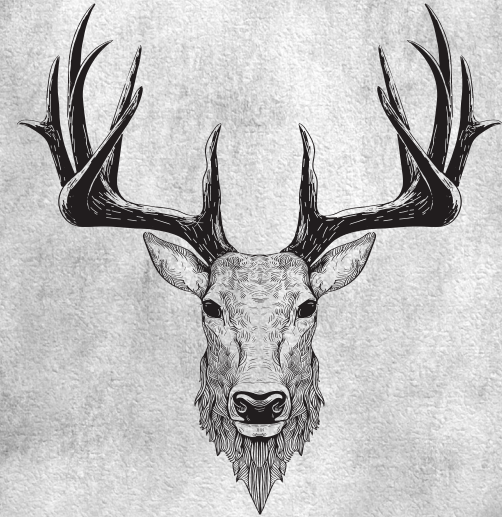


THE STAG
AND THE SPEAR



THE REMNANT CHRONICLES

PROLOGUE



The man pulled at his collar nervously and retrieved a damp finger which he wiped on his pant leg. His heels rose up and down involuntarily; his eyes darted.

The door to his left opened, and his breath caught in his throat.

“The führer will see you now,” the woman said, without making eye contact.

He rose slowly and then snapped straight as if his upper body was locking itself in place against an expected storm. He turned and strode upright and stiff-legged into the room, where his arm shot toward the ceiling.

“Hail, führer!”

A man in uniform sat behind a desk, looking down at scattered papers in front of him. Behind him, a large red, white, and black flag framed his short-cropped hair.

“What news do you have of the relics?” He spoke without looking up from his papers.

“The spear—we believe we have found the spear.” The man’s tone betrayed his emotion.

The man behind the desk dropped his papers and stood. He was short, but he carried the weight of power in his movement.

“The spear? The Spear of Destiny? The true one, or another of the pretenders?” His excitement trailed off into reservation.

“We believe it to be the real one, mein führer. We believe it to be the one destined for your hands and no others.”

The man behind the desk said nothing but motioned for the other to continue. The man adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses and began.

“We believe it is in London—hidden in the Tower of London, to be exact. It was hidden there long ago, hidden and protected with the crown jewels. We do not believe their Beefeaters know what they guard, but elements of

the infernal Sporrai stay close and know where it is.”

“How good is this intelligence? I do not want to be disappointed again!”

The man in the glasses took an unconscious half step backward before speaking again.

“We have one of their operatives who has turned. His information corroborates what we have discovered in the texts. We are sure of it, mein führer.”

“This cannot be wrong! We have a war to win on the Continent and cannot afford a distraction!” The man slammed his fist into his desk, causing the other to blink nervously, though he stood his ground.

“The information is good.”

The small man slipped down into his seat and sighed. “Tell me again of this spear and what it will mean when it is in my hands.”

“The spear, sir. It is the spear that pierced the side of the Christ. It poured forth God’s blood at Calvary, or so the Christians say. If you believe the older story of the Sporrai, it is also the blade that was brought back to this world by Isildane and which pierced the side of the great White Stag in the world of Logres.”

“Do *you* believe it?” The man’s eyes were intense, as if boring right through his subordinate.

“I believe,” the man spoke haltingly. “I believe that it is destined for your hands, and in your hands, though there might not be a god to slay, it will defeat all who oppose you and the Fatherland.”

“And how will it come to find its destiny?”

“Mein führer, Operation Loki is ready. If you order the Luftwaffe to commence the planned bombing of London, we believe we will be able to use the distraction to sneak our forces into the Tower and smuggle it out while the British are busy putting out the flames we rain down upon their pathetic beef-eating heads.”

CHAPTER 1

Sirens blared in the city streets. Smoke choked the air, and fires raged as firemen and citizens battled the flames that remained from the night's terror.

Duncan Page sat on the edge of his iron bed. An unwelcome tear dripped down his cheek as he stared at the tips of his worn leather shoes. He knew these were the last few minutes of his normal life, at least for a while.

Duncan's mother dusted and re-dusted the sideboard absentmindedly as she waited for the moment she so dreaded. Duncan's father had now been away for three months, learning to fly fighters for the Royal Air Force. Now Duncan was to be sent away, and she would be alone to try to keep their small grocery open through the crisis.

London was all Duncan had ever known. Many of his friends had been evacuated the year before in Operation Pied Piper. But the expected German bombs never came. His parents made the decision to keep him home to help with the family business. But then the bombs had begun falling on the capital city. He and his mother had spent the previous night huddled together under her bed as their flat rocked with the explosions outside.

Despite his protests, he was now being sent to the countryside for safety. Duncan felt like a coward leaving his mother behind in what had become a war zone, but he was also relieved: the simplest crack of a floorboard made him flinch. Then again, he could only imagine how much he'd miss home.

"Duncan," his mother called down the hall, "it's time we go."

Duncan did not answer but straightened his legs and stretched his back. Just two weeks before, he had spent his 16th birthday without his

father, the first one they had ever spent apart. He thought that day was bad; now he knew a new depth of loneliness, and he hadn't even left yet.

With one last look around his room, a room he was not sure he would ever see again, he stepped down the hall. His mother was buttoning her coat, and though she was desperately trying to appear strong, she burst into tears with the first glimpse of her son.

"It's all right, Mum. I'll be fine."

"It's not that," she lied, to protect his confidence. "It's just that you are so grown up and handsome. My young gentleman." She smiled, and her head tilted to the side.

"Mum!" Duncan rolled his eyes, continuing the emotional stage play they were performing.

Duncan could take only a small suitcase and a canvas backpack with him. He might only be gone for a few weeks, but the war had already gone on a year, and they both knew it could go on for years more. Now that Hitler had turned his attention to pounding London, no one could guess how long the capital would be unsafe for him to return. Both knew, despite what they said to one another, that it might be years before they would live together as a family again.

Duncan cursed Hitler and the Nazis every day, and his mother prayed for salvation every night.



The train station was flooded with children, as though the river Thames had risen and each bucket of water was another well-dressed and frightened child. In his mid-teens, Duncan was one of the oldest of the children heading out and was a head taller than most. Some children cried, and others mocked courage by teasing each other, shoving, and punching. Duncan just stood silently in line, a numbness overwhelming his mind.

Duncan was lost in his thoughts when a woman approached and asked to see his card. Like all the other children, he carried a pre-addressed and

stamped postcard. When he found where he would be living, he would send the card to his mother, so she would know where he was. The card was the most precious thing he had with him, for without it, he and his mother might be lost to each other for months.

"Oh, yes, here it is," Duncan replied, shaking off his fog.

"I grew up not far from your street, myself," the woman said before moving on.

Duncan looked again at his mother's handwriting and placed the card back into the breast pocket of his flannel suit coat. He looked around to see his mother hugging a younger neighbor who was seeing her ten-year-old daughter off.

Duncan looked around at the faces of the children, stepping gingerly through the crowd until he found the little girl from flat 3C.

Emma was sobbing and stretching herself to see above the crowd. Duncan brushed her hair and bent down to say hello.

"Do you mind if I stick with you, Emma?"

The girl didn't answer.

"Here," he said. After putting down his bag and adjusting his backpack, he picked her up and turned around, pointing to where their mothers were consoling each other.

Emma's mother mouthed the words "Thank you!" and forced a smile for her daughter. Duncan's mother beamed with pride and waved.

As the two talked, a man in a long, khaki raincoat and matching fedora approached from behind. Duncan's luggage was sitting on the platform just behind his right leg. Without him noticing, the man fiddled with Duncan's luggage, then waded back through the flood of small people and disappeared.

The train whistle blew, calling everyone's attention to the conductor barking orders to the children. The doors of the train cars opened, and the children filed toward the closest ones. Emma grabbed hold of Duncan's left hand and squeezed tight.

CHAPTER 2

The train was crowded. Emma sat close, almost on Duncan's lap, as the locomotive pulled from the station and headed north. Duncan had seldom been to the countryside, except on church picnics, and he had never been to Oxford. He pressed his face against the window and watched the suburbs turn gradually to countryside and the smokey skies of London fade into the distance.

Duncan prayed for his mother and his father. Emma had removed her hand from his but continued to hold tight to the strap of his backpack. Duncan gave her some confidence and a connection to home, and she was not about to let him go. They made small talk together and with the other kids crowded into their car, but they were both naturally quieter and were content to stay so.

Conductors shuffled up and down the aisles occasionally, checking on the children and offering encouragement. "Heads up! It won't be long, now! Holiday in the country, lads and lasses! A nice holiday in the countryside in store for you!"

Nearing Oxford, however, a man with a different countenance crept through the cars. He wore small iron-rimmed glasses beneath tightly cropped hair. He hung a leather cap on his right hand as if concealing something beneath it. The man moved slowly and didn't smile. He was looking for something or someone, but he asked no questions.

The man spent extra time looking up and down Duncan's train car. He lingered in a way that made Duncan uncomfortable. Before moving on, he asked the boy across from Duncan to move the bag that was sitting between his feet. When he did, the man had a direct view of Duncan's luggage. He gazed at it intensely and then moved on. Duncan was glad to have him gone.

Arriving in Oxford, the children were separated into boys and girls and then subdivided. When Emma had to leave Duncan, he reassured her that she would be fine and would have a great time playing in the countryside with the other girls. He promised to come find her, if he could, and to come by for a picnic before too long. He knew it was likely that they would not see each other until they were both back in London, living in neighboring flats, but he wanted to leave her with hope and comfort.

"You have your card, right?"

"Yes," Emma replied.

"It's really important. Show it to me."

The girl pulled it from her coat pocket and held it out. "Very good. Be sure to send it back to your mum and say something really sweet to her. Yes?"

Emma nodded her head, put the card in her pocket, and lined up with the other girls. She would be sent to a church just outside of Oxford to be processed; she would stay there until she was placed with a family in Yorkshire.

Duncan was sent to the Green Dragon School on the Banbury Road, just outside of the main city of Oxford. He was given a cot in the gym with the other boys from the train. He was in row fifteen, cot number five. That six foot by three foot rectangular space would be the only place he could call his own until he was placed in a permanent location to ride out the crisis. He looked up and tried to satisfy himself: his space rose thirty feet to the rafters. He could at least imagine it was all his.

The noise in the gym was a painful drone of chatter mixed with occasional shouts that reminded Duncan of the drone of Luftwaffe planes from the previous night's raids. Mercifully, there were no air-raid sirens.

Jimmy, a plump Cockney, sat on the number four cot of row fourteen. He began to talk as soon as Duncan arrived. "So, first time here?"

"Yep," Duncan replied.

"Not me. I was here last year. Came in the very first wave, I did. Stayed here for a nice holiday. Just a few months. Enjoyed the change of pace

at first, actually, but found it boring after a month. Not like London—a sleepy place it is, here. But it'll be fine for another change.”

Duncan found the kid annoying and looked around for a place to move, but Jimmy had already grown tired of the conversation and moved on like a hyena searching for more victims.

Apprehensive about meeting the other boys, Duncan opened his suitcase to pick out one of the books he had asked his mother to pack. Instead of a book, however, Duncan was startled to find a piece of paper wrapped and tied with a string around a rectangular object that felt like a brick. *Mum?*

On the paper was a note, written in pencil.

Young man, I saw how you treated the little girl. Very generous and gentlemanly of you. I am trusting you to be worthy of those accolades again. This is the most important thing I have ever been in possession of, but it is not mine. Neither is it yours. It is a thing meant to be lost—but don't lose it! Please deliver it to Professor John McLeod of 20 Northmoor Road, Oxford. Don't show it around, just get it there as soon as you can. Prove worthy.

Questions flooded his mind: How did the note and object get there? Who had put it into his suitcase? It had to have come after he helped Emma, but when? The questions remained unanswered as he untied the string and unwrapped the package.

The paper was not covering a brick, but a piece of wood that looked like a box. As he turned it over in his hands, however, he could find no latch or hinge. It appeared to be a solid piece of wood; every face was ornamented by carvings worn dull.

On one wide surface was a Celtic cross ornamented with rough carvings of people, animals, and symbols. On the opposite surface was a stag lying down, its head slumped onto its forelegs. What was perhaps a man's legs and arms, or a St. Andrew's cross, spread out in the shape of an X

beneath the beast. Marks around its antlers made it look like the deer's head was glowing.

Around the four narrower sides ran a continuous ring of images, symbols, and scenes. Duncan couldn't even guess at the meaning of most of them. There were lions and deer, unicorns and dogs. There were crosses and Ss, human beings and Celtic runes. He turned it over and over, looking for an opening and fingering the carvings.

Duncan's imagination was filled with strange images he did not understand. When he finally came back to the gym, someone was trying to break into his thoughts. “Mate . . . Mate, I'm talking to you, Mate.”

Jimmy had come back to his cot and was curiously staring at the object gingerly held by Duncan. “I say, is that yours, mate? What is it?”

“No, it's not mine,” Duncan answered.

“Not yours, well then, I think I lost it. Give it back to me.”

“Um,” Duncan caught himself. “It's mine to deliver to someone else. Just doing a favor.” Duncan looked up at Jimmy. Behind the other boy's left ear, he saw a leather cap move across the back of the gym. His eyes focused, and he recognized the man as the one who had seemed to linger on him and his bag on the train. He felt strange and slipped the block back into his luggage and under his cot. He pulled his backpack up and put it in the place of a pillow before lying back against it and looking up at the ceiling. Bored again, Jimmy walked away.

CHAPTER 3

The next few days were routine for Duncan and the 200 other boys in the Dragon School gym. They had time to play in the school yard and heard basic lectures on hygiene, the state of the war, and the need for common sacrifice. Duncan came to measure his day by the smells wafting through the gym. The cooking odors grew stronger as the meals progressed through the day from morning porridge to evening stew. He organized his cot so that pictures of his mother and father always sat on the floor beneath his head, and one of his books was always within reach if he needed to escape for a few minutes.

Occasionally, mostly at night, he would get the wooden block from his luggage and feel it in the dark, running his fingers through the worn cuts and wondering what it was and why he was given it to deliver. He imagined all kinds of scenarios, and it kept his mind occupied on things other than being stuck living in a school gym without his parents.

Duncan made a few friends, including Jimmy, who calmed down as the days went on. Many of the boys were placed in private homes, where they would wait out the bombings in London. As the cots emptied, Duncan worried about his own fate. Soon, half the boys were left. Then just fifty. Then twenty-five.

As the numbers of boys declined, their minders gave them more freedom and more little jobs to do to help around the school. Duncan made sure to ask the volunteers about directions in Oxford and particularly the way to Northmoor Road, which turned out to be only blocks away from the Dragon School.

Two weeks into their stay, the news from London was no better than when the children were evacuated. Nazi planes had continued nightly bombing raids, and though the volunteers tried not to alarm the children,

they all knew homes were being destroyed and parents were being killed. They all prayed not to wake up orphans; they all cursed the Nazi hun.

Being one of the older boys, Duncan was trusted with more responsibility than the others. He helped with the younger kids wherever he could and proved himself trustworthy enough to take a wagon full of milk bottles to the drop-off spot closer to downtown Oxford. He embraced the chance to get out of the school and, at least for a few moments, to feel like he was free again. He hoped to have the chance to find Professor McLeod and deliver the package to him, though he also wished he could keep it, whatever it was.

One of the volunteers, an older woman named Hazel, pressed a two pence coin into his hand and whispered, "Maybe you will be wanting a little candy while you are out?" She ended the sentence with a wink. He thanked her and said that would be very nice. He wished he could take some candy to little Emma but didn't have any idea where to find her. By now, kids from the trains were strewn throughout the Oxfordshire countryside and at nearly every school and church in the city. A search for her would surely be fruitless, he realized.

Duncan packed the block and the note he received with it in his backpack and started off toward the appointed destination of his milk-bottle mission. He moved quickly so he would have time to run his other errands too. Leaving his cart on the sidewalk, he walked into a newspaper stand and asked for a pence worth of candy, deciding it was best not to take advantage but to return the other pence to Mrs. Hazel.

Duncan wheeled his cart back down the Banbury Road toward the Dragon School, but then went up a side street and around behind the school, turning onto Northmoor Road and searching the numbers until he found house number 20.

He wheeled his cart into the drive and walked toward the front door, which was green with a bronze lion-head knocker in its center. He took a deep breath and raised the knocker, making it clang three times. He stepped back and waited for an old professor in a wool suit, smoking a

pipe, and looking down at him in reading glasses.

When the door cracked open, Duncan was not met with a stodgy old professor, but a girl about his age. Her brown hair framed her big brown eyes with soft curls. He found himself drawn into those eyes, and somewhere deep inside, he suspected they could make him do anything.

“Well? What do you want?” the girl snapped at him.

Duncan shook himself free of the power of her gaze but could only manage to stumble over his words, making little sense. Frustrated, the girl looked beyond him and saw the cart in the drive.

“Oh, you are here for scrap metal. No, we don’t have any today. Goodbye.” She shut the door, leaving Duncan on the step.

Duncan braced himself for another encounter with the brown pools and knocked again.

Before the girl could get out an exasperated “Yes?!” he blurted out: “McLeod. Professor McLeod. Here to see him.” He smiled a victory grin.

“He is busy writing today and wishes not to be disturbed. Come back next Wednesday.”

She shut the door.

He knocked again.

Less mesmerized by her eyes and more annoyed now, Duncan readied himself for the challenge. He had to knock a third time before he heard footsteps approaching the other side of the door. The handle turned. He was ready.

“See here, missy!” He began his rejoinder, but instead of two big brown eyes staring back at him, he was met with a large floral-patterned apron, atop which floated stern cat-eye glasses.

“Now *you* see here, ruffian!” the woman dressed him down. “The professor does not countenance such rudeness in his home or on his doorstep! I don’t know what you want or who you are, and I don’t rightly care. Go away and come back when you learn some manners.” She slammed the door, and he heard a bolt lock on the other side.

“All I want to do is deliver this stupid piece of wood,” he muttered to

himself as he turned back toward his cart. Then he turned around again with new resolve. The brown eyes were looking at him through the window.

As he approached the house, a hand came up from beneath them and pulled the blinds shut. He walked to the next window, and as he did, the blind slammed down. It was the same with the next window, and the next. The game on, he jumped a small hedge to the back of the house and began to run just ahead of the eyes and the falling shades. Thinking “I’m winning!” kept him from looking where he was going as he turned the corner of the house.

His legs kept pumping but his shoulder was checked in its progress by a slight wall—a wall of herringbone tweed that stumbled with him and coughed up its pipe.

“Sir! What is the meaning of this!” the wall croaked as it stood erect and looked down at Duncan, who was splayed among the last of the summer flowers. The eyes appeared at the window, shining with laughter until a floral apron pulled the last blind down in disgust.

“Young man, what are you doing here?”

“Well, sir—oh!” Duncan suddenly realized: “You must be Professor McLeod!” He jumped to his feet.

“Of course I am, because this is his house, so I have to be. I do the asking and the telling around here when intruders come into the garden and knock me about.”

“Yes, well, sorry about that, sir. I, well, your daughter and your wife wouldn’t let me in to see you, sir, and I have something for you.”

“I have a daughter but not a wife, and if you are a courier, you could have left the package on the step or given it to one of them. Why do you need me?”

“Well, sir, I don’t know, sir. But you see, I am an evacuee from London and—” the professor cut him off.

“Of course you are. I would recognize that city accent anywhere, young man, and I don’t have any more to give to charity right now, so good day to you.”

CHAPTER 4

“No, sir, I don’t want anything from you. I have something for you. I was given a package for you.”

“Go on.”

“Well, it’s here in my pack, sir.” Duncan unbuckled the top flap of his canvas pack and pulled the wooden object from its resting place. He handed it to the man, who seemed more puzzled than pleased by it.

He turned it in his hands and stepped out of the shade into the sun to examine it more closely. “Lord above, have mercy on us!” he finally exclaimed. He started suddenly and trained a dreadful countenance on Duncan. “Where did you get this?”

Startled by his change in demeanor, Duncan stumbled over his words. “I don’t quite know, sir, I just . . .”

Seeing there would be no quick answer, Professor McLeod cut him off, grabbed the strap of his pack, and dragged him up the back steps into the house. Duncan was too startled to resist. Once inside, he saw the girl with the big brown eyes standing by the kitchen sink.

The man pulled him fully into the room before he slammed and locked the door.

“Daddy!” the girl exclaimed.

“Molly, meet boy, whatever his name is. Boy, meet Molly. Mrs. Moore, some tea in my study, if you would.”

“Duncan. The boy’s name is Duncan,” Duncan called back as he was dragged around the corner and into the professor’s study.

The room was appointed just as Duncan had assumed a professor’s study would be: lots of books on shelves and a desk in front of a bay window, strewn with papers, pens, and ink pots. Accumulated cultural artifacts were assembled haphazardly in corners and on shelves. There was a skull and various fossils, animal bones, and African masks. A bottle of port sat surrounded by tiny crystal glasses on a small table between two leather chairs. Various bits of old weapons were stored in the corner. English pikes leaned on African spears. Thin wooden bows leaned against bulky crossbows. Swords and daggers hung on hooks above them all. Next to the blades were beautifully polished metal rings. Duncan felt like a five-year-old in a candy store.

“Just sit there, son,” the man ordered as he turned on the desk light and began to examine the package.

Duncan alternated glances at the man examining the object with his own investigation of the cultural debris around him.

The man murmured and took notes. He turned the wooden box around; each edge had a turn in the light of the lamp. As if he had forgotten to do so, he suddenly jumped from his seat, looked out the window, and pulled the blind down.

“Do you know what this is, son?”

“No.”

“Just as well. Tell me your story, then. How did you get it and why did you bring it to me?”

Duncan began recounting the story as best he could, guessing at how the object found its way into his luggage. He produced the note from his pack and handed it to Professor McLeod who replaced his reading glasses after taking it.

“Curious. Very curious.” The man stood and stepped over to the old leather chair near where Duncan sat.

A knock broke the silence, and the housekeeper brought in a tray with a pot of tea and small hard biscuits. “Thank you, Mrs. Moore,” the professor said. Duncan did not respond, as he was not sure any of it was for him. As the door shut, he caught a glimpse of the bottom of Molly’s blue dress in the hallway.

“So, you are an evacuee, are you? Where are you staying?”

“Well, I have a cot at the Dragon School. We are in the gym, you know. Most of the boys have been taken to homes or other rooms to stay, but I have not yet been called.”

“Do you like it in the gym on a cot, son?”

“It’s fine, I guess. It’s better than being bombed.” Duncan’s mind suddenly raced to his mother’s plight at home, and guilt washed over him. “I mean, I am sure my mum is fine, but I wish she could be here with me. But my dad will shoot a few of those nasty Nazi birds from the sky, and it will all be over soon.”

“Right you are.” The man paused. “Duncan, I believe you know nothing about this box you brought to me, and neither of us know why you are here. But the fact is that you *are* here, now. You were chosen to bear this great gift to me and found a way to do so. I could use a boy like you around here to help with the garden and my work. I’m an archaeologist, you see. I study the artifacts man leaves behind—the clues and mysteries he leaves for us to follow. That often requires having an extra set of strong arms around, and you are a kind of mystery as well, so I like you.”

Duncan straightened in his chair.

“Duncan, would you like to come here and live? I mean, just for the duration of the crisis. Afterward you can return to your mother and help get life back to normal in our capital city.”

“Yes, sir! I would like that very much, sir!”

“Well, then, let’s send you back to the school, and I will come by tomorrow and fill out the paperwork to be your volunteer guardian here in Oxford.”

The professor stood, and Duncan followed him to the door.

“Um, sir—thank you, but you might want to check with your daughter because I am pretty sure she hates me.”

“Hates you?” The professor laughed. “Good! I train her to hate all teen ruffians!”

Duncan looked confused as they exited the study. Molly and Mrs. Moore were watching from the drawing room as the professor wished Duncan well and told the boy to expect him by nine the next morning. Before he shut the door, though, he turned and asked, “Molly, do you hate this poor boy?” Duncan was already outside on the step, and as much as he strained his ears, he could not hear an answer from the drawing room.



Duncan was very happy to be leaving in the morning and found it hard to fall asleep. His imagination was lost in powerful brown eyes dancing amid swords and spears and skulls. He couldn’t help but imagine what life would be like living at 20 Northmoor Road. Even though it wasn’t yet official, he found himself eagerly retrieving his postcard before breakfast and writing it to his mother.

Dearest Mother,

I have found the most wonderful family to live with. He is a professor at Oxford, and he has a housekeeper and a daughter named Molly. I didn’t see a mother, though I suppose there is one. They live at 20 Northmoor Road, here in Oxford. Please write to me when you can, and tell me how things are in London. I hope Father has already shot some of those Nazis from the sky. Love you both very much.

Your son,
Duncan

CHAPTER 5

The professor carried Duncan's bag as they walked the few blocks from the Dragon School to the McLeod household. They talked as they walked, and the professor puffed a stout walnut pipe while Duncan told him more about his family and his life up to the point when the Blitz began.

"Well, my boy, I am looking forward to getting to know you even better," the man said as they turned into the drive.

Molly and Mrs. Moore were waiting when the two arrived. Though it was only Friday, Molly wore her best Sunday dress. Mrs. Moore wore a newly pressed white apron over her dress, which bore a print of small red flowers. In the days ahead, Duncan would come to know that Mrs. Moore only wore floral pattern dresses, all the same style, but different colors. Her motto when it came to her wardrobe: "Why have to think about it?"

"Mrs. Moore, would you show Duncan to his room? I have some things to attend to at the college and will return for supper. Molly, do be civil, won't you?"

Mrs. Moore, who smelled of mint and mothballs, introduced herself and explained that she had been the professor's housekeeper for almost ten years. She talked of her family living in what Duncan thought was an anthill but turned out to be the Bedfordshire town of Ampthill.

His room was on the third floor, which was a partly converted attic. Mrs. Moore's room was on the opposite end of the floor, and there was a small sitting room between the two.

Mrs. Moore let Duncan settle into his room and told him to come down when he was ready. She would prepare tea and a snack for him in the kitchen.

Duncan unpacked the few belongings he had with him. He put his

books on the nightstand and set the picture of his father on the dresser, but he took his mother's with him to the bed. He lay on the quilt studying the portrait; he was thankful to be settled into a nice, safe home, but somehow this made him miss her even more.

When he began to feel hungry, he stood and started down the stairs. Molly was leaving her own room when he arrived on the second-floor landing. She pressed her blue and white dress down flat with her hands and smiled at him.

"Good morning, Duncan; my name is Molly."

"Good morning, Molly; my name is Duncan."

Each offered a small, nervous laugh.

Duncan glanced over her shoulder, but Molly gripped the door handle behind her back and pulled her door closed. "It's not proper for a boy to see into a girl's room, Duncan."

"Oh," Duncan said, a tinge of embarrassment sneaking into his voice. "I didn't know. I don't have any sisters."

Molly turned and headed down the stairs, seeming to enjoy another moment of putting the boy back on defense.

Duncan sat with Molly and Mrs. Moore, sharing tea, scones, and jam. "With the war heating up and a bunch of Yankees expected to get over here eventually and join the war, this might be the last we see of the good stuff," Mrs. Moore said as she buttered a piece of scone. "Better enjoy it, children. I lived through the Great War some twenty-odd years ago and can attest that war ain't all jam and butter. Oh, it has its benefits, mind you, but eating is not one of them."

The three talked of the house rules and daily routines. Mrs. Moore gave Duncan a list of jobs to start him off, including putting the garbage on the curb, taking the glass and metals to the recycling, and helping to keep up the back garden.

Duncan listened dutifully but found himself stealing glances at Molly as he did. There was something about those brown eyes that captivated him. He had never experienced anything quite like looking at them. It

wasn't just that her eyes were extremely large; there was a power behind them that seemed incongruous with the teenager's slight frame. In the days ahead those eyes would lose only the initial power to shock him, but they would not lose their influence over him.

"Why don't you show Duncan around the neighborhood, Molly?"

"Well, do you want to look around, *delivery boy*?" Molly asked.

The two walked, but barely talked, through the outskirts of Oxford and down to the park, where a few college boys played cricket. Most of the conversation consisted in Molly pointing out neighbors and places of interest. Duncan barely looked the girl in the face, and Molly returned the uncomfortable favor.



Professor McLeod was a creature of very predictable habits. But on this day, he did not return for tea at 4:00 p.m. and was still not home for supper at 6:00 p.m. "That man!" Mrs. Moore muttered to herself. "First night with a new house guest, and he decides to eat at the pub! No word to Mrs. Moore, oh, no. No word for Mrs. Moore! Why would she want to know? How could it affect her? I'm sure she is not trying to have a nice meal for our new guest!" Mrs. Moore seamlessly carried on the mock conversation with herself while she cleared the table and washed the dishes.

At 8:15 p.m., the professor burst through the front door, dripping water on the floor as he bolted it behind him. He ran to the back door and bolted it, too, before peering through the curtain into the garden. "The shades, quickly, the shades!" he barked to the other three.

"Is there a bombing raid, Father? We didn't hear the sirens." Molly was heading to the sitting room, and Duncan crashed up the stairs after Mrs. Moore.

Only after they'd reassembled and the professor was satisfied that the house was buckled up tight did he answer Molly's question.

"No, no air raid tonight," he said as he caught his breath.

"Then what on this great earth of God's creation is this jackrabbiting around about?" Mrs. Moore asked, her meaty hands firmly planted on her ample hips. "And all this water on my floors!"

The man grabbed Duncan by the arm and dragged him into his study. "Keep the doors locked and blinds down, Mrs. Moore. There are bad people about this night, Nazis maybe even, and we *don't* want to let them in to play! Molly," he continued, "when Mrs. Moore has some tea ready, would you please do the delivering?"

The man motioned for Duncan to sit in the tattered leather chair closest to the door as he took the one on the opposite side of the table and poured himself a small glass of port from the crystal decanter.

"Son, I need to ask you to go over your entire story with me again. But before you do, I need you to look me in the eye and answer this question: Have you heard of the Order of the Sporrai?"

"No," Duncan answered, his heart racing with the tension in the room. A nagging fear crept over him. He might be asked to leave and go back to his cot at the Dragon School.

"Are you sure? Never heard your parents talk of it, or an uncle, or grandparents, or anyone else associated with you?"

"No, sir. At least I don't think so, sir."

"Now, look at me carefully, son. What do you know of the treasures of Isildane?"

"Treasures? I'm a shopkeeper's son from London, sir. I don't know of treasures or a land called Isildane."

The man sat back in his seat and shifted his feet. Staring at the space above his desk, he said, "It's not a place, son, it's a person. Isildane is a man. But never mind about that, now. I believe you don't know, but that just deepens the mystery. Why are you here? Why did you have it? I need to hear your story again. Give me the names of your parents, any odd recollections from your childhood, strange holidays you were taken on—whatever comes to mind that might set you and your family apart from the average."

Duncan felt only slightly uncomfortable telling this man he barely knew about his family. He trusted him in a way he couldn't rationalize, and he certainly did not want to go back to living on a cot in a stinky gym.

Molly arrived with tea as Duncan was recounting the last moments before his father went off to train as a pilot for the Royal Air Force.

"Here, sit down, Molly." The man gestured to his daughter to take his seat. He shut the door and pulled his desk chair over closer to them before sitting down.

"Duncan, as Molly knows, Mrs. Moore, though a lovely woman, is a member of the royal club of yachting and gossip!" He looked at them from under his eyebrows.

Molly nodded in agreement. "Can't keep a secret any longer than it takes her to get to market!"

"So the three of us will keep this to ourselves. She may be out there straining her ears to hear even now, so let's keep it low." The man poured each of them a cup of tea, preparing it as they preferred, then scooted his chair in even closer.

"Duncan, I am going to have to trust you further because you proved trustworthy in bringing me the package and because someone with knowledge has already trusted you. Continue to prove yourself worthy, son."

"Molly knows a bit about my work and about an organization I have been trying to track down for the last decade. I believe they existed and continue to exist, but I am not one of them and have not, until now it seems, been in contact with a member."

Duncan wondered if the man meant that he was a member of this society without knowing it. He remembered back to when he and Zachary and Maxwell formed a club in year six but knew that couldn't be what the professor meant.

"As I told you, I am an archeologist. I dig up the past and try to tell the world today what life was like before we came along with our machines and motorcars. In my research I discovered that a society once existed

that protected an ancient source of power, often called the treasures, or just the treasure, of a man named Isildane."

The professor took his tea and stood, leaning on his desk. "There is evidence of them in the myths and legends of the ancient peoples. There is evidence of them in medieval literature and even in literature being written in our century, Duncan. I believe they existed. I believe they lived to protect the treasures. I believe they still exist today."

Duncan sat silent and dumbfounded. Molly stared at the expression on his face in great amusement. If she hadn't been part of her father's work since she was a babe, she would have the same look on her face, she mused.

"And, what is more, I believe we are being called into service!"

Duncan put his teacup down on the table and took a deep breath.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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