



CHAPTER

FAMA REGIS

Bonnie leaned against the bedrail and clutched Sir Barlow's burly hand. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

Barlow smiled, lifting his mustache. His dark eyes sparkled. "Yes, Miss. Thanks to an infusion of your blood, I am as fit as a fiddle." The knight's brow furrowed under thick strands of unkempt hair. "That is the correct idiom, isn't it?"

Bonnie tightened her grip on Barlow's hand and laughed. "That's the perfect idiom for a true gentleman!"

Barlow's smile broadened, revealing a chipped front tooth among a half-dozen yellowed incisors.

A new voice filled the room, strong and cheerful. "Indeed it is the correct idiom. A fine violin well played is fit for heaven itself."

Bonnie spun toward the sound. Professor Hamilton, her teacher and friend, ambled into the hospital room, unbuttoning his black trench coat. She glanced at a clock on the wall. "Did you run into trouble somewhere?"



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“Only minor annoyances.” The professor clipped a cell phone to his belt and leaned a wet umbrella against the wall. “I’m afraid the foul weather has caused the entire populace to forget customary manners. There seems to be a general uneasiness, an underlying anxiety weighing down every man, woman, and child.” He pulled a wrapped sandwich from his coat pocket and handed it to Bonnie. “The restaurant queue seemed interminable, and several pushy fellows insisted on . . . ahem . . . butting into the line.” The professor nodded at Barlow. “I could have used the services of a battle-trained warrior.” He withdrew another sandwich from his opposite pocket. “This is for you, but Dr. Kaplan said you must maintain the hospital diet until tonight, so I’ll save it. Was your noontime meal sufficient?”

Barlow mumbled something unintelligible under his breath, then added in a louder voice, “A ghost couldn’t survive eating the paltry servings here.”

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Bonnie put her sandwich in the side pocket of her backpack. “I’ll go outside to eat this later. No use torturing our good knight.” She hitched up her pack to make her hidden dragon wings more comfortable. “Did Sir Patrick have any news?”

“Quite a bit.” The professor ran his hand through his unruly white hair. “It seems that the Great Key, as he calls it, is now in William’s possession. Apparently Shiloh gave it to him last night at the campfire.”

Bonnie caressed a colorful string of beads around her neck. “The pendant with the rubellite? How is that a key?”

“Patrick says he will tell us more when he comes.” The professor squinted at the intravenous tube stretching from a dangling plastic bag to Barlow’s arm, then pulled a pair of spectacles from his shirt pocket. “He did tell me that Merlin called it the Great Key in a prophecy, indicating that it would be crucial should the Watchers ever emerge from their prison.” He slipped the glasses on

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and read the label on the IV bag. “Patrick confirmed our thoughts, that we should locate the king’s chronicles. The book will help us unlock the mystery of the key.” He lowered his head and sighed.

Bonnie tried to make eye contact with the professor. “Is something wrong with Sir Barlow’s IV?”

The professor’s gentle smile quivered. “No, no. That’s not it at all.” He slid his hands into his pockets. “It just reminded me of days long past when I spent many hours coaxing instruments like these to work just a little bit better.” Drooping his head, he pushed an electrical cord under the bed with his foot. “Those were times of shadows, the darkest days of my life.”

Bonnie took a step closer. “Do you mind telling me what happened?”

“Oh, no. Not at all.” The professor pulled a wallet from his back pocket and fished out a locket-sized photo from inside. He bent over and showed it to her.

Bonnie studied the photo, a black-and-white picture of a man in a tuxedo and a woman in a wedding gown. She felt the joy of the smiling faces and the oneness of the clasped hands. “She’s beautiful, Professor. You look very happy.”

“Yes, we both were.” He returned the photo to his wallet and straightened. “It has been more than twenty years since she passed away.”

“I knew she died, but I didn’t know when.” She took the professor’s hand in hers, trying again to catch his faraway gaze. “It must have been very sad for you.”

The professor finally looked down at her and smiled, but it was a sad smile. “Indeed. She was the light of my life. We were as close as two people can be, one mind, one spirit. Our daughter, Elizabeth, was about to be married, and the evening before the wedding, we attended the rehearsal dinner, a beautiful affair at a posh restaurant—white tablecloths, crystal, silver, fine

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china—all the trimmings of an elegant feast. Later that night, my wife became deathly ill—food poisoning of some sort—and she had to go to the hospital. She insisted that the wedding go on as planned, and since one of my students, Carl Foley, whom you know, of course, as Walter’s father, volunteered to stay with her, we decided to set up a live video feed to the room so she could attend the ceremony from her hospital bed.”

“Then she got to see the wedding?”

“Yes, but by the time I returned to her side, she had worsened. The doctors had no explanation, but it was as if she were drifting away; her mind was leaving her body. She would cry out, ‘Help me! I’m falling!’ though she lay securely in bed. As you can imagine, I was beside myself, but God did not answer my prayers according to my desires.” He straightened the intravenous tube, his bottom lip quivering as his voice began to crack. “She . . .” He swallowed and wiped a tear. “She passed away that very night.”

Bonnie slid her hand around his elbow and leaned her head against his arm. “I’m so sorry, Professor.”

He leaned over and kissed Bonnie gently on the top of her head. “As were many others, little angel. It was such a lovely funeral with hundreds of gracious mourners. And so many people brought flowers! We both loved our flower garden, so I made sure I flooded the funeral home with her favorite, the carnation, and I added Easter lilies, of course, but the guests brought dozens and dozens of bouquets and laid them against the casket. And, strangely enough, people also brought dresses and skirts my wife had made for their daughters.” He laughed under his breath, his eyes glistening. “She couldn’t bear to make pants for them. She believed young ladies should look like young ladies. In any case, the visitors expressed their thankfulness for my wife’s skill and generosity in sharing her love with

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so many friends and neighbors. It was as if the story of Dorcas in the book of Acts were being replayed at the funeral." A new tear made its way down the sage's wrinkled cheek, and his voice pitched up ever so slightly. "But there was no apostle Peter to come and awaken my precious one from sleep." The professor raised his hand and bit his knuckle, closing his eyes as his body heaved with stifled sobs.

Bonnie wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close. She glanced at Sir Barlow. Tears streamed down the knight's face, too.

After a long pause, the professor spoke again, his voice now much stronger. "So I will have to go to her when I finish my course here on earth, and I look forward to that day with great anticipation."

Bonnie gave him a strong hug. "I know you miss her, but I hope your course isn't finished for a long time." She pulled away, looking up at the professor with the brightest smile she could muster. "So she was a seamstress? What a wonderful gift!"

"Yes. What she could do with a needle and thread!" He sighed again, his lips tightening. "But that is in the past, and there are new dark days to deal with, I'm afraid." He strolled to the window, sliding his hands into his pockets again as he gazed at the wet landscape through the foggy glass. Raindrops pelted the windowpane, sounding like a hundred soft fingers tapping for permission to enter. "I am concerned for Patrick. He seems weak . . . exhausted." He withdrew one hand and sketched a square on the condensation. "He is many centuries old, even older than I knew. And now, being fully human, he will certainly die. I fear his days are coming to a close."

He wiped away the condensation with his sleeve. "And Patrick informed me that this is no ordinary weather event. These monsoon conditions are spreading over the entire North

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American continent, and a similar phenomenon is beginning in Europe. While I was walking in the downpour, it seemed that each drop emitted a popping noise as it struck the sidewalk, much like the sputter of a droplet on a hot fryer, yet so faint that I doubt I would have noticed if I had not leaned over to pluck a quarter from the walk. With thousands of droplets popping, it reminded me of Rice Krispies in a bowl of milk.”

“Do you think that’s what’s making people so irritable and jumpy?” Bonnie asked.

“Very possibly. If this is demonic work, stirring fear in the hearts of people would certainly fit their *modus operandi*, but there may be more substance to this rain than simple fear mongering.”

Barlow sat up in bed and threw off his sheets. “There is no time to lose.” He stripped the tape that held his IV tube in place. “Those scoundrels from the abyss are a step ahead of us. We must summon my knights to battle!”

Bonnie wrapped her fingers around Barlow’s wrist. “Wait! The nurse will do that.”

The professor jumped to the bedside and grasped Barlow’s shoulder. “Patience, my good fellow. Dr. Kaplan has already ordered your discharge. We will get you out of here as soon as possible.”

Barlow laid his hand over Bonnie’s, an apologetic look on his face. “I’m sorry for my outburst, Miss, but I’m anxious to lead my men into battle against the demons.”

Bonnie gently fastened the tape back on Barlow’s arm. “It won’t be long now. If we can get you out of here soon enough, we can all go and get Sir Patrick and your knights at the airport.”

“That reminds me,” the professor said. “We couldn’t possibly carry everyone in my car, so I called Marilyn this morning and asked her to fly here and ferry some of us back to West Virginia.”

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Bonnie straightened the IV tube and draped it around the bed. "Did you ask Billy to search for King Arthur's book?"

The professor patted her on the shoulder. "Yes. He said he would search for it right away."

"Right away? In this downpour?"

"Yes. With the Watchers on the move, we must act quickly. If they are able to manipulate the weather, the magnitude of the disasters they can wreak is incalculable." He ran his finger along the IV tube and sighed, his eyes wet with new tears. "Are you ready to face more danger, Miss Silver?"

Warmth surged through Bonnie's body, as if an oven-heated blanket wrapped around her and chased away the autumn chill. She gazed at her teacher. If only there were some way she could give him a glimpse of all the wonder she had seen in heaven after dying in the sixth circle. What earthly words could possibly express the joy of perfect bliss? "Professor, I have been in the arms of my Lord in heaven, and I saw a reflection of my face in his laughing eyes." She felt her own tears welling up as she folded her hands at her waist. "I've never been more ready in all my life."

Billy tiptoed across the rocky cave floor, guiding Excalibur with both hands. The sword's energy pierced the darkness and spread out into a glowing sphere, surrounding him in a wash of alabaster light. As he glided under the bright shroud, the cave's shifting air penetrated his skin like the grip of a life-devouring phantom.

The professor's call had already delivered a numbing bite to his senses. "Locate *Fama Regis*," he had said. "And guard the pendant well. The fate of the entire world could hang in the balance."

Billy shivered hard. His journey to the dragon's den had begun under gloomy skies that quickly deteriorated into a tor-

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rential downpour. Now, in the cave's cool draft, his wet clothes sapped his body heat. He freed one hand and blew a stream of superheated breath on his fingers, making them toasty warm in seconds.

As he advanced deeper into the expansive cavity, a hint of danger pricked his mind, prompting him to creep more slowly, one gentle step after another. A trickle of water echoed nearby. That was new. Clefspeare's cave had always been perfectly dry before. But now a steady plink, plink, plink troubled the silence, slowly escalating in frequency. The sound racked his nerves. He couldn't see any water yet, but those drips had to collect somewhere, and that meant trouble. If a growing pool reached the ancient book . . .

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He stopped and sniffed the damp air. After his experiences with scentsers in the circles of seven, he vowed never to let one of those mind-altering odors sneak up on him again. This was no time to get waylaid by sleepiness or anger, or even worse, fits of laughter. The needle on his danger meter pushed toward the yellow-alert zone, but he had no way to tell who, or what, might be lurking in the shadows. It was time for silence.

He dimmed the sword's glow and crept forward again, mentally shushing the crunching pebbles under his hiking boots. At the back of the cave, the walls came together in a crease. A collection of marble-sized stones lay in a pile where the corner met the floor. Billy crouched, picked up one of the stones, and brought it close to the sword. Its polished facets shimmered red, sending streaks of crimson across his fingers. A laser-like beam shot toward an octagonal pendant dangling from a chain around his neck. The gem in the pendant's center seemed to answer the stone's red aura, pulsing vibrantly with its own shade of crimson like the heart of a ready warrior.

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“Yo! Billy!”

Billy dropped the gem and jumped to his feet. He extended Excalibur and brightened its glow. “Walter? Is that you?”

“Who else?” Walter stepped into the sword’s corona. “Thanks for the light. It would’ve been hard to find you without that overgrown mosquito zapper.” He extended a dripping umbrella. “It’s pouring out there. I thought you might want this.” He pulled down the hood of his olive drab rain slicker. “Something wrong?”

Billy tucked the pendant under his shirt and took the umbrella. “My danger alarm’s working overtime, so you kind of spooked me. But it couldn’t be you setting it off; you’re not dangerous.”

“Who says so?” Walter unbuttoned the front of his raincoat. “I’ll bet Devin thinks I’m dangerous by now, sitting in that candlestone with nothing to do but twiddle his claws.”

Billy poked his friend’s lean belly with the umbrella and grinned. “You’re only dangerous at the buffet line.” He propped the sword against his shoulder and tilted his head upward. “I hear water dripping, and it’s getting louder.”

“No wonder. It’s raining so hard out there I had to ask directions from a fish.” Walter glanced all around the dim chamber. “The cave probably has a leak somewhere.”

“Yeah, could be.” Billy tapped the floor with the umbrella, shaking out a spray of droplets. “I thought you were staying with the womenfolk. That’s more important than keeping me dry.”

“Your mom decided there was enough room for everyone to head for Baltimore.” Walter began counting on his fingers. “Prof will drive back with Barlow, Fiske, Standish, and Woodrow, and your mom will fly back with Bonnie, Ashley, Karen, Shiloh, Patrick, Newman, and Edmund.” He shrugged his shoulders.

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“Sounded like a boring trip, and besides, Karen stays glued to me like old chewing gum, so I decided to hike up here where the action is.”

“It’s dull as dirt here,” Billy said. “I was hoping the dragons would fly in. That’ll stir things up.”

“Yeah. Ashley said they could get here today if they hurried. I told her we’d go dragon riding as soon as they finish off the Watchers, but who knows how long that’ll take.” Walter bent down and kicked some loose gravel. “Any luck finding the book?”

Billy pushed the top of the pile of stones with the umbrella tip. “Not yet. I thought Dad would’ve hidden it in his cave, but all I’ve found is this pile of gems.”

“Gems? Cool!” Walter held up a black square of leather. “If you cash those in, I guess you won’t be needing this.”

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“My wallet?” Billy took it and stuffed it in his back pocket.

“Yeah. Your mom put some money in there in case you needed it.” Walter shoved the pile of gems with his shoe, then knelt and leaned close. “Well, Sherlock, I guess you didn’t look right under your nose.”

Billy lowered the sword, lighting up the stones. An old leather binding protruded from the toppled pile. “I didn’t have a chance,” he said, dropping the umbrella and grabbing the book. “You sneaked up on me before I could.” He blew a coat of sand from the cover.

Walter stood again and craned his neck to read the raised script. “What does *Fama Regis* mean?”

“The acts of the king, or something like that. It was written by Arthur’s scribe.” Billy opened the heavy cover. “Believe it or not, the scribe was Palin for a while.” He flipped through several pages of thick parchment. “And he drew some awesome

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pictures. Take a look.” He gave the book to Walter and held Excalibur close. In a drawing, a knight draped in chain mail raised his sword and shield against a lunging dragon. The dragon blasted the shield with a tsunami of flames, its wings fully extended in battle. A young lady dressed in silky white stood close by, her delicate hands covering her ivory cheeks.

Billy tapped on the parchment. “Let’s get this to camp. Maybe when Prof gets back we’ll find some clues and—” He spun around, pointing Excalibur toward the cave entrance.

Walter slapped the book closed and whispered. “What’s up? Danger getting close?”

“Big time.” He lit up Excalibur like a blazing torch and nodded toward the entrance. “Come on. I’m tired of waiting for danger to sneak up on me. Let’s give our visitor a greeting he’ll never forget.”

Billy charged ahead, Excalibur’s beacon leading the way. As they neared the entrance, muted daylight mixed into the darkness, brightening with every step. Billy halted at the archway and glanced all around, sniffing, listening. Walter skidded to a stop at his side. A curtain of rainwater cascaded from the top of the entry arch, pelting the ground and streaming down the slope, away from the cave. Billy whispered, “You smell something?”

Walter wrinkled his nose. “Yeah. Smells like a wet dog.”

A twangy voice rose in the distance. “Now, Hambone, ain’t nuthin’ to be skeered of in that cave. Do you want to get colder ’n a nekkid rat in Alaska?” A skinny, long-legged man pushed through a thicket, a shotgun poised on his shoulder and an old hound trailing behind on a leash.

Billy laughed. “It’s just Arlo Hatfield!”

Walter tucked *Fama Regis* under his coat and fastened the buttons. “Cool! I’ve been wanting to meet him.”

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“Danger’s still close,” Billy whispered, “but I don’t want to explain Excalibur to Arlo.” He thrust the sword into his back scabbard and waved at the old hillbilly. “Pssst! Arlo! Get in here, quick!”

Arlo tightened his grip on his gun for a second, but when his gaze found its way to the cave entrance, he relaxed. He spat out a stream of tobacco juice and stepped up his pace. “C’mon, Hambone. Looks like we’ll have comp’ny.”

The blue tick hound hesitated, prompting Arlo to pull him along. “What’s wrong with you today? Ain’t you got a lick o’ sense? You remember Billy, donchoo? The boy what lost his pa?”

Arlo jerked Hambone’s leash, nearly dragging him forward. He gawked at Billy, water streaming from the bill of his baseball cap. “Whatchoo doin’ here?”

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Billy gestured for Arlo to come inside. He stooped and petted Hambone, still whispering. “I was looking for something that belonged to my . . . uh . . . my pa.” As he stroked the dog’s ears, his pendant fell outside his shirt again and dangled on its chain. “Why are you here?”

“Hambone and me were out huntin’ squirrels near the crick when the rain commenced to gettin’ mighty fierce. I remembered the cave up here, so we came lookin’ fer it. But Hambone’s actin’ awful queer, like he’s skeered of somethin’.”

Billy stood again. “Maybe the weather has him spooked. I haven’t seen it rain like this in . . . in a coon’s age.”

Arlo scratched his head through his cap. “Could be. But I don’t rightly know how long a coon lives.” He reached out and slipped his fingers behind Billy’s pendant. “Now here’s a purty thang. It’s flashin’ like a radio tower light. Where’d you git it?”

Billy’s danger sensation suddenly jumped to red alert, a thousand needles pricking his skin. The pendant’s glow washed over the hillbilly’s face like a pulsing laser. His wrinkled skin seemed

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to melt, rivulets of flesh pouring down like bloody sweat until a new face appeared, a shining, ghostly visage with cruel red eyes.

Billy jumped back and yanked out Excalibur. Walter leaped at Arlo and twisted the shotgun from his grip, giving the hillbilly a hefty shove as it pulled away. Arlo stumbled back into the downpour, leaving Hambone in the cave. As water splashed on his head, the hillbilly's face reappeared as if painted on his skin by the windswept rain.

Excalibur's beam shot out from the tip and waved over Arlo's head. "I don't know who or what you are," Billy shouted, "but if you take one step, I'll zap you to kingdom come."

A glowing foot stepped forward, leaving Arlo's foot behind. Then, an entire body emerged from the hillbilly, a nine-foot-tall goliath of a man dressed in brilliant silver mail. Arlo's body collapsed behind him, motionless.

"Go ahead and strike!" the man shouted. "I've already been to kingdom come."

Billy tightened his grip and whispered to Walter, "I hate it when someone dares me to strike. It usually means it won't work."

Walter broke open the shotgun barrel and peered inside. "No shells." He tossed the gun on the ground. "You got any fire-breathing ammo?"

"Yep. It's been brewing in my belly for a while."

"Then let's fry this pig and start makin' bacon."

Billy dimmed his sword and launched a torrent of fire at the creature, splattering his shining body with biting orange flames. The man swelled in size, growing to at least twelve feet tall. Plumes of steam shot into the air as sheets of rain cooled the inferno.

Walter grabbed Hambone's leash and backed away. "So much for that idea."

"No! Wait!" Billy pointed with Excalibur. "Something's up!"

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The humanoid creature stumbled on shaky legs, smoke rising from his scorched torso. He dropped to his knees and spread his arms wide. He shouted, "Be closed!"

A rolling wave of darkness flew from the creature's hands. It splashed against the cave entrance and spread out, laying a sooty coat over the archway.

Billy lit up Excalibur again and swiped the beam against the black curtain. It tore across the expanse, and sparks of light ate away the darkness like buzzing termites.

"He doesn't like the fire!" Walter shouted. "Hit him again!"

Billy launched another fiery salvo, but it bounced off the entrance and shot just past his head toward the inner recesses of the cave. Hambone whined a mournful lament.

Walter hovered his hand over the archway. "A force field?" He kicked at the base of the field, sending out a splash of sparks. "Owww!" he yelled, jumping on one foot. "These things are such a pain!"

The shining creature stood and laughed. "That should keep you in there long enough."

"Long enough for what?" Billy yelled.

"You'll soon find out." An evil smile grew on his face. He opened his enormous palm to the sky, allowing the rain to pool and drip over the sides. "These waters are courtesy of my lord, the prince of the power of the air. He sends his greetings, young king, and hopes you will enjoy a refreshing swim."

Walter slung a baseball-sized rock at the force field, but it ricocheted harmlessly back. "You're a big talker for someone who's scared of a couple of kids and a hound dog!"

A pair of wings sprouted from the back of the creature. "We are wise enough to know our weaknesses. Why battle against your strengths?" He laughed and launched into the air, disappearing from sight.

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“Coward!” Walter shouted. “Come back and fight like a . . .” His voice trailed off to a whisper. “Like a man . . . I guess.”

Billy gazed at the hillbilly’s body on the ground outside. Rain poured over the still form without mercy. “I sure hope Arlo’s okay.” He touched the field with Excalibur’s tip. The contact point sizzled and threw the blade back. “The blade won’t pierce it.” He summoned the beam and let it slowly approach the field. As soon as it brushed the surface, the beam angled away as if bouncing off a mirror. He doused the light. “It must not be like the portals in the circles. The beam doesn’t faze it either.”

“It’s not soundproof,” Walter noted. “We heard that ghost creature, and I still hear the storm.”

Billy turned slowly toward the back of the cave. “I hear something else.”

“The dripping sound again?”

“More like gushing now.”

Hambone let out a howl. A stream of shallow water had pooled all around, lapping against the dog’s paws. It flowed to the cave entrance and stopped at the force field, unable to drain through the exit.

“We’d better think fast!” Walter shouted. “Can that beam of yours go through rocks?”

“It only transluminates organic stuff.” Billy lit up Excalibur again. “But it’s worth a try.”

The beam drilled into the ceiling as if trying to bore a hole through the solid stone above their heads. Steam poured from the contact point, masking his efforts.

Walter grimaced as sparkling light rained on his head. “Is it working?”

Billy moved the beam, dimming it slightly. The steam dispersed, revealing solid rock, clean and shiny, as if polished by a buffing brush. “No. Not even a dent.”

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“And the floor’s hard as concrete, so we can’t dig under the field.” Walter marched in place, sloshing in the calf-deep water. “I’m running out of ideas. You got any?”

Billy grabbed Hambone’s leash from Walter, yelling to compete with the sound of rushing water. “Just keep *Fama Regis* dry.” He waded toward the back of the cave. “Hambone and I will try to find the source. Maybe we can block it up somehow. See if you can find a big, loose rock.”

“I’m right behind you.” Walter dragged his feet through the knee-deep water. “Maybe I can kick up a rock while I’m walking.”

Lifting his legs high, Billy trudged into the darkness, lighting his way with Excalibur. When he reached the rear wall, cold mist sprayed his face. Water rose past his thighs, and Hambone paddled frantically to keep his head above the surface.

Walter shouted over the din. “Sounds like it’s coming from the ceiling.” He lifted a rock the size of two fists. “This is the best I could do.”

Billy raised his sword, guiding the glow upward. Torrents of water gushed from a back corner and plunged into the flood. “I can’t hold the sword and try to plug it at the same time.”

Walter handed *Fama Regis* to Billy. “Don’t worry. I can handle it.” He clambered up the wall, clutching stony projections with his free hand. As he pushed the rock into the gaping hole, the fountain split into dozens of fingers and splashed across his face. The stream slowed for a second, then spat out the rock like a shot from a rifle. “There’s no way!” he shouted. “It’s too fast!”

Walter jumped, splashing down into waist-deep water. He took *Fama Regis* back and held it high. “I say we try the entrance again!”

“Yeah. We’re not doing any good back here.” Billy scooped up Hambone under one arm. “C’mon, boy. You’re getting tired.”

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They forged ahead into the more illuminated part of the cave, reaching the archway once again. Billy lifted Hambone over a wall protrusion and set him down on a ledge just above the flood. The water now crested at the bottom of the pendant as it dangled over Billy's chest. "I'm going to try Excalibur," he yelled, "and a blast of fire at the same time."

Walter balled one hand into a fist. "Give it all you've got!" He rested the book on top of his head. "Even a little hole might keep the water from rising."

Billy charged up the sword's energy, making it so bright he couldn't keep his eyes on the blade. He slashed the beam against the entry and launched a ferocious salvo of fire. The flames bombarded the field, spreading out over the entry space, making ripples of orange along the plane. The laser beam bounced off the field again and struck the water, lighting up the surface with dancing sparks of white.

"Turn it off!" Walter yelled. "The water's like electrified ice!"

Billy shut down the sword and stopped the flames. The force field shimmered like a disturbed pool, then turned crystal clear again. With water rising to his armpits, he resheathed Excalibur and lifted his elbows over the dying sparks. "Got any new ideas?"

"Just one." Walter placed the book on Billy's head, and Billy instinctively grabbed it. Walter stepped toward the force field, took a deep breath, and leaped into it. A tremendous explosion of sparks sent him flying back through the water, like a torpedo shooting through the depths. When he stopped, he lay floating on the surface, facedown and motionless.

Billy lunged for him and screamed. "Walter!"

