

Shadow Era

Prologue

Patrick Desrochers & Diana Parsons

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The origins of Shadow Crystals are shrouded in controversy. Some say that the Crystals were created by the God, Teroth, when He shaped the Heavens and the Earth, to ensure the survival of humanity. Others say that Seroth, God of the Underworld, created the Shadow Crystals to commit malefic atrocities and bring misery upon mankind. Whatever the truth may be, one story that is told can be found in the *Chronicle of the Land of Teroth*, which is displayed at the Great Temple of Vesmana in the city of Ega. The *Chronicle* tells the story of the Great War that was waged amongst the Gods and of the vicissitudes of Heroes whose lives are the stuff of legends. According to the *Chronicle*, the first man to discover the Shadow Crystals was named Nishaven.

Nishaven lived on the outskirts of Uhr, a small village of Egaras, with his wife, Elana and his two children, a son named Murah and a daughter name Mirka. Arakat, his father, also lived with the young family after he passed on the farm to Nishaven when he retired. Nishaven had the utmost respect for his father. Arakat worked relentlessly alongside his own father to emancipate himself from the Lord of the Manor of Kelleth, now the canton of Kelleth, to gain ownership of the land. Arakat proudly taught Nishaven everything he knew about farming and the value of a hard day's work; he taught him the ways of the world and the beauty of nature. Nishaven was very close to his father. Arakat taught his son at a very young age to cultivate his curiosity. They would watch for clues in the sky that would determine the coming weather. Arakat would also teach him the names of birds and how to distinguish between them. "*Klu'a* is the name of the bird with the white beak and black feathers," his father said as they paused to listen to the melodious trill.

Nishaven was tall and robust. His hard work on the farm conferred upon him a muscular physique, but he was a kind and gentle man. He adored his wife Elana and his two young children followed him everywhere. Like his father, he helped the

neighboring farmers plough their fields in the spring and harvest their crops in the fall.

Nishaven had not been formally educated by the priests, but he had gained much common sense from working the farm. He could be toiling the land one day and fixing the roof the other. He could be selling chickens at the bazaar in the spring and harvesting hay at summer's end. It allowed him to be a jack-of-all-trades. He was a smart young man, sharp-witted, but at times he had been a bit naive to the cunning men of the world. Nishaven had been ripped off by Marcus, a blacksmith, on a new tiller and once lost a dozen silver pieces betting on a side road three-card shuffle scam. He had since mistrusted any offer that was too good to be true and Nishaven became wary of snake oil cure-alls.

He worked the farm and was capable of providing for his family. He grew some wheat, some barley and had a small vegetable garden for his family. There were chickens and a few heads of cattle. He would collect fresh eggs and get a jug of milk from the cows every morning for breakfast. Whatever else his family needed, he bought in town after making some money at the bazaar, where he rented a small tent to sell fresh eggs and milk that would sell by noon.

At the bazaar in the village of Uhr, rows of tents lined the square where farmers sold chickens, cured meats, vegetables, fresh milk and eggs - and the smell of butter and cheese lingered in the air. The aroma of fresh baked bread wafted from the bakers' stall. Artisans sold pottery, quilts and jewellery. The noise of laughter filled the square as neighbors visited and children played, and it was loud, as chickens squawked in cages. In amongst the various transactions, there were drunken patrons spilling out of pubs, the occasional pickpocket getting caught and raggedy women of ill repute flirting with nobles and commoners alike. Pleasant odors

were mixed with the stench of sweat, rotting vegetables and nearby manure from the cattle sold.

Early one morning, Nishaven arrived with his family and set up his stall. It was eerily quiet. Few merchants opened their stalls and barely a customer could be seen. Magda, old Mortimer's widow, didn't show up for her usual pint of cream. Nishaven remarked on the quietness to passers-by, but was frequently ignored as they hurried away. Through the rumble of rumors, Nishaven heard that many were sick.

One middle-aged woman fearfully said: "Didn't you hear? Many villagers have fallen ill. We've seen nothing like this before."

An elderly gentleman stopped and solemnly said: "Many of the villagers were struck by cough, fevers and chills; some have developed lumps, like black pustules, on their arms, legs and neck." He frowned and looked down, "So many have taken ill that it appears as if it's a plague," he further surmised.

Nishaven was shaken and gravely concerned. He quickly took down his stall, packed up his goods, and rushed his family back to the farm. He was thankful he lived on the outskirts of the village. He warned Elana and Arakat of the dangers of visitors stopping by the farm or the children running off to the neighbors.

Sleep did not come easily that night. Nishaven tossed and turned until the wee hours of the morning. When he finally fell asleep, he was awoken by a dream, filled with such luminescence and vivid color. Figures appeared; their faces without features, like statues carved out of marble. Their bodies draped in golden sheer. One stepped forward and said: "Nishaven, I am Uma, servant of Teroth. Thou have been chosen by Him to find the Shadow Crystals." She slowly stretched her slender arms forward and displayed the Crystals glowing in her cupped hands. "Travel to the Altalas mountains. At the base of Mount Aran,

there is a cave in which ancient runes mark the site of the buried Crystals. Find the precious jewels and bring them to the Great Temple of Vesmana. There, thou shalt find an ally to help you rid the land of this evil.” The Shadow Crystals in Uma’s hands seemed to radiate with energy. Nishaven, hypnotized by their shimmering glow, reached forward to the touch the crystals — and shot up in bed. He was drenched in sweat. Elana was still sleeping and he could hear a faint snore coming from her side of the bed. Nishaven knew this was no ordinary dream.

The sense of urgency did not leave Nishaven; he sensed a great significance in the message from the servant, Uma. He felt compelled to search for the Shadow Crystals, even though he didn’t know what they were or understand their purpose. When he told Elana and his father about the dream, Elana became distraught and begged him not to go. Nishaven said, “Many of the villagers of Uhr might die if I do not undertake this journey.”

Nishaven rummaged around the house looking for provisions as his wife followed him closely. He quickly packed a pilgrim’s bag with *nippan* — dry bread perfect for long travels, dried meat, a mattock and a spade for digging. He was ready to go; he hugged Elana, but she was crying. Arakat cleared his throat and said, “You will need to watch out for thugs roaming the road up to Mount Aran. I’ve heard that a caravan did get ambushed a few weeks ago. Be careful, son.” Nishaven promised and asked his father to watch over his family while he would be gone. Arakat nodded and assured him that no harm would come to them. Nishaven turned to his wife and kissed her goodbye. As the door closed, Murah coughed forcefully into his little hand — Nishaven paused as shivers ran up his spine.

Nishaven started on his journey to the Altalas Mountains. He did not own a horse and had too little money to afford one, so he headed off on foot to the northern road. After several days of travel, winding through thick brush, crossing marshes and

streams, he arrived at the base of Mount Aran, dirty and tired. The cave was not easy to locate; the entrance of the cave was hidden by overgrown bushes. Many travelers had gone by this area, but somehow, this cave had not been used as shelter for ages.

The cave was dark and dank. He set up camp and lit a torch to look for the ancient runes. At the end of the cave, he found the wall marked by ancient symbols that glinted in the torch light. They had been carved in a language that Nishaven had never seen. Nishaven started digging and worked relentlessly for hours on end, throwing the dirt over his shoulder. After a day of digging without rest, Nishaven had not found any crystals. He was exhausted. A part of Nishaven cursed Uma and the other servants for sending him away on a frivolous chase and taking him away from his family. The other part of him considered that what the servants had described had been true up to now: there was a cave in the side of Mount Aran; there were also runes carved into the wall.

That night, Nishaven slept heavily and Uma appeared again. Even though Nishaven could not see her lips move, she said: “Take these Shadow Crystals, Nishaven, use them to protect humanity from the forces of evil.” The figure had the same glowing crystals in her hands and was offering them to Nishaven.

“I went where you asked and found the runes. There are no crystals. I have dug for a day now and I have not found them!” Nishaven yelled.

Uma stayed motionless with her arms outstretched towards Nishaven. “Take the Crystals Nishaven. Take them back to the Temple of Vesmana. There is not much time left...”

Nishaven, again, mesmerized by the Crystals, reached with one hand to touch them – and suddenly woke up. He was cold and

tired but his mind was clear. The Crystals were there, he only needed to find them. Once again he was determined to find them and, in the middle of the night, he began to dig. He dug and dug, but to no avail. The hole was getting deeper and wider. He tried digging in different places. Once again he grew exhausted. He stopped and ate and began to dig some more. He worked relentlessly and finally, in the late afternoon, he saw a dim purple glow sifting between the rocks from the ground below. Nishaven was euphoric! He let out a cry of victory. He quickly cleared the dirt and rocks. They were the most beautiful gems he had ever seen – shimmering and lighting the inside of the cave. He picked one up and found that it was warm in the palm of his hand. Nishaven wrapped the crystals in cloth, tied it securely and placed them deep within his bag. He went to sleep that night after bathing in a nearby stream, looking at the stars, thinking of his beautiful Elana, wishing he could feel her warm presence beside him.

At dawn the next morning, he ate a bit of *nippan* that his wife had made and some dried beef, rinsing it down with a few gulps of water from the stream. He packed his bag and headed for the city of Ega, the largest city in the land of Egaras, where he was hoping to find the Great Temple of Vesmana.

Nishaven reached Ega near dusk. It was large and heavily populated. As he entered the gates, panhandlers begged him for spare change. Nishaven noticed some dark hooded individuals hanging about in alleys. He also noticed that a lot of the people were sick, walking with sticks and crutches. Some were lying in the streets, moaning either from too much drink or from the pain of the plague. In a side alley, Nishaven saw a body left in a puddle of mud with flies buzzing around its head. The acrid smell of decaying corpses was overwhelming.

He reached a monolithic building made of white stone where the statue of a scantily clad woman greeted him. It was most

probably a representation of Vesmana. Nishaven found the Temple to be dark; there were a few torches giving away a bit of light, but not nearly enough for the large expanse leading to the altar of the Temple. There was little room to walk as the ill covered the floor of the nave. Most of them were sleeping and others were propped up against supporting pillars. Some were still and Nishaven could not tell if they were alive or dead. They were all covered to some extent with lumps and pustules inflicted by the plague. Nuns and priests were tending to the sick, some as ill as the people they were tending to, others not showing any sign of illness. A young priest came up to Nishaven at the door. "Please sir, leave the Temple of Vesmana at once! Unless you have been sickened by the Dark Plague?"

Nishaven shook his head and said, "I need to speak to the Head of the Temple."

The young priest motioned for Nishaven to come in and pointed at an old man, alone at the end of the nave, behind the altar. "That is Wizent the Sage, Great Priest of the Goddess Vesmana. He will answer whatever question you may have, if he can." From afar, it looked like the old man was mumbling some kind of prayer for the sick to which no one seemed to listen.

Nishaven walked down the nave of the Temple to the altar where the priest stood with his arms outstretched and his eyes closed. After his prayer, the priest opened his eyes and noticed that Nishaven was standing in front of him. Nishaven introduced himself and told his story of the servants of Teroth appearing before him in a dream and sending him to find the Shadow Crystals. Wizent listened carefully as Nishaven told him that Uma had asked him to bring the jewels to the Great Temple. Wizent coughed in his fist and wiped his hand on his robe. He was amongst the oldest people Nishaven had ever seen. Most people in Egaras did not live past fifty years of age. The priest looked like he was well beyond his sixties. His eyes were a crisp

blue, surrounded by bushy white eyebrows and a long beard that went down to his chest. He wore a blue robe and a Veda flat cap as did all the priests at the Temple of Vesmana.

“You are telling me, young man, that the servants of Teroth paid you a visit *twice* to tell you about some magical crystals in a mountain? That sounds dubious at best. But why would they choose you? And did you find those Crystals?”

“Yes, yes, I did in fact. In a cave at the base of Mount Aran,” Nishaven said emphatically.

Nishaven stuck his hand into his pilgrim’s bag and took out the crystals wrapped in cloth to show the incredulous priest. Wizent’s eyes widened as he saw the unnatural glow that the stones cast in the dark Temple. His long, stringy fingers fluttered over the stones but he let them go when he felt their warmth — taken aback. He told Nishaven to put them on the altar. The old man’s eyes teared as he saw the stones being emptied from the young farmer’s bag.

“The prophecy had said that one day, despair would overcome the land of Teroth and that its source would be his brother, Seroth. The prophecy also said that a countryman would find the cure for this evil and save the damned by discovering the spark of the Gods.” He placed his hands on Nishaven’s shoulders and said, “It is you, Nishaven, that the prophecy was talking about.” Wizent wiped his eyes and thanked Vesmana for the offering and thanked Teroth’s servants for coming to the young farmer in his dreams.

“Please, go ahead and cure the sick with the crystals. It is what the prophecy predicted,” the priest said.

Nishaven had no idea what to do. He grabbed a Crystal and willed for the sick to be cured. The jewels glowed without any

change. No one got up and no one was cured. Again, he willed the sick to be rid of the Dark Plague. Nishaven shrugged and put the stone back on the altar. Wizent asked, “Would you mind if I tried?” Nishaven shook his head and took a step back.

Wizent began praying to his Goddess. The Crystals glowed like burning embers, they grew stronger and brighter and the ground beneath their feet rumbled. The energy enveloped Wizent and he fell to the ground. After a brief moment, the Grand Priest stood, he took his staff in his left hand and raised his right, and before the sick he commanded: “Step back Seroth, may the light be my guardian. May the Dark Plague leave the land of Egaras! Now you shall be healed.” His voice echoed against the walls and woke the sick that were moaning and writhing in the Temple. Nishaven thought he heard an old sick man say that they were trying to sleep for Vesmana’s sake!

Nothing happened.

Wizent told Nishaven, “You must be tired from your travels. Why don’t you rest in the guest quarters and have a good night’s sleep? Priestess Zhanna will show you to your room.”

One of the priestesses came to Nishaven and did a brief curtsy before him and asked him to follow. She wore a revealing robe as did all priestesses of Vesmana. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders in beautiful curls. She took Nishaven to Wizent’s parsonage and showed him to a room where he was served a meal consisting of meat and potatoes and a bed where he could sleep for the night. But Nishaven was anxious to return to his family. He had hoped that Murah’s cough had not developed further. He was worried about what Wizent would do with the Crystals, so he ate his dinner and climbed out the window.

In the meantime, Wizent watched for any sign of healing and cure. By the time it takes to say mass, old Ledran was able to get

up and dance, albeit with the help of his cane. Ana, Wizent's house mistress got up, dusted her apron and thanked Wizent tersely before going back to the parsonage to finish her chores. More and more in the assembly became free of the disease and thanked the Great Priest profusely until the nave emptied. They called him Wizent the Wise, Wizent the Sage, Wizent the Miracle Worker. They kissed his fingers and held their foreheads to his hands as a sign of deference.

Wizent immediately put the stones in a girdle bag and stuffed it under his robe. He hurried to the King's court to tell him of this miracle, unaware that Nishaven was quietly following him. When the advisor came to greet him, Wizent told him that he needed to speak to King Alandros urgently, babbling all the while about prophecies and crystals and miracles. The advisor, a short skinny man with a long strip of hair going the length of his skull, was holding a piece of fine cloth over his mouth. He asked Wizent to show his arms and legs and prove that he wasn't infected with the Plague. Wizent, outraged, rolled up his sleeves and pulled up his robe. The guards patted him down and found the girdle bag full of Shadow Crystals. They grabbed him by the arms like a common thief and dragged him inside the vestibule. "Please give me back my bag! Only the King is allowed to be privy to its content! I forbid you, by Vesmana the Great, to open this holy bag," Wizent protested. The guards held him while the advisor dropped the girdle bag to the floor and poked at it with his foot.

"What's in it?" the advisor asked.

"I told you," Wizent replied, "the content of this bag are for the King's eyes only. There is no poisonous snake nor is there any trace of the Dark Plague."

The glow of the Crystals emanated through the cloth bag and it seemed to quell the advisor's suspicions. He carried the bag to

the King's court, while the guards dragged Wizent along behind, the priest protesting all the way about he how was being handled.

Alandros was dressed in full royal regalia, wearing gilded armor and a sword at his hip, his dark curly hair spilling onto his shoulder plates, his serious mouth circled by a goatee. He was seated upon the throne and looked weary. Wizent thought his apparent fatigue was probably caused by the disease inflicted upon his Kingdom. The King had been cloistered in his castle for weeks; very few were allowed to see him.

On bended knee before the King, Wizent told the story of the young Nishaven professing that servants of Teroth had appeared in his dream. He told of the young man's quest to find the Shadow Crystals and he arrived at the Temple with the Crystals in his possession that very night. Wizent said that through prayer to Vesmana, he had been imbued with the energy of the Crystals and had thus cured the victims of the Dark Plague that he cared for in his Temple. Already, the cured spoke of the miraculous event. The King listened patiently, stroking his chin.

"You need to have your couriers spread the news of this great miracle in every canton. A cure for the Dark Plague has been found!" Wizent said.

King Alandros smiled and thanked Wizent for coming to inform him of this miraculous event. "So, you were brought mysterious crystals that were found by a young farmer in a cave at Mount Aran. He brought them to you and you were able to cure my subjects of this disease?" the monarch asked. Wizent knew by the look in the King's eyes where this was leading. "Well, my Lord, it did happen, but I don't think that those Crystals have any other purpose than to cure the sick and rid your Kingdom of evil," Wizent said.

“Oh, rightfully so, my dear friend, evil has many forms,” Alandros retorted, “and I can imagine that these Crystals have very useful purposes indeed!” A smirk appeared on King Alandros’ face and he took the girdle bag from his advisor, who bowed solemnly and backed away into the shadows. The Shadow Crystals shimmered at Alandros’ touch and he held one high above his head, inspecting it against the dim light.

All the while, Nishaven had left the parsonage and looked for a way to enter the King’s court. He finally found a poor servant who was relieving himself on an outside wall of the castle. Nishaven knocked him out with a piece of firewood. Garbed in the servant’s clothes, he passed the guards and advisors without incident. He now stood in the other corner of the King’s court, his presence hidden by majestic drapes made of thick and heavy velvet. These curtains were perfect barriers for the drafts caused by servants opening service doors, but it was also a perfect hiding place for someone to eavesdrop.

“You know as well as I, sage man,” the King continued “that the Dark Lord Keldor of the far Kingdom of Nekrha has made a pact with Seroth to seek ultimate power and immortality and eventually conquer the land of Teroth. If the three Kingdoms were to fall under his rule, all hope would be lost.”

“Your Highness, I beg to disagree. I need to perform mass cures instead of going to war.”

Nishaven listened carefully, curious to see what the King would decide.

“I am sorry Wizent, but the good of many outweighs the good of a few. Cures will take place, but I must determine the magical powers of these Crystals to prepare a defense.”

King Alandros exclaimed, with the stone still in his hand, “On my father’s head, King Alemar, Ô miraculous jewel from Teroth’s earth, please bring men of arms and knights, so that I can defeat Lord Keldor, servant of Seroth, Demon of the Underworld.”

The Crystals in the King’s hands glowed with an intense purple hue. The energy of the Crystals surged and entered the Kings body through his eyes. The King stretched his arms out and the energy that had flowed into his body rushed back out.

A dark circle immediately appeared before Wizent, the King, Thener and the rest of the guards. The circle grew to the size of a large man within a few minutes. It was suspended in mid-air and its rim was scintillating with sparkling energy. A man holding a war banner and a scimitar stepped out of the portal. He looked around and declared: “I am Aldon the Brave.” He kneeled before the King and said: “I pledge allegiance to the King and to the people of this Kingdom.”

As soon as Aldon pledged allegiance, a slim foot appeared through the portal and another figure stepped out. It was a beautiful young woman whose curves made all those present, including Wizent, blush. She kneeled beside Aldon the Brave and said, “My name is Jasmine Rosecult. I am here to serve you my Lord.” The King smiled. He was exultant as more and more warriors appeared before him. Their names and appearances differed greatly from one another, but they all appeared ready for war.

The King turned to his advisor and said, “Thener, set up a mining camp at the base of Mount Aran. All Shadow Crystals shall belong to the King. I will fortify my army against Keldor’s horde.” The King seldom spoke of himself in the third person unless some kind of official decree was to be understood from his words.

Nishaven stepped out from behind the heavy curtain and dashed towards the King's throne, yelling, "Wait, wait, you can't do that!"

Guards immediately tackled him and lifted him off the ground after a short skirmish.

"Who is this?" the King asked.

Thener said, "Only a servant who doesn't know his place in the King's court. Guards, take him to the dungeon immediately —"

"Your Highness," Wizent said, "this is the young Nishaven that I was talking about."

The King snapped his finger and waved for the guards to bring the young man to him. The guards shoved Nishaven down on the steps before the throne. Wizent asked, "What are you doing here young man? I thought you were resting at the parsonage."

"You lied to me old man! You took the Crystals to the King instead of curing the rest of the infected! Villagers of Uhr are in need!"

"Enough!" the King roared. "Take that man out of my sight!"

"Be gone now," the King stopped for a moment and added, "and thank you for finding those miraculous stones. With them, the Kingdom of Egaras is now safe from the evil of Lord Keldor and, hopefully, Seroth himself."

Nishaven stood back up, eyed the bag at the King's feet and left with guards following behind, halberds at the ready.

“Thener! Consult with the Guilds to find the best hunters, priests, mages and...” the King paused and stroked his chin, “and thieves! Yes, thieves, they may be useful,” he mumbled. “And bring them to me so that I can build an army and defeat Keldor. Only the best and most trustworthy of their trade shall be Shadow Crystal keepers and fight for the Kingdom of Egaras.”

Thener bowed and sent servants out with the King’s message.

Nishaven headed back to the parsonage as Wizent the Sage followed, running and stumbling on his robe behind the young farmer, holding on to his cap.

Nishaven turned and stopped only for a moment and spat, “Curse you, old man! Now, my family might perish without the Shadow Crystals. You should never have taken them to the King! I lost much time coming to Ega instead of taking care of my family in Uhr.” Nishaven’s eyes were filled with rage. He was pained by the thought of losing his family to the Dark Plague. Still in his servant’s uniform, Nishaven went to the parsonage stables and saddled a horse.

“Tell your King that there will be hell to pay if my family is sick and cannot be saved,” Nishaven yelled. He rode all night until he finally saw the log fence that marked the edge of the village of Uhr. His horse panted dryly and he feared that it was going to collapse soon from exhaustion, but Nishaven continued to push the animal.

Dawn broke as he arrived at his farm. He was immediately greeted by a crow from atop of his cottage. He opened the door and called for Elana, Murah and Mirka. He called for his father, but no one answered. The shutters on the windows clapped loudly in the gusting wind. Nishaven went upstairs where he found Elana lying on their marital bed, holding their children at her chest, as if they were sleeping. If it weren’t for the horrible

marks on their faces and limbs, Nishaven could have hoped for the best. Time stood still. He couldn't breathe. Then he moaned in agony and became enraged. His scream could be heard across the village of Uhr.

He threw the pitcher that sat on the bedside table. He smashed the chairs and knocked over the table. He kicked his pilgrim's bag across the room. Its contents were strewn across the floor.

He finally broke down and wept, clutching his wife and children, indifferent to the fact that he could become sick himself; yet secretly wishing the Dark Plague would strike him so that he could join them in death.

And there he saw it, across the floor — an oblong Shadow Crystal staring at him with its intense shade of violet.

Nishaven crouched down and retrieved the smooth, glowing stone.

“Come on, you can do this,” he said to himself.

He prayed to all the gods he knew. But the stone remained unmoved by his prayers. He prayed some more, he waved the Crystal around; he rubbed it on their skin, uncovering every mark and dry pustule, and wept until his tears ran dry. Their eyes did not flutter; the breath of life did not come back.

Thus began the Shadow Era.