

# 1

Bastion stood at the top of the stairs staring down into the darkness. The stairs were wood and looked like they had been made a long time ago. He had expected it to be cold, but the air felt warm and dry. As with the rest of the building this space did not look neglected. These were no rickety stairs leading into a cold and damp basement.

To the right of the stairs Bastion saw a light switch. He flicked it on and bulbs came to life above the stair well revealing a flight of about twenty steps that came to an end at another closed door.

Bastion descended the steps. They were firm beneath his feet with no creaks or loose boards which gave him courage to keep going. After all the events of the last two days he wasn't sure if he wanted anymore surprises, which made him wonder why he was walking down a hidden staircase beneath a bookshop that apparently his dead father had owned.

At the bottom of the stairs Bastion approached the door. It was a plain wooden, exactly the same as the one at the top. The only thing that was different that Bastion could see was that there was no lock.

He reached out and grasped the door handle. Once more his ring warmed against his finger, but this time it was much more noticeable, and sent a tingle through his hand. He pulled his hand away and inspected the ring, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. He twisted the ring on his finger and the tingling went away. He glanced around wondering what was going on, but also was now curious.

"Weird" he said to the door which just stared back at him blankly.

He reached out again and grasped the door hand. Again the tingle and warmth returned. He turned and pushed the door open.

It was dark beyond the door. He stepped through and as he did so

he felt the same tingle in his hand spread over his body, as though he was stepping through some kind of unseen membrane. He jumped back.

“What the hell?”

Tentatively, he put his hand through the door. Again the tingle but nothing else. In the darkness he thought he saw a faint glow around the door frame, but then it was gone. And suddenly, lights in the room beyond started to come to life of their own accord. Bastion’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

Stretching away from him, and framed by the doorframe, were more rows of shelves, these were much taller than the bookshop upstairs and the books on them looked much much older. Bastion stepped through, ignoring the tingle this time, surprised at the size of the room before him. The floor was sunken, and Bastion stepped down the three steps onto the floor proper which was made out of solid stone. The room was at least three to four times the size of the entire bookshop upstairs. Most of the space was taken up by tall bookshelves that reached at least two feet higher than the top of his head. Not all the shelves were taken up by books. On some there were strange objects. Weird microscopes, an arrangement of what could only be described as crystal balls, little wooden figurines on one shelf that looked so life like Bastion had to blink to convince himself they weren’t.

He walked down the aisle that lead through the middle of the bookshelves and came to a circular area. From here he could see that the shelves were all arranged around this centre, leading off in a radius and organised in a widening circle around the room.

In the centre was a large desk, upon which were piled more books. Some were incredibly large and reminded Bastion of atlases, others were remarkably small, so tiny you’d need a magnifying glass to read. Which was good, because fastened to one corner of the desk was a large magnifying glass that looked like it could be moved around to read over. Next to this, and looking out of place amongst such old books and a scene that looked like it had stepped right out of Harry Potter, was a television, one of the boxy older kind.

As with the bookshop upstairs, there was no dust. Everything looked as though it had been left just moments earlier and at any second the owner would come back. Which kind of freaked Bastion out, considering that someone was his murdered father.

Bastion looked around and wondered if his mother knew about all

of this and was this secret space somehow related to why she killed him? Psychotic break was how things were termed officially, but explanations beyond that were quite limited and, up until now, Bastion had never really dug much deeper, afraid of what he might learn.

Looking at the shelves of books that looked like they had stepped straight out of the middle-ages, Bastion wondered if his father was some kind of antique book dealer. That could really be the only explanation. But then, why the hidden door? Why no signs out front.

Perhaps he was an illegal antique book dealer. Bastion had heard of such things and looking around him he could believe that shady dealings were undertaken in this subterranean crypt. What kind of people dealt in illegal antique books? And what were illegal antique books anyway? There was no such thing as forbidden books were there? But then, what if they were *stolen* antique books? That would explain the secrecy and the cover, and perhaps why his father had never told him about this place.

Which made him wonder again about his father's murder and why his mother had done it.

As always, thoughts of his mother made Bastion's stomach tie itself up in knots. How was someone supposed to feel about a crazy mother that had murdered your father. Bastion had never been able to bring himself to hate her, but he also wasn't sure that he felt much love for her either.

As he looked around and thought, he walked round the desk to the large over-stuffed armchair beyond and sat down.

The seat was comfortable, extremely so, that he could almost imagine that it was made especially for him.

Was this where his father sat as he dealt in his stolen books? How often did he come here, he wondered. Did anyone else know about this place.

As he mused about things he had no answers to, Bastion noticed a white envelope on the desk. It was placed perfectly so that anyone sitting on this chair was see it directly in front of them. It was unmissable as it leaned perfectly placed against a large dark blue glass sphere.

Bastion swallowed as he realised what was written on the envelope in perfect handwriting.

Just one word.

*Bastion.*

Bastion blinked and read it again. Yep, it still read his name. An

envelope addressed to him. He wasn't aware of anyone else called Bastion, and he also knew of no one else that had the keys to this place so the logical conclusion was that this letter was addressed to him.

But, if the lawyer was to be believed, then no one had been here in years, and this letter had sat here untouched for over ten years, waiting for this day when Bastion would sit in this chair and see. Placed as though they knew he would be sitting right here and see it. Perhaps the lawyer had placed it her. But no, he said no one had been here, and something told Bastion that that was the truth. No one had been in this place since his father had left it many years ago.

Tentatively, and with hands that suddenly felt clammy, Bastion reached out for the envelope. He turned it over in his hands. It was unremarkable. Just a plain white envelope, albeit of a pretty hefty paper stock. The handwriting was neat, with a flowing flourish on the 'B' as though the writer was someone who liked to add a little dramatic flair.

Bastion looked around the room, which had a sudden air of expectation. He couldn't help but feel as though this place had been waiting for him and now that he was here, there was a sense that it was holding its breath. But, for what?

Swallowing back the nerves, Bastion gently tore the envelope open.

He pulled out a single piece of white paper that matched the envelope. Unfolding it, Bastion frowned.

There was a single line of handwriting in the centre of the page.

Nothing else. It wasn't a letter. It wasn't a set of instructions.

Well, that wasn't true. The first two words were exactly that: 'Read me'.

Bastion's eyes flicked over the letters and he shook his head. The words were not even in English, perhaps Latin. Bastion cast his mind back to to a distant Latin class that he quickly gave up when he had been at high school. But, nothing came to mind.

The sense of expectation in the room became suddenly heavy.

Frowning over the words, Bastion quietly mouthed them, trying to decipher some meaning.

*"Ne quam exspectat, sed dormit. Mortuum dicat, veni foras."*

It made no sense to Bastion, but his mind was suddenly distracted from the strange words on the paper and instead became aware of a deep thrum that was rising in the room, as though from deep underground. He could feel a gently vibration in his feet, and out of nowhere he sensed a gentle sigh of wind ease groan through the room.

“What the hell is going on?”

The thrum grew, and the sighing wind picked up the pace slightly, ruffling some of the pages of the open books on the desk.

There shouldn't, *couldn't* be any wind down here. It was a closed room underground.

Bastion was just thinking it might be time to get out of here when the ring on his finger suddenly grew intensely warm, and there was a bright green flash.

“Holy crap!” Bastion leapt up and tore the ring from his finger, throwing it to the desk where it dropped with a thud.

The wind died and the low thrumming in his feet also stopped. Suddenly everything was deathly still, apart from Bastion's heart that now felt like it was beating against his ribcage.

Bastion leant over the desk and peered down at the ring. It looked like it always had. A thick, gold ring with a latin inscription around a large clear diamond. Except that diamond a second ago had flash a bright green. Tentatively, Bastion reached out and pushed it with his finger. It was cool to the touch. Just a gold ring. Nothing more.

Then someone spoke behind him.

“Son, it's good to see you.”