

## A Second Chance

The book was placed on the top shelf. Keith struggled to reach it, but unfortunately he had to face it: he's just too short. Swallowing his humiliation, he approached a library assistant and asked for help. The old lady wasn't able to move very fast, which was why Keith had to wait quite a while. The lady smiled at him. "Ancient Magicke? A good choice, young man, as it will challenge your vocabulary knowledge—a lot. Have fun reading!" She giggled as she resumed cleaning the library.

Ever since he was a little boy, Keith Amerill loved to read anything written. Reading various posters hanging from the wall was his hobby, annoying pedestrians as they swerved to avoid crashing into the immobile boy. "Big nuisance, that Keith," said a grumpy old man who lived beside the Amerills' house. Naturally, Keith's mother had scolded him many times, but like most children, Keith never listened to his parents. Fortunately this didn't occur everyday—his mother had enough problems as it was. Keith's mother ran a small business of selling cookies, while his father had abandoned them since he was five.

One would've thought that Keith, being a bookworm, is a smart boy. The problem is, he's only interested in fiction books—or more specifically, books about magic. This made him the subject of many jokes, ridiculing his excessive belief in magic. "Hey Keith!" kids would yell. "Ride your magic broom and fly to the moon!" On these days Keith would "barricade" himself in the library, until those naughty children scampered off somewhere else, which was what happened today. Keith felt a thrill as he looked at the book in front of him. *This will be one heck of an awesome book*, he thought. And he wasn't wrong—in fact he had no idea of the power stored in the book he's holding.

Keith started reading, entranced by the way the text seemed to shimmer and twinkle. As promised the book concealed a staggering amount of challenging words, most of which were in Old English, but Keith was an avid reader and struggled on stubbornly. He was amazed; his suspicions are true! Magic *do* exist! According to *Ancient Magicke*, Magic used to be available to everyone who knew how to control it. The population of so-called "magicians" nearly tripled in size during the Middle Ages. However something inexplicable began to happen: Magic starts

to fade away. By the time of the Renaissance Age none save a few magicians remain. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century they've ceased to exist.

A cough over the intercom interrupted his thoughts. "To all visitors of the library, please return all books into their shelves or check out those you want to borrow immediately. The library will be closing in 30 minutes. Thank you for your attention." Keith, naturally, wanted to borrow the book but being thirteen years old isn't enough to procure a library card. Card membership is strictly restricted to eighteen-year-olds and above. So Keith was faced with a dilemma: wait 24 hours to read the book or do something he has never done before: hide in the library so he can read it all night?

Admittedly, one should never hide in the library and read all night—it's an irrational and inappropriate way to finish reading a book. But Keith was a rather impulsive kid; therefore he chose the latter. The night guard was an obese, elderly man who did his rounds twice and then slept the rest of the time, thus Keith had no difficulty evading him. After the guard locked the doors, did his rounds and settled down on the librarian chair to sleep Keith emerged from a locker he was hiding in and switched on a torch he always carried around. He chose one of the plush sofas near the windows and resumed reading. Little did he know of the figure lurking outside, as he read chapter after chapter...

*Hmm, he mused. This chapter is about possible theories on the reason behind the disappearance of magic. Hey, number 3 seems plausible. It mentions something about demons, which wanted vengeance for being treated as slaves by magicians, stealing our magic and sealing it somewhere. Do demons exist? I wonder if....*

*Crash!* A window broke 12 meters from where he was sitting. Out of pure instinct, he ducked behind a sofa. Footsteps echoed as the intruder walked through the shelves as if seeking for something. *A thief?* Keith thought. *But there's nothing of value here. What's he going to steal? Books?* The notion was so ridiculous that Keith had to smother a chuckle.

He paled when he realized the smothered chuckle caught the attention of the intruder. The intruder raised his head—Keith had just noticed he was wearing a cloak—and raised his hands in the air. The air hummed and crackled as a wind seemed to blow towards Keith. Realizing his cover was blown Keith leaped out of his hiding spot and raced toward a phone

booth conveniently placed in the library.

“If you move another inch I’ll call the police,” he shouted, glad his voice didn’t reveal the terror he’s feeling. *That was no natural wind*, he thought.

The stranger grunted. “I don’t want trouble, boy. Hand me that book and I’ll forget anything’s happened.”

Keith grew more suspicious. “Why? What’s so important about this book? And how did you know it’s in this library? You’ve never been here, I know for sure.”

Something flashed in the depths of the stranger’s hood; his (or is it a her?) voice grew colder. “I *said*, I didn’t want the trouble of ripping that book from your dead hands, but I will if I have to. Now GIVE ME THAT BOOK!” As the stranger said the last part he suddenly bounded towards Keith. Frozen in shock and fear, Keith could only stare as the stranger covered the distance in a matter of seconds. Thus he didn’t fully comprehend what happened next.

A blast of white light shot out from his right, hitting the stranger head-on, sending him crashing into another window, which held despite the impact. The guard, whom Keith thought was still snoring in the librarian’s chair, held up his hand, which was crackling with brilliant light, muttered a few words, and pointed his forefinger at the stranger. White bands of light burst out, encircling the stranger and effectively keeping him prisoner. The guard laughed at Keith’s dumbfounded reaction.

“Hee hee hee! You should’ve seen the look on your face! My word, I’ve yet to see fish gape better than you. So, my young friend, I guess we haven’t been properly introduced eh? The name is Firion Thaneson, and you know me as the night guard. Whereas in reality, it’s much more complicated than that...And you are?”

It took Keith a few seconds to remember his name. “Ah, Keith Amerill sir. Pleased to meet you. If I may ask, what is that? And how did you...trap.... it? And why...”

“Easy, boy, easy, you’re going to choke on those Q’s!” The guard chuckled. Then his tone grew serious. “Remember, little Keith, there’s a reason why we don’t display these “talents” we have in public. Before I answer those questions I need you to swear never to reveal our

secrets to commoners.”

“I swear,” said Keith.

The guard then pulled out a scroll and instructed Keith to repeat his words, forming a pact. Keith said the words one by one; the scroll seemed to vibrate. “Now place your hand on the scroll,” Firion instructed. He did, noticing the smooth texture of the scroll. The guard then uttered strange words that seemed to reverberate throughout the library. There was a flash of red light, and Keith pulled his hand back; he felt a stinging sensation. It was not unlike being injected. “Oho!” said the guard, a twinkle in his eyes. “I never thought I’d live to see the day!”

“What was that flash? And why did my hand get stung?” inquired Keith.

“Ah, that means you’re special, it does,” said the guard. “It means you have the talent, boy! You can do magic!”

Keith was astounded. He was flabbergasted. He was...well he couldn’t quite figure out how he’s feeling at the moment. All this time, the reality of magic seemed dubious, since Keith could find no proof of its existence. All this time friends and relatives ridiculed him for believing in something “imaginary”. And now....not only does magic exist, but he can also use it as well!

“Son? Son, we have to get moving. Cops these days, the kind of racket we’ve been making would attract them like bees to flowers. So, now I leave you with two choices. I could take you home to your parents. The alternative, though...I’m not sure why I’m even thinking about it, but I suppose I *could* take you to see the Proficients—our leaders. Now I know the latter probably sounds more exciting, but let me give a little warning. The path we magic wielders take is plagued with danger. Many of us wish we’d been born normal...me included. So what’s it going to be?”

I guess you already know Keith’s answer as he opened his mouth. Firion didn’t look pleased, but he nodded his grizzled head. “Reminds me of myself when I was your age. Oh well, if that’s your decision let’s go then. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

They scrambled out of the window as police sirens wailed in the distance. “Follow me,” Firion muttered. To Keith’s surprise the imprisoned intruder floated behind them. The next few

hours were a blur to Keith, as Firion led him through a series of dark roads and alleys, through sewers and bridges until finally, they arrived at a small cottage. The exterior looked horrible—Keith wasn't much of a judge for houses but even he couldn't deny the apparent lack of appeal in the house."Excuse me sir, but do the Proficients really live *there*?"

Firion stared at the boy for several seconds. Then he grinned."Expecting a palace aren't you? Boys these days...Don't judge a book by its cover young fellow," he said as they approached the foreboding, ancient cottage. Firion then pronounced, loudly and clearly, "I, Firion Thaneson, do request permission to enter this abode." A brilliant light resembling Firion's magic glowed for a few second, then dispersed into nothing. They entered the door silently.

As you might've expected, there's more to the cottage than meets the eye. Inside was a vast space of white pillars and marble floors. Golden lights blinked from pristine ceilings. Still in shock, Keith mutely followed the night guard, who immediately let out another chuckle when he saw Keith's face."Teach you something about magic, eh?"

They moved on to another mystical room. White clouds seem to swirl about them as they strode towards a majestic table. Sitting on marble chairs were three of the most imposing people Keith's ever seen. Their ageless faces showed no sign of imperfection. They wore iridescent robes, distorting their appearance as if they were a mirage. Then the tallest one spoke. "What have we here? Firion Thaneson, explain the presence of an Ethereen in our midst! And who is this young fellow?" He asked, frowning at Keith as if trying to read his mind.

"He is a new wielder, I'm sure of it. His aura glows before us even now. Tell me, child, you were at the library when this...monster....attacked, yes?" the lady on his right inquired. Keith merely nodded.

"The book contains valuable knowledge in magic. I fear they may start a rebellion...The Stone Circlet is next. Go retrieve it, Firion. Bring Addison the Air Mage and the boy too."

As they hurried towards a corridor Keith began asking questions. "So what's a Stone Circlet? Why did the woman send us together? Who's Addison?"

"Well," said Firion,"the Stone Circlet is a powerful artifact that radiates magic. The woman—her name is Elena Starmore—is a Seer; she can see glimpses of the future, which is

why she sent us together. Addison... well, he's a rather rash lad about 6 years older than you. Are there any more questions?"

Fortunately for Firion, Keith's questions were halted for a moment as a huge figure strode out of a room and walked along with them. "Hey Firion ma man! Long time no see! Who's the runt?" He said, nodding at Keith.

"Hey there Addison, you grew again didn't you? This is Keith, our newest member... And we'll be going together on a Quest, just me and you and this young fella. Before we do that though we'll have to see the Guildmasters first! Shouldn't take too long...I have a feeling this one's gifted!" He said, winking at Keith.

Alas, the visit wasn't as brief as expected—in fact it's taking much longer. Keith was astounded at how many Guildmasters are there—magic isn't just about casting spells after all. "I don't understand," the Wizard Guildmaster exclaimed. "All my sensing spells indicate a latent capability in magic-wielding but I can't seem to narrow it down to a specific skill set."

Much to the surprise of the three companions all of the other Guildmasters agreed. "His form is translucent and his future is obscured by heavy mists," reported a baffled Seer Guildmaster. "This boy's future will be either too monumental to See or too brief—I hope it's not the latter!"

The next morning they set off to retrieve the Circlet-after fully equipping themselves for the journey ahead that is. "We'll need lots of food!" Firion cried, stuffing the bags. "Don't wanna go on a diet, old man?" joked Addison. "Too late for that I'm afraid," replied Firion, patting his stomach regretfully. Keith had to wait five minutes before he can stop laughing.

Firion had decided earlier to travel by car. "My car will get us there in no time at all!" He said, walking towards a slightly battered black sedan. "Yeah, and break our backs in the process," muttered Addison to Keith. Keith had to stifle a laugh—the sedan looked like it could break apart any moment. He almost wished they could teleport there.

As the sun's rays started sinking and the library came into view Firion said, "You kids better get ready—My Sentinel senses are tingling. Danger is around; can't pinpoint where though." At this point he looked a little worried. No sooner had Firion finished saying this than a

jolt rattled the car. "OUT NOW!!" yelled Addison as cracks appeared on the window. The three of them jumped out just as the car cracked under the crushing tentacles of a-

"What is that??" gasped Keith, staring at the monstrosity wrecking the car. It reeked of carrion and seemed to be made out of dead meat and bones. They were held together by a sickly green light that caused the asphalt to melt & sizzle. "Necromancy," Firion grimly replied, raising his hands. The thing exploded, spattering them with gore. "Eugh," muttered Addison, wiping the filth off his shoulders.

They've barely regained their breath when several figures stepped out of various buildings. "Addison!" Firion called. Addison nodded his head and closed his eyes. A powerful gust of wind knocked all of them down, pinning them to the ground. "Go! Get in the library! I can't hold them forever." Firion grabbed Keith's arm and sprinted towards the library.

"Get back!" A voice shouted out. Firion and Keith ducked as a brick crashed into the library door they've just closed. They saw a battlefield—Sentinels defending attacks from winged beasts spitting green fire. "I thought this might happen," murmured Firion angrily. "The Sentinels of this city should never have agreed to guard the Stone Circlet. They would be overwhelmed." As if on cue the lead Sentinel turned towards them and said, "Firion my friend! I fear you are right: the Circlet should be evacuated! You know where it is... take it away!"

Firion nodded and gestured towards an ersatz bookshelf. It immediately split open, revealing a dark tunnel. Keith ran towards the entrance, followed by a breathless Firion. "Be wary, my boy," wheezed the guard. "I suspect the demons have entered this way... I sense their taint in the air. Wait, is that Addison?" The guard pointed ahead of them. Indeed they saw it was him, running full-speed towards them. A premonition coursed through him. In a split second he knew what would happen. As the demon in front of them revealed its true form and leaped forward to butcher Firion, Keith once again trusted instinct and raised his hand.

Time stopped. Literally. Keith examined his handiwork and saw a blue bubble surrounding them; he had effectively removed them from this timeline. Keith tried to think of his next plan of action as the world flew by in a blur of colours. *Well done, young Keith.* A voice resonated throughout the bubble. Keith turned around just in time to see a figure shimmering into existence. He gasped. Can it be?

The figure halted a few meters from where Keith was currently standing. *You have done far, far better than I... and at a much younger age too.* "No way... Dad???" Keith whispered as he stared, immobile. The figure pulled back his hood and stepped forward. It was his dad, but there's a big difference between the person standing in front of him and the dad Keith remembered. A scarf was wound tightly around his mouth. Maroon-purple scars lacerated his face, and his hair is pure white. *Yes, my son. It is I. You see now why I have decided to leave you? The power we Chroniclers wield scars us significantly.. Even now, your life is being reduced by mere seconds... And if you don't resume your previous timeline there will be even greater consequences...*

"But Dad... I can't go back. If I resume my timeline, Firion would die, the demons would steal the Stone Circlet, and the world will fall..." Keith replied miserably. Time passed as his dad seemed to consider his words. *My son, what you must understand is that interfering with Fate is perilous... I lost my mouth when I tried to stop the meteorite from obliterating the dinosaurs, and would've lost more had I not stopped... Nothing could be as horrible as the feeling of losing your life. There is another way... Instead of creating a new timeline, you could unravel this one... and hope you can do better next time.* "I agree," Keith said, "but how will that change anything? How will I know how to prevent Firion from dying again?? Dad, I'm scared."

Dad sighed. *I will not force you on this, Keith. Nor can I guide you at all—we Chroniclers cannot interfere with each other's timeline. But Keith, you are a resourceful boy; there is still hope! There are infinite possibilities once you unravel your timeline... And though you will not have any recollection of this meeting, remember this: I love you, and I'm so proud of you. Now go save the world, kiddo.* He winked and tried to look cheerful, but Keith could clearly see the tears leaking out of his eyes. Keith nodded, accepting fate, and closed his eyes...

"Keith, wake up sweetie," Keith's mother cooed. Keith opened his eyes and giggled with the enthusiasm of a five-year-old embracing a new day. Keith's little legs immediately boosted him outside, running to hug a certain, smiling person. "Happy birthday, kiddo," his father laughed.