

Disney
TALES FROM



THE
KEYMASTER'S
QUEST

Three keys are shown at the bottom left of the text. One is a large, ornate key with a circular head, and two are smaller, simpler keys. They are arranged in a cluster, with the largest key being the most prominent.

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For Nancy, my greatest adventure.



Chapter One

Rest in Peace?



It wasn't an ordinary funeral. At least, Andy Stanley didn't *think* it was. True, Andy had never been to a funeral before, but he was fairly certain that there was usually a body . . . or a casket . . . or at least some evidence that the person in question was in fact *dead*.

Perhaps Andy shouldn't have been surprised. After all, his grandfather wasn't exactly conventional—or so Andy had been told. Andy had never so much as spoken to his grandfather, but he had heard plenty of stories

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about Ned Lostmore. He had practically memorized the legendary archaeologist's many books, with titles like *Carnivorous Plants I've Nearly Been Eaten By* and *Witch Doctors: A Prescription for Madness?*

Andy wondered why everyone was so ready to accept the worst and proclaim Ned gone. He knew little about the details surrounding his grandfather's disappearance other than the fact that he had been looking for a temple hidden deep in the Amazon jungle. The last communication anyone had received from Ned was a letter sent to the university where he worked, stating that he had found the temple and was determined to explore it. The temple was infamous for its protection spells. Legend claimed that any mortal who entered would never return.

Andy assumed that most people would have ignored those legends, brushing them off as nothing more than superstitious mumbo jumbo. But Ned Lostmore was different. Andy knew from reading his grandfather's books that Ned took such curses very seriously. He also knew how seriously his grandfather took his work. Andy

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guessed that the possibility of finding ancient artifacts inside the temple would have made Ned brave any danger. Not even the threat of hidden traps and deadly poisons would have deterred the intrepid jungle doctor from achieving his goal.

But no one knew what Ned had found. He had never returned from the temple, and a search of the area around his last known location had revealed no trace of him. It seemed that Ned Lostmore had simply vanished into thin air!

Now Andy found himself standing at the funeral of a grandfather he had never met, surrounded by the strangest assortment of people he had ever seen.

Andy had always felt self-conscious around people he didn't know. He tended to fidget and repeatedly smooth his blond hair, convinced that he looked strange and out of place. And in fact, Andy *did* look out of place in this crowd. Dressed in his best suit and tie, his hair only slightly ruffled, he was by far one of the most *normal* people in sight.

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Andy was still taking in the strange collection of funeral attendants when a short man wearing an elaborate tribal mask and headdress approached him.

"Greetings, dear boy," the man said, reaching out to shake Andy's hand. "You must be Andy Stanley! Your grandfather described you perfectly. Dr. Cedric Willoughby Marcus Theodore Bunsen the third, at your service."

Andy shook the man's hand, at a loss for words.

The man's voice was crisp and clear, tinged with an English accent that would have made him seem quite proper if not for the ferocious mask covering his face. Andy tried to pull his eyes away from the mask, but he couldn't do it. *I wonder what his real face looks like*, he thought. *There must be a reason he wears a mask!*

"By jingle, look at that!" the doctor exclaimed suddenly.

"What?" Andy asked, finally finding his voice.

Cedric grabbed Andy's hand and studied his fingernails intently. Andy tried to pull away, but the doctor

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had a stronger grip than Andy would have expected from a man of his stature.

"You have a rare case of the Ogopogo River Jimmy-Jams!" the doctor said. He paused a moment to think and then asked, "Have you been petting any hippos lately?"

"Ummm . . . no," Andy said, puzzled. *Hippos? Is he crazy? Why would I pet a hippo?*

"Not to worry, my boy. I have just the thing!" the doctor said. He rummaged through a small pouch at his belt and produced a clay jar, which he shoved into Andy's hands. "Hold on to the contents inside when you sleep at night. You'll be cured within the year."

Andy stared down at the jar. He didn't know whether to thank the witch doctor or run away from him. Cedric was obviously off his rocker.

The doctor seemed to sense Andy's hesitation. He leaned over and whispered conspiratorially, "Don't worry, I studied at Cambridge. Inside the jar is a pair of giant crocodile teeth. Very magical."

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Andy managed a small chuckle, but the doctor didn't seem to be joking. He just stared at Andy through the eyeholes of his mask.

Andy edged away from him, feeling uncomfortable. "I'd better see what my parents are up to. Um . . . thanks for the teeth."

"Don't mention it, dear boy," Cedric said. "Your grandfather specifically told me to watch out for you. I have plenty more cures where that one came from, should you ever have need of them."

"Right. Thanks . . ." Andy mumbled, backing toward the crowd of people gathered in the yard behind his grandfather's house.

He looked at the jar of teeth in his hand. *What do I do with these?* he wondered. Before he could come up with an answer, he heard someone call out, "You there!"

Andy's whole body stiffened. He turned to see a large barrel-chested man with a red handlebar mustache approaching him rapidly. Andy stood still, arms stiff at his sides. He was too afraid to do otherwise.

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From a distance, the man looked relatively normal. But as he got closer, Andy saw that where his left eye should have been was a shiny steel ball. Andy stood up straighter, trying not to stare at the man's metal eye. But he couldn't keep his mind off it. *What is it with Grandfather's friends? First a tribal mask and now a metal eye? How does someone even lose an eye? he wondered. And why replace it with a piece of metal?*

The big man stared down at Andy. "What's your name, private?"

"Andy Stanley, sir," Andy replied. He hated the way his voice shook when he answered.

The man looked Andy up and down. "Stanley, did you say? Andy Stanley?"

Andy continued to stare forward as the big man lowered his head next to Andy's, peering closely at the boy's face with his one good eye. After a moment, he grunted. Then, to Andy's surprise, the man let out a big guffaw. "Ha! Had you going there, didn't I?" he said,

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laughing. "Nice to meet you. I'm Captain Rusty Bucketts, bush pilot and adventurer."

Andy relaxed and tried to smile. His stomach was still churning as he shook the big man's outstretched hand. The crushing grip that enfolded his own made Andy gasp with pain, but Rusty hardly seemed to notice.

"I recognized you at once. You look just like your grandfather," he said. "We flew over eighty missions together in the Great War. He's a great man, to be sure. Nobody can match the indomitable Ned Lostmore!"

Andy startled at hearing the pilot refer to his grandfather in present tense. But before he could give it another thought, Rusty whirled him to the left and introduced him to a pair of ladies.

"Betty, Dotty, allow me to introduce Ned's grandson, Andy Stanley."

Andy was taken aback. The beautiful ladies in front of him were conjoined at the hip! The two wore matching dresses, each black with a jade and silver dragon woven into it. They smiled at him, their dazzling white teeth

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gleaming. Both were rather tall and had glossy black hair and high cheekbones.

"Charmed," said the one Rusty had introduced as Betty.

"Absolutely charmed," said Dotty.

"The sisters are accomplished belly dancers. They've performed for heads of state across Europe and the Far East," Rusty said.

Andy didn't know what to say to that. His cheeks flushed with embarrassment and he stammered a reply.

"I . . . I'm sure you're quite good at it," was all that he could manage.

The sisters laughed, noticing how uncomfortable he was.

"We do more than dance," Betty said.

"Yes, we're *much* more than just dancers," Dotty said.

The women narrowed their eyes and grew serious. They leaned toward Andy and hissed in unison, "We're the best assassins your grandfather ever worked with. Don't let appearances deceive you, boy."

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Andy's eyes widened and he nodded vigorously.

I certainly won't! he thought. The change that had come over the women had caught him completely off guard. It was like admiring a beautiful animal from afar only to get close and see its teeth dripping with venom—shocking and hard to reconcile in his mind.

Andy shook his head, processing the women's words. Why would his grandfather need to work with assassins?

He was trying to figure out what to say to the women when he heard the funeral director calling for everyone to gather around, his voice ringing out above the crowd. Relieved, Andy excused himself and rushed off to find his parents. He was moving through the crowd so quickly that he accidentally bumped into someone. He looked up to see a face covered with white makeup. The lips were painted a bright cherry red, and black makeup outlined the eyes.

A mime?

The girl looked at Andy and smiled broadly. Then she began to speak rather loudly and at a rapid pace.

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“You must be Andy! I've known your grandfather for years! He and I met when I was in Paris. I had just learned how to act like I was trapped in an invisible box! Of course, I hadn't learned how to do it properly. Most people thought I was fighting off invisible mosquitoes. I tried to explain to everyone what I was doing, but only your grandfather guessed what I was really pretending to do. And of course, once he discovered that I was not only a mime but also an opera singer, he told me how much he loved the opera, too! We both love opera! Isn't that funny?”

“I can't believe it's really you, Andy! Your grandfather said you might come, but I hardly expected . . . I mean, I knew that you probably *would* come, but you didn't know him, did you? And I wasn't sure you'd travel all the way to Oregon for a man you'd never met. I thought maybe you'd rather stay home, where it's safe, and read a book. But then, Ned always said that there was much more to you than it seemed at first glance. Not that there's anything wrong with you at first glance. You're a

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nice-looking boy. I actually thought you'd be shorter. My name's Molly, by the way. Say, have you combed your hair lately? It's sticking up in the front. Here, let me. . . ."

Molly reached into a pocket and whipped out a comb. Andy tried to back away, but she had a surprisingly strong hold on his arm and kept him firmly in place as she ran the comb through his cowlicks.

Andy sighed. It seemed he had no choice but to stay put until she was done. *What does she mean, home is safe? he wondered. Is it not safe here?*

Andy shook his head. Molly was still blathering on about something or other. "I, uh, thought mimes weren't supposed to talk," he said as she tugged on a particularly obstinate tangle. "Ow!"

Molly ignored him and just kept babbling. The more she talked, the more Andy wished for some of that famous mime silence he'd heard about.

"I think that you should stop reading about your grandfather's adventures and try having one of your own, you know? It's not healthy to stay inside reading

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so much. A boy your age needs fresh air, excitement. And it wouldn't hurt for you to get more protein in your diet. You're looking a bit paler this week than you did a couple of months ago. More meat and vegetables, young man, that's the secret."

Why is she acting like she knows me? Why are all of Grandfather's friends acting like they know me—like he knew me? I've never met the man, and I don't think Mom has spoken to him in years! Has Molly been watching me? Has he been watching me?

"There, that's better!" Molly finally said with a grin. She flipped her comb into the air and landed it expertly on top of her black beret. Andy didn't know whether to thank her or laugh. Luckily, he was saved from having to decide by the funeral director's announcement that the ceremony to honor his grandfather was about to begin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please make way for Nicodemus Crumb," the funeral director called. "Step aside, now. Those metal rods he's carrying have sharpened tips, and we don't want anyone to get hurt."

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Andy glanced up to see a strange-looking man in gray robes enter the yard with a handful of homemade lightning rods. The man's face was a web of deep wrinkles, and he limped when he walked. Looking closer, Andy noticed that this was because of a carved peg leg with strange symbols etched into it.

Ned's will had outlined specific instructions for the kind of ceremony to be performed upon his death. Apparently, this Nicodemus Crumb was the only one who could perform the appropriate rites. Once again, Andy couldn't help wondering how his grandfather had come into contact with such a man.

He sure knew some interesting people, Andy mused.

Nicodemus Crumb planted the iron poles in a circle around the crowd. At the center of the circle sat an easel holding a black-and-white photograph of Andy's grandfather. Then he asked everyone to join hands, forming a large ring between the photo and the lightning rods.

Andy gulped. Now he *knew* this was no ordinary funeral. But he had always been one to follow orders.

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So with another deep breath, he set down the jar of crocodile teeth and, stepping forward, took the hands of the nearest people—one of the belly dancers and the mime.

Satisfied that a proper circle had been formed, Nicodemus began to shout in a high, raspy voice, "*Injunctae stormous lightinea! We call upon the four winds to honor the passing of Nedley Lostmore! Let the earth mourn his passing and the clouds demonstrate their fury! Injunctae stormous lightinea!*"

Andy could tell that a storm had been building all day. The air felt electrically charged, and a cool wind was already blowing from the south.

Whether Nicodemus Crumb actually knew how to summon the storm was debatable, but Andy knew that putting a bunch of tall metal rods in the middle of a flat yard was asking for trouble. Every fiber of his being demanded that he leave right then and there. The thought of being struck by lightning terrified him.

Andy tried to get his parents' attention to let them

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know he wanted to leave. But try as he might, he couldn't subtly catch their eyes. He tried clearing his throat and coughing loudly, but his mother and father were so absorbed in the unusual ceremony that they didn't so much as glance at him.

Finally, in a fit of desperation, Andy tried to extricate himself from his place in the assembled circle and move to where his parents were standing.

And that was when his clumsiness kicked in.

Andy tried to be careful. He always tried! But like so many times before, his shoelace had come undone and he tripped over it. Andy's arms flailed wildly, and he grabbed for something to stop his fall. Unfortunately, the only thing nearby was one of the lightning rods. Andy's fist closed around the rod, but it wasn't strong enough to break his fall. As he hit the ground, the rod came free, flew from his hands, and conked Rusty—the pilot with the artificial eye—on the back of the head.

The force catapulted the pilot's steel eye through

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the air and across the circle, where it smashed into Molly the mime's forehead. Molly let out a terrified yelp and stumbled into a massive torch, which fell over and ignited a patch of dry grass in the middle of the circle.

Andy watched in horror as the crowd released their clasped hands and raced forward to try to put out the fire. By the time they succeeded, Ned's picture had been burned to ashes.

Nicodemus, who had singed off his eyebrows while trying to rescue his lightning rods from the blaze, turned to face Andy.

Andy gulped. *This is not going to be good.*

So, trusting his earlier judgment, he turned and ran back to his grandfather's mansion, leaving the ugly scene behind.

Andy walked quickly through his grandfather's luxurious home, tugging desperately at his tie, eager to loosen it and breathe normally. What had just happened rattled

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his nerves, and he wanted to go somewhere quiet where he could think.

As he walked down the hallway toward his grandfather's study, Andy caught sight of his reflection in an ornate mirror hanging on the wall. He was pale and thin. His blond hair was once again sticking up in all directions from his running his hands through it, and his brown eyes were bloodshot. The trip to his grandfather's house had taken two days, and he looked in desperate need of a good night's sleep.

Andy made his way into the study and flopped down in a big leather chair by the fireplace. He felt something poke him in the back. Leaning forward, he reached into his pocket and tossed the contents onto the table in front of him. A key and a letter hit the table's surface with a loud thud.

A week before the funeral, Andy had received a strange package in the mail. Inside was a note from his grandfather's attorney informing him that his grandfather had left him an inheritance. Andy wondered

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what the man who had never cared enough to meet him could possibly have left for him. A book? An ancient artifact? Piles of money?

His initial excitement about the prospect of wealth had evaporated when he arrived at his grandfather's mansion and learned that the inheritance was no more than an ornate rusty key and a letter with a wax seal. Andy had put them in his pocket to look at when he got a minute alone, but in all the commotion at the funeral, he had forgotten about them.

Now Andy looked at the letter.

I wonder what he wanted to tell me.

Written on the sealed note was his name, in neat spidery handwriting. Until he had received the note from the attorney, Andy hadn't even known that his grandfather knew he existed! Now that he had a moment to think about it, he found his curiosity growing. Why had he been left a key? What did it open? And what in the world could his grandfather have written to him?

Chapter Two

The Letter



I *can't just sit here forever.* Andy thought, staring at the note and the key on the table in front of him. *I should open it.*

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Andy reached for the letter. He examined it closely.

My name's been written with a fountain pen, Andy thought, a smile spreading over his face. Andy had loved fountain pens for as long as he could remember. He had personally collected over thirty of them and was

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a subscriber to *Fountain Pen Monthly*. Andy loved the way the ink flowed on a crisp, clean sheet of paper. And he loved how elegant everything written with a fountain pen looked.

Sometimes Andy liked to imagine that he was an important man signing an important document. He practiced his signature over and over until he had it just right, every letter the correct size, the flourishes rolling beneath his name with a confident swirl. He could name all the different nibs and what they were used for, list the pros and cons of dropper-filled pens and cartridge fillers, and recite the history of fountain pen usage.

He even knew that the very first fountain pen in recorded history had been commissioned in the tenth century by al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the caliph of the Maghreb, but he usually didn't mention that to his friends for fear they would think him a little too obsessed.

Andy studied his name. He could tell from the width of the line and the way the ink reacted to the paper the

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kind of ink and nib his grandfather had used.

Beecham's India Ink and a Hodges HB-2 pen. Wow. That's rare.

Andy had read all about Hodges pens. They were so highly coveted by collectors that even pens in poor condition were often valued at well over ten thousand dollars. Andy's dream was to own one someday. He couldn't care less about getting a new bicycle. He would much rather have a Hodges pen!

Andy broke the crimson wax seal and gently lifted the top of the folded page. His heart beat wildly as he studied the first few lines.

DEAREST ANDY,

MY SINCEREST APOLOGIES FOR NOT WRITING SOONER OR MAKING THE TIME TO MEET YOU OVER THE YEARS. AS YOUR MOTHER CAN PROBABLY ATTEST, I AM AN INCREDIBLY BUSY MAN AND I TEND TO GET ABSORBED IN MY WORK.

ALTHOUGH I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO SEE YOU

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PERSONALLY, REST ASSURED I HAVE MADE IT MY MISSION TO KNOW YOU. I HAVE HAD MY ASSOCIATES WATCHING OVER YOU AND REPORTING BACK TO ME FOR SOME TIME. THEY TELL ME THAT YOU CLEARLY POSSESS THE LOSTMORE SPIRIT—SOMETHING THAT SKIPPED A GENERATION WITH YOUR MOTHER—AND THAT MY TRUST IN YOU IS WELL PLACED.

“The Lostmore Spirit? What would make him think I have that?” Andy mumbled.

AT THIS VERY MOMENT I FIND MYSELF HALF WRAPPED IN FRAGRANT VINES, AWAITING ENTRY TO A TEMPLE HIDDEN DEEP IN THE AMAZONIAN JUNGLE.

I SUSPECT THAT MY ENEMIES ARE PURSUING ME AND THAT THE TEMPLE I'M INVESTIGATING MAY LEAD TO A TRAP. IN SPITE OF THE OBVIOUS DANGER, I AM, AS ALWAYS, TRYING MY BEST TO KEEP MY HEAD ABOUT ME.

I'M SURE YOU HAVE PROBABLY HEARD SOME

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STRANGE TALES ABOUT YOUR OLD GRANDFATHER. AFTER ALL, I HAVE SEEN MANY UNEXPLAINABLE THINGS—PHENOMENA THAT WOULD MAKE YOUR HAIR STAND ON END AND YOUR TOES CURL! (BY THE WAY, IF YOU EVER ARE PLAGUED WITH SUCH AN AFFLICTION, A TABLESPOON OF HONEY MIXED WITH FARNSWORTH ROOT WILL RELAX YOUR TOES AND HAIR AND RETURN THEM TO NORMAL.) AND YOU MUST BE WONDERING ABOUT THE KEY I LEFT YOU. IT HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO OPEN A VERY SPECIAL DOOR—ONE THAT HIDES BEHIND IT A MISSION OF GREAT URGENCY. I EXPECT THE VERY THOUGHT OF DANGER AND ADVENTURE WILL EXCITE YOU, MUCH AS IT DID ME AT YOUR AGE.

I FEEL CERTAIN THAT WITH A LITTLE DEDUCTION AND LOGICAL REASONING, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO QUITE EASILY DISCOVER THE LOCATION OF THE LOCK AND THENCEFORTH REVEAL THE AMAZING GUEST THAT AWAITS YOU.

ONE BIT OF ADVICE: DON'T LOSE YOUR HEAD! IT IS A VALUABLE TOOL AND SHOULD BE TREATED WITH

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CARE. HEAVEN KNOWS I'VE GOTTEN A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF USE FROM MINE AND PLAN TO CONTINUE USING IT FOR MANY YEARS TO COME, IN SPITE OF THE RATHER PERILOUS CIRCUMSTANCES I CURRENTLY FIND MYSELF IN.

CHIN UP, OLD BOY! ADVENTURE AWAITS!

YOURS SINCERELY,

YOUR GRANDFATHER

NED LOSTMORE

P.S. I LOOK FORWARD TO MAKING YOUR ACQUAINTANCE!

KUNGALOOSA!

Andy folded the letter up. Make my acquaintance? We just had his funeral!

He set the letter back on the table and picked up the rusted key. He shivered. One end of the key was shaped like a human skull.

I'm not really sure I want to know what this opens, he thought. And for the briefest moment, he considered

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forgetting about the whole thing. He could just return home and keep the key in a drawer somewhere, write the whole thing off as a prank, and go on living a normal, relatively safe existence.

But perhaps there was a little bit more of his grandfather in him than Andy would've liked to admit. The stir of curiosity he felt was hard to resist, and he knew that if he didn't at least try to find the lock, he would always wonder what might have happened.

Maybe I really do have some of that Lostmore Spirit he mentioned, Andy thought.

He stood up and carefully walked toward the blackened stone fireplace. Picture after picture—all showing the same three people—lined the mantel. Andy easily recognized his grandfather, but the other people were a mystery. Who were the man and woman standing beside Ned in all the photos?

Andy looked closer. In almost every photo, the man and woman wore matching safari outfits and pith helmets. She was a stunning beauty with blond hair and

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a heart-shaped face. He was stocky and seemed as solid and immovable as a boulder.

As Andy took a step back to study the pictures, his knee bumped into a small table with a fragile-looking teacup on it.

Usually when this kind of thing happened (as it did on a daily basis), the outcome would be the table flipping over and the teacup smashing into a million pieces on the floor. Andy would feel his usual embarrassment and frustration with himself for not being more careful and aware of his surroundings. He would immediately start cleaning up the mess, apologizing profusely to the disappointed person whose item he'd broken. And he would, of course, volunteer to pay for the damaged item, usually receiving a forced smile and assurances that all was well. Then Andy would feel miserable for the rest of the day.

But that day, something happened that had never happened before. Andy's right hand shot out with a strange reflexive precision, catching the teacup and its

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saucer, while his left caught the table a mere inch above the floor.

After carefully setting the table and teacup back in place, Andy stared at his hands in amazement. Phrases like *good catch* and *nice save* were never directed at him, but there was no other way to describe his move.

Andy smiled, feeling a wave of relief and a flash of confidence followed immediately by confusion. What had just happened?

He gazed around the room, noting the dust motes that floated in the late-afternoon sunbeams pouring through the panes of his grandfather's cut-glass windows. Clearly the storm that had been brewing had passed. The warm glow suffusing the study made the room seem almost magical.

Something about Andy felt different. Could it have been that the day's events, although disturbing, had filled him with the conviction that life wasn't meant to be lived so anxiously? Risking everything was something that, until that moment, Andy had read about in his grandfather's

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books but had never considered doing himself.

It's like the spirit of my grandfather could walk in through the door at any minute and sit down at his desk, he thought.

Andy looked at the array of items lining his grandfather's desk: a letter opener made from a medieval fork, a magnifying glass with a strange horn for a handle, and handwritten list after handwritten list. A 1938 calendar with a series of appointments written all over it in red ink stood in the corner of the desk. Andy smiled, picturing the old jungle doctor hard at work, cataloging his archaeological finds.

Suddenly, Andy noticed a large map displayed above the desk. He walked over to it, narrowly avoiding tripping over an antique brass spittoon that lurked near the bottom corner of the desk.

As Andy drew closer, his eyes widened with surprise. It was not a map of the world, as he'd assumed. In fact, it didn't seem to be a map at all. Instead, it was a huge piece of parchment inscribed with tiny writing designed



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to look like continents. As Andy leaned in, he saw that the spidery scrawl was the same as he'd seen on the letter from his grandfather. It had also been written with a fountain pen.

"That looks like a .35-millimeter Humbolt," Andy murmured, observing the tininess of the lettering and thinking of the corresponding pen nib. The writing was precise and beautiful, but try as he might, Andy couldn't read the words. They were all gibberish.

KISREID EI HIT NRO DINRAATAS

The nonsensical phrase was written repeatedly all over the parchment. Andy wondered if it was some kind of Norwegian dialect.

He continued to stare at the words, reciting them over and over. They didn't sound right to him, and he felt like he was missing something. There was a distinctive quality about the phrase that nagged at him, like the answer to a riddle that sat on the tip of his tongue.

Andy loved code breaking. He had read tons of books about it and had even made up his own secret

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codes. He was sure that what he was looking at was no different from the other codes he had read about. But the solution eluded him. After ten solid minutes of staring at the words, Andy gave up. But no sooner had he turned away from the strange writing than a thought occurred to him.

He wheeled back around, a huge grin spreading over his face. The elegant simplicity of what his grandfather had done filled him with newfound respect for the man.

So simple, Andy thought. It's almost a joke!

But it wasn't a joke. It was an instruction!

If he skipped every other letter of each word and reversed the order of the remaining letters, the command revealed itself. *Kisreid eihit nro dinraatas* became *stand on the desk*.

Andy turned from the map and cleared off the top of his grandfather's desk. He pulled himself up and surveyed the room from a new height, his jaw dropping in wonder. The room, which had seemed so cluttered

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and disorganized from the ground, had changed. From this new angle, all the furniture and artifacts formed a carefully organized pattern.

"Amazing," Andy whispered, awestruck.

Subtle golden lines had been painted on the surfaces of the artifacts and furniture. The light pouring through the windows illuminated the lines.

Andy was breathless with excitement. He observed the lines closely.

There's a whole other world here, he thought.

Then he noticed something else. All the lines pointed to the same object: a tiny painting of a gold key on top of a display cabinet filled with pinned moths. The head of the key was pointing directly at . . .

"That suit of samurai armor!" Andy exclaimed.

The armor stood in the corner of the room, next to a large brass vase holding a spiky cluster of decorative tribal spears.

That must be where the keyhole is hidden, Andy thought.

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He hopped off the desk, sending a boxful of paper clips scattering to the floor. Then, being extra careful not to bump anything else, he moved across the room to the armor. His pulse quickened. He had to admit his grandfather might have been right. This was pretty exciting. Maybe he was up for an adventure after all.

At least, as long as having an adventure is more like finding an Easter egg hidden in a house than having a near-death experience in the jungle, he reminded himself.

As he examined the suit of armor, Andy noticed a sequence of silver numbers engraved on its black marble base.

21 14 4 5 18 13 5

I wonder if there's some kind of combination lock somewhere, Andy thought. He searched around the base but found nothing interesting other than a tiny etched skull at the end of the numerical sequence.

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Andy studied the key again. "The symbol matches the key," he told himself, "so I must be on the right track." Andy ran his hand through his thatch of blond hair and whistled through his teeth. If this was a code of some kind, it was tougher than the last one.

He'd never been a math wiz, but he could tell that the numbers weren't arranged in any kind of mathematical order based on prime numbers.

"Hmmm, I wonder why Grandfather used numbers instead of words this time," Andy mused. He stared at the numbers for another long moment. There was a small gap between the first five numbers and the last two.

"It's almost like words. . . ."

He snapped his fingers as a new thought popped into his head.

"Of course!" he exclaimed. Andy mentally counted through the alphabet, assigning each number its corresponding letter. After finishing, he realized that the numbers did indeed spell out two simple words.

UNDER ME.

The Letter

Under what . . . the suit of armor? Or does it mean something else? he wondered.

Andy tried feeling all around the base of the armor, searching for any visible cracks or a way to get underneath it. But after a few seconds, he concluded that it was solidly fixed to the floor.

Hmmm.

Again he noticed the skull next to the numbers. Could the phrase be about that? Maybe he was supposed to find something beneath it.

Andy placed the edge of his fingernail under the tiny raised skull and pulled upward. To his delight, it opened with a little pop and revealed a keyhole.

Yes!

Andy grinned as he pulled the key out of his pocket and placed it in the lock.

Here goes nothing.