

THE PALADIN PROPHECY

ROGUE

ONE OF THEIR OWN HAS BETRAYED THEM.



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARK FROST

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Will's List of Rules to Live By.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

YOU DON'T ALWAYS HAVE TO PLAY BY THE RULES

Will West is playing a dangerous game. He is continuing to work with the mastermind of the sinister Paladin Prophecy plot - his own grandfather, Franklin Greenwood. Will wants to keep his friends safe, but they are in the hands of a madman. To defeat Greenwood the team must rescue Will's guardian. But their mission will take them to a battle that could obliterate their world. Can they protect Earth from the demons beyond? Or could a rogue player destroy them all?

Thrilling mystery and electrifying suspense from Mark Frost, the screenwriter of *Fantastic Four* and co-creator of *Twin Peaks*.

ROGUE

THE PALADIN PROPHECY

BOOK III

MARK FROST

RHCP DIGITAL

FOR MY SON TRAVIS . . .

ONE

WILL'S RULES FOR LIVING #1:

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO KEEP A SECRET, DON'T TELL ANYBODY.

"Have you ever tasted champagne, Will?"

"Can't say that I have, no, sir."

Franklin Greenwood gestured to his butler, Lemuel Clegg, who directed one of the uniformed staff members standing by with an open bottle toward Will.

"Just a splash," said Franklin, then leaned over toward his grandson, seated to his right, and winked. "It's not as if we don't have something to celebrate."

"That's right, sir," said Will.

He watched the crystal liquid swirl around the bottom of his glass as the waiter withdrew the bottle. Will raised his drink, imitating his grandfather, and touched the glass to his.

"To the Prophecy," said Franklin.

"To the Prophecy," said Will.

He took a sip and grimaced at the bitter bite of the effervescence. Franklin drained his glass in one greedy gulp and held it out for more. The nearby staff member holding the bottle rushed to refill it, without appearing to hurry.

"I can't tell you what joy these last few months have brought me, Will. I've never wanted anything more than to share with my family the blessings I've worked so hard to create. And as you know, for the longest time I'd given up imagining that would ever be possible."

Will nodded sympathetically, forced another small swallow of the frothy swill down his throat, then set down the glass, hoping he could get away with leaving the rest of it untouched. "I feel the same way."

"Will, this time we've spent together has meant more to me than I can even begin to express. Your willingness to listen and learn without judging, your positive attitude toward our goals . . ." Franklin leaned over and laid a cold hand on top of Will's. "But do you know what has been most gratifying for me? The opportunity to bear witness to your burgeoning talents."

"Thank you, sir."

"I can think of no measurable way to assign a value to that. This is a priceless treasure. After so many disappointments in my personal life, I could never have hoped for more."

"For me, too." Will held his gaze and smiled shyly.

"Grandfather?"

"Yes, Will."

"You've told me that, as we get to know each other, you wanted nothing more than to gain my trust."

"That continues to mean more to me than I have words to express . . ."

Franklin's voice caught in his throat, choked with emotion. Moisture appeared in his hazy blue eyes. He gulped down another half glass of champagne, then took a pocket square from his crested blue school blazer and dabbed away some tears.

"You don't have to say anything, Grandpa. And I only hope that, with all you've seen and heard from me these last few weeks, I've gained your trust as well."

"Yes, of course." Franklin folded and pocketed his handkerchief and smiled benignly. "How may I convey that to you, Will?"

"I think I'm ready to hear the whole story."

Franklin considered the request, savored the final bite of his soy-fed Japanese Kobe rib-eye steak, pushed his plate back—another waiting staff member whisked it away instantly—then reached over and patted Will’s hand.

“Let’s take a walk,” said Franklin.

They exited the old, weather-worn castle out a side door that Will hadn’t noticed before, depositing them on the less-developed eastern side of the island. The late-summer sun hung low in the sky, shadows edging toward evening. Franklin started down a trim, graveled path that led through manicured gardens. Will kept exact pace with the old man’s long, even strides.

“I grew up on this island,” said Franklin, looking around as they walked. “My earliest memories are all enmeshed with this place—these trees, the smells, the water, the magnificent views.”

“Were you born here?” asked Will.

“Nearby,” said Franklin, gesturing vaguely toward the mainland. “Father founded the Center a few years before I was born; I drew my first breath in the small school infirmary that was part of our original campus. All that’s gone now, of course. By the time I was a toddler, Father had purchased the Crag and the island from the Cornish family. Everything about the Prophecy and our family’s involvement with it starts with Ian Cornish.”

“Cornish came to Wisconsin after the Civil War, didn’t he?”

Franklin patted Will’s arm. “You have been paying attention, haven’t you?”

“I figured that’s why you wanted me to sort through all those old files up there,” said Will, nodding back toward the tower that loomed over the castle’s eastern half. “To learn about the Center and the Greenwood family tree.”

As he glanced up at the tower’s windows, Will held up two fingers behind the older man’s back, so quickly that his

grandfather couldn't see them.

"Indeed. Well reasoned, my boy. Ian Cornish designed and manufactured rifles, cannons, and munitions and amassed a great fortune, as you know, by the end of the Civil War. But he lost his oldest son in the war's final month, and it unhinged the man. He fled New England and settled here, a stranger to this part of the world, half mad with grief, and as a way to assuage his derangement, he put his fortune to frantic work."

"What did he think that would do?"

"In his diaries, Cornish writes of feeling haunted by the restless spirits of the men killed by his armaments—legions of them appeared to him at night, led by the ghost of his own son. Ian believed he was receiving instructions from these spirits about what to build up here . . . and what to dig for down below. And the only way he could find peace was to obey their instructions."

"So that's why he went down into the tunnels."

They passed the small family graveyard that Will had noticed on an earlier visit—his own family's plot—the Greenwoods—and the gravestone of the man walking beside him, Franklin Greenwood, resting below the stone statue of a winged angel lifting a sword to the sky.

"Something was calling him, all right," said Franklin. "But it wasn't the ghosts of dead soldiers—or should I say, that's not all it seems to have been."

"So that's why he started excavating."

"Extending the preexisting system of tunnels and caves under the island, always going deeper, yes. Driven to find something he believed his visions told him waited for him down there. Something he believed would absolve him of his sins and wash away his undying grief."

"And he found it," said Will. "In that lost city down there."

"Strange the ways and beliefs of men," said Franklin. "But sometimes when the mind breaks, and I believe that's

what happened to poor Ian Cornish, it can lead you to even greater truths. Like Cahokia.”

Franklin paused in front of a small stone mausoleum to catch his breath.

“Although it seems evident that the last of that ancient civilization died or were driven from their home countless thousands of years ago,” said Franklin, “some trace of them remained in their lost city—a fragment of their consciousness, I suppose, embedded in a few precious objects they’d left behind.”

“Things they called aphotoc technology.”

Franklin gave him an admiring glance. “You seldom cease to amaze me, Will. You really set your teeth into these research assignments of mine, didn’t you?”

“Like you said, never do anything halfway.” Will shrugged. “What sort of objects?”

“I’ll come to that, but mark my words,” said Franklin, raising a finger. “For what he brought back to the human race, Ian Cornish will someday be remembered as one of our most courageous explorers, every bit as important to the story of man as Galileo, Christopher Columbus, or the men who split the atom.”

Franklin lifted a small black device from his pocket and pointed it at the stone building in front of them. Carved doors, which had appeared to be purely decorative, pivoted on hidden hinges and with a grind of stone on stone swung open.

Franklin pushed the device again. Just inside the doors, two sleek stainless-steel panels slid apart, revealing the car of a large and ultramodern elevator.

“Allow me to show you,” said Franklin, pointing Will toward the car.

Will stepped inside, and Franklin followed. He punched commands into a complex control panel on a side wall just inside the doors. Looking over his grandfather’s shoulder, Will watched him enter a specific sequence of numbers.

The outside stone doors closed, and the steel panels whispered shut. Will felt a whoosh of air compress around him. They began to descend, smoothly ramping up to what felt like considerable speed.

This is the ground-level entrance to the same elevator we discovered in the hospital a mile down below, Will realized.

“If what he found was so important, why didn’t Cornish ever tell anyone about it?” asked Will.

“Oh, but he did,” said Franklin. “Cornish had made many influential friends back in his native New England. Chief among them his fellow members in what, on the surface, appeared to be a social or academic club in Boston. Prominent men, pillars of that community, makers of history, all part of an organization rooted in tradition and culture whose origins were bound up with the birth of liberty and freedom in early America.

“But in fact that organization’s history ran much deeper than Ian knew, back to the ruling castes and monarchies of western Europe, centuries before our continent was even discovered.”

The man took an old-fashioned key from his pocket and held it out on his open palm. It appeared more ceremonial than practical. On its porcelain tab Will saw a three-lettered insignia, intertwined with a ruler and a compass, which he recognized instantly.

“The Knights of Charlemagne,” said Will.

“Exactly. Once he revealed this discovery to his colleagues back east, they took tremendous interest in supporting Cornish’s work here. A few years later, when the poor man’s mental state deteriorated, it was under their supervision that the first meaningful explorations of Cahokia moved forward. Do you begin to see how this all flows together, Will?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ian Cornish’s oldest son died in the Civil War, but he also had a *second* son, too young to fight, who knew about

Cahokia from the beginning. Cornish initiated the boy into the Knights, and he traveled west with his father when he first journeyed here. This only surviving son of Ian Cornish assumed a key role as the enterprise took shape. And when poor Ian lost what feeble grasp he had on the last of his reason, finally taking his own life, this sturdy young man, Lemuel Cornish, was appointed by his fellow Knights to continue this great work and keep his father's legacy alive."

Lemuel. "Kind of an unusual name," said Will.

"Not for the nineteenth century," said Franklin, looking up at the walls. "I knew him, of course. As did my father. Lemuel Cornish sold us the estate that became the school. But he didn't tell my father anything close to all he knew. He saved that for me."

"Why?"

"Thomas Greenwood—my father, your great-grandfather—was many things. A man of vision, a born leader, and in the field of education nothing less than a prophet. He was also . . . How shall I put this?" Franklin glanced at the ceiling. "You know I'm right, Father—an incorrigible Goody Two-shoes."

Will couldn't help laughing. "How do you mean?"

"Thomas never met a heathen he couldn't convert, a hopeless case he couldn't save, a sinner he couldn't redeem. Goodness, always 'Goodness,' with a capital G. All of human existence divided neatly into black and white, and my father confidently armed with an unshakeable faith in his ability to discern the difference."

Will felt the elevator car vibrating ever so slightly as it began to slow, almost imperceptibly.

"What's wrong with that?" asked Will.

Franklin looked slightly annoyed by the question; the vivid scar tissue behind his ears turned a brighter shade of pink.

“What’s wrong, dear boy,” said Franklin, meeting Will’s eyes with a restrained but reproachful look, “is that such a simple, reductive, dare I say childlike philosophy leaves out all the gray, the in-between, the place where men who learn to actually think for themselves get to decide how to live by their own rules.”

The car stopped, and the panels silently slid open in front of Will.

“And that’s where most of the interesting things happen,” said Franklin.

“Where’s Will?” asked Brooke, just entering the suite.

Nick looked up from his three hundredth push-up.

“Dinner with Old Man Elliot again.”

Nick flipped to his feet and towed off, pumped, covered with sweat, and grinning at her like he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t really. Brooke, as usual, looked effortlessly flawless—outfit, accessories, hair, just a hint of makeup, every aspect of her presented self put together like a perfect recipe.

“He’s spending an awful lot of time over there,” said Brooke as she set down her backpack on the table, then pulled out an appointment book and started writing in it, absentmindedly twirling a stray strand of her golden curls. “What about Ajay?”

“He’s still over at the Crag, too, working late, organizing those old whatchamacallit—archives.”

“Ar-*kives*, not ar-*chives*. You put *chives* on a baked potato.”

“*You’re* a baked potato,” said Nick, still grinning at her.

Brooke shook her head and laughed, then took a longer, more admiring look at him. “Whatever training program they’ve put you on is doing wonders for your bod. And absolutely zero for your brain.”

Nick turned a chair around and sat across from her, resting his chin on his arms. “Since you’re so deeply into

playing camp counselor, don't you want to ax me where Elise is?"

"Ax you? All right, I'll ax you. Pray tell."

"No clue," said Nick, drumming his fingers. "Why you want to know where everybody is all the time?"

She gave him one of her patented looks of exasperation. "Can't I be curious about my friends?"

She picked up the black phone on the table and punched the lone button. When the operator picked up, she asked, "Would you page Elise Moreau and have her call me, please?"

"What's today's date?" asked Nick when she hung up.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You've got your calendar right there in front of you, snowflake. What's today's date?"

"August seventh," said Brooke.

"Oh, that's right," said Nick, snapping his fingers. "It's National Be Curious About Your Friends Day."

She gave him a longer look, and for a moment a flash of malice showed through, before she covered it over. "There must be some way I can unknow you."

"Keep dreaming, darlin'."

Nick watched Brooke as she went back to writing in her book, his smile falling off when she stopped looking his way; then he stood up and moonwalked toward the kitchen, glancing at the wall clock.

"May I offer you a refreshing beverage, Brooksie?" he asked.

"A water would be fine, thanks." Facedown in her book.

"One H-two-O, coming right up."

Ajay slid the last box across the floor, landing it precisely in the only gap in a long row of boxes stacked neatly against the back wall of the circular tower room.

He closed his eyes, put his hands to either side of his skull, and pressed gently. This seemed to help alleviate the

pressure that built up during these extensive memorization sessions. Unfortunately, it did nothing for the even sharper headaches that sometimes woke him in the middle of the night.

You're building new neural pathways at extraordinary rates of speed and density. That's how Dr. Kujawa had described the phenomenon to him after the tests they'd recently run. *And "pathways" doesn't begin to do this process justice; you're building superhighways.*

When Ajay looked in a mirror recently, he'd noticed his eyes appeared to have grown larger. His pupils had also become less sensitive to light, almost as if he welcomed it now, because it allowed him to keep them open wider and longer and to see more. He found that he was *hungry* to see more. Most alarming of all, the last time he'd tried on an old baseball cap, the fit was decidedly tighter than he remembered.

He'd decided it was best not to think too much about these things.

Ajay looked at his watch, then hurried to the east-facing window. He peered down at the path leading toward the shore past the graveyard and quickly spotted two figures moving along:

Will and Mr. Elliot.

Ajay widened his eyes, focusing in on them as he'd learned to do, details accumulating and enhancing the image.

He saw Will glance back toward the tower, reach his arm back, and raise it behind the older man.

Two fingers.

"Good golly, Miss Molly," whispered Ajay in alarm.

He quickly moved to retrieve the knapsack he'd hidden in one of the boxes. Looked at his watch again: 6:50. Ten minutes before Lemuel Clegg would arrive to bring him his dinner.

He removed his small school pager from the bag. The one he'd modified to avoid detection by the school's server network.

"Sensing that he might be less receptive to the actual narrative, Lemuel Cornish never told Thomas about what his father and the Knights had found down here," said Franklin as the doors slid open again. "My father never heard a word about it."

Franklin led Will out of the elevator into a narrow corridor. They hadn't descended all the way to the bottom. This was a level Will had never seen before, built in a style decades newer than the ones in the old hospital, freshly painted, with portraits on the wall, men in nineteenth- and twentieth-century dress who he assumed must have been prominent members of the Knights.

"What kind of a man was he?" asked Will.

"Lemuel? Practical. Levelheaded. He understood only too well how his father had lost his way. That Ian's obsession with what he'd uncovered under these grounds owed more to passion, or madness, than reason. You see, after his initial enthusiasm, Ian gradually became convinced that he'd made a dreadful mistake, that this lost city needed to be sealed off, buried for all time."

"I take it Lemuel didn't see things the way his father did," said Will.

"He was a much more balanced man. Lemuel adopted a curious but cautious approach to the ongoing investigations. It was his idea, for instance, to install those great wooden doors at the mouth of the tunnel. Not to seal anything off, although he let his father believe that was the reason, but simply to prevent any unwanted or accidental entrance."

"Do you know who carved those words on them—*Cahokia* and *Teotwawki*?"

“We don’t know exactly when he put the first one there, but we believe carving those words on his son’s doors was among the last things Ian Cornish ever did.”

“But why did he call it Cahokia? You know about the one in southern Illinois, right?”

“Oh, yes, the Native American archaeological site. Vast mounds of earth, laden with artifacts, evidence of an earlier civilization. French explorers stumbled onto it over three hundred years ago. It’s a state park now, complete with guided tours and a souvenir shop, although it wasn’t anything close to that organized back in Ian’s day.

“But after he paid a visit there, Ian apparently came to believe that his discovery here and that one to the south were part of the same vast underground network of cities. Not a Native American one, mind you, but an even older civilization that the Others constructed long ago beneath the entire Midwest. A conclusion that, in Ian’s declining mental state, he believed supported the idea that they had once been Earth’s dominant species. Which he in turn interpreted”—he paused and chuckled as he turned to Will with a twinkle in his eye—“as evidence of their desire to take over the world a second time.”

“So that’s what the second word on the door is about, then,” said Will. “You know what that one means, right?”

“Teotwawki. Oh, yes, an acronym: *the end of the world as we know it*. More ravings, but sadly, so it proved to be for Ian. At that point, he had been confined for some months to a padded room here at the Crag, judged a danger to himself. Then he escaped one day and fled down into the tunnels. That’s when he carved those letters on the doors with a knife he stole from the kitchen. And then Ian used that same knife to take his own life.”

Will paused for a moment. He’d stood in that exact spot, not so long ago. He closed his eyes, sent himself back there, and for a moment touched the overwhelming aura of

the poor man's terror and desperation. He shuddered as it ran through him; then he quickly shook it off.

"What about the statues of the soldiers in the tunnel? Did Ian put those there, too?"

"Yes, another folly of Ian's that Lemuel tolerated enough to indulge, even after his father was gone—one soldier for every American war. Sentinels, Ian called them, standing guard against what he feared might one day emerge from down below. I hope you can see by now that poor Ian had some exceedingly strange ideas about *what* he'd found. But he'd also grown far too unstable to come close to realizing exactly *who* he'd found."

"But Lemuel did."

"Oh, yes. And he was also perceptive enough to realize that in order to make the most of it, the Knights would need the help of someone in our family going forward. An ally from the next generation who would appreciate the magnitude, dare I say the magnificence, of what all this could lead to." Franklin glanced over and smiled at Will again. "That's why he came to me."

"But you were just a student here then, weren't you?" asked Will, confused.

"I was twelve," said Franklin.

He stopped before a set of double doors and took out the porcelain key.

"But you see, I was very much like you, Will. I'd discovered the tunnels during my own explorations when I was still in short pants. A boy needs his adventures, doesn't he?"

"I guess so, sir."

"And not unlike Ian Cornish, I found that something down in those caverns spoke to me as well. Not a voice, per se, but a feeling, an emanation that radiated intelligence, mystery, and the promise of something titanic. It was irresistible to my imagination. So I kept venturing back down below, a little deeper each time, until I finally made it

to the doors. And that day, as I emerged from the tunnels, I found Lemuel waiting for me.”

“Was he angry at you?”

Franklin chuckled. “He tried to make me think so. But after we spoke for a while, he sensed we were kindred spirits. My curiosity was handsomely rewarded. Lemuel began taking me along with him on his trips down below—beyond the doors—showing me, a section at a time, the enormity of what they’d found.”

“You never told your father about this?”

“It was a secret only Lemuel and I shared,” said Franklin, raising his eyebrows mischievously. “Just as all this will be ours.”

He inserted the key into a large rectangular keyhole and turned it. Will heard the lock yield, and Franklin softly pushed the doors open.

A dimly lit carpeted room waited inside. Sleek, spare furnishings, a few expensive-looking works of modern art on the wall. Two leather wing-backed chairs.

Someone was sitting in one of the chairs, turned away from the door; Will saw a thick-soled, old-fashioned black shoe splayed out to the side on the floor but couldn’t see the person’s face.

“Until one day Lemuel asked me to share our secret with one of Father’s colleagues, a faculty member here at the Center, one of my instructors, who’d also taken an interest in me. A man who they knew would appreciate what they’d discovered even better than I.

“You see, Will, from our inception in antiquity, the Knights have excelled at conducting what we would call today ‘deep background’ on people who are of interest to us. And they couldn’t have been more right about this man, or me, for that matter, or the whole situation. It’s no exaggeration to say that this pairing became the turning point in our history.”

Franklin walked into the room. A sickly sour smell hung in the air, medicinal and threaded with a hint of rot. Will felt a shiver of fear root him to the floor. He forced his legs to carry him forward after his grandfather, toward the man in the chair.

“I’d like you to meet him, too, Will,” said Franklin, turning to face him once he reached the other side of the chair.

Will saw an ancient hand rise from the arm of the chair to beckon him closer. Sallow skin hung off the bones, spidery fingers trembled as they waved, fingernails looked like thick yellowed talons.

“Will . . . this is my mentor, Dr. Joseph Abelson.”

When Will finally saw the man’s face, he nearly keeled over.

* * *

The pager buzzed quietly in Nick’s pocket as he reached for a water bottle. Screened by the fridge’s open door, he quickly slipped out the device and glanced at the message screen.

Go time.

“Holy crapanoly,” whispered Nick.

He dropped the pager back in his pocket and took a deep breath as he unscrewed the top of the water bottle. He took a small vial from his other pocket and unscrewed the top. He squeezed the rubber stopper on top, filling it, then drew out the glass vial and squeezed again, emptying the colorless contents of the vial into the water. Nick replaced the cap, pocketed the vial, and grabbed another bottle for himself.

“Here you go, Brooks.”

Brooke never looked up as Nick set the bottle of water down on the table in front of her, took a seat across from

her, cracked open his own bottle, and drained half of it in a single swig.

“Hot enough for ya?” he asked, then belched.

She finally looked up at him. “If I offer to pay you, will you go away? I can afford it.”

“Come on, you oughta know me better than that,” said Nick, finishing his bottle in another epic swig. “How much?”

Brooke scowled at him, reached for her water bottle, and looked back at her book. Nick watched carefully as she unscrewed the top, then paused as she finished reading something.

Like he’d seen his friends do, he closed his eyes and tried to send a thought suggestion to her: *Drink*.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah, perfect, why?” asked Nick, reopening his eyes.

“Your face was all screwed up, like a baby trying to poop.”

Brooke took a long sip of water while slowly shaking her head.

Awesome. The mind thing totally worked. Or maybe she’s just thirsty.

“I was just trying to think,” said Nick.

“I forgot—for you, that’s cardio.”

He glanced at his watch.

Seven minutes. That’s how long it’s supposed to take before it affects the nervous system.

“I’m gonna hit the shower,” he said.

“Thanks ever so much for the update,” said Brooke, turning away, her face buried back in her book as she took another sip.

Once he was behind his locked bathroom door, Nick answered Ajay’s page with one of his own.

Done.

TWO

WILL'S RULES FOR LIVING #2:

YOU CAN'T LIVE YOUR LIFE TWO DAYS AT A TIME.

“Dr. Abelson, this is the young man I’ve been telling you about,” said Franklin, smiling, raising his voice well above a conversational level. “My grandson, Will.”

The man’s right eye was opaque with milky cataracts. The other had a cold reptilian blankness to it. Wisps of hair clung to his head like cotton candy. The flesh of his face sagged like it was trying to slide off his skull, and the runoff collected in a wrinkled puddle below his chin.

Abelson extended his right hand, mottled and covered with scabs, the fingers bent and twisted like broken twigs. Will reached out and took it. Dry and scaly to the touch, it felt more like a claw.

Will quickly calculated:

This is my grandfather’s mentor. My grandfather’s at least ninety-five. So somehow Dr. Joseph Abelson—a man who was a contemporary and colleague of Adolf Hitler’s—can’t be a day less than a hundred and fifteen . . . and maybe even a whole lot older than that.

As Abelson stared at him, a long, dry rasp escaped the man’s throat, an attempt at speech that didn’t sound like words.

“He says you look like your father,” said Franklin with a little chuckle.

And you look like a mummy, thought Will.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” said Will, raising his voice to match his grandfather’s level and drawing his hand back.

“As I believe you know, none of the first class of Paladins perished on that ‘plane crash’ we arranged in ‘38,” said Franklin, then patted Abelson on the arm. “And neither did our teacher. He came back to supervise the program, in the hospital the Knights built for us down below, which you’ve also seen.”

Will couldn’t take his eyes off Abelson, who continued to gaze at him with that one unsettling red-rimmed eye. No sense of what he was thinking or feeling registered; that eye looked dead, and his slack face seemed incapable of forming any expression at all.

You’re not the only one who can mask his feelings, thought Will as he turned back to his grandfather.

“You weren’t even on the plane,” said Will.

“No, my father had seen to that—after the interference of his meddlesome friend Henry Wallace. He packed me off to Europe for a few months, and so I missed being part of the program.”

“Lucky for you,” said Will.

The memory of those pathetic, malformed creatures writhing around, wasting away in the copper tanks down below came to mind. *For the last seventy-five years.*

Will closed his eyes and shuddered.

“Yes, well, we all knew the risks,” said Franklin, untroubled. “Those boys all volunteered with open hearts, and not one of them has said they ever regretted it.”

Not according to Happy Nepsted, thought Will.

“And although my father had prevented me from participating initially, when I returned to school, the Knights still found a crucial role for me. Can you guess what it was?”

“You were the control group,” said Will.

“Precisely, Will. Every worthwhile scientific inquiry requires a baseline to chart any changes in the study group against, and that assignment fell to me.”

“But wasn’t your father watching you like a hawk, afraid you’d fall back in with them?”

Abelson gave out a small, wheezy gasp and Will realized it might have been a laugh. That’s how Franklin seemed to interpret it, and he smiled in response.

“Not during the war years,” said Franklin. “Father was far too preoccupied, like the rest of the country. Fighting Fascism, Nazis. Making America ‘safe.’ Not to mention Father really did believe he’d already expunged the Knights from the Center for good.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t give him any reason to think otherwise.”

“Exactly. I played the perfect choirboy. The next challenge we faced was of our own making. By the time the war was over, as a number of unfortunate issues with the health of our first group began to surface, we’d realized the protocols for the Paladin program would require extensive . . . fine-tuning.”

Abelson raised a finger and his tongue rolled around as he issued a few more unintelligible rattles and hisses in Franklin’s direction.

Franklin leaned down to listen. “That’s right, Dr. Joe,” he said, then, interpreting again for Will, “Back to the drawing board *indeed*.”

Franklin moved to an opaque curtain covering a space on the wall the size of a medium window.

“But this time we’d found a whole new level of inspiration. You see, by then we’d established stronger and more reliable contact with our . . . new friends from down below, on the other side of the divide.”

“But how?” asked Will as he walked over to join his grandfather. “They were all dead by then, weren’t they, or banished there—”

“Dead, certainly not, but banished?” Franklin chortled again. “That’s only what those preposterous do-gooders who put them there have convinced themselves to believe.”

He looked at Will sharply. “And you do know who I’m referring to, don’t you?”

Will knew he was on dangerous ground here; he tried to maintain a delicate balance of skepticism and light contempt in his response. “I heard they call themselves the Hierarchy. Are those the ones you mean?”

“Exactly so.”

“I didn’t know they were real.”

“Oh, they’re real, all right, sorry to say, and full of more self-righteous arrogance and delusional grandeur than you could possibly imagine.”

“Who are they?”

“Like our friends, older beings. Far older, from some other realm beyond our imagining, or perhaps, as they claim—I’ll reserve my skepticism—advanced souls who’ve evolved beyond the indignities of physical life on Earth into a more exalted existence. And I suppose it is possible that at one time, in distant ages past, they did serve a useful function for this Earth. Who’s to say? Maybe for a period of time they faithfully fulfilled that purpose.

“But once our friends developed into something like their equals, I believe the Hierarchy’s pride got the better of them. Instead of celebrating them as peers, they perceived the Others as rivals, and from that moment on, these fools forfeited any claim on their former role as “benign protectors.” After that, they engaged in a genocidal crusade to thwart a magnificent race of beings that was guilty of nothing more than realizing its destiny. Which culminated in the Hierarchy’s tragic decision to ‘banish’ the brightest light this world had yet produced.”

Franklin’s voice trembled with barely suppressed anger and his hands were shaking as he waved them around emphatically. Will had never seen him so wound up.

“Now you and I, we’re expected to learn from our mistakes, correct? Well, the norms of human behavior don’t apply to our ‘lords and masters.’ That was only the

beginning of their missteps, Will. During our own human history, these fools have made countless blunders interfering with the affairs of men, thwarting our progress, holding us back from reaching our highest potential.

“But the worst mistake the Hierarchy ever made was their first one, and how badly they underestimated the Others they tried to so callously destroy. And soon we will finally make them pay for it.”

Will’s blood ran cold, but he kept his voice neutral. “I’m not sure I understand. Do you mean your friends aren’t actually trapped in—what do they call that place again?”

“The Never-Was? Oh, yes. They were trapped in there all right. Banished. Never to be seen again.”

“So how did they make contact with you?”

“In dreams, of course,” said Franklin, as if this was the most obvious answer in the world. “To begin with. Both Dr. Abelson and I experienced this, a slow filtering of ideas into our minds. But it took us a while—thick-skulled hominids that we are—to realize these remarkable creatures were reaching out to us through a language of symbols and images, not words—and that eventually led us to what they wanted us to find.”

“What was that?” asked Will.

“A more direct way of communicating,” said Franklin, grasping a pull string attached to the curtain. “Through the device they’d left behind so long ago specifically for that purpose. They’d designed it as a kind of beacon, like the black boxes in today’s commercial airplanes. One that emanated a faint signal that could only be perceived by individuals attuned to its peculiar frequency—the one that Ian Cornish had first sensed when he arrived and searched for down here in vain all those years. The one that Lemuel and Dr. Joe and I finally found.”

Franklin pulled the curtain, revealing a window looking into a small adjoining room, about the size of a closet. On an elevated platform sat the object.

It was the ancient brass astrolabe Will had once happened across in the basement of the castle. A larger version of the one Franklin had given him when he'd first revealed his identity—the one sitting on the desk in his bedroom—but an exact replica, as near as he could tell.

“Put those glasses of yours on,” said Franklin, placing a kindly hand on Will’s shoulder. “And then have another look at it.”

Jumping out of the shower, Nick dressed quickly, then grabbed the bag he'd packed with all the items on his checklist. He listened at his door, glancing at his watch. Counting down the seconds to seven minutes. He cracked open the door and peeked out.

Brooke was no longer at the table. Nick’s heart skipped a beat; he looked around and didn’t see her anywhere. The water bottle still stood on the table, half empty; that meant she’d drunk more than enough to do the job.

Nick cautiously crept through the living room and peeked into the kitchen. She wasn’t in there either. Then he noticed the door to Brooke’s room hung open a crack.

Nick moved silently across the room. As he was about to nudge the door open, he heard a whisper of movement behind him. Brooke lurched out of the shadows behind the fireplace, extending an outstretched hand at him. Her face twisted in fury and spite, almost unrecognizable.

Don’t let her touch you. That’s all they’d told him. That was all he needed to hear.

Nick vaulted into a backward somersault, landing on his feet on top of the sofa, then springing off again to the far side, putting the sofa between them.

“Wha’ did you do?” she screeched at him, her voice slurring.

“What?!”

Brooke staggered toward him, her motor skills visibly impaired, fighting desperately to stay upright, yelling even

louder.

“Wha’ the hell did you do to me?”

She tripped and fell over the footstool in front of the sofa, then scrambled after him, pulling herself up onto the cushions.

“I didn’t do anything to you,” said Nick.

“Don’t lie to me!”

Everywhere Brooke touched, *everything* she touched, wilted and shrank, leeches of color, light, and whatever life or energy it once possessed—blanched, discolored, drained. As she yanked herself up to her feet again, rabid with fury, struggling to find her balance, Nick shuffled back behind the dining room table.

“I don’t know what the heck you’re talking about,” said Nick.

“Yesh you do!”

She lurched toward him again, grabbing on to the top of a dining room chair to keep from falling. As her fingernails dug into the veneer, a coarse vapor issued from under her hand, and the slat of wood collapsed inward, sending her tumbling toward the table. She landed with both hands on its surface, her fingernails dug in, and then she slipped backward toward the ground, leaving scorched, skidding nail marks and handprints behind.

Nick couldn’t see her for a moment. As a precaution, he took two running steps and parkoured around the wall behind him, flipping and landing in the center of the room.

He looked back but didn’t see her under the table where he’d just seen her go down. That strange black vapor rose from a variety of places, and the table and chairs looked as if a piano had fallen on them. Nick picked up the small shovel from the fireplace tool set.

“For crying out loud, Brooke,” said Nick. “You touch your mother with those hands?”

She rose up suddenly from behind the sofa and leaped at him again, hurling herself through the air between them

with astonishing speed. As Nick somersaulted out of her path, he saw the front door fly open; someone entered and pointed their raised right hand at Brooke.

A bright red flower blossomed in the back of her left shoulder. She landed hard, scorching the carpet, then rolled, staggered halfway to standing, reached back, and pulled what had hit her from her shoulder.

A small dart.

She looked at it, uncomprehending, before dropping to her hands and knees and then face-planting on the floor. Dark, acrid vapor rose from the carpet all around the outlines of her body.

“Talk about mood swings,” said Nick.

Coach Ira Jericho stood in the doorway, loading another dart into the pistol in his hand.

“Check to see if she’s out,” said Jericho.

“No way, I’m not touching her,” said Nick, still wielding the shovel.

“What, she too tough for you, McLeish? Can’t be serious, little bitty thing like that,” said Jericho, walking toward her body.

“Little bitty thing? Dude, you didn’t see her go straight-up psycho. She’s like a hella honey badger.”

They both looked down at her, Nick a step behind Jericho, maintaining a safe distance. Head turned to the side, eyes rolled up in her head, Brooke’s back rose and fell regularly, deep breaths, totally out.

“Shouldn’t we tie her up or something?” asked Nick.

“Check that. She’d just melt the rope.”

“She won’t be doing anything but drooling on the floor for a few hours.”

“What’d you hit her with?”

“Enough to tranq a moose,” said Jericho, looking at her closely.

Nick leaned in closer, peering at her delicate eyelashes and turned-up nose. “I’m just kinda glad I didn’t have to

clock her with this shovel. I mean, no matter how mad evil she's gone, she's still sort of my friend, you know?"

Jericho stared at him. "Whatever you say, McLeish. Are you ready to roll?"

"Put me in, Coach."

"Grab your gear. We don't have much time."

Nick grabbed his backpack and the one they'd packed for Will, then joined Jericho at the door.

"Guess I'll have to work through all this emotional stress down the road," said Nick, taking a last look back at Brooke as they hustled out into the hall.

Ajay took another bite of the ham and cheese sandwich the butler, Lemuel Clegg, had brought him and chomped on another handful of potato chips.

"I can't quite put my finger on what it is," said Ajay, chewing away, "but the sandwich is particularly delicious this evening."

Clegg didn't usually stay and watch him eat—in fact, he hadn't done it since Ajay first started working on the files a month before.

Drat.

"Did you make this sandwich yourself, Mr. Clegg?"

Clegg just stared at him, arms folded, scowling, immune as always to any attempts at charm. The man was so consistently, aggressively antisocial; Will had advised Ajay that the only way to make him leave you alone was to keep talking to him.

"I'm thinking that you may have employed a different condiment this time? Perhaps some diced gherkin pickles or a strategically deployed slice of Japanese daikon?"

Clegg looked at his watch.

Why is he waiting? Does he suspect anything? Have I done something to give away the game?

"I understand your inscrutability perfectly," said Ajay with an agreeable grin. "A master chef never gives away his