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The Book

At what price?

by Hugh Perkins

Synopsis

Vincent and Jason discover a magical book. There is a price to pay. What will they choose?

Document Information

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## Chapter 1.

Beginnings.

Helen woke up, sweating. A vision of herself burning, dieing, the dream she'd just had. It filled her with dread. It was just a dream though right?

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Jason brought his hands in front of him and threw them forward. They glowed slightly red again and felt slightly warm.

He rubbed his hands together, clapped them together.

The shaman said, "Try again Jason. Push your hands forward and feel the fire flowing out of them.

Jason rubbed his hands together, shook them, and shoved them forward. Nothing happened. A leaf drifted slowly out of the trees and floated to the wet grass in front of him. Nothing very fireball-like.

"How long will it take me to learn, great Shaman?"

"That depends on you Jason. It takes faith. You have to believe."

"Did you ever use these for real great Shaman?"

"Oh yes, I've lived a long time, seen many things."

"What do other people think about your powers?"

"I try not to show them to other people. I could do so, but it would draw jealousy and greed. People would want me dead so I'm not a threat, or they'd want to capture me and force me to use my power against others."

"Can't you just use your power to escape, to avoid having to deal with that stuff?"

"There are limitations even on my power Jason. Enough people grouping together can overpower me." The great Shaman looked at the ground, "Do you see that tiny ant there Jason?"

Jason peered into the damp grass, "Yes, sure."

"On it's own it doesn't look like anything, and on it's own it can do little to harm you, but imagine if thousands of them were to rush all over your body. You'd be overcome. You couldn't fight back."

Jason looked thoughtful, "Yes, that's true, great Shaman."

"It's better to hide your power, use it only when you need to. Besides it's fun to make friends with humans, with other people, and it's harder to do that when you're not their equal."

"But you are not their equal."

The great Shaman said, "Are you questioning me boy!" but then he smiled, "Yes, well you are right. I can never really be their equal in that way, I will always know my own power. Yet each person on the earth has their own power that you don't know about. Everyone has some reason to feel superior to you Jason."

"Do you feel superior to me great Shaman?"

"I'm the great Shaman. I am superior to you Jason", he laughed.

"I'm better than you great Shaman!" Jason mocked.

"Yes well maybe one day, little grasshopper", said the Shaman teasingly. "Right, you want to try another fireball? Just bring your hands in front of yourself and imagine the fire streaming out of them."

Jason said, "What makes you think I am a Shaman, great Shaman?"

"I'm the great Shaman, I know these things Jason. It is written."

"Hmmm. I just feel like a small scared little boy, great Shaman."

"Honesty and open-ness about one's feelings will win you many friends, little grass-hopper. Don't worry about it, it'll come slowly over time."

"Worry?"

"Fireballs are fun. Right, want to watch me a second?"

"Sure."

The Shaman stood up and shuffled forward, leaning on his twisted wooden cane. He took a deep breath and straightened his back, no longer leaning on the cane. He handed the cane to Jason with shaky hands, "Here take this Jason. Hold this one second please."

"Sure."

The great shaky Shaman lifted his quivering hands slowly up in front of his wrinkled ancient face. He gave a little flick. A small ball of fire came out, moved across the clearing then went out.

The great Shaman said, "Well, that one didn't come out very well. I am getting old you know Jason. You saw the technique though right? Just flick your hands forward and believe in it."

Jason looked sympathetically at the great Shaman, "Will I be old one day great Shaman?"

"We all have our day in the sun Jason. No-one wants to die, but it comes to us all."

"Can't you avoid it? Can't you do something about it?"

"I need to leave my place for you youngsters to come along. Life is about change. I've had my time."

"I don't want to die great Shaman."

"I've had a lot of fun Jason. Right, enough talk, you wanna try a fireball?"

Jason nodded dumbly and pushed his hands in front of his face. Another wet leaf fell on his hands, no fire came out.

The Shaman laughed, "Don't worry about it. Think of it as a bonus. If you can't do it, you can just lead your

normal life for now."

"I want to be a Shaman!"

"All in good time Jason. All in good time."

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Jason flicked his hands forward. A tiny fireball came out and floated across the lawn towards his dad's car. It floated unerringly through the side window and settled quietly on the car seat. The plastic of the car seat started to melt. Bits of the plastic ran down in droplets. The seat caught fire. Smoke rose from the flames, rolled along the underneath of the car's roof.

Jason looked on dumbly in unbelieving horror as his Dad's saloon car filled with smoke and flames. He dropped his hands and put them behind his back. He put them in his pockets. He tried to pretend not to have hands. What hands? I don't have hands! What do you mean "What hands?".

The flames continued to rise from the burning melting plastic seat. The seat next to it started to fall victim in turn. It melted, smoked, caught fire. Its smoke and flames blended with the other seat. Jason could no longer see outside the other side of the car.

A guy across the street looked at the car then looked at Jason. Jason tried to look innocent, tried to say "It wasn't me!" with his innocent, no-hands, expression. He looked really guilty

The man said, "What's happening?"

Jason just looked dumbly at him, trying to look innocent, looking guilty.

The man said, "I'll phone the fire brigade." The man lifted his briefcase up, reached inside and took out his mobile phone. He held it in one hand and typed in numbers.

Jason turned his fascinated attention to the burning car, his dad's burning car, the car Jason had just accidentally set on fire.

Perhaps he should put it out somehow? At least tell mum?

He ran inside. His mum was in the kitchen.

"Mum! Dad's car's on fire!"

"What? What are you talking about?". She dropped the washing-up and ran to the front of the house.

Jason's mum said, "Oh my God. I'll phone the fire engine. You stay indoors ok? It's dangerous. It might explode. Come on, inside now Jason."

Jason ran inside, following his mum.

As his mum lifted the phone and dialed the numbers, a large bang signalled the fuel tank exploding. Bits of metal pelted the outside of the house. A piece of car seat flew through the front door, into the kitchen, bounced off the sink, and fell on the floor. It sat in front of Jason and his mum, burning.

Jason said nothing. He looked at the burning remains of his dad's car in unbelieving horror. He promised

himself never to try using these powers again.

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Jason prodded the luke-warm rubbery chicken with his fork. It didn't look very appetizing.

Dad said, "I need to check the insurance."

Mum said, "What do you think happened?"

Dad snapped, "How should I know? I'm not a mechanic."

Mum said, "Jason was outside at the time. Maybe he saw something?"

Dad said, "Hmmm. Jason, you were outside when the car caught fire, did you see anything?"

Jason felt his Dad's and Mum's eyes staring at him. He turned red in terror. His hands became sweaty. He said, "It wasn't me! I didn't do anything!"

Dad said, "No-one said you did Jason. Did you see anything strange happening?"

Jason said, "I didn't do anything! It wasn't my fault!" His fork span around in his hands as his sweaty hand lost its grip on it.

Dad and Mum looked at each other strangely.

Dad said, "Jason. Did you do something to my car?"

Jason said, "It wasn't me! I didn't do anything! It wasn't my fireball!"

Dad looked at mum again.

Dad said back to Jason, "What? What fireball wasn't yours?"

Jason said, he realized he'd said something he shouldn't, he said, "Um, no fireball. No fireball. There wasn't a fireball. Not my fireball!"

Dad looked at mum. Mum signalled with her hands she had no idea what Jason was talking about.

Dad looked at Jason, unsure where to go next. It was obvious Jason was hiding something, not very well. On the other hand, Dad didn't particularly want to have to tell the insurance company his own son had set fire to his very expensive car.

## Chapter 2.

The book.

Vincent walked through the tall, wet, green grass. The sun shone. It was early morning and he felt happy and free. He pushed one of the tall grasses near him, ran his fingers up its bushy head to take its seeds into his fingers. He threw the seeds into the wind, and watched them float around. Some of them fell back onto his red and white stripy pullover, sticking into the wool. He tried to pull them out, tried to rub them off, but they were each entangled in the wool, and he would need to pull them out one by one. He just left them in for now. A couple of seeds had gone into his mouth. He spat them out, then rubbed his mouth on the sleeve of his jumper.

Across the grasses, 20m away, the trees of his den stood proud from the field. They made a great den. No-one went there except his friends and himself. His friends weren't up yet. It was quite early. On a Sunday morning, usually he got up quite late too, but the sun had been shining in through his windows this morning and he had felt quite happy and elated.

He pushed forward through the wet clinging grass towards the den.

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As Vincent entered the den, the world fell into shadow. The trees cut out the light, so everything was much darker than in the bright sun-drenched fields. It was quieter in the den area too. He could hear some birds singing in the trees above him. The world was peaceful. He could just hear birds singing, the sound of the wind moving the trees and the grasses, making them rustle. Sometimes he could hear people calling to each other in the distance, saying hello, or goodbye, or telling a child to be careful on her bike, normal Sunday morning sounds.

He looked around the den. The scene became more visible as his eyes adjusted to the dimness, to the shadow.

Something rustled on the floor of the den, a sheet of paper perhaps. He looked towards the sound. There was a thick dark blue book. It looked quite old. Its cover was torn but fairly thick. He picked up a rock and threw it towards the book idly. It missed and splashed into the mud next to it. He tried another rock, and it missed too.

He aimed at a tree trunk instead. The rock bounced off with a satisfying thud. He looked up at the wooden platform they'd been building in the tree next to him. Nothing big, just three planks laid flat, side by side, over a couple of other planks wedged into the tree branches. The book could look cool on the platform. He walked through the mud to the book. Mud splashed around him as he walked, leaving spots on his worn-out, patched, faded blue jeans. He picked up a stick and prodded at the book. He turned over the front cover.

The front cover was fairly heavy. The first page was covered with a large colorful ornate decoration. The decoration framed a circular picture of a boy playing in a den. He turned to the next page. The title of the book was "The Life of Vincent". A picture of a small boy in a red and white jumper sat underneath the title.

Vincent closed the book, picked it up out of the mud. He turned it over to wipe the mud off. The mud didn't stick to the book too much. He wiped the book on his jeans. He walked back to the platform tree, and climbed onto the platform. He put the book down, and sat down on the platform looking around the den.

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Vincent turned idly to the book, and flicked through some of the pages. The pages felt interesting as he turned them: vivid, full of life somehow. They didn't feel like dead pages. It was an interesting feeling; it captivated him, intrigued him. It was a little like the feeling he felt at night, when he moved in the bed in just the right

way. He opened one of the pages. There was a couple of words written in big letters, filling the pages. The words said,

"Hello Vincent".

Vincent said, "Hello Vincent." The book sat there. He ran his fingers over the letters. He got the same feeling of aliveness he'd got from turning over the pages.

Vincent said idly, "Hello book".

The letters faded out, changed. They said, "Pleased to meet you."

Vincent blinked, rubbed his eyes. He closed the book. That was weird. The sun must be stronger than he thought. He touched his skin, he wasn't really sweating, maybe he should have drunk more water. As he felt his skin, fear moved through him and his skin became moister.

He jumped down from the tree and looked around the den. He wished Ben and Philip were here. It was boring here on his own. The book made him feel strange.

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Vincent crouched down and looked at the mud. The mud smelt stagnant, rank. He touched its surface briefly with his forefinger. The mud stuck to his finger. He lifted his finger in front of his face curiously and peered at it. He brought it near his nose and sniffed it. It smelt nasty. The mud had little bits of vegetative matter in it. He stuck out his tongue and thought about tasting it. He couldn't bring himself to touch the stinky rank mud. Maybe the gang could use that in a dare later on? He brought his hand down to his jeans, and wiped the mud off on them.

He pushed his finger into the mud, and drew, engraving lines in the mud's surface. He started to write "Helo". He wrote "Vincent". He looked at it. It looked silly, he didn't want the others to read it. He used his hand to erase it. He started to draw again. He wrote "Plesd", then "to", "met", and "gu". "Plesd to met gu". It looked cool and interesting. The letters each had their own pattern, their own personality. He was very happy that he could write complicated sentences like this. Maybe the book had other cool sentences he could write? He could learn lots of cool sentences here in the den, then surprise his mother later!

Vincent straightened up, and ran up the platform tree to the platform. He crouched on the platform, bending his legs, and bent forward to open the book. He used his muddy fingers to flick through the pages. He opened the book at an interesting feeling page. The page said simply,

"Fireball".

Fireball? What was that? Fire? Ball? A ball covered in a picture of fire? A football covered in a fire symbol? It sounded cool! He turned over to the next page. There were pictures of a small boy doing various things with his hands.

He looked at the pictures. The boy looked a little like him, same color jumper. The first picture showed the boy clapping his hands. Vincent clapped his hands. It felt interesting, like the feeling he got from turning the pages of the book. The book said out loud, "That's good. Do it harder."

Vincent looked down at the book. He said, "What?" The book said, "It was good. It was a good clap. Do it a little bit harder. It was great!".

Vincent stared at the book. He picked it up and turned it over. There was nothing on the other side except mud. The platform was muddy but otherwise normal. He put the book down.

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Vincent decided he'd imagined it and turned back to the pictures. The book showed a child moving his hands in a certain way. It looked silly, like dancing. He looked around him, there was no one watching. He looked at the pictures, and copied the actions one by one. It was fun in fact. It was hard to follow the pictures, but he worked his way slowly through them. The book said, "That's good! Do that again!"

Vincent looked at the book strangely. "Stop that! Go away!"

The book said nothing. Its writing looked a little less colorful somehow. Vincent turned back to the drawings and worked his way through them again. It felt cool to imitate these drawings. It made him feel alive, happy. It was like dancing. It was like looking at some of the older girls in school.

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Vincent spent his morning practicing. By the end he could do the moves slickly. It felt awesome! He couldn't wait to show it off to his mum!

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Vincent sat in class the next morning, watching the maths teacher tell them something about adding numbers together. It looked dull, and Vincent couldn't see why it could be useful to learn this. Didn't his dad just use a calculator to do stuff? It was pointless, and hard. He looked down at his hands underneath his desk. He'd been practicing the moves during the night. It was cool to be enjoying them. Normally Vincent hated dancing or anything like that, but he was curious what it was like to enjoy dancing, he was jealous of the people who looked like they were enjoying it. He was enjoying moving his hands like in the book. It was a secret. It was his secret. No-one else knew he could do this, and no-one else could do it. Only the book knew, and him. Well, the book didn't count: it was just a book. It was his own secret. Maybe he'd tell Ben later? But Ben would laugh. He felt a little sad about that.

He looked over at Penelope. It gave him a strange feeling to look at Penelope. He enjoyed looking at her, but it felt wrong somehow. He tried not to let anyone see him looking at her. She had long brown hair made out into two plaits on either side. She was really good at doing the plaits. She showed other girls how to do them. The girls spent their break time practicing them. Could he show her the moves? That was silly! She was a girl! What do girls know!

"Vincent!" shouted the teacher. He jumped slightly and jerked his head up to look at the teacher. His eyes came into focus on the teacher.

"Vincent!", shouted the teacher, "Can you repeat what we just learned?"

Vincent's heart rate went up. He felt himself grow hot. The class turned to look at him, Penelope with them. He looked at the blackboard, searching for clues. There were some numbers being added together.

Vincent said, "Sir. You were adding numbers together."

The teacher said, "Very good Vincent. That's pretty good since this lesson is about adding numbers. What did we learn about adding numbers Vincent?"

Vincent looked at the teacher's mocking face. He looked at the blackboard. He stammered, "You were adding 17 and 5 sir."

"Yes?"

"Yes sir."

"Vincent, we were learning about carrying numbers over. Can you tell me what carrying numbers over means?"

"Sir?"

"Vincent, you need to pay more attention in class."

"Yes sir."

"Vincent, go to the headmaster's office at break-time and explain to him what was so interesting that you couldn't listen in class."

Vincent looked down, "Yes sir" he said. Great, another visit to the headmaster. The headmaster would say stuff to him, blah, blah, blah. It was a complete waste of time. He looked back up to the teacher, "Yes sir."

The teacher said, "Yes sir indeed."

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The headmaster's office had a big wooden door. Vincent sat on a hard wooden bench opposite it, in the corridor. The headmaster had asked him to wait. He waited. It was dull. Boring. The corridor was featureless: carpet, walls, doors.

Vincent looked down at his black trousers. They were clean ones because it was Monday. His mother made him change his clothes every Monday. It felt cool to have clean clothes, but they wouldn't stay that way very long.

No-one was around. The headmaster was going to keep him waiting for a while.

Vincent brought his hands up and looked at them. He felt an excitement in his stomach at the idea of doing the Moves again, doing them in public, here. It was odd that he felt such elation about that, but he did. He looked around, there was no-one. He brought his hands up and did the moves. As he finished, there was a faint hiss. Fire burst from his hands and floated upwards then popped out. He looked up to see smoke rising towards the ceiling. He could smell burning oil.

He put his hands down, put them underneath his legs. He watched the smoke rising through the air, touching the ceiling, then rolling across it.

Vincent brought his hands out from under his trousers and looked at them. He caressed them, one with the other. They looked perfectly normal. He examined each crease carefully, the color of the skin. It all looked normal.

The headmaster popped his head out of the door, "What's that smell? Something's burning!"

"I don't know. What smell?" said Vincent.

The headmaster looked at Vincent suspiciously, "You can't smell anything?"

"No sir."

The headmaster looked piercingly at Vincent, "Turn out your pockets boy."

Vincent's pockets contained nothing suspicious. The book was in his bag; and who would ever suspect something was odd about a book, in a school?

## Chapter 3.

Feelings.

Helen watched the girl in front of her as they walked down the road. The girl was about six years old, with a pink frilly dress. She held her mum's hand. The girl looked interesting somehow. Helen wanted to say hi to her. Helen watched the girl talking with her mother. The girl was quite quiet, but honest and open and happy. Helen wanted to be her friend.

A bottle flew out of the house next to them. It arced through the air, and crashed into the middle of the road, throwing up a haze of green glass fragments. The girl and her mother turned to look, then started walking more quickly. They stopped making their conversation and concentrated on moving forward.

Helen looked back towards the house. A girl's voice screamed, "You always think about yourself!". A bang, something breaking. A guy's voice shouted, "Fuck you. Fuck you. What the fuck do you want with me woman?"

Two dogs ran out of the front door. Big dogs. Ugly heads. Big ugly heads. Powerful muscular hind legs. Rottweilers. They ran next to each other down the garden path, out the front gate, then turned left up the road. One of them charged into the little girl. The girl fell on the ground. She screamed. Her mother screamed. The other dog ran to grab the girl's throat.

Helen screamed. The dogs looked at her. Helen looked at them.

Helen walked towards the dogs. The girl lay there not daring to move. Her mum looked back to see what the dogs were looking at.

The mum shouted, "Are these your dogs?"

Helen said, "They came from that house."

The mum shouted, "I don't believe you. How dare you let your dogs attack my daughter. What's your name?"

"Helen. Listen, I know you're really upset, but can we do something about these dogs first, and then, let's sit down and talk about this somewhere ok?"

The mum looked at Helen strangely, "You're very mature for your age aren't you?"

Helen ignored her and looked at the dogs. The dogs were looking at her lovingly. She sensed their fear and loneliness. She sensed the mistreatment they'd been suffering at the hands of their owner. Images went through her of being chased by some guy carrying a baseball bat, of being hit repeatedly with a baseball bat.

Helen looked at the dogs. She reached out her hand to them. They walked towards her and snuggled up to her hand. She put her arms around them and let her tears wash down her face and onto their mistreated fur. She kissed them and fondled them.

Helen looked up. The other girl was looking at her with shining eyes. Helen said, "Hi."

The other girl said shyly, "You saved me!"

Helen said, "What's your name?"

The mother said, "Her name's Catherine." She looked at Catherine. "Catherine, we have to go." She looked at Helen, "Keep your dogs on a leash."

Catherine said to Helen, "What's your name?"

Helen said to Catherine, "My name is Helen, Catherine."

Catherine's mum pulled on Catherine's hand, "Come on Catherine. Let's go."

Catherine walked off, following her mother. She turned her head back. Helen and Catherine looked at each other. Helen smiled at Catherine. Catherine smiled at Helen.

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Catherine looked at her brother Tim's knee. A deep gouge in it filled quickly with blood. The bicycle lay underneath him crookedly. The blood made her feel slightly sick. Tim looked at the blood then started to cry. Catherine tried to think what to do. She hesitated between trying to comfort Tim, trying to do something to fix the wound and going to get her mother. She put her hands on Tim's shoulders, and said "There, there, it'll be alright. I'll go and get mum."

Something fascinated her about the wound. The blood was coming out of it quite quickly, but it wasn't that. She couldn't really figure out what was fascinating to her. She brought her hands up and moved them over the wound. Her hands started to tingle. Light came from them and moved towards the wound. She fell back in fright. She lay on the ground and brought her hands up to her face to look at them. Her hands looked normal. They still felt a little tingly.

Tim's crying had stopped. She sat up and dusted the sand off her hands and arms. She looked at Tim. He was staring strangely at his wound, at where the wound had been.

The wound had disappeared. In its place was pristine skin, with the tiniest scar running along where the wound had been.

Tim looked at the disappeared wound, then back up at Catherine. His eyes were wide with astonishment and fear. He backed away on his hands, burst into tears, got up, and sprinted towards the house as fast as he could, "Mum! Mum!"

Catherine looked after him. She looked down at her hands. They looked normal enough. Had she imagined what she thought had just happened? She remembered a wound with blood coming out of it rapidly. A deep gouge created when Tim had fallen awkwardly off his bicycle whilst trying to show off in front of her, riding really quickly at her, and trying to dodge at the last minute. Something hadn't quite worked, and he hadn't really hit Catherine really hard, but he'd come off his bicycle badly, hitting the tarmac and falling onto the sharp rusty structure of the bike.

Catherine rubbed the palm of her right hand with the fingers of her left hand. The palm felt normal. The skin had the same fairly dry, somewhat resistant texture of normal skin. There was no electricity, no blisters or anything bizarre. There was still a slight sensation of tingling like when she thought she'd had some light coming out of them before.

Her mum appeared on the doorstep, "Catherine! What's going on?"

"Mum?"

"Timothy's in tears, saying weird things about you Catherine."

"I don't know mom. Tim fell off his bike."

"He said there was lots of blood and then you fixed him."

"I don't know mom. He fell off his bike."

"Tell me the truth Catherine, he's saying really weird things."

"Is he ok?"

"He looks fine hon."

Catherine's mum walked towards her, picked her up, cradled her in her arms, and kissed her on the forehead. She said, "Tim looks fine honey. He says you had light coming from your hands."

"I don't know mom. Maybe. I don't know."

Catherine's mum put her down on her feet on the ground. She took Catherine's right hand and looked at it. She said, "Are your hands ok Catherine?"

"Yes mom, they're fine". She snapped a little, from fear as much as anything.

"Alright hon. I have to go and comfort Tim ok?"

"Sure mom."

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Catherine sat on the soil mound looking around the wasteland at the back of the housing estate. Her best friend Jason sat next to her. They scratched at the ground beside them, played idly with the soil.

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Helen said to Catherine, "What do you mean, you can heal people?"

"Seriously Helen. My brother hurt himself. I healed him with my hands."

"You're so taking the piss Catherine."

"You know me Helen. You know I don't do that. You know I don't know how to lie."

Helen looked down at Catherine, she jumped off the climbing frame and came near Catherine, "Yes that's true, but it's a little hard to believe. Maybe you imagined it?"

"Perhaps."

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Jason looked at Catherine, "Your hands have power?"

"I think so. Sometimes."

Jason looked thoughtful. He said, "But that would be magic! Magic doesn't exist?"

"You think?"

Jason thought again. The Shaman had told him that he would be the next Shaman. He hadn't said anything about any other Shamans. It was a little disappointing, and worrying. He decided to find out a little more. He said, "Can you show me?"

Catherine said shyly, "Well, you're not hurt."

Jason thought briefly. Well, he could hurt himself a little and Catherine could heal him right? He said, "Well, what if I hurt myself?"

Catherine said, "What would you want to do that for?"

"Well, so you can show me your power?"

"You don't believe me?"

Jason said quickly, "Well, so you can practice your power."

Catherine looked up into his eyes, "Ok sure."

Jason looked around. Catherine said, "How will you hurt yourself?"

Jason looked at the ground, there were plenty of dry sticks and twigs, a few rocks. He said, "Well, how much can you heal?"

Catherine said, "I'm not sure really. It only worked once. Maybe I imagined it."

Jason looked at Catherine, he was a little disappointed really, maybe she had imagined it after all. He said, "Yes, maybe you did."

He said, "Ok, how about I find a sharp stick and cut myself with it, poke it into myself. Will that work?"

Catherine said, "Well, maybe." She felt a little nervous about this experiment. It felt a little odd for someone to hurt themselves on purpose. She didn't really know if she could actually heal him or not.

Jason picked up a sturdy sharp looking stick. He held it with one hand and rammed it into his other hand. It bounced harmlessly off his flesh. He said, "Hmmm, that didn't work. Maybe I should try harder?"

Catherine said, "Sure." She was glad that Jason hadn't managed to hurt himself. She quite liked Jason actually. He was fun to hang out with. She didn't really want him hurting himself.

Jason closed his eyes and brought the sharpened stick into the palm of his other hand as hard as he could. Pain shot up his arm. He opened his eyes and cried out in pain. He looked in fascination at the twig sticking into the palm of his hand, with blood forming around the wound. He felt slightly faint. There was a thud next to him. He looked to see Catherine lying on the ground. She really had fainted.

"Oh great", he said quietly, and looked in fascination at the wound on his palm.

## Chapter 4.

Visions.

Helen looked around the room, "There's an evil that is forming itself."

Catherine laughed, "What do you mean, an evil?"

Helen looked at Catherine seriously, "No really, a great evil is forming. I feel it in my bones."

Jason said, "Well, what are we going to do about that? Where is the evil?". He smiled a little patronisingly.

Helen said seriously, "No, really, I can feel it. I don't know how we can find it, or what we can do about it, but it's there, it's here, it's near us."

Jason said, "But there's nothing we can do?"

Helen said carefully, "I don't know. Why don't we go for a walk? Maybe the feeling will grow stronger when we are near it?"

Jason said, "Can't someone else deal with it?"

Helen said, "It's really evil. Who's going to deal with it?"

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The three of them walked into the shopping centre.

Catherine said, "Ok, where do you think we should go to?"

Helen said, "Let's just walk around on different floors, let's start over there." She indicated an electronics shop on the other side of the square.

Jason said, "Sure, why not?"

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They sat down at Burger Magic. Jason placed the tray of burgers and cola drinks on the table.

Helen felt tired. They were all happy to sit down.

Catherine said, "So what now?"

Helen said, "I'm not sure. Hey, thanks for humoring me on this guys. Maybe it's useless. Maybe it's just my imagination."

Jason said, "Hey, we're in this together. I mean, I don't know if I believe you entirely on this, maybe it's just some strange feeling, but we'll go through this together."

Helen looked at him, "Thanks Jason."

Catherine said, "You know, sometimes when you look for things they disappear. They appear when you're not expecting it. Perhaps we can just lead our lives and it will appear, when we're not expecting it?"

Helen said, "Hmmm, maybe. Let's spend this afternoon looking around town though ok?"

Jason said, "Sure, why not? I've got a couple of new cds I want to buy first though, ok?"

Helen said, "Yes of course." She looked at Catherine and Jason's eyes, "I appreciate this. I know you don't really believe in this, maybe I don't myself entirely, but I can't just dismiss it."

Jason said, "We're friends. We'll stick with you."

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Helen walked into class. She opened the door, and stepped inside the room. Something coursed into her body, she felt weak. The world turned black. She felt herself fainting towards the floor. She banged her head against the door-frame.

## Chapter 5.

Preparations.

Vincent awoke to darkness. It must have been about 4am. He could hear the owls hooting in the darkness outside. The trees moved in the wind, their leaves rustling. Something felt odd, something had awakened him. It was cold. He brought his duvet up higher, under his chin, pulling it around him with his hands. He moved his feet around to pull the bottom of the duvet back over the lower half of his body. He pulled the duvet around him but he was still cold.

Vincent needed the toilet a little. Not enough that he really had to go, but enough that he didn't really want to go to sleep without using it first. The air was not warm, the bed was cold too, but not quite as cold. He was lying down half asleep.

He lay there for a while, in the darkness, listening to the owls and the rustling trees, not sleeping, not really awake. Eventually, he made up his mind that he should just go to the toilet, and then he'd be able to sleep again.

He sat up and swung his legs around to get out of bed. He pushed the lamp-switch on the wire running besides his bed. The bright light made him blink. He looked around for his carpet slippers, and put his feet into them.

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Vincent flung another fireball into the sky. It joined the others, streaking into the heavens. He said to the book, "This is great! Wicked! Nice work book!"

The book said, "I have my good points."

"Where'd you come from book?"

"I've been around a while, longer than you can imagine I think."

"I remember when I was three years old, cutting the grass of my parents' lawn with scissors. It didn't work very well. I gave up after a while."

"When were your parents born Vincent?"

"I'm not sure, but you know probably anyway right book?"

"I do. It was in 1972. I was created before that. I've existed for a while."

"What about the Romans? Were you around when the Romans were conquering Europe?"

"I was."

"Egypt? The pyramids?"

"I've been around for a while."

Vincent paused thoughtfully, "You must have had other owners before me?"

"Owners!" said the book incredulously, then shut up and said, "Yes, of course, I have had one or two other owners in my life."

"What happened to your other owners?"

"They led interesting lives."

"Who was your last owner."

"Have you heard of a guy named Hitler?"

"Yes of course!"

"Not him."

"Heh!"

"You haven't heard of any of my previous owners Vincent."

"Why'd you pick me?"

"You picked me Vincent."

"What were you doing in my den?"

"Seemed as good a place as any."

"What was the name of your last owner?"

"My last owner as you put it was named Eric. I met him in 1952."

"Where is he now?"

"He's dead Vincent."

"Dead?"

"Dead."

"Couldn't you protect him?"

"It's not so simple Vincent."

"How'd he die book?"

"He ran out of life. Everyone runs out of life."

"You don't though? You outlast everyone?"

"I'm a book. It has its good points."

"What do you like book?"

"Like? I'm a book. I like using my powers. I influence events subtly."

"Who made you, book?"

"I don't know. I appeared one day. I don't remember more than existing. Do you remember being born Vincent?"

Vincent thought for a while. He could remember being fairly young, but he couldn't remember being really young. He must have been a baby at some point he guessed, but he couldn't remember being a baby, not even a little memory, nothing.

"No, nothing. That's strange isn't it book?"

\*\*\*

As Helen walked into the classroom, Vincent pushed past her. Their hands touched each other briefly. An image came to her head of Vincent looking into her eyes and destroying her. She looked at Vincent, but he looked perfectly normal, just a boy in a rush not to be late for maths class.

"Hi Vincent", she said.

Vincent turned around, embarrassed, "Uh yeah, hi. Erm. Helen."

"You're in a hurry to get to maths!"

"Uh yeah, don't want to be late again."

Helen looked into his eyes. Vincent looked away, shyly. The eyes were innocent. Normal.

Helen moved into the classroom and sat down.

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The book said, "What do you want to be when you are older Vincent?"

"A King! With many slaves! Everyone will respect me!"

"People do respect you already Vincent!"

"Not at school! People just think I'm some loser!"

"You could use me to become powerful, make friends, make people like you."

"I want to be the most powerful person in the world."

"I can help you do that Vincent. Do you want that?"

"Will I have friends like that? Will people like me?"

The book decided that Vincent had friends already, but there was no point in saying that. The book had other ideas.

"Sure. People look up to powerful people who can do things for them. If you are the most powerful person in the world, everyone will respect you. Everyone will like you."

"Ok. When can we start?"

"There's something you need to do first. I have lain dormant for a long time. My powers are fading. They are not as strong as they used to be."

"Ok. What do we need to do to make your powers strong again book?"

"There are others who have powers. We need their powers. We need to absorb power from them."

"Sure. Like borrowing someone's lunch?"

"Yes. We need to borrow their power from them."

"How long do we need their power for? Can we give it back later?"

"We need to keep the power, Vincent. Their powers will no longer work for them."

"What will happen to them?"

"They will be fine. They won't need their powers any more."

"Ok. Good. How do we take their powers?"

"There is a spell you need to learn. It will absorb their powers. You can start to learn it now."

"Sure. That sounds fun!"

"Once you've learned the power, you can start using it to get my power back, to give yourself new powers."

"Who are the people whose power we need?"

There were several actually: Helen, Catherine, and Jason. The book decided Vincent didn't need to know this just yet. Just one for now.

The book said, "Someone from your school. Her name is Catherine".

## Chapter 6.

A Visitor.

Catherine woke up into the cold blackness of night. The trees were rustling outside. Something had woken her, but it just seemed black, nothing unusual. No weird sounds.

There was a scuffling outside. A whispered curse. Catherine woke up completely, she became completely alert. She opened her eyes and peered at the window. She could see the moon streaming in past the trees.

A shadow appeared in the window. A man's head. It stayed there. She froze and looked at it. Should she scream? Run to her mother?

She screamed. The head disappeared. The light clicked on in her parents' bedroom, down the hall. With the courage of victim turned attacker, she ran to the window, and looked out.

A small boy hung in the tree. The boy held a book in one hand. It was Vincent, from school. He looked scared and sulky.

Catherine opened the window. "What are you doing here Vincent? This is my house!"

Her mother appeared in the doorway. "What's going on Catherine?"

"There's a boy from school outside mum."

"At your age?" Catherine's mum looked at Catherine strangely. "You're just a child." Catherine looked at her mum puzzled. What did that mean? Did adults hang from trees outside people's windows? Did dad used to do that when he was no longer a child, or an adult, or... this didn't make any sense.

Catherine said, "What? What do you mean?"

Her mum looked at her. Perhaps Catherine had nothing to do with this. She went to the window. She shouted, "Hey! What are you doing! Get down from there!"

Vincent replied, "It's high! I'm scared!"

Catherine's dad came into the room, doing up his dressing-gown. "What's going on?" he demanded.

Catherine and her mum turned to him. Her mum said, "There's a boy from Catherine's school chasing her from the tree outside!"

"At her age?" He looked at Catherine. Catherine felt that sense of not understanding adult stuff.

Catherine said, "Did I do something wrong dad?"

Her dad looked at her. "Ok, let's get rid of this guy." He walked to the window and looked out. He shouted at Vincent, "Hey! What are you doing in our tree! It's 3 o'clock in the morning! Get down from there!"

Vincent clung to the tree, looking scared, and shivering.

Dad looked at the boy, "Get down from there!"

Vincent looked at Catherine's dad, "I can't. It's too high."

Catherine's dad looked at her mum, "Should we get the ladder?"

"If we try to get him down and he falls, we're liable."

Catherine's dad said, "Right. Let's phone the fire brigade, or the police."

Catherine's mum said, "I'll phone the police."

Catherine's dad said, "I'll go. Wait here. Keep an eye on the boy." He looked at Catherine's mum and at Catherine. He said, "Do you want to put some clothes on? It's cold!"

He walked out of the bedroom, and over to the hall phone.

\*\*\*

Robert walked up to Vincent, walked right up, close to Vincent, putting his face an inch from Vincent's. He looked into Vincent's eyes mockingly. "Hey stalker!", he said, "You think it's fun to spy on girls at night?"

Robert threw his head forward, pushing his forehead into Vincent's nose, head-butting him. Vincent reeled backwards, put his hands to his nose in pain, crouched downwards.

Steven appeared, came up besides Robert. He stood side by side with Robert and looked down at Vincent, "Hey stalker. You think it's ok to climb up girl's trees? You disgust me!" Steven stepped towards Vincent and aimed a blow with his right foot into Vincent's stomach. Vincent rolled backwards, putting his hands to his stomach. Blood ran from his nose. He lay on his back, clutching his stomach. As he breathed out of his nose, the blood bubbled and splashed onto his shirt and onto the floor. He brought his knees up to his stomach to defend himself. He looked up at Steven and Robert with frightened eyes. He put his hands down by his side, and tried to move backwards away from them, crawling backwards with his hands and feet.

Robert looked down at him, "Hah! Not so strong now are you! You can attack girls but you're not so strong against men are you!"

Steven aimed another blow with his foot at Vincent's legs. It glanced off, didn't do much damage, didn't make any impact.

Robert stepped forward, and kneeled on top of Vincent, straddling him. Vincent tried to push Robert off, but Vincent was too feeble. Robert lifted his fist then ploughed it downwards into Vincent's left cheek. Vincent's head twisted to his right, with the force of the impact, and the pain. The impact pushed Vincent's head into the wooden floor. His head felt dizzy and faint. The blood was bubbling in his nose. He thrashed about with his hands trying to push Robert off. Steven came in from the side, and aimed a kick at Vincent's head. Vincent saw the leg draw back, anticipated the pain of the booted foot ploughing into his head. The foot flew towards him. It hit his head.

\*\*\*

Vincent lay on his bed in tears, with his legs brought up to his stomach. He rubbed his eyes with his hands, smearing the tears around. His nose wasn't bleeding any more. Dried blood was crusted around his nostrils. Spots of blood were on his chin. His shirt had spots of blood on.

It wasn't right to be attacked for spying on Catherine. He wasn't doing anything bad. He wasn't a bully. He

wasn't attacking her. He just needed her powers. She wasn't an ordinary girl, she was a witch! It wasn't anything to do with Richard and Steven, and all the other people at school who'd been making fun of him all day.

What was he going to do?

The book said, "They don't deserve you Vincent."

Vincent twisted his head slightly to look at the book. He put his thumb in his mouth and sucked it, "What do you mean?"

The book said, "They don't deserve you. They don't understand you. They don't know your power."

"They don't", agreed Vincent.

"Show them your powers and they will love you, respect you. They won't bully you any more. People will like you."

Vincent looked at the book, "But we don't have the powers yet?"

"No, but we will. Just bear this pain for a little while, and once we're powerful we'll show them who's king. We'll show them who's boss."

Vincent closed his eyes and went to sleep, dreaming about using magical powers to string Robert and Steven up, torture them, taunt them with his power.

**Chapter 7.**

The End.

Helen picked up her lunch tray and walked over to Vincent's table. He was sitting on his own looking sad and angry.

Helen said to Vincent, "Mind if I sit down?"

"What do I care? Everyone hates me." He looked down at his food. He looked back at Helen, "You'll see. You'll love me in the future, all of you, you'll respect me."

Helen put her dinner tray on the table. She pulled the chair back, sat on it, then pulled it back in closer to the table. She looked tenderly at Vincent, "Your nose looks pretty bad Vincent."

"You'll see. I'll get back at you for doing this."

Helen moved her hand up to Vincent's face, touched the dried blood.

Vincent looked at her, letting her touch him, enjoying the sensation. He moved back, away from her hand. He said belligerently, "In the future, you're all going to love me. You'll see."

Helen looked at him, "How's your nose feeling Vincent?"

Vincent looked at her, "It's painful. What do you think?" he snapped.

Helen said, "Yes. I understand." She brought her hand back down. She said, "Catherine is my friend."

Vincent looked down sulkily. He pushed his food around the plate. Helen looked at him patiently. Vincent said, "It's nothing to do with you. You don't understand."

Helen said, "Catherine's a girl, a young girl. It looks strange to be hanging outside a young girl's room in a tree you know?"

Vincent looked at his food, mashing the potatoes into the carrots a little. If only people were like the potatoes and the carrots, obeying him, letting themselves be mashed around as he chose. He looked up at Helen, "She's not an ordinary girl you know."

Helen said, "Yes, she's very beautiful."

Vincent said, "No, I mean, she's not really a girl." He looked down again, back to the potatoes and carrots, passively being mashed around. He said to himself, muttering, "You wouldn't understand. She's not really a girl."

\*\*\*

The friends - Catherine, Jason and Helen - sat in Burger Magic.

Catherine said, "Ugh, the guy is so weird. I'm scared Helen."

Helen said, "Let's go and see him. You up for that Jason?"

Jason said, "Yeah, sure. Tell me again about your conversation with him at lunchtime."

Helen said, "He's hiding something. He kept talking about a book, and how Catherine's not really a girl. I think he means Catherine has a power. He wants her power."

Jason said, "He knows about her power?"

Helen said, "It seems so."

Jason said, "How'd he find out?"

Helen said, "I don't know. He didn't say."

Jason said, "How does he think he can get her power? That'd kill her anyway!"

Helen said, "I don't know. Maybe it's something to do with the book he keeps talking about."

Catherine said nervously, "Let's just go. I'm scared guys."

Helen said, "We're with you Catherine."

Jason said, "We're here for you Catherine. We'll stick together and figure this thing out."

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Helen said, "Hey Vincent!"

Vincent looked up from the book, annoyed, a little sulky. "What are you guys doing here?"

Catherine said, "What's that book you have with you Vincent?"

Vincent closed the book, picked it up, held it away from them. He said, "It's nothing. What are you talking about?"

Jason said, "There's something special with that book isn't there Vincent?"

Vincent shouted, "No! What are you talking about?"

Helen said, "Can you let us see that book Vincent?"

Vincent shouted, "No! It's mine! I found it first!"

Helen said, "Guys, I can feel its power, the book's. I can sense the evil oozing out of it. It's like a puddle on the ground, an aura filling this area with hatred."

Vincent said, "The book is nice. He's my friend. He wouldn't do anything bad."

Jason said, "What were you doing outside Catherine's window the other day Vincent?"

Vincent said, "It's nothing. Catherine has something that the book needs. The book won't do anything bad. The book will die otherwise. Don't be so selfish!"

Helen looked at the others then back at Vincent, "Something the book needs, Vincent?"

Vincent said, "The book's dieing, it's losing its powers. It just needs its power back. That's all. Nothing bad will happen to Catherine. The book just needs her power. It's like borrowing someone's lunch."

Catherine said, "I'm someone's lunch?"

Helen said quietly, "Vincent, you want to take Catherine's power?" Her voice was quiet, even. It wasn't violent, or loud, but there was quiet menace, perhaps fear. She was afraid, for if Catherine's power was removed, like removing someone's heart, their lungs, what would become of Catherine?

Vincent said, "The book just needs to feed a little! Catherine won't be hurt!"

Jason said, "Oh really! You know that taking our power away cripples us. We die if it's done suddenly enough."

Vincent whined, "She'll be fine! It's just a bit of power. She can live without it. Look around you! Most people don't have any power. They live just fine."

Helen said evenly, "Vincent, it's not so simple. Our powers are deep within us. Ripping them out rips out our souls. We die."

Vincent looked at Helen. His eyes were open in surprise. He said questioningly, "We?" He looked at the three friends, "What do you mean 'we'? You all have powers?"

Helen said, "Yes. The book probably wants all our powers you know?"

Vincent looked at the book. He said to it, "Book?"

The book said, "We'll sort out Catherine for now. We'll discuss the others later Vincent."

Helen said commandingly, "Give us the book Vincent."

Vincent pulled the book away, to one side. He said, "No! You shan't have it. I found it first. Go away. Leave me be."

Helen said, "The book wants our powers. The book wants to kill us. We can't just leave you be I'm afraid."

The book said, pointing a tendril of golden light at Jason, "You boy, what's your name?"

Jason stammered, "It's Jason." He watched the finger of golden light wave its pointed end just in front of him. Particles of dust shone in the light. The rest of the wood looked dark in comparison.

The book said, "Are you afraid of death Jason?"

Jason said, "Yes, of course! Everyone is. You're not going to kill us. We're stronger than you." He didn't really sound convinced.

The book said, "How would you like to live forever Jason?"

Jason said, "Yes of course. Who wouldn't?"

The book said, "Right, but you're going to die eventually. Everyone does. Your powers can't help you."

Jason said, curiously, "And so?" He sounded a little hopeful that the book would provide some solution to this issue.

The book, "I can make you immortal Jason. You'd like that right?"

Jason looked at the book and back at the tendril of light. "Maybe". His stomach felt the excitement of discovery. Immortality? That would be awesome! That would rock! Everyone else around him would die. Well, that wouldn't be so awesome. But he'd make new friends. Immortality! What would that not be worth? He'd sell his soul for immortality!

Jason looked at the book, "You're lying. I don't believe you." He hoped it was true though. Was there some way the book could prove it?

The book said, "It's as you like. In a hundred years you won't care. You'll be dead. Is that what you want Jason?"

Jason's eyes moistened. He blinked back tears. It was such a cruel choice to make. He said, "You're lying! You're trying to trick me! You'll just get me to do something bad then run away!"

The book said, "Helen's wrong about me. I'm not evil. I just want to help."

Helen said, "Yeah right." She looked at Jason, "Don't listen to him Jason. The book is seducing you. It's a sign of fear! The book knows we're stronger than it!"

Jason looked at Helen with moistened eyes. He said, "How can I deny immortality?"

Catherine looked at him with surprise, "You'd betray your friends to get immortality?"

Jason said, "Who said anything about betraying friends?"

Helen said, "We're here to destroy the book, to kill it. You're here making deals for immortality with it."

Jason said, "It's just a small deal. We can kill the book after that."

Catherine said, "Oh yeah, great idea Jason!" She looked away, half amused, half disgusted, not wanting to believe what Jason was doing.

The book said, "I can give you immortality Jason. Don't worry about these other two. In a hundred years they'll be dead. What do you care what they think now? You'll be alive for thousands of years! Immortality! Think of everything you'll see! The discoveries you'll make!"

Jason said, "You're lying book. I don't believe you."

The book said, "It's your choice Jason. To prove your loyalty to me you need to destroy Helen and Catherine. Fireball them now."

"Destroy them?"

"Neutralize them. Fireball them. Don't worry about them. I'll take care of them Jason."

Jason looked up at the book, a tear ran down his cheeks. He turned to Catherine and Helen with moist eyes. He looked at the book. His hands shook. He raised them up. He turned the palms upwards and looked at them. He used his left hand to massage the palm of his right hand, rubbing the thumb of his left hand over the palm, massaging it, warming it. He pondered. Immortality sounded pretty cool. He'd always wanted it. But to betray his friends? But they'd be dead soon anyway! What was a hundred years when you were immortal?

Helen said, "What are you doing Jason? How can you even think about this?"

Jason said, "He's offering me immortality Helen. Do you really want to die sometime?"

Helen said, "He's lying to you Jason. He's tricking you into splitting up from us. He won't follow through with it."

Jason said, "Maybe he will, maybe he won't." He flicked his hands back, and flung a flaming mass of fire towards Helen. Helen screamed and clawed through the flames, falling to her knees. She breathed in the hot fire, searing her insides, burning her lungs. She could no longer scream. Her vision started to blur, turn black. She could no longer inhale.

Catherine reached up her hands to heal her. Jason shouted "No!" and poured fire in her direction. Catherine succumbed in her turn to the searing, burning, disabling flames. Her clothes charred and disappeared. Her naked skin charred, turned black, bubbled in the flames. She screamed, but her screams turned bubbly and subsided.

The book moved its tendril of light over the dieing girls. "Nice work Jason. I commend you."

The book turned it's attention to Vincent. Vincent was watching the girls burn horrified. The book said to Vincent, "Don't worry about the girls Vincent. We'll put them in their proper place once we're done. Don't worry about them."

Vincent looked at the book. His eyes showed fear. His face was unmoving, white. Vincent said to the book, "Promise?"

The book said, "Sure Vincent. Of course. I'm here to help you."

Vincent said slowly, "Ok, you'd better be right. They're people you know, book."

The book said, "Vincent, you need to get their power now, and then once you've done that, we'll put them in their proper place. They won't feel pain any more."

Vincent said, "Sure, ok". He didn't sound convinced though. He sounded lethargic, sleepy, slow.

The book said, "Let's do this, get it over with. If you wait too long they'll die. Do you remember the spell Vincent?"

Vincent said, "The spell to get their power? Sure, I remember it. I should do that now?"

The book said, "Yes. Let's take care of Jason first. Thank-you by the way Jason. We couldn't have done this without you."

Jason said, "You're going to give me immortality book?"

The book chuckled, "Yes sure Jason. You're going to be peaceful forever."

Vincent said, "Sorry about this Jason. I have to do it. The book's not well."

Jason said, "Sorry? What do you mean sorry." He said more quickly, hurriedly, "You're giving me immortality right?" He sounded a little uncertain, he was a little uncertain. This seemed a little odd, he didn't really feel a part of the group of three. He was an outsider.

The book said, "Thank-you for your help Jason. Really, it was really good of you. We'd have struggled without your help."

Vincent said to the book, "Do I have to do this book?"

The book said, "Yes, just do it. Don't think about it?"

Jason said, "Wait, what's going on?"

Vincent said to Jason, "This won't kill you. It's just going to take your powers away Jason. You'll be fine. The book told me you'll be ok afterwards. You'll just not have your powers any longer." Vincent looked at the book, "Right, book?"

The book said, "Oh yeah, absolutely. Definitely. Peaceful forever. Immortality of sorts."

Jason said, "You're not going to give me immortality are you?"

The book said, "Oh yeah sure, immortality, you'll be peaceful forever." The book chuckled.

Jason's face turned pale, "Peaceful forever? Dead?"

Vincent said, "No! Not dead! The book said you'll be ok. Don't worry about it! Right book?"

The book said, "Oh yeah, sure. Right, do you want to cast that spell?"

Vincent concentrated on the motions of his hands. They whirred around in a blur. Jason watched them. They looked beautiful, fascinating, hypnotic.

Something happened to Vincent's hands, they jarred together somehow, breaking the hypnotic effect. Vincent said, "Oh dear". The book said, "That's not...". There was an orange flash. The book and Vincent were no longer where they were. Jason looked around the clearing. He couldn't see them. He looked up into the trees. No sign of them. He couldn't hear them. He turned, not there either.

He sat down, and looked around. He'd betrayed his friends for the sake of something that seemed important, and he'd been betrayed in his turn it seemed.

He looked down at his ankles and rubbed them with his hands.

His nose was burning from the acrid aroma of the burning bubbling corpses of Helen and Catherine. He looked across at them.

He felt something familiar about the sight of burning things, things that he had destroyed using his Power.

He looked down at the grass beneath him and played with it using his fingers, twisting the grass around them. What a confusing day. He felt exhausted. His friends had left him. His friends lay dieing in boiling masses of oil and body fat. No more friends. No immortality. He felt sorry for himself.

Jason shouted "I'm so useless! Everyone hates me! I'm horrible! I deserve to die!" He started to cry, and smeared the tears over his face with his blackened hands. Helen and Catherine continued to burn in their pools of molten body fat.

Jason shouted "I'm so useless! What can I do!". He sunk down on the floor. He breathed in the fumes of burning Catherine and Helen. Their bodies were crackling.

Jason caught sight of a small rivulet of water running through the wood. Its water gurgled as it churned over the stones.

Water! Just the thing. He needed something to carry it in.

A half-broken bucket lay nearby, discarded by its neglecting owner, left to decorate the woods until it decayed at some point in the unforeseen future.

Jason pushed himself up onto all fours, and crawled over to the bucket on his hands and knees through the wet grass.

He picked up the broken bucket, and dipped it in the small rivulet of water, pushing it under the surface, letting water enter into its dirty interior.

But they'd hate him! How could they ever forgive him! They'd never be his friends again! They'd tell everyone how bad he was!

He lifted the bucket out of the creek. There was a large crack running through the bucket. The water leaked out as fast as he could lift it. He threw the remaining contents in Helen's direction. A few drops splashed onto her, vanishing instantly and invisibly in the heat.

He tried again, but the drops of water did nothing. He tried pressing the gap together with his hands, but it was no use. The crack wouldn't seal itself. The crack got bigger. Helen and Catherine continued to burn, bubbling in the heat.

He could fuse the plastic together at the crack using his fireball powers, but he was afraid to use them any more. His powers did more harm than good.

He put the bucket into the water and squeezed the crack together. It was no good.

He took the bucket out and examined it.

He looked back to the burning remains of his friends, the friends he had betrayed. He looked at the plastic bucket. He took a deep breath and moved his hands over the crack. Fire came out of the palms of his hands and he melted the plastic together along the join.

He put the healed bucket into the creek and pulled it out, filled with water. He walked over to Catherine. He poured the water over her body. The water sizzled and fizzed. The body became moist blackness, no longer in flames. Smoke and steam rose and filled his nose with their nauseous aroma. He fetched another bucket and doused the remaining flames on Catherine.

He did the same for Helen.

The two charred bodies lay there, moist blackened shapeless forms.

Jason looked around. The book and Vincent were nowhere to be seen.

Jason fell down to the floor, and lay there. He brought his feet up to the foetal position, and cried himself to sleep.

Jason stayed like that, numb, not knowing what to do, feeling himself in a nightmare from which he couldn't just wake up. A nightmare of his own doing. How had it come to this?

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A voice said, "Jason." Jason opened his eyes and looked up. The Shaman was standing over him, looking down curiously. Jason put his thumb in his mouth and sucked.

"Jason, you are learning an important lesson today."

Jason looked up at the Shaman, "Yes Shaman."

The Shaman said, "I can resurrect Helen and Catherine but beyond that you're going to have to deal with this on your own. It's going to be difficult for you."

Jason said nothing. He lay on the floor feeling useless and horrible.

The Shaman moved his hands over Helen. Her wounds healed, her clothes reformed. She looked whole again. For now she slept.

The Shaman said, "My powers are nearly over. Be good Jason."

Jason said, "What do you mean Shaman?"

The Shaman walked over to Catherine. He moved his hands over her but nothing happened. He said, "This is it. I'm going away Jason. You're going to have to take care of yourself on your own. You are intelligent, you learn quickly. You will succeed." Jason said, "What? Where are you going Shaman?"

The Shaman knelt down besides Catherine, held his hands over her, and closed his eyes. He raised his head upwards, grimaced, concentrated. He moved his hands over Catherine. Blue fire came from his hands and enveloped Catherine. Her wounds healed, her clothing became whole again. Jason looked at the Shaman. His face was contorted in pain. The Shaman opened his eyes and looked at Jason. He said, "Goodbye Jason. Learn your lessons as well as you can."

The Shaman brought his hands to his chest, then leaned to one side, laying himself sideways onto the ground. He closed his eyes. His hands jerked, and then there was silence, no movement.

Jason looked at him. He said, "What?" He ran to the Shaman. What was happening? The Shaman was the source of his power! His mentor! The Shaman was his protector in this cruel confusing world. Without the Shaman what would he do, on his own? He grabbed the Shaman's hands. They felt cold. He moved them around, nothing happened. A crack appeared in the Shaman's head, it moved through his body. Blue light came from his body and enveloped it. The body disintegrated into particles of light. The particles blew in the breeze and dispersed. The grass was compacted where the Shaman had been, pressed down. There was no other trace.

Jason moved back and sat down. He felt fear in his stomach. And responsibility. If the Shaman was gone, he'd have to grow up, become a man, could no longer rely on the Shaman for protection.

## Chapter 8.

A Beginning.

Helen looked at Jason, "What just happened?", she snapped icily.

"I fireballed you. You burned up. The Shaman saved you." he said.

"You couldn't even save me yourself! What are you going to do now Jason?"

"I don't know Helen. It was so tempting. The Shaman died."

"What happened to the Shaman?"

"He used his last powers to save you."

"He wants you to be his successor? It's hard to believe!"

Jason looked down, said nothing.

Helen said, "How do we know you won't do the same thing again Jason? How can we ever trust you? Trust needs to be earned you know?"

"I know. I'm shit. I'm bad. I don't know what to say."

\*\*\*

As Jason was walking down the street, he caught sight of Catherine coming the other way. He looked at her, she looked beautiful. He was happy to see her.

They moved closer. She didn't look at him. As they passed, Jason said "Catherine!" She ignored him, it was like he wasn't there.

Jason felt a coldness in his heart, a deadness, a numbing feeling of having done something awful, and not knowing how to fix it.

\*\*\*

Jason lay awake in his bed. It was 2am, maybe 3am. He'd been lying awake since getting into bed. He couldn't sleep. He'd lost his best friends. The Shaman had died. Catherine and Helen hated him. Catherine hated him because he'd betrayed her. Helen just analysed him as though he was some laboratory rat. He didn't really like Helen much.

He remembered Catherine passing him on the street and ignoring him. It hurt so much. She was so beautiful, was so kind to him, and now she was gone, out of his life.

What could he ever do to get back on their good side?

He thought maybe he should just kill himself. He was useless to the world, useless to other people. They didn't like him, and he didn't know what to do, or how to behave. A Shaman? What nonsense! Who was he to have special powers, it was pathetic. What a stupid dumb decision. He wished the Shaman were here now, to help him, to guide him.

He rolled over to his other side. The moon shone through his bedroom window, passing through the shadow of the trees outside, moving in the gentle breeze.

There must be some way to prove to them that he had changed. But... had he really changed? He'd been offered immortality, and he'd chosen that, rather than his friends. He'd chosen eternity friendless, rather than spend the short time he had, but with friends. Would he choose that again? It was the choice he'd made!

What he'd really learned was to be really careful about making such choices. He'd chosen carefully, gambled on the book helping him, and lost, but he'd lost a lot.

He rolled over onto his other side, and fell asleep.

At night, he dreamt of loneliness. He dreamt of watching as other people partied and had fun. He was just a bystander, powerful in theory, but useless, nothing, a fly, watching as the rest of the world partied together.

\*\*\*

It was 4am. Jason was awake again. He phoned Catherine. The phone rang at the other end. Catherine picked up.

She answered blearily, "Hello?"

Jason said, "Hey, it's me."

"Oh. What can I do for you Mr Peterson?"

"Ummmm, I couldn't sleep. I was thinking about us."

"It's a little late for that don't you think?". The phone went dead. Jason put the phone back on the hook, and lay awake watching the moon through the softly-moving trees.

\*\*\*

Catherine and Helen sat together in Burger Magic sipping a cola.

Helen said, "We can deal with this on our own. We don't need Mr hotshot fireballer to help us."

Catherine said, "Unbelievable what he did. I can't believe it."

"You like him don't you?"

"I didn't think he would do that."

"He attacked me first. He only attacked you when you protected me."

"Oh well that makes it so much better."

Helen said, "The Shaman died too."

Catherine said, "Who's the Shaman?"

"Jason's sponsor. The guy who trained him, showed him his Power."

"What does Jason think?"

"Jason just thinks about himself. He wishes the Shaman were still here, to guide him, to help him."

"Strange to choose Jason as his successor."

"People grow, they change. Maybe the Shaman was like Jason before?"

Helen took a sip of her coca-cola, swirled the cup around, listening to the ice clink together inside.

Helen said, "We'd be more powerful together, the three of us."

Catherine said, "You think we can trust him again Helen?"

"I don't know Catherine. I don't think we can trust him not to swap us for immortality, but at least he learned not to trust the book."

"He hasn't learned anything."

"Well, why don't we get rid of the bok first, together, then figure out what to do about Jason later?"

Catherine said, "I'm not convinced Helen. He'll just do the same thing again."

Helen said, "He's not going to make the same mistake twice. I wouldn't trust him with my life, but I think we can take on the book together."

Catherine said, "Sure, I trust you Helen, and I trust your decisions. If that's what you think is best I'll run with that."

"You have reservations though?"

"Helen, how can I ever talk with him again? How can I look him in the eyes again? I liked him Helen. I liked him a lot. He liked me. And yet he loves himself more, and he'll do anything to protect that."

"It hurts right?"

"Yeah."

"I don't need you to be really friends with him again, but we do need to get rid of this book, purge it from the world." Helen looked into Catherine's eyes, "Let's do this ok?"

Catherine said, "Sure, ok." She looked into Helen's eyes, "Yes, ok."

Helen said, "I don't need you to be friends with him, but we are going to have to meet with him again ok?"

Catherine looked down, then looked back up at Helen's eyes, "Ok, Helen, I trust your decisions. Let's do this."

\*\*\*

Jason walked into Burger Magic. He was wearing the same clothes as before. His trousers had a hole in. He was wearing trainers. His hair was unwashed and uncombed.

He looked around Burger Magic, looking for Catherine and Helen. He caught sight of them, smiled uncertainly and walked over to their table.

He said, "Hi guys."

Helen said, "Sit down Jason."

Jason sat down on the bench, opposite Helen, next to Catherine.

Helen said, "Listen Jason. We need your help. We can take on the book with just two of us, but it's going to be easier with three."

Jason listened, and nodded.

Helen said, "Do not think that this means we forgive you. We don't. I don't know, Catherine doesn't know, if we will ever forgive you for what you did. Maybe we will never forgive you. Right now, we need your help ok?"

Jason nodded dumbly, "Ok, sure." He looked like a tiny child, unsure of himself, ashamed.

Helen said, "I don't know if we can trust you with our lives in the future. I'd like to think so. I'd like to think you've grown older and wiser. I think we can trust you not to trust the book though right?"

Jason said, "I can't believe he betrayed me like that!"

Helen laughed, "The betrayer resents betrayal!"

"I'm not a betrayer! I just made a strange decision Helen."

"Trust needs to be earned Jason. I think you will make a different decision in the future if you're in the same situation. Let's see how things go ok?"

"Sure." Jason felt he'd always make the same decision in the future, especially if that meant that this stupid Helen girl wouldn't get to talk down to him any more.

He turned to Catherine, "I miss you Catherine."

Catherine didn't look at him, "You betrayed us Jason. You betrayed me."

Jason looked down.

Helen said, "Right, we're not going to resolve our disagreements right now, but let's deal with that later ok? What we need to do now is take down the book, send him back to wherever he came from."

She looked into Jason's eyes. He nodded. She looked at Catherine. Catherine nodded, "Ok."

Helen looked at Catherine, "Catherine, can you shake hands with Jason, and tell him you will work together with him to send back the book?"

Catherine looked at Helen quietly then she turned to Jason and looked him in the eyes. She reached out her hand to Jason. "Jason, I hate you for what you did. I do not forgive you. I will never forgive you. I will work with you to take down the book though ok?"

Jason took her hand "I'm sorry Catherine. Thank-you for agreeing to talk with me for now."

\*\*\*

Helen said, "Over here. I can feel its power. The book's."

Jason helped Helen to push through the lush green vegetation.

Jason felt the sting of nettles. He cried, "Ow!". He brought the back of his hand up in front of his face to look at it. It just looked normal. He said, "Nasty nettles."

Helen said, "Everything has its place. You ok?"

Jason said, "Yeah, let's go on."

Catherine said, "I'm scared guys. Jason, you're not going to do anything silly right?"

Jason said, "Trust me! Why can't I make a mistake and get over it? It happens you know!"

Catherine said, "Let's get this over with. I hate this."

Helen said, "Look, in that clearing over there."

They could make out Vincent sitting in a clearing cross-legged, in front of the open book. Vincent was making casting sequences with his hands. The same sequence over and again. An evil casting sequence. Jason recognized the blur somewhat.

Catherine shuddered. She whispered, "Ok, let's go."

\*\*\*

The friends moved into the clearing.

Helen said, "Hi Vincent."

Vincent looked up at them, saw the ghosts of Helen and Catherine looking at him. He blanched. His eyes became wide with fear. He said, "You guys are dead!"

Helen said, "Yes, we're back"

Catherine said, "We're here to haunt you."

Jason said, "Forever, and ever, and ever."

Helen said, "Be serious Jason!" but she smiled at him.

Jason said to Vincent, "Where'd you guys get to last time? You were casting some spell on me, and then you vanished."

Vincent said, hurriedly, "What do you mean. That was meant to happen! It wasn't a mistake. I didn't cast the wrong spell by accident!"

Jason smiled, "Hah! Need more practice I see!"

Vincent shouted, "No really. It was supposed to happen. What are you talking about!"

Helen looked around in the branches above Vincent's head. A couple of squirrels were sitting there watching the scene.

Helen focused on them. One was young, a boy, curious, and innocent. The other one was older, could sense the evil coming from ... somewhere... it wasn't sure where from.

Helen focused on the older one, the one with some kind of sense for the evil. "Hi there squirrel", Helen said to the squirrel magically, unheard by the others.

The squirrel jumped a little. It teetered on the branch, scrambled for its footing. Some pieces of bark floated through the air. It got a grip on the branch, and pointed its bright wide eyes in Helen's direction.

Catherine said to Vincent, "We're not ghosts, but you did kill us."

Vincent said, "The book said you guys would be ok! Anyway, you are ok, so it was right."

Jason said to Vincent, "The Shaman saved them. He's dead now."

Vincent said to Jason, "The Shaman?" He didn't know who that was. He continued, "Anyway, who are you to talk? You'd sell your grandmother, your soul, to get what I have."

Jason looked down, didn't reply. Catherine turned her head to look at him. Could he be trusted this time?

The squirrel scampered along the branch, down the trunk of the tree. It stood on the grass on its hind legs. It sniffed the air, looking this way and that, moving its nose cutely. It sensed the book, and scampered towards it. Helen said "Good!" to it, magically.

The squirrel said to Helen, "You're really human? I feel a great compassion from you."

Helen said to the squirrel, "Lots of humans love squirrels."

The squirrel said to Helen, "Not this one. Not the one with the book. Not his friends."

Helen said, "Ah that's too bad. They're young. They don't know their power. Can you see the book?"

The squirrel said, "Yes. It's a little big. I won't be able to lift it!"

Helen said, "It's ok. Just believe, have faith. I can help you a little, but I can't do it for you."

The squirrel darted forward. Vincent was saying to Jason, "You want this just as much as me. You think you're so high and mighty because you don't have the book. You want what I have."

The book said to Vincent, "Vincent, we've got a problem here."

The squirrel picked up the book in its teeth and front paws. How it hurt! How heavy it was. He said to Helen, "I can't do this! It's too painful!"

Helen said, "Well done squirrel! Excellent work! Keep going. Over here. Quickly, before the boy notices."

Jason said to Vincent, "No, I'm different from you Vincent. You can't even cast a spell right!"

The book said, "Vincent, we've got a problem here."

Vincent said to Jason, "Anyway, your time has come. We need your power."

The squirrel scampered in front of Jason, towards Helen. The book dangled from its front teeth. Blood leaked from its mouth from the effort of holding such a heavy book. Helen said to it, "Good work. Excellent."

The squirrel said to Helen, "Thanks."

Jason reached out his hand towards the squirrel. He grabbed the book, wrenching it from its mouth, twisting the squirrel's teeth. The squirrel squeaked at Jason. It lay on the floor, nursing its teeth with its front paws.

The squirrel said to Helen, "What's happening? I thought he was your friend?"

Helen said to the squirrel, "Yes. Ummmm."

Helen said to Jason, "What are you doing?"

Jason looked down at the book. The book! The front page had a picture of him on. He was wearing glorious kingly clothes. He was surrounded by faithful subjects worshipping him.

The book said to him, "Nice isn't it?"

Jason moved his hand over the front cover of the book. Jason said to the book, "Wow, you're so perfect! You're all I need."

The book said, "I'm yours now Jason." A lie. "I belong to whoever holds me."

Vincent said, "What?"

The book considered what it knew about Jason. In truth, the book belonged to no-one, but why tell its supposed 'owner' that? People liked to believe they were in control, had power. It made them so much easier to control, to manipulate, in their turn.

The book said, "I'm happy you are my owner Jason. You are intelligent, clever, handsome. You will make an excellent master. I am your loyal slave."

Jason opened the book. The pages told of legendary battles he fought in. He was a great hero. Magic. Beautiful ladies.

Jason looked up at Helen and Catherine. He said to them, "I have it! I have the book."

Helen looked at him, "Yes, you do."

Catherine whispered loudly to Helen, "Let's go."

Helen said to Catherine, "Wait."

Jason said, "Right, let's get this over with." He turned to face Helen, looking her in the eyes. He moved his hands. A fireball streamed from them. Helen opened her eyes wide.

The fireball engulfed the book.

The book cried out, "What! No? What are you doing Jason! I'm yours!"

Jason said, through tears, "I don't know what you are book. You promise everything, but you betrayed Vincent. How can I trust someone who betrays his friends?"

The book cried, "I'm burning up Jason! Quick, do something! Help me!"

The woods shuddered. The air shook as in a heat haze. Strange shapes arose from the burning book. A herd of deer galloped out from the book, moving their legs through the air, passing through the trees unimpeded. The noise of their galloping faded away.

The book said, "I'm dieing! Save me Jason!" Jason looked at it impassively. The book said, "Vincent! Save me!"

Vincent lay on the ground, on his back. His face was contorting. His mouth was opening and closing like a goldfish. He was in no position to do anything for the book.

The book screamed, "Do something Vincent! What are you doing!"

Helen and Catherine's death appeared in the air. The friends saw Helen and Catherine being fireballed by Jason. They saw Helen engulfed in flame, burning up.

Jason said, "You're evil, book."

The book said, "No!"

An image filled the air of Vincent dieing, being torn apart by monsters. The book said, "That image is not true! Don't look Vincent!"

Vincent saw his death in the hallucination. Vincent said quietly, "That's my death?"

The book said, "It's nothing to do with me Vincent. That's not how you would have died."

Vincent looked as the monsters tore into his stomach, ripped out his intestines with their claws. The Vincent in the hallucination looked down at his stomach in terror, felt the bloody stomach with his hands.

The Vincent in the hallucination picked something up from besides him. The book. He said to the book in the hallucination, "You betrayed me book. Who do you belong to?"

The book in the hallucination said, "I belong to no-one Vincent. I am me. I am. Good-bye Vincent."

The Vincent in the hallucination keeled over. His eyes went blank. The life left them.

Vincent, the real Vincent looked at the book. He said, "You would have destroyed me!"

Images continued to stream from the burning book, from the dieing book.

The book said, "Don't believe these images! Help me Vincent! I am your slave."

The air shook. Deep vibrations coursed through the air. The friends put their hands over their ears to protect

them. A last hallucination came, a vision of the book's early life, being abused by its first owner.

Helen said, "Even the book has its reasons".

The book's power vanished. The hallucinations died. The pages charred. Flames erupted from them. A roaring, the sound of an inferno, arose from the burning book.

Helen said sadly, "It's a shame."

Jason said, "It just thought of itself."

Helen said, "Yes, but it had its reasons."

The book exploded. Pieces of charred paper filled the clearing, floated down from the sky.

Vincent fell back onto the floor, lost consciousness, lay there.

Catherine said, "Vincent?"

Jason said, "He's dead. Good riddance."

Catherine said, "The book is dead?"

Helen said, "Yes, but Jason means Vincent."

Catherine said, "Yes. She walked through the clearing towards Vincent and knelt down besides him.

She said, "He doesn't deserve to die." She moved her hands over him and gazed at the recumbent Vincent.

Blue light streamed from Catherine's hands and enveloped Vincent's body.

Catherine said, "What's wrong with him?"

Helen said, "Maybe the book?"

Jason said, "The book was part of him. The book died."

Catherine focused her strength on Vincent. Her breathing became heavy. Sweat glistened on her forehead. A drop of sweat ran down her cheeks.

Catherine said, "It's no use."

Vincent's eyes opened. He looked up into Catherine kneeling over him. He closed them again, in shyness, and in surrender to her.

Catherine smiled, "No, he's alive." She touched his torso with her hands and moved her hands up and down. "He's going to be ok."

Vincent lay back feeling the warmth from Catherine's hands.

The book was dead. He felt that. It had been part of him. Its roots had been inside him. When the book died, the roots died inside him, festered, thrashed around, destroyed parts of him.

He opened his eyes. He said, "You guys took the book!" He didn't sound angry though.

He said, "The book had so much power, but it was so deceitful. It destroyed what it touched."

He continued, "Did you see my death? The book stood by as I died, gloating. Friends like that!"

Jason said, "Friends are important."

Catherine walked over to Jason, "Yes." She looked at him. She leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. Jason blushed.

He said, "Thank-you Catherine."

Vincent thought of all that had happened. The book had been fun, but what was really fun was having friends. In the end he had just wanted to use the book to make friends, to force people to like him, to respect him. It hadn't worked very well.

Vincent said to the three friends, "Can I be your friend?"

Helen said, "Friends takes time."

Vincent said, "I like you guys."

Jason said, "Come, let's go to Burger Magic."

Helen said, "I'm on for that. You coming Vincent?"

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