

"HARRY POTTER MEETS THE HUNGER GAMES!"

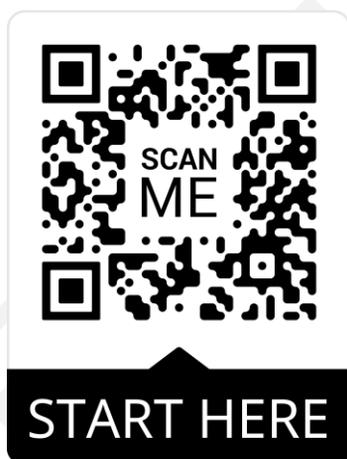


THE STONE THIEVES

Eddy Tetrion



AUGMENTED EDITION





THE STONE THIEVES

AND THE HONOURABLE ORDER OF INVENTORS

~ AUGMENTED EDITION ~

Eddy Tetrion

FOREWORD BY TERRI TATCHELL

CONCEPT ART COMMISSIONED
BY NEILL BLOMKAMP

WWW.FABULOUSATOMS.COM



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Cover illustration by David Edwards.

ISBN: 9798427954976



Social Media



*For my wonderful friends and family.
Thank you.*



Concilio et Labore





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*When They come, it will not be in mighty vessels.
No host shall darken the skies,
for They shall not descend from the heavens.
Cities will not crumble or burn,
when all the voices fall silent.
There will be no destruction. No war.
Not even a whimper shall be heard.
For They shall come swiftly, from the shadows.
Of single mind and purpose, the Darkest of Tides,
Cleansing us from this refuge, finally and for all time.*





FOREWORD

BY TERRI TATCHELL

By now, you've figured out that some moments in life, you get to keep forever. Generally, these moments involve beginnings or endings. Special ones. Ones that affect or alter your life experience either positively or negatively. I find it interesting that we can only recognize these moments in hindsight. I wonder, if you knew you were embarking on one of these life-altering positive beginnings – would you want to know? If the answer is yes, stick with me for a few more paragraphs, and I'll share what my experience has been. If not, turn the page to the story's beginning, pretend we've never met and enjoy the journey ahead on our own terms!

Okay – you "want to knowers" are with me! And if you could see me now, you would see I am grinning ear to ear, rubbing my hands together in anticipation. Eager anticipation. Because I know that you are at one of those "keep-forever" moments as you open this book. You are at the beginning of a story journey that I believe will define a decade, span mediums and inspire generations to come.

The characters, ideas and world which lies ahead will thrill you, surprise you, comfort you, challenge you and above all, expand your concept of what truth is. And the best part? It's going to be fun!



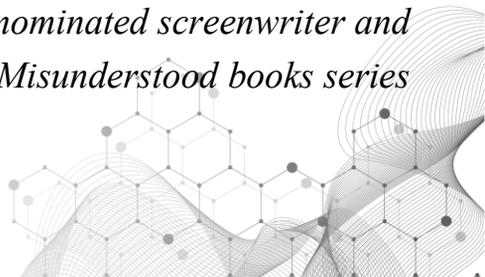
Bold claims for sure, but I've read this book from cover to cover more than once. I've listened to the audiobook and imagined the adaptation. I know this book. But more than that, I've been privy to what comes next. And trust me when I say there is no one but the creator that can envision that. It is mind-blowing. And he's done it all for us.

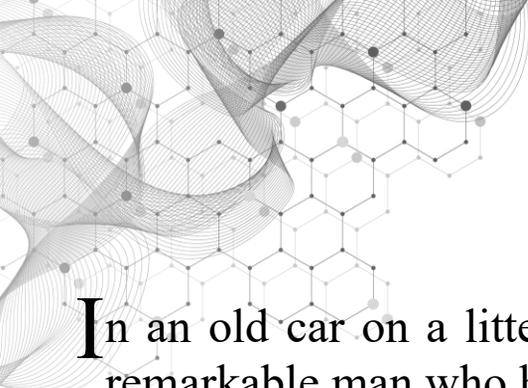
I am honoured to be writing this intro and spent a while considering what would best serve you, the reader. There was the inclination to delve into just how smart and well-researched it is. How the science is real while seeming fantastical all at once. There were the characters. The inventions. The historical, literary and scientific references. The heartbreak, the coming-of-age angst and of course, the twists and turns you won't see coming. But ultimately, I decided that it is in your best interest to jump in without knowing where you are going.

I haven't given anything specific up, and a few pages in, you'll see for yourself. This is unquestionably one of those special beginnings that you will get to keep forever.

Happy reading,
Terri

Terri Tatchell is an Oscar-nominated screenwriter and author of the Endangered and Misunderstood books series





PROLOGUE

In an old car on a litter-strewn street sat the most remarkable man who had ever lived.

Through the dirty windscreen, he stared at a Royal Mail post box. Like everything else in this neighbourhood it was worn out, its flaking skin of old flyers barely covering tacky graffiti. The flap was bolted shut; the post box closed for business.

Or so it seemed.

The car door groaned, strained and stuck. But with a bump of his elbow the warped panel popped free. A carnival of debris sought to entangle the man's legs, yet his eyes never left the red post box, his fingers worrying at the edges of two neatly addressed envelopes.

From his pocket, he drew a magnet. A very special magnet comprised of pieces that had been scattered across the globe.

The man placed the magnet carefully on the side of the post box and twisted it forty-five degrees, then ninety degrees counter-clockwise. He moved his hand exactly five inches up and rotated it again.

Then he pushed the magnet horizontally, snagging the posters; another twist, a well-rehearsed slide, and the post box came to life.

The battered red top rose an inch, revealing a band of polished metal. In the centre were three dials: day, month and year. It was set to the first of January 1654.

Beside the dials, carefully etched into the metal, was a coat of arms with the words '*Nullius in verba*' inscribed below. It was the crest of The Royal Society.

'On the word of no one,' the man whispered.

He could not help but stare longer than he should.

After all these years...the Time Box. The most fabled of Christopher Wren's Hidden Inventions. It was real! An incredible invention hidden in plain sight.

He fumbled at the tumblers, not noticing the faint kiss of a mechanical spider guarding the dials. The lid rose another inch, revealing an envelope-shaped slot.

It all came down to this. There could be no margin for error.

The kiss left on his finger became a tingle, then a burn. Then angry, oozing blisters.

Darkness crept across his vision and his legs gave way as the poison took hold. How could he have been so careless? What clue had he missed?

No margin for error.

He forced his arm forward and the corners of the neatly addressed envelopes caught in the slot, only slightly, but enough to cause his grip to fail. The letters teetered in the opening for an agonising eternity, before a feeble gust of salvation finished the job and pushed them into the past.

Sated, the lid slid down and the Time Box resumed its impassive watch, oblivious to the passing of this most remarkable man.



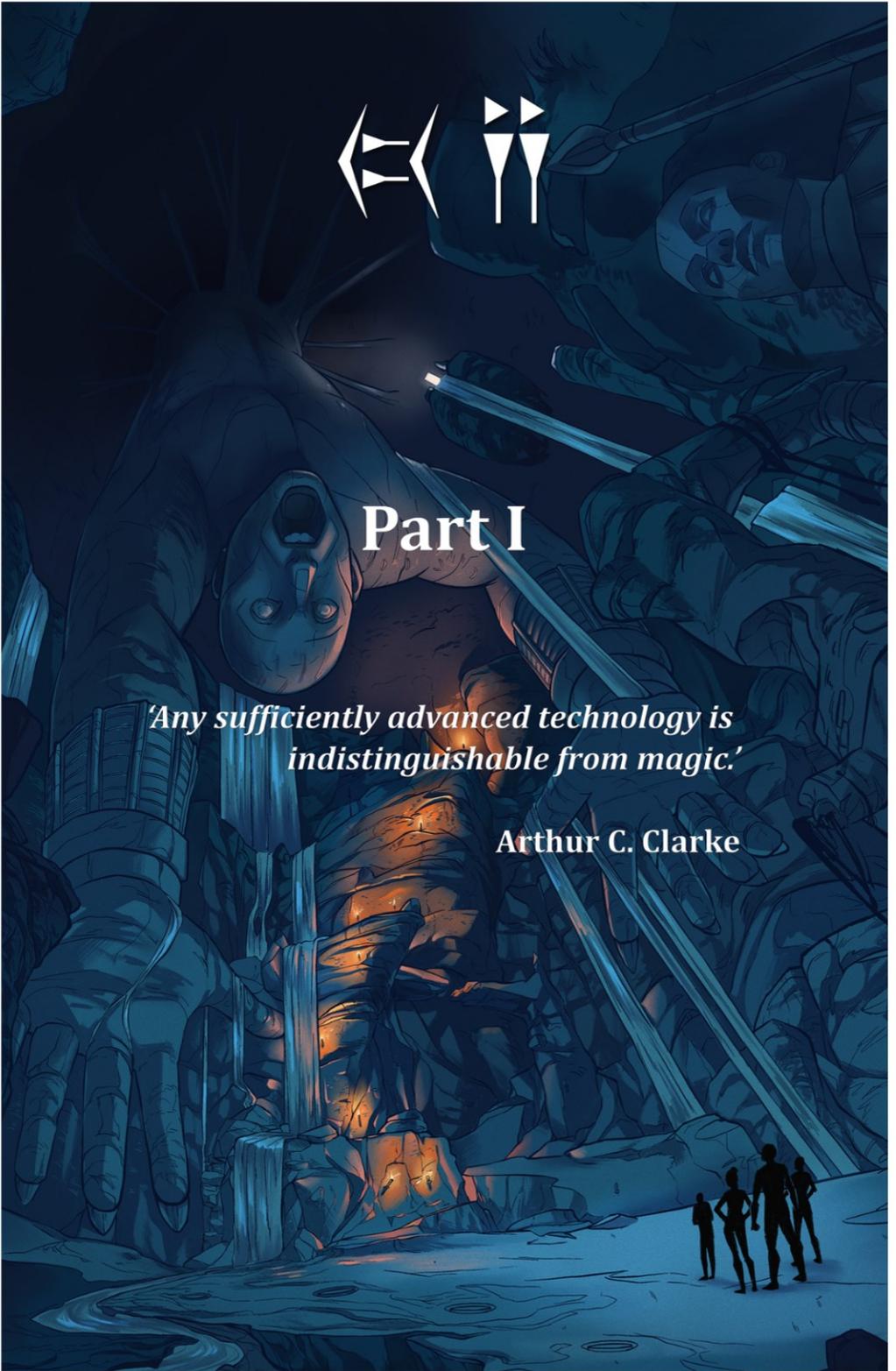
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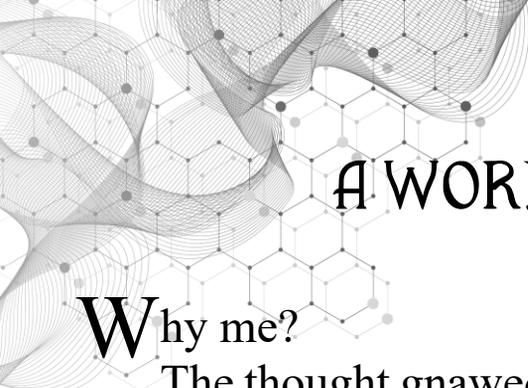


Part I

*'Any sufficiently advanced technology is
indistinguishable from magic.'*

Arthur C. Clarke





A WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES

Why me?

The thought gnawed at Sam as he slumped at his school desk. It was a day they all dreaded: parents spouting the joys of their profession in front of the entire class.

He rubbed his eyes. At least his father had been promoted and was no longer just a Patent Clerk, though Jasper was still quick to point out that Einstein had once been.

Jasper Van Sandt looked nervous, his hands fidgeting in the lap of his faded tweed suit as Sally Jacobs' mother droned on about insurance. Despite a classroom of rapt faces, not one student would recall five words from her speech, all of them were instead focused on the glamour and gossip surrounding her brief appearance on *The Apprentice*.

‘Any questions?’ Mrs Jacobs purred.

Twelve hands shot into the air.

‘About selling insurance,’ the teacher clarified.

There was a rustle of retreating cotton.

‘Yes, Adam?’ Mrs Walsh bit off each word. Sighs and cross-eyed expressions spread, heads lolling back. Adam Pinnyswood was dull. He put the ‘d’ in ditch water and he was also a pretentious know-it-all.

Sam drifted off as the Pinnyswood inquiry began, his voice becoming a distant murmur.

Despite being tall and athletic, with an infectious smile and quick wit, Sam was new to St Vincent’s and treated like an outsider.

Born in England, but raised in southern Africa, his parents were far from affluent and his scholarship to the private school was an affront to many elitist sensibilities.

He glanced over at Victoria. She was the other outsider in their year, though her mother was some hot shot in a big tech company, so she was considered a fitting addition.

Must be nice to feel like you belong...

She caught his forlorn gaze and winked back.

‘Mr Van Sandt?’ The teacher invited his father to take the floor.

Jasper tripped as he approached the lectern and Sam’s gut tightened.

‘Um, thank you, Mrs...’ Surreptitiously, he checked his sweaty palm. ‘Walsh,’ he deciphered the letters.

The teacher smiled awkwardly, then nodded towards the class.

‘Right. Hello everyone, I’m Jasper – Sam’s father – and I work for the Patent Office in London. It’s my job to oversee the team responsible for cataloguing and storing all patent applications.’

Sam heard someone yawn – loudly – at the back of the room, prompting a titter of laughter. Mrs Walsh fixed the perpetrator with a stern gaze.

Mr Van Sandt continued, ‘Every year, we receive thousands of applications, from inventors, scientists and businesses all over the country. They send all manner of weird and wonderful ideas. My department processes them and ensures none are misplaced. Or forgotten! Now, you may wonder why all this is important—’

‘No!’ Came the reply from behind a concealing hand, and this time the laughter was loud and unrepentant.

‘That’s enough!’ Mrs Walsh declared. ‘Who wants to spend their afternoons trimming the faculty lawn with blunt nail scissors?’

Mr Van Sandt abandoned his notes and stepped out from behind the lectern.



‘Everything you want, every road you take and decision you make, will be in pursuit of a particular arrangement of atoms.’

The room fell silent. Sam noticed a few of the children exchange confused glances, but the silence held.

‘Everything you are, everything you see, everything that has been or ever will be, no matter how magical or mundane, is nothing more than an arrangement of atoms. We’re all just atoms. The one thing that defines us, however, is their arrangement. A fabulous arrangement of atoms promises unlimited potential.’

Two girls, heads bent, returned to their phones.

Pulling a device from his pocket, Jasper flicked a switch. ‘This arrangement, for example...’ The girls jumped when Mr Van Sandt's voice blared from their respective speakers, ‘allows you to commandeer the broadcast capability of any active electronic device within a twenty-foot radius.’

Mrs Walsh confiscated the phones. The offenders blushed. Sam and the rest of the class snickered.

Jasper held up a small silver stick with a neon purple tip. ‘Can anyone guess what this is?’

A boy near the front shrugged. ‘Looks like a match.’

‘First prize! But what makes it special?’

He scraped it across the lectern, producing a trail of greenish blue sparks. The class were enchanted by the chemical fire. This time, there was awed silence.

Jasper banished the flame and relit the match to demonstrate its capabilities. All eyes were now firmly on him.

Sam’s hand strayed to the faded scars on his forearm. He was not a fan of fire.

‘Strike-a-lot matches: Just one of a thousand prototypes that never made it to production because the patent was quashed by billionaires or greedy conglomerates. There’s a host of brilliant ideas – truly spectacular arrangements of atoms – dying a dusty death... Except of course, during a time of war.’

He waited. The hook was baited.

‘What does that mean?’ Big Col the rugby captain tried not to seem too interested.

Sam watched, as his father leaned forward.

‘It means,’ Jasper began in a hushed tone, ‘that when Britain is at war, the Government will use any patent or power to protect the sovereignty of the Crown. Remember that the electric car was invented sixty years ago.’



‘There could be light bulbs that never burn out, hover shoes, jet packs – yet they remain untouched scribbles on my shelf. But in wartime, all bets are off.’

A boy at the back sat up. ‘What about weapons? Guns, bombs, lasers!?’

‘Flying cars?’

‘Robots!’

The existence of such unimaginable wonders fed their dormant imaginations and for the first time in ages, excitement seized the room.

‘A Time Machine!’

‘Bottomless bags?’

‘Atomic batteries!’

The list mushroomed, in both scope and extravagance, every student jostling for their flight of fancy to be heard.

Sam could not help grinning at his father.

Mr Van Sandt leaned back and tapped his nose in a knowing manner. ‘Official Secrets Act, I’m afraid,’ he delivered with aplomb. ‘I’m sworn to silence by the King himself.’ His voice dropped to a whisper. ‘But there are secrets in my archives so fabulous, so incredible, they could change the world forever...’ he paused, every ear held ‘...if they ever got out.’

An awed ‘*Woah*’ and the odd expletive followed. Mrs Walsh, ignoring the latter, stepped forward and began to clap.

‘Thank you, Mr Van Sandt, for that very surprising insight into the world of the Patent Office.’ The students followed her lead, the whole class in awe of Sam’s father. Could the tide have just turned in his popularity stakes?

‘Questions?’ The teacher asked.

It took ten minutes for the din to subside.

Sam closed the front door of the old gatehouse.

Arthur’s Rest had been in his family for generations. It was a tall, narrow stone building with a stout, studded door and high-pitched roof. Beneath the swept eaves and ornate gables, climbing roses and ivy wound their way around narrow leaded windows and carved stone mullions. Sam’s bedroom was in the octagonal turret which overlooked the vast grounds of the Witheringham Estate and their own modest, quintessential walled English garden.

He shrugged his bag onto the hall table and caught the edge of a neatly addressed envelope. The letter slid to the floor unnoticed and disappeared beneath the thick mahogany dresser.

‘I’m home!’

‘In the kitchen.’ His mother's reply was followed by shrieks of delight.

‘Sammy, Sammy!’

The twins roared into view covered from pigtail to plimsoll in sugar, flour and dough and caught him in the lounge. They leapt upon their older brother.

‘We bakin’!’

‘You’re *kidding!*’ He spread his arms and gawped at them theatrically.

Tugging at his shirt, the little girls ushered him toward their heinous laboratory in the kitchen. Surrounded by rolling pins, pastry cutters and deformed offerings to the cookie Gods, his mother smiled warmly. Dusting her hands on her apron, she leant over to kiss him.

‘Judging by the lack of bruising, I’m assuming your father didn't completely ruin you?’

Sam grinned. ‘He gave the ‘*fabulous atoms*’ speech, whipped out a few toys and somehow had them eating out the palm of his hand!’

The rest of the day had been surreal. By home time, the entire school had heard about his father being a mad scientist who used a flame-thrower and fired a prototype laser at the headteacher.



The twins, oblivious to the conversation, were hiding under the table and feeding dough to the dog who was nearing a sugar-induced seizure.

‘Girls, no more for Chloe,’ their mother warned. ‘If she pops, there’ll be an awful mess and you’ll have to clean her up!’

The front door slammed, and Sam was barrelled aside when the diabolical duo leapt up again. ‘Dada, Dada!’

Jasper and Angie listened to their son re-live his day whilst they ate.

The twins were swapping spoonfuls of green jelly and thick yellow custard. Very little, however, was finding its way into either mouth.

‘... and I’ve even been invited to go to the cinema on Saturday, in Leicester Square. Big Col’s dad invested in a production company and has tickets to a world première – all the stars will be there!’

‘Fantastic,’ Angie said, ‘but your father or I will drop you off and collect you. You’re not running around London on your own.’

Sam's face fell. ‘But I’m fifteen!’



‘Barely! I’m – we’re – very happy that the boys are finally including you, but you’re not going on your own. Maybe your father can go into the office and catch up on some work?’

Jasper raised a finger to object. However, further debate was interrupted by Chloe, who stood up, retched and parted company with several pounds of cookie dough. The girls (convinced that the dog had, in fact, duly popped) screamed and fled.

Saturday, rather disappointingly, took all week to arrive.

Sam had fended off several earnest visitors from school with the news that his father had been summoned away on ‘business’, but this revelation had only fed the rumour mill, expanding both curiosity and Sam’s burgeoning popularity.

‘Ready?’ Jasper called.

Sam finished the message he was sending, slammed his feet into his trainers and gave his blonde hair the tenth check before heading down the stairs three at a time.

The train ride into London was cramped; it always was.

Sam sighed. Loudly. For the umpteenth time in the half-hour journey.

‘Spit it out,’ his father said.

‘Do we *have* to go to your office? It’s so boring. Can’t we do something else please?’

‘It’ll be fun.’

Sam wasn’t convinced.

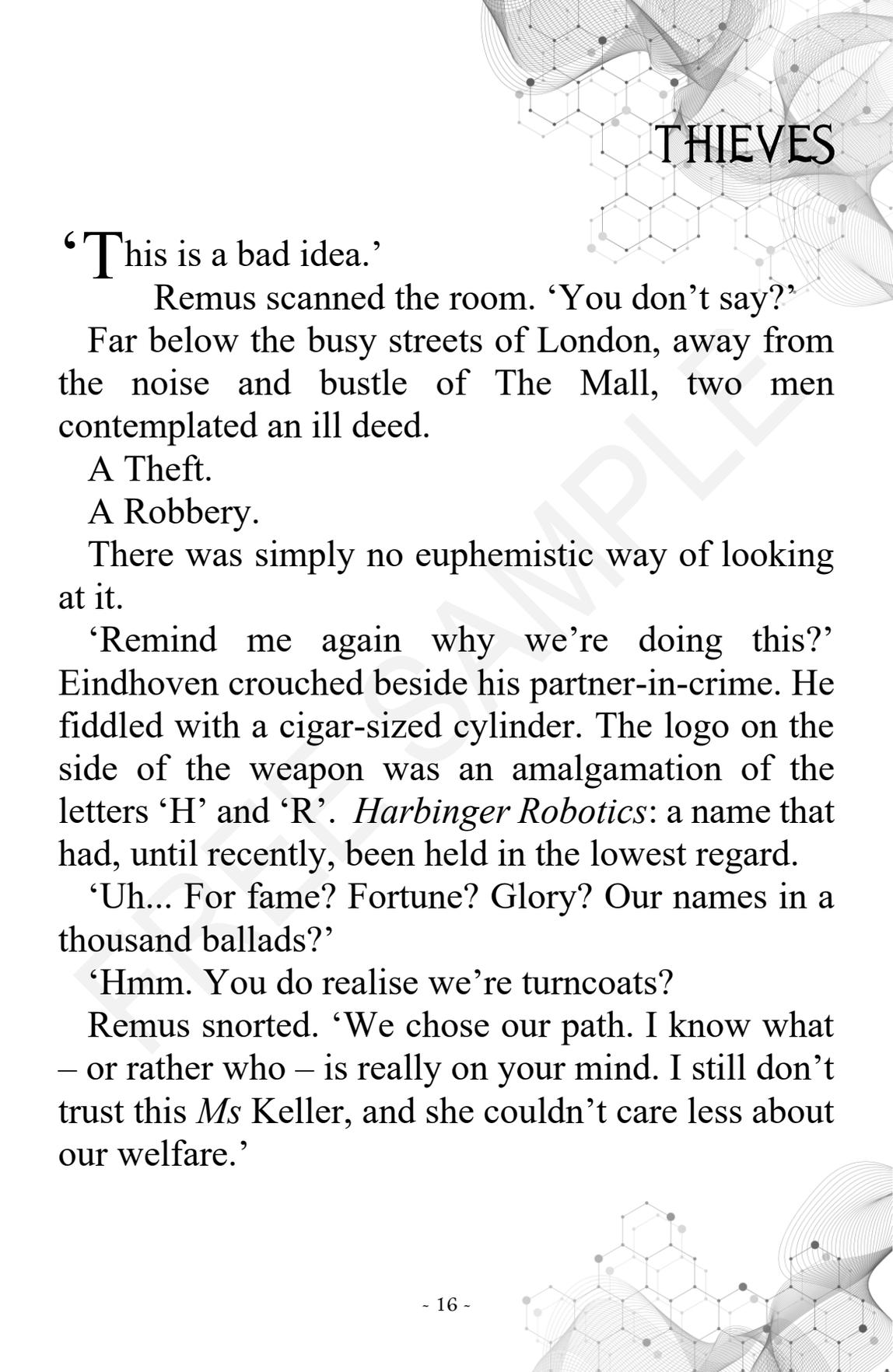
He was already impatient and uncomfortable in the hot sardine-can-carriage. A man with an offensive body odour stood too close, and the smell of garlic made him gag. The man gave Sam a withering look and shuffled away slightly.

Jasper made a face at him and Sam shrugged. Turning, he noticed a very cute girl through a new gap in the packed bodies. Perhaps this trip would present other opportunities. His mood lifted considerably when their eyes met and the girl smiled at him.

Now if he could only ditch his dad...



Chapter 1



THIEVES

‘This is a bad idea.’

Remus scanned the room. ‘You don’t say?’

Far below the busy streets of London, away from the noise and bustle of The Mall, two men contemplated an ill deed.

A Theft.

A Robbery.

There was simply no euphemistic way of looking at it.

‘Remind me again why we’re doing this?’ Eindhoven crouched beside his partner-in-crime. He fiddled with a cigar-sized cylinder. The logo on the side of the weapon was an amalgamation of the letters ‘H’ and ‘R’. *Harbinger Robotics*: a name that had, until recently, been held in the lowest regard.

‘Uh... For fame? Fortune? Glory? Our names in a thousand ballads?’

‘Hmm. You do realise we’re turncoats?’

Remus snorted. ‘We chose our path. I know what – or rather who – is really on your mind. I still don’t trust this *Ms Keller*, and she couldn’t care less about our welfare.’

‘Still,’ Eindhoven mused, ‘I wonder if there’s a Mr Keller?’

‘If there was, I’d put good money on her having eaten him before the honeymoon. You’d do well to steer clear.’

Eindhoven huffed and rocked on his haunches. The easy part had been getting inside the building.

In the background, the hum of the fluorescent lights seemed to grow louder. ‘If Baid finds us down here, we’ll be praying for a thousand Black Widows.’

Remus swallowed at the name but said nothing.

‘Ready?’ Eindhoven braced his foot against the wall.

Remus did the same. ‘As I’ll ever be. *Nullius in verba!*’ He caught the sour expression. ‘Too soon?’

‘Too soon!’

The two men dashed from the shadows, bent low as they crossed the large chamber. The room belonged to an archive, and a secret one at that. One they had sworn to protect with all the other archives, for there were quite a few: clandestine structures, hiding in plain sight, concealing unimaginable treasures and terrors.

Eindhoven felt a stab of guilt. *Jasper and his precious bloody atoms!*

This particular archive was vast. There were countless floors each housing a seemingly endless number of rooms filled with high shelves and cabinets, faded wooden drawers, skeletal metal racks, boxes, files, folders – even old Tupperware. Finding something in here must be impossible.

Arriving at the first set of cabinets, Remus began opening and closing doors and drawers, rummaging through the depths.

‘Nothing!’

Eindhoven laughed. ‘You didn’t seriously think it would be that easy?’

‘Well, I’ve little to go on. I’ve never stolen anything before.’

Eindhoven gave him a pithy look.

‘And the more I think about it,’ Remus continued ‘the more I think we should just...’

‘It’s too late for that now. So, let’s just crack on, as I, for one, would like to see another sunrise.’

From the shadows, a dark-skinned man with intricately scarred cheeks watched the pair.

Baid shook his head. There would be no tomorrow for these traitors.



Chapter 2

FOR EVERY ACTION

Sam and Jasper arrived at Charing Cross station and made their way through the crowds toward the Strand, dodging umbrellas, backpacks and the odd toddler on a Gruffalo case.

They crossed over to The Mall, before climbing the steps toward the Duke of York column.

'The Royal Society,' Sam read out when they stopped at a black palisade gate beside a large cream building. 'I thought you worked at the Patent office?'

'This is where the real work is done,' came the evasive reply from his father as he led Sam down some steps to an unremarkable door. It had no buzzer, wore no grandeur. It was just a plain, sturdy panelled door. A tarnished silver plaque was set above a post flap on the wall next to it.

'Fabulous Atoms' it read.

Sam pointed. 'You didn't?'

'Hmm? The sign? Oh, I couldn't resist. It's a free service to help people register a patent. Inventors are a lazy lot, especially when it comes to paperwork.' Jasper slid his hand into the letterbox and Sam heard the mechanical whir of a scanner. Buzz. Click. The door opened, and in they went.

Sam's shirt was stuck to his back and the cool air was a relief.

A spiral staircase led down to a lobby of highly polished white tiles. At the far end was a single door, and beside it sat a guard. He wore a crisp grey uniform and a very shiny pair of shoes.

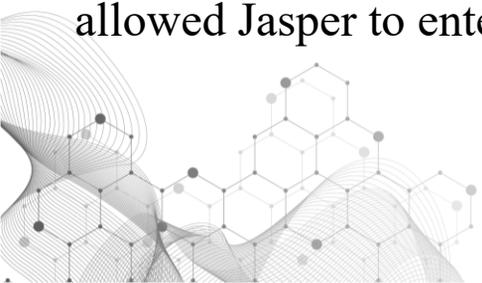
In his lap rested a dog-eared copy of *'Perpetual Motion: Getting the ball rolling'*. He had a calm, pleasant face, small bushy moustache and equally bushy brows. Setting down his book, the man rose to greet them.

'Good afternoon, Mr Van Sandt, right on time, I see. And this must be Samuel.' The guard smiled, extending his hand. 'I'm Harold.'

Turning, he tapped a nondescript panel on the wall beside his chair, which became a holographic screen. 'Where to?'

'Level Sixteen, please, Harold. Just need to collect a few things for Monday. The audit is nearly upon us!'

'Oh, aye? Bet Flic is in a right old state. Sixteen, you say,' Harold rotated a three-dimensional schematic. The image expanded until Sam could make out floor plans. Stepping aside, the guard allowed Jasper to enter a code.



Sam jumped when the metal door lit up and slid open.

‘Mind you don't wander off down there – we’s still lookin for the last person that did!’ Harold winked when the door slid closed, the whiskers of his moustache twitching.

* * *

‘Well, this is a fine mess you’ve gotten us into!’ Remus spat.

‘Me?’ Eindhoven blustered, snatching a glance around the corner.

‘It certainly wasn’t *my* idea to break into The Royal Society archives and steal some sodding scroll for a woman who fluttered her eyelashes at me! Let alone one who works for Harbinger!’

‘You seem to have conveniently forgotten the money!’

‘That’s because there are no shops in the graveyard, you moron!’ Remus fumed.

Further debate was interrupted when a searing blast slammed into the wall, and sent the pair crashing to the floor.

Coughing, Remus scrambled up, pulling his stunned compatriot with him. ‘How the hell did Baid know we’re down here?’

‘You *know* how!’ Eindhoven choked. ‘Still, we’re not dead yet.’

Remus touched a wet patch spreading across his side. ‘Easy for you to say.’

Eindhoven swore. ‘Come on. This way.’

* * *

The lobby lift door slid open again as soon as it had closed, and Sam expected to see Harold fussing with the button. Instead, they stood before a gloomy chamber filled with row upon row of shelves.

‘How...?’

Jasper stepped past his dithering son and triggered the light sensors. ‘Speedlifts!’

‘How far down or up did we go?’

‘We’re about two hundred metres below The Society lobby.’

‘What?’ Sam hurried to keep up. ‘We travelled two hundred metres in a second? That's impossible!’



Jasper favoured his son with an expansive grin. 'Boring old office, indeed! Down here,' he spread his arms, '*impossible* is one word that's seldom used. Now where is Theoretical Genetics? I swear it moves every time I... Oh, I give up. Flic!' He turned and shouted.

There was a minute's silence, and then Sam heard a faint humming before a bright object shot over his shoulder.

'Yes, Mr Van Sandt?' a female voice asked.

'Ah, there you are, Flic. I'm looking for the Electrochemical Sap patent.'

'You've gone past it, as usual.'

Sam stared open mouthed. Hovering before them, about the size of a football, was a robot: smooth and shiny with a band of neon blue light around its middle. The air beneath the robot shimmered.

Jasper noticed his son's jaw dragging on the floor. 'Sorry, Sam, this is Flic, our Cybernetic Curator.'

'But wha... what is it?'

'It?' The blue bled to red and the floating custodian rounded on him. It had two cameras for eyes and a speaker grill mouth.

'I am a highly intelligent, self-aware cybernetic organism. One who has catalogued every document on all two hundred and seventy-two levels of the

London office, right down to the mjöð soaked napkin upon which Gustaf Felvovin scribbled the recipe for self-levitating hydrogel!’ A telescopic arm unfolded and poked Sam in the forehead.

‘*It, indeed!*’ Flic whizzed away, muttering.

‘*Mjöð?*’ Sam rubbed his forehead and looked at his father.

Jasper laughed. ‘Viking beer. Quite an acquired taste. And no, is the answer to your next question!’ He pointed after the robot. ‘Farnsworth’s Learning and Interactive Cybernetic Curator: Flic for short. Felicity Farnsworth was the curator here for over sixty years and on the day of her retirement, presented us with her replacement.

‘Apparently, the old genius passed her time studying the patents in Advanced Robotics and Synthetic Neurological Cybertronics. Flic was the result and her design formed the basis for all our Cybernetic Assistants. I think Felicity programmed more than a little of her own personality into Flic though, for she gets a little touchy at this time of year.’

‘How come?’

‘It’s the audit soon and Felicity used to take it very personally if our Index scored below ninety eight percent in catalogue accuracy.’

‘Now, we must get a move on if you’re going to make this movie.’

* * *

Remus slid to the floor. ‘It’s no use.’

The wound was fatal. The wet patch was no longer a patch and he was losing feeling in his arms and legs. ‘That man’s not human. We’ve scoured every floor of this place – there’s no scroll and nowhere to hide.’

‘Come on,’ Eindhoven tugged at him, but Remus was spent.

‘Get out of here.’ His friend’s eyes were rolling. ‘Take the Speedlift and head for the lobby. You can use Harold’s computer to find your bloody scroll. Here,’ he handed Eindhoven one of Ms Keller’s devices.

Putrid cow. This was all her fault.

‘You’ll need it. Now go!’

* * *

Sam wandered past tall, densely packed shelves crammed with every manner of manuscript, and labelled by neat and patient hands, until they found the robot near the top shelf, her pincer moving from spine to spine.

‘Digesting Root Beetles, Dynamite Tubers, Elastic Vines, Electrochemical Sap – here we are!’

‘Brilliant, thanks Flic! Back to the Speedlift, if you don't mind. Sam's got a big afternoon planned.’

‘Hmm!’ Her neon nimbus had changed to a sulky green by the time they reached the lift.

‘Thanks again, Flic,’ Jasper said. ‘See you Monday.’

The robot banked and disappeared, the rows of chamber lights pinging off behind her.

Again, no sooner had the door closed than it slid open, and they were back in the white tiled lobby. Though it was not at all how they had left it.

The charred pages of *Perpetual Motion* were scattered to all corners. The blackened, smoking cover lay beside the empty chair. The air reeked.

Sam stared at an ugly smear on the pristine floor, a clotted crimson streak that stretched across the room. At its end lay a crumpled body, limbs bent at unnatural angles.

Placing a hand across his son's chest, Jasper peered out of the lift, then hurried over to the wall and pressed a panic button. The lights bled to red and an alarm began to wail. He turned to Sam.

'Stay! There!' then ran over to the fallen man.

The lift door slid closed and Sam was left in the dim, pulsing steel box. He blinked. It took a moment to realise he was alone. No buttons, no apparent way out. A wave of claustrophobia gripped him, and Sam banged the door.

'Help!' he shouted, kicking and beating on it. 'Dad! Dad! Get me out of here!'

The door opened. His relief, however, was short lived.

He was back on Level Sixteen.

Here, too, red floor lights beat in time with the alarm. Sam peered into the gloom. He could make out shapes, but they did not look like shelves. Sam shuffled forward, arms and fingers searching.

'Flic?'

Nothing.

His foot struck something hard and he stopped, cursing. Bending to rub his toes, he fished out his phone for a light.

The something hard was a large metal foot. Joined to an ankle, then a knee.

A giant metal robot out of a 1950's movie, all right angles, welded joints and exposed bolts. Serrated rubber pincers, capable of crushing him whole, hung at its side. The head was a kite shaped block of iron and the quatrefoil eyes glowed demonically.

A noise caused Sam to turn just in time to avoid a beam of light that burst past him and sliced into the steel centurion.

He stumbled away from the robot amidst a shower of sparks as another flash followed the first. Then he tripped, dropping his phone. Heart pounding, Sam swore and scrambled away.

There was a humming, followed by a rush of wind and he was flung across the room, landing hard, and rolling before being lifted and slammed onto the ground once more. The force drove the wind from him, and bright spots skittered across Sam's vision. Gasping, clawing at the musty air, he lay with his cheek pressed against the rough floor, ears ringing.

He heard a click, the flicking of a switch, and suddenly the air around Sam turned warm and sticky, like glue. He struggled but whatever had him, held fast. The muffled sound of footsteps drew nearer.

'Busy down here, considering it's the weekend. And such splendid weather, too,' a man's voice remarked. It was deep and heavily accented.

‘I certainly didn’t expect the archives to be so busy, being such a well-kept secret. Do you know how hard Level Two Seven Three was to find? Yet here *you* are.’ The voice paused, then sighed with genuine regret. Raising his hand, he pointed a cigar shaped device at the boy, its tip glowing. ‘Still, dead men and all that... Goodbye.’

From the shadows sped a blur of metal and angry red light. Flic rammed into the stranger at speed and the viscous air around Sam evaporated.

‘Not allowed! Never allowed in here!’ she shrieked. ‘Who are you? Show me your face!’ The stranger regained his balance and rolled away. Coming to his feet, the man struck out at Flic with a retractable staff.

It glanced off her side. He then narrowly avoided her next charge and staggered against Sam. The two became entangled. Something came away in Sam’s hand, but the man didn’t notice, his attention firmly on his airborne assailant.

Seconds before Flic reached him the man clapped his hand over a panel on his chest. The device made a whirring sound and pulsed between his fingers. He turned on his heel as the device emitted a bright flash.

‘No!’ Flic screamed. ‘That too is forbidden. Forbidden!’

But the man was no longer there.

The Speedlift opened and three behemoths bustled into the room, flashlights in their hands.

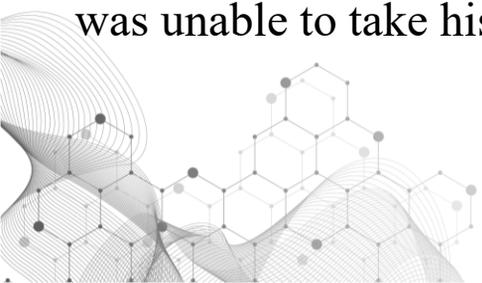
Sam slumped, his every bone and muscle on fire. In his hand, however, he held a strange prize: a long tube wound in cloth. One end was peeled back and he could make out the faded wooden spindles of a scroll.

‘You have it!’ Flic swooped down, steam venting from a crack in her side. One of her camera eyes had been smashed and was leaking green fluid. Farnsworth’s design had not anticipated volatile aerial incursions.

‘Well done, boy. Well done, indeed.’ She took the item in her pincers and, spluttering inky smoke, disappeared into the maze of dusty relics.

‘You all right, son?’ One of the men knelt in front of Sam. He wore a long black and purple coat with a steel vambrace around each wrist. Both hands were gloved, but his palms glowed and crackled with energy.

‘I think so.’ Despite the ringing in his ears, Sam was unable to take his eye from the man’s hands.



‘You'd better come with us. Mr D’Angelo will want to see you. Your father's already in his office.’ He laughed when Sam winced as he tried to stand. ‘Cheer up, it’s not every day you face a rogue Paladin and survive! Baid caught up with his mate a few floors up and that chap, let me tell you, wasn’t so lucky.’

Sam had no idea what or who he was talking about. The man clapped him on the back with a force that rattled Sam’s teeth, before they headed towards the lift, flashlights scouring the room.

Eindhoven flinched, expecting the crazed robot to crash into his back. But the device on his chest had transported him to safety.

‘Clever.’

He appeared to be in an office near the top of a tall building; a neat, minimalist room with a solitary mahogany desk. The only remarkable décor was two rows of tribal masks on the walls beside the double doors. Some were small and round, beautifully carved and highly polished. Others were elongated and rough, scarred creations with hollow eyes and snarling lips.

The front of the office was glass and the view was spectacular. To the west, the sun was sinking into a cherry sea, casting the mask collection in a menacing crimson hue. Far below, the busy streets of a city were already blinking neon.

To the east, an imposing, flat-topped mountain dominated the horizon, draped in a cloth of marshmallow cloud.

‘Welcome to Africa, Mr Eindhoven.’ The doors opened, admitting a slim woman carrying a briefcase. ‘No Mr Palatine?’



The final image of his childhood friend slumped against the wall would haunt Eindhoven forever, but regret would serve no purpose right now. ‘Ms Keller,’ he nodded.

She had changed since they parted company in London, her casual tourist garb replaced with a tailored suit and painfully high heels. Making her way behind the desk, she took a seat, motioning him to do the same.

‘I trust everything went according to plan?’ Ms Keller opened the case, turning the gaping square toward him. It was empty. Hungry.

Eindhoven crossed his ankles and looked out the window, ‘It’s quite a revelation, being on the other side of the fence.’ He reached inside his jacket and placed the first of the devices she had given them on the table. It looked like a water pistol, made of smoky plastic with a cone shaped barrel. ‘The Mangler made short work of poor Harold. And this – I forget its name – the Hot Spot, was it?’ he placed a cigar shaped device beside the gun ‘...was not without its uses. ‘But the Turner,’ he tapped his chest, ‘now this came in handy.’ He paused. ‘One can't help but wonder what is worth so much effort?’

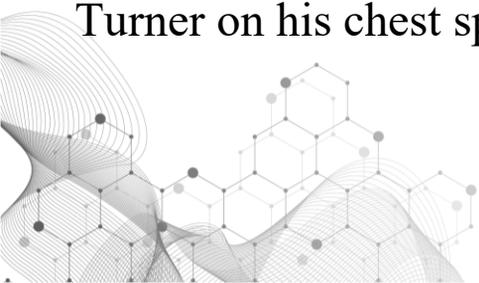
Ms Keller's lips formed a firm line. 'We've a great many assets at our disposal. Harbinger is unparalleled in technological innovation. And now, thanks to you, we have even greater insight into the Mods of your Cadres, so in return, we've allowed you to sample a few of our... toys. Amazing what you can achieve without petty rules and meaningless constraints, wouldn't you agree?' She could not help but dig at the dogma of his former employer as her fingertips found a button beneath her desk. 'Now, the scroll?'

Too late to turn back now. Eindhoven had enjoyed little glory or reward in recent years and Harbinger's offer was welcome. The Ex-Paladin reached for the scroll at his side, and was hit by a wave of cold panic when he found an empty pocket. He checked the other, but it, too, was bare.

Eindhoven swore. 'Why, that little...'

Ms Keller watched the colour drain from the man's face. Fighting the disappointment that his failure brought, she chose instead to cherish the faint silver lining. Her fingertip traced the hidden button once more, and then she pressed it, ever so slowly.

Eindhoven looked down in surprise when the Turner on his chest sprang to life. 'Wait...'



But it was too late. A needle shot from the back of the housing, administering an agent into his bloodstream.

‘Are you familiar with the tale of King Ferdinand of Naples, Mr Eindhoven?’ Ms Keller picked at a stray piece of cotton.

Unsurprisingly, the paralysed man did not reply.

‘I’ll take that as a ‘no’.

Ferdinand, or Ferrante, ruled Naples in the late fifteenth century. He was an exceptional and ruthless politician, infamously so, for he dealt with his enemies in a most gruesome manner. Once he had helped them shrug loose their mortal coil, he had them embalmed, dressed and put on display in his own macabre museum. The only visitors he allowed were those he suspected of disloyalty, to show them the fate that awaited all who crossed him. It proved a most successful object lesson for improving devotion.’

She paused.

‘Morbid as it is,’ her voice dropped, ‘I was fascinated by the tale. So much so, that I shamelessly plagiarised the idea. You’ve been injected with a neat little concoction the ladies in the lab refer to as LS₂, or the Living Statue serum. Its chemistry is fascinating, but I won’t bore you with the details.’

Essentially, it puts your body into a state of suspended animation.

‘With one evil little twist: You can still see, still hear and remain quite conscious. You are a living statue. One that will have a place of honour in my own museum; which, I’m not too proud to say, has yet to be graced by a Paladin.’

Ms Keller smiled, spreading her hands. ‘So, welcome! You’re going to make a fine addition and quite the talking point for my next tour.’

She snapped the empty case shut. ‘Harbinger does not accept, condone nor reward failure, Mr Eindhoven, and I must now find another way to acquire that which you’ve so spectacularly failed to deliver.’

Ms Keller took the case and left the room; flicking off the light, as she closed the door, the rhythmic click-clack of her heels growing fainter.

Eindhoven struggled. From the wall, hollow eyes and gaping mouths mocked him. He watched the sun dip and set, perhaps for the last time. *So much for that sunrise.*

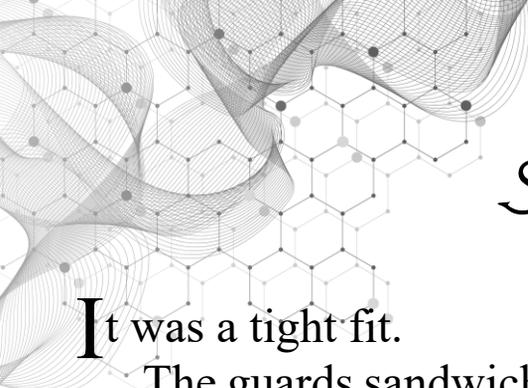
His mind shied away from the fate that now awaited him. Sentenced to an endless nightmare in some twisted mannequin freak show. To be leered and laughed at by this evil woman.

Remus had been right. *Too late for regret.*

Inky blue-black sullied the blushing sky, a great hand plucking the first stars from hiding. High above the bustling bay, far from the continual beep-beep of the taxis and lively music booming from the bars, the traitorous Turner flashed and came to life once more. When the moon rose on silver rails, the office was empty.



Chapter 3



SO MANY QUESTIONS

It was a tight fit.

The guards sandwiched Sam into the lift. A steer-sized hoof crushed his toes. ‘Sorry.’

Sam barely noticed. His head was spinning.

What the actual hell had just happened?

Thankfully, the door opened straight away and Sam hobbled onto the deep vermilion carpet of a windowed hall. Opposite the lift, a round table and chairs nestled beside an imposing set of double doors with well-polished brass handles.

The lift closed, leaving Sam with a guard who motioned for the boy to take a seat, then knocked on the doors before entering.

Sam spied a bowl of toffees and helped himself to a crinkly wrapper, feeling grateful for the sugar-hit as he walked over to the closest window, curious to see what level of the archive they had reached. The view left him confused.

It was one of rolling hills and grass seas; a wide river wound sluggishly through them from distant snow-capped peaks, and a herd of horses traversed the prairie.

When he leaned closer, Sam could even feel the sun radiating through the glass. This wasn't St James' Park!

'What the—?'

A deep rumble caused him to turn to the opposite window, through which ruffled palms and honey sands held white crested waves at bay. Sam touched the pane. It was damp from the spray.

In the distance, dark clouds drew closer to the beach. Lightning tore across the nebulous horizon, followed by another growl of thunder, and the toffee bowl rattled skittishly.

Sam took a step back, unable to wrap any understanding around where he might be. It couldn't be London, and definitely wasn't underground. The herd was now close enough to make out the prancing antics of the foals.

The grand doors opened and Sam jumped.

There was a crunch when the guard stepped on the wrapper.

'Been at the toffees, have we? Come on then, sweet tooth.'

A second thunderclap caused the guard to wrinkle his nose. 'So much for surfing after work.'

'Sam!' Jasper rushed over, patting his son's chest and stomach.

‘I’m fine, Dad,’ he said, pushing the hands away.

‘Of course you are, my boy,’ declared a tall, silhouetted figure standing before a long window spanning a large room.

‘Have you ever seen a ghost cat, Samuel? *Panthera uncia*, the snow leopard. A truly magnificent creature.’

He turned to face them. The man’s eyes were piercing and his cheeks bore the ruddy glow of a frosty morning. ‘Come see for yourself.’

Sam looked to his father, who nodded. He felt the chill before he saw the snow, his breath steaming when he drew near the window. The landscape beyond lay in deepest winter, icy tendrils and heavy drifts rested against the glass.

‘There.’ The man pointed toward the far end of a clearing. Sam squinted against the glare but could see nothing among the rocks and ice. Then he caught sight of the ghostly predator.

The snow leopard's long tail swayed as it padded across the crisp ground a few meters from them. Its chest was white, but the rest of its fur was mottled smoky grey to tan, with dark rosettes adorning it from head to tail.

‘Magnificent,’ the man sighed. ‘Though soon it will be extinct.’

They watched the creature stalk across the clearing, sniff the air, then disappear behind a tree, oblivious to its audience.

‘Where are we?’ Sam blurted. This was all too much to take in. ‘How are there windows of different places in the same room? Are they real or electronic? And how are they hot and cold, or wet. . .’ He faltered.

‘Sammy! So many questions! But first, introductions; I’m Salvador D’Angelo, your father’s... supervisor.’

‘Just Sam,’ he corrected. Never Sammy. He rubbed the scars on his forearm, suppressing memories of the only person aside from the twins to call him that. Introductions were all very well, but no one had answered his questions.

Their host plucked the stopper from a decanter. ‘That’ll be all for now, Owen,’ Salvador informed the guard waiting by the door as he filled a tulip-shaped glass.

‘Cognac, Jasper?’ The bottle hovered over a second glass.

‘No, thank you.’

He gave Sam a sly look. ‘How about you?’

‘Uh, a Coke if you have one? Please.’

‘With a drop of the good stuff? For the shock?’

‘Just the Coke, thank you.’ Jasper headed off any temptation.

Sam paused to marvel at Mr D'Angelo's office, which resembled a well-loved study. Deep, comfortable chairs, a dark wooden desk and multiple shelves that strained under the weight of books and ornaments of every shape, size and cultural persuasion. The remaining walls were draped in maps and paintings.

He turned to study its architect. Salvador D'Angelo was a tall man, straight of back and broad shouldered. His dark hair was neatly cropped, with a smattering of grey dotting his temples. He was not wearing glasses, although Sam saw some balanced upon the mass of papers strewn across the desk. One of them, he noticed, was an open scroll, and he leaned in curiously.

Upon the faded parchment he could make out a careful rendering of a temple with a subterranean chamber. Runes and strange markings decorated the drawing.

Mr D'Angelo casually rolled the scroll closed as he picked up his glasses.

‘Persephone, what’s the time, please?’

‘Which time zone, sir?’

‘London.’

‘Four forty-five.’

Sam looked around. He spied a shiny silver-blue teardrop torso hovering behind a lamp.

‘How rude of me,’ Salvador apologised. ‘That’s Persephone, my C.A.’

Sam tried not to look blank.

‘Cybernetic Assistant. A descendant, if you will, of Farnsworth’s Curator model; whom I believe you met earlier? Now with a few improvements.’ The robot’s nimbus brightened at the praise.

‘Right then, the windows.’ He swirled his glass. ‘They’re called Far Sight windows. Think of them as very powerful telescopes that allow you to not only see but experience every sensation of your chosen vista from the safety and convenience of...’ he spread his arms showman-like, a slosh of cognac escaping, ‘your own home. Far more impressive than a television, you must agree?’

Sam nodded.

‘Now tell me all about your afternoon, I hear you had some fun and games on Level Sixteen?’

‘Two Seven Three.’ Sam corrected

Salvador’s smile never quite reached his grey eyes as he looked at the boy. ‘There is no Level Two Seven Three.’

‘Well, that's what *he* said.’ Sam's voice broke at the memory of the attack, of the searing light and the suffocating pain.

‘*He*, who is he?’

‘We didn’t get around to introductions, it was the man who disappeared. He said we were on Level Two Seven Three.’

Mr D’Angelo said nothing.

‘And the guard?’ Sam continued. It would be hard to forget the twisted body on the blood-stained floor. Another memory to bury.

‘Harold? He slipped on the stairs and dropped his soup. Out cold when your father found him. I just don’t understand why people can’t use the canteen, after all the money I’ve spent on it ...’ Salvador muttered.

Sam knew he was being fobbed off. Mr D'Angelo had too quick an answer for everything.

‘Now if you don't mind, young man, I’d like a quick word with your father. You can wait for him outside.’

‘You’re not going to fire him?’

Mr D’Angelo laughed. ‘Heavens, no.

‘Persephone, why don't you change the windows in the lobby, show young Sam Tokyo at night?’



The robot glided forward. ‘Certainly, sir. May I also suggest the Easter Islands: it will be sunrise there soon?’

‘Splendid.’ Mr D'Angelo extended his hand. ‘A pleasure to meet you, Sam, and I'm sorry if we caused you any alarm. I hear you've an exciting evening planned, so I won't keep you any longer.’ And ushered him into the hall.

‘I'm so sorry,’ Jasper began when Salvador had closed the door, but he was waved to silence.

‘How were you to know we'd have saboteurs running around today?’ Salvador sat down, and began picking at the worn leather chair. ‘Bloody Harbinger! I thought we were past all this...

‘What does the boy know?’

‘Sam? About us? Nothing. After what happened in Zimbabwe, we've tried to let him enjoy his childhood. I know other parents drip feed the truth to their children, but he's been through enough already.’

Salvador swirled the brandy. ‘I may have a solution to that. Bring Sam to the college at the end of his school term.’

‘What? Why?’

‘The Council has been debating a new project for some time, an apprenticeship of sorts. It may prove the perfect introduction for your son. We’re becoming too reliant upon the gadgets and gizmos. Need to start training younger students in the old ways. Go back to basics.’

‘The boy seems bright, athletic and has certainly showed some stomach today. He could be a perfect candidate to help us shake things up.’

Jasper spluttered. ‘It was more like dumb luck. He's barely fifteen. I was nineteen when I went through my Induction, and I scarcely coped. What about his regular schooling?’

‘This will only last for the summer and is nothing like a full Induction. It’s important to assess their skills early. We’re not all cut out to be Paladins. But he may be.’ Salvador managed to hide his smile as he saw Jasper flinch. Vanity was his favourite sin.

Jasper paused. ‘You think he has that potential?’

‘Who knows? But if today’s anything to go by....’

Jasper chewed his lip, childhood dreams of fame and glory rising with narcotic charm.

‘Then it’s settled. But in the meantime, we need to find out what our “guests” were up to and if anything was taken. Keep me posted.’



* * *

Heat. Oppressive, burning heat. Sam rolled over, away from it.

Screaming.

Someone was shouting his name. A disturbance sent to interrupt his pleasant dream.

Smoke. Caustic fumes, filling his lungs. Choking him. Sam coughed and his eyes shot open.

‘Sammy!’ His twin sister was shaking him, her eyes wide.

‘Soph,’ he coughed again, ‘what’s wrong? What’s going on?’

‘I don’t know,’ she cried. ‘I heard shouting. Everything’s burning. Sammy, I’m scared!’ Sooty tears were streaming down her face.

There was smoke everywhere. Sliding under the door, puffing past the ill-fitting window frame, even seeping through the thatched roof.

Sam felt sick. He remembered the burnt colour of the African sky the day before. Dark, angry clouds that smothered the horizon. His father had assured them they were safe, that the Research Station was of no interest to the rebels; yet most of the labourers had left days ago, carrying everything they could manage.

There was more shouting. Harsh voices. His mother was screaming their names.

Sam grabbed his sister, pulling the blankets from their bed and draping one over her.

‘Soph, we need to get out. Put your hand over your mouth and stay under the blanket!’ He wrapped a blanket around himself before giving the door a tug. The handle was hot and he snatched his hand back, cursing.

He tried again using the corner of the blanket. Behind him, Sophie’s sobs grew louder.

A wall of heat from the corridor burst in.

‘Come on!’ He shielded his sister, heading for their parents’ bedroom.

‘Mummy!’ he shouted. Five years old and so very frightened. ‘*DADDYYYYY!*’

There was an awful splitting sound as the roof gave way. Sam pulled Sophie past, propelling her toward safety.

A beam fell between them, spewing molten thatch.

‘Sophie!’ He screamed, losing sight of her. ‘Quick, open their door, get inside!’

‘Sammy!’ Her voice was desperate. Scared and alone.



They had never been apart. They'd shared a womb and everything since. He leapt forward, swatting the pyre.

Strong arms swept him up and away from the flames. 'Come, we need to get out.' The man's voice was muffled, a wet rag over his mouth.

'No!' Sam writhed, kicking free, clawing at the smoking wreckage separating him from the other half of his heart. The blanket caught and a fresh crest of flames devoured his arm.

Sam screamed. The man found him again, relentless, pulling him back.

'Sammy!' He heard his sister's voice for the last time. 'Don't leave me!'

Sam sat up in bed, drenched in sweat. Heart pounding.

There was no smoke. No fire. Only the most bitter of memories.

His head hurt. Usually, it was just his heart.

His tongue had died and begun rotting in his mouth.

'I hate you, beer,' he cursed.

Bleary eyed, he squinted at the clock. It was a little after three. He flopped back, whimpering.

The movie premiere had been a welcome distraction. As had Sam's first adventure into alcohol, but he had predictably overdone it.

'There's no way!' His mother's voice drifted up the stairs. 'I don't care, he's only fourteen—'

'Fifteen!' both he and his father retorted from different rooms.

'Only just! And I want to know more! An apprenticeship is it? You can't just throw him in the deep end. Do you even remember *your* induction?'

There was a sullen silence. 'It's just for the summer. D'Angelo said he has Paladin potential!'

His mother swore. 'Are you honestly that gullible? You're allowing your own childhood fantasies to obscure the fact you're talking about putting our son through an ordeal that most adult candidates struggle with. Even if it's a watered-down version, I'm just not having it, Jasper...' A door slammed and their voices became incomprehensible.

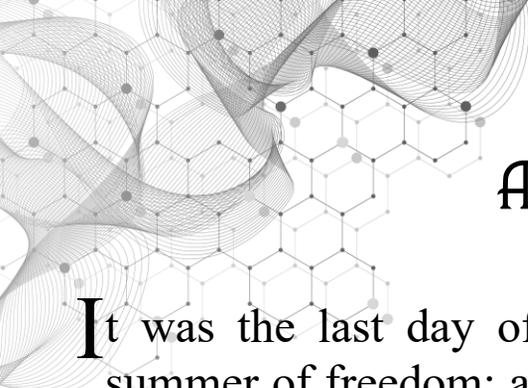
Sam knew he should be curious, and probably even concerned about what he'd just heard, but his gut was still bubbling like a volcano and it took all his concentration not to vomit. He needed water but couldn't move. He shut his eyes to stop the room spinning.

A voice drifted into his head, as another smoke-infested bout of sleep rose to claim him.

Still, dead men and all that. Goodbye.



Chapter 4



A FROSTY WELCOME

It was the last day of term. The beginning of a summer of freedom; and it flew by with very little work being done.

Sam watched the children flow past him in chattering packs, exchanging plans to explore far-flung destinations and enjoy sun-drenched sojourns abroad.

His new group of friends were no different. Mullins was heading to Ibiza. Again. Flynn Oliver's family were 'doing' South America, the adventure of a lifetime, and no one seemed able to top that.

'We're just going back to India again!' Sanjay looked crestfallen.

'What about you, Van Sandt?' Big Col asked. 'Off to Africa? Lions, tigers and all that.'

'Tigers are endemic to central Asia,' Adam Pinnyswood piped up from beyond the group's periphery.

Big Col flicked a crust of sandwich in his direction.

Sam shrugged. 'Don't know yet. Dad's been M.I.A all week. Something kicked off at the office and he's barely been home since.'

All eyes were on him in an instant.

‘Go on, then!’ Mullins prodded him. ‘Spill the beans, you git!’

‘Robbery.’ Sam could not help himself. ‘Armed.’

‘No. Way!’

‘Yup. Can't say any more than that, I'm afraid.’

Big Col punched him in the shoulder. ‘You nob. Details now!’

‘Well, all I know is that they broke in, killed a guard and made off with something Top Secret.’

Sam tried not to think of the twisted body on the blood-stained floor.

‘Wooah...’

‘Yup, serious stuff.’

The minute hand had at last marched past fifty-nine and the bell rang, releasing them from the oppressive yoke of learning for six glorious weeks.

The goodbyes were varied. Some emphatic, others fleeting. A few girls fought tears. Adam Pinnyswood cried openly.

Victoria was off to France with her uncle. ‘I'll miss you.’ She pressed close to Sam, her green eyes smiling, full of mischief.

‘Of course, you will, I'm quite the catch.’ That earned him a dig in the ribs, then a fleeting kiss before she turned tail.

For a moment the weight of old and new events lifted and he grinned at her retreating form.

Summer! He looked up at a rare blue expanse. It lacked the golden depth of an African sky, but then there was no sickly black smoke either. Sam's scars throbbed. His heart began to pound and his vision blurred. *Sammy, don't leave me!*

A hooter beeped, and he looked down, blinking. The twins waved wildly from the car and Chloe yipped from the boot, snot and saliva splattering all the windows.

He smiled, forcing his worries away, and decided it was going to be a great summer.

The barbeque popped indecisively, then roared into action.

Standing as far from the flames as possible, Sam waved the tongs, his eyes watering. No matter where he stood, the smoke blew *right* into his face.

This was his father's job and no way to treat his trauma! Sodding fire.

It was early evening and, for once, rain had not soured a Saturday. The flames raced across the coal bags and another sneaky puff of smoke caught him unawares. Coughing, Sam retreated, swearing at length. His mother's phone rang and Chloe barked.

‘Quiet!’ the twins scolded, mimicking their mother as they ran around the garden.

His father was at work. Again. Sam was certain he was avoiding him. Hardly what Sam needed, after everything that had happened.

He had tried to talk to his mother about it, but was told to put his imagination to better use and instead entertain his sisters with the stories of floating robots and funny windows.

‘Your father’s on the way.’ Angie Van Sandt leant out of the window, phone pressed against her chest. ‘So, don’t put the meat on yet.’

‘Goodie, goodie!’ The twins raced onto the patio. Chloe chased them, snapping at their heels and sending them into fits of mock panic. They dashed across the lawn and dived into the Wendy house. Chloe leapt up at them, barking plaintively.

‘Becky, Amy,’ Sam said, ‘don’t tease her, it’s not nice.’

‘Girls, come wash your hands,’ their mother called.

Chloe knew what that meant and deserted her quarry, racing inside to continue her never-ending quest for food.

After sizzling steak, juicy chops, sausage, corn and jacket potatoes, all smothered in garlic butter, they were all well and truly stuffed.

Sam burped. ‘Excuse me,’ he managed before a hiccup quickly followed. The twins giggled.

‘Come on, girls, help Mummy with your plates, please.’ Angie wiped the ice cream from their fingers before handing each a dish.

‘How was the audit?’ Sam asked his father, who had arrived only a little late for the meal.

Jasper looked surprised. ‘Good. Very good, in fact. 98% for the third year in a row. Finished this morning. Takes a while to get through two hundred and seventy-two floors.’

‘Seventy-three.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Nothing.’ Sam muttered, wondering how long his parents would continue to act as though he was stupid.

His father rested his fork. ‘Look, I know we’ve not had a chance to talk yet, about what happened—’

‘How's Harold?’

Jasper looked away.

Sam couldn't let the opportunity go. ‘Spilt soup? I guess the book he was reading spontaneously combusted in his lap?’

Silence.

How typical!

‘Why’d you even take me there, if you’re going to treat me like a child?’

‘I thought you worked in some dreary basement, stamping *Approved* or *Denied* on boring patents. But no, there's Speedlifts, magic windows, and a flying robot with an inferiority complex – oh, and did I mention the dead body? Never mind the maniac who attacked me on a level of your ‘office’ that you and your smarmy boss say doesn’t even bloody *exist!*’ Sam was standing now, shouting at his father, all his suppressed fear and anxiety boiling to the surface.

His mother bundled the gaping twins inside and closed the door.

‘I’m sorry,’ Jasper said, staring at the chipped stone paving. ‘I just wanted you to be proud of me. I saw the way you looked when I got up in front of your class. You were embarrassed, Sam. Ashamed that I wasn’t a rich executive or hot shot lawyer, but there’s so much you don't know...’ His voice trailed off and he shook his head. ‘I thought a few fancy inventions and a bit of mystery might change things. I had no intention of throwing you into all... that.’

‘But tomorrow,’ he looked up, ‘tomorrow will start to explain things.’

‘Your mother doesn’t approve and I must admit I’m less than thrilled by the prospect, but now you know that there’s something to know, well,’ he ventured a half smile, ‘you can’t put the crap back in the cat, can you?’

Sam managed a half laugh. His father was rarely crude. The tension between them lessened. ‘Sorry. I just felt like I was going to explode and there’s no one I can talk to about this. Even Mum thinks I’m nuts.’

‘That’s okay, she’s used to it, living with me!’

‘I do have a question for you.’ Sam was determined to get at least one answer from his father.

Jasper looked wary. ‘What?’ he asked, gathering the remaining plates.

‘That robot, Flic, said it was self-aware. Artificial Intelligence?’

‘That’s right.’

‘You’ve seen the movies, isn’t that a bad idea, won’t they get tired of taking orders and turn on us? Judgement Day and all that?’

Jasper laughed. ‘If you knew how many times I’ve heard that. Our A.I. aren’t slaves, Sam. They’re helpers. We don’t order them to do anything. They’re designed with a role in mind and performing that duty is elective.’

‘Take Flic, for example, the job we do at the archives is one that serves the greater good and that’s what any intelligent life form wants – peace, harmony, the protection of knowledge. Flic doesn’t simply do a job a human is too lazy to do; she does the job many humans would be needed to do. She’s quicker, better and far more efficient. Just ask her!’

Sam forced a weak smile.

‘It’s a symbiotic relationship.’ His father assured him.

‘Hmm.’ Sam could see the logic but remained dubious about the potential of an army of flying robots. He could not help but wonder what other secrets his father was keeping from him.

Sundays at *Arthur’s Rest* were usually lazy days. Sam could enjoy a little longer in bed, woken by the scent of cinnamon and coffee creeping up the stairs. It was the day of the Sunday papers, endless cartoons, online gaming, rich leftovers for Chloe and a brief reprieve for Sam from his parents. It had something for everyone.

This Sunday was different. It would be a day of answers. Sam was already up and dressed.

Jasper popped his head around the bathroom door. He was dressed in jeans and a checked shirt, a thick jacket hung over his arm.

‘Bring your winter coat.’

Sam peered through the window at the sun-drenched lawn. There was not a cloud in the sky.

‘You're kidding? It's going to be twenty-five. I'm in shorts and sliders all the way.’

His father looked vexed. ‘Trainers or boots would be better. And make sure it's a warm jacket.’

Four bulky guards now lurked in the white tiled lobby. Harold, it seemed, was yet to recover. ‘I guess it's hard to bounce back from a bout of being dead,’ Sam muttered, eyeing the men.

If his father heard the barb, he ignored it.

Two of the guards flanked the lift and the others stood on either side of the room. They wore long black and purple coats with a small silver badge on the collar, gloved hands folded over their stomachs.

‘Well, well,’ sneered one of the guards near the lift as Sam and his father approached. ‘Van Sandt! Been a while. How's the leg?’

Jasper's hand instinctively strayed to his right thigh.

‘It’s fine, Greeves. I see you’re still battling the functional end of a razor. Did you finally get kicked out of Prague? There can’t be many stations left that will have you.’

The man mountain chuckled, a nasty humourless rasp. ‘After your buddy Eindhoven went rogue, the Council assigned the grownups to guard your dusty hovel.’ He looked around with disdain. ‘Trust me, I’m no more pleased by it than you are.’

Jasper's face was ashen. ‘It was Eindhoven? But he nearly killed Sam!’

‘Ha! You didn't know!’ Greeves gloated. ‘Priceless! Your finger was always fumbling for the pulse, Van Sandt. Wasn’t he best man at your wedding? Classic!’ His gaze drifted to Sam.

Greeves did not have what one could call a pleasant face. His nose was bulbous and misshapen, a purple hue to its tip and edges. His eyes were too close together and the massive jaw that jutted from his skull was covered in coarse stubble, trying to hide a long scar that stretched from chin to ear.

‘This your boy?’

Sam could feel sweat trickle down his spine.

‘Got more to him than you do, Van Sandt. Must get that from his mother. How is the lovely Angelique? Talk about punching above your weight!’

The guard closest to Sam left his post at this point. 'Wher'to, Jasper?' The man's accent had the musical twang of the Caribbean. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Greeves, he was of equal size, with dark skin and thick dreadlocks.

Sam noticed his eyes were a striking hazel, flecked with dots of green and grey.

'The College, please, Abiwe.'

Greeves let out a scoff. 'The Invisible College? Why?' He indicated Sam with a curt nod. 'He's not old enough, what business you got there?'

'Tha's enough, man!' Abiwe snapped. He turned to Jasper when the lift door opened. 'I'm afraid, giv'n the current situation, you 'ave to go tru Shen Pi.'

Jasper nodded. 'We've brought jackets.'

'Jus' jackets? The password is "Sandcastle". Som egghead's idea of a joke, I tink.'

'Sandcastle.' Jasper nodded. 'Greeves.'

The man said nothing, however Sam noticed his middle finger made heavy work of scratching his neck when they passed.

'You may want to put that on now.' Sam's father pointed at his jacket.

A second later, the lift door slid open and an arctic blast of air rushed in carrying thick snow, whipping and swirling around them.

Sam stood dumbstruck staring out at the high white mountains before them, whilst his father zipped his coat up to his chin and stuffed his arms into deep pockets.

‘Come on.’ Frost was already forming on his glasses. ‘Stay behind me and – whatever you do – don't turn around!’

Despite the brief blast of snowy air, none appeared to be falling on the mountain, which glistened under the starry sky. Ignoring the only piece of advice he had been given, Sam turned around and nearly suffered a heart attack.

There was no lift behind him.

No door.

In fact, there was nothing behind him. Well, not for several thousand feet at least, for two strides away, the ground vanished into darkness.

He panicked and lurched into his father's back, sending the pair tumbling to the ground.

‘Sam!’ came the muffled remonstrations; Jasper's head and shoulders were buried in the snow.

‘Are you lost, stranger?’ a voice asked.

Sam looked up at a dark shape looming over them, blotting out the stars. One became several shapes, fur-hooded men now stood between them and safety.

The newcomers held long staffs with heavily-studded points touching the snow. Curved blades swung from their hips and a long strip of cloth was wound around each face.

‘The Guardians of Shen Pi,’ his father said, as if it would mean something to Sam. Jasper tried to rise.

Seven swords slid from their scabbards, flashing in the moonlight.

‘Please, do not move again.’

Sam's stomach tightened, the tips of several blades less than an inch from his face.

‘We, The Few— Wait, that’s not it... Sandcastle!’ Jasper shouted, hunched over on sodden ground. ‘Sandcastle, damn it, Jen Si!’

The swords slid into their sheaths and Sam was lifted to his feet.

‘My apologies, Mr Van Sandt.’ Jen Si’s voice could have come from any of the hoods. ‘But I’m sure you appreciate the necessity for caution.’

‘I do, I do.’

All but one of the guards retreated, joining a row of men who formed an ominous corridor leading toward the summit. As they passed, Sam was surprised to see that every other man was, in fact, a statue.

Each stony sentinel carried a burning torch or a short bow, their arrows knocked and ready to be drawn, others held supple throwing spears. The real warriors were so still it was hard to tell man from carving.

In every direction, the horizon bristled with snow-capped peaks. The wind whipped across the lip of the summit in swirling charges. As it rose toward the peak, the outcrop widened to create an avenue, leading to a stone fortress set into the mountain.

Taking a torch from the nearest statue, the man called Jen Si led them toward the stronghold. It was no fairy-tale castle, rather a squat, solid series of interlinked buildings, slathered in snow and ice. It was foreboding.

Sam could just make out a pair of carved dragons guarding the entrance, weathered claws extended, their faces sculpted into a perpetual snarl. Beyond them, the dark maw of the forecastle awaited. Two battered wooden doors stood off their hinges, thick drifts piled against them.

Sam felt yet more questions amassing. ‘Where are we? And just how the hell did we get *here*?’

‘Speedlift, of course. Shen Pi is a monastery in the Himalayas.’

Sam's socks were sodden and squelched with every step. His feet were starting to freeze. It was all getting too much. 'Dad, my head is about to explode! What is The Invisible College?

'We're going to head office, the birthplace of The Royal Society and so much more before it. But to get there, we have to come here first.'

'Oh.' Sam replied. His toes were almost numb and the thin air was making him feel lightheaded. This adventure was rapidly losing its appeal.

They passed the wrecked doors and walked into still shadows. Sharp slivers of ice hung from the ceiling of a long tunnel, catching the light of the torch. A series of narrow slits were spaced at regular intervals along the walls.

'For archers,' his father supplied as he noticed Sam's interest. 'This is the only way in or out. In the olden days, guards would have sat behind these walls, armed with crossbows and throwing spears.'

Sam peered into the small voids, imagining malevolent eyes staring back.

'What happened to the doors?'

'They've always been that way,' Jen Si said. 'They're bait to lure attackers into this tunnel. There's a hidden door that rolls into place, preventing any retreat.'

Sam swallowed but said nothing.

The corridor narrowed and the proximity of the walls was oppressive by the time they arrived at an intact door of stained timbers. It was steel bound and heavily studded. Sam noticed the walls on either side of it were also perforated, although these holes were at floor level.

‘And what are those ones for?’

‘Oil. Vats of pitch could be poured down them making it very difficult for any enemy that made it this far to maintain a stable footing.’ He raised the torch, revealing blackened stone around the door. ‘It’s also flammable.’

Sam felt a rush of warm air when the door swung in and Jen Si led his visitors into the heart of the monastery.

* * *

Ms Keller was no longer amused.

Progress had been too slow and failure rife. The stench of it frustrated her. Three of her four pawns had been removed from the board, the late (and far from great) Mr Eindhoven, being the most recent. She now had but one tiny seed from which to harvest success. And it was proving a hard nut to crack.

Flattery, bribery, blackmail and extortion, she had applied all without success. It was time to go back to basics. Good old-fashioned fear.

The person opposite her was enduring a great deal of that right now, and had suffered for several hours. Fear, she imagined, would be a welcome relief from pain.

‘Of course, if you continue to refuse, we will never harm you again. In fact, we’ll even keep you alive when you’d otherwise wither. Your family, however, will always suffer. And you will watch. Taking in every detail, creating beautiful, enduring memories to cherish during the long life I will make sure you live. Am I making myself clear?’

Her victim was slow to reply, sweat drenched and shuddering from the Capsaicin gas, from relentless and untold agony. Burning from the inside out.

She used it as an encouragement in the interludes between their little chats, to keep the mind focused.

‘Yes.’ It was barely a whisper.

‘Good.’ She smiled. ‘I trust we’ve reached an accord?’

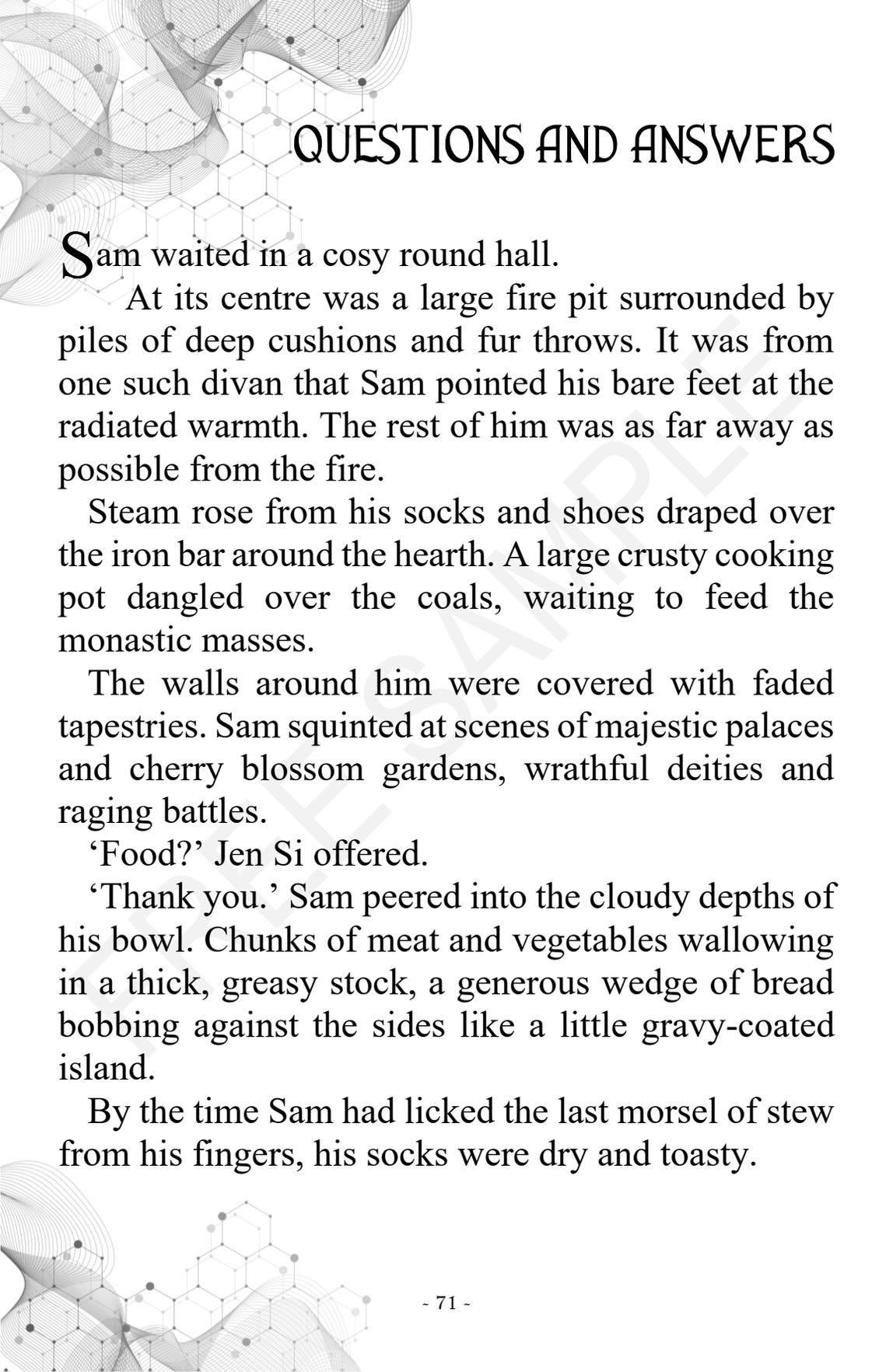
The figure nodded, head slumping.

‘Excellent.’ Ms Keller rose, smoothing the front of her crimson silk blouse, nails painted a perfect jet black. ‘You have a month. Two at the most. After that, well, I’m sure you can imagine.’

She turned and left the room, heels clicking a steely march.



Chapter 5



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Sam waited in a cosy round hall.

At its centre was a large fire pit surrounded by piles of deep cushions and fur throws. It was from one such divan that Sam pointed his bare feet at the radiated warmth. The rest of him was as far away as possible from the fire.

Steam rose from his socks and shoes draped over the iron bar around the hearth. A large crusty cooking pot dangled over the coals, waiting to feed the monastic masses.

The walls around him were covered with faded tapestries. Sam squinted at scenes of majestic palaces and cherry blossom gardens, wrathful deities and raging battles.

‘Food?’ Jen Si offered.

‘Thank you.’ Sam peered into the cloudy depths of his bowl. Chunks of meat and vegetables wallowing in a thick, greasy stock, a generous wedge of bread bobbing against the sides like a little gravy-coated island.

By the time Sam had licked the last morsel of stew from his fingers, his socks were dry and toasty.

His shoes, though a little damp, were dry enough, and with a burp he fell in behind his father, following their host from the hall.

The décor of the monastery was sparse and, in most cases, barely functional. They passed dark, dreary chambers furnished only with thin mattresses and tattered blankets, and praying rooms with faded idols and stubby incense sticks. Finally, they reached a steep staircase near the rear of the complex. As they climbed, tiny portals in the wall provided Sam with a breath-taking view of the moonlit mountains.

Their ascent ended at a small landing, where a lone door rattled against its latch. Strong gusts of wind whistled around the tower and the door flapped open, revealing the torches of the guards far below. Confused, Sam realised there was no room on the other side. Why had they come to the top of the tower, if there was nowhere to go?

Neither his father nor Jen Si seemed perturbed by this fact. Their guide produced a small stone amulet on a string before sitting down on the last step. Murmuring what sounded like a prayer, he pressed the carving between his palms.

Sam looked up at his father who was chewing a fingernail.

Jen Si finished the incantation, stood up and placed the amulet around Jasper's neck. Before Sam could draw breath, his father surged forward, giving the door a firm push, and stepped into the dark night sky, pulling his panic-stricken son behind him.

Instead of falling into an abyss, Sam's foot encountered carpet. The scream died in his throat and he fell to his knees.

Jasper turned and smiled down at his son, sweat glistening on his brow. 'There's a lot to be said for the modern age. The old way of doing things required a lot of faith.' He helped the boy stand.

A flying robot barely missed Sam's head.

'Sorry,' the saucer shaped body slowed slightly before humming off, 'didn't realise that door was still in use...'

Sam staggered back against it. The monastery and mountain had vanished. There was no rushing wind, no tower or wobbly door.

Jasper avoided another airborne messenger. 'We're here! The Invisible College! And you can finally have all your answers. Well, some at least; I imagine what you'll see here will only lead to a great deal more questions!' He removed the amulet then placed it in a box on a three-legged table beside the door and began fussing with his collar.

Sam reached for the box to examine the amulet, but it was empty. He closed the lid, and opened it again. Still empty.

‘Of course it is.’ He gave up and turned his attention to the College.

They were standing at the foot of an enormous curved staircase that wound around a large classical stone statue of a man. On either side of the hall, a row of metal doors swished open and closed. People hurried in and out of them carrying papers and books, the odd bulky scroll or long tube tucked under their arm. Some paced in pairs or clustered in tight groups, heads bent in conversation.

Sam gawped at robots of all shapes, sizes and colours which buzzed, bobbed and weaved between the crowds, their soft neon lights pulsing hypnotically.

They hummed up and down the colossal statue, an old man in a toga and sandals.

‘Herredrion,’ Jasper supplied. ‘The first of our Order, first of “The Few”.’

‘The who? What Order?’ Sam was trying to soak up every detail, ‘I thought you worked for the Patent Office, or The Royal Society? God, Dad, I’m so confused!’

‘You’re right, I do, but they’re both a part of something far older and larger, serving a much wider purpose.’ Jasper gazed up at the idol.

Sam waited. ‘Which is...?’

‘To protect humanity from itself.’

‘I don’t understand?’

‘I’ll let Ruben explain it. Come on.’ With a neat side-step, Jasper avoided a group of women in green uniforms and headed for the stairs.

Floor after floor, Sam tried to peer down the corridors as they ascended. Each level of the atrium was a hive of activity. He was fascinated by the array of weird and wonderful robots, not to mention several unidentifiable creations roaming the halls.

He hurried to catch his father, his attention having been snared by something that looked suspiciously like a floating carpet, two levels down. ‘So where exactly are we now?’

‘You mean where is the College?’

‘Yes.’

His father shrugged. ‘Everywhere. This hall is simply a meeting of corridors, a bit like an anthill, except every room is located somewhere else; the thresholds are portals, much like the Speedlifts. You can access a thousand rooms from here, spread all over the world. It’s truly amazing, hence the name.

‘There are many Far Sight windows, as well, of course, like those in Mr D’Angelo’s office. And,’ he indicated the cloudless sky far above them, ‘a rumour has it that the atrium ceiling is the largest Far Sight window ever built.’

Sam suddenly felt a tad claustrophobic. ‘That’s not the real sky?’

Jasper left the staircase at the penultimate level, and stopped in front of two gothic doors. ‘Here we are, the Old Library.’

On the opposite side of the atrium a set of shiny new doors stood open, admitting a constant flow of traffic.

‘That’s the new library.’ Jasper explained.

The staircase made one final curving ascent to a landing behind the head of the statue. Sam could now make out the man’s long, bristling beard, fierce eyes and bushy brows. His forehead was furrowed and in his arms, he also carried a bundle of scrolls.

The boy peered up at two guards in purple and black coats who stood either side of the banister.

‘What’s up there?’ Sam stretched onto his toes.

‘That’s the Chamber of the Council.’

‘Let me guess – through another magic door behind the statue’s head?’

‘Yup!’ The old library doors gave a protesting groan.

‘Now in here you’ll find Ruben. He’s going to answer some of your questions,’ Jasper lowered his voice, ‘tends to go on a bit though, so be ...’ he made a pincer movement with fingers and thumb, ‘concise. I’ll be back later. Enjoy!’

The Old Library was indeed old. The floor was a mirage of faded chequered tiles. Two crescent desks near the door were piled high with papers, dusty green glass lamps illuminating the laden counters. Row upon row of columns supported a vaulted honeycombed ceiling. A huge, discoloured map covered the wall to Sam’s right. A globe, taller than the average person, rested in a cradle below it, rotating slowly. As he drew closer, Sam was amazed to see tiny clouds floating above the three-dimensional landscape, turquoise seas and blue-black oceans rippling in the light of its own little sun.

‘That’s one of my favourite pastimes.’ A rusty voice took him by surprise. ‘I’ve spent hours watching typhoons and hurricanes ravage this poor little orb. Even saw a volcano erupt once.

‘It’s the only hologram I allow in here. A real-time projection of the Earth, collecting data from every satellite in orbit.’

Sam turned to find a short man regarding him, his hands clasped over a stout tummy, fingers wiggling. Wire spectacles balanced on the end of his button nose.

‘Ruben?’

‘That I am. Da Vinci. And a direct descendant! Though our family tended this library long before Leonardo put us on the map. Ha, map!’ He pointed at the faded one on the wall, with a chuckle. ‘Very bright chap. Of course, most of his truly inspiring works never saw the light of day. All squirrelled away in here, or the archives. You’ve been there? Well, there’s no fancy Farnsworth thingamajig flying around and making a mess in here. Oh no! Had one, briefly. Archimedes, they called it. Gone now. There’s loads over there though,’ he flapped his arm in the direction of the new library. ‘Full of gadgets and gizmos. But in here,’ he beamed at his dusty empire, ‘we do things the old-fashioned way. If you want the important information, you’ll find it in here.’ He paused, smiling.

Sam looked at the man, not sure if he’d finished or if Ruben expected applause. Perhaps he was just drawing breath to continue.

He continued. ‘To business then! The others are waiting. Come, come.’

Picking up a thick book, the librarian huffed and puffed up a stout spiral staircase to an alcove set between the columns, where several mismatched leather chairs were arranged around a coffee table; discoloured lamps of various shapes and sizes were also dotted around the landing.

Sam noticed that three of the seats were already occupied.

‘Please.’ Ruben pointed him toward an empty chair.

To Sam’s left sat a tall boy with short hair and muscled arms. He was easily as large as Big Col, without the mischievous look. He regarded Sam’s arrival impassively, arms folded.

Beside him, an old squat red armchair appeared to have almost swallowed its occupant. In it sat a much smaller boy with pale skin and mousy hair. His hands were folded in his lap and he sat bolt upright, blinking. He did venture a smile and Sam winked back.

To Sam’s right a girl sat with her back to him, her long legs draped over the arm of the chair as she stared up at the ceiling. Her long hair was blonde and she had skin the colour of honey.



‘Right.’ Ruben took a seat and called their attention, resting a tome across his generous thighs. His feet did not reach the floor.

‘Forget everything you think you know. This requirement has changed the lives of countless young men and women over the centuries, and the instruction forms the opening speech of every Induction. So, fitting, I thought, to begin with these words today. You will now find that the impossible is, in most cases, possible, and that things you never thought probable, do exist.

‘Accept that and you’re halfway to understanding our world.’ He beamed at them excitedly. ‘Who knows the history of the Order of The Few?’

Sam was relieved when the small boy with the mousy hair quickly raised his hand.

Ruben's day was complete. ‘Excellent! Giuseppe, is it?’

‘I prefer Joe.’

Sam thought the boy could be Italian.

‘Of course, of course. And do you know, Veronique? Fedor?’ He looked at the others, but both shook their heads. ‘Sam?’

‘Um, I thought that’s why we’re here.’

Veronique smirked and Fedor gave a snort.

‘Yes, yes,’ Ruben waved his hands, ‘just wanted to see where I needed to start.’

‘How about at the beginning?’ Fedor suggested. Russian, Sam guessed from his accent.

The poor librarian was not used to dealing with moody teens and appeared crestfallen by their reaction. Sam watched him fuss with the book in his lap, picking at the cover.

Joe tossed Ruben a lifeline. ‘My grandfather told me that the Order started long before the Crusades.’

‘Yes, yes. Very good. Herredrion was, in fact, a philosopher and inventor in the time of Homer, a thousand years before the birth of Christ. He’s said to have come from across the seas and the first account we could find of him, outside our own records, of course, was at the downfall of Troy. Such was his humble nature, he kept no account of himself, for he lived to serve a simple purpose: to preserve and protect knowledge.

He carried with him a book, and gathered all manner of secrets in it. Mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, engineering, he sought to catalogue and preserve them all in the hope that they could be used to uplift and better our world.’

‘Must have been a big book,’ Fedor said.



‘Well, the majority were recorded on scrolls,’ Ruben admitted. ‘He saved the most important finds for his book. But these were troubled times and word soon spread of this mystical book that held, it was said, the secret to life itself. He gathered many followers, but those who wished to wrest these secrets from him also sought Herredrion and he was forced to flee. The faithful few who followed him into exile swore to protect the book, and so the Order of The Few was born. Over time it developed other names, branches and divisions. Some eminent, such as The Rosicrucian and The Royal Society, others. . .’ he paused, curbing his tongue, ‘were darker and more secretive.’ He scratched the arm of his chair with his fingernail. ‘Do you know what makes the Order so special?’

‘Service is hereditary and exclusive,’ Joe said. ‘Only the descendants of Herredrion’s Few can serve.’

‘Close. Only direct descendants can serve in the field. However, the world soon became a much larger place and we were forced to make use of outsiders in a controlled manner. The work they do is compartmentalised. The Cadres, however, are all of the Blood.’

Sam was becoming intrigued by this bedtime story.

‘Cadres?’

‘Teams who serve in the field. Each Cadre has four members: Readers are the academics with a capacity to store vast amounts of knowledge. Charlatans are the team chameleons. They spy, cheat and steal; brilliant at retrieving information. Juggernauts provide the muscle, of course. And finally, each Cadre has a Paladin, a “Glory Hound”.’ He smiled. ‘They lead the Cadre, and are the strategists, possessing guile and cunning – and diplomacy when needs must.’

The boys were grinning. This was interesting.

Veronique spoke for the first time. ‘Sounds a little sexist?’ Like Joe, her accent was light, and Sam thought he detected a French lilt.

Ruben looked shocked. ‘Not at all, my dear. Most Cadres have a female Reader, Charlatan or Paladin. I even think there have been a few female Juggernauts, though not many, mind. We cast no favour upon sex, creed, or colour, I can assure you. All of the Blood are equal.’

She nodded. Her blue eyes strayed to Sam and he looked away quickly.

‘Where was I?’ Ruben paused. ‘Oh, yes. The Order was started with the purpose of protecting Herredrion's book.’

‘He witnessed what humanity had become capable of at the fall of Troy, and knew that more power would only goad us into far worse. So, The Few began collecting and hiding any advancement which, in the wrong hands, had the potential to unleash destruction and chaos. As their treasure grew, so did their power, and The Invisible College was built. The Cadres evolved from necessity and over the centuries, The Order grew to encompass every continent.

‘We monitored all the great inventors, such as Sir Christopher Wren, Tesla, Faraday, Edison, Curie, Einstein – they were the real cause for concern, and we even inducted a few into the Order. Or “The Honourable Order of Inventors”, as Wren liked to call it. Most came to understand that just because something could be invented, did not mean it should. Unfortunately, ethics and social responsibility often take a back seat in moments of genius.

‘Of course, we’re not always successful. Things have slipped through: gunpowder, the cannon, the gun, mustard gas, Agent Orange, the atomic bomb – dare I say, the Internet. But, for each of those cataclysms, we were able to prevent hundreds of others, and so our purpose has remained to protect humanity and the world around us.’

‘What other things?’ Sam was now itching with curiosity.

Ruben rubbed his chin. ‘Well, you have the Forbidden Inventions. There’s invisibility, shrinking and time travel. We use some of the less risky secrets ourselves, of course. As you have, too. Every Speedlift and door in the College is a wormhole. We can bend time and space to bring two places together, punch through and *voila*, a portal! And the Elixir of Youth formed the basis for our CarboSilicone technology. But the Forbidden inventions are too dangerous, and there are some which will never even be opened, simply catalogued and sealed in the depths of Herredrion’s Belly for all time.’

‘Wow!’ Joe was impressed, and also intrigued by the mystery of the Forbidden. ‘But what’s Herredrion’s Belly?’

‘It’s a nickname for the archive inside our founder’s statue. It can only be reached through the Council Chamber and is heavily guarded.’

‘So why are we here?’ Fedor asked. ‘My brothers are Juggernauts, as is my father. They left home at eighteen, not fifteen.’

‘Quite right.’ Ruben wiggled and adjusted his glasses. ‘Each household of the Blood is required to dedicate at least one child to the Order.’

‘When they reach the age of eighteen, the candidate is brought to the College to go through an Induction, to see if they are fit for field service. If they fail, they join our support functions, otherwise, they are assigned a discipline and begin their field training. Only after that does their Cadre service begin.’

Joe looked worried. ‘But I’m only fourteen...’

‘Yeah,’ Sam lamented. ‘This sounds like fun, but I’ve got friends and school, then Uni. I doubt my parents would even sign off on a gap year, let alone secret agent training.’

‘You’re here because you have been chosen, Sam,’ the familiar voice of Mr D’Angelo came from behind them. ‘As have you all. And your parents have agreed to your participation.’

He was standing at the top of the stairs and approached them as he spoke. ‘You’ve heard some of the glory, the things we’ve achieved in the name of greater good.’ he prowled around the island of chairs. ‘*“We Few, we happy Few, we band of brothers; For he to-day that sheds his blood with me, shall be my brother...”* Do you know Shakespeare? With the light, must come the dark.

‘You see, Herredrion's legacy did not stay in Ancient Greece and, just like the tales of Jason's Fleece or Pandora's Box, the legend of the Book of Power grew.

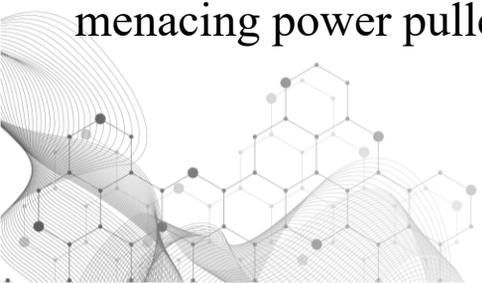
‘It was not long after, in a dark place, that another group was formed – the Harbingers.

‘Except they were not the philanthropic sort and they were many. These were greedy, malicious people, who would stop at nothing for power.

‘Over the centuries, they wormed their way into the company of mighty monarchs, whispering tales of a treasure that would raise the ruler upon high. Exalt him above all others.

‘They encouraged the Greeks to lay waste to Troy, urged Hannibal to cross the Alps and convinced the emperors of Rome to tear Europe apart; Genghis Khan’s conquest of Asia. Alexander the Great, even the Christian Crusades – all have searched for Herredrion’s book. The Spanish Inquisition, the British and Dutch, even the Vikings scoured the globe for it.

‘None were more single-minded than the Nazis, who plunged the world into two wars in their quest for power. But in the shadows, as always, a far more menacing power pulled their strings.’



‘Ruben mentioned the Forbidden Inventions, those we have confiscated, but there are also the Hidden Inventions, inventors we didn’t reach in time or who refused to accept our cautious logic.

‘Entire Cadres are dedicated to scouring the world for these secrets and their creators, for if they fall into other hands the outcomes would be catastrophic.’ He stopped behind Sam and placed his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

‘And so, we prevail. Operating from the shadows, we continue to serve Herredrion's somewhat idealistic purpose and adapt it to the modern age. For times are indeed changing.’

He resumed pacing around the circle. ‘In the past hundred years, we have made more technological progress than in the previous thousand. Projects like the Fabulous Atoms initiative have allowed us to find and control many dangers. And it’s proven very successful, even more so with the rapid expansion of the Internet.

‘We own and operate some of the largest global technology companies and can actively influence the development of society, releasing helpful advancements and managing the dangerous ones. The Global Village has not always been a boon for it transformed the playing field instantly.

‘Now anyone can create a virus or an electromagnetic weapon that could send us back to the Dark Ages. And so, we’ve concentrated on steering global politics to challenge cybercrime and clandestine terrorist groups.

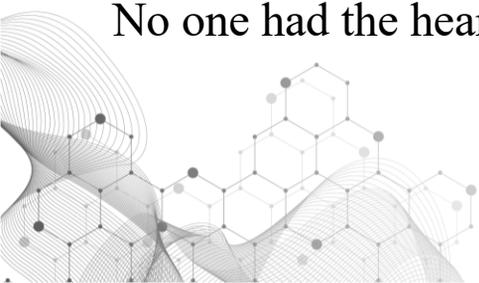
‘But in doing so, we’ve created a double-edged sword. We’ve focused on technology and become overly reliant upon it; and if we lost the ability to power these new wonders, we’d be helpless. So, we’ve designed a contingency plan, a different type of apprenticeship to create a new breed of field personnel, who will learn the skills of the Old Order before they tackle A.I., Earth Song networks, CarboSilicone implants, Far Sight cameras and Inertia Dampening Armour.

‘You four have been selected to take early training in Psychokinesis, Bugei Juhappan, Ethnobotany—’ He stopped behind Ruben. Four confused faces were staring at him. Salvador hated explanations. ‘You know nothing of the old skills?’

‘No, sorry,’ Sam apologised. The others nodded in agreement.

‘What do they teach you in school these days? I’m surprised you still learn Latin.’

No one had the heart to tell him they didn’t.



He drew a deep breath, ‘Psychokinesis – from the Greek word *psyche*, meaning mind or soul, and *kinesis* meaning movement – is the ability to control and, in certain cases, bend the world around you.’

‘Like at Shen Pi,’ Sam blurted.

‘Exactly. The monks are experts.’

‘*Bugei Juhappan*,’ Salvador continued, ‘is a Japanese term that refers to the eighteen skills studied by *Bushi*: swordsmanship, archery, unarmed combat, espionage, strategy, to name but a few.

‘And lastly, Ethnobotany: the study of plants and their qualities, which gives one the opportunity to create cocktails for every situation.

These are the types of skills missing from the modern Cadres. So, the Council selected four promising youngsters,’ he looked at each of them, ‘to complete a summer apprenticeship. You’ve been given the chance to become the first of a new generation.’

They all beamed back at him.

Vanity, he smiled, was still his favourite sin.

‘There is, however, an important condition. If you fail to pass the course, your family will not be able to remain in The Order, there is too much at stake.

Joe's eyes were wide and Fedor's frown had intensified; only Veronique kept complete composure.

'So, at the end of the six weeks, providing you passed,' he spread his arms wide, 'your skills will be put to the test against a modern Cadre at the annual CruciBowl tournament, held at The Inventors Fair!'

Sam had never heard of either event and his worried expression mirrored the others. Things had escalated quickly.

'Nothing too dangerous, I promise,' Mr D'Angelo assured them.

The potential recruits looked unconvinced and he chewed his lip thoughtfully. 'Perhaps I shall arrange for you to meet a few of the teams before The Inventors Fair. Your names will be on every tongue and all this before your Induction. You'll be famous!'

A million questions and concerns were on Sam's mind, but he managed a smile.

Pride! Mr D'Angelo suppressed a self-congratulatory grin. As sins went, it came a close second.

'Einstein once said, "*The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious, the source of all true art and science.*"



He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists. This knowledge, this feeling, is the centre of true."

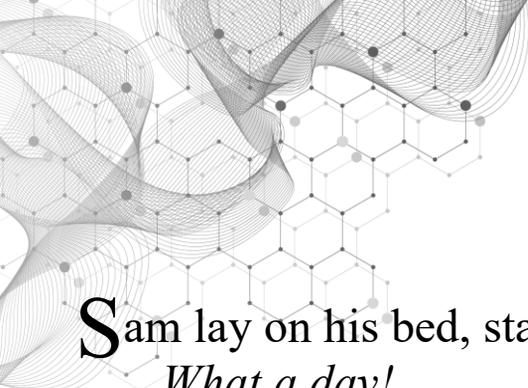
He stood back from the chair he had been leaning against. 'Will you take that journey, will you become one of The Few?'

Lost for words, Sam and the others simply nodded.

'Excellent! Ruben will inundate you with reading material and we'll see you back here on Monday.'



Chapter 6



NEW FACES

Sam lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling.
What a day!

He looked over at the pile of books on his desk. *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu, was on top. Below that, the faded green spine of a heftier book showed the title *Meditation and Psychokinesis: Practical Application* scrawled in flaking silver leaf. The Ethnobotany book at the bottom of the pile was even larger.

He had got some answers today, but as his father had predicted, they had only led to a load more questions. His mind was alight with excitement, confusion and doubt. The summer was going to prove very interesting.

* * *

Joe turned the last page of *Meditation and Psychokinesis*. He'd found it fascinating and had devoured it in hours.

The young Italian was a quick study and could recall every word, line and sentence he had ever read – verbatim.

Which was no small amount of information considering that he had been reading a book a day before most children had learned to walk.

Of the assigned books, only, *The Art of War* lay untouched. Joe had read it when he was eight and thought Joseph Marie Amiot's French translation to be closest to Sun Tzu's original text. His obsession with reading was part compulsion and part shield.

His books protected him from the outside world and today he felt like he needed more protection than ever.

If you fail, your family will not be able to remain in The Order...

With a grunt, he heaved the Ethnobotany digest onto his lap and once more allowed his curiosity to wash away the sense of foreboding.

Hours later, his mother nudged open the door to his father's study, carrying a tray. She set it down on the bed in a small clearing amidst the sea of books, and then tugged the curtains open, allowing the afternoon in. The view of Lake Como was stunning, and she could not help but sigh at the bright sails bobbing on the water, wishing her son were outside and not locked away in the book-lined mausoleum which had become his bedroom.

She sat on the chair beside Joe's bed, moving a strand of hair from under the frame of her son's glasses. 'Nonno says you had a good day?'

'Si! Very interesting. Huge library! *And* there is another one. I hope to see it soon, too.'

His mother gave a sad smile. 'Your father was the same. He spent more than half his life in this room, nose buried in a book. I had to leave notes between the pages, to remind him to eat.' She paused. 'He would be very proud of you.'

'I've read all his books now.' Joe patted a crimson cover beside his pillow, *Prestupleniye i Nakazaniye*. 'This was the last one.'

'Russian?'

'*Crime and Punishment*, by Dostoevsky. I can see why Papà liked it. It explains that your conscience can be far stricter than any physical punishment.'

'Oh, Joe. You're too *young* to be wallowing in such serious things. You should be outside! Playing, chasing girls, getting into trouble. We live in one of the most beautiful places on earth and you'd never know, for all the time you spend up here.'

'You want me to get into trouble?'



‘I just don't want life to pass you by while you read about other people's. Now tell me all about your day whilst you eat, and then you must agree to go outside for a while.’

Working the tray onto his lap, Joe began his account slowly.

Lake Como was beyond compare.

The water shimmered and the fairy tale shoreline of neat lawns, sculpted trees and graceful buildings were bathed in gold. Many of the world's most elite families called it home, and Joe's ancestors had lived there for countless centuries. It was the centre of his small universe. He stood on the balcony, looking out at the lake, the patio and garden lit by hundreds of tiny lanterns, flickering in the breeze.

‘Well, well, I see the Little Lord has left his tower.’

A familiar face grinned up at him from a hammock.

‘Very funny, Bella.’ He stuck out his tongue. ‘I didn't know you were here.’

The girl stretched. ‘Just popped in to bring some wine we found in the cellar, but that was over an hour ago. Would your Lordship care to go to the lake?’

Joe felt anxious whenever Isabella was about. ‘Okay.’ He managed to not squeak.

He paused before a mirror on the landing and gave his hair a quick check. Cleaning his glasses, he scurried through the kitchen and into the garden, his heart fit to thump through his chest.

Bella was a year his senior. She went to an all-girls school in Switzerland and now they only saw each other during holidays but, when they were children, they had been inseparable. Playing in the grounds, swimming in the lake and always scheming ways to wrest delights from the cook.

That was before his father died.

That summer Bella had returned from school a young woman and things had never been the same between them. He looked at her differently now, her long dark hair, olive skin and sparkling eyes, the same cheeky grin but more interesting lips...

Stop it! She's your oldest friend, only now she's beautiful and you're still just...you!

'Took your time,' she teased. 'Come on then, let's get some air into those dusty lungs!'

The gravel path crunched underfoot. The evening was warm and the first stars bright. Bella flopped down on the grass, resting on her elbows. 'Aren't they amazing?'



‘I guess. Did you know the closest star to us, after the Sun, is Alpha Centauri? It’s only 4.3 light years, which doesn’t sound like a lot, but that is over 41.7 trillion kilometres...’

Bella laughed, a golden sound. ‘I bet you have the girls lining up at the gates, Joe.’

‘I...’

She patted the grass. ‘Zip it, smarty pants, and sit down before you strain something.’

He frowned, but complied, leaving a respectable gap between them. ‘How was school?’

‘Boring, but I’m off to Ibiza next week. You?’

If only you knew. ‘Not sure,’ he lied. ‘Nonno wants to go to Bali.’

‘Cool – awesome beaches!’ She rolled over onto her stomach and was now next to him, looking up with her big brown eyes.

He was sweating buckets.

‘You know, it’s been so long since I’ve seen you without glasses.’ She drew herself up, inches from his face, fingers reaching for the frames. His world became blurry.

‘You’re growing into quite the handsome young man, aren’t you, little Lord Joe?’

‘You know I don’t like being called that. Can I have my glasses back, please?’

‘*Si, si!*’ She held them just out of his reach. ‘But I want something first.’

He swallowed. ‘What?’

‘A kiss, you fool.’ And with that Bella leaned forward, the smell of her perfume filling his senses.

Joe closed his eyes, heart hammering. He could not believe this was happening. There was a rustle of cotton. He opened his eyes. Her blurry form was gone. And so were his glasses.

She laughed. ‘You didn’t think it would be that easy, did you?’

‘Bells, I can't see!’

‘Love is blind,’ she teased. ‘Didn't you know?’

He took a few steps in the direction of her voice.

‘Over here,’ the next call came from behind him.

‘This isn't funny, Bells.’ That awful feeling of helpless anxiety was rising in his stomach.

‘Don't be such a baby,’ she called from his left side. ‘Besides, some things are worth fighting for, no?’

Joe bit his lip, fighting back a hot retort. The sheen of his infatuation with *Signorina* Giordano was wearing off. He turned toward the hazy shape that should be the house.



‘Oh, come on, Joe,’ Bella called. The disarming scent of her perfume washed over him. ‘Here,’ she slipped his frames in place. ‘Is it so bad to let someone else be in control just for a moment?’ She was disappointed and Joe suddenly felt guilty.

‘ISABELLA! We're leaving.’

‘I...’ he began, but she had already started toward the house.

‘Have a good summer,’ she called over her shoulder. Then turning to look at him, she blew a kiss. ‘Better luck next time.’

* * *

Fedor was the strong, silent type. Not by choice. It was just easier to be that way.

His gene pool swam with brawn, oozed it, in fact, leaving little space for intelligence to manifest, and yet Fedor had been blessed with both. Blessed, however, was a subjective description. He would argue that he was cursed.

Fedor bent to pick up his books and caught a boot to the rear.

‘You don't need books.’ His father scowled. ‘You're a fighter, not a poet!’

‘Not all books are about poetry.’

The next kick caught him on the leg and he winced. 'You see! Already you're trying to be smart with me!'

Fedor's mother slapped her husband with the tea towel. 'Leave him be, Alexis!'

'There were no books when I did my training. Lots of punch bags, vomit and blood! Hard floors and stinky sawdust to land on – if you were lucky. Who's this Ruben, anyway?'

'The Librarian, Papa. These are his books. Mr D'Angelo told him to give them to us.'

His father's brow knotted. 'Well, that's his business. But whilst you're under this roof, you follow my rules.'

'Now get changed and bring the wood in, unless your mother can use those to feed the stove?'

Fedor shepherded the books away from the cast iron maw.

His bedroom was at the back of the old stone farmhouse. Thick walls, heavy larch beams and warped windows impregnated with dust. The squat building nestled among a copse of spindly pines, overlooking the valleys to the south. To the north, the horizon bristled with thick forests.



As children, he and his brothers had built forts and waged wars from their imaginary strongholds in the woods, between their chores, trapping game and practicing Sambo in the barn.

His brothers were gone now. Dimitri had left last year and Karl two years before that. They were both excellent fighters, Sambo champions, with not one original thought between them. Perfect, in their father's eyes.

Fedor was better than both of them. What he lacked in size, he made up for in strategy, adapting his father's holds and submissions with great success; a feat that had both troubled and angered Alexis. Now, at nearly sixteen, Fedor made short work of his brothers when they returned home for Defender of the Fatherland Day, and that served to incense his father even more.

Fedor shrugged off and neatly folded his town clothes before trudging out into the yard. Prising the axe from the wood-pile, he whistled to the pair of Laika hunting dogs rolling in the dust beside the kitchen door. Misha and Mikhail darted past him, snapping at each other in their hurry to take the lead.

They barked a lot, much to his father's disgust, and Alexis could often be heard bellowing at them from within the house. But they were brilliant hunters, and both affectionate and loyal to Fedor.

The clearing where Fedor liked to chop wood was about a ten-minute walk from the house and he had chosen it for that very reason. The weight of the day fell away with every step he took.

He had known of the Order ever since Karl had returned from his Induction. Until then, Fedor believed he had joined the army. His father and brothers were Juggernauts. Good ones. They often returned from assignments battered or bruised, but were none the worse for wear; and he enjoyed the stories they told around the fire late into the night, limbs soaking in steaming baths of salt, bellies full of vodka.

Mr D'Angelo's speech carried grave consequences for Fedor. If he failed the apprenticeship, his family would lose *everything* – and they would blame him.

Slowing to a plod, the dogs out of sight, he did not notice that a silence had settled upon the forest. Even the wind had died, retreating through the undergrowth and carrying away the faint scent of unclean fur and fetid breath that should have warned him about the bear.

The demon rose from the undergrowth in a shower of branches. Long claws stretched toward the boy, slavering jaws parting inches from his face. Fedor staggered back and tripped. The fall saved him from a vicious swipe. The ground shook as the bear lost its balance and landed on all fours, squashing Fedor beneath its matted gut. The boy lay frozen, his mind racing in terror.

He had dropped the axe but dared not move a muscle. The animal shifted its weight; a low growl reverberating near the boy's head, and Fedor knew his final moments were upon him.

Two streaks burst from the undergrowth, snapping and snarling. Misha and Mikhail launched themselves at the massive creature smothering their master. Darting back and forth the dogs drew the bear's attention from one to the other. Misha managed to tear the soft underside of its foreleg, whilst Mikhail snapped at its nose.

The bear reared in response, offering Fedor a chance to escape, but not before stepping on the boy's ankle. Ignoring the pain, he rolled away until his shoulder encountered the handle of the axe. Snatching it, he turned and swung with all his might. The weapon whistled through the air and sank into a tree.

The dogs had now placed themselves between him and the bear, hackles raised, growling. The bear's black eyes were wide and saliva dripped from its jaws.

Its fur was dark and wet where the dogs had nipped at it, but the rage and hunger that had driven the animal to attack eclipsed its pain.

Frantically working the axe loose, Fedor raised it over his head and hurled it at the monster towering before them, then turned and ran.

Discretion is the better part of valour! ‘Dogs, COME!’

The pain from his ankle was white hot, but far better than sharp claws raking across his back. He plunged through the forest, hands raised to shield his face from the wooden fingers trying to tear at him. Then the ground gave way and he fell, tumbling over and over.

Fedor stopped with a crunch.

Darkness.

* * *



Veronique marvelled at the sight of Paris at night.

It was a magnificent city, but the true Parisian atmosphere could be found away from the crowded streets, in Montmartre and Montparnasse. They were her favourite places, filled with artistic charm and colourful characters. And tonight they held the promise of even greater magical delights, for it was *Bal masqué* – her family’s annual masquerade ball.

Her silk and chiffon gown rustled, as she made her way to the dressing table. ‘Who shall we be tonight?’ she asked the face in the mirror.

To the world, she was simply Veronique. However, when she chose to hide from it, the girl in the mirror was rarely the same person twice.

The prim persona of that dutiful daughter was pushed into the shadows and the face she saw in the mirror could do anything, be anyone. She had played every conceivable role, and tonight she would be Nikki.

She lifted a crimson mask with gold lining and a bright red plume from Ruben’s pile of books, dismissing their call.

Mañana, as the Spanish would say.

She waved the red mask and puckered her lips. ‘*Nikki, the Temptress?*’

‘Or *Nikki, the Noble?*’ The black and silver mask complimented her golden skin. Tilting her chin upward, she sucked in her cheeks and put on her best pout.

‘*Nikki, the Fool?*’ Crossing her eyes behind the visage of the jester, the bells jingled mournfully when she set it down.

‘Ah, the mysterious *Papillon.*’ The butterfly mask was beautiful. A gift from her grandmother, it was made from jade and gold leaf, with gentle curves and tiny sequins. ‘*Parfaite!*’ She smiled at the mirror. ‘Perfect, darling,’ she repeated in her aristocratic drawl, rummaging through her make up box.

Veronique loved acting. As a child, her dressing up box would have put the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens to shame. From silk kimonos and richly plumed Native American headdresses to glitzy 1920s fashion and trendy Sixties outfits, face paints, false teeth, wigs, glasses and gaudy jewellery – Nikki’s armoury was endless.

Her obsession did not end there, for she was fascinated by people's accents and inflections, and could mimic them all within minutes of meeting someone. Lisps and stutters, giggles, laughs and snorts, she kept them all.

In fact, her skill became so precise that she had earned the nickname *Le petit perroquet*, the little parrot.

Every time she sat at her dressing table, she asked her reflection the same pressing question, but tonight presented her with a new opportunity. For tonight Nikki could stand where usually only Veronique was permitted. And tonight she would be *Nikki, the Southern Belle*.

The Beauchamp *Bal masqué* was hosted at their lavish townhouse. An evening of meticulous décor, sumptuous cuisine and sophisticated spirits. No expense was spared and the event was a staple fixture on the social calendar for both celebrity and royalty.

Veronique stood at the banister surveying the lavish hall below. *Les diamants de la couronne* drifted through the open terrace doors; the musicians gathered near the fountain. Guests wafted across the floor in glamorous costumes, feigning sincerity at every meeting. She could see long-nosed Venetian masks, colourful Mardi Gras costumes, jesters, make up and feathers, there was not a bare face to be seen. Champagne corks popped and the nectar of privilege flowed.

Veronique found it anonymous, impersonal and flamboyant. She descended the stairs and scooped up a drink.

‘*Bonsoir,*’ a tall man in a black and gold Venetian mask greeted her, brandishing a fluted glass.

Veronique unleashed Nikki’s southern charm. ‘What’s that now?’

‘*Pardon.* You’re not French?’

‘Heavens, no.’ She tittered, waving her hand. ‘Well, distantly, perhaps. I’m from Savannah, Georgia – in the United States. Of America.’

‘Yes, I know where it is.’ She could hear the slight scoff in his tone. This was too easy. ‘And what brings you to this fine party, *Mademoiselle...*?’

Veronique waited the perfect length of time.

‘Oh, you mean my name?’ She laughed again, slapping the man’s chest. ‘Why didn’t you just say so, silly. It’s Anastasia. Anastasia Swanson. And you are?’

‘Gerard Bordier.’ He took her hand, kissing her fingers. ‘Welcome to Paris.’

Her uncle did not recognise her.

‘I see you’re drinking fruit juice, *ma chérie*, you must try the champagne, it’s what we French are famous for. Amongst other things...’

He had yet to release Veronique's hand, or notice that his wife was watching the exchange from across the room.

‘Well, I'm afraid bubbles go straight to my head, sir, and I certainly don't want to be making a spectacle of myself amongst all these fine folk.’

‘Nonsense!’ He swiped two glasses from a passing tray. ‘I'll not hear of it. Let's find somewhere a little quieter and you can tell me all about your... Savannah, was it?’

‘Gerard!’ Veronique's aunt stood at his shoulder, hands on hips, her naturally stern demeanour even more formidable beneath her Faustian mask. ‘I hope you're not trying to get our little *perroquet* drunk?’

‘Bianca, this is *Mademoiselle* Swanson, from America, I've yet to see Veronique and I can assure you I wouldn't...’

‘*Mon Dieu!*’ She turned her attention to the young woman. ‘You look lovely, my dear. Mother will be delighted to see you've chosen her mask. Have you seen her?’

Nikki vanished.

‘No, not yet,’ Veronique replied. ‘I love your costume too, Aunt Bianca. Very feisty!’

Gerard's jaw dropped. 'Veronique!' His cheeks had darkened beneath his long-nosed mask. 'Why, you...'

'Oh hush, Gerard!' his wife snapped, whisking her niece away.

* * *

Jenny MacLeod sat outside Mr D'Angelo's office, chewing a toffee and admiring a glorious, albeit smog-stained sunrise from the top of the Empire State Building. The other window displayed a damp, grey Machu Picchu.

It had been a long time since her last holiday and three glorious weeks of sailing the sun-drenched islands of Fiji were now but hours away. She had thought it a certainty before her summons to see the Boss. On a Sunday.

Jenny was an ambitious Trainer. She was responsible for seven of the top ten Cadres, and had successfully introduced Krav Maga to their martial arts syllabus. She was known to be smart, competitive and driven. But now she was tired. *So* tired! Her head flopped back. Just a few more hours now...

The door to the office opened and Owen's bull neck swung into view. 'Come on in, Jen.'

Inside, Persephone was humming along the bookshelf near the door.

‘Hi, Seph.’

‘Miss MacLeod.’

Salvador was wading through reams of text on a holographic screen. ‘One minute, my dear,’ he murmured.

Jenny waited, staring at the peaceful mountains through the long window, the succulent green grass rippling hypnotically in the breeze. So tired.

With a faint click, the holographic projector shut down, and Salvador turned to her. ‘Thank you for coming in at such short notice, Jennifer, I understand you’re getting ready to go on leave?’

Sunday name. This did not bode well. ‘Yes.’

‘Anywhere nice?’

‘Fiji.’

‘Wonderful place. Rebecca and I were in Vanua Levu for the Millennium.’

Jenny only had a very hazy memory of her own Millennium celebrations. She smiled in response and he continued.

‘I’ve got some good news and some bad news for you.’ Salvador laced his fingers and pursed his lips.

‘The good news is that your apprenticeship project has been approved. The bad news, I’m afraid, is that it must begin tomorrow.’

Jenny's stomach tightened. The project he was referring to had been as much his idea as hers. In fact, she was fairly certain he had ‘let her have’ the incredibly bold idea, as it had never quite felt her own.

‘I know this disrupts your holiday plans, but such an important project cannot be entrusted to anyone else, so I must insist that you delay your trip.’

She forced a smile and tried not to sound stiff. ‘That’s fantastic news, sir. What finally changed the Council’s minds?’

‘Gabriel made the final decision. Your reputation has reached considerable heights, he was very impressed.’

Gabriel Laurent was the Head of the Council and Jenny could not help but smile.

Vanity. Oh, how Salvador loved vanity.

‘The Council has decided that an apprenticeship to recruit and train field operatives several years before their formal Induction age, is a good one. They agree that it could imprint key skills, set them apart from the modern Cadres, and increase their effectiveness in the field.’

‘Wait, *before* their Induction? But that would make them kids. I wasn’t suggesting that—’

‘Fourteen or fifteen: Old enough to handle the physical requirements. We’ve got six weeks, and you’ll need to push them to their limits. If we succeed, it’ll be the start of a new era. And who better to break the mould than the young woman who’s single-handedly re-inventing our approach to training? You’ll be famous, Jennifer!’

She blushed.

It was almost too easy.



Chapter 7

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Fedor awoke in pain.

His head hurt. His ankle throbbed. It felt like his entire body was bruised, but it did not *feel* as if he had been eaten...which was an immediate plus. He could hear panting and hoped it was the dogs.

He opened his eyes. The sun was setting upon the very tips of the trees. Below, the richness of the forest had bleached into the monotones of twilight and the crickets were strumming in the undergrowth. He was lying at the bottom of the dry riverbed, and Misha and Mikhail crouched nearby, their backs to him, ears pricked as they sniffed at the woods. He raised his hand to his head and his fingers came away bright red.

Great.

The movement caught the dogs' attention and they leapt up, fussing over him. 'All right, dogs. I'm all right. Good dogs. *Gooood* dogs.' He closed his eyes and mouth, whilst they smothered him in canine kisses.

When Fedor finally pushed himself off the ground, his vision swam, a wave of nausea rising. 'Urgh.' His father was going to have a field day with this.

‘You could’ve been killed!’ his mother fumed, raising his ankle onto her lap. She peeled away his boot. The joint had swollen into his footwear and the two were reluctant to part.

Thankfully, his father had not been home when he returned, but his mother's reaction was almost as bad. Where her fury came from concern, his father's would have born of annoyance, or disappointment. Probably both.

Alyona deposited a bottle of vodka in front of her son before pouring boiling water into a basin and fetching her first aid bag. It was far from the first time one of her boys had come home battered and bruised, though never before from wrestling a bear.

‘Drink. But only a sip!’

Fedor was only too happy to comply.

‘What was it doing so close to the house?’ She stripped away his sock. The ankle was purple but the skin was not broken and he could wiggle all his toes. Just.

‘The bins are sealed, the dogs eat indoors and we’re nowhere near winter, I just can’t understand it.’

Fedor's hand strayed toward the vodka. For medicinal support, of course.

‘Oh no, that's enough of that! Now bend forward, let me see your thick head.’

He closed his eyes, the warm water from the sponge running down his neck.

‘It's quite a bump.’ She felt around the lump. ‘But only a small cut. You'll be fine.’

Misha was sniffing his swollen ankle and licking it, whimpering. He was too tired to flinch and the warm caress of her tongue was soothing.

‘You do realise your father will expect you to fetch the axe in the morning?’

‘*Da.*’

‘And I suppose you still need to pack for this trip?’

‘Uuuurgh!’ His head was beating like a thousand drums and the last thing he felt like now was packing, let alone going on this stupid training camp.

Her demeanour softened and Alyona kissed her son's forehead. ‘I tell you what, you hobble over there and light the fire. I'll bring a footbath to soak that ankle and then I'll pack your bag. You can check it over in the morning. *Da?*’

‘*Spasibo, Mama,*’ he whimpered. Feeling very sorry for himself, he heaved his large frame out of the chair and shuffled into the lounge, Misha and Mikhail never leaving his side.

‘Good dogs.’

It had been a long day.

* * *

Joe sighed. Long, hard and with feeling. It had been a trying evening all round. First Bella, and now his mother – who had scattered half of his wardrobe around the room and currently held a massive, stuffed toiletry bag under her arm.

‘I don't need all this.’ He rolled his eyes when a third plaid sleeveless cardigan was added to the pile. ‘Nonno says it'll be just like Summer Camp. A few pairs of shorts, some shirts, a jacket and hiking boots.’

‘How does *he* know?’ She held up two pairs of beige corduroy trousers. ‘What about your allergies? Your medicine? Not to mention a spare pair of glasses!’

‘Have you packed a swimming costume? You'll need sunscreen, SP50, at least!’

Joe flopped onto the bed, head in his hands.

It was true, they had not been given a list. In fact, Ruben had been pretty vague on details. A six week course with a free weekend midway and a trip to the mysterious Inventors Fair at the end. They needed parental consent, basic necessities and their wits.

Wits, Joe had in abundance. *Check!*

‘How about an umbrella?’ from deep within the wardrobe.

Patience, on the other hand, he did not.

He swore.

Quietly.

* * *

Veronique studied the books she had dismissed only hours ago. In the hall below, the ball continued in muffled reverie.

‘*Nikki, Monte Cristo,*’ she sighed.

Her father had tracked her down, probably with Aunt Bianca's help, and marched her upstairs at midnight. ‘Your selection is a great honour, Veronique, and you will do your family proud,’ he had told her. ‘It’s time to put away this childishness.’ He indicated the costumes draped about the room and slammed the door.

He was the reason she had created Nikki, her complex alter ego who could enjoy life without the pressure of carrying the family honour. It was not Nikki’s fault that Veronique’s father had no son. Nikki did not feel guilt. Nikki was free.

Sitting crossed legged on her bed with the books beside her, all finery forgotten, she picked up the worn deck of Tarot cards and flipped the top one over.

The Wheel of Fortune.

The cards never offered an exact answer, the Wheel had many potential meanings. She flipped over the next card.

The World.

A trend was forming. The end of a cycle of life and a pause before the next.

There was one last card to turn. Her fingers trembled.

The Magician.

This felt a little more positive: she must embrace her talents and tap into her potential.

Veronique flopped back onto the pillows and stared at the ceiling rose. She did not notice one final card slip from the deck and slide to the floor, coming to rest on the pile of masks beside her bed; the most well-known and misunderstood card in the Tarot, the skeletal figure of Death.

* * *

Sam couldn't sleep. He lay in his bed, hands folded behind his head, feet shuffling.

He had packed. A bulging bag awaited destinations unknown. The twins had hampered the process, taking great delight in removing clothes the second they were folded and stowed.

'You're sure you want to go?' his mother had asked. 'You don't have to. Not yet.' Angelique was not ready to lose another child.

Sam's teenage bravado had crushed any misgivings he might have had. 'Of course! Dad says it will be Summer Camp on steroids!'

His mother had not been impressed with that analogy.

'Besides,' Sam had gushed, 'there's so much I want to know, a whole world that no one knows about – that I didn't know existed! And it's somewhere that we – *I* – actually belong! I'm one of The Few!'

'Well, just remember, not everything that glistens is gold. Oh, and there is a letter on your desk for you. Who is writing to you nowadays, isn't everything "DMs" for you lot?'

In his excitement Sam had forgotten about the neatly addressed envelope and it still lay unopened.



He glanced over at the red display of the alarm clock. It was *01:17*.

He tried to clear his head, listening to the rise and fall of his chest, to his father's occasional snore drifting across the hall through two closed doors, but his thoughts returned to the same words.

If you fail, your family will not be able to remain in The Order...

Sam would not fail. This was his chance to find something real in the turmoil that had been his life since the fire.

Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

‘You can leave your things here,’ Ruben told them. ‘Coats, too. And you won't be needing *those!*’ He removed the bulky camera and safari binoculars from around Joe's neck. ‘Jennifer MacLeod will be looking after you for the next six weeks. She's one of our best Trainers and is eager to meet you. This way, please.’

After a twist and several turns through row upon row of bookshelves, the tour ended before an old wooden door near the back of the library. It was beautifully carved with an intricate storyboard, but Sam was given no time to study the carefully worked

relief as Ruben tugged it open. ‘Come along now, through here.’

Fedor stepped aside to allow Veronique through.

‘*Merci,*’ she smiled, squinting into the dark. The Russian boy followed, ducking under the doorframe. Joe was hanging back, unsure, so Sam gave him a nudge and smile of encouragement.

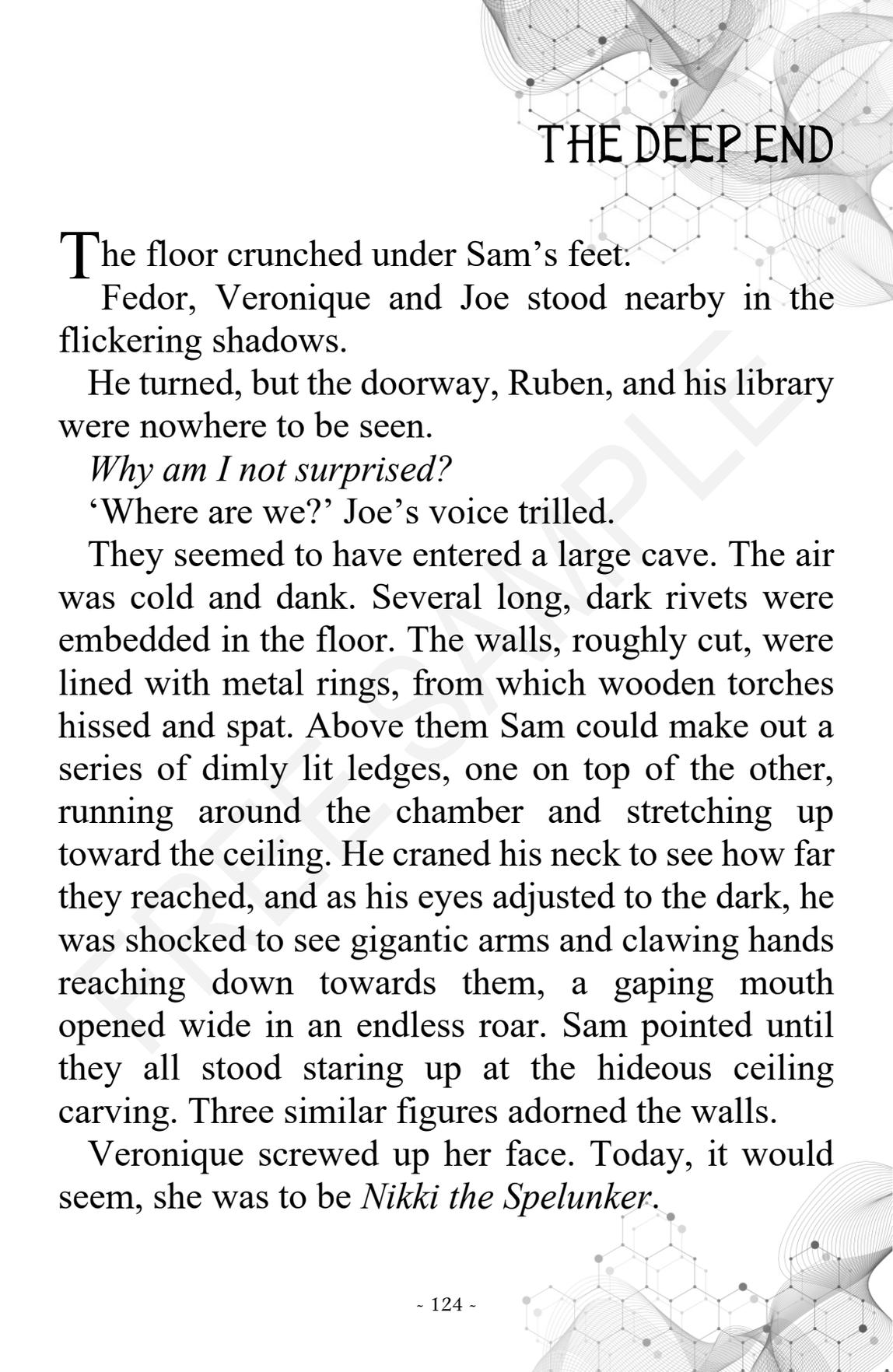
He caught Ruben's eye. ‘You're not coming?’

‘Heavens, no! I'm agoraphobic. Never leave the library if I can help it. I need an umbrella just to venture into the hall.’ He tittered nervously.

Sam nodded, not sharing the joke. ‘Stick together,’ was the last instruction he heard before he followed Joe into the gloom.



Chapter 8



THE DEEP END

The floor crunched under Sam's feet.

Fedor, Veronique and Joe stood nearby in the flickering shadows.

He turned, but the doorway, Ruben, and his library were nowhere to be seen.

Why am I not surprised?

'Where are we?' Joe's voice trilled.

They seemed to have entered a large cave. The air was cold and dank. Several long, dark rivets were embedded in the floor. The walls, roughly cut, were lined with metal rings, from which wooden torches hissed and spat. Above them Sam could make out a series of dimly lit ledges, one on top of the other, running around the chamber and stretching up toward the ceiling. He craned his neck to see how far they reached, and as his eyes adjusted to the dark, he was shocked to see gigantic arms and clawing hands reaching down towards them, a gaping mouth opened wide in an endless roar. Sam pointed until they all stood staring up at the hideous ceiling carving. Three similar figures adorned the walls.

Veronique screwed up her face. Today, it would seem, she was to be *Nikki the Spelunker*.

Further reverie was cut short by a harsh grating sound. The floor shook and Sam stumbled. Stone plugs rose from beneath the rivets, sealing them off. The sculpture above them began to groan, making the deep gurgling sound of a blocked tap, until a stream of liquid erupted from its mouth.

‘What the hell is going on?’ Veronique cried, dashing for cover.

Backs pressed against the wall, they stared at the deluge.

‘A drain,’ Fedor shouted. ‘Those holes in the floor. Must’ve been a drain.’

Joe blinked. ‘He’s right. And unless that stops,’ he indicated the statue, ‘or the drain opens, this cave is going to fill up—’

‘And we drown,’ Fedor finished.

Sam saw Joe was shaking. ‘What the hell kind of library is this?’

They stared at the deepening pool in disbelief.

‘A test,’ Veronique blurted. ‘It must be some kind of twisted test.’ Her hair was matted and mud splattered. They all cut similar sodden figures, cowering against the wall.

‘*Nikki the Drowned Rat!*’



Sam grabbed a torch. If this was a test, then they'd damn well rise to it! 'Look around. If you're right, there will be a clue or some instructions somewhere. If we can get up there,' he pointed to the ledges, 'we can buy ourselves some time.'

Fedor handed a torch to Veronique who began to scour the walls for clues. The last went to Joe. He needed two hands to hold it.

'Over here,' Joe called a few minutes later. 'There's something under here, but it's caked in this sh...' He hit the wall. The old plaster sent up dust, but remained in place.

'Water,' Sam said. 'We need to get it wet.'

'Shirts?' Fedor suggested.

'Yes!'

The pair turned and ran over to the rising pool, ripping off their t-shirts. Veronique pretended to look away when the bare-chested boys ran back.

Slapping the material against the wall, they began to scrub. 'It's working!' Joe whooped, the crude plaster coming away in his hands. 'Keep going! More here. Here!'

Veronique began to claw at the mud, too, manicured nails forgotten. The tide was now pooling around their ankles.

They soon exposed a mural. Joe traced the relief, lips moving as he translated the instructions. ‘There’s someone pulling a lever, closing the drains. That looks like a reservoir above the cave. It empties here... from the mouth of the statue.’

Veronique stabbed at the picture of the gigantic reservoir. ‘It’s bigger than this cave!’

‘We have to get that drain open,’ Sam shouted.

‘Or stop the water.’ Fedor said.

‘You’re both right,’ Joe agreed. ‘Look. This figure is placing something into the side of the statue. That seems to stop the water and opens the drain.’

Sam peered over the boy’s shoulder. ‘But what?’

‘There.’ Veronique patted a smudged section. ‘They’re climbing onto those ledges. But how do we get up there? They’re so high.’

‘Well,’ Sam paused, ‘what if we wait for the water to rise and float up?’

Fedor nodded.

‘Um, guys...’ Joe sounded worried as he cleaned another section of the mural. ‘I don’t think we can do that. Look!’

The next image showed serpents attacking the figures in the water.

‘Oh my God!’ Veronique cried. ‘What the *hell* are those?’

Sam turned. 'Let's not stick around to find out.'

'There's nothing else here!' Joe rubbed at the wall. 'That's it, what're we gonna do?'

'Not panic,' Fedor replied.

Sam noticed the bruises on the boy's face and wondered what had happened to him in the hours since they had parted company.

'Come on then.' He wrung out his ruined shirt. 'Let's get a move on.'

The ledge was so high above the cavern floor that neither Sam nor Fedor could brush the bottom of it.

'Well, that's not going to work,' Sam panted, hands on knees.

Fedor squatted. 'Get on my shoulders.'

They wobbled their way toward the lip of the ledge but were still just too short. Sam swore when Fedor staggered and fell, dumping them both into the water.

'Sorry. It's my ankle. Had a run in with a bear yesterday.'

They all stared.

'You what now?' Joe gawped.

'I'll tell you about it later.'

'I've an idea,' Veronique said. 'What about making a human pyramid?'

Sam looked embarrassed. 'I didn't think of that.'

Veronique smiled and patted him on the cheek. ‘Well then, you’re lucky you have me. Now on your knees, my minions!’

As the tallest, Sam and Fedor were at the bottom of the pile, noses in the water, eyes wide as they kept watch for serpents. Joe clambered on top.

With two nimble leaps, Veronique crested the pyramid and reached for the ledge. *Nikki, the Acrobat!*

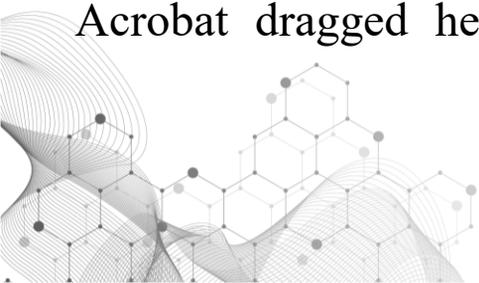
Her heart sank; it was still not high enough. Then she noticed that the stone lip appeared lower to the right. Clambering down, she dragged the boys out of the water and reformed the pyramid.

The image of the Magician card on her bed came to mind. Embrace your skills. Tap into your full potential. You will be tested. *Today, I am Nikki, the Victorious!* Veronique looked up, bent her knees and launched herself toward the ledge.

Everything slowed down as she jumped, the din of the waterfall becoming a muffled drone. Hands outstretched, legs pedalling, she propelled her body toward the outcrop.

Contact!

With considerable kicking and wiggling, Nikki the Acrobat dragged herself up and onto the ledge.



Rolling onto her back, she lay gasping for breath. Everything hurt.

It took a moment for her to catch her breath, so she didn't hear the sound of the hatches in the walls opening. Long, dark shapes glided into the water.

Joe's high-pitched scream startled her. 'Something just brushed my leg!'

'Mine, too!' Sam shouted and the boys began to splash about.

'*Veronique!*' three voices screamed. 'Hurry up!'

A knotted rope lay coiled a few feet away and Veronique scrambled toward it. Her stomach twisted when she realised it was not anchored to anything. There were two rounded stones at the lip of the ledge, spaced a few feet apart, but they were not large enough to use. Veronique was out of time. Nikki took over.

She wrapped the rope around her waist and braced her feet on the stones, throwing the length over the side. 'Send Joe up first!'

The rope jerked, nearly pulling her over. She leaned back and let out a cry, the rough twine fighting her grip and tearing her hands. The pain was almost unbearable.

'I want to go home!'

Veronique heard sobs between gasps and a tuft of mousy hair appeared.

‘Hurry!’

Joe wriggled onto the ledge and they quickly shared the line between them.

‘Now Sam!’

The rope snapped taut and the pair grimaced. Thankfully, he did not take long to crest the ledge and took over from Veronique as she rushed toward the edge to find Fedor.

‘GO, GO, GO!’

Fedor had his back to the wall, distracted by movement in the water on every side.

‘Look out!’ Joe shouted.

There was a tremendous splash on the far side of the cave and the boy started. Another followed and the snakes began to drift toward the disturbance.

It was all the invitation Fedor needed, surging for the rope.

‘It worked!’ Joe laughed, kneeling beside Veronique. He flung a final projectile into the seething mass. ‘I hate snakes, filthy beasts!’ he laughed manically. Noticing her look, he shrugged. ‘I laugh when I’m nervous...’

‘*Spasibo!*’ Fedor splatted down on the ledge beside them, panting as the others explored the area.

‘Over here.’ Joe had found a small alcove.

With a groan, the Russian got to his feet.

‘What is it?’ Sam asked.

They all stared at Joe and, startled by the fast-rising water behind them, he stuttered. ‘It looks like a brainteaser,’ he gushed. ‘A tile puzzle. You have to slide eight slates around nine spaces until you complete the picture. It must be a clue to what we do next.’

Fedor was in a black mood after his narrow escape. ‘Just smash it up and put it back together.’

Sam shook his head. ‘Doubt we can cheat. Try to figure it out, we’ll look for a way up.’

Joe was already fiddling with the pieces. ‘We need a key to help with the pattern.’

‘I’ll look,’ Veronique said. *Nikki, the Explorer!*

Not far below, the waters churned.

‘Found something!’ Veronique called, indicating the pile of stones near the rope. ‘They’re Roman numerals.’ She turned one over. There was a pattern underneath. ‘I put them in order, but there are three missing.’

Joe seemed cross at first, then paled. ‘Oh no,’ he looked toward the ledge and then back at the pile of stones. ‘I didn’t realise, I just threw them....’

‘Well, there's nothing we can do about that now,’ Sam said. ‘Can you solve it without them?’

‘It’ll take more time.’ The boy said, uncertain.

The water was now a few feet from the base of their refuge.

‘Better hurry then,’ Fedor muttered, ‘time is running out.’

Joe dashed back to the puzzle.

The water was soon lapping at the ledge.

‘Try that one.’ Veronique had been standing over Joe's shoulder 'helping' for some time. The boy sighed but moved the tile.

‘I've got it!’

‘You're welcome,’ Veronique looked annoyed.

‘No, I’ve realised what I've been doing wrong.’ His fingers raced around the board in a different direction. There was a 'click' and the stone behind the puzzle rolled away. Inside, was a stout lever beside a small stone disc.

‘Well done!’ Veronique patted Joe on the back. The boy picked up the coin-shaped stone, turning it over. Fedor gave the lever a firm tug and a rope ladder unfurled from the gloom.



The second ledge was larger than the first.

Its floor was divided into a board of squares, each marked by a carving. Sam placed the ball of his foot on the closest square. It sank under his weight. He withdrew his foot, relieved when the slab returned to its original position. Maybe they could run across it.

‘Seems safe enough.’

‘Wait,’ Fedor said. ‘There must be a catch.’

Veronique pointed to another mural on the wall, too far away to read. The only way to reach it was across the unstable chess board.

‘I hope that’s not the key.’ Joe laughed, his anxiety returning.

‘Why put the puzzle in the way? Why not put it over here?’ Sam shook his head.

Fedor bent to examine the stones. ‘We are meant to work it out. Those two stones are the same. So are those.’

‘One of us has to get across.’ Sam stepped forward. ‘I’ll go.’

‘No,’ Joe said, still feeling outdone by the first puzzle. ‘Let me try to figure it out.’

Veronique started pulling up the rope ladder. ‘Here. If anything happens, hold on tight!’

Joe laughed again. ‘Okay. Got to start somewhere.’

Taking a deep breath, he stepped onto the chequered floor, choosing one of Fedor's stones. It sank down an inch or two but, thankfully, no more. He looked for the same marking and took another step giving the others a reassuring thumbs up when nothing happened.

The next stone, a new design, was not so forgiving. This time, the square sank onto a button.

Click.

Water began to gush from the mouths of three other statues.

Joe spun about, swearing.

'Keep going,' they shouted over the pounding waterfall.

Three more careful steps saw Joe clear of the squares.

The mural showed a birds-eye view of the ledge and the board; Fedor was right, most stones had a twin. There were, however, four that were not paired. One of these could trigger the way out, or shut off the water. Or speed up their deaths if he was wrong.

Turning back to the board he made his way over to the closest odd symbol and gingerly stood on the square. It sank and he felt it click. Gripping the rope ladder, he awaited his fate.

Nothing happened.

Still alive. Result! He started to move but tripped and accidentally landed on the square next to him. This time, the stone fell away.

Joe threw his arms out, dropping the ladder and pedalling backward. The others rushed forward, but he steadied himself and held up his hands.

Think!

Four markings, four people. He made the connection and formed a theory. They had to each make their way to a singularly marked stone, using the paired stones as a pathway. When all four were down, the puzzle would be solved.

‘I’ve got it,’ he shouted over the noise of the waterfall. ‘I hope!’ he added under his breath.

Veronique went first, nodding to the boys, when the button beneath her stone clicked into place. Sam followed, and Fedor wasted no time making his way to the final stone.

Beside the mural, a hatch popped open to reveal a narrow staircase and a second stone coin.



The third ledge was perilously small. Four sturdy levers protruded from the wall. All were in a ‘down’ position.

‘Right,’ Joe said studying them closely to distract himself from vertigo. ‘This looks simple enough.’ He bent to lift the first lever.

‘Wait!’ Fedor shouted. ‘Let’s grab hold of something first.’

Sam saw Joe’s cheeks darken.

‘Good thinking,’ he agreed. ‘Keep hold of each other, too.’

Using all his strength, Joe managed to lift the lever. High above them, a knotted rope unfurled several feet from a winch in the wall.

When he let go, however, the lever crashed to the floor and the whole ledge moved slightly, retracting into the wall.

‘WHOAH!’

‘The rope’s gone!’ Veronique cried, pointing upward.

‘We have to try keep the levers up,’ Sam said.

Joe shook his head. ‘They’re too heavy.’

‘Four people, four levers,’ Fedor noted. ‘It has to be done at the same time.’

Veronique did not look convinced. ‘If you’re wrong, we could fall.’

Sam shrugged. ‘And if we don't get off this ledge soon, we'll be swimming with the snakes.’

‘We have to try,’ Fedor agreed. ‘Veronique, will you be able to lift one?’

‘*I can't hold it!*’ Joe looked pained. He was not built for this. Books were his bag, not brawn. He fought off nervous laughter.

Sam’s brow furrowed. ‘Fedor and I will each lift a lever. You two can keep them up with your shoulders whilst we tackle the last two.’

Fedor nodded. ‘Good plan.’

With a grunt, the boys worked until the final pair clicked into place and the winch unravelled the rope completely. The end was dangling just out of their reach.

‘It's too far out,’ Joe cried.

‘We're going to have to jump for it,’ Sam edged backward, the water centimetres away. With a deep breath, he dashed forward and like a monkey leaping for a vine, arched his body toward the dangling length, grasping it and swinging wildly out over the flooded cavern and through the waterfall.

Veronique was next and came very close to missing the pendulum entirely, before hurrying, hand over fist, toward safety.

‘Now you,’ Fedor pressed himself against the wall to let Joe past.

‘OMG...’ the boy stammered. The end of the rope was now in the snake-infested water.

‘Now,’ Fedor snapped, ‘or we’re both in deep water. Literally!’

‘I...’ Joe fussed, rubbing his sore hands. ‘I can’t!’

‘Yes, you can,’ Fedor forced a smile. ‘GO!’ He gave the boy a clap on the back. Joe bolted. He jumped too soon and soared across the empty space, certain to fall short. Fortunately, Sam gave the rope a sharp flick and sent it spinning toward Joe’s outstretched arms.

‘Quickly!’ Veronique called down.

Scaly bodies were rising out of the water toward him, but Joe was frozen stiff, clinging to the rope.

There was nothing for it. Fedor was going to have to jump and hope he did not send them both hurtling into the murky depths.

His swollen ankle protested at the first lunge, but he put the pain from his mind, focusing on Joe and the spot of rope above him. He had to reach it.

The jump was good. Fedor grabbed the rope and wrapped his legs around Joe. He could hear the boy crying. Hands white, jaw clenched, his eyes clamped shut.

‘This isn't happening, this isn't happening...’

‘Joe,’ Fedor bent toward him, ‘Giuseppe, I've got you. Come on, we can do this. Together.’

Joe opened one red-rimmed eye.

‘Come on.’ Fedor pulled himself up, letting his legs dangle so that the youngster could move. ‘Let's get out of here.’

Joe sniffed, then laughed involuntarily. He unclenched his fists and edged slowly toward Sam and Veronique who waited above him, arms outstretched.

‘Was there another coin?’ Joe collapsed on the ledge, snot running freely.

Sam held it up. ‘Yup, got it! That's three.’

‘I can't do this anymore,’ Joe moaned, holding his aching arms and Veronique nodded. The ordeal was taking its toll.

Nikki, the Weary.

Sam was furious at the peril they had been placed in but now was not the time for anger. ‘We must be close to the end,’ he said, trying to sound positive. ‘Nearly out of here – wherever the hell “here” is!’

Fedor was pacing, looking for clues.

‘There,’ Joe pointed, still on his back. They followed the line of his shaking finger. Suspended from the ceiling on a thin cord, a final stone coin spun slowly. It was too far over the water to grab.

Sam swore. ‘How on earth are we going to reach that?’

‘Maybe we could use the rope?’ Veronique sounded vague.

Fedor shook his head. ‘The slightest movement could send it into the drink and I don’t fancy going after it.’

Sam stared at the elusive disc.

Joe broke the silence. ‘What’s been the main theme in all these puzzles? Us! Working together! How could four people reach that coin?’

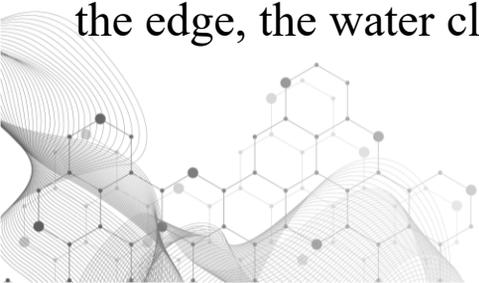
Veronique snapped her fingers. ‘Monkey chain!’

Nikki, the Genius!

‘Hashtag winning!’ Joe applauded weakly.

Fedor rolled his eyes and turned to the wall. A dusty iron ring was barely visible. ‘There!’ Grabbing it, he stretched out to Sam who took his wrist and extended his arm to Joe.

‘No,’ Veronique said. ‘I’m stronger. She slipped her cool hand around Sam’s wrist. They were now at the edge, the water closing in.



‘Don't. Look. Down,’ Sam heard Veronique whisper to Joe, when she took his arm. Joe leaned out, accepting his inevitable death, certain he would slip into the murky waters. He stretched onto his toes, his fingers wagging. Sam watched him make every attempt to lengthen his body. Ever so slowly, the boy edged toward the coin swaying seductively in front of him. So close now, so close...

One moment the tips of his fingers brushed the coin and the next, he was plummeting toward the blackness.

Joe hit the water with a tremendous splash. He kicked his arms and legs, fighting to get to the surface before slimy coils could drag him to a suffocating doom. He breached the pool just below the statue's mouth, which spat unrepentantly upon him. The others were on what was left of the last ledge, shouting and reaching toward him.

Sharp teeth sank into his leg and Joe screamed. A long, muscular body bashed against his back and he kicked at it, thrashing in the water. Another buffeted him from the other side. He kicked and clawed. The outstretched hands were so close, just a few more kicks...

Then they vanished, as a long body wrapped around his leg and dragged him under.

Joe was overcome with terror. Water filled his mouth and throat as he screamed. He hadn't even begun to live; all the books and studying had been for nothing. Bella flashed through his mind. He should have kissed her...

Strong hands gripped his. Something struck the coil around his thigh and suddenly he was free and rising toward the surface.

A firm arm was dragging him to safety. More hands found him and Joe felt himself lifted from the water, worried faces peering down as he wretched. Familiar faces.

'Joe!' someone shouted.

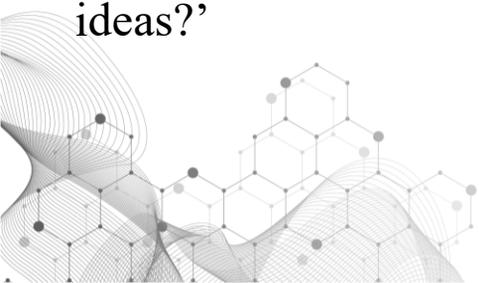
Was that his name? His head rolled from one face to the other. How did he know them? He lifted a clenched fist, and then opened it to reveal a small stone coin pressed into his palm.

Then he fainted.

'You got it!' Veronique shrieked. 'Joe, Joe!' She shook him but the boy was out cold, blood oozing from a nasty bite on his leg.

Sam dropped his head to Joe's chest and listened.

'He's breathing. He's okay, I think. But he won't be for long. We need to get out of here. Guys, any ideas?'



Fedor pointed to a set of rings buried in the ceiling. 'They lead to the top of the statue.'

'Monkey bars.' Veronique stood up. 'I can do this.' She held out her hands for the coins. 'Just lift me up.'

Nikki, the Acrobat!

Fedor looked at her and then at Sam, who was still kneeling beside Joe, soaked to the bone. His bravery had impressed the young Russian. Sam had hit the water seconds after Joe had slipped beneath the surface, with no regard for his own safety. He waited for a response.

Sam handed Veronique the coins. '*Allez!*'

Fedor lifted her toward the first ring. Gripping it, she hung there, sizing up the distance. Then with a flick of her hips, Veronique began to swing backwards and forwards. She let go with a faint cry and lunged forward.

Just two rings separated her from the statue, close enough to make out slots in its neck and she swung again.

One to go.

Her arms had begun to ache and cramp threatened to paralyse her raw fingers, but taking a deep breath, Veronique made the final lunge.

Her fingers gripped the statue and she slipped.

'NO!' she heard the boys cry above the din.

‘Not like this,’ she moaned, plummeting toward gaping jaws.

Cold stone brushed her palm and Veronique snapped her fingers closed, halting her descent on the statue’s ear.

She laughed; she could not help it. Joe’s nervous malady appeared infectious.

‘Are you okay?’ came the shout from the ledge.

‘*Oui,*’ she whispered to herself. ‘Yes!’ This time, a shout.

Summoning her last ounce of strength, she worked herself upright. The slots were within reach. With great care, Veronique drew the first coin from her pocket.

She heard it rattle and roll into the statue, tripping some mechanism within. The column of cascading water slowed.

‘It's working!’ she shouted over her shoulder.

The torrent of water waned further with the second coin, and the third saw the deadly torrent subside to a trickle, and then, to their relief, it stopped.

‘You've done it!’ came the cheer from the boys. ‘The last one should open the drain.’



As Veronique worked the final token free of her pocket, it caught on a stud in the denim and slipped from her fingers. She watched in horror as it spun away.

‘NOOO!’

With her legs locked in place, Veronique quickly fell backward like a trapeze artist, throwing herself into the path of the falling coin. The desperate act paid off, and she snatched it moments before it disappeared into the water.

Nikki, the Magnificent!

Sam slumped to his knees. ‘I don’t know how much more of this I can take!’

‘Nor me,’ Fedor muttered. ‘You okay?’ he shouted to Veronique, who still hung upside down.

‘No!’

‘Fair enough...’

She clambered back to her perch and, with a defiant whoop, slammed the final coin into place.

There was a gurgling, sucking sound, followed by a surge of bubbles, and finally the dreaded water began to recede.

‘Quick!’ Fedor shouted. ‘You need to get back before the water gets too low, otherwise if you fall...’

Veronique wiggled around to face the row of metal rings.

* * *

Salvador D'Angelo let out a sigh when the girl landed in Fedor's arms. The large Far Sight window in his office was tuned into the cave feed, captured by Levi Orbs, small camouflaged floating cameras. The gripping real-time action was streaming to both Mr D'Angelo's office and to the quarters of their very concerned Trainer, Jenny MacLeod, who had been completely against the trial by water.

Salvador turned to smile at his guest and refill their glasses. The Head of the Council had already made his opinion quite clear, and now regarded his host's presentation shrewdly.

'You're a gifted Operations Director,' Gabriel had told him earlier that afternoon, 'and you'll get all the credit if this "apprenticeship" pays dividends, but it'll also sit squarely with you, should anyone be hurt or killed.'

They watched as Jenny and Jen Si rushed to help the battered youngsters. Fedor and Sam lifted Joe and together the group made their way out through a door at the top of the chamber.

The feed ended and the window returned to the peaceful view of a Swiss mountain top.

Salvador could hardly conceal his smugness. ‘An impressive performance.’

‘Indeed.’ Gabriel seldom wasted his words. ‘They show promise. I’ll keep an eye on their progress.’ He rose and walked towards the door. As he did, a dark-skinned man with scarred cheeks emerged from the shadows and followed him from the room.

The door clicked shut and Salvador swore. ‘Where did *he* come from?’

‘I didn’t see him come in, sir. He’s a bloody ghost,’ Owen said from his post by the door.

‘More like the Grim Reaper.’ Salvador snorted. Baid had always protected the Head of the Council and his reputation was legendary, but his presence left a chill in the air.

‘I thought Sam did well, sir?’

‘They all did, didn’t they? Wasn’t Fedor a surprise? He may have the family muscles, but there’s a lot more going on upstairs. This could be an intriguing summer, Owen, my boy. Very intriguing indeed.’

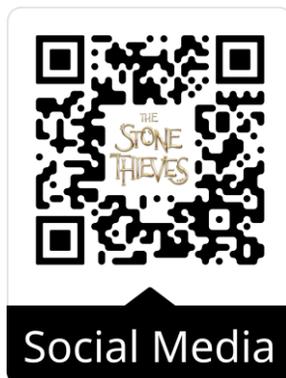
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many wonderful people made this book possible. The QR code below will take you to an online acknowledgement which allows me to credit and provide links to the fabulous artists who have contributed their time and patience to bringing my world to life.





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