Vellum:

The Book of All Hours

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Published by Macmillan

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VOLUME ONE

The Lost Deus of Sumer

PROLOGUE

The Road of All Dust

The Journals of Reynard Carter – Day Zero

– A burning map. Every epic, my friend Jack used to say, should start with a burning map. Like in the movies. Fucking flames burning the world away; that's the best thing about all those old films, he said – when you see this old parchment map just ... getting darker and darker in the centre, crisping, crinkling until suddenly it just ... *fwoom.*

That was Jack for you; if you asked him what he wanted for his birthday, he'd tell you he wanted an explosion. Jack was crazy, but as I flicked forward through the Book, faster and faster as each page fed in me a growing sense of horror and awe, I thought of what he'd said. I thought of gods and tragedies, legends and histories, and movies that opened with scrolling tales of ancient times. The vellum pages beneath my hand flickered under a light that wasn't fire, however, but rather the pale blue of the underground vault's fluorescent lights; and if there was a burning it was in my head, a fire of realisation, of revelation. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that at any second the world around me would be torn away in flames and ashes, stripped back to reveal a scene of carnage choreographed as in some lurid Hollywood flick, and soundtracked with a crashing, clashing music over screams and sounds of war.

The Book. I slammed the thing closed, checking a suspicion. Its outward, leather, cracked and weathered carapace was thick and dark, embossed with strange sigils – an eye-like design, a circle within an ellipse, but with four smaller semicircles on its outer edge at three

o'clock and nine o'clock, and at five and eleven; overlapping this but offset was a rectangle. The framework of embossing around it looked, for all the world, like the stolen architectural plans that lay abandoned on the floor, and with a glance around the vault my suspicion was confirmed – it matched. The long, rectangular room with the doorway in the bottom right-hand corner; the left-hand wall thicker, as it should be, a supporting wall for the building above; the two blocks of wall on either side jutting out a foot or so into the room two-thirds of the way up, as if the original end wall had been knocked through at some point, extended into a forgotten recess; the tiny alcove at the far end which I'd found hidden behind a tall glass-panelled bookcase and which was barely legible on the stolen plans, drawn in pencil where the rest was marked in ink.

I felt a bit guilty, looking at the piles of Aristotle and Nostradamus and Molière and who knows what else, lying on the floor where I'd put them so I could heave the solid bookcase out from its place. Fragile, priceless artefacts of the university's Special Collection, books a student would sign for, with his tutor's name and research subject, and have brought to him by the curator, in the Reading Room upstairs, lain gently on the desk before him on foam supports, their brittle pages to be turned so delicately, so tentatively in case they crumbled to dust between unthinking fingers. And I'd treated them like paperbacks dumped on the floor by someone rearranging furniture. But they were worthless in comparison to the Book; they were already dust.

I wiped away some of the blood that ran down from my forehead and opened the book again, to its first page.

The Book of All Hours

The Book of All Hours, the Benedictines called it, in the Middle Ages, believing it to be the Deus's own version of some grand duke's book of hours – those hour-by-hour and day-by-day, week-by-week and month-by-month tomes of ceremony and meditation inked by monks in lamplight, drawn in brilliant colours on vellum,

pale but rich in tone, not bleached pure white but yellowed, brown, the colour of skin, of earth, of wood, old bone, of things that were all once alive. Princes and kings would commission these books and they'd take years of hunched backs and cramped hands and fading eyesight to produce by hand. It was said by the Benedictines that God himself commissioned such a tome from the one angel allowed to step beyond the veil and see his face and listen to his words, and write them down. The patriarch Enoch, who walked with God and rose to Heaven to become the angel Metatron, had made this book at his master's command, they said, and it held God's own word on every instant of eternity, the ultimate instruction manual for he who dared to live what He commanded, fully, absolutely. But no man was perfect enough to live in such devotion; so they denied the Book existed in this world at all; said it could be found only in Eternity, where the spirit was freed of the weakness of the flesh.

– The Book of All Hours, my father had said. Your grandfather went looking for it, but he never found it. He couldn't find it; it's a myth, a pipe-dream. It doesn't exist.

I remember the quiet smile on his face, the look all parents have at some time, I suspect, when they see their children repeating their own folly, a look that says, yes, we all think like that when we're your age, but when you're older, believe me, you'll understand, the world doesn't work that way. I'd come to ask him about these fanciful stories I'd been told, about the Carter family having ancient secrets, not just skeletons in the closet, but skeletons with bones engraved with mystic runes, in closets with false walls that hid dark tunnels leading deep, deep underground.

– But Uncle Reynard said that when grandfather was in the Middle East–

– Uncle Reynard is an incorrigible old fox, said my father. He tells a good tale, but you really have to . . . take what he says with a pinch of salt.

I remember being shocked, confused; I was young, still young enough that it had never occurred to me that two adults whom I trusted absolutely might believe entirely different things. My father and his brother, Reynard – my namesake uncle – they knew every-

thing after all, didn't they? They were grown-ups. It had never occurred to me that the answers they gave to my questions might be entirely incompatible.

– Of course, you should listen to your father, Uncle Reynard had said. Honestly, you shouldn't believe a word I say. I am *utterly* untrustworthy when it comes to the Book.

And he held my gaze with complete sincerity . . . and winked.

– Almost as bad as the Cistercians, he said.

The Cistercians called the Benedictines fools. They were quite convinced that the Book existed in this world, but they feared it as they feared the Devil himself. They damned the manuscript as the most diabolical of grimoires, a Book of the Names of the Dead, of every being that had ever lived or ever would live – human, angel, devil. They made reference to the Bible, to the Torah and the Koran, to Christian apocrypha and Jewish and Islamic legend . . . Didn't the Revelations of St John talk of a book made by God's scribe, a Book of Life containing names that were no mere christenings but the true and secret names, names which the owners could not refuse to answer when called before the Throne of God? But if this was to be carried out into the world only in the End Days, where then did Solomon learn the names of all the djinn? They were burning old maids at the stake in those days, herbalists and midwives; they believed the world was riven with darkness; they feared the evils of knowledge. So they said there had to be a *copy* of the Book of Life, a dark counterpart made by Lucifer himself before he fell, when *he* was God's right hand. And they said that perhaps he'd written into it the very name of God. Perhaps this was why he fell. If so, they whispered, it was a book that might be used to summon and bind even the Almighty to an audacious mortal's will.

The only binding that concerned me right now, though, was the makeshift bandage of torn sleeve stemming the bloodflow from my wounded hand. If I'd been thoughtless with the other books of the Special Collection, if I'd been rough-handed as I heaved the bookcase out to reveal the dust-smeared glass that fronted the alcove – like a painted-over window, or an inset museum display of a priest's hole, or a smuggler's secret cellar – I had been careful with the suction

grip and diamond-tipped cutter as I carved the circle in the glass panel that fronted the alcove. The last thing I'd expected, though, was for it to shatter with a blast that threw me back across the room. I had been lucky. Only one of the shards had been large enough to do more than surface damage, embedding itself deep in the palm of my right hand when I'd thrown it up to cover my face. The rest of the shards had left me with only minor cuts, plenty of them, but most no more than skin deep. It was a mystery to me, why the case had been so pressurised as to shatter the very moment the seal was broken; it was a trivial mystery, though, in comparison with the book itself, sitting there inside its circle of salt.

The Legends of a Lifetime

– A book of hours, I said. Or a book of names. Nobody knows.

– Bullshit, said Joey. You're making it up.

– Shut up, said Jack. I'm listening to this.

He slid the G'n'T across the table to me, handed Joey his Guinness and sat down in his own seat with his ouzo, sniffed it with a wrinkle-nosed grin.

– Go on, he said.

– Right, I said, voice hoarse from trying to talk over the thumping bass of the juke-box in the Student Union. So there's a Jesuit scholar in the seventeenth century, and he says that *both* these ideas are heresy. According to him this is the book from which everyone's sins will be read out before the Throne of God. The Judgement of All Accounts, or the Account of All Judgements, he calls it. Not so much a book of the names of the dead, but of everything that anyone's ever done, or ever will do, every deed, past, present and future.

– It'd have to be one fucking huge book, said Joey.

I shrugged, smiled, took a sip of my drink.

– Maybe the language it's written in is more ... concise. I don't know. That's what I'm saying. Nobody knows exactly what it is. But *where* it is ... that's another matter.

– You read too much, said Joey. Man, I bet if you look on their library database every university has a copy of–

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– *The Macromimicon*, said Uncle Reynard. You know, you do have to wonder where Liebkraft got his ideas from. Elder gods; a book written by a mad Arab; a translation of an even older text. Where did you get this?

He turned the battered paperback over in his hands. Yellowed pages, broken spines, bent corners, lurid cover – this wasn't ancient mystery, just modern pulp, not truth, but trash. And it was everything my uncle had been telling me since I was a child.

– Second-hand bookshop, I said. Fifty pence. You ... you ... I don't believe you strung me along for ...

I was lost for words. The legends of a lifetime, told over glasses of milk or – these days – beer, and all of it just an elaborate fiction. And a stolen one at that. He just sat there in his armchair, smoking his cigarette.

– You know, this has been out of print for decades, he said, handing it back to me. You should read it. Honestly. I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

He had that old smile of mischief on his face.

– Sure, I've read Liebkraft, I said to Joey. Everyone in the Carter family has to read Liebkraft at some point or another. You especially, Jack.

I lit a cigarette and took a long draw, milking their attention. I'd fallen in with Jack and Joey in our first year at the university – Jack, the flame-haired wild boy with a tendency to climb out onto window-ledges while drunk ... another Carter, strangely enough, but no relation to the best of my knowledge; Joey Pechorin, the dark-voiced nihilist who struck you at first as someone trying too hard to be cool until you got to know him and realised, no, he really was that sullen and dismissive. Fire and ice, they'd been friends since school, inseparable until Jack hooked up with flighty, flutter-eyed Thomas. Thomas Messenger, so full-on a fairy that we couldn't help but call him Puck. Puck, who was, as usual, late. I saw Jack check his watch, look towards the door.

– Why do you think he has his character called Carter? I said.

– *Bullshit*, Jack coughed into his hand.

But I could see how the idea intrigued him.

– God's honest truth, I said. He knew my grandfather when–

– Oh, fuck off, said Joey. Fuck right off.

I shook my head, gave him a sad, resigned look. *Your loss.*

– Don't believe me. Doesn't bother me. I know the Book exists. I know where it is.

The legends of a lifetime, a lifetime of legends, of interest piqued, of curiosity sharpened, honed into a tool – I hadn't come to study at this university because of its academic reputation. I didn't give a damn for the mock-gothic tower and the quadrangles, for the droning lectures about Shakespeare and Spenser and Milton, for the pomp and ceremony of this or that professor still stuck in a previous century with his black robe and solemn voice. My three years of study in the library here were three years of research into its corridors, not its books. I knew the building now, inside and out, like I'd lived there all my life, every floor, every corner, every doorway. I'd studied the architect's plans. I'd struck up friendships with security guards, librarians. I'd worked there part-time for the last year and a half. I knew where the cameras were, what times the guards did their rounds at night, who manufactured the security system, how it worked, how it could be disabled. And I was finally ready.

– I know where it is, I said.

– I'll believe it when I see it, said Joey.

So will I, I thought. *So will I.*

Between Kabala and Calculus

Three years for me, and as many generations for my family – maybe more if my uncle was right. In the Middle Ages, he'd told me, every guild, every craft or trade had their own mystery play based on a story from the Bible or from the apocrypha. The Masons would put on a play about the Tower of Babel. The Wine-merchants would put on a play about the drunkenness of Noah. And there was a play he'd heard of, he told me, about the angels who fought neither for God nor Lucifer, but instead fled from the War in Heaven, down to Earth, and carried with them the Book of Life, so that it should be safe from the destruction. They carried it across the earth, from one

hiding place to another, always on the move. The play, of course, was performed by the Carters.

– Well, of course, my father said, that's where the whole story comes from. The Carters travelled all over the place. The mystery plays were performed all over Britain, and on the Continent. And everywhere they went, you get these stories appearing about this ancient book. Myths based on a play cobbled together from a legend written in the margins of scripture. Stories created from stories created from stories. None of it's true, but eventually people start to forget what's fiction and what's fact. The Masons don't have a monopoly on spurious mythology, you know. But it's ridiculous. The idea that the last of the earth-bound angels hired a young carter to take a secret book across Europe to . . .

He went suddenly quiet; he must have realised from the confused expression on my face that I'd never heard this part of the story before. He sighed.

– That's what your grandfather believed, he said. That the Carters had taken over from the angels as guardians of the Book. But they lost it. And they've been looking for it ever since.

– Your grandfather was a sick man, he said, quietly, sadly. He was in the Great War, you know. He wanted to believe in . . . something greater. War changes people. Death . . . changes people.

Death changes people.

I remembered Jack and Joey fighting; I remembered watching as Jack self-destructed; Joey pulling a bottle of ouzo out of his hand and shouting at him; Jack screaming at him over and over again – *fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.*

You describe people as crazy – you say, *that Jack, he's crazy* – and it doesn't mean anything until you see them really, truly, going crazy.

There was a Jewish scholar, Isaac ben Joshua, in Moorish Spain who said that the Book drove everyone who saw it crazy. He said that it held not deeds but laws, that it was, in fact, the original Book of the Law – not the Mosaic Torah but an even older covenant known only in the most marginal of apocrypha, dating from the antediluvian time of Enoch and the rebel angels, binding the physical world in principles somewhere between kabala and calculus. He

referenced an Islamic source, a story saying that all but one solitary page were blank, and on that page there was only a single simple sentence, an equation which captured the very essence of existence. This, he said, was why all those who'd ever looked upon the Book had gone insane, unable to comprehend, unable to accept, the meaning of life laid out in a few words of mathematical purity.

After what happened to Thomas, I remember thinking that I knew what that sentence was. Two words.

People die.

The page I looked at now, though, the first page of the Book, had no words on it, only a blueprint of the maze of concrete tunnels and chambers that surrounded me, here in the bunkered depths of the old building. Gold illumination traced out conduits, ventilation and wiring, heating ducts, while the same eye-like logo on the cover of the book was inked in black here, smaller though, more cursive; I felt that burning feeling rising in my head again. There was something wrong about an artefact as ancient as this with content that was so ... modern. This wasn't some doggerel prophecy before me, not a vague prediction but a precise plan, a schema. And, flicking forward to the next page I recognised the library as I'd seen it on the architectural plans I'd been studying for so long. Again that symbol in the centre of it. Pages two and three together mapped out the building in its context, the network of roads and footpaths, the buildings and grassed areas of the campus around the library. I recognised it; I had recognised it instantly and it was that recognition that had made me close the Book and reopen it, as if the act might change it, as if looking at it again, I might this time see something more rational, more sensible.

Instead it seemed even less rational. Now that I studied it more closely, it worried me even more because, in the tiniest of places – only here and there, mind you – the location of this pathway, the outline of this building – it seemed just a little different from my memory.