she snapped.

The bully's apprentice flew.

Jason rose sluggishly to his feet and dusted off his clothes. His mind was reeling with fear, but a moment later it was replaced with shame. What begins with fear, he thought, always ends in shame. Teacher approached.

"And what did you learn?!" she asked grimly.

"It's always better not to fight," he said, a well-rehearsed response.

"Try again!" Teacher shot back.

Startled, Jason fumbled for another answer, but none was

coming. The first answer always worked before. Teacher then turned his chin to inspect his cut lip. She wiped a drop of blood away. As she did so, the boy noted how frail her hand now felt, masking the grip that had brought Ben to his knees. How strange, he mused, that someone so delicate in features can have such hidden strength.

“Strength cannot always be detected by appearances alone,” Jason said thoughtfully. “That is what I learned.” He was surprised by the answer. For a moment, it didn’t quite feel as though it was him talking, but someone else within. He suddenly blushed, feeling quite stupid. Maybe he had taken more blows from Ben than he remembered.

Teacher placed her hands on Jason’s shoulders and drew him close, closer than he had ever been to her before. He dropped his eyes, but she raised his chin until there was no avoiding her gaze. She was so commanding, he thought, so commanding and strong!

“In this world of ours,” Teacher began, “appearances have little to do with anything. Yet that is only the beginning of your lessons. Fear comes in many guises, Jason Del. It has many degrees. That’s another lesson you must learn . . . and soon. Ben inflicts mild fears to enslave a playground. And *you* have proven unable to confront him.” Her disapproving voice cut deeply.

Jason shivered as she continued.

“So what would you do if faced with an evil so great and a terror so massive that it would enslave an entire world? What would *you* do then, Jason Del?”