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Limbo II

Andy Secombe

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Part I

Day . . .

In the swirling dust cloud of the cosmic mind, a monstrous thing pawed at the doors of consciousness. It was ages old and black with evil, and it wanted admittance. It wanted to feel the sun on its back, to glory in the sensuousness of its corporeal reality; it wanted . . . to be.

And soon, very soon now, it would.

Chapter 1

Nilbert Plymstock, eighteen-year-old scout leader, third grade, killed the engine and clambered down onto the damp, mossy ground. Under a lowering grey sky, the vast, empty expanse of Dartmoor brooded menacingly. 'We'll camp here,' he shouted back to the party of thin, whey-faced boys huddled, shivering, in the back of the Land-Rover.

Nilbert filled his lungs, and his nostrils whistled tunelessly. It was beginning to rain, but a cold shower couldn't dampen Nilbert's spirits, even though, from the Gore-tex uppers of his boots to the turn-ups of his oversized khaki shorts, his thin, stick legs were blue-mottled with cold. He ripped open his rucksack and pulled out a bar of Cadbury's Wholenut and a small carton of chocolate milk. 'Ah, it's good to be alive,' he said. 'There is nothing, absolutely nothing better than being a scout. It's more than a way of life, it's a vocation.'

At that moment, a walnut-sized meteorite zipped past his nose and slammed into the ground between his boots. In the shocked silence that followed, Nilbert looked down at the three-foot-deep crater that had suddenly appeared at his feet, and felt the still-smouldering, fist-sized hole in the broad brim of his Baden-Powell, official-issue, pack-leader's hat, and decided to do something more useful with his life.

Boggs' Brasserie, Castle Limbo's main restaurant, was today situated on the mezzanine, just behind the café-bookshop. The large,

hammerbeam-roofed dining hall was usually on the third floor, but Limbo was like that.

The huge, grey, misshapen castle had been the seat of the King of Limbo from time immemorial. It had been built in the Age of Darkness, and so no one had been able to see what they were doing – turrets, wings, flying buttresses, all sprouted from it at strange and interesting angles, and not one doorway or window was straight. Inside, too, the building had several interesting quirks. Stairs would appear and disappear at random; doors that had once led somewhere would open onto solid brick; corridors that for years had stayed comfortingly level would, of a sudden, slope precipitously downwards, sending any that were not familiar with the castle's ways to certain death. Before the Incident, whole floors had gone missing; the dining hall itself had once disappeared completely for over six hundred years. Of course, since the accession of King Bernard and Queen Iris, things had calmed down considerably – the castle loved them and was desperately eager to please. In fact, the reason for the restaurant's relocation today was a chance remark made by the Queen.

Perusing the vast array of glossy magazines on offer in Smeil's Café-Bookshop, she had happened to mention to the King that she felt a little peckish. Walking out of the café into what should have been the North Gallery, the King and Queen had been only mildly surprised to find themselves in the restaurant, its liveried staff waiting to satisfy their every whim.

Now they were sitting at their special table, on the raised dais in front of the large window which, wherever the restaurant happened to be, always had the best view in Limbo.

'How's your sole, my little dumpling?' said King Bernard, grabbing Queen Iris's thigh.

Iris flushed. 'Bernard,' she smiled coyly, 'we're supposed to be regal.'

'You'll always be queen of my heart, my love,' he replied, taking her hand and kissing it.

Iris went a deeper shade of red and tried to cover her embarrassment with her napkin. 'You're terrible,' she whispered.

Bernard smiled. The passing of the years and the discovery of the joys of long lunches may have increased his girth and added a certain fleshiness to his long face, but they had done little to dampen the love he felt for his wife. True, her hair was now as white as snow and the lines around her big, round eyes were etched deep, but to Bernard she was still as lovely as the day he first saw her – strolling down Lancing High Street in a summer dress. 'Ah, my love,' he sighed.

'Where's that son of ours?' she said suddenly, retrieving her hand from Bernard's embrace and smoothing her napkin over her lap. 'If he's not careful he's going to miss lunch altogether.'

Iris wasn't entirely comfortable with public shows of affection, but this, Bernard sensed, was something more than embarrassment. 'Are you all right, petal?' he asked.

At that moment, the dapper, torpedo-shaped figure of the maître d'hôtel appeared. 'Your majesties,' he said, bowing low. 'Are you enjoying your meal?'

High up amongst the skewed towers and turrets of Castle Limbo, in his room which could not be reached by any known means, Rex Boggs, Wizard to the Court of Limbo, looked up from the big book of spells that lay open on the table before him.

'It is time,' he said and, closing the book, stood and walked round the great circular table covered with strange and arcane symbols to the big, navy-blue Aga. Putting on an oven glove printed with a lobster motif and opening the door of the baking oven, he pulled out a tray of madeleines, and a sweet vanilla fragrance filled the air. Tipping them out onto a cooling rack, he carefully picked one up between forefinger and thumb, and examined it critically. Then he

took a tentative mouthful. 'Mmh, not bad, not bad,' he said, sucking in air through his open mouth to cool the still baking-hot morsel. 'Much better than the last lot.'

The Wizard of Limbo had big, blunt features and a wide, friendly smile. He was large and rather unprepossessing, but he did have the most extraordinary eyes – blue like the morning sky, as deep and as placid as a mountain lake, with here and there a fleck of white like swans taking flight.

He turned to the window. Scents of hyacinth and jasmine rose up from the gardens below, mingling agreeably with the aroma of baking, and out of a clear blue sky the sun beat down on the Great Plain stretching to the far foothills of the snow-capped mountains on the horizon. It was a beautiful prospect, but Rex couldn't really enjoy it – something was *wrong*. He'd felt it earlier: a knocking – no, not exactly a knocking, more a rasping tremor. Whatever it was, Rex had a strong suspicion he would soon have some very serious work to do.

After the miracle he had wrought in saving the universe, Rex was well respected by the citizens of Limbo, being much sought after to officiate at weddings and christenings, or to do a spot of healing. He was very good at mending broken bones.

Unlike his father, the previous Wizard, who had used his gift of second sight to advise businesses on the outcome of high-risk investment opportunities, and ran a lucrative sideline informing courting couples whether or not they had a future together, Rex was no businessman. Although he had inherited a large part of the preceding Wizard's mind, Rex was not a natural wizard – he was softer-natured than his father and had spent most of the last ten years reading and perfecting his baking techniques.

The heavy responsibility that goes with the exalted position of Wizard of Limbo had been thrust upon him, one summer's day on Hove seafront. The story of how Rex had battled the monster that threatened to destroy the universe had passed into legend, and now

every school child in Limbo could recite by heart the episode where Rex, with a nifty spot of time travelling, had tricked the beast into killing Rex's old and infirm self.

But that was ten long years ago, and Rex now found it almost impossible to relate to that storybook hero. He sighed and gazed out at the bright day. Life here was perfect, it was true – the sun shone continuously, and there weren't even any seasons to break the golden constancy of a never-ending July morning. But he had secretly begun to understand what had led his father to try and break the monotony by writing the Book. Nothing ever happened here. *Steady now, Rex,* he thought, *that way madness lies,* and he popped the rest of the madeleine into his mouth.

Then it came again – that pawing, scraping shudder against the doors of consciousness, and, despite the warmness of the day, Rex shivered. Instinctively, he went to the bookcase and took down a small, chunky and well-thumbed tome. Opening it, the room was suddenly bathed in rainbows, for there, glittering within its hollowed-out centre, was the egg-sized Limbo Crystal. This fabulous gem had been created a micro-nanosecond after the Big Bang, and as such was the oldest thing in the universe. Deep within, it had a peculiar and extraordinary flaw – a small, three-dimensional image of the castle, perfect in every detail – and, underneath, the legend 'Souvenir of Limbo'. In the right hands it was an immensely powerful tool. It was the key to the door between dimensions – between 'what is' and 'what could be', and vice versa.

Rex weighed the Crystal in his hand. This gem gave him the power to travel anywhere he wished, through both time and space. But where should he go? To see the previous Wizard and ask his advice? No – Rex was the Wizard now, and any problems were his responsibility alone. Besides, how could he ask for help when he had no idea what the problem was?

Sighing, he replaced the Crystal in the chunky book. But as he

was putting it back on the shelf, he happened to glance at his watch.

'Oh shit.'

He was supposed to have met his foster parents King Bernard and Queen Iris for lunch half an hour ago.