

“What is this place?” he asked breathlessly. We were in a dark underground room, much smaller than our basement. The room was lined in thick concrete blocks. There was no light coming from the outside, and I guessed that the room was probably soundproof as well. Not a room built for entertaining. A room built for keeping secrets.

Paul found a cord in the ceiling and pulled it. We both jumped as several light bulbs clicked on and flooded the room with harsh artificial light. The light revealed a small metal desk with an old wooden straight-back chair against the back wall. A computer monitor and hard drive sat on top of the desk, along with several pens and pencils and one red three-ring notebook. Beside the desk stood two wooden bookshelves, filled to bursting with books. Next to those, a large map of England was taped to the concrete wall.

I ran my eyes over the map to the floor on the left, and froze. The desk and map were odd, but at least they were everyday items. The large black slab of stone lying next to them was not. The cold chill ran down my spine again, and I shuffled backward several steps.

“Oh my God, is that it?” Paul asked nervously.

I ignored the question and inched my way forward, toward the stone. It was large, perhaps 7 to 8 feet wide and 10 to 11 feet long. Easily 3 to 4 inches thick. Hundreds of symbols were etched into the dark surface, in a language I’d never seen before. The stone was glossy, but didn’t reflect light the way it should. Instead, it seemed to suck the light from the room around us, building its own dark aura. And it hummed. I could feel the pulse of the stone in my bones, like a giant, steady heartbeat. It beat again and again, matching my own heartbeat, and I forgot to breathe. Doc hadn’t been lying, then. The stone did speak to him. And it called to me the same way it called to him. I’d been hearing it for days. I just hadn’t realized it. As I stood there, transfixed and listening, the writing on the stone began to glow. I blinked and looked again, to see that the glow was gone.

“Did you see that?” I gasped, reaching for Paul and taking my eyes off the stone for the first time.

“See what?” Paul whispered. “The only thing I see is that creepy stone.”

“The symbols ... I think they moved,” I said, surprised that Paul hadn’t seen it.

Paul shook his head. “Didn’t see anything like that, buddy.” He took a step toward the stone and bent over to look at it.

I followed slowly, wondering if I’d been seeing things. Then the humming started again, louder than before. This time it went straight to my head, and I gasped and fell to my knees. The stone thrummed louder, and took on its eerie glow, burning brighter and brighter until the symbols themselves lifted up off the surface. They hovered just above the stone’s surface, ghostly, dark reflections of their physical counterparts. Then they began to move, dancing around the edges of the stone to the humming rhythm of its heart.

“Holy...” I breathed. It was one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen.

“Hey, what on earth are you doing?” Paul asked nervously.

I stood, keeping my eyes fixed on the dance in front of me. “You’re honestly telling me that you can’t see that?” I whispered.

“See what? This isn’t funny anymore.”

Paul grabbed my arm, and the dance ended as abruptly as it had begun. The symbols fell back into place, and the stone lost its glow. I moaned quietly. The symbols had been strange, eerie, and frightening, but they’d also been surprisingly familiar. Losing them was almost physically painful. I focused on the stone, trying to bring them back, or make the slab glow again.

“So how exactly does this thing work?” Paul asked, breaking my focus.

I cleared my throat and tried to find my voice. “Doc didn’t exactly leave directions in his journal. He just said that the stone ... spoke to him.”

“Well what the heck does that mean? That stone doesn’t look like it has any kind of speech capabilities.”

I smiled. “Actually, I think I know exactly what it means.”

Paul didn’t hear me, and reached out to touch the stone. “So this is it,” he said, bending down. “This is the stone that can take us into the past.”

“Stop! What are you doing?” I grabbed his hand and pulled him back.

“I’m just touching it. Why?”

“I don’t know. Who knows what might happen? Maybe you’re not supposed to touch it,” I answered.

“Ah.” Paul nodded. “Good point.” He shoved his hands back into his pockets. As he spoke, though, a jolt of energy shot from the stone into my bones, and the unearthly glow returned. I felt an irresistible urge to put my own hands on the stone, and allow the symbols to race across my skin. Confused, I closed my eyes, trying to focus and clear my head. All I could feel, all I could hear, was the stone’s humming, drowning out all other sight and sound. Drowning out thought. Then it was gone, leaving in its place a feeling of calm contentment. Of readiness. And a clear, precise light in my mind. I could feel the stone beneath my hands, as though I were already touching it. My mind explored the deep, cold grooves in the surface, and felt the light touch of the symbols as they moved. A shot of heat moved from the stone, through my hands, and down my spine.

“I wonder what the symbols mean,” Paul said quietly.

I heard him through the haze of the stone, as though he were standing on the other side of a wall, or under water. I suddenly became acutely aware of my surroundings – the smell of mildew and garlic, the friction of a cricket rubbing his back legs together outside. I could taste the sodium that clung to the salt water embedded in the concrete of the walls around us, and felt Paul’s heart beat as if it were in my own chest. I heard sounds that didn’t make any sense. Horses running, and the sound of metal screeching against metal. Men yelling, or cheering.

Looking down, I saw a hazy, half-formed path in front of my feet. Listening closely, I heard exactly where it would lead. And when.

I opened my eyes, breaking the spell, and turned to face Paul. His face had gone slack and white as he stared at me.

“I know exactly what the symbols mean,” I said quietly.

“How do you know that?” Paul asked.

“Because,” I replied slowly, “the stone just told me.”