

JOHN R. FULTZ
THE REVELATIONS
OF ZANG



TWELVE TALES OF THE CONTINENT



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This book is a work of fiction. All characters, names, and events portrayed are fictional or are used in an imaginary manner to entertain. Any resemblance to any real persons or dead is purely intentional for the purposes of satire.

THE REVELATIONS OF ZANG, TWELVE TALES OF THE CONTINENT.

By John R. Fultz

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THE PERSECUTION OF ARTIFICE THE QUILL

The Vizarchs came for Artifice the Quill during a public reading of his latest tale, casting clouds of sleepdust into the crowd atop the Tower of Letters. Wordlessly they encircled him, their faces smooth silver masks beneath the hoods of black robes.

His attentive audience collapsed across one another in ridiculous positions. They would remember nothing of the arrest on awakening, not even the carefully crafted words of the narrative whose end they never heard. A summoned wind caught the pages of his manuscript, sweeping it over the roof-garden's edge, ink-scrawled parchment blackening to ashes.

Seizing Artifice by the wrists, the Vizarchs dragged him through the winding corridors of the tower, down spiraling stairs of basalt, each step inlaid in jade filigree with the names of history's greatest Quills. As these names passed beneath him he imagined the Vizarchs pulled him backward through time into the unenlightened ages before the invention of the written word.

He demanded no explanation, for the Vizarchs possessed no tongues. He knew they had come because of the book. The End of Sorcery had won too much acclaim and sold far too many copies throughout the city and beyond. Rumor had it that caravans even carried his greatest work to readers as far east as barbaric Neptu, where books were rare as fire opals. For the past year the two hundred novice scribes who apprenticed in the tower had produced nothing but hand-written copies of Artifice's volume, churning them out at the astounding rate of nearly a thousand leather-bound copies per month, all of which sold quickly to merchants, scholars and noble folk. Lately the city's illiterates flocked to the book's public readings in record numbers. In the back of his mind, Artifice had been expecting this abduction. Radical thinkers were always made to suffer.

Along the Avenue of Doves, past a succession of walled estates, they pulled him. He tried to walk, but they forced him down so that his sandaled feet dragged behind in the manner of a drunkard hoisted away from a night of debauchery. Their grip was as relentless as their brisk pace, and his arms ached at the shoulders. Strolling noblemen shot scowls at him.

Soon the Vizarchs exited the noble quarter and came into the plaza of the Grand Bazaar, where the city's common folk milled about the stalls of fruit vendors, wine sellers, butchers, fishmongers, fabric weavers, potion sellers, blacksmiths, and hundreds of private booths displaying merchandise of every shape and size.

The crowd parted before the Vizarchs and their captive, some citizens sneering, some laughing, most feigning disinterest to avoid drawing the hooded ones'

attentions. The faceless warlocks were the law in the city, a force to be feared and respected, the living will of the Divine Council, punishers of the wicked, jailors of the accused, executioners of the guilty. If any in that crowd objected to seeing a nobleman so treated they knew better than to express it. Artifice kept his eyes on the worn flagstones, teeth gritted, trying to ignore the pain in his arms. He refused to cry out or beg for mercy; it would do no good. Twice he felt warm spit splash against his cheek; someone hurled a rotten plum which splattered against the back of his head.

A team of horses wound its way through the square, pulling an overloaded wagon manned by a single driver. The Vizarchs must have passed too close to one of the horses; suddenly it reared on its hind legs, neighing discomfort at the nearness of the supernatural. Its three brothers caught its panic and tried to leap out of their harnesses. The wagon shook and jostled its cargo as the hapless driver attempted to whip the horses into submission. Bales of cloth, baskets of fruit, and casks of ale fell from the wagon, bursting and spilling their contents across the pavestones. Artifice's captors splashed through the foamy fluid.

Something else rolled from the wagon with the terrible sound of shattering glass.

A foul wind blew in all directions, hot as a furnace, and the plaza erupted in panic. The Vizarchs halted, their dark robes whipped by the hellish wind, and Artifice looked up from the ale-drenched flagstones to see the hulking, crooked-boned thing that stood released. Someone had loaded a conjuring bottle onto the wagon without securing it. Probably purchased that very hour at one of the alchemy stalls and on its way to the estate of the wagon's owner, where its prisoner would serve whatever purpose its new lord had in mind—guarding a cask of treasure, providing sorcerous instruction, disposing of political rivals, or simply serving as a curiosity to decorate some precocious Lady's parlor. But now the bottle was shattered, and with it the binding spells that imprisoned the demon.

The silver faces of the Vizarchs met its pit-black eyes as the plaza emptied itself, merchants deserting their stalls, cooks dropping their fresh produce, children screaming after their fleeing parents. The creature spread scaly wings and belched thunder. Its claws opened like giant carnivorous blossoms, closing with a sickening crunch around the lead Vizarch, who died as he had lived, soundlessly.

Frightened citizens gathered in the far corners of the plaza to watch the battle. If the Vizarchs failed to recapture or destroy the demon nothing would stand between them and those vicious claws. Men grasped swords and spears from the abandoned weaponsmith stalls, cowering bravely behind pillars and statues, praying to conflicting gods that they not be forced to face the monstrosity.

A flash of amber light, the sound of leathery wings slapping stone—Artifice fell to his knees against the hard pavement, numbed arms waving wildly, free now of his captors' steely grip. The Vizarchs tossed amethyst lightning and emerald flame at the bloody-fisted beast. It laughed, a sound like grinding stones, and crushed another warlock in its claws.

Over the shoulders of the spell-weavers, Artifice looked into the thing's eyes, black and inky, bottomless voids emitting terror. The great mouth opened, yellow fangs gleaming, a serpentine tongue convulsing. A rotted-corpse stench. Hostile magic danced around its impossible bulk, veils of conjured lightning slithered across its knotted hide. The Vizarchs worked their sorceries and died, one by one.

Artifice tore his gaze from those horribly deep eyes and ran.

He was unimportant now as the crowd watched their defenders fall. He entered the nearest alleyway, shoving gawkers and weeping women aside. He ran blindly through twisting corridors, the creature's eyes lingering in his mind's eye, filling his soul with a profound emptiness. A thunderous wailing came from behind, and he screamed. Screamed as he ran; ran until he no longer heard the sounds of the conflagration in the plaza. Only then could he stop and try to catch his breath, inhaling the sewer-stink of a narrow back alley. He fell panting against a wooden wall and pressed his ear against it. The muted chorus of a bawdy drinking song washed away his terror like an unexpected tonic. On the other side of the wall a tavern crowd had begun its evening festivities.

A drink...that's what he needed. A good, stiff shot of the place's finest liquor to calm his nerves. Back in the plaza, a dozen blocks away, reinforcements were arriving. One drink, then he would decide what to do. He staggered around the corner and entered a doorway beneath a swinging placard carved in the shape of a winged stallion.



Night spread its chilly embrace across the city as a late-running merchant galley dropped anchor along the wharf. Artifice, wrapped in a moth-eaten cloak bought for the price of an ale in the Thirsty Pegasus, made his way discreetly through a crowd of sailors and fatigued laborers. A forest of ships' masts swayed gently at his right where hundreds of moored vessels sat waiting for the dawn, their crews gone out on shore leave or settling down to sleep the night below decks. On his left a seemingly endless row of ramshackle, salt-stained buildings served as nightly lodging for thousands of dock workers, rivermen, and foreign seamen. Here the River Vartica emptied into the Southern Sea after flowing hundreds of leagues from its lofty source in the northern mountains. Artifice breathed deeply of the night air, a heady mixture of saltwater, imported spices, and human sweat. He searched for the sign of the Drowned Rat.

The establishment was easy to find, thanks to the stuffed carcass of a bloated wharf rat dangling above its green-lacquered door. Artifice entered, coughing at the mixed

reek of pipe-smoke, spilled liquor, vomit and unwashed bodies. Despite its sparse furnishings, a tangled sprawl of chipped stools and mildewed tables, the place was nearly full. Artifice negotiated a path through the place and seated himself at one of the last few open tables. Nine barmaids worked the room, carrying ale and wine to thirsty men who teased and pinched them as if such behavior were expected. Occasionally the girls fended off advances by slapping a customer's face; this meaty sound brought quite a cheer from the offender's table. It seemed a great honor to be slapped by one of the serving girls at the Drowned Rat.

Before Artifice had a chance to order, a thin man in black silk sat down at his table. The man's rich attire contrasted sharply with his rugged features—narrow eyes, pointed nose, lanky black hair and mustache greased with some fragrant oil that momentarily overpowered the stench of the room. Gold bangles adorned his earlobes. He smiled at Artifice, several teeth missing. A silver stud pierced his lip at the corner of a narrow mouth.

“What brings you back here, Quill? Miss the lovely atmosphere?”

“I knew you'd be here.”

The thin man motioned for a serving girl. His long nails were painted black. “What you drinking?”

“I need more than a drink, Taizo.”

“Course, but you have to buy something. Don't want to look...suspicious, eh?”

Taizo ordered two pints of brown ale then leaned forward on his elbows. “What you need? More research? Writing another book?”

Artifice shook his head. “I've been arrested. Need to get out of town. Quickly.”

Taizo grimaced. “I'm a thief, not a smuggler.”

“I can't leave without certain...items. I need you to steal them for me, from my suite in the Tower of Letters.”

A girl plopped down two foaming mugs on the table. Taizo slapped her bottom and dropped a silver coin in her hand. “I see. You can't go back because the Vizarchs will be waiting for you.” Artifice nodded, sipping at his drink. “What makes you think I can get past the silvercheeks?”

“Can you?”

Taizo tilted back his mug, taking a long draw. He sighed and wiped foam from his mustache. “Sure. Cost you.”

“You like emeralds?”

“My favorite color.”

“I thought so. Now listen, this has to happen within the hour.”

“Love a challenge. Details?”

Artifice briefly explained the layout of the two dozen suites that composed the upper third of the tower. Taizo glided out of the tavern like a shadow. Artifice ordered another ale and a baked pork pie.

He ate dinner quietly and nursed two more ales as the inn grew more crowded, the smoke among the rafters thickened, and the voices around him grew louder and less distinct. He kept his eyes on the door, expecting to see a Vizarch there at any moment. He imagined Taizo creeping through the alley behind the Tower of Letters, rubbing his gloves and bootsoles with a tarry liquid, and scaling the smooth wall toward a certain window. He hoped there weren't any Vizarchs waiting inside his room, but there probably were. But the thief had his own ways of dealing with them, and Artifice didn't want to know what those ways were. He'd used the man before when gathering research for his latest story, the one that no longer existed thanks to the “silvercheeks.” Hiring someone like Taizo was a capital crime itself, but the fellow was only stealing what already belonged to Artifice. Besides, the Quill was already a wanted man.

In a moment of near panic he imagined Taizo writhing in pain at the feet of a flame-handed Vizarch, spilling his guts about Artifice and giving directions to the Drowned Rat. Then the little man sauntered through the door, lugging a sailor's duffel over his shoulder. Grinning, Taizo squeezed through the mass of tables and motioned for Artifice to follow him.

They walked through a faded tapestry decorated with mermaids and sea dragons into a narrow room. A single table without chairs supported a lit lantern. Taizo emptied the duffel across the table and Artifice breathed a sigh of relief. Everything he'd asked for was here: an ivory box containing a half-dozen fresh quills and two bottles of squid ink; a leather satchel packed with two empty journals and several rolls of blank parchment; a bulging, serpent-hide belt pouch; a heavy crimson cloak trimmed in gold, rolled around a pair of tall, thick-soled boots; and a square-bound copy of *Rise of the Enlightened Ones*—the book that had changed Artifice's life. Written over fifty years ago by the city's greatest thinker, he could not imagine leaving his rare copy behind. He would take it to the grave with him if he must.

“Hardly looks like travel provisions to me, but you're the customer,” grinned Taizo.

“Excellent. Did you steal anything else? For yourself?”

“Nothing you'll miss, I warrant.”

Artifice opened the serpent-skin pouch and poured its contents onto the table: twenty-six thumb-sized emeralds. The room went suddenly sea-green as the lantern light amplified the jewels' faceted surfaces. Taizo gasped, and by that sound Artifice knew the thief hadn't taken a peek into any of the requested items. The man was a professional. He grabbed five of the gems and placed them in Taizo's palm.

“Each one of these could buy you an estate on the Avenue of Doves,” he said. “You did a fine job, Taizo.”

“You’re a generous client, Quill. I wish you well. Three of them were waiting for you there, you know. You’re in serious trouble.”

“That’s why I’ve got to get going.”

“If you’re looking to hop a riverboat, I know a captain who’ll—”

“No,” said Artifice. “They’ll be watching the river routes, and checking all outgoing sea vessels.”

Taizo slid his emeralds into a hidden pocket somewhere on his silk shirt and folded his arms. “There’s a Ghothian caravan heading out tomorrow from the West Gate. Going north, I believe.”

“How do you know this?”

“It’s my business to know. The currents of commerce and all that.”

“I’m not fond of spiders,” said Artifice, pulling on his traveling boots. “But that will have to do. Many thanks.”

“Hold on,” said Taizo, his right hand fishing under the collar of his shirt. “When they realize you’ve left the city they’ll start conjuring. They’ll send a Seeker after you, or something worse. You’ll need this.” He held a circular amulet between his fingers and lifted its silver chain from around his neck. Its bronze surface featured an octagonal rune surrounded by three winding serpents biting each other’s tails.

Artifice shook his head vehemently, pulling on the crimson-and-gold cloak. “I abhor sorcery.”

“I know,” said Taizo. “I read your book.”

Artifice’s surprise was evident. “You can read?”

“Don’t look so surprised. Most thieves are educated people. The good ones, anyway. This charm comes from the Red Isle. You wear it, you’re invisible to demons, elementals, wraiths, any conjured thing. Believe me, it works, I know from experience. You don’t want to wake up with a demon feasting on your bowels, do you?”

Artifice rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. “I don’t think I can—”

“Seekers don’t just rend the flesh,” whispered Taizo. “They feast on the soul, bit by bit. It’s no way to go. Better a dungeon and ten years of cold gruel.” He laid the amulet on the table. In the dancing lamplight the serpents seemed to writhe. “It’s your only chance, Quill. Leave without it, might as well let me cut your throat right here and take all those pretty emeralds.”

Artifice picked up the amulet by its chain. He felt somehow dirtied from its touch. He slipped it over his head to dangle beneath his tunic, two inches to the right of his heart.

Taizo looked suddenly serious. “Cost me a pretty penny, that bauble.”

Artifice took another emerald from the pouch strapped to his belt. “This should cover it.”

“Aye,” Taizo said, his grin coming back. “And may the gods bless your journey.”

Artifice shook his hand and exited the little room, the noisy inn, out into the briny smell of the wharf. He walked west into the city, the Red Isle amulet hanging about his neck like a guilty secret.



Someone atop the city’s western wall shouted orders down to the gate’s winch crew and the great iron portals began to swing shut for the night. A smattering of folk exited while they still could, mostly caravan workers heading for camps staked outside the portal. Artifice walked among them, crimson cloak pulled tightly about his shoulders.

An unpaved road wound through a sea of gaudy tents and blazing bonfires. The sounds of camp chatter mingled with the smells of roasting meat and horse sweat. The caravan from Ghoth was easy to spot among the collection of temporary settlements, thanks to the massive forms of its great beasts of burden: thirteen elephantine arachnids loaded with barrels, crates, casks, and bundles. Most of the giant spiders wore gazebo-like huts on their hairy backs, strapped into place with strands of their own steel-strong webbing.

The Ghothian merchant lords wore enormous turbans, silk gowns tied with rope-like belts, and scimitars in jeweled scabbards. They paced about the kneeling beasts shouting directions to their laborers, who were loading the day’s acquisitions and securing them with nets of sticky black webbing. None of the lower caste workers would eat or sleep until the caravan was ready for an early morning departure.

Artifice walked quietly into their camp, passing between two gargantuan spider heads, his image reflected by firelight in the creatures’ multiple glassy eyes. The monsters lay surprisingly still as their owners increased their burdens, eight tree-thick legs folded beneath each of their bloated bellies. Immense mandibles clacked impatiently, a sound like cracking coconuts.

An iron-helmed guard brandishing a spear halted Artifice. "Why you come here?" His words were nearly indecipherable beneath a thick, musical accent.

"May I speak with the caravan master?"

The man directed him to an obese fellow lounging on a large oaken trunk, bellowing occasional orders to the servants scrambling across the back of the nearest spider. Artifice introduced himself. The big man stood, an ivory-toothed smile splitting his round face. "I am Agbod. Welcome to my humble camp."

Agbod was eager to accept a paying passenger for tomorrow's journey and asked for a modest sum of gold. Artifice showed him a single emerald instead. Despite the evident glow of avarice in the merchant's eyes, Agbod shook his head, claiming the gem far too much for passage, since they could only take him as far as Ghoth itself.

"I'm heading for Caspaar," Artifice told him. "And I need to leave tonight."

Agbod frowned, his eyes still on the gem. "Ah, that will not be possible, I'm afraid," he said. "You see we are still loading, and the men must rest."

"A single beast and a driver are all I need," said Artifice.

Agbod pulled at his tiny beard. "I'm afraid it's not possible."

"Very well." Artifice turned to leave, took three steps before Agbod's shout rang out.

"Wait! Wait my friend," he came wobbling after Artifice. "It comes to mind that I can spare a single beast. But I would only do this for such an honest and handsome man as yourself!" He snatched the emerald from Artifice and shoved it into the pocket of his embroidered vest. "After all, one late arrival will hardly spoil my profits on this expedition."

He led Artifice to a beast loaded with a shipment of imported spices, fifty crates wrapped in a net of resinous webbing, where he conversed with a tall, muscled man named Dishnub. Then he embraced Artifice and went back to his loading crew.

Dishnub wore a curved dagger, baggy pantaloons and white turban, his bare chest tattooed with spidery insignias. He looked tired and none too pleased about his new assignment. He nodded to Artifice and motioned toward a rope ladder descending from the hut on the beast's back. Artifice climbed while thick, black hairs the texture of frayed hemp brushed his clothing and hands, the sickly-sweet smell of spider skin filling his nostrils. Dishnub followed him without a word.

Inside the little hut Artifice took a seat on a divan loaded with fat cushions while Dishnub stood before the open window closest to the spider's head and trilled commands in a bizarre language. Ghothians spent their lives breeding and training these behemoths, harvesting their webs and venoms for various industrial applications. It was not sorcery that controlled these beasts, or so Artifice had heard, but the lifelong bond forged between each spider and its handler. The monster's bulk shifted as Dishnub sang, the little hut bobbing left, then right, rising forty feet to a

new stability as the spider extended its arched legs. The jointed mid-point of each limb rose higher than the top of the hut where Artifice clutched a narrow railing. Dishnub shouted a final farewell to his master below, and the spider loped northward away from the camp.

Artifice felt suddenly guilty for hijacking this man's evening. "We'll travel until midnight," he offered, "then we'll stop for some sleep."

Dishnub nodded, prodding the beast's broad back with the tip of a spear to indicate direction. The pace was rapid yet surprisingly smooth, all the speed of a galloping horse with none of the bone-jarring effect.

"How many days until we reach Caspaar?" Artifice asked him. Dishnub held up four fingers, which his passenger took to mean a four-day journey. A riverboat would've required double that time without stops.

Artifice leaned back on the couch and watched the moonlit city recede behind him, the quiet expanse of ocean reflecting a multitude of stars. A wedge of silver spires rose above the metropolis like an icy mountain. He tried not to think of the hapless wretches languishing in the dark honeycomb of dungeons beneath those bright towers.



The Harlots of Caspaar enjoyed renown across the Continent. Besides serving as the major trade nexus of the northlands, their city brought in great wealth through the Temple of Ahnimah, the triple-breasted goddess of fertility. The harlots were her priestesses. By making love to any one of them a man paid homage to the goddess herself. Caspaar lay at the intersection of two merchant routes and the River Vartica, a few leagues from the edge of the wild Zang Forest. Artifice dismissed the Ghothian when the temple's sparkling dome appeared on the horizon. He walked alone into Caspaar, watching the riverboats glide in and out of its busy wharf district.

The journey north had been uneventful. No brigands would dare assault the vast arachnid, which explained why Ghothian merchants never lost a bit of cargo. Artifice purchased daily meals from the farming and fishing villages along the way, taking care to keep the beast well out of sight. Dishnub ate only from his own humble provisions, exemplifying the finicky palate of his people.

The eight-legged giant crossed sparsely wooded plains and climbed steep hills without slowing. Once per day Dishnub let it rest, feeding it great chunks of dried meat from the cargo net. When the beast drew near to Caspaar it halted at the river's

edge, and Artifice climbed the rope ladder to the ground. He glanced back at the departing spider one last time, a tiny black dot sliding over the horizon toward Ghoth.

The cobbled streets of Caspaar radiated outward from the great temple like the spokes of a wheel, its buildings constructed mainly of baked stone, square-shaped houses and storefronts free of ornamentation, very different from the ornate designs of southern architecture. Traders and laborers filled its streets with a midday buzz of activity. No one gave Artifice a second glance as he came in from the open fields and strode toward the temple avenue. Foreigners were expected and welcomed here.

A constant stream of outlanders poured in and out of the grand temple. Its arched entrance opened into a verdant courtyard lined with citrus trees, poppy flowers, apple and olive trees, grape vines, tall willows, and tiered fountains. Patrons and their chosen ladies sat on granite benches, sipping yellow wine in anticipation of carnal delights.

Artifice entered the temple proper. A serving lad took his satchel and cloak, leading him into the pillared hall where the goddess herself stood upon a central pedestal. A thirty-foot eidolon sculpted of pure white marble, her eyes twin sapphires, pale arms spread to embrace the world. A collection of priestesses knelt before the three-sided altar, garbed in white robes hung with garlands of lilies and roses. The scents of jasmine and frankincense rose from smoldering braziers hung from the dome on silver chains. He approached the altar, knelt to kiss the bare feet of the goddess, and placed an emerald among the rest of the day's tributes: gold and silver coins, finely-crafted jewelry, strands of pearls and garnets.

A dark-haired beauty approached him, perfumed hair a mass of curls, golden circlets adorning her wrists, ankles, and neck. "The goddess welcomes you," she said, in a voice like dripping honey.

"I wish to see Thalia," said Artifice.

She made him wait in the courtyard beneath a tree full of swollen purple fruit, some import from a warmer clime, and another servant brought him a glass of the amber wine. Soon a tall woman in the robes of a high priestess emerged from behind a hedge of white roses, her eyes a deeper green than the emerald he had given the goddess. Her dark hair was coifed into a tall cone wrapped with strands of golden fabric, her pale skin bright beneath purple vestments, bare feet delicate and inviting. She smiled, showing perfect white teeth as he stood to embrace her.

"You are a high priestess now," Artifice said. "I did not know."

"One of twenty-nine." She kissed him deeply, then pulled away to stare into his eyes. "I thought I would never see you again."

Artifice caressed her cheek. "You are more beautiful than even I remember."

He followed her inside the temple and climbed a set of carpeted stairs to her private chamber where a silk-lined bed awaited their passion. They made love twice, dined on grapes, cheese and fresh-baked loaves, then made love again. Later, the setting sun outside her westward window filled the chamber with a warm glow. They lay wrapped in each other's arms among a tangle of soft, damp sheets.

"Why did you leave Narr?" she asked.

"I might ask you the same question," he replied.

"Didn't I answer it five years ago?" she said. "The goddess chose me, I did not choose her."

Artifice nodded, pretending to believe her words. "I need a new life," he said. "I can't go back to Narr. The Vizarchs."

She rose on one elbow, her other hand stroking his naked chest. The Red Isle amulet lay on a bedside table with the rest of his belongings. "I am not surprised," she said. "You dared to dream of a world free of sorcery. Then dared to share that dream with the masses."

"You read *The End of Sorcery*?"

"Of course I did."

He kissed her forehead, cheek, mouth. "It shouldn't be a crime to dream."

"I'm sure the Divine Council disagrees. You're a threat to their power. Their entire way of life."

"What did you think of it?"

"I thought it was brilliant," she said. "But I'm not a sorcerer."

He rose from the bed, pacing toward the open window. The moon was rising. "Filthy wizards have no right to impose their will on my mind. On the citizens of Narr. On the world itself!"

"Their power gives them the right," she said, wrapping herself in a sheet and joining him at the window.

"Does it really?"

She was silent, rubbing his back with petal-soft fingers.

"It's your parents, isn't it?" she whispered. "The way they died."

He frowned at her. "It's far more than that."

"Are you being honest with yourself, Artifice? They were taken from you at such a young age, and in such a horrible fashion."

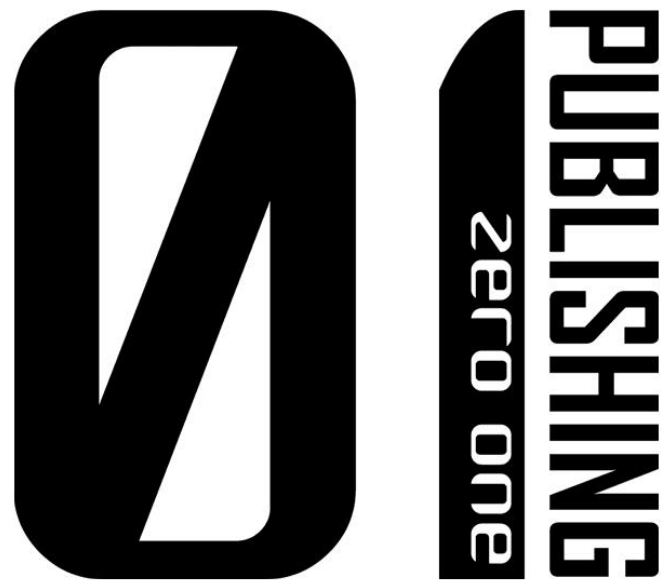
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