

# OBSIDIAN FIRE

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BOOK ONE

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THE CAVE  
OF THE  
SLEEPING  
SWORD

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DWAYNE R. JAMES



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# Obsidian Fire



BOOK ONE



*THE CAVE*  
*of the*  
*SLEEPING SWORD*



Written  
by  
**DWAYNE R. JAMES**

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This book has been written with a young adult audience in mind and, as such, it contains some of the language that these young adults so love to use. Most of it is fairly mild, but parents should still keep this in mind so that, if you're reading it to young children, you're ready with an appropriate substitute word. Personally, I recommend "Flickerdoodle" because who could possibly be offended by being told to Flickerdoodle themselves?

Graphic Design, Illustrations, and Desk Top Publishing by  
Dwayne R. James.

For Rick.

Although I always treated him like my sidekick,  
it was really always the other way around.



## Prelude

*June 1933, a tiny island somewhere off the coast of Scotland.*

The old man stood at the tower window, and stared out across the sea at the setting sun. The cold wind stung his cheeks, and waves beat so violently against the castle wall below, that he could taste their salty spray even at this height.

Reluctantly, he closed the window.

Maybe it was his age; maybe it was the circumstances, but, now more than ever before, he found himself missing the calmer waters of the calderas, and the warm Aegean breezes of his youth. Behind him, a wireless radio sparked and hissed while a newsman's voice fought through the static to be understood.

"... been more than two months since the Flaming Knight was last seen in action," spoke a voice in a crisp British accent. "This is the longest that the Knight has been out of sight since he first appeared dramatically some five years ago wielding his mysterious fiery red sword."

The old man turned away from the window, walked to the middle of the room, and took a seat behind a large, ornately carved oak desk. Resting on the blotter in front of him was a small sword — no bigger than a large dagger — its blade like carved red glass, and its hilt burnished gold with a dull orange stone embedded in the pommel. The old man pulled at his thick grey beard thoughtfully as he stared at the dagger in front of him.

"There was a time," the newsman continued, "when the Flaming Knight seemed to be everywhere at once, so the fact that he's disappeared completely is all the more unusual. There are still so many unanswered questions about his origins, as well as the nature of his sword's apparent magical properties, although there are critics who suggest that

the Knight was little more than a skilled illusionist practiced in the art of mass hypnosis. For now, the search continues, and we will keep you informed should anything change. In other news, in Germany today..."

"Turn it off Fitch," the old man whispered brusquely, his voice sounding weary, as if it hadn't been used in several decades.

A second man, standing by the polished wood cabinet that housed the wireless, obediently reached down and twisted a dial to shut it off. As he turned to face the old man behind the desk, he spoke up tentatively. "We're going to have to go public Grand Master," he offered kindly as he pushed his wire-rimmed glasses higher up his nose. "Another Flaming Knight will need to be found."

The Grand Master exhaled heavily as he picked up the red-bladed dagger. "It's not up to us," he answered finally. "If I've learned anything in my years guarding this sword, it's that somebody worthy will appear – eventually – but not until the time is right. Not until the need is great."

"But the need *is* great," the other man countered. "Gilmart failed, Arakanian is still out there..."

"I know!" interrupted the Grand Master, a little more forcefully than he had intended. He composed himself and continued quietly, "It was the last thing that..." He stopped, as if he couldn't say the Knight's name, almost as if he'd momentarily forgotten what it was. He started again. "It was the last thing that Gilmart said to me."

*Well, not the last thing,* he thought. *There was more, and I will continue to ponder the significance – as well as the oddity of it – later. Alone.*

The old man stood up, giving strength to his voice, and adding weight to his next words. "And if this is the case – if Arakanian is indeed alive – then this is our call to action, and we must do all that we can to make the brotherhood stronger, considering the power that he now commands." The old man walked out in front of his desk as he spoke.

"But, as for choosing another sword bearer, I will say it again: it's not up to us." He was now holding the hilt of the tiny sword out in front of him, so that its finely knapped blade was pointing up at the ceiling. He stared at it intently as if willing it to come to life. "Though oft is the time, I've wished that it was."

Finally, he lowered the dagger, and dismissed his assistant by saying, "I wish to go alone."

The bespectacled man nodded his head simply, and said, "As you wish Grand Master," before withdrawing into a side chamber as quickly as his limp would allow.

The old man glanced out the window to see that the now-orange sun had finally touched the distant horizon, so that it seemed that the water at the point of contact was beginning to boil and steam.

*It is time.*

He retrieved his robe from a hook beside the door, threw it over his faded tunic, pulled the cowl up over his head, and slipped the dagger into one of the cloak's inner pockets.

As he pulled the heavy door of his office open, he was once again taken aback to see the still-unfamiliar slick, black scorch mark that scarred the other side. He scowled at it as he closed the door behind him, as if challenging the burn to make some kind of offensive action. Once again, the old man contemplated replacing the ancient door outright, simply so that he wouldn't have to be continually reminded of what had so recently been lost. Yet, even as he turned to make his way down the curving tower stairs, he wondered soberly if perhaps—considering the stakes—this was not such a bad thing.

*Never forget, he mumbled to himself. And never get caught off-guard again.*

The tower halls and passages appeared to him to be uncharacteristically empty tonight, even though he knew that the castle was being guarded even more heavily now since the attack. Only once did he catch a fleeting glimpse of a

dark robe disappearing furtively around a corner.

*They know well enough to leave me alone tonight.*

At the base of the tower, the Grand Master stopped in front of another large wooden door, and withdrew a lit torch from a sconce beside it. Taking a deep breath, he placed his shoulder against the heavy door, and pushed. The ancient gate opened grudgingly, revealing a dark vaulted corridor beyond.

By the flickering light of the torch, the old man moved down the passageway, and as he reached the top of a flight of steps, he could hear the door creaking shut behind him, reminding him that he wasn't as alone as he felt. His brothers were never far away, even as they respected his desire to perform the rite by himself.

The old man began to descend the long set of stone steps slowly, as if he were unwilling to reach his ultimate destination. Nevertheless, in far less time than he would have liked, he found himself in the subterranean cave system beneath the castle, standing in front of an overly familiar cave wall that was split almost vertically by a thin meandering crack, and covered in fading runes and pictographs.

Wasting no time at all, the Grand Master pulled the diminutive sword out of his cloak, and held it above his head as he began to speak THE words. They were words he'd only spoken a handful of times, yet he knew them as well as any other incantation he'd ever used, even though, after all of these years, Proterion's dream-language remained stubbornly unfamiliar to his tongue, and tasted just as strange.

Above him, the sword began to glow, casting a red hue on the damp walls and ceiling of the cave. For a heartbeat, the old man wondered if perhaps it had finally decided to wake up for him, but his rational mind knew otherwise. This was but part of the ceremony, for in front of him, the crevice in the wall was equally awash with a glow from within.

Finally, he stopped speaking, lowered the sword and looked at it longingly—perhaps even lovingly—one last

time. Then, he took a deep breath, stepped forward, and slid the blade easily into the crevice, a shower of sparks the only indication that the knife should have been too thick to fit in the first place. When the last of the sparks had faded away, the amber stone in the hilt of the sword began softly to glow, throwing a subtle orange light on the old man's weathered face.

After a time, the old man reached up tentatively, gripped the hilt, and tugged on the tiny sword forcefully. He was satisfied that it resisted his pull, no matter how much he wished it didn't.

The Grand Master leaned heavily on the wall, one hand on either side of the embedded dagger. Slowly, he looked nervously over his shoulder as if noticing the figure behind him for the first time.

"I hope this is what you wanted Kathryn," he said before turning to meet the stony glare of the woman's effigy that was sculpted out of the rock wall behind him. He looked at her wistfully. "You said that this sword would provide the answers we needed." He turned away from her, unable even to look her likeness in the eye for very long. "I can't help... can't help but feel that you were... mistaken."

There were so many questions, and there were only two people who had the answers. One had been buried at sea less than a month ago, and the other one — he glanced at the hilt of the dagger that stuck out of the crevice — was forever out of reach.

It all seemed too overwhelming, yet...

*Gilmat said that we had eighty years, he thought to himself. Although I'm not sure how it's possible to know such a thing.*

Finally, he turned to leave, but had only gone a step before his sorrow finally overcame him, and he crumbled to the ground at the foot of Kathryn's statue, sobbing inconsolably.

## The Cave

*June 2013, a tiny island somewhere off the coast of Scotland.*

The hilt that stuck out from the fissure in the cave wall was a lot smaller than what I would have expected for such a legendary sword.

*The pictures always made it look bigger, I thought to myself as I looked at it by the flickering light of the torches. Much, much bigger.*

Sure, I may have thought the same thing when I first saw the Mona Lisa – and can even recall remarking sardonically at the time that I'd used postage stamps that were bigger – but this was different. This sword, quite literally, wasn't much larger than a dagger. Apparently, eight hundred years worth of mythology can have the same effect on objects as a rear view mirror, and make them appear bigger than they really are.

*No, not mythology Mark, I had to remind myself. THIS sword is real. It's NOT a myth, it's a fact. You've seen the pictures of the last Flaming Knight; watched the 1930s newsreels of the Flaming Sword in action...*

And now, here it was in front of me, after all this time: the *Flaming Sword* in all its diminutive glory.

I'm loathe to admit that the sword's inconsistency of scale has really thrown me, and has started to make me doubt things that I'd been so sure of for years. In fact, it's forcing me to give a lot more credence to Dirk's words than I ever really wanted to. The entire trip here, he kept telling me that the sword *had* to be fake, and that the clandestine organization that claimed to guard it – yet offered public tours to see it – was simply perpetuating the hoax.

"Think about it," Dirk had said. "They're going to give the real Flaming Sword to any idiot who can pull it out of the crevice? It's probably not even a complete sword. It's likely

just a broken hilt cemented to the wall. You'll see. We'll pay them a few bucks, they'll let us each have a turn tugging on the hilt hopelessly, and then they'll usher us quickly out of the cave and into their overpriced gift shop."

HA! I think as I look around, noting that the only opening to the cave is the one we used to enter. *Shows what Dirk knows. There was no gift shop on the way in, and none back in the castle either!*

Still, if I *were* to put stock in Dirk's conspiracy theories, I'd have to admit that the supernatural setting that the sword calls home is probably a little *too* perfect. I know that if I were going to perpetrate a hoax about a mystical sword waiting for the chosen one to pull it out a crack in the rock, I'd base it here, in the islands that have long been thought of as the magical center of the British Isles, perhaps even the entire world. It's a perception that has been centuries – perhaps even millennia – in the making, and has an excellent pedigree in that it invokes rumours of connections with the long lost, great civilization of Atlantis.

I think it's probably clear by now, that I did a lot of research before coming to this cave.

In my investigations, I learned that this small wind-swept island in the Inner Hebrides was rumoured to have been first populated by the Atlantean people so many years ago that it's pointless to even try and assign a date to the occupation. It's widely claimed that the first group to arrive from Atlantis were the Hyperboreans, but it was purported to have been the second group – the Rutans – who established a colony on the nearby island of Iona, and presumably on this island as well, if the ancient remains that were long ago uncovered here are any indication.

This connection with Atlantean mysticism is further implied by the fact that this island is even called *New Santorini*, after the island of the same name in the Aegean sea whose submerged calderas is thought by many to be physical evidence of the volcanic eruption that destroyed the lost civili-

zation roughly 3,600 years ago.

To be fair, the official *New Santorini* tourist brochures don't actually promote the Atlantean connection, and say only that the island was first settled sometime in the eleventh century with the construction of a fishing hamlet and an abbey, both of which were destroyed about a century later in a Viking raid. The brochures then go on to document that, sometime in the fourteenth century, Castle RedStone was built, as far as I can tell, about two hundred feet directly above me.

Castle RedStone is a bit of a misnomer, truth be told, since the stones that it's constructed from are the same mottled brown that characterize the islands in this area of the world. It's not all that big of a castle either, being mostly a large bailey yard surrounded by a high stone curtain wall with a squarish tower at each of the corners. The thickest and tallest of the towers—presumably the keep—was built up and out of a rocky spit of land that jutted out into the sea, so that it had a commanding view of the Sea of the Hebrides, an imposing moat if ever I saw one. The brochures claim that the purpose for the castle has been the same since the day it was built, that of protecting the magical sword that I'm now standing in front of.

I look at that sword again. The inconsistent light from the lanterns makes it hard to see, and it seems to flicker and fade, almost like it only exists on the outer edges of my perception.

Yes, this sword is the reason for the castle above me, although I know from my research that nobody can actually say for sure whether the sword was put here in the cave under the protection of an existing castle, or if the castle was built afterwards. All we know for sure, is that the Obsidian Brotherhood, the self-professed guardians of the Flaming Sword, have been using this fortress for centuries, waiting for the Sleeping Sword to choose the person with the right moral fortitude to wield its awesome power.

*That is, if you believe that kind of stuff. Hell, I'm a believer, and even I have a hard time saying this kind of thing out loud with a straight face.*

Sure, I can appreciate how hard it could be for some people to accept the legend. It's been so long since the sword's been seen in action that it's all too easy to relegate it to being some kind of medieval fairy tale, war-time propaganda, or worse, outright hoax. In fact, the whole legend had been largely forgotten, until the recent revelation by the brotherhood of a long-lost *Prophecy* brought it back into the public's attention.

"Hey look," whispered Dirk, interrupting my thoughts, and effectively reminding me that I did not undertake this journey all by myself. "Check out that chick from the ferry."

That "chick" that Dirk is so masochistically referring to, is a buxom young woman with long blond hair and a very loose grasp on the concept of the appropriate attire to wear in public. Right now, she's bent over at the waist tying her shoe, and it seems to me that it's taking her a preternaturally long time to do it. The fact that Dirk is so fixated on her when we're in the presence of an ancient magical sword, is but further evidence that we do not share the same motivation for being here. That's been especially clear since we first boarded the ferry in Oban. During the three hour passage, Dirk spent some of his time with his nose in his laptop, and most of the rest of it shamelessly flirting with a group of young women who were on their way to the island on some kind of university tour.

Dirk can be a pig, but he's a good friend. In fact, we've been best buddies since grade school, our friendship initially being formed when we banded together to stand up for ourselves against the schoolyard bullies who would pick on us both for being computer club nerds. Although, truth be told, he had it much worse than I did, because he was also a target for being the only black kid in our small Northern-Ontario town. We made a great team pushing back against

the bullies, but personally, my motivation went well beyond our own self-preservation.

Y'see, I had been raised on stories about the legend of the Flaming Knight, and they had touched something inside of me, something that couldn't be ignored. For me, the Knight represented all that was good and moral in humankind. He had used his powers and abilities to stand up for those who couldn't stand up for themselves, and he had challenged the rest of us to do the same. So naturally, when I filled up and out at a very early age (I was already over six feet tall in Grade 8), I knew that I had to use my imposing stature to make a difference, first in high school, and then beyond (by the time I was 17, I was a master of at least three different forms of martial arts, and could expertly handle about a dozen classic weapons, including both long and short swords.)

I've always thought it was funny how the Knight had been able to inspire so many of us, considering that he had only operated for a scant handful of years, never gave an interview, and was never photographed without his signature helm. In fact, some say that he single-handedly gave birth to the super-hero genre that appeared in comic-book form shortly after his first appearance.

I don't know about that, but it's certainly true that he started the whole vigilante movement, and gave it a lot more credibility than it would have had otherwise. In fact, not long after the Knight disappeared in the early 1930's, reports began to emerge the world over about ordinary civilians who were mobilizing themselves against those who would seek to take advantage of them, or others. When interviewed, every single one of these people claimed that it had been the Flaming Knight that had been their inspiration. For many years, this vigilante movement went unacknowledged by the governments of the world, likely because none of them wished to risk an organized backlash from a populace that was suddenly feeling empowered.

It wasn't until the 1970s that the Canadian government was the first to legalize vigilantes, after a small group of civilians, brandishing little more than nun chucks, completely dismantled the FLQ terrorist organization, effectively ending the crisis. The US Federal government followed suite in the early 80's after a civilian used a tricked-out walking stick to disarm a gun-toting John Hinckley Jr. just as he was about to open fire upon then-President Reagan and his entourage.

The cause was further facilitated by an impassioned plea before the United States Congress by an aging Martin Luther King Junior, who had been saved from an assassin's bullet some twenty years earlier by a young woman and (of all things) her well-aimed boomerang. In a speech that many have since claimed to have been even more moving and eloquent than his "I have a dream" speech, King spoke of how heroes are needed in a world that tends to focus on the loud acts of evil, simply because they're unusual, all the while forgetting that they are still exceptions and not the rule. He was concerned that, over time, and after constant exposure to the actions of the evil minority by a media who had become too focused upon the ratings potential of their reprehensible actions, the population at large might come to believe that *everyone* was inherently bad. He was especially afraid that people would come to know – and ultimately be motivated by – fear.

He said that the whole world needed heroes who would stand up colourfully and obviously, and be the ones running *towards* the danger when so many others were fleeing from it. They would become the symbols behind which the rest of us would rally; the ideal from which the rest of us could find inspiration, and they would be the ones to show us that, for every individual bent on committing an act of unspeakable violence, there were dozens and dozens of regular folk who, at every minute of ever day, were out there dynamically committing works of kindness, and campaigning tirelessly for the common good.

“No,” he said. “Heroes may not stop every act of violence, but they help people to feel that there is hope in a world where such acts routinely occur.”

As a direct result of these events, there are hundreds of sanctioned vigilantes operating throughout the world today (myself included), some admittedly costumed a little more brightly than others (for the record, I prefer basic black). Of course, it’s all very closely regulated, and we’re forbidden from using guns, or any form of lethal force for that matter, and we’re saddled with more liability and malpractice insurance than most doctors.

I am registered under the code name of *KnightLight* (a name that was inspired, of course, by the Flaming Knight), and patrol an area of lower Manhattan in a portable headquarters disguised as an old rusty garbage truck. Dirk comes out with me occasionally, but prefers to keep a low profile in a supporting role (he truly despises the term *sidekick*).

Through it all, Dirk has been right there beside me, even when I told him a few months ago that I wanted to seek out the Flaming Sword so that I could finally become a crime fighter with more power at my disposal than a can of pepper spray and a taser. Even though he didn’t for a moment believe that the sword was legit, he’d still been excited about coming with me on this trip, which is more than I can say for my fiancé Kimberly, who chose to stay at home in New York City.

Thus far, the trip had been fairly uneventful. We’d landed in Glasgow two days ago, and took some time to adjust to jet lag before taking a bus to Oban very early this morning where we boarded a passenger ferry. There were about two dozen of us on that ferry and, after a journey of about an hour and a half, we finally got our first good look at the island of New Santorini, and I could tell right away that nothing I had yet seen had done the place justice, not the pictures in the brochure, or the satellite images, not even the online videos. As the ferry glided into the tiny harbour in the shad-

ow of the castle, it truly was like stepping back in time.

Moored all around us were more medieval vessels than I'd ever seen in one place outside of a movie. There were knarrs, single-masted cogs, hoys, and picards, even a few caravels. There were a few of Egyptian ancestry, one or two of Saxon origin, several that could have sailed directly from the Thames, and one, that was up in a dry dock and well protected by a wooden canopy, looked to be a classic fishing boat of Greek origin.

Our passenger ferry weaved its way easily through this small fleet, and finally docked at a large wooden wharf where we were met by, and then instructed to disembark by a small group of monks who introduced themselves as our tour guides. Each of the three men were clean-shaven and bald, and were dressed, perhaps a little stereotypically, in a simple loose-fitting light-brown tunic that was cinched around the waist with a thickly braided cord. The small badge that each wore on their scapulas (that I knew from my research was the embroidered image of a hand holding a fiery sword aloft), identified them as members of the *Obsidian Brotherhood*.

"Welcome to the island of New Santorini," spoke the monk standing closest to us. He was wearing a broad smile, his arms spread wide. "I trust your passage was a comfortable one. My name is Robert, and I'll be one of your tour guides today. Where you go next is up to you. For those of you wishing to learn more about the many reproductions of sailing vessels in our harbour, please follow Deepak here." Robert gestured to the monk to his right. Several of the ferry passengers stepped forward and followed after Deepak, who immediately led them down a long wooden walkway towards a large galley docked at the end of it.

Robert continued. "I'll be leading the tour through the village and the castle, while Aaron," he nodded towards the remaining monk who looked up from what appeared to be a Smartphone to acknowledge the introduction, "will lead

the tour to the cave for those of you who can't wait to try your hand at waking the Sleeping Sword." He had a smile on his face as if he were in on some kind of joke that the rest of us weren't getting.

The larger part of the group moved towards Robert, who in turn ushered them down the wharf towards a distant wooden stairway that scaled a tall bluff. The small cluster that remained numbered six people, including myself, Dirk, a young woman, a big man with a cowboy hat, and a young Asian couple, whose constant displays of affection strongly implied that they were newlyweds.

The bald monk named Aaron greeted us warmly, as he slipped his Smartphone into a hidden pocket of his robe. I was getting so used to seeing smart phones like his everywhere in the modern world, that it took a moment for me to realize how odd it was to see technology like this being used so openly on an island that sold itself as a place to immerse yourself in a purely medieval experience.

"As Robert told you, my name is Aaron," announced the monk in a slight Scottish accent, "and I'll be guiding you down into the subterranean passages beneath the castle to see the Sleeping Sword, and give you all a chance at pulling it from the stone." He rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. "Word of warning first though, this is not a trip for anyone with a dislike of the dark, confined spaces, or— for that matter—spiders." He looked around to gauge our reaction. Satisfied that everyone was still willing, he continued, "Well, then let's not waste any time shall we? I can tell you're all very eager."

Behind me, I could hear Dirk mumble something that was no doubt sardonic, but I didn't hear what it was, nor did I ask him to repeat it.

Aaron turned, and gestured for us to follow him down the wharf towards the staircase. While we walked, he introduced us all to the island, the brotherhood, and gave us a brief background on the history of Castle Redstone. Im-

mediately, I could see why he'd been chosen to lead these tours. His voice, though not very deep, hardly had any of the heavy Scottish brogue that might have made it more difficult for Westerners like myself to understand.

Once we had climbed the wooden see-saw staircase that hung off the cliff wall of the harbour, we found ourselves in a large open space in front of the castle that was about the size of two football fields. Over in the shadow of the castle walls was a small reconstructed medieval village, and arranged along the opposite edge, looking out over the sea to the North-West, were a number of very large siege engines. In between was a grassy field populated here by a few grazing sheep, cow, and goat, and there by children running around at play.

Aaron was explaining that the castle was also well known as a research academy that offered numerous courses in a variety of medieval-themed subjects. This wasn't news to me, as I had come across this fact in my research, and had already watched all of the academy's online documentaries that were available.

"We have quite a few videos online as well," offered Aaron coincidentally. "Our goal is to give the viewer a much better idea of what life was really like in the middle ages, for those unlike yourselves, who can't be here in person."

The young blond woman put her hand up to ask a question, and immediately, Dirk elbowed me in the ribs to pay attention. Presumably, this was one of the young women he had been chatting with back on the ferry. I tried to nudge him back, but instead ended up embedding my elbow in the laptop bag that he had slung over his shoulder.

"Hey, easy," Dirk said playfully as he shifted his bag so that his laptop was out of my elbow's range. "I'll heal. Maisy won't."

*I never could understand his predilection towards naming his technological gadgets. Maybe that's why he never goes anywhere without that bag.*

The young woman identified herself as a student, and asked Aaron exactly what kinds of videos were available. "We have a wide variety," answered Aaron as he walked. "For instance, some videos show how ancient candles were made, others show how food was prepared, or how it was stored. We've got documentaries on boat building, as well as how ancient weapons like swords, bows, or crossbows were made and used. Some of our most popular videos highlight and demonstrate these siege engines." As the young monk spoke, he gestured at the numerous devices arranged along the far edge of the field. There was a covered battering ram, a very tall siege tower, a couple of smaller ladders, a catapult, and a very large counterweight trebuchet.

"That trebuchet, for instance is the star of our most popular series of videos, as it's the biggest working device of its kind in the world."

"It's functional?" asked a member of our group.

"Absolutely," answered Aaron. "We give regular demonstrations of it actually, which is why we have it set up facing *away* from the castle."

Most of our group laughed at this. Personally, I was getting a little impatient. I'd been waiting most of my life for the opportunity to see the sword, and I didn't really want to have to wait very much longer. I'd already watched the trebuchet videos online; I knew how it worked. I just wanted to get moving.

Aaron, however seemed to have other ideas. "They're just about to demonstrate it for Robert's group," he suggested. "Let's just take a moment to watch."

I didn't think that I showed any external signs of irritation, but Dirk must have seen the way that my jaw was set, because he leaned in closer and whispered, "Take it easy buddy. The sword isn't going anywhere."

I forced myself to smile back at him, and watched the trebuchet, as several monks pulled on ropes that were attached to pulleys to fully lower the beam. Once it was in place, four

other men lifted a large stone off of a nearby rock pile, and nestled it into the thick leather sling attached to the end of the beam. Then, all but one moved well away from the trebuchet, taking the gathered tourists with them.

Aaron narrated for us to let us know what was going on. “Right now, we’ve got a rock in the sling that weighs about 100 kilograms – that’s about two hundred and twenty pounds for our American friends – although the device is capable of throwing projectiles three times that size. Once the beam is pulled all of the way down, it’s released so that the counterweight on the other side of the axle pulls it back up again quickly...”

Right on cue, the beam began to arc up into the air, pulling the sling and the projectile that it carried with it. It began slowly enough at first, and then began to pick up considerable speed. Despite my earlier impatience, I found that I was becoming fascinated by what was happening in front of us. It’s not often you see an object that large sent sailing so smoothly into the air. Sure, I’d seen the videos, but I was discovering that they can’t prepare you for the experience of seeing it live. For one thing, even at this distance, you don’t expect it to create the kind of wind that it does, nor are you prepared for the sudden change in air pressure that seems to take your breath away.

As the rock crested the top of its arc, one side of the sling released, and the stone tumbled gracefully through the air for about 400 meters, before finally splashing dramatically into the sea.

“That’s also the reason that the ferry doesn’t travel along the north side of the island,” said Aaron, once more to laughter from the group.

Aaron was walking again now, leading us towards the village and the castle beyond. Mercifully this time, although he described the village as we walked through it, he refrained from actually stopping to show us anything.

All around us, the village inhabitants were getting things

ready for the coming influx of tourists from the day's ferries. On our right, a baker was pulling fresh bread out of a stone oven, while beyond him, a woman was pouring out samples of ale and mead. To our left, a blacksmith was shoeing a horse, while behind him in the shop, his colleague was hammering a glowing piece of metal. Up ahead of us, a man and a woman were setting up chairs and tables in a brick-paved courtyard outside a little restaurant, and a couple of young boys were drawing water from a well. A lot of it was pretty stereotypical to be sure, not unlike that which you'd see at a standard Renaissance Fair, but there were a few details that showed that the designers knew what they were doing.

As we walked, my attention was drawn to an old man who was moving among the villagers and chatting with them each in turn. Although he was dressed like the rest of the monks, he was the only one who sported facial hair in the form of a thick grey beard. I noticed how each of the re-enactors seemed to defer to him as if he were in charge, and I watched how he would offer what appeared to be advice or an instruction to each of them as he went. As our group passed, he exchanged a greeting by way of a nod with Aaron, and then stopped to watch us carefully – perhaps even suspiciously.

Aaron led us through the village and into the castle through a wide gatehouse with a raised portcullis. Ahead of us, in a sandy area of the courtyard, a number of young men dressed as squires were testing each other with what appeared to be blunted practice swords. Several monks were walking among them and offering them advice, as well as demonstrating proper technique.

"We also teach traditional sword fighting here in the bailey," said Aaron as we walked around the courtyard, before anybody had a chance to ask what was going on.

The man with the large cowboy hat spoke up in a thick Texas drawl, "Are these folks tourists too? We were on the earliest ferry today. How'd they get here before us?" He

seemed a little upset, almost as if he had been assured by some travel agent that he'd be first on the island.

Aaron smiled at the tall man as he answered, "Oh, you are most definitely the first group today. These guests have been here for a few days now. We offer longer stays for those who want to truly experience what life was like in the middle ages." He gestured at the sword-wielding squires. "They sleep in appropriate quarters, eat authentic food, dress in period clothing, and learn an apropos skill while they're here. Some stay for a few weeks, others as long as a whole year."

The Texan grunted in reply, but continued to eye the trainees suspiciously as he walked with the rest of us around the training area.

As we moved, I looked at the castle walls around us, and noticed something odd under the rampart behind us and beside the barbican. The stones making up a large portion of the curtain were a slightly different colour than the rest of the wall, almost as if they hadn't weathered quite the same. What's more, some of the older stones around that section were blackened, as if they'd been exposed to extreme heat. It looked very much to be evidence of an attack that had been repaired more recently. The whole thing struck me as odd, since I hadn't read anywhere about Castle Redstone having ever been under siege.

Ahead of us at the base of the keep, there were four monks standing on either side of an alcove with a recessed dark wooden door. They nodded to Aaron, and greeted our group warmly. Two of them pulled a couple of ancient-looking gilded lanterns off braces on the wall, and lit them while the other two pulled the heavy door open.

The room beyond was dark, and we couldn't see much of it until one of the monks entered, and began almost immediately to descend a staircase.

"Please follow Patrick everyone," directed Aaron as he pulled another lantern off the wall. "Oh, and watch your

step.”

One by one, our group of six tentatively entered the passage, followed immediately by Aaron and another monk. Ahead of us, a ceiling curved steadily downwards, as we descended a well worn, stone stairwell. Thankfully, our way was well lit by a series of lanterns that the first monk was obviously lighting as he moved deeper.

The stairway was long, and broken up by occasional landings, with the low rock ceiling above and around us darkened by what I could only assume was centuries of open-flame torches. We hadn't been descending for long before I noticed that the steps were no longer worked stone, and had been carved directly into the rock itself. We had obviously left the castle structure behind us, and were now entering the natural cave system beneath it. I was also noticing that it was much colder and damper down here; several times, I found myself splashing through thin puddles that had gathered on the smooth treads of the steps.

As we moved further down the stairs, Aaron began to speak again, his voice amplified by the enclosed space that we were now in. He began to tell us about the history of the island, and how the Obsidian Brotherhood – whose original members were thought by some to be the descendents of the Druids who first settled these islands in the Hebrides – initially gathered to guard the sword. There was nothing in what he said that I hadn't already read about in my research, but I thought that it was funny how, once again, there wasn't any mention of Atlantis. Apparently, the brotherhood who organized these tours wanted to promote the mysticism of it all, but not overdo it with legends that might be considered too outlandish the more conservative element of the population.

*Even an ancient brotherhood such as this one has to consider branding, and how it markets its image to a modern, perhaps more cynical audience I suppose.*

The passage eventually levelled as we caught up to the

first monk. He waited until we were all gathered at the base of the stairwell, and then ushered us along a twisting corridor with a smooth flat floor, and a low, but manageable, ceiling. As we walked, we passed a number of cave openings on either side that were each being blocked by a monk holding a flickering lantern. Perhaps it was the darkened atmosphere, but had they not been smiling pleasantly, it would have been a tad foreboding. They were polite in the way their presence told us not to enter these other caves, but it still felt a little too militaristic for my taste. I also noticed that, once our group had passed them by, each of these men fell in behind us, until our group had grown to twice its initial size.

After a few minutes, the leading monk stopped to stand under the arch of a broad opening that obviously led to a larger cave, turned to face us, and bid us to halt.

"We're about to enter the *Cave of the Sleeping Sword*," Aaron announced weightily as he moved to the front of the group to stand beside his brother. "It has been prophesized that, early in the second decade of the new millennium, the Flaming Sword shall choose a new sword bearer." He paused for what I can only assume was dramatic effect. "Will one of you six be that person?"

Slowly, dramatically, the monks moved aside, and gestured for us to go into the larger cave. The Texan, not surprisingly, was the first one of us to enter, followed quickly by the remaining members of the group. I'd like to tell you what the rest of the cave was like, but I only wanted to see one thing: the sword. This was a moment that I'd been waiting for my whole life, and now that I was finally looking at it, my first thought was that it was much smaller than what I had expected.

Aaron apparently could read my mind. "Yes, I know what you're thinking," he said loudly, his voice echoing off the ceiling and walls of the damp cave. "It's the first thing anybody says when they first see the Sleeping Sword. *Shouldn't*

*it be bigger?"*

Everyone laughed, and quickly, the monk changed topics, and started telling us more about the role that the brotherhood has played in guarding the sword over the centuries.

*Am I the only one who noticed that he didn't actually explain why the sword looked so much smaller? I mean really! The hilt was about the size and shape of a Twinkie!*

"Some of you may remember the last time the sword chose a Flaming Knight to wield it," the young monk continued. "It was 1928 when the sword was last pulled from the stone, and it was used to right a great many wrongs all across Europe before being returned here under mysterious circumstances a scant five years later."

"What happened to the Knight?" asked somebody near the back of the cave.

"Nobody knows," replied Aaron in an ambiguous tone that implied that either he wasn't telling us everything that he knew, or he was playing up the mystery for our entertainment.

I moved as close as I could to get a better look at the sword, an effort made all the more difficult by the big Texan who kept moving around in front of me and blocking my view. Although my first impression of the sword, at least in terms of its size, was a little underwhelming, I was still nonetheless captivated by the awesome beauty of it.

Legend had it that the Flaming Sword had been knapped out of a single, unusually large, piece of blood-red obsidian sometime in the twelfth century. Although the dagger before me isn't of a size that could be considered "unusual", I can see a little bit of its unique red blade sticking out of the crevice between the rock wall and the hilt.

*And oh, what a hilt it was.*

Intricately decorated, and fashioned entirely out of bur-nished gold, the hilt borrowed from the classic anthropomorphic Celtic design, with the cross guard and pommel processes bent into shapes that were reminiscent of the

arms and legs of a human figure. One could only assume that the blade, which extended unabashedly out from between the two legs of the figure, was phallic in nature. The figure's body was represented by a grip wrapped tightly in dark leather, and the figure's head – being the very tip of the pommel – was symbolized by a large amber stone.

Speaking of the amber stone, it appeared to be almost as supernatural as the sword itself. It seemed to be soaking up the meagre light being cast by the half dozen flickering lanterns in the cave, and then amplifying that light, and splaying it across the surrounding walls as dancing spots in much the same way as water would be sprayed by holding a thumb over the nozzle of a hose. In fact, there were times when the lantern light was obstructed (usually by the Texan's obscenely large hat), that I'm sure that the stone continued to glow all on its own.

If this tiny sword *was* a fake, it was a pretty convincing one, its authenticity aided in large part by the decorations on the cave wall all around it. Directly below the blade for instance, there was a faded painting that was barely visible, showing a red sword enveloped in a bright yellow flame, being held aloft vertically by an armoured hand.

*Ah, so that's where the idea for the brotherhood's logo came from.*

This was not the only pictograph on the wall, however. There were dozens of them, some more brightly painted than others, and some that were hardly recognizable. One that caught my eye directly to the left of the sword showed what appeared to be two winged serpents entwined into a symbol that was reminiscent of a Celtic design. Apparently, I wasn't the only one to notice this pictograph as I can hear the newlyweds chatting about it.

"I'd always thought that dragons were a modern invention," whispered the husband.

No doubt, he was assuming that he'd found something anachronistic that proved that this cave was a modern re-

production. I knew otherwise however (dragons had indeed been imagined as far back as medieval times, likely as a result of the contemporaneous discovery of dinosaur bones) even though I wasn't about to speak up and tell him as much, because something else had drawn my attention.

Directly above the sword, were faded runes that had been arranged in a rough semi-circle with the blade as the center-point. It was obviously some kind of ancient writing system, but it was of a kind that I didn't recognize. Naturally, this was perplexing me, because I had memorized a lot of rune-based languages in preparation for this trip, and this one was strangely familiar in a manner I couldn't quite put my finger on, yet I still couldn't decipher it.

"Who's the woman?" asked the young student's voice, interrupting my train of thought. Curious, I looked around to see who, or what, she was talking about.

Behind me, extending out from the wall directly opposite the sword—and so big that I'm surprised I missed seeing it on the way in—was the statue of a woman carved out of what appeared to be the very rock of the cave itself. The woman was dressed in long flowing robes, her hands holding what appeared to be an exact duplicate of the Flaming Sword, as if she was offering it to us. The sculpture was so ancient that most of its surface was either cracked, covered in lichen, or pock-marked, except for the face, which was so perfectly smooth that it looked like somebody had been polishing it daily. Standing on either side of the statue, as if guarding it, were two fairly stern-faced monks holding their lanterns aloft.

"That is a statue of Kathryn Flint," answered Aaron, a note of reverence in his voice. "She is the mage who gave the sword its awesome power. It is said that her *pneumena*, or what many of you would call her *soul*, lives in the sword. It is she that you must impress when you make your attempt to pull the real sword from the stone, for it is she who ultimately decides who is worthy...and who is not."

"Is that another sword?" asked the newlywed husband pointing to the blade in the stone woman's grip. "Can we see it?"

"It is a replica," Aaron answered. "We will need to have something here to show future tourists once one of you extracts the real Flaming Sword now don't we?" There was more laughter as Aaron silently declined to answer the man, and instead stepped forward to stand beside the real Flaming Sword embedded to his right in the stone wall of the cave. He held his lantern out in front of him, commanding our attention.

"With that, we should begin. The prophecy tells us that the time to choose the next Flaming Knight is nigh upon us," he repeated. "I charge you again. Is one of you the *chosen one*?" He asked, pausing dramatically in a speech he'd doubtless repeated numerous times. He gestured with his lantern towards the runes above the blade. "These ancient words say it all. They read: *If ye be worthy, ye shall possess all the powers of the Flaming Sword.*"

"What language is that?" I asked the monk pointedly, as I wiped off a drop of water that had fallen from the damp ceiling onto my forehead, and moved a little to the left to avoid the next one.

The young monk seemed taken aback at first, even defensive, but mellowed quickly enough. He was probably assuming that I was another brash American, so I made a mental note to take it down a notch. With a little less boldness, I added, "It's just that I've studied many ancient languages, and this one is new to me."

The monk smiled impishly. "It's very ancient. I'm not surprised." Then, he turned away from me, and continued his story, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he'd left a question unanswered. *Again.*

Beside me, Dirk leaned in and tugged at my sleeve. "*If ye be worthy,*" he snorted derisively, and a little too loudly. "I guess they couldn't decide which myth to plagiarize eh?"

What is this? Thor or King Arthur?"

"Shhhh," I responded.

Dirk leaned back, but didn't stop talking. "Shame Kimberly isn't here," he countered, "at least then I'd have somebody to talk to."

"*Shut UP!*" I hissed as quietly as possible. Aaron looked at me briefly, but never interrupted his speech.

"...not be taken lightly," he had been saying. "For anybody who attempts to pull the sword out of the stone, must truly understand and appreciate the responsibility that it represents should they be successful." He looked us each in the eye as he asked, "Do you understand this, my friends?"

We all nodded in unison.

"Do you then solemnly swear to assume the helm of the Flaming Knight should the sword see you as being worthy?"

One by one, prompted by Aaron's probing stare, we each answered in the affirmative. I meant my "Yes" sincerely, although I'm sure that Dirk's "Sure, why not," was likely meant to be more than a little flippant. I was also the only one to hear Dirk's follow-up, whispered directly into my left ear, "Yeesh. Talk about being over the top. Relax buddy."

Finally, satisfied with our responses, Aaron said through a toothy grin. "OK. Who is to be first then?" He stepped away from the sword hilt to stand back beside the statue of Kathryn Flint.

Not surprisingly, the Texan leapt forward to be the first, practically knocking over the young student in the process. He pulled on the hilt for a solid two minutes, trying a number of different positions to add leverage. Finally Aaron spoke up and said, "If it doesn't come out easily sir, then I'm afraid it's not going to come out at all." Finally, the large man moved away, a gloomy shadow of rejection darkening his face.

The newlyweds went next. Although the husband had the same luck as the Texan, he accepted his failure a lot faster, and with more grace. After his fruitless tug, he smiled,

shrugged his shoulders, and made way for his new wife, who in turn approached it warily. As we watched, the young woman reached out towards the hilt, but seemed unwilling to actually touch it. It was in that moment of hesitation that the Texan spoke up, breaking the silence.

"There ain't no point li'l missy," he said callously. "There ain't no way that the sword's gonna pick a woman." He grinned in that mean-spirited way that bullies all over the world all seem to have in common.

*Do bullies take some kind of course to learn that sneer?*

The woman's husband stepped between her and the Texan. I had also begun to move towards him when, somehow, Aaron got there first. The young woman had been visibly cowed by the big man's rebuff, and had begun to pull away from the sword, when Aaron's hand touched her gently on the shoulder to stop her.

"If that truly was the case," Aaron said to the Texan, "then perhaps that explains why it rejected you *sir*." The quiet tension in the cave was split by laughter, and the Texan didn't take kindly to being the butt of the joke. He glowered at Aaron, and I could see him twitching as if he were about to make an offensive move towards the monk. I moved even closer just in case, but I could see that three of the other monks in the cave have done the same, as had the young woman's husband, who seemed to be having an equally hard time containing himself. The Texan finally seemed to realize that he was outnumbered, and immediately backed away muttering under his breath.

"But seriously," continued Aaron. "There is no such restriction. The sword sees within. It sees beyond external labels. A person's worthiness is not dependent on gender, race, or sexual orientation. Nor is it an indication that you are unworthy should you fail to pull it out. The Flaming Sword is looking for a very specific combination of skills, talents, potential, and, of course, honour."

*I'm really beginning to like this guy.*

Aaron touched the woman's shoulder gently, and gave her a reassuring smile as he stepped away from her. The young woman returned the smile, wrapped her fingers around the obsidian blade's hilt, and pulled. When it resisted her, most everyone in the cave (with the obvious exception of the Texan) seemed to vocalize their disappointment. She smiled, raised her arms in mock defeat, spoke a quiet "Thank You" to Aaron, and moved to the back of the cave as her husband rubbed her back supportively.

"Like I said," spoke up Aaron. "Please don't take it too hard, any of you, should you fail. After all, it has been eighty years since the last Flaming Knight, and hundreds of years since the one before. One could say that Kathryn is extremely choosy." Once again, most of us laughed, and the tension in the cave was pretty much broken.

"Who's next?" asked Aaron. The young student responded by raising her hand, and stepping forward. Aaron moved to the side to let her pass. She took hold of the gilded hilt, tugged on it first gently, and then a little harder, but ultimately with no luck. When she had stepped back from the wall, Aaron turned his head towards me and Dirk, silently indicating that it was our turn. Behind me, Dirk nudged me with his elbow, pushing me forward.

*It's likely just a broken hilt cemented to the wall, I could hear Dirk's voice saying in my head.*

I approached that hilt warily. Slowly even. I didn't want to rush this, even if I had spent most of my adult life dreaming of pulling this very sword out of the wall and becoming the chosen one.

If I just turned around and left right now, I could continue to fantasize about being the Flaming Knight; my dream would continue. But, on the other hand, if I pulled on the sword, and it didn't come out... Well, then my dream was truly dead. Truth be told, this logic was probably a contributing factor in why it took me so long to finally make the trip here to *New Santorini*.

I could hear people around me shifting their weight uncomfortably—perhaps impatiently—but nobody spoke. The only sound was the persistent dripping of water off the mossy ceiling.

Finally, I stepped all the way forward, took up a solid stance right in front of the sword in the stone, and reached out and touched it with my finger tips, brushing them across the stylized cross guard and then down along the leather wrap. It was surprisingly warm to the touch, probably because of the others who had been holding it ahead of me. Then, slowly, I wrapped my fingers around the hilt, took a deep breath, went to my happy place in my head, and tugged.

I might just as well have been pulling on the rock wall itself.

I pulled lightly at first, but when it obviously didn't move, I pulled harder, and then harder still.

It took a while for the message to reach my brain that it shouldn't be this difficult, because I was still pulling. I even tried wiggling the hilt up and down a little, like it was a key that wouldn't turn in a lock, and I even pushed on it a little, just in case it operated like the latch on a stereo cabinet.

Nothing worked.

*The sword has not chosen me*, I thought, even as I could hear the voice of my Grade 10 English teacher telling me not to use the passive voice.

*Fine Mrs. Demeter. The sword rejected me. Better?*

I could sense Dirk's presence beside me, and felt his reassuring hand on my lower back. Despite all his derogatory comments, he knew what this meant to me, and for once he remained silent.

I held on to the hilt for a long time, mostly because I knew that I would never get a chance to touch the sword again. I would never be this close to this legendary blade again. There was so much going on in my mind, but I knew that I'd have plenty of time to think about it later so, finally, I let go of the dagger, and stepped back, away from the wall.

“Did you want to try next?” I asked Dirk with as much stiff-upper lip as I could muster.

“Are you kidding?” he answered jokingly, and more than a little sarcastically. “I barely have enough time for life as a part-time vigilante. How am I going to handle life as a full-time superhero?” He stepped between me and the wall, physically separating me from it. “You and I both know that this is all an overhyped tourist attraction,” he continued as he put his arm around my shoulders to pull me away. I let him move my body, but my eyes remained fixed on the blade.

He was still speaking, trying to reassure me as we moved away when, out of the corner of my eye, I could see a loose strap on his laptop bag snag the hilt of the sword, and I watched in amazement as the blade was pulled slowly out of the crevice in the wall as we moved away from it. What was even more shocking was that Dirk wasn’t even aware that it was happening.

I grabbed his shoulder to stop him just as the sword tumbled completely from the fissure, and fell to the cave floor with a loud metallic clang.

Everybody in the cave froze as Dirk and I, both holding our breaths, looked down.

Lying on the ground between our feet was an object that could best be described as an angry ruby. From tip to hilt, the leaf-shaped sword was about a foot long. It was the first time that I, or anybody else for that matter, had seen the stone blade in some eighty odd years, and it was glorious. Lantern light danced across the glossy, finely knapped surface of the red obsidian that was thin enough so that I could actually see the sand beneath it through the uniquely coloured glass.

*The legend is real, I thought.*

Sure, I’d honestly hoped that it was, but some rational part of me had admittedly never really fully bought into it. Now here was proof that the sword was genuinely magical,

because it had finally chosen somebody.

*And that somebody was ... Dirk?*

Silence permeated the cave—at least until the skirmish broke out.

Somehow, I knew instinctively that the scuffling sounds I was hearing were coming from the Texan. I mean, who else could it have been? I also knew intuitively that he was going to try and grab the sword before anybody else could. That, of course, made us a target.

I looked up quickly, just in time to see the big man making a dash for the front of the cave towards the dagger. One of the monks had already tried to stop him, and I watched as he got laid out flat with a heavy backwards swipe of the Texan's huge hand.

Immediately, my reflexes kicked in, as everything began to move in slow motion, a state of perception I was very familiar with thanks to my vigilante work.

"Dirk, grab the sword!" I yelled, even as I stepped in between the dagger and the stampeding Texan. He'd already built up a considerable amount of speed, so when he reached me, I decided that, instead of trying to simply stop him short, I would use his own kinetic energy against him. Ducking under a brutish and clumsy swing of his arm, I stepped to his right, and twisted myself around behind him, while simultaneously planting my foot directly in front of his right leg. When I felt that leg touch mine, I pulled back on it quickly with my own, while simultaneously grabbing his right wrist at the end of its arc. In this manner, I was able to actually steer his momentum so that he slammed head first into the cave wall at full speed.

The impact, I'm sure, would have been enough to take out an elephant, but all it did to the Texan was to knock off his signature hat. In fact, it barely slowed him down because, amazingly, within seconds, he was back up on his feet, and staring intently at the sword that, for some reason, was still lying unclaimed on the floor. Dirk was standing above it, his

hand barely reaching out. He seemed to be stuck in place, as if he was unsure of what to do.

“DIRK!” I repeated more forcefully this time even as I moved to block the Texan again. “The sword! Pick it up!” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see others moving around in the cave. Even though the uneven light of the lanterns made it difficult to figure out exactly what was happening, I could at least confirm that the monks were ushering the other tourists out into the corridor, and out of danger.

*Good thinking. Leave the beast to me.* I flexed my hands, squeezed them into loose fists, and directed them defiantly towards the big man.

To my relief, I could see that Dirk was moving again, my words apparently having snapped him out of his temporary indecisiveness. He was finally reaching to pick up the sword, so I turned my full attention to the big man.

The Texan was still standing with his back to the wall, looking a little dazed from the head-on collision, but he appeared about ready to try another rush. Before I could open my mouth to dissuade him however, Aaron was suddenly standing beside him. I couldn’t tell what the monk was doing exactly. At first, I thought that maybe he was applying pressure to a point on the man’s neck, but he might just as well have been whispering something in his ear. Whatever he did, the effect was immediate, and the big man simply collapsed unconscious.

At that very moment behind me, I heard a whooshing sound, like the noise that a BBQ makes if you let the propane run too long before you finally light it. In front of me, and in response to whatever had made the sound, Aaron looked up and immediately froze, his mouth agape. At the same time, all around me, I could see light and shadows dancing on the cave walls that hadn’t been there before.

*What in blazes?*

Slowly, I turned, and my expression immediately plagiarized the one that I’d just seen on Aaron’s face because, in

the spot where Dirk had been standing mere moments before, there was now an armoured figure of a man, and that figure was holding a long sword of red glass that – perhaps most significantly – was on fire.

It was most definitely the Flaming Knight; I recognized the costume from the historic pictures and films that I'd seen, only this was the first time I'd seen it in colour. To be honest, I was more than a little taken aback at how different the outfit was than I had expected. For one, it was a lot more colourful. For example, the tunic that covered the chainmail, and sported the same flaming sword-in-hand sigil from the cave wall, was actually a dark purple, and not black as I had always assumed. In addition, the long cape attached to the spaulders, as well as the plume that sprouted almost garishly from the top of the helm, were both red.

Naturally, I wondered at first if the figure actually was Dirk, or whether somebody else had rushed in to take his place while my back was turned, but then I noticed Dirk's laptop bag strung over the Knight's shoulder, as if his armour had simply formed out of thin air around it magically.

*Magically. Heh. Suddenly, that's not so far-fetched is it?*

Ironically, now it was the Flaming Knight's turn to look smaller than legend had made him seem over the years. Although the long plume made Dirk look taller than he normally was, and the bunching of the cape on his shoulders made them look wider, Dirk was still a small man, and no amount of extra armour was going to change that.

Yeah, I know I should have been doing something; *anything* really, but I couldn't help myself. The analytical part of my brain had kicked in, and was taking the opportunity to closely observe the magical uniform on display before it. Many people, over the years, have described the Flaming Knight's outfit as a suit of armour, but that's actually a bit of a misnomer. As I could now definitely verify, the suit was more like a tight-fitting chainmail hauberk with mitons on the hands, boiled leather vambraces on the wrists, and

spaulders on the shoulders. The only actual piece of armour was the helm that, with a closed visor, completely obscured the Knight's face. Even the pants and boots appeared to be little more than thick leather.

My quick moment of observation came to an end abruptly as Dirk, still without saying a word, finally began to move, and his destination appeared to be the rune-covered cave wall. His movements were jerky and rushed, almost like he was barely able to keep himself under control. Placing the point of the Flaming Sword against the crevice from whence it had come, Dirk grunted in what was obviously an effort to slide the blade back into the wall. Unfortunately, the sword was a hell of a lot bigger than it had been earlier, and there was also the nasty detail that it was now aflame. As Dirk struggled, great yellow flames were licking up the damp wall, bubbling the ancient paint of its runes and pictographs.

Around us both, so much seemed to be happening all at once, all of it on the edge of my perception. I noticed vaguely for instance that the monks were dragging the unconscious Texan away, and then I watched detachedly as Aaron rushed by, looked at me once as if he were about to ask me to leave, but then kept going instead. I didn't see him exit the cave, as I was still too busy staring at the now-suited figure that used to be Dirk.

The Knight had finally given up on his efforts to re-insert the sword into the wall, and was now flicking the burning blade quickly in much the same way that you'd shake a lit match to extinguish it. In the process though, large dollops of flame were spraying off the end of the blade, one of which landed on the Texan's discarded ten-gallon hat, setting fire to it immediately. I noticed that a few blobs of flame had also landed on the sandy floor of the cave, and had continued to burn of their own accord for a time, despite the fact that there wasn't anything for them to consume.

"Dirk?" I said finally, cautiously approaching my old

friend. I didn't want to get too close, just in case he started swinging his fiery weapon in my direction in his confusion.

He stopped shaking his sword. I couldn't see his face, but I could tell by the fact that his helm had swivelled towards me that he was now looking directly at me.

*Was that actually still him in there?* I wondered. *I mean, the Dirk that I knew, or did the armour somehow change the person inside of it when it appeared?* I realized that there were so many things about this that I just didn't know.

"What the hell's going on Allen!" Dirk cried, his voice slightly muffled by the closed visor. If the tone of his voice weren't enough of a clue, I could tell he was upset by the fact that he was using my last name, something he only ever did when he was angry.

*That's Dirk all right,* I thought, relieved.

I was about to answer him, when my words were interrupted before they could even come out of my mouth by the swift entrance into the cave of the same bearded old man that I'd noticed in the village earlier, followed by Aaron and a number of other monks. The old man took a quick look at the figure holding the Flaming Sword, gasped, and then fell to his knees. The other monks followed suite.

"Hail Gilmat!" they chanted in unison. "Hail Flamer!"

"Hail what now?" asked Dirk. "Oh, I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

## The Obsidian Brotherhood

With the genuflecting monks looking on, Dirk finally gave up on his efforts to extinguish the Flaming Sword in his hand, and decided instead to simply throw it down onto the sandy floor of the cave. It proved to be a good idea because, once there, it stopped burning immediately, while simultaneously shrinking to its former, dagger-like size.

"This is all some kind of mistake," Dirk said to the kneeling monks, as he struggled to pull off his helm. "I didn't pull that sword from the stone, and I am not your *Flamer*." He emphasized the last word as if it were somehow obscene.

"Apparently, the sword would have us believe otherwise," said the old man with the long grey beard, grunting slightly as he pushed himself back to his feet. When he was standing again, he entreated his fellow monks to do likewise. The way that they deferred to him made it clear that he was the one in charge.

Dirk had finally figured out how his new helm was secured, and he tore at the leather strap to release it. It was obviously an effort made all the more difficult because of his chainmail gloves, but he persevered, even as he cursed his current lack of dexterity. Although I moved forward to offer assistance, I was too late, because he finally pulled the last of the straps free, tore off the helm, and tossed it to the ground where it rolled away, eventually coming to a stop at the foot of Kathryn's statue.

At first, I had a hard time recognizing my best friend's face, now that the helmet had been removed. I had rarely seen him this worked up; his eyes were wide and frantic, his lower lip quivering, and his nostrils wide and flared. He looked equal parts scared and pissed off, and I genuinely felt sorry for him. A few of the monks actually fell back on their knees once they saw his agitated face.

The old man stepped forward and stared silently at Dirk, his eyes narrowed. His wrinkled gaze flicked briefly to me, but didn't linger long. He stood for a moment, his hands clasping each other within the broad sleeves of his monk's robe.

Finally, he spoke up. "We will talk more. But not here. If you would both please follow me."

I was honestly a little surprised to be included in the old man's invitation, after all, I wasn't the one sporting the new armoured look, and they very well could have asked me to leave. But, for some reason, he seemed to want me involved, and I wasn't about to argue with him.

Abruptly, the old monk turned, and walked swiftly out of the cave, without waiting to see if we were going to follow him.

*This was obviously a man accustomed to getting his own way.*

Most of the gathered monks shuffled off quickly after the old man, but five of them stayed behind with us. Every single one of them seemed to be attempting to summarily master the art of invisibility, and each wore the same expression of deep regret that they hadn't started practicing the skill at a much younger age.

Dirk and I both watched the bulk of the monks leave, then we turned to face each other for a moment. Dirk had a detached look in his eyes. I'd like to say that it was the kind of look that a deer would have in response to headlights, but that didn't quite apply here. Deer were known to freeze and be unable to move out of danger's way when caught in the bright lights of an oncoming car. The look in Dirk's eyes said to me that he was ready to bolt and run like hell the first chance he got.

"Are you all right?" I asked. I reached out to touch his elbow in a show of support, but it never got there. My fingers were stopped about an inch away from his body by something that made my skin tingle. Quickly, I pulled my hand away.

"What was that?" Dirk asked, the tone in his voice clear that he didn't want any more surprises.

"I don't know," I answered as I reached out to touch him again, gingerly this time. Once again, my fingers were blocked before they could reach his body, almost as if a transparent piece of plastic were in the way. It was apparently some kind of invisible force field, and as I rubbed my fingers along it, I watched as tiny tendrils of blue electric sparks radiated out from where my skin made contact with it.

"Hmmp," I voiced, intrigued by what I was seeing. I stepped back to get a better look at the entire outfit, and as I watched, a couple of water drops fell from the ceiling and bounced off the same transparent barrier, leaving behind the same fleeting blue electrical bolt design.

*Now, it all made sense.*

I'd always wondered why the Flaming Knight didn't actually wear a full suit of armour. Sure, the chainmail and boiled leather may have been more or less sufficient for protection from some medieval weapons, but I never could figure out how the Knight had been able to stand his ground against more modern weapons like bombs and guns – until now that was.

"It's a force field, or something." I finally offered. "Some kind of passive defensive shield."

As I studied Dirk's intangible screen, several more water drops hit it in rapid succession, causing several more blue sparks to branch out and connect, further defining the field's overall form.

"I want to try something," I said as I bent over to pick up a handful of sand.

"Allen," Dirk cautioned. "This is not the time for..."

Ignoring my friend, I tossed the handful of sand in his direction, interrupting him in the process. The individual grains of sand collectively hit the invisible barrier pretty much at the same time, causing hundreds of blue electric

points of impact to radiate out and then join together. For a brief moment, before the sand bounced away, I could see that this was more than simply an amorphous magical shield, it was actually the exact shape of a completely transparent suit of armour.

"Fascinating," I added.

*If it's magical, I wondered. Just how impenetrable is it?*

Where I was absorbed by this awesome new discovery, it appeared to have an obverse—even claustrophobic—effect on Dirk. Indeed, it seemed to actually be alarming him, because he had begun to scratch at his outfit uncomfortably, as if his body was suddenly crawling with insects.

At that moment, one of the remaining monks cleared his throat quietly, and reluctantly said, "Um, gentlemen, the Grand Master is waiting."

*Grand Master is it? Well, I suppose that makes sense, it being a brotherhood and all.*

I looked over at Dirk who was shifting around inside the chainmail as if it were irritating him. He knew what I was going to ask before I even opened my mouth to give voice to it.

"I don't want to talk to *him*," he said pulling irately at his spaulders (I couldn't help but notice that his fingers weren't repelled by the passive defensive shield in the same way that foreign objects were). "I don't want to talk to anybody. I just want to go home."

"We need answers about what just happened to you Dirk. He's the only one who's got them."

Dirk stopped fidgeting and looked at me coolly. Once again, I'm forced to wonder what I would be doing were I in his position. I had to admit that, no matter how much I would have wanted this transformation to happen to me, I'd likely still be a little freaked out by the strangeness of it all, and how quickly everything was moving along. Then, there was this mysterious brotherhood, who seemed to be pulling all of the strings, save one that was arguably the

most important one: the sword's selection process.

*If the Brotherhood really were in charge of the sword, then why shouldn't they also be able to decide who wields it? And, more to the point, how much control do they expect to have over the person who ultimately does?*

In front of me, Dirk rolled his eyes and grunted. "Fine," he finally acquiesced reluctantly.

We both turned towards the cave entrance, but hadn't even taken a step when the same monk that had spoken earlier cleared his throat again, and pointed at the floor. "Would you um...please bring...well, the sword?" he stammered. "Please," he added quickly.

We both looked down at the tiny red-bladed sword lying on the ground between us.

"I'm not touching that thing again", Dirk answered roughly, through a mouth that sounded like it was full of marshmallows. "There's no way I want it catching fire again. *You pick it up.*"

I regarded the sword for a moment. It didn't look hot.

*Would it light up for me?* I wondered hopefully. *Now that it's out of the wall.*

I crouched down, reached out for the hilt, and touched it lightly with the index finger on my right hand.

Nothing happened. I think I was more disappointed than relieved.

I wrapped my fingers around the grip, and clasped it tightly.

Still, nothing happened.

The sword was warm to the touch, just as it had been earlier when I'd tried in vain to pull it from the wall, but not nearly as hot as I'd expected for something that, not just ten minutes ago, was enthusiastically aflame.

Picking the sword up off the ground, I became aware of something that could only be described of as a tactical illusion. The sword just felt bigger than it looked; not just in weight, but in the way it balanced. If I'd closed my eyes, I

would have sworn that I was holding a long sword.

I held the weapon well out in front of me with the blade pointed up towards the ceiling, knowing full well how awkward I looked. Then I nodded at Dirk, and we set off through the cave system together with the monks – three of them leading the way, and two hanging back as sweepers.

By the light of their lanterns, the brothers led us out into the corridor beyond the Cave of the Sleeping Sword (*I'm guessing that they're going to have to rename the cave now aren't they?*) and into the first side tunnel on the right. This led to a long wide passage that eventually narrowed into another winding corridor.

I cleared my throat to warn Dirk that I was about to speak. "What happened anyway?" I asked. "I mean, when you picked up the sword."

"I dunno," he answered, his voice small and far away. He was either still in shock, or barely containing his anger. "The moment I picked up the dagger, it caught fire and expanded to its full size, as fast as an air bag inflating." He was still fidgeting inside his outfit, only now he had begun to tug on the cape attachments in earnest. "At about the same moment, this damned costume appeared." Finally, he figured out that the cape was hooked onto the spauldings, so he tore the whole thing up over his head and tossed it unapologetically onto the floor of the corridor behind us.

We followed the monks down another set of stone steps, and through a smaller tunnel until our way was eventually blocked by a slightly oval metal door that looked like something that you'd find on the front of a safe. On either side of this door stood brothers that were dressed more like soldiers than monks. They wore a full-body suit of dark boiled leather, with several vicious looking weapons strapped strategically onto their bodies, each of them holding a thick spear whose end was planted in the ground at their feet.

*There's more to this brotherhood each and every minute now isn't there?*

The monks leading us spoke briefly to the guards, who then looked at us suspiciously. I became very aware of the dagger that I was holding awkwardly out in front of me, and hoped that they didn't assume that I was being belligerent. I lowered it as much as I dared, but I still had no desire to get any closer to the blade, in case it *did* decide to flame on after all. Beside me, Dirk was examining his gloves and vambraces, presumably trying to figure out how they were secured.

The guards turned to face the metal door, and spoke something aloud simultaneously. Apparently somebody on the other side of the door must have heard them, because there was a metallic click from within the door, and it immediately swung smoothly open towards us.

Our tour guides gestured for us to enter, and then stayed outside with the guards. We stepped in and, as the door swung weightily shut behind us, I could hear the internal locking mechanism sliding back into place obediently.

We walked forward until we were standing in the middle of a cave that was much larger than the one that formerly housed the Sleeping Sword. This one featured a high vaulted ceiling over most of it, and had multiple levels that were accessible here with carved stone steps, and there with wooden ladders. The walls of the large cave indicated that the space saw a fair amount of use, as there were shelves, cabinets, and display cases spread about, as well as three recessed alcoves directly across from us that, considering the amount of clutter everywhere else, seemed curiously empty. In fact, the whole subterranean space felt like a cross between a museum and (considering how thick was the steel door at the entrance) a secure storage area, and it was one that I suspected also doubled as a meeting area, due to the long wooden harvest table in the center of the cave. It was around this long table where several brotherhood members were now gathered, including the old man with the grey beard.

Aaron was standing beside the man whom we now knew to be the Grand Master, talking fairly rapidly into his ear. I'm assuming that the monk was telling his master all about everything that happened earlier in the cave, although I couldn't hear any of the details. Curiously, Aaron appeared to be gesturing towards me now with his eyes, and the old man seemed to be smiling subtly. After a moment, the leader of the brotherhood made a hand gesture, and the monk stopped talking immediately, and stepped back.

The Grand Master looked us both over again, the fingers of his right hand playing in his beard thoughtfully. Finally, he nodded courteously and, speaking directly to Dirk, said, "We've been waiting a long time for you Gilmat. Welcome."

Nobody spoke. Everybody appeared to be waiting for Dirk to respond, but he was too busy pulling his laptop bag over his shoulder and handing it to me to hold before continuing to tear at the straps that held the vambraces on his wrists.

Finally, I spoke up instead. "Gilmat?" I queried.

It was Aaron that answered, even as he gazed at Dirk. "It's Gaelic. Translated literally, it means sword-bearer. Every Flaming Knight is known by that name within the brotherhood." It's funny how his voice has a more pronounced Scottish lilt to it, now that he's surrounded by his brethren.

The old man hadn't spoken since his initial welcome. I could see him staring at Dirk now, his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I said *Welcome* Gilmat," he repeated directly at the disrobing Dirk.

Dirk's response was pointed. "I didn't ask for this," he spit, not even looking up at the old man.

The Grand Master forced a smile, trying to make light of an obviously tense situation. "I'll be honest," he said. "Your reaction is not what I would have expected. I would have thought that most people would be honoured by such a gift."

"Yeah? Well I'm not most people then. I wasn't even trying to pull the damned thing out." He had at last released the straps that secured the boiled leather wrist guard on his left arm. "It came out by mistake." Finally, the left vambrace was loose enough so that he could slide it off, so he threw it to the floor, and began to work on the right one.

"Yet still, the sword chose you," continued the Grand Master in a tone of voice that one would normally use with a small child. "That's clear from the fact that it woke up for you."

"But I didn't *ask* for this," repeated Dirk.

"You swore an oath!" spoke up one of the monks who I recognized as having been in the cave during the tour. "Aaron asked you to swear an oath to take up the mantle of the Flaming Knight should it choose you, and you swore to it."

Dirk's temper was flaring now as he violently ripped off the last vambrace, followed quickly by his chainmail mittens. "I thought it was part of the show! I never once for a moment thought that this was real!" His voice was muffled slightly as he was in the process of pulling the tunic up over his head.

"Are you telling me that you choose not to accept the gift?" The Grand Master's voice was low and measured.

Dirk stopped, a look of relief on his face, though his voice was steeped in sarcasm. "Oh good, then I *do* have a choice." He struggled to remove the chainmail, which wasn't all that easy because of how heavy it appeared to be. Once it was off and on the ground with most of the rest of his outfit, Dirk expressed relief that he was still wearing his regular clothes under the enchanted armour.

"You *always* have a choice." The words from the Grand Master were drawn out, and delivered with more than a little obvious reluctance.

Dirk responded almost immediately. "In that case," he said while gathering up the outfit he'd so far removed, and throwing it all onto the table in front of the old man. "My

answer is NO. I officially decline the offer.”

The pursuant silence lasted only a moment before it was interrupted by a tiny voice that appeared to be my own. “Can I have it instead?” I asked sheepishly

Everyone ignored me.

Dirk continued. “And besides, the fact that I ‘swore a vow’ as you claim doesn’t matter.” He was bent over now, taking off one of his boots. “I didn’t actually try and remove the sword. It got caught on one of the straps of my laptop bag as I walked away, and got pulled out by mistake.”

“I’ll take it,” said a voice that I was once again alarmed to discover as my own. This time though, one of the monks glowered at me in response.

“The prophecy can’t be wrong, and can’t be denied,” said Aaron.

“Well the prophecy was wrong then,” retorted Dirk as he kicked off his final boot.

“Give it to me...”

*Just where is that voice coming from anyhow?*

“You don’t understand,” spoke Aaron with a considerable amount of passion in his voice. “The need is great. We need you. The world needs you now. There is a danger unlike...”

“I’ve already told you,” countered Dirk as he leaned on the conference table to pull one of his legs out of the thick pants. “I don’t care.” He was breathing heavily from the effort it took to extricate his other leg before kicking the pants aside. “I never asked for this, and as far as I’m concerned, you can keep the sword!”

Without thinking, Dirk reached out and grabbed the dagger from me, intent on giving it back to the old man. Once he touched it though, it immediately enlarged and sprung back to life dramatically, a jet of flame shooting up from it and licking the cave’s ceiling, while simultaneously melting a light fixture.

“What the hell!” yelled Dirk frantically, his voice once

more muffled by the helm that had reformed over his head, along with the rest of the costume that he'd just worked so hard to remove. Immediately, he dropped the sword on top of the table, where it turned the wood around it black and smoky before fizzling out and shrinking. Then, Dirk tore off the helm again, and practically spit at the gathered members of the brotherhood. "How do I take this off? Permanently!"

Without a word, the old man stood up, retrieved the tiny sword from the table, and walked over to a shelf along the wall. Pulling what appeared to be a leather sheath from the shelf, he slid the dagger into it, fiddled with it somehow, and almost immediately, Dirk's armour disappeared.

The Grand Master turned to face Dirk again. The friendly old man was completely gone now, having been replaced by a bitter version.

"If you do this," he growled. "There's no coming back. Not ever."

Dirk considered the old man's words. "Works for me. I'm assuming that we're free to go then?" he asked of the Grand Master. The old man growled in response, but didn't actually say anything intelligible. Instead, Aaron stepped forward placing himself physically between the two men.

"There's a ferry within the hour," Aaron said through a forced smile.

"Thanks," answered Dirk. Then he turned to me. "Let's go."

## Glasgow Green

“Huv youse nae hames tae go tae?” called out the barmaid to the disparate group of her remaining patrons of which Dirk and I were a part. Reluctantly, we stepped down off the barstools, slipped on our jackets, and walked out into the city of Glasgow at night. Although there were probably about a half dozen of us filing out the door of her bar, I truly suspected that the barmaid was probably most pleased to be getting rid of the two of us more than the others, since we’d spent most of the evening nursing the same two beers, and coming up with excuses not to talk about what happened two days ago on *New Santorini* Island.

Needless to say, it had not at all been a pleasant departure from the cave. The gruff old Grand Master was none too pleased that Dirk should refuse the sword. I guess telling Dirk that he had a choice was just his way of being polite. When it was clear that Dirk was serious about not accepting the gift, the old man ordered Aaron and a few other monks to “Get us the hell out of his sight.” Aaron quickly accommodated the old man, and delivered us to the wharf without speaking at all to us along the way.

We didn’t have much to say to each other on the ferry home. Dirk wasn’t flirting as usual, and all of the other passengers, of which there was only a handful at this time of day, just left us alone, as if there was some kind of invisible bubble around us the whole time. Dirk didn’t seem to notice though. He just kept his nose in his laptop until the battery ran out, and then stared out the window at the waves. Appropriately, a storm was gathering on the distant horizon.

I watched him for a large part of the two hour trip, trying to figure out what he was thinking. Finally, I had to admit that the only thing I was certain of, was the fact that my own mind was ablaze. Not only was the Flaming Sword real, it

had chosen another Knight, and it wasn't me.

*After all these years of wondering and fantasizing, the sword was REAL.*

Imagine all the good that could be done with it. All the lives that could be helped; all the lives that could be changed. It was an awesome responsibility, and I had to admit that I could understand why Dirk didn't want it. I had sought it out. He had only come along for the ride, and he had been chosen almost by mistake.

We spent the next two days biding our time while waiting until tomorrow's flight out of here, and doing our best to avoid reporters.

The news of the sword coming to life again and choosing a new Knight was, as should have been expected, all over the media, and news organizations from all over the globe had descended en-mass on Glasgow, Oban, and the island to track down more information. Thankfully, not too many details had been released as of yet, other than the fact that the new Knight was an American (which was funny because they didn't even get that right, seeing as Dirk and I were both Canadian). The Brotherhood was obviously doing a bang-up job in managing the media, because nobody appeared to even be aware that Dirk had turned the sword down.

We had seen one news item the other day (one that had been repeated over and over again in the absence of any real information in the age of twenty-four hour news outlets) that showed the other members from our tour group being interviewed. They didn't really have much to offer, which said to me that the brotherhood had been able to convince them not to talk, presumably with hush money. The most forthcoming among them had been the Texan who, sporting a large white bandage where his signature hat should have been, spoke mostly about how it "shoulda" been him, and that it was some skinny runt who got it, which was funny, as he'd been unconscious during the actual revelation of the

## Flaming Knight.

We had tried to move our flight up by a couple of days, but had been unable to, so we just tried to keep busy, and keep our minds occupied. We'd spent our last day walking around the downtown core, exploring museums like the People's Palace and the Winter Gardens, and as evening settled, we had visited the pub that we're now standing in front of.

We looked across the street towards the large park in the middle of the city called Glasgow Green, and I noticed how wistfully Dirk was staring at the trees that we can see there. Instinctively, I knew exactly what he was thinking.

We had both been raised in Northern Ontario, and had spent a lot of time as kids exploring the northern Canadian bush. But, where I had certainly always appreciated nature, Dirk's connection had always been much deeper. It was like he was a part of it. I've never seen anybody more comfortable in the wild, and never seen the wild more comfortable with any other person. Hell, I'd even seen animals come out of hiding, and approach Dirk directly. It's uncanny really, and it's something I've never understood, but I've certainly learned to respect it.

I know that the last few years have been difficult on Dirk in a city like New York, because whenever he gets stressed, he needs trees, open water, and a marked lack of concrete to make himself feel better.

After what had just happened to him a few days ago, I knew without having to ask that the park across from us was calling to him in ways that I could never appreciate.

Dirk looked at me as if he knew that I already understood what he wanted. His look also said that he knew that I wasn't about to refuse him either, even though I was more than a little nervous about it. I've been paying pretty close attention to our surroundings over the last couple of days, and I was pretty sure that we were being followed, by more than just reporters. I keep spotting somebody in a trench

coat, but keep dismissing it as unlikely that he's actually following us, because who would be so obvious as to wear something as clichéd as a trench coat to tail somebody in this day and age?

We cross the street, enter the park, and make our way towards the trees along the shores of the *River Clyde*. Since it's the middle of the night, we've pretty much got the park to ourselves.

Somewhere south of the Nelson Monument, at about the time we entered the moon-cast shadows of the trees, I heard Dirk take a deep breath and let it out slowly. I could sense him relaxing, and wondered why we hadn't thought of this yesterday, or the day before, or of doing it during actual daylight for that matter.

Dirk dropped to the ground, and leaned his back up against a tree. Then he pulled a mickey out of his laptop bag, and took a quick swig of its contents before offering to me, even while he grimaced as the liquid burnt its way down his throat.

I took the mickey, sat down beside him, and asked, "What's in it?"

"We're in Scotland," he replied dryly. "What do *you* think?"

I took a timid sip, and handed it back to him as I coughed the scotch down.

"Smooth," I squeaked. We'd never been heavy drinkers, but this did kind of feel like the kind of thing that you'd do in this situation.

"You're wondering why I did it aren't you?" Dirk said as he took another tepid swig.

He didn't have to specify what he was talking about. I'm sure neither one of us had been thinking of anything else.

"Well," I answered lightly. "The thought had crossed my mind."

He smiled tightly in response, and said, "I've been giving this a lot of thought, and it's mostly because of my father."

"Your father?" I asked in confusion. Dirk's father had been a well known surgeon before they moved to our home town, and I know that their relationship had been rocky over the years. He hadn't been around much when Dirk was growing up, and his obvious wealth was just another convenient reason for the school yard bullies to go after Dirk. "I don't understand."

"I don't think I can handle that kind of power. What it would do to me. Like what it did to him."

I thought about this for a moment before offering, "I still don't understand. Sure, your Dad was good at his job, and had a lot of power in the community, but the sword represents a different kind of power. It's not the same thing at all."

"Isn't it? For him it was the same. For him, when lives were in his hands, he was playing God, and he knew it. How is that different than what I'd be doing with the sword?"

I had to admit that maybe Dirk had a point, but he wasn't finished.

"I watched that kind of power go to my father's head. He was the big fish in a small pond, and he got arrogant and aloof as a result. He got overconfident, and was convinced that he couldn't fail." Dirk paused, and took another drink before continuing. "When Mom got sick, Dad was convinced he could fix her, and he ignored the advice of real experts, refused to take her to the specialists in Toronto, and she just got worse."

Dirk was about to lift the mickey to his mouth again, and then thought better of it, and handed it to me instead. I knew where he was going now, but didn't want to interrupt him.

"Mom died because of what he did," he finally said. "I'm sure of it. Even afterwards, he never admitted his role in it. It was always somebody else's fault. *Always.*"

"And you're scared that, if you accept the sword, that you'll turn out just like your father?"

"I *know* I will. I already have. There are so many things in

me that I'm noticing that are just like him, and it's not just that I look like he did at my age. I handle things the same way. Have the same temper. The same sense of humour. The same impetuosity." He was pulling at the grass now with his hands, and tossing the blades away from him as he spoke. "But I do have one thing that he'll never have. I know my limitations. I know the temptations that I should avoid. Because of this, I know that I can't deal with that kind of power, so I won't accept it. I *can't*. People could die."

I had rarely seen my best friend this serious. There wasn't much that rattled him, and he was the kind of person that made light of every situation, no matter how ominous. This was also the first time that I'd ever heard him speak about his feelings for his father, and how much it concerned him to be so much like a man that he so obviously disdained. Suddenly, so much about Dirk made sense. It was no wonder that he always avoided real responsibility and the recognition that often came with it: he didn't want to risk having his ego stoked. He'd seen up close the kind of hubris that it can lead to.

"I had no idea," I said finally.

"Nobody did."

We sat for a time in silence, listening to the sound of the city beyond the river, and the boats that moved back and forth across its dark water. Occasionally, a light from one of the boats would sweep into the trees, creating light and shadows that would play across the grass.

"I don't know what to say Dirk. I have no idea exactly how the sword works, and I'm really sorry to pull you into the middle of something that I wanted."

He snorted an acerbic laugh, and muttered something that sounded like an acknowledgment of my apology. "It should have been you," he added.

"You're damn right it should have me," I replied while taking another swig from his mickey.

"You're more the superhero type," he continued. "Hell,

even your name screams *secret identity name*. Mark Allen," he said in a deep and mysterious voice like the kind that you hear in the movie trailers. "By night he's a Superhero, and by day, a mild-mannered... Hey what do you do with yourself during the day anyhow?"

Dirk continued to talk in a tone of voice that made it clear that he was beginning to feel better, but I had stopped listening because I had become aware of a movement off to my left. There was a figure slipping quietly between the trees, pausing behind each one in what was an obviously vain attempt at not being seen. And, if I wasn't very much mistaken, the figure was wearing a trench coat.

I nudged Dirk's arm and gestured towards the figure, now about a dozen meters away.

"Who is that?" he asked quietly. "Is that a woman?"

"I've no idea," I answered in a whisper. "But I'm going to find out. Keep talking like I'm still here. Then, in three minutes, cough loudly."

I rolled into the dark shadows behind our tree, and crept closer to our mysterious guest, keeping the tree that he was hiding behind between us. When I was right on the opposite side of the tree, I crouched low and waited. Behind me, Dirk started to have a very loud coughing fit, and I took that opportunity to leap up, grab a low lying branch, and swing on it so that I landed on the other side of the tree, right behind our very surprised spy.

Immediately, I assumed an offensive pose with my hands out in front of me, and demanded, "Who are you, and why are you following us?"

The mysterious figure was dressed a little too much like a spy, almost as if he'd mimicked something that he'd seen in an old pulp magazine from the 60's. He wore a wide-brimmed fedora, a long dark trench coat (with an equally dark shoulder bag that look almost like a purse), and dark sunglasses, even though it was well past midnight. If it weren't so serious a situation, I'd have assumed that he was

being ironic.

The wannabe spy slowly took to his feet in front of me, and through a very familiar smile said, "It's about time you saw me. I've been tailing you obviously for days."

"Aaron?"

Just then, Dirk appeared beside me. He looked Aaron up and down and said, "Nice fashion choice."

"Thanks," answered Aaron, apparently unaware that he was being teased.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded. "I thought the brotherhood was done with us."

"The Grand Master can be a little..." Aaron paused while looking for the right word. "Well, obstinate."

"I'd noticed," offered Dirk sardonically.

"He can be difficult at times to deal with, so I thought I'd come and try to talk to you myself. I followed you because I'd wanted to see if you'd changed your mind," he said directly to Dirk.

Dirk hesitated for a second. Finally, he answered, "I haven't. The answer is the same. Find another Glimad."

"Gilmad."

"Whatever."

"Um, Aaron," I interrupted. "Did you come alone?"

"Yes," he replied. "Why?"

"Then who are those other guys?" I pointed to an area of the forest between us and the water, where a group of darkly-dressed men were currently sneaking around in the trees, their presence having been briefly revealed by a passing spotlight from a boat on the *River Clyde*.

"I've no idea."

As we watched, another light panned by, reflecting off shiny cylindrical metal objects in their hands.

"They've got guns," I observed a little more matter-of-factly than I had intended.

"Crap," offered Dirk helpfully.

Immediately, I began to push Dirk and Aaron forward,

towards the monument. "Let's move then shall we? Perhaps find some cover?"

As we ran out from underneath the trees, I was alarmed to notice that several of the closest street lamps had suddenly gone dark. We hadn't gotten much farther before the first flash of light came from the forest. Although we didn't hear any gunshots, we could hear the unmistakable sounds of tiny metal objects whipping through the air above us. Immediately, we dove for cover behind the base of the Nelson Monument.

"They've got silencers," I offered, as I heard a couple of bullets slam into the stone on the other side of the wall. Interestingly, none of the shots have been all that close yet. Either the silencers were affecting their aim, or they were purposely trying to miss.

*Unless they're just really bad shots.*

"Who the hell is that?" hissed Dirk at Aaron from his crouched position behind the wall.

"Damn," answered the monk as he pulled a cell phone out of his shoulder bag, and punched at the display. "I was afraid of this." He was connected almost immediately, even as a few more tiny missiles whizzed by above us, spoke a few words into the phone including our current location, and ended the call. "I've asked for back up but... well it'll take several minutes."

"I don't think we have that much time," I said. "It won't take them very long to figure out that we don't have anything to defend ourselves with." I looked at the monk. "You don't happen to have a gun do you?"

He shook his head distastefully.

"Wait!" demanded Dirk. "Go back a bit. You said you were afraid of this. *What exactly were you afraid of?*"

A bullet grazed the side of the obelisk behind us, sending a few tiny chips of stone clattering onto the ground around us.

"Well you weren't exactly alone in the cave when you

pulled out the sword were you?" countered Aaron.

"I told you, it was an *accident*."

"It doesn't matter Dirk," Aaron answered, almost kindly. "Somebody's obviously figured out who you are. Somebody's either after the sword, or is trying to make sure that you never use it."

I'd had the same concerns, which is why I'd been watching our back so vigilantly the last couple of days. This trip to a darkened, and relatively deserted park late at night was the first real opportunity that we'd given for somebody to make a move.

*Damn. What was I thinking, letting Dirk talk me into coming here?*

"Well it's a good thing that we don't have the sword then," I said. "All we have to do is figure out how to get away..." Something in Aaron's expression gave me pause. He was looking at me with what appeared to be a sheepish expression, but I couldn't tell for sure because of how dark it was.

"We *don't* have the sword right Aaron?"

"Well, not exactly," he answered as he reached into his shoulder bag again, and pulled out the sheathed dagger that was the Flaming Sword.

"WHAT THE HELL! WHAT..." The rest of Dirk's impassioned words were lost in another hail of silent gunfire. More stone chips from the monument rained down upon us, and we ducked down even further behind the protective wall.

"DO YOU MIND?!!" yelled Dirk towards the distant assailants, his voice squeaking in a way I hadn't heard since he went through puberty. "You're damaging a national monument!"

Ignoring Dirk's continued, and increasingly nonsensical rant, I moved closer to Aaron. "You brought the sword with only yourself to protect it?" I asked the monk pointedly. "Isn't that a little reckless?"

"Not if Dirk uses it."

More gunfire slammed into the stone retaining wall behind us, as Dirk continued to vent his frustrations, partly at the assailants currently peppering the monument with bullets, but mostly at Aaron for bringing the sword back to him.

I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him a little.

"Dirk, relax," I implored. "Just take it easy." He eventually stopped ranting, sunk his teeth into his bottom lip to keep it from moving anymore, and glared at me. "Look over there," I told him, gesturing towards the open field between us and the museum. A group of obviously drunk students were cavorting about on the grass, and were clearly headed in this direction, albeit in a very meandering fashion. They hadn't heard the gunfire because of the silencers, and obviously hadn't noticed the flashing of the muzzles yet either or, if they had, had assumed that somebody was using a camera with a flash.

"The gunmen have to be stopped before somebody gets hurt," I said. "I don't like it any more than you do, but you're our best chance right now." If only I had my protective gear, this wouldn't necessarily be the case, but I couldn't afford to think with my ego now, not when lives were at stake.

Dirk looked over my shoulder towards the group of students. He sighed bodily.

"Fine," he whispered as he slipped the strap of his laptop bag over his shoulder and handed it to me. "Give me the sword Aaron."

Aaron handed him the sheathed dagger, and Dirk looked at it for a moment.

"How do I... How do I turn it on?" he finally asked.

"Honestly," answered Aaron irately, as if Dirk were a dull child. "Just pull it out of the sheath."

"Y'know, I've never done this before," said Dirk as he gripped the hilt in one hand and the sheath in the other, even as Aaron reached out and angled the sword so that it would be pointing away from us when it enlarged. "At least

I've never done it on purpose, you'd think that maybe you'd have just a little more..."

Whatever else Dirk was saying was lost in a blast of white noise and a gust of imploding wind as the transformation occurred. I was trying to pay attention to what was going on, but it all happened so fast. As quickly as the sword expanded to its full length and caught fire, the Flaming Knight's armour faded swiftly into existence. I couldn't help but smile at this concrete reminder that the legend was real, even as I felt a twinge of jealousy that it wasn't actually me inside the armour.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"Not bad this time actually," answered Dirk's voice from behind the newly materialized visor. "It's actually not all that different than not having it on at all. Maybe it's because we're not in a cave anymore, but it doesn't feel nearly as claustrophobic. In fact..."

"Do you two mind," Aaron broke in. "We're in a bit of a firefight right now. Can you save your discussion until later?"

*Speaking of the firefight. Something was different.*

"Listen," I said. "There's not as much gunfire." I looked around us to either side out into the shadows. "Somebody's on the move. Likely to try and flank us because they've finally figured out that we're unarmed. You'd better go now Dirk."

"Me? Go where?"

Aaron sighed and muttered something that sounded like, "Heidni'baw" before saying, "Out there. Listen, although it may not feel like it to you right now, you're fully armoured." The monk picked up a chipped piece of stone, and tossed it at Dirk so that it bounced off the invisible magic shield that we'd discovered back in the cave. "And nothing can get through, not even bullets."

"You sure?"

"Positive."

“Not even bullets?”

“Would you just get out there please?”

I could hear Dirk taking a deep breath, and watched as he stood up tentatively. Almost immediately – and perhaps more than a little predictably – he was fired upon. The remaining shooters focused their shots on this new target but, just as Aaron had promised, each and every bullet bounced off in a little spark of electric yellow. But it wasn't so much that they bounced off the armour like ricochets, it was more like the bullets were simply stopped short in mid-flight to fall impotently to the ground.

Through it all, Dirk was holding his arms up over his head while screaming. I was concerned at first, until I realized that it wasn't a shriek of distress coming from my friend, because it had begun to morph into what was obviously a gleeful exclamation.

“HOLY F@#%ING HELL!!!!” Dirk screamed as he slowly lowered his arms to watch the bullets continue to careen ineffectively off his helm, arms, and chest. “I'M F@#%ING BULLETPROOF!”

All at once, he seemed to realize that he was still holding a burning sword, so he lifted it up above his head, and took off abruptly in the direction of the gunmen, while screaming, “I'M BULLETPROOF YOU MOTHERF@#%ERS!”

I looked over at Aaron sheepishly. The usually reserved monk had an obvious expression of shock on his face. I'm gathering he'd led a fairly sheltered life cloistered at Castle Redstone, and Dirk's very colourful language was catching him off guard.

“You have to admit,” I offered through a weak smile. “What Dirk lacks in eloquence, he makes up for in spirit.”

Off in the trees, I could see the Flaming Sword waving around above Dirk's head, and I could hear that he was still screaming obscenities. There weren't any more flashes of light on his armour either, indicating (I assumed) that his attackers were now on the run, having realized that the

sword-waving lunatic coming at them was impervious to their bullets.

Through it all, I continued to pry the darkness on either side of us watching for movement, and my vigilance paid off. In the shadows off to our left, just slipping out of the trees, was a man with a gun. I smiled a little mischievously once I realized that, since he was still intent on attacking us, he was apparently out of touch with his companions, since he obviously didn't know that they were currently fleeing the scene.

Immediately, I was on the move, trying to draw his fire away from Aaron. If I could just keep moving, and maybe if he was a bad shot, I could take advantage of the sparse cover, and get close enough to disarm him.

I felt incredibly naked without my *KnightLight* protective gear. Sure, it's not like it would make me bulletproof like Dirk, but it would have helped a little. No matter, I didn't have a choice; I had to act right away before the gunman had a chance to corner us.

Before I got far though, I heard Aaron say something behind me that I couldn't quite understand. Before I could ask him to repeat it, I watched incredulous as the man dropped the gun clumsily, only to have it tumble out of his immediate reach.

*Well, that certainly makes things easier.*

I covered the ground between us quickly, even as the assailant pulled a knife and launched it at me. Reflexively, I studied the end-over-end twirl that it made as it spun towards me, timing it perfectly so I knocked it out of the air with my forearm on a spin when the hilt was closest to me. The move, although successful, was purely instinctual, as I'd momentarily forgotten that I wasn't wearing my padded outfit, and my lower arm was on fire where the hilt of the blade had bounced violently off of it.

*That'll leave a bruise. But I suppose it's better than the alternative.*

Not to be deterred, the man pulled another knife.

*He's got two knives? Bet he wishes that he had two guns as well eh?*

I was too close for him to throw the second knife, so instead, he held it up towards me in a threatening show of force. I pretended not to notice as I ran towards him, offering him a tempting target to slice at. Predictably, he attacked just as I had anticipated, thrusting violently towards my stomach which—surprisingly for him—wasn't anywhere near where he had expected it to be, because I had executed a quick side flip, landed on my hands, and in the process kicked the knife out his hand. I quickly regained my feet, launched myself over the assailant using his shoulders as a vaulting horse, wrapped my arm around his neck in a tight sleeper hold, and pulled him forcefully backwards to his knees.

Within moments, he was unconscious. By then, Aaron was standing beside me again, holding the man's gun, and handing me something from his shoulder bag that I could use to secure the man's wrists. Off in the distance, I could hear the sound of squealing tires, something that I hoped indicated that Dirk was successful in scaring off our attackers. I looked around the area for further signs of movement, but I didn't see any.

Satisfied that our captive was breathing and comfortable, and that I hadn't hurt him unduly in the melee, I lay him on the grass and turned to face Aaron.

"What was that exactly?" I asked directly.

"What was what?" he replied immediately. I couldn't tell if he was just playing around, or if he was generally trying to act ignorant.

"That thing you said," I replied. "Just before the gun flew out of this guy's hand. It was some kind of incantation wasn't it?" Over the years, I had done a lot of research into magic, with the aim of possibly using it to enhance my own crime-fighting abilities. I strongly believed it to be real,

having surmised that it was the only explanation for the existence of the Flaming Sword. Unfortunately, the only thing I'd been able to discover in the process was that most of the magic within easy reach – at least the kind that you can read about on the internet – is little more than hogwash.

Still, I remained convinced that there was real magic in the world. I had heard sworn testimonies about it; had even intercepted serious rumours supporting this theory, but I had never actually witnessed it.

Until now.

"Come to think of it," I continued to Aaron. "I heard you whisper something in the cave the other day too, just before the Texan mysteriously collapsed."

Aaron looked around almost nervously before responding. "I have limited skill in the dream language," he finally admitted sheepishly. "It has its uses."

I made a mental note to ask him more about this dream language, but for now, I had bigger issues in need of resolution.

*This Aaron is obviously not all that he seems to be.*

"Well that explains it then," I said.

"Explains what?"

"Why you would risk bringing the sword out in public like that alone," I answered. "And why the bullets were missing us by so much. You're not so helpless after all."

I couldn't tell for sure in the dark, but I was pretty sure that his face had reddened a little bit in embarrassment. I could hear Dirk coming back towards us now, his footfalls a little heavier than usual because of his armour. I picked up the laptop bag from beside the monument where I'd left it to go after the gunman, and we had begun to walk in Dirk's direction, when I froze, a new thought suddenly occurring to me.

"Wait," I pulled on Aaron's arm to bring him to a stop. "You could have neutralized the gunmen right from the start couldn't you? You didn't though, because you wanted

Dirk to use the sword."

Aaron was smiling now as he looked at me, his eyes studying each of mine in turn as he spoke. "I saw the way you set out to draw the gunman's fire away from me earlier, and the way you took him down. You are very skilled, perhaps even brave ... and you are also very shrewd," he paused. "Still, you give me far too much credit sir, I..."

The rest of Aaron's speech was interrupted by Dirk who was now standing beside us shaking the sword furiously again, like he had in the cave the other day.

"How do you shut this thing off?" he asked slightly irritated.

"Put it in the sheath that is now on your hip," answered Aaron gesturing at it, apparently not feeling it necessary to explain that the same sheath that had held the sword earlier had been magically transported to Dirk's belt once he had transformed into the Flaming Knight. "That will make the sword stop burning. Once you strap it in place inside the scabbard, the armour will disappear as well."

Dirk did as instructed, and slid the sword into the sheath. Immediately, it stopped burning. Dirk then fumbled with a thick leather strap that he slipped over the sword's cross guard to secure it. Once again, I'm witness to the shrinking phenomena, and watch as the sword and its matching scabbard are reduced to the dagger size that it had possessed when first I saw it. Then, the armour dissolved around Dirk immediately, leaving the shrunken sheathed sword attached to his regular belt, and exposing a wide-eyed man, shaking with obvious excitement.

"That was cool!" was all that Dirk could say initially. "The bullets..." he was demonstrating with his hands as he spoke. "They just bounced right offa me!"

"Oh no," said Aaron looking into the trees that Dirk had just emerged from.

"What?" I asked, alarmed, even as I saw Dirk's hand reach instinctively for the sword. "Are they back?"

"No, it's not that," he replied. "Look."

Between us and the river—along the path that Dirk had chased the gunmen earlier—several trees, a couple of bushes, and at least one park bench, were on fire.

"Oops," offered Dirk through a lop-sided grin which was accompanied by a noncommittal shrug of his shoulders.

Immediately, we began to run towards the fires, Dirk and I both removing our jackets with the intent of smothering the flames, when two black suburban vans skidded to a halt on the path ahead of us. Before either one of us could react, Aaron was telling us to stand down.

"That's our backup," he assured us. "You can relax."

Sure enough, even as Aaron spoke, another tunic-clad bald monk was jumping out of one of the vans even before it had even pulled to a full stop, and he was calling out Aaron's name. "Is everybody OK?" he asked.

As Aaron told the monk what had happened, two others had grabbed extinguishers from the back of one of the vans, and had gone to deal with the fires. When they had returned, Aaron asked them to get our captive and put him in the back of the first of the vans.

At about this time, we realized that we were no longer alone at Nelson's Monument. The flurry of activity had finally begun to attract onlookers, most notably the drunk students that we had spotted earlier. No doubt, it was just a matter of time before the authorities arrived, so Aaron told us to get into the back of the second van, while he left two of his brothers behind to deal with the police once they got there.

They wouldn't have long to wait apparently, because, as we followed the other van out of the park and on to Clyde Street, we met with a couple of police cars on the way into the park. I couldn't help but notice that our driver didn't even slow, but simply exchanged knowing nods with the driver of the first police car coming in.

*It would appear that this brotherhood is very well connected,*

*considering that we're being allowed to leave the scene of a fire fight with one of the shooters as a captive.*

Traffic was sparse this time of the morning on the streets and freeways of Glasgow, as our two vans travelled south-west through the city at a brisk pace. Dirk and I were sitting beside each other in the back seat, with Aaron facing us on the bench opposite ours. Dirk put his head back and closed his eyes, and began to breathe deeply in what obviously an attempt to calm himself. I decided not to interrupt him and instead gently touched the bruised area on my forearm where the assailant's knife hilt had made contact. It was very tender to the touch, and I could already feel it swelling. I'd have to get ice on it soon before it got much worse.

After a time, when it was clear that nobody was willing to be the first to speak, Aaron started fishing around in his shoulder bag, eventually pulling out an electronic tablet. He flipped open the cover, powered it up, and began doing something that I couldn't see, so I instead began to look out the window at the city slipping by.

We travelled in silence for a while, until finally I asked Aaron, "Where are we going?"

"Your hotel room isn't safe anymore," he answered. "The brotherhood has a private hangar at the airport, so we're going there. At least for now." He was studying Dirk carefully. "That is, until we decide what happens next."

"What *does* happen next?" wondered Dirk as he opened his eyes. He was still shaking with excitement, and presumably adrenaline, and he still had a goofy grin on his face despite his short meditation.

"Well, I suppose that's up to you," Aaron said. "I see that you've still got the sword on your belt." The monk gestured to the sheathed dagger.

Dirk followed the direction of the monk's pointing finger. "That doesn't necessarily mean that I want to keep it." His smile was quickly fading, although his eyes were still wide with shock.

"I understand. But you also have to understand that, whether you want it or not, the word is out there now." As if to punctuate his point, he flipped the tablet around so that we could all see it. Immediately, I recognized a YouTube video window, even as I realized that the reason that the moving images currently appearing in it were familiar, was because I had just experienced them myself, not more than a half hour ago.

"Crap," understated Dirk beside me.

Although the video was dark, grainy, and obviously filmed at a distance with a zoom because of how shaky it was, it was still pretty damning. You could clearly see a figure wearing a knight's garb standing by the Nelson Monument and holding a flaming sword, as bright sparks that could only be ricocheting bullets speckled his chest and head. On the video, a few voices expressed incredulity before they were hushed in time to hear the distant voice of the armoured figure loudly, and quite obscenely, announce that he was bulletproof, before setting off down the path waving the flaming sword above his head. At this point, once the Flaming Knight had disappeared out of sight, the video ended abruptly as it had begun.

I looked at the information bar beneath the video player. It had only been uploaded ten minutes ago, yet already had over two thousand views.

"I suspect," said Aaron, "that by morning, it will be.. what is you call it? Viral?"

"Viral," I corrected, my throat suddenly dry.

"We managed to contain things on the island," the monk continued. "But this is different. The word is out now. We can't quell this."

"This is your fault you realize," Dirk said, his words moderately vitriolic. "You brought the sword to me."

"But I didn't bring the gunmen."

"You sure about that?"

Instead of responding verbally, Aaron simply returned a

withering glare. It was the kind of look that I was used to getting from Kimberly. It was the kind of look that combined the accusation that I was wrong with the imperative that I stop talking immediately. Dirk had apparently had some experience with this glare too, because he acquiesced to it, and didn't immediately respond.

"Could we claim that it's all a hoax?" I asked hopefully.

"That might convince some, but there are others who will believe it." Aaron looked at Dirk directly, almost sympathetically now. "I'm sorry to say it Dirk, but you, and your family are targets now."

"F@#%ing hell," muttered Dirk.

"Not to worry though. We've put guards on your father in Toronto." Dirk seemed to find this very funny, and laughed derisively at what Aaron had just said.

"Why is this happening?" I asked pointedly. "Why is Dirk a target?"

Aaron chewed on his words a little bit before finally offering them up. "Like I said earlier, somebody is either after the sword itself, or is trying to kill Dirk in order to keep him from using it. I don't know which."

"Who?" Dirk and I asked it at the same time.

"We have our suspicions."

"*We have our suspicions?*" I mimicked. "That sounds suspiciously to me like you know more than you're willing to say."

Aaron had no response to this, so I continued, "Back in the cave, you said that the need for the Flaming Knight was great, and that there was a danger unlike any other coming. Is this related?"

Aaron hesitated before responding, "I can't say. Not here. Not now. Especially when I don't know if Dirk is going to accept the sword or not."

"So, let me get this straight," offered Dirk. "I'm in untold danger if I accept the sword, but you can't tell me the nature of that danger until I accept the sword."

"Don't forget the part about the fact that you're in danger if you don't accept the sword too," I offered mockingly.

"Oh yeah, thanks for reminding me of that part," Dirk said, his voice turning caustic. "Hell of an organization you're running buddy. You routinely put civilians at risk by letting them tug on the sword knowing that, if somebody actually does pull it out, their life is in danger."

Aaron raised his eyebrows. "I would have thought that, if anybody understood how an ordinary citizen can make a difference in the world, it would be a registered vigilante."

*So he's done his homework has he? He knows who and where Dirk's father lives, and he knows about our operations as Knight-Light.*

"This should be nothing new to either of you," the monk continued. "You put yourself, others, and those you care for at risk everyday when you go out in public and fight crime, even if you are wearing a costume when you do it. The Flaming Sword could take your work to a whole other level, especially considering that it comes with the support of the Obsidian Brotherhood who, for centuries, have been sworn to support the one who wields the sword, and fight the same just cause. With this sword, you could become a symbol of hope for your community, even for the world at large, the same way that the last Flaming Knight was."

What he was saying wasn't all that unusual so far. In fact, it had been exactly the same thing that I had wanted to do with the sword had it chosen me instead.

"The sword is not asking anything unusual of you," continued Aaron, an edge creeping into his voice that I'd not heard before, "and it is not anything that you weren't already doing, so let us please put an end to your declarations of unwillingness and your professed inculpability." He looked back and forth between us, but his eyes finally found Dirk's and held them firmly. "You say that the sword came out of the wall by mistake Dirk, but I think that you will find my friend, that *nothing* ever happens in this uni-

verse by mistake.”

At that moment, we pulled into a large garage while the other van kept driving towards an old abandoned warehouse down the road.

“We’re here. I’ll give you both a moment to talk it over.” He called to the driver, and both of them stepped out of the van and closed the doors. Behind us, I could hear the click and hum of the garage doors descending.

“He’s got a point Dirk,” I said.

“Yeah? So what.”

“I know that this whole vigilante thing has always been my idea—even my obsession at times. But, you’ve never said no to being a part of it with me. You even moved all the way to New York City with me because of it. Although you’ve rarely been involved in the actual hand-to-hand fighting, you’ve still been there, giving me the support I needed.” I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed it gently. “Truth be told, I couldn’t have done it without you; I *can’t* do it without you. But Aaron’s right. That makes you guilty by association. You want this life as much as I do. You want to make a difference, because you have been making a difference.”

Dirk continued to stare forward, fidgeting, but not responding.

“You were great back there,” I continued. “You know how hard this is for me to say when you know how much I wanted this sword, but I have to admit that you’ve got guts. I don’t know if I could have stood up the way you did back there in that hail of bullets.” Dirk smiled in spite of himself, as if remembering the heady feeling of being bulletproof. “And about what we were talking about earlier, about how you’re afraid that you’ll succumb to the same arrogance that your father did. I want you to know that you’ve got nothing to worry about, because you’ve got something that your father never had.”

Finally he looked at me, “What’s that?”

"A best friend, who is willing to kick your ass into next week if you ever start getting full of yourself, invulnerable armour or not."

Finally Dirk smiled at me, and even chortled a bit.

"What's more," I persisted. "I'm confident that the sword chose you for a reason, whether you believe it or not. It was able to see something genuinely worthy in you that you couldn't see yourself. Perhaps it was your self-awareness of how much you're like your father that did it. Perhaps the sword saw that you had the potential to overcome the same temptations that others could not. Whatever it was, I'm pretty sure that, if there were any real danger of absolute power corrupting you absolutely, the sword would not have awoken for you."

Dirk's eyes narrowed slightly in thought. Finally, he said, "So, what should I do?"

"Well, you know what I would do, but that doesn't matter. I don't want to tell you what to do. But think about this. You're unfortunately in danger no matter what you decide, but if you take the sword, you'll at least have a half decent chance of protecting yourself and the ones you love. And you'll also be able to do some real good in the world."

Dirk cleared his throat. "It still should have been you."

"You're damn right it should have been me."

"Still, that was a hell of a rush earlier. Being bulletproof and all," he added. Then his voice got quiet. "I guess I can play the hero." Suddenly he started speaking louder again as he finished, "But I'm not doing this without you."

I smiled. "I'm not going anywhere. Shall we tell Aaron that we're about to finally make his boss smile again?"

"Seems unlikely," he answered. "But sure."

We opened the doors to the van and stepped out. Aaron was standing over by a window, leaning against the sill, his arms crossed over his chest, and a petulant look colouring his face.

"So, what's next?" asked Dirk.

“Is that a yes?” demanded Aaron, his arms still crossed. Dirk looked at me smiling. “Yes,” he said firmly. “It’s a yes.”

Aaron clapped his hands together and grinned. “Excellent,” he said as he walked towards us. “It’s time for us to go then.”

“Where?” I asked.

Aaron looked at me, a resigned expression on his face, as if he were looking for some support from me as well.

“Where else?” he answered. “Back to the lion’s den.” A sudden thought occurred to the young monk, as if for the first time. He looked at the small sword on Dirk’s hip and exhaled heavily.

“The Grand Master’s going to be pissed isn’t he?” offered Dirk helpfully.

Through a weak smile, Aaron responded, “That’s the best case scenario.”

## END OF BOOK ONE

The story continues in:

### **OBSIDIAN FIRE, BOOK 2**

#### *Revelations of a Secret Brotherhood*

Look for it in December 2013 at [www.obsidianfire.ca](http://www.obsidianfire.ca).

Join our mailing list to be get notification when the next book is available, by sending an email to the author at [dwaynerjames@gmail.com](mailto:dwaynerjames@gmail.com).