

The Power of 7

By

Steven B. Orkin

Based on the storybook

The King With Six Friends

*Written by Jay Williams
Illustrated by Imero Gobbato*

From Chapter 3

With a sinking heart, the Prince of Toriador realized he had virtually no chance of escaping the hundred-headed snake of Aladar Medisi's reach. He stood paralyzed in the middle of the dark courtyard.

“What do you do when nothing you do makes a difference?” he mumbled numbly.

“Give it your all and hope for the best,” said a quiet voice from the darkness. “Doing something is almost always better than doing nothing, young prince. And there is always room for hope, is there not?”

Zar whirled in the direction of the voice, but saw no one.

“Who are you?!” he demanded. “Show yourself!”

“Lower your voice,” the stranger advised. “You have mere minutes of life left if you do not follow my instructions; considerably less if you continue declaring your location.”

Chastened, the prince whispered, “I’m listening.”

At that moment, they heard men and horses. Looking to the right, Zar saw at least a dozen guards on foot and four more on horseback searching the area. More would come from the other direction soon enough. Several carried torches, creating more than enough light to see him once they moved into range.

“Do exactly as I say and you may yet see the sun,” the stranger said.

The man’s voice had an odd, hollow timbre to it, as though he were speaking through a metal tube or in an empty room. Though Zar heard him clearly, he couldn’t see more than a cloaked silhouette in the shadows of the castle wall. The man was clearly a master of stealth. Who was he?

“Move close to the castle wall. Stay low to the ground in the shadows. Continue along it to

your left. Do you see that flag atop the wall?”

He pointed far off along the wall where the flag of Toriador, a gold hawk head on a field of burgundy, flapped high above them.

“Yes.”

“When you reach it, feel along the base stones until you find one that has a particularly rough texture in the upper right and lower left corners. Press them simultaneously. It will allow you to get through the wall and outside the grounds. Close the portal immediately behind you.”

“What do I do then?”

“The portal leads to an alley. Wait there until I return. If you remain quiet and still, the shadows will protect you. The two-of-the-clock bell should toll shortly. If by chance I do not return by then, you may assume I have met my maker and you will have to do the best you can to make your way out of the city. As I’m sure you understand, it’s critical you leave Toriador immediately.”

“Where are you going?” Zar asked.

“To engage in some misdirection.”

The boy began to speak further, but his shadowy benefactor interrupted him.

“Time is short, Prince Zar. Your window of escape is rapidly closing. We will speak further if you live long enough to do so. Go.”

Seeing no other viable options, Zar followed the instructions as the man – he realized he didn’t even know his name – dashed off so silently it seemed impossible. The shadows at the base of the castle wall were deep enough to contain a slender fourteen-year-old boy. He would have thought of staying close to the wall anyway but it comforted him that the mysterious visitor had suggested it, validating his own instincts. He considered the possibility that he was being shepherded into capture, but that seemed too subtle for Medisi. Though the treacherous Second

had planned his coup with great care, it had occurred with the simple brutality of a hammer strike.

As he reached the halfway point, Zar saw the cloaked, silhouetted figure dash across the courtyard. There were shouts of surprise and the guards instantly took up the chase. Zar was amazed how close to them the figure had appeared; it seemed certain he would be quickly captured or killed, but judging by the sounds of pursuit that ensued, he was leading them on a merry chase.

The prince didn't wait around to see what happened; he ran along the wall to the spot the mystery man had indicated and started feeling around the wall. The base-stones were about eighteen inches on a side, and there were quite a lot of them to get through in the vicinity. As he quietly but frantically searched for the one he needed, panic bubbled into his brain.

“He lied to you. There is no secret door. You’re wasting your time. Just run. You’ll figure out a way to get past the gates. You have to go right now! There is no –”

A dark shadow swept over him and the prince looked up to see a guard on horseback towering over him. The man grinned in triumph and shouted, “He’s here! I’ve got him over –”

Zar brained him with a well-aimed rock. The man’s eyes crossed and blood gushed from his nose as he fell unconscious from his mount. Though the boy took grim satisfaction in this, the damage was done. Voices cried out, the thump of hoofbeats and leather boots approached from all directions. After taking a moment to slap the haunch of the horse and give it a push off into the courtyard, he continued his search for the door with amplified desperation.

“Please,” he said urgently. “Please!”

And there it was. Zar gasped in relief as he felt the extra-rough texture of the two corners and pushed as hard as he could. For one last desperate second, he thought nothing was going to happen, then the block sunk about an inch into the surrounding stones. He heard a soft click and it slid freely into the wall as he kept pushing forward. He wondered how such a flagrant (but in this

case, lifesaving) security breach could have been installed in the King of Toriador's protective barrier without his father or any of his staff knowing and added it to his growing list of questions for his shadowy benefactor, assuming he ever saw him again.

The stone was on a recessed, curved metal track set into the floor of the alley that shifted it against the wall to the left, leaving Zar ample room to exit, though he had to get on his belly and slither through to do so. As the stranger had told him, the doorway led to a dark alley. Taking a moment to ensure he was alone, he slid the stone back into the wall. In his haste, however, he neglected to position his hands properly, and as the door set in place, it wedged his fingers painfully between it and the wall, trapping him. Zar slapped his free hand across his mouth, failing to stifle his moan of agony. He hoped he hadn't broken his fingers but there was nothing he could do about it if he had.

Outside, the guards converged on his location as they discovered their senseless comrade. He couldn't make out their words but their excited inflections couldn't be misinterpreted. Though furious, they smelled blood. Mere minutes had passed so the boy could not have gone far. In their minds, they had all but caught him.

Zar prayed the guards didn't examine the wall too closely. The secret door had been well-crafted but his trapped hand had prevented it from fully closing, creating a shallow but noticeable recess in the stonework. If they found it, he was dead. It was that simple. Though the narrow passage would be difficult for a grown man to easily fit through once they pushed the stone back, they could reach through to grab him or thrust in a sword or loaded crossbow. They'd drop him in his tracks long before he reached the end of the alley.

Several long minutes passed as he watched the door for a tell-tale shift of discovery. It was hard to accept that as his life teetered in the balance, all he could do was wait but he was better off

risking them finding the recess than moving the door. Zar looked longingly over his shoulder down the dark alley and into the street beyond. So close, but at the moment, it may as well have been a thousand miles away. His heart thudded in his chest so loudly, he thought that surely the guards must be able to hear it. It seemed to be moving up into his throat in a slow, determined bid to escape the confines of his body. His hand throbbed in perfect time with his heart and head, and all three felt twice as big as normal. Vaguely, he wondered if his hand would suffer any permanent damage by the time he got out of there.

“IF you get out,” a grim voice inside his head said. *“If.”*

Zar strained to get some sense of what was happening on the other side of the wall, pressing his ear to the hard stone. A few moments passed as he listened to the muffled sounds of activity, then flinched at the piercing cry of what sounded like a boy his age. The guards abandoned the area with shouts of excitement and a rumble of boots and horses and the pounding in Zar’s head began to subside as a cool rush of hope poured across his brain. The possibility that he might actually get out of here alive flickered like a newly-lit candle in his mind.

When he was confident his pursuers were gone, he nudged the door outward just enough to free his hand, which howled with pain as blood rushed back into his nearly-crushed fingers. He was glad they hurt; in a weird way, he thought that might mean they weren’t that badly damaged. Shaking his injured hand up and down to get more feeling back into it, he flexed it experimentally. Though stiff and a little swollen, it appeared to be in working order.

“That’s something, anyway,” he mumbled aloud as he gripped the handholds on the base-block and pulled it the rest of the way inside. He heard the soft click of the locking mechanism securing in place. Just as an academic exercise, he felt the corners of the inner side and found that the textured corners were there as well. The door could be used for entrance as well as exit.

Zar shifted position so he was sitting against the wall and breathed for what seemed like the first time since being woken by his now-dead father and servant. He allowed himself the luxury of believing he had successfully completed the first phase of his escape. It was more than he had expected and had dramatically increased his odds of getting out of Toriador. The city was quite large so with a little luck and perhaps an additional helping hand from his liberator, he might be able to either get out tonight, or hole up somewhere until an opportunity presented itself in the days or even weeks to come.

“No,” he corrected himself. “Tonight or never.”

Medisi wanted him dead. He had likely already mobilized the entire city in service to this objective. Everyone under his command would be ordered to take part in the hunt. Anyone not working for him would be encouraged to help by either a hefty reward or threat of imprisonment or death for helping him, even through inaction.

Zarion mulled over the possibility of seeking sanctuary at one of the local churches, but were even they safe? Was it not possible that as part of the cog in his clockwork machine of treachery, Medisi had promised them large donations or other compensation if only they agreed to turn in the rogue prince of Toriador when he showed up? Though he believed the individual members of the clergy to be decent and trustworthy overall, Zar had no way of knowing what Medisi might have told them, offered them, or threatened them with. Whatever it was, he was sure it had been compelling enough to warrant defying the sacred custom of sanctuary.

Would the rest of the five families help him? Before the chaos of the night’s events, he would have thought they would have done so without hesitation but now he wasn’t so sure. This whole thing had been so well-planned and executed. Could Medisi really have pulled it off without at least tacit approval of the balance of Perennia’s primary ruling bodies?

“I doubt it,” he admitted numbly.

Despondence settled over his sense of hope but then he heard his father’s words in his head: “*Thinking the worst is a self-fulfilling prophecy, lad.*” Though this cheered him up a little, a vast chasm opened in his heart as he realized he’d never hear that voice again beyond the dark hallways of his mind.

As instructed, he would wait for his benefactor until the two o’clock bell. If he hadn’t turned up by then, he would begin the next leg of his outbound journey on his own: escaping the city he had called home his entire life.

Glancing down the alley into the dark street beyond, Zar wondered if he would ever see Toriador again after this night.

“Ready?” said a voice behind him.

Zar jumped and nearly shouted in surprise, then recognized the ebony silhouette of his rescuer.

“How did you get here without coming through the door?” he asked, nerves jangling.

The shadow shrugged, “‘Door’ is such a vague term when you think about it. There are usually many ways out of any given location. Any of them could be considered a door, could they not? Come, young prince. We must leave the area immediately. Medisi has instituted a city-wide lockdown and has flooded the streets with guards to enforce it.”

The boy did not ask how the man in black knew this. He doubted he would have gotten a straight answer, anyway. Instead, he got to his feet and started after the older man. After a few steps, however, he halted. The hair on his arms and the back of his neck prickled in fear. His jaw dropped open. Though it was quite dark, Zar realized his companion was far darker than the shadows themselves.

Realizing Zar had stopped following him, the man turned back to him.

“Who are you?” Zar said.

“I think it best for both of us if I not reveal much detail about my identity at this time.

Should we meet again, I will likely be able to be more forthcoming. You can call me Shade.”

“You’re one of *them*, aren’t you?”

The man considered how to respond to this question, then replied, “I have certain resources at my disposal.”

“Are there more of you in the city?”

“There are always some but none of them are working with me at this time. I considered staging a rather grand distraction but felt it would cause other, greater problems later on so I decided to keep a low profile. For the moment, I’m all you’ve got, I’m afraid.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“Great forces are in motion about you, Prince Zarion. You have a great deal of growing up to do in a very short time.”

“Martise told me as much.”

“Ah, yes; Trelaine...”

Zar’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You know Martise?”

The rogue shook his head and replied, “Not really. We have never met face to face. I only know *of* him. Does he still live?”

The boy tried to answer three times, his heart filling his chest. Finally he managed, “I... I don’t think so. He... he d-died... trying to... protect me.”

Shade looked to the ground, head hung in disappointment.

“That is unfortunate. A good man, Trelaine. A potentially valuable asset.” Looking back to the boy, he went on, “He gave his life to ensure yours continues. He gave it for the good of Toriador and by extension, Perennia. However, as I said, great forces are in motion about you, and at the moment, more of them wish you ill than well. Trust no one.”

“If that’s true, why should I trust you?”

The man in black laughed, a dry, papery sound.

“You learn quickly, my boy; a skill that will serve you well. As you have been forthright with me, so will I be with you, to some extent, anyway. Though I saved your life gladly, I cannot deny I have a vested interest in your well-being. Though some say I stir the devil’s cauldron, I assure you I do not.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I can be trusted to do what I say I will do. Enough talk for now. We must depart. Your window of escape continues to close.”

“There’s another secret door out of the city,” the boy stated rather than asked.

“Indeed. Reaching it safely, however, is –”

A two-man foot-patrol stood at the end of the alley, peering down into the darkness. One of them had a lantern which he held aloft to increase the radius of the light. Though it didn’t reach all the way down to where Zar and his companion stood, the edge of the lantern’s glow was only a few yards away. After a moment, the guards advanced down the alley.

The boy’s heart froze in his chest. He looked to Shade for guidance, and the ebony man leaned very close to him. In a voice no louder than a soft breeze across a single leaf, Shade said, “Would you say, young prince, that dire circumstances often require extraordinary solutions?”

Zar nodded.

“So be it. Though your father was far more broad-minded than most, I doubt he ever sang any songs of praise about the unwanted residents of Perennia.”

“No,” the boy admitted. “He didn’t.”

“Well then. You have a decision to make, young prince. Will you allow the words and thoughts of others to guide you in this, the most desperate hour of your young life? Or will you trust that what you think you know may not in fact be the truth? Since we haven’t much time, I will tell you this: If you value your life, you must continue to trust me. Will you do that? Will you face your fears to save your own life?”

Though his brain tingled with fear, Prince Zar nodded.

“Yes. I will. For now.”

“Fair enough,” the stranger said, stepping back.

“What... What are you going to...”

“Stay as close to me as possible. Be as silent as you can be.”

Zar felt a change in temperature as the shadowy rogue stretched out his arms, his cloak unfurling like the wings of a bat, enfolding him in a dark embrace. Though Zar anticipated warmth, he felt a strange and unearthly chill. Further, his benefactor had no discernible mass. He was a shadow made real.

“I can’t see,” the boy whispered in agitation. “How am I supposed to –”

“I will tell you where to go. Picture in your mind the alley we are standing in, how it leads out to First Concourse.”

“Can’t you just clear my eyes?”

“My abilities are quite sophisticated in many respects, but I lack the finesse for that kind of detail in this context. Can you see the alley in your mind?”

Zar nodded, trying to keep his body from shaking as the guards continued to advance. They were picking up their pace, suspicious for some instinctive reason.

“Be aware that given the relatively narrow confines of the alley, we cannot escape undetected. Only audacity will aid us now. We are approximately fifty feet from the street. Once we reach it, you will have to run for all you’re worth toward East Gate. You must listen carefully to my instructions and act on them immediately or you risk running into a wall or some other object and knocking yourself unconscious. When we get close to our objective, I will run interference, but the streets are now well-patrolled and the main thoroughfares are well-lit. Once we reach the outer vectors, our odds of reaching the escape door increase substantially. Do you have a weapon?”

Zar almost sobbed as he pictured his father’s sword stretched across the laundry chute opening as he slid into the basement. God, how could he have been so stupid!

“No.”

“In our favor, the guards will not realize they are in danger until it’s too late. My suggestion, though not the most honorable technique, is to punch them both between the legs as hard as you can as you pass them. It will incapacitate them at least long enough for us to get out of the alley. Are you ready?”

Zar pushed from his mind the knowledge that though he had done plenty of rough-housing and even some weapons training in his brief life, he’d never attacked someone with the specific intent to hurt them. The dynamics were different now. His life depended on him committing violence against others. He’d done it earlier when trying to help Martise, but that had seemed different; less premeditated.

“Yes.”

“Very well,” said Shade. “Let us begin.”

~~~