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FREE SAMPLE EDITION



PROLOGUE + CHAPTER ONE

Historical Fantasy · Music · Enchanted Kingdoms

A mystery in two worlds begins with a single song.

PROLOGUE



IDAR-OBERSTEIN, GERMANY, 1939

The lights in the workshop glowed brightly, even though the shop had been closed for hours. From the clock near the door, a single chime echoed, signaling the early hour. Even though the candles had nearly burned themselves into puddles, the two brothers huddled over the workbench remained wide-awake as ever. With a tool in each hand, each brother worked frantically over their piece, eyes glistening with excitement like children opening a long-awaited present. Several minutes more passed in the flickering candlelight with only the scraping of metal on wood to break the silence.

All at once, the taller man, muscular, with dark-hair and a bristly beard, dropped his tools and gave his brother a hearty pound on the back. His brother, of leaner build and fairer complexion with a smooth boyish face, grinned broadly back. Then, slowly, one after the other, they let their tools drop to the table, clattering with a satisfied finality. Starting with a low chuckle, their mirth grew contagious and swelled until both brothers bellowed with triumphant laughter.

“It is finished, Jorgen! Our masterpiece!”

Jorgen nodded jovially. “Right, my brother. All except one thing.”

The older brother picked up their handiwork and etched the familiar inscription on the underside with his ancient tool:

J und K Müller
Frankfurt, Deutschland

Setting their masterpiece on the table, they sat and admired it, the product of many painstaking hours of labor. For many years, the brothers had earned a living with their woodwork, but this piece was something much more special than their usual fare.

“Well, my brother,” muttered Jorgen. “I think we should turn in for the night. We can give it a test run in the morning. We wouldn’t want to disturb the others.”

They finally blew out the pitiful candles and retired to their respective rooms. For a

long while afterwards, the darkened interior of the shop remained still and silent. A chill winter wind rustled the shutters, whistling and howling like a band of ghouls.

Long after they had retired to bed, a quiet creak sounded, and a shadow slunk down the stairwell, taking each stair individually. As the form reached the bottom of the stairs, it dared to move a little bit faster, emboldened by the nearness of his prize. With carefully measured steps, the figure reached the table and brooded over it.

"You're mine," it whispered.



FRANKFURT, GERMANY, 1940

A heavily bearded man sighed as he entered the bank, carrying a tightly wrapped bundle under his arm. It had been a long, hard month of travel, and his muscles ached from the strain. He'd been up to a Nazi rally in Berlin, down to the University of Zürich in Switzerland, and over to Vienna to attend a number of concerts. By his estimation, he had sampled the best and brightest the German-speaking world had to offer and had gone away with everything that he had come for.

He smiled and hummed a jaunty waltz tune to himself as he stepped up to the teller at the first window he saw. The teller looked up disinterested and droned. "Welcome to the First Bank of Frankfurt. How can I help you?"

The bearded man glanced furtively from side to side, as if to make sure that no one else was watching him. He lifted the bundle and placed it in front of the teller.

"I would like to place this in my special safe-deposit box. Here are my papers confirming my account number and identity."

The teller took the papers and examined them slowly, his eyes lingering on each line as if scrutinizing each letter for mistakes. Finally, satisfied, the teller returned the papers and grunted. "Yes, yes, everything seems to be in order. Right this way, please."

The teller led the man down a dimly lit corridor, stopping at the end of the hallway in front of a heavy metal door. The teller removed a key ring from his pocket, rifled through the assortment of keys, and selected the correct one. The door swung open to reveal a completely empty gray room. The teller ushered the bearded man in. "Take as long as you like. I'll escort you out when you're finished."

The bearded man nodded and closed the door behind him. The teller stood outside and waited as the minutes quickly piled up to over an hour. The teller impatiently tapped his foot, wondering silently what on earth could be taking him such a long time.

After another twenty minutes had elapsed, he finally lost patience and rapped sharply on the door. "Sir, is everything all right in there?" He received no response. Suspiciously, he knocked again, and when no one answered, he reinserted the key and slid open the door. The teller gasped. The bearded man was gone. Only his strange, rectangular parcel remained in the center of the floor, still wrapped tightly in a dark cloth. Sweat broke out across the teller's brow. Should he report this? Was the man trying to steal something from the bank? Frantically, he tapped on the floors and walls, trying to

find some alternate route of escape that the mysterious man could have used. His search revealed nothing. He glanced down at the package and made up his mind. He would get rid of the evidence and forget the incident.

Hastily, he snatched up the package, clumsily fumbling with the wrappings. He took one glance at the object inside and bit his lip in confusion. Why had the man gone to all the trouble to protect this? His questions lingering unanswered in the air, he stuffed the package under his arm, exited the room, and locked the door. He returned to his window, concealing the parcel in the shadows by his feet. Perhaps today was not such a bad day after all. The package might come in handy. At the very least, it would fetch a good price.



THE CANTICLE KINGDOM

The chamber window burst open, flooding the room with icy air and eerie shadows. Lightning roared from the open window, striking simultaneously with the clattering shutters. The feeble woman shot up in bed, clasping her chest as if her heart threatened to give up its life-sustaining labor.

“Your Majesty!” cried the man, Rufus, by her side. “You must remain calm! You are safe here.”

The queen’s breathing slowed, and she slowly reclined to her previous position on her back. From the corner, Camilla, the queen’s calico cat, jumped up on the bed and snuggled up next to the queen. She was the queen’s favorite pet, and only rarely were they ever seen apart. The cat had been Rufus’s only supporter during these midnight vigils.

“Thank you, Rufus. I know I am safe. My sleep was troubled enough without these storms.”

Rufus nodded solemnly and removed a small vial of red-brown liquid from the night-stand adjoining the bed. “Here, your Majesty,” he whispered, holding up the vial to her pale lips. “Drink this. It may not help as much as it used to, but at least it will do something.”

Her lips trembling softly, the queen slowly sipped the liquid until the entire contents were gone. In desperate anticipation, the young chamberlain gazed at the queen’s wrinkled face, looking for any signs of relief. None came.

Nothing made sense. Only a week before, the queen had been the epitome of health: young, fair, energetic, and hopeful.

“My lady, I don’t understand! Cornelius prepared the draught as he always has. He’s the best there is! I don’t know why—”

A feeble gesture from the queen silenced Rufus’s futile speculation. For several seconds, only the fierce pounding of the raindrops could be heard. The queen once again opened her sunken eyes and began to speak, her voice barely audible. “I am afraid we must do what—” A fit of coughing wracked

her flimsy frame. Rufus placed a hand on her shoulder to steady her until the fit subsided. “—what we have worked so hard to avoid all this time.”

Rufus’s gaze darkened, his face lined with worry. “No, my lady! You will recover! You will remain . . .,” Rufus let his words trail off into nothingness. He did not believe them himself.

Silence reigned for a few moments more, and then the queen continued. “No, Rufus. Your faith is admirable. Your loyalty is unsurpassed. But it avails us nothing. I do not understand why this great change has gripped me so suddenly, but. . . .” She gazed wistfully into the distance. “I can feel the life leaving me. I have tried in vain too long for something that I cannot obtain. In a matter of days I will be gone, and there seems to be little else we can do to stop that.”

Rufus’s eyes filled with tears. “But with that option, you will be lost—forever.”

The queen’s eyes closed in resignation. “I am afraid that cannot be avoided.”

CHAPTER ONE



THE HIDDEN DOOR

THE CANTICLE KINGDOM

“Johann! If you don’t come down to breakfast this instant, I’ll—”

Young Johann was not interested in hearing the rest of his mother’s threat. Instead, he muffled it with a pillow over his ears. Then, thinking better of his protest, he slipped grudgingly out of bed and into his brown tunic and tied it off with a forest green belt. There was no use in waiting to find out whether her threat was shallow.

“Coming!” Out of his bedroom window, he caught a quick glimpse of the gleaming white castle atop the distant hill. It glistened invitingly in the early morning light, the sun having finally peered out through the storm clouds. From the highest tower of the castle, a series of bells chimed—a low tone, followed by a high one and a descending scale—signaling that it was eight o’clock.

Johann had just celebrated his thirteenth birthday, and as such, he was still caught in that awkward stage in which the body cannot seem to make up its mind whether to move on to adulthood or to remain a child. He was not the strongest of boys, and his arms and legs had often been compared to things like willow wands and fire kindling. However, his pleasant smile and glistening brown eyes more than made up for his lack of strength when it came to disarming his opposition. Wavy light-brown locks that showed no desire of ever being tamed shot out from all over his head, much to his mother’s dismay.

With several great leaping strides, Johann bounded out his bedroom door and down the stairs into the kitchen. There, his grandfather was already devouring his portion of bread and cheese while his baby sister toyed nosily with her porridge.

At seeing him, his mother gave an exasperated sigh and pointed severely to a bowl on the table, which had long since stopped steaming.

"Eat," she commanded. "Brutus wants you in the shop in a mere fifteen minutes, and it is not my fault if you have to bear the brunt of his displeasure if you're late."

Now, it was Johann's turn to sigh. Brutus was the blacksmith to whom he was apprenticed, and his muscular arms were not the only thing that caused sparks to fly in the shop.

As Johann made quick work of the portion in front of him, his grandfather looked up, his eyes seemingly gazing past the boy. "Quite the storm last night, eh, Johann?" he drawled.

"Uh-huh," replied Johann, his mouth still full of porridge. Grandpa leaned back in his chair, his wispy hair falling randomly along his temples.

"I can't recall a storm so fierce since Lady Ellis was the queen around here and Lord Balthazar came to power. Yes, times were different then . . ."

Johann's mother stopped what she was doing and whirled around to face his grandfather. "Watch your tongue, you fool! You know full well it's forbidden to speak of such things! What if you were to be overheard?"

Grandfather wrinkled his brow in consternation, his lower lip jutting out. "No use in acting like the past doesn't exist. It's utter nonsense."

Johann saw his mother flush a deep shade of purple as she brandished her serving spoon like a bludgeon in the old man's face. "Listen, you loony, old codger. The only reason you are still alive is that the soldiers believe you are too senile to be of any threat to them. Unfortunately, I know better. You best keep up the act and keep your mouth shut." She stormed back to the stove. "Especially around my son," she added with venom.

Grandfather shrugged his shoulders, brushing aside her comment. "The boy will learn someday, Maria. Might as well be from us."

Maria sighed with a look of resignation. "I know. I just don't want him flying off places like his father . . ."

Johann, though curious, had more pressing matters on his mind than grandfather's old stories. In his haste to gulp down the last of his porridge, he left generous portions spackled across his face. Finishing with a flourish, he leapt from the table, slipped on his shoes, and ran a hand through his hair all at the same time.

"Goodbye," he cried hastily and rushed out the door in the direction of the blacksmith's shop.



As Johann timidly approached the door of the blacksmith's, he could already hear Brutus's rapid hammer strokes, and he caught a glimpse of the flying sparks shooting off violently in all directions. This was not a good sign. Then, as if possessing a sixth sense, Brutus suddenly stopped his hammering.

"You're, late boy," he growled, his face lit with the flames.

Johann gulped. This could get painful.

"S-so sorry, Uncle," he stammered. "I was—"

A sudden, ringing hammer stroke cut the boy off.

"Quiet. Excuses are about as effective as tempering metal over a matchstick." Brutus's smoldering eyes bored into Johann for several long moments. Then, his mood shifted, a twinge of worry suddenly entering his voice. "Have you seen Brigitta?"

Brigitta was Johann's partner in all his exploits. She was almost exactly Johann's age, and like Johann, she was slight of frame. However, unlike him, she was pure muscle. Most accused her of being a tomboy, an accusation that she never refuted. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was usually unkempt, and her bright blue eyes, more often than not, carried a very mischievous gleam.

Johann was not sure whether his uncle's words held a veiled accusation. "No, I haven't seen her since . . . lunch yesterday."

The blacksmith stepped closer, weighing the boy's words. "She wasn't in her room this morning. I figured that she snuck out with you. Perhaps I should have listened to your excuse after all."

Johann sighed, wishing he had something more exciting to say. For once, he had no idea what she was up to. "No, I really haven't seen her. She always lets me know about her, er, adventures. She's probably fine."

The gruff, bearded blacksmith wasn't convinced. He stood there in silence for a few seconds, his taut muscles glistening in the firelight. "You stay here," he grumbled, setting down his hammer and wiping the sweat from his brow. "I am going to look for her." Without another word, Brutus disappeared through the doorway.

Still a bit dazed over his good fortune of not being punished, Johann gazed around the room, trying to decide how to occupy his time until his uncle returned with Brigitta.

Immediately, Johann realized an additional lucky break—in his haste to leave the shop, his uncle had left the fires burning brightly. Usually, Johann was not allowed near the flames and was confined to menial tasks and remote observations. However, with his master gone, he would have time to make some progress on the project he had been secretly planning.

More than anything, Johann wanted a sword of his own. Unfortunately, this idea did not fare well with his uncle, and it fared even worse with his mother. Thus, Johann had to resort to practicing his budding swordsmanship with blunt sticks. In the meantime, he had saved—well, pilfered—enough scrap metal from the shop to make an attempt at swordmaking, should such a chance present itself.

Seizing this first opportunity, Johann ran eagerly to the flames to use

what precious time he had. His uncle's hammer, which lay next to the flames, was a formidable tool. It was obviously much too large and heavy for his stripling arms. Needing only a few seconds to think, he stepped away from the flames and headed toward the back of the shop.

The back closet contained most of Brutus's spare tools. Johann knew that it contained hammers of various sizes and at least one that would fit his purpose. Trembling a bit with anticipation, Johann slipped open the door and squinted into the darkness. The closet was positioned so that the flames did little to offer him any light.

Fully expecting his uncle to return any minute, Johann stretched out his hands and felt his way into the darkness. At first he felt nothing, but eventually his persistence was rewarded with the feel of cold metal on his fingertips. However, as he took another step into the darkness, his foot caught on an object lying on the floor, causing him to lose his balance. Hands outstretched, he tumbled farther into the closet with a yelp, bracing himself to land on something either very hard or very sharp. The impact was nothing like he expected.

Johann felt his hands hit the back wall, but instead of standing firm, the wall gave way like a trap door. His hands landed in loamy earth, and he couldn't see a thing. Stunned, Johann lay there for a good minute before trusting himself to stand again. When he did, he became immediately aware of a faint glow emanating from the center of the room, soft and constant, very different from the flickering firelight he was used to.

In the glow of the light, Johann was able to make out the details of the room. It was fairly small, only about three or four times the size of the closet he had just exited. Metal boxes lined the entire perimeter of the room. In the center of the room lay a compact metal table cluttered with various scraps of dark metal. In the center of the table, a faintly glowing yellow orb sat propped up on a squat pedestal supplying light to the room.

Johann brushed the dirt from his clothes and crept curiously toward the table. *What in the name of the Queen is my uncle doing back here?*

As he approached the table, he saw that one of the metal boxes lay open. Squinting in the dim light, he reached in the box and removed a lightweight piece of metal. The piece appeared perfectly square and was grooved along the sides. In the center of the sheet was a solid, squat cylinder of metal, perfectly smooth and polished. Gawking in amazement at its fine craftsmanship, Johann mulled the sheet over in this hand, wracking his mind for what use it could possibly have.

Replacing the sheet in the box, he searched around the rest of the table and found various pieces of metal, mostly sheets and cylinders in various stages of completion. However, it was what lay beneath the metal pieces that caught Johann's attention.

Spread out on the entire length of the table was a diagram in a layout that Johann had never seen before. The diagram was composed of a large rectangle in which many horizontal lines had been drawn. At seemingly random intervals lay black dots strewn across the paper like a colony of motionless insects. At the top of the diagram lay a line of ornate text in a language that Johann could not understand:

Muster: EIN LIED DES HERZENS

Komponiert von dem Herrn Jung

Es lebe die Musik!

Johann ran his hands up and down the lines several times, trying to make some sense out of the seeming randomness of the diagram. Unfortunately, before Johann could contemplate this strange inscription any longer, he turned his head at a distant noise. He heard heavy footsteps in the shop and an unmistakable, irritated grumbling. Brutus was back.

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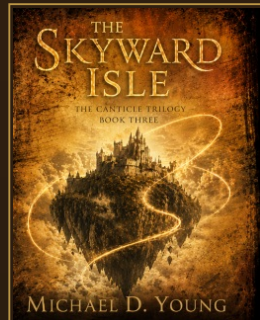
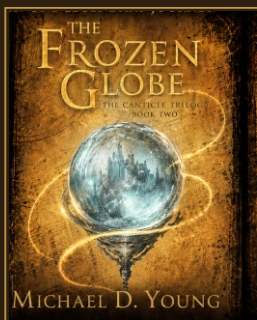
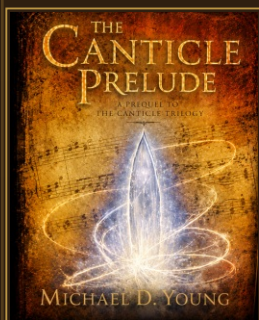
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