

BRAN
HAMBRIC
THE SPECTER KEY

KALEB NATION

PREVIEW: CHAPTER 1
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PART 1

Chapter 1

The Woman and the Briefcase

ELSPETH WAITED FOR HIM at the gas station. A single row of tall pumps sat in front of the building like rust-colored phantoms staring out into the night. Stalks of wispy grass cut through cracks in the parking lot gravel and waved in the breeze, the windows of the store broken and the car wash devoid of life. No cars passed on that road—no one took that old route through the dark, sandy hills anymore. But it was where Elspeth waited, and it was where she knew he would arrive.

If anyone had passed on the deserted road, no one would have seen her in the darkness. She stood alone, her black hair blowing behind her, a streak of white dashed through it, arms crossed over the black wand hidden inside her long coat. The skies were clear, but the moon hardly shone on her face, waiting and emotionless.

An old gray van pulled off the road, one of the windows taped over with a ripped trash bag that flapped intermittently. The van jerked to a halt in the middle of the lot, and the door snapped open, creaking as a man slid out. He

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was short and overweight with a greasy face, hair graying and eyes bloodshot from long hours in front of a computer screen. He jumped when Elspeth stepped out, but when he recognized her, he pulled a briefcase from the van. His gaze darted around, wary, as he had every right to be. She was wanted by every Magic Investigational Police officer in the world—but she had offered him a reward he could not refuse.

“Cold night, eh?” he said as he came forward, licking his lips with anticipation, wrapping his torn coat closely to his body. His gaze searched the hills around them.

“I presume you got it,” Elspeth said. She glanced at the briefcase, and even that small movement made him shuffle back a step.

“Money first,” he demanded. “Like you promised. Had to knife through m’best mate to get these, so I’m not leaving without the money.”

“Very well,” Elspeth said, drawing a leather bag from its resting place against the worn bricks. She passed it to him, and he took it with shaking hands.

“Count it,” she said. “Hopefully it’s enough to pay for your friend’s casket.”

He dug through the bag. It nearly slid from his fat, sweaty hands, but when he looked up, his eyes were bright.

“A casket of pure gold,” he said with a harsh laugh. “Combination is 1-1-9 on the right, 1-9-5 on the left.” He shoved the briefcase into her hand. She spun the dials and glanced at the contents within. “It’s all there,” he said to her. “The tapes, the papers, all of it. I broke the passwords to the third level administration of the Mages Council database, but that’s as far as I got. If there’s anything

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deeper, no one's going to get it besides the Primirus or the Archmages."

"Everything I need is here," she confirmed after a few moments.

The man nodded his head in farewell, but froze mid-bow, his gaze trained over Elspeth's shoulder. A pair of searing blue eyes moved in the grass behind her. Elspeth stepped to the side.

"I'm finished with him," she said, and something leapt from the darkness with a shriek that echoed against the hills. The man dropped the money and screamed horribly, falling back to the pavement, cursing and struggling, but the creature caught him by his leg, snarling in his face. The man gave one final gurgling, screamed curse before his voice was abruptly cut short by a crack and a tear. But Elspeth was already reading the papers and paid him no attention.

"Let it feed, Joris," she said as another man appeared out of the shadows of the station. "After it's done, drag what's left to his van and burn it. Let that be his casket."

Joris kept his eyes from the gruner as it fed, a shock of blond hair going to his shoulders and his strong gaze hardly wavering, even as the horrible sounds echoed in the emptiness. Elspeth stepped around the building and held the papers up so she could see the words in the faint moonlight.

Presently, the gruner loped to her side, brushing against her leg, its body like a giant dog standing on its back paws, crouched low, black with sharp bristling fur that flexed across its muscular back and head. Two blade-like tusks protruded from its lips, bearing dirty bits of the man's jacket. Its cobalt eyes were no longer hungry.

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“I’ve covered the van with gasoline,” Joris said when he returned. “We should be moving before I set it off.”

“Very well,” she said. She clicked the briefcase’s lid shut. “I have found the answers we seek.”

“They have the Key?” Joris asked.

She gave a small, dark smile. “No, they do not.” Elspeth’s voice carried a hint of resignation. “Which means Emry passed it on to someone before she left—either physically or by desire. I do not know.”

A harsh ringing sound near Joris pierced the quiet. Shoving his hand into his pocket, he drew out a silver cell phone. The front was lit with the caller ID, and Joris blinked when he saw it: the single letter T.

“It’s him,” Joris breathed.

“Answer it,” she said. He hesitated but finally flipped it open.

“Hello, Joris, chilly night isn’t it?” came the voice of a man on the other end, almost before Joris had a chance to turn on the speakerphone.

“Haven’t heard from you in a few months,” Joris said flatly. “Trouble with the police?”

The man on the other end chuckled. “I think after nearly a decade they’d have given up on us. Tell me...did my directions lead you to Bran?”

Joris stiffened. “They were correct.”

“But he proved to be as difficult as I said, did he not?” the man’s voice went on. “I thought you might be able to handle it, but I guess not.”

“And how would you know that?” Joris hissed. “You wouldn’t be living if you came within a hundred feet of me.”

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The man on the phone gave another laugh. “Wouldn’t I?” he said. “What about sending Shambles alone, twice? You, seeing Bran at the tavern?”

Joris’s eyes narrowed, and he looked to Elspeth, who forced him to be quiet.

“Sounds like you blundered it plenty,” the man reproved. “I thought I had him sitting on a plate for you. I can forgive others, but when you lost him at the garage—?”

“That’s enough!” Joris couldn’t contain his rage any longer. “What do you want, before I go back to that house and murder the boy right now?”

“You wouldn’t dare try that,” the man said slyly. “You know the boy’s powers. You can’t risk being caught—not with what you have at stake now that Baslyn is gone.”

Joris clenched his teeth, and the man spoke again. “Elspeth, I see you’re there as well.”

She stood up straighter, glancing over her shoulder in a jerk she could not hide. A flower on the edge of the concrete wavered in the wind. Her gaze swept from it to the grass. Nothing.

“I have a proposal for you,” he said, his voice soft. “A deal that could get you the Specter Key and Bran at the same time.”

Elspeth lifted her chin slightly.

“I see on your face you would enjoy Bran out of the way,” the man went on, and Elspeth’s eyes darted around, still perceiving no one.

“But you want the Key more,” the man finished. “And I know how to get it.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As a child, Kaleb Nation was forced to write one page a week in creative writing. But after he finished his first story, no one could make him stop. At age twelve, he telephoned the editor of a major publisher to pitch his book but got to talk with security instead. Years later, his books are produced by publishers world-wide... including the one that first turned him down. Aside from writing, Kaleb is a blogger and a former radio host. He turned twenty-one in 2009 and currently lives in California. Visit Kaleb online at www.kalebnation.com.

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