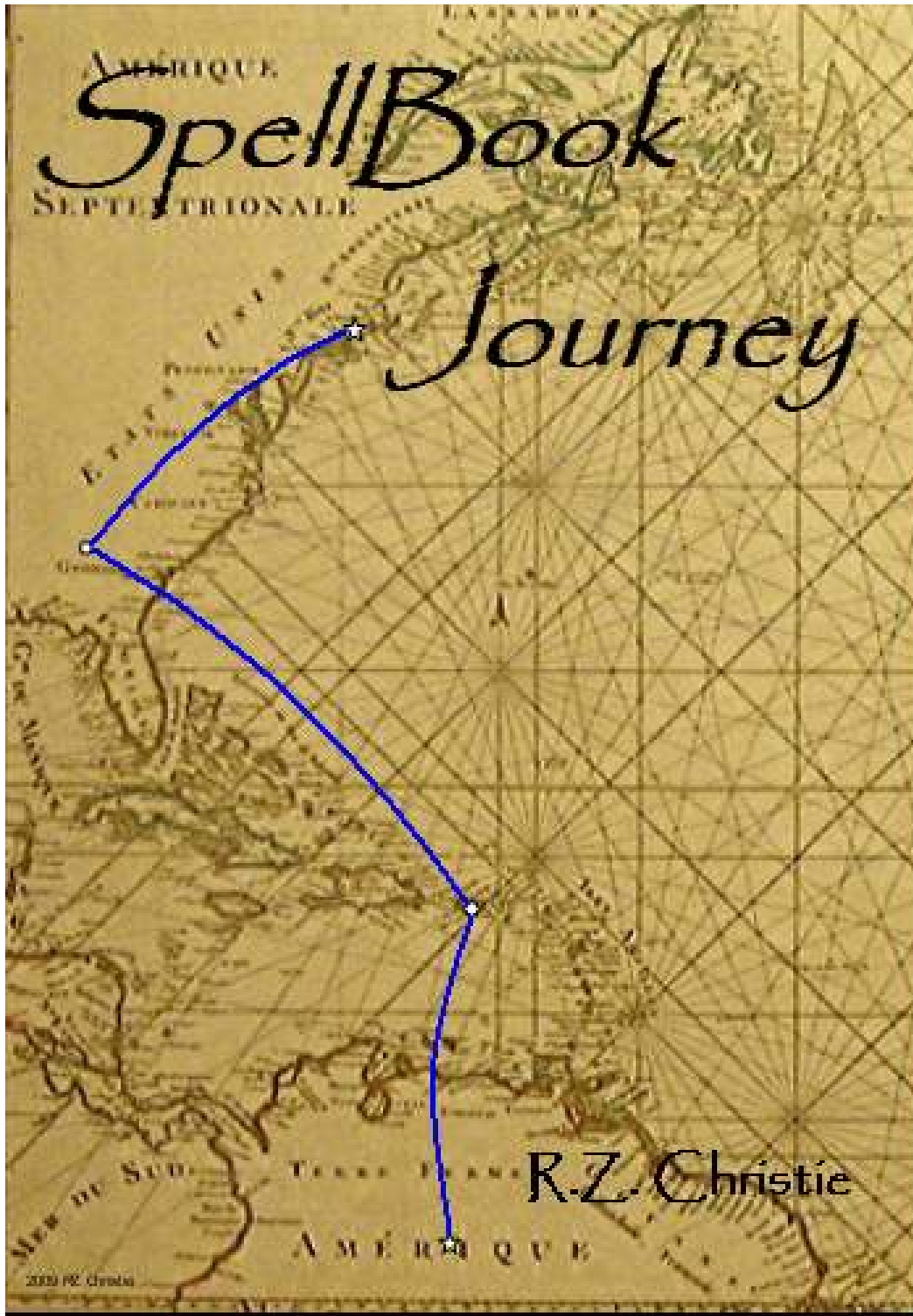


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Prologue

Circa 235 A.D., Northern France

The flames of the torches flickered chaotically in the evening breeze; illuminating a small open area in a thick, conifer forest. The scent of pine drifted about, mixed with the smell of the burning tallow. It was the night of the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, and thus, it was when the sun was at its lowest point on its ecliptic path across the heavens.

To the west, the sun was just slipping away; a gold, molten disc that took its warmth with it. To the east, a pale full moon began to rise in the clear winter sky; its cold, white light predestined to cast long shadows on the snowy forest floor.

A man stood naked underneath a long, white tunic; his dark brown eyes scanning the other occupants of the clearing. His arms hung loose at his sides as if useless, and his long, black hair fitted in the wind carelessly. The tunic was open in the back, just like a hospital gown for patients; but neither the cold breeze, nor the six inches of snow he stood in, fazed the wearer. He seemed immune to the frigid weather, or he had perfect control over his being. Either way, he did not flinch when the chill wind blew.

Behind him was a towering pine tree that was perhaps eighty years old, and facing him was a group of eleven robed figures —flanked by shadowed forms standing on the forest's edge.

The colors of their robes were all a deep, uniform gray, and each bore a deep hood, which were all draped over the heads of the wearers. They could have been mistaken for snow splattered statues, but the steady breaths that they took shone fully in the mixed light.

All was still, until a twelfth individual strode out of the darkness. The reddish brown wool of its robe glided across the snow's surface as the figure marched up behind the group. It paused, waiting for two of the eleven to separate. Once able to proceed, the newcomer marched forward several steps, its billowing sleeves nearly covering up the thick, leather bound book in its grasp. The figure's graying brown beard and mustache was well groomed, belying the wildness in the blue-green eyes that stared at the man in front of the tree. A moment passed; where the only sounds were the torches' flames and the breeze whistling through the pine needles.

As it lifted the book, the lead figure spoke. "Dumas Curras," it said, in Gaelic, in a deep male voice. "You have been found guilty of mass murder through the abuse of your Talent." Issuing a series of low —almost musical— words, the man held the thick binder out horizontally.

Seconds later, several thick roots erupted from the pine needle ridden snow, intertwining and wrapping themselves together as they rose higher in a singular column. When their grasping tips touched the leather surface of the binder, they spread out, twisting and weaving themselves to become a living pedestal for the book.

Dumas issued a mocking laugh that bordered on maniacal. "Murder?" he said, his voice a vibrant tone. "I did not see you prosecute the Roman army; when they burned my village to the ground and MURDERED MY WIFE AND CHILD!"

The figure opened the book casually, glaring deeper into Dumas's pale eyes. "We can forgive the revenge that you took on the soldiers. But the senseless slaughter of citizens who had never seen the battlefield—"

"Why should I care about them?" cut in Dumas; his eyes and face becoming more crazed with every word, until he was drooling with rage. "They don't care about us when our innocents are slaughtered in their quest for power." He paused to scan the group of onlookers, his breaths billowing through the air.

"They wanted power? Well, I gave them power. As much as I could muster."

"And you went to far," the robed man said angrily as he flipped through the thick pages. He found what he was looking for a second later, and his eyes looked up at Dumas again. "Are you ready for your judgment?"

"Judgment?" Dumas said as he shot him an evil glare coupled with a maniacal smile. "Go ahead. Kill me, Hector. It won't stop what I have started."

Hector smiled in return, his eyes twinkling with confidence and said, “If you are referring to your partners in this atrocity, I tell you now that we have already rounded up your consortium of fanatics and dealt with them accordingly.”

Dumas’s smile faded, replaced by red faced anger. “What did you do to my followers, you Roman sympathizer?”

“Like I said. They have been dealt with,” Hector said in a calm tone. “And now, all that remains of your ‘Order’ is you.”

Hector’s nonchalant tone infuriated Dumas into action. Raising his hands, he began to intone in a deep, musical voice. But before he could finish the incantation a bolt of blue energy flashed out of the darkened forest line, between two of the robed figures, and struck him in the chest.

He hit the tree behind him hard, disrupting his invocation. The blue energy enveloped him from head to foot and he found himself pinned to the pine’s rough girth.

“You shall not cause the death of another soul,” a powerful feminine voice said from the darkness. “And now you will pay for the lives you have taken without mercy.”

Dumas shifted his gaze past the group of robed figures and saw a single shaft of blue light floating in the dark. He smiled at first, and then threw his head back and laughed. “You cannot kill me, Hector. You don’t have the courage, or the conviction.”

Hector rolled his jaw angrily before saying: “I don’t plan on killing you. That would be an insult to all those souls who want justice.” He paused as he put his hand on the book. “You will be imprisoned. For as long as mankind allows.”

Dumas’s face turned pale as the group of robed figures stepped forward and gathered around Hector. They all began to drone a rhythmic chant over and over, their voices becoming one unified voice that filled the forest with its powerful sound.

As Hector joined in, the book began to glow a translucent shade of red-orange. It shuddered once as he put his right hand on its pages, the glow spreading slowly into a sphere of light that grew larger with each repeat of the chant. With a twitch of his left hand, the tapered fingers of the pedestal curled around the edges of the book to hold it steady.

Dumas, recognizing the chant that the cloister repeated over and over, struggled with the magical bonds, screaming out: “You can’t do this! It’s inhumane!”

“And so were the things that you did to all those innocent people,” the female voice said from the darkness. “You slaughtered helpless men, women, and children as if they were mere

vermin.” There was a brief pause as the chanting grew faster and louder. “Do not worry, Dumas Curras, I am sure that it will be a long time before someone cuts you down.”

As the edge of the red-orange glow touched him, Dumas felt his body turning numb. He looked down in horror as his arms and legs became as grayish-brown as the bark. A few seconds later, the rough surface became soft and pliable, like plaster; sucking at his limbs. He struggled to free himself, but as his hands and feet were swallowed up by the tree he knew it was too late.

Hector quickly held up both hands, and the clearing became deathly quiet as the chanting abruptly stopped. “Do you have any last words, my old friend?” he said in a sad voice.

Dumas did not reply; the shock and reality of the situation had deprived him of words.

As the forest became still again, all eyes were on the man who was slowly and surely being swallowed up by the tree. His legs had already slipped beneath the bark’s surface, along with his forearms and lower torso. The tunic that had been draped over his body was now tearing apart as Dumas’s arms were absorbed into the hungry conifer. It fell gently to the snow covered ground a few seconds later.

As his chest, neck, and face began to take on the bark’s hue, Dumas found his voice, and his eyes focused on Hector. “I will have my revenge, Hector. If not on you, then on your descendents my wrath shall fall.” As if the bark of the tree was quicksand, drawing him in, it quietly enveloped the back of his head. He struggled to get his last words out before it covered his face. “I WILL HAVE MY REVEN—”

And then he was gone; embedded magically in the pine by the power of the robed cloister. His last words echoed through the forest like a haunting memory, causing some of the onlookers to flinch involuntarily.

Hector let his head drop as the pine’s bark became solid again, and then slowly closed the book. Lifting it from the root pedestal, he turned to the nearest robed figure.

“You know what to do, Cedric,” he said, holding it out.

The man nodded, lifting a leather bag to accept the binder. “I do.” He then bowed respectfully and strode to the edge of the clearing. He was met by a figure from the shadows, who accompanied the courier into the forest’s depths.

Hector stood calmly as the others slowly departed in small clusters and pairs. He could hear Dumas’s threat over and over in his head, and the cold knot of fear formed in his stomach.

“You did the right thing, Hector,” the female voice said from the shadows.

“Did I?” he said back sharply. “Will my descendents suffer his wrath someday?”

There was a short pause as the figure lowered her head. “Perhaps. Perhaps not,” the voice said. “But, for now your greatest concern is to ensure that the SpellBooks are never found by the Romans, and that our way of life is preserved.”

Hector folded his arms. “Do not worry. I’m sending the books to Britannia, to my mentor.”

The voice’s owner smiled. “That is good. Merlin will know what to do.”

Chapter 1: The Release

Circa: December, 1941 A.D.

Northern France

The snow drifted across the vast forest in vibrant swirls as the convoy of armored vehicles drove slowly down the makeshift road. They rounded a curve, the headlights piercing the white fog of frozen flakes. Soon a cluster of other vehicles, with dark, iron crosses on their doors, came into view. A squad of armed soldiers stopped the lead vehicle, spreading themselves out to preplanned positions to cover the convoy.

A window in the second vehicle, a black Mercedes, lowered slowly, and the squad leader approached to look inside.

"Your papers please," he said in German, and a small black book was handed to him by a gloved hand. Upon quick inspection, the soldier snapped the binder closed. "Ah, Captain Gottwald," he said as he handed back the book. "We have been expecting you. Commandant Brinkmann is waiting in his tent." Straightening, he moved to the lead vehicle and waved them on. The leader, as well as the two guards assisting him, snapped to attention as Gottwald's Mercedes passed.

The convoy moved into the camp, coming to a halt in front of the largest tent. The driver of the Mercedes got out, rushing around the vehicle to open the door for his passenger. A lean man

in his early twenties exited, his blue eyes scanning the campground carefully as his short, blonde hair flitted in the wind. As he put on his round officers' hat and pulled his long, gray woolen overcoat around him, the pair of SS insignias on his collar flashed in the nearby firelight.

The two guards at the tent's entrance snapped to attention, and one of them opened the tent flap to allow him access. The Captain bore a black leather satchel with brass buckles, clamping it against his chest as he made his way inside.

The interior of the tent wasn't very big, but it provided relief from the biting wind. It was dominated mainly by a neatly made cot and a small table onto which the officer set the bag. Another officer with SS badges stood on the far side, tending to a small wood burning stove. He was a few years older, with a stern face, dirty-blond hair, and piercing blue-green eyes.

Gottwald stepped up to him and clacked the heels of his boots together. "Heil, Hitler."

"I trust you have what I want?" the man said, his baritone voice stern and demanding.

"Yes, Herr Commandant," the Captain said, motioning to the satchel.

The Commandant eyed the Captain with a hungry gleam and moved to the bag. Opening it, the officer removed the contents; an old, thick book bound in worn brown leather. He grinned evilly as he dropped the empty satchel in Gottwald's arms. "At last, Captain," he chuckled, running his fingers across the ornate gold emblem on the cover. "The means to conquer the world."

"Herr Commandant, Sir," the Captain said nervously. "I have read the history of the tree."

Brinkman seemed to ignore him. "And?"

"And I do not think that releasing the power locked in it is a wise choice."

The Commandant shifted his eyes to the Captain. "Your concern is duly noted," he said with a contemptuous tone. "But we are proceeding."

"Yes, Herr Commandant," Gottwald said, clacking his heels and saluting.

"Dismissed," growled his superior officer.

Gottwald stepped out of the tent slowly, his face frowning and a tinge of uncertainty tugging at his conscience. He walked to a nearby cluster of soldiers gathered around a large fire. The soldiers snapped to attention at his approach and saluted. The Captain returned the gesture and they returned to their fire.

"Cold, Sir?" a soldier asked politely. "Would you like something hot to drink?"

"Yes," the Captain said, taking a small metal cup into which the man poured some steaming coffee. But Gottwald wasn't shaking from the cold Gaul winter, nor was his mind.

Before sunrise the next morning, the Captain trudged through the falling snow to the Commandant's tent. The man was already awake and ready. He offered Gottwald some coffee and breakfast, and they ate in silence. Soon after they finished, the two men made their way outside to a narrow deer trail through the trees. Several soldiers waited there, holding burning lanterns, and with them were two robed individuals. They were both tall, with their hoods drawn over their heads to hide their faces and their hands engulfed in their sleeves. The squad 'snapped to' at their approach, and their eyes sneered at the monks for not doing so.

"I have what we were looking for," the Commandant said as he held the book's satchel up.

One of the monks stepped forward, unfurled his arms, and received it with thin, pale hands.

"Excellent," the man said in a thick, grumbling voice as he withdrew the satchel's contents and dropped the bag carelessly.

The Captain could see the man's chin now; pointed, hairless, and as equally pale as his hands.

The monk mumbled something incoherent and his toothy smile increased as he turned away. "Come."

They were accompanied by the soldiers as they started up the well used trail, their weapons slung over their shoulders casually.

After a few minutes, the group came to a large area previously cleared of trees by the troops. And in the center was a massive pine that dwarfed all the trees around it.

Captain Gottwald slowly paced around its twenty foot girth, looking up frequently at the towering trunk with its countless branches. A foreboding air hung around the pine, one that set his nerves on edge. Especially when he stepped up to the only other thing left behind by the soldiers' handiwork: A pedestal; seemingly grown in front of the tree out of its roots! It was covered in nubs, where its branches had been carefully stripped off, and appeared very old. The soldiers with lanterns spread out, placing their light sources in predetermined locations to illuminate the clearing.

"I still do not think that this is a good idea," Gottwald said to the Commandant as he turned toward the man.

The officer only sneered at his subordinate whom blocked his view of the tree. "If you are so afraid, you coward, then leave," he said with a low growl as he watched the monk move up to

the root pedestal and set the book down on it.

Gottwald scowled angrily and stepped aside. He stood behind the Commandant as the man opened the book and placed his hand on its pages.

The monk began to speak in a deep, musical voice and the book began to glow yellow in the deep shadows of the forest. The soldiers looked on in awe as the pedestal came to life to hold the binder firmly.

"You see, Captain," Brinkmann arrogantly said in a low tone. "The world around you possesses powers that you never knew. Powers that will soon be ours to command."

The monk, however, remained focused on the creaking pages, turning them one by one, until he found what he was looking for. Taking a deep breath and raising his hands high, he issued a loud intone of lengthy proportions. Soon his repetitive chant rang all around them as if a choir was present.

"Commandant?" he said slowly as he turned toward the two officers. His eyes shone white in the book's glow and Gottwald swallowed hard. "I need your assistance."

Brinkmann stepped forward, standing in front of the pedestal and followed the directions dictated by the priest. He held out his hands, palms down, over the book.

Captain Gottwald inhaled sharply as his commanding officer's hands burst into a fiery, orange glow. The Commandant looked at the monk, who nodded, turned toward the tree, and touched the ancient bark. The flaming glow started to spread to the gnarled surface slowly, and then the Commandant's hands sank into the bark's rough surface as if it were mud. The man pushed them in up to his elbows, seemingly searching for something inside the ancient conifer by the expression on his face.

And then his eyes lit up with joy. Bracing against the trunk with his knees, he pulled hard, drawing out his arms slowly and with much effort. Soon his hands were clearing the surface, and in their grasp was another man's wrist and hand.

As the Captain and soldiers gawked wide-eyed at the sight, Brinkmann continued to pull, extracting the body of a man from the ancient pine.

He was Caucasian, middle aged, with jet black hair and a clean shaven face. He was completely naked; and the falling snow collected on the cold, ashen skin of his back. When his chest cavity and diaphragm cleared the surface, the man inhaled deeply. This startled Brinkmann; who released him as if the man had become searing hot. Dumbfounded, they all watched as the man took several more shaky breaths as he lie face-down in the snow.

Brinkmann squatted down, examining the wondrous sight while reaching out his glowing

right hand to touch it.

The soldiers watched in awe, jumping back when the naked figure suddenly grabbed the Commandant by the right wrist. Several of them drew their rifles and pointed them at the figure, saying: "God in Heaven. It's the Devil."

"No!" Brinkmann commanded hastily, touching the man's right shoulder with his left hand. He looked down at the naked figure. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes," said the man in a very raspy voice. "Pull me free."

As Brinkmann began to pull again, an agonizing scream pierced the air and a spectral humanoid figure materialized from inside the tree. It was semi-transparent, floating directly above the naked man.

"No!" it said in Gaelic as the soldiers and Gottwald fumbled for their weapons. "You will not escape me, Dumas."

"Oh yes I will, Hector," Curras said back when he recognized his jailor's voice. "I will not be denied my vengeance."

The ghost's appearance became clearer now, the form of a gray-robed, bearded man in his sixties now showing within the shimmering outline of white light. Its attention shifted to the monk at the pedestal, and bellowed. It lunged forward, swooping around the man and whipping the loose snow into a torrent of frothing white flakes.

Everyone but the monk, Dumas, and Brinkmann dropped to their knees and clapped their hands to their ears as its screams filled the air.

His anger fueling what little strength that he had, Dumas shouted to Brinkmann. "You! Ignore it and pull me out!"

Nodding in stunned awe, the Commandant gripped the man's hand again and began to pull.

"You will not stop this," the monk said to the ghost above its howling screams. "Lord Curras will be free." The hood flipped back, unveiling a pale white head adorned with long, smooth black hair. The dark, thin eyebrows furrowed down into a creased 'V' and the albino eyes became pinpoints of darkness. "And there is nothing you can do about it."

"You may take him," Hector's spirit said through its howling. "But you can't have his power." It swooped down onto Curras and Brinkmann and floated above to the naked man.

Dumas then screamed out in agony as the spirit plunged its white, inhuman hands deep into his back.

"No!" Dumas cried at the monk who was furiously flipping pages. "It's taking my

Talent.” He could feel the inner heat generated by his magical powers being sucked out of him by the icy entity. And as it did so, his hair began to lose its color, shifting from jet black to silvery-white. His eyes did the same, becoming a steely grey.

The monk stopped his frantic searching when the spirit separated itself from Dumas as Brinkmann separated him from the tree.

“Enjoy your freedom,” said the floating figure slowly as it held a dark green orb of energy in its transparent grasp. “For without the full extent of your power, you are helpless.”

Dumas attempted to grab the ghost, falling far short of the spiritual figure as it laughed and melted back into the tree.

“Are you alright?” Brinkmann asked; helping Dumas to his feet as the glow on his hands faded.

The monks stood in awe a few seconds, and then stepped forward, past the pedestal, and kneeled respectfully in the snow. They both began to murmur in low tones repeatedly as if praying.

Captain Gottwald stood up from where he had collapsed, horrified and shaken from the experience. The hairs on his neck still prickled and he knew that something evil had just been released from its prison. The ghost exemplified the image of an angel from heaven, minus the feathered wings, and thus he was sure of his assumption.

“My God,” he whispered to himself. “What have we done?” He noted that the book’s glow was fading and stepped up quickly to lift it from the pedestal’s grasp. No one saw him do it either, for all the soldiers were still stunned and disoriented from the ordeal. Scanning the clearing, he realized that nobody was watching him, and so the Captain slipped away into the nearby tree line with the book.

Brinkmann removed his heavy, woolen overcoat and draped it over Dumas’ shoulders. “You must be cold,” he said. “Take my coat for warmth.”

The man didn’t seem to notice the biting chill, or the coat. His eyes were transfixed on the massive tree. “You will not have the last laugh, Hector,” he said in Gaelic. “Only someone with

the Seventh Book could have freed me. And now I have it.” He turned to the Commandant, switching to German with a deep scowl on his face. "Tell me, what year is it?"

"1941," Brinkmann replied.

"And the Roman Empire?"

Some of the men exchanged glances, and started whispering to each other.

"The Roman Empire collapsed nearly fifteen hundred years ago," Brinkmann said, astonished. "Have you been in that tree for that long?"

"Longer," the man said as he stood up straight and took in a deep breath of cold air. "And now I am free."

"Yes," the commander said; his lust for power showing. "Free to help us conquer all of Europe."

Dumas' pale eyes shifted toward Brinkmann and then scanned the others in the clearing. "Conquer? I will have no part in Roman conquest."

"But we are not Romans," Brinkmann countered defiantly and with notable arrogance.

"We are the Master Race. And all other races will be subjugated, or destroyed."

This did not sit well with Dumas, and he swiftly grabbed the Commandant by the collar of his coat. "Then, like the Romans before you, you are my enemy. And you will all die."

The soldiers now all pointed their weapons at him and the air was filled with the sound of cocking weapons.

"Release Herr Commandant," the squad leader said firmly. "Or we shoot."

Dumas smiled briefly. "No."

The leader aimed his rifle. "Then you leave us no choice."

Before they could shoot, however, Curras waved a hand and muttered something incoherent; something musical in nature.

A wall of icicles; surrounding the kneeling monks, the Commandant, and himself thrust up from the ground, blocking the shower of bullets that the soldiers fired. Dumas issued a malicious grin and with a sharp, single word, coupled with an outward thrust of his fist, shattered the wall into hundreds of flying, pointed shards.

The icy darts struck down the soldiers like bullets, and only Captain Gottwald, who had fled to the safety of the forest, remained alive.

He peered from behind a large tree at the scene, horrified at the carnage that the shattered ice wall had wrought. To his right, several men lay writhing with shards sticking out from their torsos, their agonized moans filtering through the trees. To his left, one soldier had been pierced

through the chest by a larger chunk, pinning him to the trunk of a nearby pine. His blood drained down the crystalline shaft of the icy projectile, dripping rhythmically to the snow. Next to that poor soul; two more soldiers were pinned together by one of the longer shafts, and next to them, the squad leader lie on his back in the snow with his helmet lying next to him. He had been killed instantly.

Gottwald turned and started to flee as quickly and quietly as possible. *"I cannot allow him to get this book,"* he thought as he fled toward the camp. *"It will be the death of us all."*

The soldiers from the camp, alerted by the gunfire, were now rushing up the trail with their rifles ready. Gottwald, who was not on the trail, hid while they rushed by. He then made a reckless break for the encampment.

Dumas glared into Brinkmann's eyes with animalistic intensity as he lifted him off the ground with one hand. "Now then," he said with a voice as cold as the wind. "How did you release me?"

"We used a spell from a book," the Commandant said as he gasped for breath. He had never seen such power before, and he feared for his life.

The man's eyes narrowed as he grinned, and said with a growl: "Excellent. So where is it?"

The commander pointed to where it should have been, but the book was no longer there. "It was there," he gasped. "I swear."

Dumas dropped him, striding past the monks to the ancient pedestal. He looked about and sniffed the air. "Yes," he said softly. "It was here. But not anymore." He strode back to Brinkmann as the man stood up. "Who took it?"

"I...I..." the commander stammered.

Dumas grabbed him by his uniform jacket and slammed him against the massive pine. "Tell me who took it!"

"I don't know!" Brinkmann said through gritted teeth.

At that point, the remaining soldiers from the camp arrived, and they all pointed their weapons at them. Curras turned his head slowly, the cold glare unnerving a few. He intoned a few words, and then smiled when the metal of their rifles began to turn red hot. The soldiers dropped the weapons, the snow hissing from the heated steel as they shook their singed hands.

Brinkmann sighed. "Thank you for sparing them."

"Who says I will?" the man said as he returned his vicious gaze to the officer. The tone chilled the commander to the bone, and when the soldiers' uniforms started to smoke, he averted his eyes in helpless frustration. Within seconds, the soldiers burst into flame, their agonizing screams filling the forest's quiet confines as their burning flesh permeated the air with a horrid stench.

"You didn't have to do that," Brinkmann said as he withdrew a short bladed knife from under his coat with his right hand. "They could have helped." He moved in front of Dumas, straightening his collar. He looked around at the bodies of his men and noted one missing. "The book. I know who has taken it."

"No matter," said the magician casually, lifting his right hand. "I will find it. And thus, you are of no further use to me."

A second later, Brinkmann's knife flashed in the lantern light, and Dumas screamed out as the polished steel blade slashed open his left cheek, right below the eye. Blood spurted out, splashing on his right arm when his head jerked to that side. With his left hand, Dumas grabbed Brinkmann's weapon hand by the wrist, twisted it up over his head, and grabbed the officer's throat with his right.

But the Commandant was well trained in hand-to-hand combat. He brought his left hand up between them, forcing his assailant's grip on his throat to falter and release.

Taking advantage of Dumas' momentary surprise that the move had bestowed upon him, Brinkmann struck him across his right cheek. And when this failed to free his right hand, he dropped the knife into his left and drove it deep into the right side of Dumas' chest.

Looking down, Dumas released his grip before he staggered backward. The stab wound bled freely as he dropped to his knees and then careened over into the bloody snow.

"NO!" said the lead monk as he sprang from the ground. His jump carried him twenty feet to where the Commandant was standing.

Brinkmann spun as the man landed in front of him and was once again grabbed by the throat. But this opponent didn't flinch when the SS blade was plunged deep into his chest. Shocked at the monk's apparent lack of feeling, the Nazi fearfully looked into the piercing pale eyes.

"You cannot kill me, mortal," the monk said with a sneer. With inhuman strength, he lifted Brinkmann from the ground. "But I can kill you."

A dull crunch sounded seconds later, and Brinkmann's body fell to the snow with a

cushioned thud.

The monk then turned his attention to Dumas. He knelt slowly, hesitating briefly before rolling the man over.

But Dumas was alive, and the stab wound was neatly stitching itself closed.

As the monk reached out to touch the hole, Curras opened his eyes and grabbed him by the wrist.

“Who are you?” he said in German as he sat up.

The monk bowed his head and spoke in Gaelic. “I am but a humble servant of the Order.”

Dumas’ eyebrows perked up in surprise. “The Order?” he said.

“Yes, My Lord,” said the monk as he continued to stare at the blood sprayed snow. “The Order of the Eclipsing Moon.” He shook his right arm up in the air, exposing a tattoo of a shadowed moon on the pale flesh of his inner right forearm, above the wrist.

Dumas rolled his right arm over to expose his own tattoo, a near perfect match. “How can this be so?” he said as he got to his feet. With a suspicious sneer, he released his grip of the monk’s wrist and grabbed his smooth black hair roughly to pull his head back.

The monk cried out in anger, his long, pointed canines showing as clearly in the growing daylight as his alabaster skin. His eyes glared at Dumas viciously. “Release me!” he roared. “Now!”

Curras did so, stepping back defensively. “Who are you? And how did you get that tattoo?”

“I am Mallek, descendent of Melphior, your head priest.” He got to his feet slowly and glared viciously at Dumas with his albino eyes. “And I have led your Order for over five hundred years.”

Dumas scowled at him, his eyes shifting to the other robed figure as it rose. “But you are one of the undead,” he said slowly. “A curse I started.”

Mallek’s eyes ignited with the flame of hate. “So, I have you to blame for this eternal damnation?”

“Yes,” said the Order leader. “I cursed the Roman captain after he raped and murdered my soulmate, my love. I made his lust for blood and death so high that he morphed into the first of the undead.”

“We are called vampires now,” said the disciple in a cold, hissing voice. “Also known as the Nosfuratu.”

Seemingly ignoring the vampire, Dumas clenched his right hand into a fist. “I watched as

the captain's bloodlust felled every soldier under his command, one..by..one." He turned to Mallek now, his eyes narrowed in contempt. "And what reason have you to lead my Order, Vampire?"

Mallek dipped his head respectfully. "I was a follower of your teachings years before I was Turned," he said in his grumbling voice. "And as an Immortal, I have been able to keep the Order alive." He pulled his hood over his face, plunging it into shadow. "All the while searching for the means to release you."

"If you are a true believer in my faith," Dumas said while buttoning up the overcoat. "Then why did you ally yourself with these.....vermin?"

"To free you, My Lord," the vampire said quickly as he bowed. "They possessed the means to acquire the book. And I possessed the Talent to use it." He swallowed when no response came. "I did not tell them what might happen when you were freed. I only told them what they wanted to hear."

"The power to conquer?" the man said.

"Yes, My Lord," Mallek replied, bowing deeper. "And now you are free."

"Yes," Dumas said as he turned to the giant pine. "But I am not whole." He touched the tree's bark gently and felt the faint throb of his stolen power trapped inside. "A sizable portion of my strength is still infused in this vessel of wood. And I need the Seventh Book to free it." He put his hand to his chin, and then rubbed the wound on his left cheek. It was now fully healed, except for a thin, pink scar.

Mallek noted his wonder. "The removal of your power has had an unusual side effect," he stated slowly. "It would seem that you are now Immortal."

"Yes," Dumas said as he checked his chest. "It would seem that way." He turned toward Brinkmann's body and began to remove his boots. "Tell me, Mallek. Who could have taken the book?"

"The Captain must have seized it when we were battling the Guardian," said the vampire as he moved to where Gottwald had been standing. "I can see where he fled through the forest." He then looked to the sky. "But with the day upon us, I have no chance of catching him."

"Yes," Dumas said slowly as he gathered up some more clothes for himself. "You must rest yourself. And I must find something to eat."

"Their camp isn't far from here." Mallek scowled in thought. "It will be easy to find Gottwald. He will run to his superiors for protection."

"And where are they?" Dumas said as he slid on Brinkmann's trousers.

"With most of Eastern Europe in the midst of war," Mallek responded with ire. "He could

go anywhere. Perhaps to Berlin itself.” He issued a sly grin. “But it will do him no good.”

“And then we will have the Book,” said the head of the Order, and then stepped up to the monk. “And I will have my power once again.” He paused in thought. “But with the Romans long gone, what do I do with it?”

Mallek nodded. “Mankind has become an infection to the world. And you will soon feel as I do about what should be done.”

Dumas regarded him for a moment before clapping a hand on Mallek’s shoulder. “Go rest in your coffin, my brother,” he said with the shadow of a smile. “For tomorrow, the hunt begins.”

Gottwald reached the camp at a run, nearly falling as he stopped to snatch up the leather satchel that the book had been in. Inserting the binder back into the bag as he ran, he slid up to the driver's door on his car. Fumbling with the door release lever, he clutched the satchel tightly in his left hand as he swung the door open. He slid onto the wide leather seat cushion and cranked the starter motor. After several rotations the engine fired, pumping a cloud of black smoke out into the deserted camp. Putting it in gear, the frightened man tore out of the bivouac and raced precariously down the narrow, snow-covered road.

A half hour or so later he neared a small town nestled next to a wide river. He stopped the car, securing the leather satchel before climbing out. He looked at the river below, scanning for somewhere that he could reach it with the vehicle. Spotting what appeared to be a narrow side road, he got back in and half drove-half slid down it. After a brief moment, the Captain could see that the narrow trail ran alongside the riverbank. He skidded to a stop there, the thought of tossing the satchel into the rushing water appealing.

A moment passed, and soon the ringing of a village church bell filtered over the sound of the river. Looking down the road ahead, he could see that it ended in what appeared to be a small boat launch. He slowly drove up to it and saw that the gap in the trees was wide enough for the car. Praising the Lord, he pointed the vehicle down into the launch-like ramp, stopped, and got out again. Putting the car in neutral, he rolled down the window and closed the door gently. Gottwald then grabbed the satchel from the front seat and moved to the rear of the vehicle. With a deep breath, the SS officer put his gloved hand on the rear fender and pushed hard. The virgin snow crunched as the tires began to roll through it on the slight downgrade. The vehicle gained

momentum before it splashed into the moving water, and the man watched as the river's strong current pulled the car into its depths.

The Captain looked about fearfully and saw that no one had seen what he had done. Running back up to the main road leading into town, Gottwald trotted as best he could into the village and up to the large church in its center. The Captain, now thoroughly winded, slowly crept up the wide stone steps to the wooden double doors. He banged his fist twice against the thick wood, the thumps disrupting the quiet morning air and leaned heavily on the broad portals.

About thirty seconds later, a one foot square window slid open midway up the right hand door, and a balding man peered through.

The man scrutinized Gottwald briefly. "Can I help you, my son?" he asked in poor German.

"Please, Father," Gottwald said in decent French. "I need sanctuary."

The monk cocked his head curiously as his brown eyes scanned the stranger, and then spoke in French. "Sanctuary? From who?"

Gunter looked around nervously. "From an unspeakable evil."

The monk could see genuine fear in the Nazi's eyes, and reluctantly opened the door. "Come inside."

The Captain entered, relieved. "Thank you, Father," he said graciously.

"Why are you so afraid, my son?" the monk asked. The Father was short and stout, in his fifties, with thinning, brown hair.

Gottwald walked briskly across the small entry hall and peered out a window at the street. "Is there somewhere with a fire, Father?" he asked.

The priest nodded and bade him through a wooden door.

Beyond the door was a larger room dominated by a long table. A large fireplace sat on the far wall, and next to it, a neatly stacked pile of firewood. Gottwald set the book's satchel on the table before removing his coat and gloves.

"I am done serving the Fuehrer. I am done with war," he said as he then walked over to the fireplace and tossed them in.

The small bed of glowing coals began to smoke from the introduction of the new fuel, and he tossed in a few pieces of thin kindling to hold down the smoking cloth.

Gottwald's eyes then peered at the priest. "Father, I have seen the Devil. And he is looking for me."

The monk could see that the man before him was telling the truth by the fear in his eyes

and the tone of his words. "Come. We will find you some clothes to wear."

"Thank you, Father," the Captain said, holding out his now bare hands.

The monk clasped his hands over the Captain's. "I am Father Castille."

"I am glad to meet you, Father. My name is Günter," he said, releasing the priest and throwing his hat into the roaring flames. He glanced at his *Toten Kopf* ring on his right hand; a rune covered silver band that bore an ornate skull and crossbones.

The ring was Gunter's most prized possession. It was presented to him by his commanding officer when he had been inducted into the SS. The Nazi's eyes drifted around the room and then back to the hat. He watched it burn as he fidgeted with the ring, and the screams from the dying men in the forest began to haunt his mind. He stood, mesmerized, as the hat's Swastika disappeared in the curling flames.

"Are you coming, Brother Günter?" Father Castille said as he paused near an exit door.

Sliding off the ring, Gunter slipped it into the satchel with the book. "Yes. Coming, Father." He grabbed the leather bag off the table and followed the priest from the room.

An hour later, Gottwald entered the main cathedral carrying the bag and dressed in a monks' garb and robe. Looking around, he started to search for a place to hide the book. He knew that Dumas would be searching for it, and he knew for sure that the man must not find it.

"What are you doing, my son?" a voice said.

Günter jerked up straight to see Father Castille watching him.

"There is nothing to find here," the priest said with a serious tone.

"I am not looking to find anything," Günter said as he lifted the satchel. "I am looking to hide something."

"Hide something?" Castille said as he moved to him.

"Yes," And he slid the book from the bag. "This."

The man's eyes focused on it a moment and then looked at him. "Is this what Satan seeks?"

"Yes. And we should not let him find it."

He did not know if it was the seriousness of his voice, or the stout determination dancing on his face, but Father Castille nodded. "Then we must hide it well. Did anyone see you come to us?"

"I don't know," Günter said as he slid the book back into its case. "It was early."

"Come," the monk said as he took him by the arm. "I will show you where it can be

hidden."

He led Günter out a side door and into a large courtyard dotted with smaller buildings. Several large trees stood bare among them, with their branches spread out to the overcast sky. Castille moved to a stone, brick, and wood building on the far side of the vast compound, ushering Gunter inside. It was a small blacksmith shop; filled with all sorts of tools, partially finished projects, an unlit forge, and an anvil on a massive stone block.

"Give me a hand," the priest said as he gave Gunter a long staff three inches thick. They inserted the poles under the anvil's heavy stone base, prying upward to lift it. Underneath was a small compartment big enough for the book. Already inside were several valuable items that would be confiscated by the German army if discovered. Resting his pole on his shoulder, Gunter dropped the satchel to the floor and kicked it into the hiding hole.

"That should do it," Father Castille said as they lowered the block. "It should be safe there."

"I hope so, Father," Gunter said as he hid the marks made by the poles with his hands. "I hope so."

"Father Castille?" said a burly man with a full beard and bronzed skin as he entered the building. His brown eyes shifted to Gunter and narrowed suspiciously. "And who is this?"

Father Castille stepped forward. "Brother Francis, this is Brother Gunter. He's just arrived from Germany to study under my guidance."

The smith pursed his lips. "I see," he said and reached out his hand. "Welcome to our humble cloister."

Gunter shook the hand with great appreciation. "Thank you."

Five years later, Gunter returned to the church. And, once again, Father Castille answered the broad, wooden door.

The man had not changed in the few years after Gunter had left. His eyes were much livelier now, though. "Brother Gunter," he said as he shook the man's hand with a smile. "So good to see you."

"Likewise," Gunter said back with his own smile. He then glanced around. "Is it still hidden?"

"Yes. Yes. Come inside." The Father retrieved his cane, limping alongside the former

Nazi.

“How’s the hip?” Gunter asked casually as he closed the door behind them.

“Like anything,” said the priest with a grunt. “I have good days and bad days.”

Gunter scowled in anger. “I should have been here when they came. I could have done something.”

“No,” Castille said, waving his hand. “If you had been here, you may have been recognized. And you know what the Reich did to deserters.”

Gunter nodded silently.

They made their way out into the courtyard, talking about the end of the war and what their future plans were. The trees were budding in the early April air, and birds flitted about, filling the quiet church grounds with the beautiful song of spring. Soon the steady ring of a hammer on steel reached across the courtyard to them, and the scent of smoke drifted on the breeze.

The small smithy was untouched since Gunter had last seen it, except for the multitude of newer tools and new projects.

Francis was working on a horseshoe when they entered. "Father Gunter," he said as he set his hammer down and thrust a glowing piece of metal into a bucket of water. "It's good to see you again."

"It has been too long, Francis," Gottwald said as the hissing water sent vapor into the air. "I need your help."

"Name it," the man said as he set his tongs down.

Father Castille handed Gunter the poles and he gave one to Francis. With a nod, the smith assisted him in lifting the anvil, and Father Castille drew out the leather satchel.

“Thank you Francis,” said the ex-Nazi as they lowered the block.

“You’re welcome,” responded the man.

"Have you decided what you will do with it?" Castille asked as he handed the dusty bag to Gottwald.

"I'm going to the United States. I should be able to hide it well there," Gunter said as he rubbed the worn leather straps. His hand felt the ring inside a second later. “Oh.” Reaching in, the priest retrieved it and held it up. “Here. Take this.” And he put it in Castille’s hand. “My contribution to the church.”

The Father looked at it. “Brother Gunter, I cannot—”

“Yes, you can,” said the ex-Nazi as he put it in the priest’s hand. “It is made of silver and

can bring you some needed revenue.” He watched as Castille handed it to Francis, and smiled.

“And now, with that done, I wouldn't mind a warm meal and some friendly company.”

Father Castille smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Let us see what we can do for you."

The next day Gunter said goodbye and, taking a deep breath, started down the road that he had run up in a fright five years before.

Chapter 2: The Find

July 12, 2005: 59 years later

Southeastern Connecticut

“Boys? We’re home.”

Ginger's call echoed through the house with a familiar resonance, drawing a smile from the green-eyed brunette's small mouth. Standing five-nine, the lean, well-tanned woman glanced over the half wall to the right of the front door and scanned the tastefully decorated living room. The house was quiet, except for the soft hum of the rotating ceiling fans and the quiet whistle from the HVAC registers.

"It's nice to be home, isn't it," her husband said as he entered and put down his baggage. "Especially with the central air." He brushed his hand through his short, fine, dirty-blond hair and looked around. Though not overly handsome, Alan's rugged features, accented by his bristly round chin and gray eyes, made him somewhat attractive. "I wonder where the kids are."

A brief glimpse at each other drew smiles. "The pool."

After retrieving a drink of water from the refrigerator dispenser, they found their two sons swimming in the pool out in the back yard. It was mid July, and the summer sun danced on

the torpid water merrily.

The boys saw them step out through the slider onto the deck and said excitedly. "Mom! Dad!"

Ginger crossed the wide, cement patio of their quaint New England home to hug them.

Though they were both well-off, prominent archeologists, the Sagenders' house wasn't lavish. Instead, they preferred a simplistic residence. Their home was a single level, northern-facing, ranch-style structure nestled on a large, wooded lot in Southeastern Connecticut. Tall trees of oak and maple surrounded the house on the east and west sides, shading it in the summer and allowing the sun to warm it in the winter. Though simple and old-fashioned, the house did have some modern items of luxury. A kidney-shaped pool, surrounded by a concrete patio and well nurtured landscaping, dominated most of the back yard and the interior was decorated with expensive furniture and things they'd collected from around the world.

"How were they, Grace?" Ginger said to her sister as the woman stood up from the patio table to embrace her. Grace was a tad shorter than her sister and leaner too; but that was all that gave any indication that they were related. Grace's short, well trimmed hair was auburn in color and the hints of a natural wave could be seen at the ends. Her mouth was larger too, with thin lips and a rounded chin.

"Jeffrey's been his usual, mischievous self," Grace replied, her emerald eyes accenting her smile from behind her shades. "But Pat's been behaved."

Ginger snorted a smirk. "He should be. He's older." She then handed her sister a folded check. "I know you don't want any of my money, Sis. But take this, please."

"And what do you mean by that?" the forty-year-old woman said sarcastically, pausing before taking the check. "Are you going to be returning to the site?"

"In a few days," Ginger replied as she folded her arms.

Grace shook her head and pursed her thin lips.

Mrs. Sagender examined the woman's solemn expression. "If you want, I'll get a sitter."

Grace gave her a sarcastic glare as she put her hands on her hips. "Please. You know that I don't mind watching the boys."

Ginger cocked her head slightly, puzzled. "Then what is it?"

"I doubt Pat will like you leaving again, that's all," Grace said with disdain, lifting her book from the table. "He's been counting the days down since you left."

Ginger's eyes softened. "Does he miss us that much?"

"You have no idea." Grace paused to chuckle. "Anyways. I don't think there's a sitter in

the world that could keep an effective eye on Jeffrey."

Ginger chuckled at her sister's sarcasm. "I suppose you're right. But take that money and buy something for yourself. You deserve it."

"You're damn skippy I do," Grace said, tucking the slip of paper into her shirt pocket while laughing. "I'll see you in a couple of days." She paused to open the gate next to the garage. "And if anything changes before then, let me know."

Ginger gave her a warm hug and a smile. "I will."

"What'd you get me?" Jeffrey said as his father sat down. The brown-eyed, dark-haired child tugged at his father's sleeve until the man gave in.

"Oh, I don't know," his father, Alan, said as he lifted the bag that he had brought in with his luggage. He dug into it and lifted out a small box wrapped in colored paper.

Dropping to the area rug in the center of the room, Jeff furiously tore off the paper and smiled ear to ear. "Army men! Cool. Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome, kiddo. Now go play nice."

The child ran off towards the back door, imitating a military radio operator giving commands.

"How'd you make out?" Pat said as he entered the room. He finished drying his short, dirty-blond hair, draped the towel over his shoulder, and put on his oval, graphite colored metal rimmed glasses.

"Great," Alan said, collapsing into the soft leather couch. He leaned forward, positioning his elbows right above his knees and letting his hands dangle. "The site's a wealth of information and artifacts. There are things in the underground chambers that haven't seen the light of day in centuries." He paused to smile. "I got you something."

Pat's eyes lit up in curious joy as his father reached into the bag again and lifted out a small box. "What is it?"

Alan handed it to him. "Open it and find out."

Inside the box there was a three inch long lock blade knife, its black leather belt case, and a small sharpening kit. The scales of the knife were made of smooth, red stained wood, secured to the nickel plated casting with several small rivets.

"Well?" Alan said with a hopeful expression.

"It's cool," Pat replied, his emerald eyes hinting that he was slightly disappointed.

"I figured that, since you broke your last one in that old theatre, you could use another. So I picked it up in London while on our layover from the Middle East. The blade's high carbon, Damascus steel, so keep it clean."

Pat opened the tapered, clip-point blade and felt its sharp edge. The beveled surface of the steel was smooth, and the unique pattern from the forging process accented the expert craftsmanship. Closing it up, he set it back in the box. "Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome," Alan said with a smile. He stood up and headed for the front door. "I could use some help with the rest of the luggage."

The youth set the box on the fireplace mantle and followed him.

"Just set those over there," Alan said as they entered his study. The room was a twelve foot square area in the northeast corner of the house. The door entered through the southwest corner, with a single, double hung window on each of the outside walls. A broad bookshelf dominated the west wall and a broad oaken desk consumed most of the eastern half on the floor.

Alan noticed that his computer was on, setting down his baggage in the small wooden chair that sat in front of the north window. "Were you online again?"

Pat hesitated. "Yeah. But I just—"

Alan cut him off with a wave of his hand. "I don't mind you being online," he said sternly. "But mind the time. I don't want to have a computer junkie for a son when I get back."

"Back?" Pat said. "From where?"

"We're going back to the site in a couple of days. To finish up."

His son's eyes glared at his, a seething rage dancing in them. "And how long will that take?"

"A couple of weeks. Maybe less." Alan paused as Pat folded his arms and stared out the thinly curtained window. "Hey. It's only two more weeks, and after that, we'll go somewhere. Maybe a Six Flags? Disneyland?"

"Whatever," Pat said with a growl, and stalked from the room.

Alan sat against his broad desk and rubbed his forehead with a hand.

Ginger was retrieving a glass from a cabinet when her son strode into the kitchen, and she

saw the anger in his face. "Pat? What's wrong?"

"Nothin'," Pat replied with contempt as he thrust the slider closed and stalked across the pool area.

"Alan?" she said, turning toward him as he entered the room. "What's going on?"

Alan sighed as he sank into one of the gray cloth captain chairs and leaned against the kitchen table. "He's ticked off because we're going back to the site."

"Do you blame him?" she said as he rubbed his forehead. "We've been gone since they got out of school."

"But the summer's not over yet," Alan said defensively. "And we did take him there on our second trip three weeks ago."

"He's growing up fast, Al," Ginger said as she moved to the refrigerator and took out a container of iced tea. "He's almost fourteen. And in four years, he'll be graduating. He doesn't have many summers of freedom left."

"I know, but—"

"But nothing. Next year, I'm staying home."

"What?" Alan said, his head perking up to look at her. "You're retiring?"

"From excavating, yes." She settled into the chair next to him and gripped his hand. "I'm starting to think that teaching may be a little more rewarding, especially at home. And you should think about taking some time off to be with your sons. Both of them."

Alan stared at her a second, then out the window at the pouting youth sitting in his tree fort. His memory glanced back two summers earlier, before his employer started offering to send him and his wife to large digs around the world. He remembered helping Pat build it, father and son, together. Standing up with that memory fresh in his mind, Alan went outside.

Ginger watched as he strode across the yard and climbed up next to their son.

"Pat?" Alan said as he sat down. "I know that this past year has been hard on you without us around."

Pat, his arms folded and his chin tucked against his chest, gave him a contemptuous snort.

"But after this dig is over, I promise to take a long vacation."

"And what's long?" Pat said, continuing to glare at the azalea bushes below them.

Alan knew that had cracked his son's hard shell of anger. "Two, three months. Unless

they discover something really significant, like the Ark of the Covenant." He gave the boy a playful nudge. "How's that sound?"

The youth shrugged a weak shrug. "Fine, I suppose."

Alan smiled, clapping a hand on Pat's knee. "Come on. Let's go look at some of the other things we brought home."

That night, after everyone had gone to sleep, Pat slid from his bed and over to his dresser. Reaching underneath, he slid out a large, well-made wooden box. He had refurbished the aged surface as best as he could; removing the old paint and mildew with sandpaper and giving it a fresh coat of stain. Listening intently for any stirring parents, he drew it out completely, carrying it to his bed to open. He clicked on his desk lamp, adjusting the lampshade to give him some light.

As he cracked open the lid, the distinct scent of rawhide exited the box's interior, filling the air with its potent aroma. Inside was a book, bound in a thick, brown leather jacket and bearing an ornate brass medallion on its cover. It was bigger than any normal book, about the size of a 15 inch laptop, and it was at least four inches thick. The pages were fashioned of semi-ridged, ochre-colored parchment; covered in black, exotic runes and unevenly cut.

They creaked loudly as the youth turned them, one by one, and Pat's mind reflected back several months to when he had found it.

Mid-April

It was while he was at an old amphitheatre not far from his home. His father had been summoned to the building by a colleague; to check to see if there were any historical items inside before they started demolition of the building.

"Wow! This place is cool," Pat said as he ran his fingers across the hand carved wood trim of the auditorium's stage. The air was a bit musty, as well as dirty from the layers of stirred up dust. The only lighting inside was from the tall iron framed windows and the few work lights that the construction crew had been using.

"Yes it is," Alan said back, gazing up at the vaulted ceiling high above them. "But mind yourself; there can be hidden dangers in this old structure."

Pat followed his father down a short set of stairs to where a multitude of workers were removing wires, wood trim, pipes, and other items that needed to be extracted before the demolition started. They ended up in the storage area of the basement, and Pat found himself constantly dodging workers carrying things out.

"Alan?" a man called up from the sub-basement. "I found something unusual down here."

Pat's father climbed down a ladder and walked over to him. "What ya got Jason?"

The man pointed at one corner of the room. "I noticed that the blocks don't mesh in this corner, like the other three.

Alan brushed some dirt off and noted a thin line between two slabs of the hewn stone blocks that made up the foundation of the building. "How old is this building?"

"It was built in the early twenties," the colleague, Dr. Morris, replied. "Why?"

"Because," Alan started to feel around the other stones. "This seemingly innocent crack looks very much like a cleverly concealed door. I found one once in Egypt at one of our digs. So there should be..." He paused when he reached a disconnected power panel. Grabbing a crowbar, he wedged the tip behind the panel and tried to pry the metal box off the wall. "I need some help here."

Pat watched as three workers made their way down to remove the panel from the wall.

It took some effort and, once the box was out of the way, Alan discovered the edge that he was looking for. "Nope. I was wrong. But from the looks of it, I would say that someone walled up something here."

Dr. Morris cocked his head. "Maybe an old exit or room?"

Alan nodded and his friend summoned the workers again to try to open up the mysterious section of wall.

After a little more than a half hour, the three workers had removed one of the large stones, exposing a hidden entry to another room.

Alan waited until the three men had removed two more before asking the boy for a flashlight.

Pat quickly scrambled to their truck to bring him one. "Here, Dad. I brought one for Doctor Morris too."

"Good boy," said his father while rolling up his sleeves and taking a flashlight from him. "Now, I want you to stay up here, son. At least until we see what's in there?"

"But Dad," the youth said, groaning. "I want to see."

"You know the rules," Alan said. Putting a hand on Pat's shoulder, he looked him in the

eyes. "Your mother would skin me alive if she knew that I allowed you to go in there with me. It could be dangerous."

Pat groaned in disappointment. "Oh. Alright."

"Good lad. Besides, it's probably an old Prohibition era storeroom full of rotting casks and bottles of liquor." Patting his son on the shoulder, Alan gave him a grin. "If that's all it is, then you can check it out. Cool?"

"Ok." Pat watched his father and his colleague go in first, followed by two workers who carried radios and flashlights.

After a few minutes, Alan reappeared and called for more men. There were just over a dozen workers on site, so another pair went down to assist.

"Pat?" Alan said. "Come here."

Curious, he climbed down into the sub-basement. "Yeah?"

"Here," said his father, handing him a cell phone. "Call your mother. She'll definitely get a charge out of this."

Pat nodded and went outside to call home.

"Hello?" said his mother after the second ring.

"Hi Mom," said the youth casually.

"Hi Baby," Ginger's voice shifted to cheerful after her neutral greeting. "What's up?"

"We discovered a hidden room under the theatre, an' Dad wants you to come up."

His mother sighed in exhaustion. "Ask him how important it is, would you?"

"I don't think I can," Pat replied as he watched a squirrel scamper across the theatre's front lawn. "Besides, he looked real excited about whatever they found."

Ginger sighed. "Oh, all right. Tell him I'm on my way."

The youth smiled as he watched the small animal jet to a large oak tree and disappear behind it. "Ok, Mom. I'll see you in a little bit. Bye."

After about five minutes of standing outside in the warm sun, Pat started to wonder what it was like down in the cool darkness. Seeing a flashlight nearby, he decided to take a look for himself.

The air was dry and stagnant as he crept in front of the entrance, and he could hear his father talking to the others in the distance. There was a short, four foot wide hall, perhaps six feet long, that connected the basement to whatever his father had exposed. Unfortunately, the hall's

exit was in the left corner, so Pat couldn't see the majority of the room's contents. He glimpsed something straight ahead though, at the far end of the chamber, but the lack of light made it impossible to see what it was. Soon several men with head lamps stepped into the hall and Pat stepped aside to let them by.

Alan followed and said to him: "Did you call your mother?"

Pat nodded. "She said she's on her way."

His father clapped a hand on his shoulder happily. "Good. Come and check this out."

The room at the end of the short hall appeared to be an old cellar, filled with all sorts of aging things from decades past.

"This must have been a storeroom for the theatre back in the vaudeville days," Dr. Morris said. "Before electricity was widespread."

"And it would seem to have become a dumping ground for useless things," Pat said as he scanned over a multitude of broken items. The object that he had noticed from outside the hall was nothing but a few broken wooden chairs mixed with an old coat tree.

The trio inspected a trunk full of old stage props, discussing the possible uses for them. Soon after that, Ginger arrived with Jeffrey in tow.

"Patrick?" she called from the top of the ladder. "Come up here and watch your brother."

With a groan, the youth said goodbye to Dr. Morris and headed out of the hidden room.

His mother kissed him on the cheek, took the flashlight from him, and headed down the ladder. "Be good."

Soon after she left, Pat watched as two individuals entered the theatre. They identified themselves to the construction foreman as representatives from the town's Historical Preservation Society and were escorted down into the basement. Pat was too busy making sure that his little brother didn't get into any trouble to notice the items that were being removed from the building. Not long after that, Ginger reappeared to take Jeff off of his hands.

"I have to go down to the Town Hall with one of the Society members to acquire a permit to excavate the site for historical materials," she said. "Do you want to stay with your father?"

Pat nodded, taking the flashlight from her.

"Just be careful," she said with a stout look, and then a smile followed. "I love you."

"Too," Pat replied, returning to the building.

Once back inside, the teen began a more serious look through the basement.

'Maybe there's another hidden chamber somewhere,' he thought. He searched the stone walls carefully, looking for any signs.

None.

"Bummer," he grumbled, sitting down on the stairs. "Maybe someday I'll find something to make Dad proud."

He shifted his posture, leaning back so his elbows butted up against the stair's face. The board they pressed against shifted a fraction of an inch, enough to warrant his attention. Standing up, Pat inspected the plank closely. It didn't seem secured except by the warping of the steps, moving in and out and side to side with minimal effort. And when he shined the flashlight's beam on it, he noticed that the heads of the nails securing it were rusted away,

'Or removed by whoever installed them!' Pat thought to himself. Taking out his folding knife, he started to pry on the end of the step above to help free the face board. The plank wouldn't go easily, creaking in contempt as he forced it.

With the step now lifted half an inch, Pat shifted his knife to the end of the face board. It was somewhat easier to pry on this board, as it was already loose. But, once again, the warped step above it got in the way. He was able to squeeze three fingers behind the face board, enough to give him a good grip but not enough to pull it free. Refocusing on the step, the youth reinserted his knife under its end and started to wiggle it.

"Oh, come on," he said as the step proved to be quite stubborn.

There was a short squeak from the plank seconds before his knife blade snapped off at the base.

"Ahh, Dammit!" he cursed, looking at the broken blade. "I loved that knife." His angry eyes focused on the board now partially protruding from under the step. Grabbing the step with angry hands, he jerked at it hard. With an aged groan, the nails finally surrendered to his will and allowed the face board to fall open. Tossing the board aside and lifting his flashlight, Pat swallowed nervously as he pointed the beam to where the plank had been.

A small hallow lay behind the staircase, and tucked tightly in it was a wooden box. It was about six inches tall by eighteen inches wide, with two aged leather straps. A line ran the entire length about two inches down from the top, and a half-inch-tall keyhole rested on the lower portion in the dead center of the wood.

Overjoyed but cautious, Pat reached in and gripped the two small straps that were secured to its side. Like the step, it didn't come out easily. Age had warped the box so as to make it tighter in the hole.

The teen sneered as he said: "Come on you bugger." He strained enough to get it to shift to the right, then the left, and then back to the right. And in this fashion, Pat began to extract the box from its resting place. A final tug broke one of the mildewed straps. But it allowed him to grip one corner. It took a little more coaxing to remove the box, but the youth was victorious, holding his prize in both hands. It was bigger than he thought, being only a few inches shorter in depth as it was in length. It was heavy too, weighing close to twenty pounds.

"What do you have there, Pat?" Alan said as he exited the tunnel.

Pat jumped at the sound of his father's voice. He was so absorbed in what he was doing that he didn't hear him coming up the ladder.

"Well?" Alan inquired, putting his hands on his hips.

"I don't know," Pat replied, setting the box down. "I found it under the stairs."

"Under the stairs?" Alan said with great curiosity. His father examined it with great care, frowning over its current condition. After a minute, he focused on the small keyhole. "Hmm. Let's take this outside."

They went out to their truck and Alan set the box on the tailgate. "Fetch my lock picks, would you? They're in the glove compartment."

As Pat went to the cab, Alan examined the craftsmanship of the container.

"Here Pop," said the youth as he returned with the lock picks.

His father opened the small leather case. He then extracted a pair of tools, one straight and the other slightly crooked. After fiddling with the mechanism a minute or two, the man turned the keyhole a half turn and smiled.

"There," he said. Unbuckling the unbroken strap, Alan gazed at his son as he put his fingers on each top corner. "Ready?"

Pat knelt down and gripped the bottom corners to keep it secure. "Ready."

The rusty brass hinges turned easily, and didn't make any noise as Alan lifted the lid. Inside, nestled in what appeared to be modern velvet, was a leather bound book with an unusual symbol—possibly a rune—embossed on a brass disc on the cover. It was approximately fifteen inches long by twelve inches across, and untouched by age. The corners were finished in dull brass hardware and the spine was reinforced by two sturdy, three piece hinges.

"Patrick?" Alan said. "Grab that folded up blanket in the cab, would you?"

"Sure," Pat said, helpfully excited, and rushed to get it.

The archeologist rubbed the leather surface gingerly, his eyes transfixed on the odd rune on the surface. *'Hm,'* he thought to himself. *'I don't think I've ever seen anything like this before.'*

“Here Dad,” said his son as he returned with the blanket.

Spreading the cover across the tailgate, Alan turned the box over to allow the book to fall onto it. With a slow sucking sound, the binder separated from the velvet liner, striking the doubled over blanket with a dull thud. It was nearly four inches thick, relieving the box of almost all of its weight. Setting the wooden container down, Pat’s father picked up the leather tome, turned it over slowly, and began to creak open the front cover. A piece of parchment dropped from inside and floated to the tailgate.

"What's that, Dad?" Pat asked as his father set the book down to pick it up.

Alan scanned the yellowish paper intensely. "Hm. It's in an old dialect," Alan mused while rubbing his chin. "Norwegian, I think. But definitely Germanic by the look of it."

"Can you read it?" Pat said anxiously.

Alan's brow wrinkled in thought. "I think it says...‘This book belongs to the members of the Sorcerers Circle of Merlin.’"

At about that moment, Dr. Morris exited the theatre holding a water bottle. "There you are, Alan. I was wondering where you got off to." He approached while wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. "Whatcha got there?"

"My son found this under the stairs leading into the basement," Alan said as he lifted the book. "This note was in the front cover."

Dr. Morris took the parchment, scanned it with an experienced, linguistic eye, and smirked. "Can I see the book?"

Pat clenched his teeth with jealousy as his father handed the tome to his comrade. He wanted his father to open it first, so he would be proud of the boy's discovery. But when Dr. Morris opened the cover and flipped through the pages carefully, the smirk turned into a broad smile.

"Well, Alan," he began. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news. But this book isn't very old."

"What?" the Sagenders said simultaneously.

"If you look," he said calmly, handing it back to Alan. "You can see that all of the writing on the pages is random in nature. And all of the pages are in fine, almost new, condition. The leather cover is also not aged."

"But wouldn't that be because of it being in that box all this time?" Pat said while looking on as Alan flipped through the pages as well.

"I hate to tell you, Pat, but no. The paper is way too flexible to be more than..." He

shrugged nonchalantly. "...twenty years old."

"But how?" Pat asked in disbelief.

"Well....back in the 80s," Dr. Morris began. "This theatre was still in use. And rumor has it that it was also used by some of the employees as a place to play their medieval role playing games." He paused to take a drink of water. "I wouldn't be surprised if this book was nothing more than an elaborate game prop. Fashioned by a creative player who had waaay too much time on his hands."

Pat sat down on the tailgate, broken-hearted. He wanted so much to make his father proud of him, and now he was crushed.

Alan gently slid the book back in the box and closed the lid. "Well, I guess it's of no historical significance then?"

Dr. Morris shook his head.

Alan handed Pat the box with a smile. "Here. Even though it wasn't a breakthrough discovery—it was YOUR discovery. So you get to keep the booty." Alan looked at his colleague. "Right?"

Dr. Morris had noted Pat's heartbroken look a moment before. "I don't see why not." He reached out a hand to Pat. "Congratulations on your first discovery, Mister Sagender," he said in a sincere, and friendly, way.

Pat shook the man's hand gladly. "Thank you, Sir."

"At-a-boy," Alan said, rubbing the youth's shoulder. "Now stick that in the truck and let's go see if we can't find some more cool things."

Pat buckled the unbroken strap, set the box in the truck cab, and joined his father.

As they entered the building, Pat heard his father mention something about the symbol on the book's cover to Dr. Morris.

"Whoever made that book probably invented it," Morris replied. "But it looked reminiscent of the old Celtic symbol for magic."

Pat ran his hand over the book's aged cover as the memory faded and he rubbed the brass medallion with a finger. Issuing a small smile, he put the book back and turned out the light. As he lay in bed staring up at the ceiling, he thought of who made it and if they were still living in the area.

'Perhaps someone on-line can help,' he mused to himself. 'Maybe I could find out what that odd symbol really means. And maybe Dad would be proud that I successfully researched it and got the right answer. '

The next few days passed quickly. Pat and Alan went fishing, canoeing, and hiking in the area parks while Ginger and Jeffrey went to visit their relatives and friends.

July 16, 1:34 P.M.

"We'll be back in a few weeks," Alan said through the drone of the rain as he loaded their luggage into the taxi's trunk. He straightened, taking the large umbrella from Pat. "Then we'll discuss what we will do on my long vacation. Alright?"

Pat gave him a nod and weak smile. He then trotted up onto the front porch. His father followed after securing the trunk lid.

Ginger exited the house holding an umbrella. She met with her husband as he came onto the porch and handed him a brown briefcase. She then turned to her two sons. "Now, you be good for Aunt Grace, alright?"

"Yes, Mommy," Jeffrey said solemnly.

She hugged him gently and kissed him on the cheek. "That goes for you too, Pat."

"Yes, Mother dear," he said sarcastically, hugging her.

"And remember to take care of your little brother."

"Yes, Mother dear."

His mother frowned. "Will you stop saying that?!"

"Yes, Mother dear."

She growled as she smiled, then kissed him on the cheek. "We'll be back before you know it." She turned to Alan, who nodded.

"Now, you heard your mother," he said as he rubbed Jeffrey's head and clapped a hand on Pat's shoulder. "Behave yourselves."

"Yes, sir," said the boys simultaneously.

They watched their parents rush to the cab, and then waved as the white vehicle rolled down the driveway.

"So," Grace said as they came in the door. "Let's see what's on TV."

9:45 P.M.

That night, Pat sat down at his father's computer to do his nightly routine on the Internet. Though Grace allowed him about an hour a day on the computer, he usually limited his on-line duration to checking his e-mails and a bit of surfing. As soon as he was off the internet, the youth set the book on the desk. Bringing up the scanner program, he set the book on the scanner to copy the symbol on the cover.

The scanner's bar of blue light slid back and forth under the glass with a low, high pitched whirl.

Pat waited patiently as the PC's tower made the usual series of electronic noises as the processor and internal hardware initiated a program to create an image.

"What the...?" he said when the screen came up blank. His face scowled in disbelief. Undaunted, he tried to scan in half, but the image wouldn't come up on the screen.

'This can't be right,' he thought, giving the book a perplexed sneer. *'It must be the program.'* He decided to check the program's integrity by scanning one of his father's National Geographic magazine covers.

The image appeared on the screen intact and clear.

'Well, it's not the program.'

But when he tried to input the book's symbol again, the screen came up clear.

The muscles in Pat's jaw tightened in frustration. Taking a deep breath, he set the book onto the desk to think. *'Maybe if I sketch it on a separate piece of paper and scan that.'*

He took out a sheet of notebook paper and started to trace it gently with a pencil.

After a few inches, the sharp tip poked a hole through the paper. With a frustrated, teeth-clenched growl, he crumpled it up and threw it into the round wastepaper basket next to the desk.

Again after a few deep breaths, he went to his room. Looking around, he spotted the self-contained art kit that his Aunt Grace had given to him for Christmas the previous year. With a smile, he retrieved a stick of pastel from it and returned to the study. Laying a new piece paper on top of the binder, he rubbed the black stick of medium across the surface.

The image scanned as a preview without an issue. And the youth believed that he was victorious. But when he tried to upload it into the PC itself, the screen came up blank.

"What the Hell is going on here?!" he said through clenched teeth. He stood up, paced for several minutes to cool his temper, and then sat back down. "I guess that I'll have to do it the old fashioned way."

It took him another half an hour to accurately freehand draw the symbol and, with an anxious demeanor, scanned it into the computer. This time, however, the image appeared intact.

"Sweet!" he said with a broad smile.

Accessing the Internet, he entered a web forum on ancient languages, and posted: 'To all; I found a book with this symbol on it. And I want to know what the symbol means. Please contact me at www.DeepDigger.com if you can help.'

It was risky using his father's web site. And that was why he had waited until his parents were gone. He went to bed after that, wondering how long it would be before he got an answer.

"Mom and Dad have friends all over the world," he mumbled to himself. And, with that knowledge, he knew somebody would respond.

But no one did. For days he checked for an e-mail, but nothing came in, other than the usual from his parents. After the third day, Pat accepted the possibility that it was made up, like Dr. Morris said.

July 19, 10:55 P.M.

"I'll send you again next week," he wrote to a friend three nights later. "Later, PS1."

Returning to his home page, Pat noted that there was a message in his father's Inbox.

Anxiety jumped into his tired mind as he accessed the cache of messages and found one from a sender titled "Symbol".

It had just been sent!

With a trembling hand, the youth clicked on it.

"Dear Mr. Sagender," it read, and below that was the symbol. "I know what this symbol means. I need to know where you found it. Please contact me at www.Paradiseworld.com."

Looking at the sending address, he turned a bit curious when none was shown. Clicking back to the Inbox, he was shocked to find that the message entry was gone! He tried to go back to the previous page, but it returned him to the Inbox instead of to the message.

Cold, heartbroken pain erupted in his stomach when he realized that the message was gone without a trace.

“Did I erase it?” he mused to himself, questioning his own memory. His eyes then lit up. “Oh nuts! A virus!”

The youth quickly turned the DSL modem off, unplugged the ethernet cable, and started to run an anti-virus scan. Nearly fifteen nervous moments passed as the program did its work. His father had top of the line protection for his PC, so it came as no surprise that a 'No virus detected' message came up.

Releasing a huge sigh of relief, Pat leaned back in the leather chair a minute and thought. *‘The book might be more valuable than we thought. Who would send a message that would erase itself after being opened?’* He paused, mid-thought. *‘And how in the Hell did they do it?’*

"Pat?" Grace said as she entered the study.

The youth turned around with a start, and then smiled at her. "You startled me."

"Sorry," she said, her green eyes creasing with her smile. "It's getting late, you know?"

"I promise to log out at midnight."

His Aunt paused to look at the clock on the bookshelf. "All right. Midnight. But no later."

Pat glanced at the clock as well, nodded with a smile, and she closed the door. "Ok. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Leaning forward, he reinserted the cable, reconnected to the Internet, then typed in the web address.

‘I should write it down so I don't forget it.’ And he did so in a small, leather bound notebook that he kept in the desk.

As soon as he hit SEND, his screen went to an instant messaging format.

“Greetings, Mr. Sagender,” a message said in an artsy Papyrus text. *“I take it that you got my message?”*

Pat was taken aback by this format. He had done plenty of instant messaging; but the fact that the message was being written seconds before he received it, without the usual scrolling pop-up lines of text, was unnerving.

“Come now. Don't be afraid. I need to know where you found that symbol.”

After wetting his dry mouth and swallowing, Pat nervously started to type.

"I got it off a book cover that my father found. Please give me any information about it."

“Are the pages covered in odd, almost unorganized markings?”

"Yes."

The response came after a moment had passed. *"The symbol is pronounced Gramoh. With a short A and a long O vowel. It means 'SpellBook' in English. If it is night where you are, turn out the light and say it in a low tone while touching the book. You'll want to roll the R and hold the O for at least five seconds. Then send me the result."*

Pat raised a curious eyebrow at the reply.

A single night light plugged into an outlet in the hallway gave Pat enough light to quietly slip across the house to his room. And after a few minutes, he returned to the study. He covered the computer monitor with his shirt to reduce the light and turned off the desk lamp to darken the room. Pale, white moonlight filtered through the thin curtains that adorned the eastern window, bathing the teen's back in its soft glow. Touching the leather cover, he said the word slowly, deliberately.

The book suddenly became warm under his hand! And the rune seemed to move!

Pat drew away with a start, watching as the symbol started to glow a pale, marbled blue. Turning to the computer, he pulled off the shirt and, after his eyes had adjusted, wrote back.

"The book grew warm and the symbol glows blue."

"Is there moonlight in the room?"

Pat rotated the chair toward the eastern window, to gaze at the full moon through its pair of clean panels of glass. "Yes."

"Dim your monitor until it is dark enough to see the glow clearly. Then open the book, repeat the word, and tell me what you see."

The youth swallowed, trying to wet his dry mouth again as he covered the monitor and slowly opened the cover. He repeated the word, feeling a rush of joy as he did so.

At first the pages remained normal. But then, after several seconds had passed, they started to glow blue as well.

A few seconds later, the writing began to shift and morph into new, more ornate, symbols. They also began to glisten in a gleaming, burning-ember-like luminescence, casting a bright red hue across the awed boy's face.

"Wow."

The wondrous silence was shattered as the bookshelf clock sounded off its twelve o'clock chime. Pat jumped at the first chime, taking a moment to gather his wits. He worked

quickly, closing the book and putting it on a shelf next to several other large books.

With a fair amount of incredulous joy, he wrote: "I can see the writing and all the runes glow!"

There was a significant pause before the response came. *"They only glow in darkness or in the presence of dim, natural light. Candlelight, firelight, lamplight, moonlight. This enchantment enables you to read them when you have poor or no light at all."*

Once again, Pat was taken aback by the statement. "Enchantment?" he mumbled to himself.

A cough sounded down the hall in the guest room, and the youth crept to the door to listen. He heard Grace climb out of bed and move into the bathroom. Fearing discovery, he quickly returned to the console.

"I have to go. I'll contact you tonight. Thank you."

"Until then, Mr. Sagender. Farewell."

Shutting off the PC, Pat made his way out of the study, down the hall, and to his room as quiet as a mouse. And, just as he slipped into bed, Grace checked in on him before heading back to her room.

Pat lay in his bed, eyes staring blankly at the ceiling, thinking of what had just happened, and if it was real magic the book contained. He would get the answers soon enough, he supposed. But, for some unknown reason, he felt the urge to sleep.

July 19, 8:30 P.M.

An elevator door slid open quietly for an intensely focused man. He was dressed in a black suit and tie, with neatly trimmed, salt and pepper hair and a clean shaven face. He strode down a short, ten foot wide hallway to a large pair of dark wooden doors. The steely gray walls were bare except for a single three by five foot picture of a majestic mountain scene. The rugged snowcaps sat against a clear blue sky, with a brightly colored field of flowers as a foreground.

A secretary with her black hair pulled back lifted her eyes from her computer screen to greet him. "Good evening, Mister Masters," she said in accented English.

"Good evening, Maria," he said back with a distinctive British accent. He paused at the doors. "Is he busy?"

“No,” she replied, pushing a button to allow him entry.

The man knocked three times at the door, waited to be called in, and then entered with a quick, fluid motion.

His green eyes scanned the room as he walked to an immense wooden desk centered in front of a large window. With the exception of a keyboard, mouse, LCD monitor, and an ornate broadsword resting on a black lacquered stand, the smooth surface was bare of anything. The back of a black, leather high-backed office chair stood beyond the desk, rocking back and forth ever so slightly.

The chair's occupant was staring through a veil of blinds at the setting sun, his thin, white fingers pressed together in thought. He was dressed just as smart as the man that had just entered, with a full head of short, silvery-white hair and steely grey eyes.

"Well?" he said as he rotated the chair and focused his eyes on the man in front of his desk. "Is it done yet?"

"We'll have him in a day or so, Sir," the man replied in a confident —yet uneasy— tone. As he clamped his hands in front of his buttoned coat he continued, "I don't expect any problems. Mexican prisoners are easily sprung. Especially if you have the right persuasion and know who to persuade."

The sitting man smiled, a facial scar on his left cheek deepening evilly. "Good. Once you have him, bring him to me. The time to act is coming, we must be ready."

The standing man bowed and turned to leave.

The sitting man paused before turning back to the sun. "Oh, and Boen?"

The man paused at the door.

"Be sure that he's presentable."

"Yes, Sir."

The scarred man stood after the door clicked closed, and walked to the window. He pulled on a string, shifting the blinds aside.

The setting sun bathed the entire room in a golden glow, drawing a smile from his lips.

‘Soon I will be whole again, he thought with a frown. And nothing in this world will be able to stop me.’

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