

The Prodigal Sorcerers

Mark Price

From set *Eternal Masters*
25. 05. 2016



The cannonball missed him by inches.

Guttural screams wailed over the ringing in his ears as the projectile splintered the foremast with a deafening roar. Still, past the panic of the desperate crew, past the pounding in his head and racing of his heart, Boldt held his ground. This was his chance.

Through the chaos and directly ahead of him, two corsairs were bearing down fast on his smaller passage ship. The only weapons in reach were clutched in his shaking hands: notes, from countless hours of study. And the bronze figurine of a sextant, his reward from an instructor, in hopes of great things to come. All for now.

He held the sextant outward as a focus, its curves and angles framing the corsairs like sights on a crossbow.



Prodigal Sorcerer | Art by Eric Deschamps

Deep breath. In control. Say the words. Clear the—

“Hullbreachers!” the captain shouted, her hair matted in blood. “Hard to port! Make ready the—”

Cut off abruptly, she and several others vanished into a thick cloud of shrapnel as the world collapsed around him.

Don’t look there, look up. See it.

He raised his voice above the din and spoke from his notes a statement of power—the words practiced, rehearsed a thousand times.

“*Ashkara nix pulu...*” The focus began to glow softly in his hand, his adrenaline rising with each perfected syllable. “*Sarko mar benosk...*” Next an orchestrated gesture, like a grand symphonic conductor. “*Kahuga Duru...*” Now, resolution. “*Tanare!*”

Instantly, a wave of distortion burst from the young man and crested over the water, an immense crack across glass, jaggedly tracking towards the enemy vessel. His eyes widened with expectation, acuteness through anxiety, waiting for impact.

But as quickly as the spell sprang to life, it fizzled, uselessly impotent against the hull of the corsair. A failure.

From the pirates, a double boom sounded—a heartbeat of iron and thunder. In an instant, he saw them: two cannonballs linked by a chain of crackling energy, spinning around each other like a bolo, so fast he could barely make them out. What make of magic was *this* ?

With blinding speed, they whirled overhead to cleave the mainmast like a seared twig. Mast, rigging, and crew came crashing down into the sterncastle and through the deck, bringing several screams to a sickening halt. Nothing but haze and silence followed.

And Kellan Boldt, master apprentice and aspirant elite, first son and heir to the Duchy of Kelsh, schooled in the art by Archmage Ghavos, now crumbled to his knees in utter defeat.

All was quiet, muffled like his family's courtyard after a heavy snow.

"You should have finished me, dogs!" spat an unseen, gravelly voice.

From below deck and through the smoke, an old man emerged, a silver beard partially hiding the scar along his jaw. Boldt had seen him before. He'd noticed his gold and black tunic, once regal, since grown threadbare and muted—and now torn from battle.



Prodigal Sorcerer | Art by Douglas Schuler

What was his name...Enthril? Yes, the ship mage. A deckhand for custodial spellcraft, mending fabric and superficial wounds. But there was nothing superficial about the man's bloodied face and injured bearing.

Enthril muttered a curse under his breath, squinted against the charred fog, and held up an empty, outstretched hand. As the wind kicked up behind it, he swept his arm across the waves.

The sea sprang to respond, following the motion and rippling with energy similar to Boldt's, but more powerful, confident. A coursing swell, formidable enough to catch the first ship upright, forcefully spun it across the waves and into its brother with a clash of creaking timber.

The two corsairs, lanced and entangled, ceased fire. Boldt could hear the pirates bellowing at each other, trying to make sense of it.

Enthril, for his part, spent the moment catching his breath.

"That'll hold 'em for now," he decided, then turned to notice the young man. "You there! Snap to!"

Boldt looked off into the distance, the words faded to mist. The old man limped across the deck to approach him.

"*Snap to* ' means get off your ass and help me before we sink."

"But the crew—"

"We're the crew now. All that's left."

Boldt looked up, jarred from his trance. Were they really the only ones left alive?

“We need to sound the ship, right what we can. Anything that keeps us breathing air instead of ocean.”

“Wait. How did you do that?”

Enthrill wiped some blood from the bridge of his nose.

“With the power of my good looks. Let’s get to work.”

Below deck, the pungent smell of hemp fiber and pine tar filled Boldt’s nostrils. A wooden caulking mallet sat unused at his feet as he employed a binding spell, a complex one of his own design, against seams in the hull.

He was thankful for the sharp smell of the caulk, as the funk of burnt flesh that hung in the air threatened to break his composure. Salt water had nearly filled the forehold, carrying the submerged bodies of the drowned. With each sway, they smacked relentlessly against the bulkhead.

“To task,” Boldt reminded himself. “To task...” He resumed his spell.

Enthrill soon joined him, carrying an armful of splintered wood.

“So I found out why the tiller isn’t working,” said the old man.

“Why not?”

“It’s gone.”

Boldt’s face fell.

Casting aside the wood, the elder mage winced as he favored his right side, just above the hip. Boldt could see blood soaked through the old fabric of his tunic.

“Do you need—?”

Enthrill shook his head. “I’m fine. Smart bastards. Waited until the last second to show their colors, *Talas* colors, and surprise. And with that, my curiosity with regards to their fancy new weaponry is permanently satisfied.”

The old man stepped forward to look closer at the apprentice’s handiwork.

“So we shore up the midhold here...” Enthrill indicated a marred patch of the chamber wall. “...and we can isolate the flooding. That’ll buy us time. But we have a bad problem and a worse problem. The bad one we’re dealing with. The worse...”

“The worse being the pirates? That you drove off with a wave of your hand? I thought you were just—”

“Just a humble ship mage? Your pristine pre-academy training tell you that?”

Boldt narrowed his eyes. “How did you know?”

“You booked passage for the Spice Isles, and vastly overpaid. Doubtless the pride of a noble family, with no reason to tread these waters unless you’re bound for Tolaria West, to the institute there. Very prestigious. Congratulations.”



Academy at Tolaria West | Art by James Paick

The younger man bristled slightly at this. “So you’ve heard of it.”

The old mage nodded toward a gold signet ring on his right hand, bearing the symbol of the all-seeing eye.

“Graduated top honors.”

“And you ended up here?”

Enthril grabbed an iron trowel, coated the end with the caulk at Boldt’s feet, and spread it across the spot his spell had missed.

“Lad, just use the damned mallet. You make things too complicated.”

Boldt picked up the tool and ran fresh tar across it.

“You think I’m afraid of a little work?” He ran oakum along the boards, echoing Enthril’s movement.

“You don’t know what I’ve given up. I’ve spent years training to study with the great minds of our age. I have plans, and they don’t include ending up a skeleton at the bottom of the sea.”

“Plans...” Enthril paused a moment to consider, then pressed forward. “I’ve been watching you these past few weeks, with your books and notes....”

“That’s right,” affirmed Boldt, with no small amount of pride. “Books and notes. The road to greatness, as true as brick and mortar. That’s why the academy sent for me.”

“And what would you learn there?”

“All of it: morphology, control, illusion....”

“Control is the illusion.”

The young man turned away from the bulkhead and looked Enthril square in the eye.

“What do you mean?”

“Boldt...” the old man began, with the slight edge that reminded the young apprentice that he’d never actually introduced himself to the ship mage—or any of the crew, for that matter. “That’s all I wanted to do. Control the results, control the outcome. I left as an academy graduate, confident I’d be a great master and find my fortune—*take* my fortune. But all this ambition, all this mastery, in the face of true wisdom? It’s like trying to tie waves against the beach.”

If there was any regret in Enthril’s eyes, he didn’t let it show. He continued working the seams of the hull.

“Out here, I’ve learned to let subside my thirst for power and glory. To see myself as a conduit, a steward for something greater than myself. A *custodian*.” He held up his trowel, covered in black tar, to punctuate the thought. “And I’ve learned you can know the heart of something without having to possess it.”

Suddenly, a distant explosion echoed throughout the cabin, bringing the lesson to an abrupt end. Enthril dropped the trowel to the floor.

“Topside. Now.”

The two mages emerged from the hold, squinting against the bright sun at their bearings. The pirates had broken free from constraint, and now closed within range of their guns—and they were joined by others.

“Four sails on the water,” Enthril noted. He turned to the downed mast, its jumble of torn sails and rigging billowing from a strong wind. “And the sheets, what’s left of ‘em, are catching. That’s what I was afraid of. We’re winding east.”

“But that’s away from the pirates, right?”

Another blast of cannon fire detonated to starboard. Closer this time, reverberating across the deck. The old mage drew a broken scimitar from the rubble and gave it to Boldt, who eyed it warily.

“I’ll keep ‘em busy,” said Enthril. “You take this.”

“I’m fighting them with *this*?”

“You’re freeing us with that. Cut the lines to the mainsail, those ones there. No spells, save your energy. Go!”

As Enthril drew himself up to face the pirates, Boldt approached the shred of mainsail, surveying the ropes and fabric as he trod across a stump of broken mast. Looking over his shoulder, he could see Enthril spreading his arms, palms down as if gliding with the wind, eyes locked dead on the advancing ships.

Beneath them, the deck moved up and back with the ocean. Enthril’s stance rolled with the sway, a loose echo of it, in anticipation. Boldt inched closer to the tangled, chaotic helix of hitches and knots, raising the jagged chunk of blade in the air.

A blast roared from the corsair. Mastcutters incoming, spinning toward them like lightning hewn from stone. Moving with the deck, Enthril quickly brought his arms up, as if hailing the sky.

With a thunderous clang, the heavy irons struck an unseen force at a shallow breadth before the bow. The point of impact rippled in shimmering light as they ricocheted against it, splashing down harmlessly a hundred feet away.

From his perch, Boldt could see Enthril stagger and fall to his knees, the energy dissipating around him.

“Enthril?” he called out.

“Get on with it!” the old man sputtered.

Boldt cut through weathered ropes and rigging, bringing the blade down again and again until the tattered sail pulled itself free. Both mages lurched forward as their ship tilted back against the wind, slowing and forcing them prone against the rush of ships.

The young mage dropped the broken blade and scrambled from his perch toward Enthril. The old man, nearly depleted, could do no more than nod at him and point forward, turning Boldt’s attention to the corsairs as the youngster took his place in front.

Boldt peered at the closing ships. What could he possibly do?

Still recovering his strength, Enthril looked up at his new apprentice. “Welcome...to the real academy, lad.”

Inspiration struck Boldt like a charge of adrenaline. He dove into his satchel, rummaging through it as the deck pitched and rose beneath his feet.

Wellspring magic. The underlying material of things. Properly managed, he could command the very waves, bring forth a squall from his hand, attack or defend any number of ways. He’d analyzed it for years. But could he manifest it now?

Boldt searched through a leather-bound book, checked a verse, and stowed it back into the satchel. Scraps of loose notes fell away as he retrieved the bronze focus.

Another blast erupted off the port bow, mere feet away. Too close. Boldt clung to the bulwark, righting himself against the rocking ship.

What were the words again? *Avenkari* was the root. He knew it, what was it?

Sweat forming on his brow, Boldt raised the focus to frame the nearest ship. Sights on a crossbow. A faint glow appeared on the sextant as he began to speak, wavering and uncertain.

“*Avenkari katala nahota...* “

A hand blocked his sight as Enthril, now standing, gently lowered Boldt’s arm. The glow left the focus.

“No trinkets.” he admonished.

“What the hell are you *doing* ?” Boldt exhaled, barely concealing his panic. “We’re about to get blown to kindling, and—”

“Don’t speak. Don’t command. *Ask* .”

“But—”

“Boldt, the essence of it is there, waiting to help you. Find what’s ready. When you see it, you’ll know what to do.”

“But I *don’t* see it, that’s what I’m trying to—”

“You’ll know.”

“*Damn it, I don’t see it!* “

Boom.

Another blast, direct hit along the hull. Reflexively, Boldt stutter-stepped back, echoing its direction. And then, without thinking, he lunged forward—emotion and alarm given physical form.

And the energy sprang forth from the core of him, unbidden and true. A voltaic surge of force lashed across fathoms of ocean to catch the vanguard upright, knocking it violently broadside to port.

The cannon fire stopped. Everything stopped, as the young mage stood still, absolutely shocked at what he had done.

“That...that...”

“You got out of the spell’s way,” said Enthril.

“That was unreal!” Boldt beamed. “I can’t believe it!”

A drumbeat sounded from the pirate ships. With nimble precision, each of the vessels veered sharply, turning about with growing urgency.

“Gods, old man, we did it!” Boldt exclaimed with exultant joy. “We got ‘em to turn tail!”

Turning abaft and eastward, Enthril shook his head and walked away.

“No. That’s not it.”

Boldt followed quickly. “What? What do you see?”

“There.” Enthril pointed past the railing at a series of buoys approaching from the east. “We’re too late. The Perimeter.”

The markers were spread out by hundreds of feet, a dotted line that stretched to the horizon.

Past it, the character of the sea changed dramatically. Much darker, with cresting whitecaps. And though the sails had been dislodged, the current would not abate, and the ship drifted ever closer.

“What’s beyond it?” asked Boldt.

No answer. Enthril regarded the approaching barrier silently, the color rapidly draining from his face.



Island | Art by Adam Paquette

“Enthril?”

Finally he uttered, “The Dire Waves. This is what *worse* looks like.”

“Ever been there?”

“Am I standing here speaking to you?”

“Yes.”

“Then no.”

Enthril moved toward center deck, his mind racing.

“Here, lad, right here. Hull’s stronger.”

“Wait, wait.” Boldt protested. “Isn’t there some way we can...”

“Too late. Current’s got us.”

“Or use some sort of spell to...”

“We’ll pass the perimeter in seconds. Ready yourself.”

“For what?”

Enthril looked Boldt in the eye, gravely.

“Everything.”

The sky grew dim beyond the markers as they drifted to the nearest buoy. Approaching it to starboard, they could make out a disquieting detail.

Chained to the marker were a tangle of skeletons, frozen into awkward positions and blanched white from the sun. The first to greet them.

As hollow eye sockets followed them ominously, Boldt and Enthril crossed the threshold of the perimeter.

“All right,” said Boldt, “Now what do we—”

Instantly, the buoy lit up in brilliant, unholy light. One after another, each buoy followed suit, the hellish glow of their beacons extending to the horizon. Boldt inhaled sharply as the skeletons came to life, extending bony arms to point directly at the two men, their toothless mouths yawning open in unison to emit a piercing, accusatory shriek.

Then something burst from the sea off the port bow. The pair looked to its source to be brought short by a staggering sight. An enormous tentacle, pockmarked with jagged horns, speared upward of 50 feet in the air.

The appendage crashed through the middle of the ship, splitting it across the keel to send the mages airborne with the deck spinning beneath them, careening like a stone skipped across a pond.

Desperately clutching at anything within reach, the men fought to stay above water as the deck broke apart, whittling their lifeline to the size of a raft. Pieces of the ship rippled end over end, slowing and then caving in, scuttled and sinking among the endless waves.

“Tell me you have something left!” Boldt entreated, frantically grappling for something to stay afloat as the sea grew chest-deep.

But before Enthril could answer, the remnants of the deck creaked and ground to a halt against something solid below.

Boldt caught his breath as Enthril stared through the floating debris.

“We’ve run aground...”

The young man quickly looked around him.

“Could it be a reef or a—”

Then something rose to meet their feet. Something large. And they too began to rise, surging past the waterline as they ascended from the sea in a rumbling churn of spray and foam.

This was no reef. Beneath them, the barnacled surface of an immense shell, the back of a creature whose scale seemed to have no end, materialized around them as a deluge of brine and sludge down-rushed against it like a torrential cauldron.



Scourge of Fleets | Art by Steven Belledin

As they rose, the shard of deck began shaking to pieces under their feet; soon it would all be over. Boldt looked to Enthril pleadingly. Enthril nodded to him.

“You’ll know.”

The old man closed his eyes in concentration, blocking out the chaos. Wood and iron dissolved around them like feeble straw, yet Enthril remained still.

Boldt regarded the man in silent concentration, not knowing what to do except...augmentation? Yes, absolutely. The two of them working in concert, sea and sky.

He went for his satchel. But to the surprise of his muscle memory, his hand found nothing but a ripped strap. The books, the notes, the bronze figurine in the shape of a sextant, all gone now.

The mass beneath their feet lurched forward, up and across, leaving Boldt to claw at the splintered muck for leverage. Before him, Enthril barely moved, lost except to the energies he called upon.

With no other option, Boldt anchored himself between what used to be a yardarm and the scaly hide beneath. Then he closed his eyes too.

Find it. See it. See what? Never mind, just—

And then the voice in his head, the voice of control, suddenly, inexplicably stopped. Or more accurately, shifted. Because he could finally *see* it.

He could see himself, moments before. With the ships, reacting without calculation, true presence in the moment, the first glint of understanding. All his study and work before, just a part. A channel for the magic to flow through, to find its own shape and meet him at its heart.

He began to utter words aloud, words still learning their form. Raw materials catching the energy like a tide. And the old man, now bathed in blue light, was guiding them through.

But Enthril seemed labored, like a bridge about to collapse under the weight of an army. Exhausted, he floated in and out of consciousness, and whispered as if to someone else.

“There’s always...always more to know...”

Boldt opened his eyes and crawled to him, and their two figures huddled against each other amid the maelstrom of wreckage. They were fixed precariously on its back now, this behemoth, and it rose ever upward as the very last of the ship crumbled away.

“I see it now. I see it.” Boldt said to Enthril. “It’s amazing.”

Enthril seemed to smile slightly at this, as he resumed his wordless chant. Boldt began again and joined him.

The creature sounded off, exhaling like a whale. A monstrous, ear-splitting roar of vapor. Undeterred, they chanted silently as one. Until something new started to happen.

A single, defiant plank of broken deck rose up to meet them, hovering at eye level not ten feet away, waiting. And one by one, it was joined by others, until a piecemeal mishmash of wood, fabric, and metal floated and swirled about them.

From the center of the forming tornado, Enthril opened his eyes, suddenly aglow with blazing, vibrant light. As the light grew in intensity, Boldt looked up in alarm.

“Enthril, what—”

The light exploded forth—engulfing the mages, the floating scraps of ship, the creature, the sea, the world. All in an instant, and then all was nothing.



Eternal Dominion | Art by Shishizaru

Boldt awoke, his cheek against a wooden deck. The sensation of the flat, smooth surface, like new, caused him to sit upright with a start.

New surroundings greeted him. The deck of a strange-looking vessel. He called out for Enthril. No response. He staggered to a standing position and quickly looked in all directions. The old man was gone. In his place: this new ship, cradled by gleaming sails jutting out in odd directions. A butterfly of white cloth. But he couldn't see the water line beyond.

Then, he heard the sound of the creature in exhalation. But it sounded distant, as if far below. He approached the rail. All around him, sky.

He was on a skyship of some kind, the make of which he could only have imagined. Floating far above his last position, hundreds of feet over the Dire Waves.

Looking down, he could make out the full shape of the bestial leviathan, easily the size of a whole fleet of ships, possibly larger. Now, its tendrils stretched up feebly to grasp at him, but their reach was far too low to even scratch at the hull.

The wind kicked up to fill the sails, and the new vessel smoothly glided past the perimeter far below, faster than the wind should take him. The shade of the sea changed to bright blue, pure as a painting.

In the distance he could see the pirate ships tacking to the south, as if they were toys. And further still, to the west, the rolling, green stretch of the Spice Isles. Within it, the Tolarian Academy, his destination, approaching.

Astern, he noted the tiller, artfully carved and elegant—and directionless, yawning back and forth with the wind.

Something just beneath it reflected the morning light and caught his eye. It was Enthril's signet ring. He picked up the ring and looked at it for a long time.

The Spice Isles drew closer. But soon, the tiller moved to starboard as the sails caught a blast of warm air from the south. And the ship veered away from the archipelago, heading north.

Boldt looked at the tiller at his command. Then, finally, he turned his back to it and strode to the bow of the ship, letting the course of the winds carry him forward. He put on Enthril's ring, as a reminder. It fit perfectly.

Far below and away, the Tolarian Academy and the Spice Isles receded into the background, growing less significant, until they were gone.

And Kellan Boldt, former apprentice and aspirant seeker, once son and heir to the Duchy of Kelsh, humbled in the art by wind and wave, now flew uncontested through the skies. To face new purpose, to find new adventure, and to know the heart of the world.



Island | Art by John Avon