

ANDREAS

SUCHANEK

The
**IMMORTAL
WIZARDS**

THE
AWAKENING

1

AWARD WINNER

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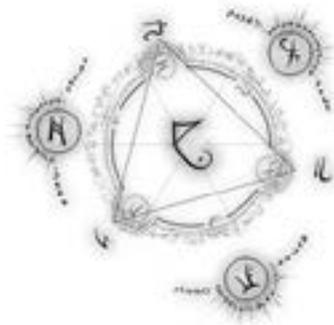


The Immortal Wizards

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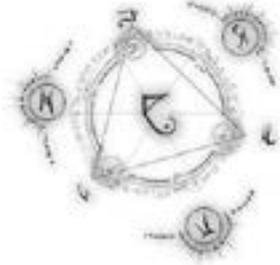
»The Awakening«

by Andreas Suchanek



Reading Sample

Prologue



I failed.

The words echoed within his soul like the cruel judgment of an all-powerful god named Destiny. How could he have ever believed he was something better than this and could escape it?

Cold air blasted his face and raindrops struck his skin like a thousand pricks of a needle. His sweatpants had long since stuck to his legs and water dripped from the thin sports jacket.

The concrete sidewalk was dark and wet.

He ran.

Past overflowing garbage cans. Bums settling in for the night in the entrances of abandoned buildings, teenagers walking in small groups from the playgrounds back to their housing complexes. The rain had driven them all away, like rats abandoning a sinking ship, if only until the next few rays of sunshine peeked out from behind the clouds. Then they would come out of their rat holes and carry on as before.

His limbs became heavier, pulled down by the leaden wetness that had soaked through his clothes. He ought to head back home. To the tiny room he shared with his brother. Throw himself on the bed and listen through the thin wall as his mom let the non-stop parade of daytime talk shows wash over her before disappearing off to her next shift at the pub.

Alex kept running.

Then suddenly out of nowhere there was an underpass, the kind of place where the young troublemakers meet. He almost hoped that they were there to try and block him. With his fists clenched, he plunged into the shadows. He was ready to throw a punch. The way it used to be, when the world had been so simple, limited to hanging out with his friends and drinking beer.

Without a care about the future: no plans, and fewer prospects. When only the moment mattered.

He loved those memories.

And hated them just as much.

There was no going back. Not that he really wanted to. In the last few months, he had done everything he could to escape the sluggish monotony of hopelessness. Away from the swamp called Brixton, Angell Town, to finally take care of his own, support his mom, and give his little brother a chance.

But that dream was now dead.

Alex slowed down, then stopped, standing in the midst of the cold, wet dark. No one was hiding in the shadows, no glint of a switchblade, no voice saying: "Hey, mate." He couldn't even count on that. He was clenching his fists so tightly his knuckles were almost popping out of their skin. He wanted to beat the shit out of someone, break some noses, see some skin torn open. Quite a simple wish, really.

Alone.

Inside, the rage was incessant, throwing itself against the armor of self-control that he had so carefully built up. It wanted out. Before the feeling could become too strong, he began to move again, past graffiti-covered walls, discarded beer cans, and a handbag lying on the ground. It was empty, probably stolen by someone.

As he left the underpass, the wind whipped his face. In the distance, he could see lightning and hear the roll of thunder. The storm was getting closer.

I ought to go back.

But he kept running. He braced himself against air and water, although he could never win. Failure seemed to be a part of who he was.

He came to the end of the street, which became a well-beaten path through the grass leading to a playground. The wind was giving an invisible someone a wild ride on the swing and the merry-go-round creaked as it turned. Only one-half of the old seesaw was still left and it was stuck in the mud. The fence had been kicked in multiple times.

Alex rushed by.

He saw the remains of the housing project they had announced years back. Three lonely towers, desolate and empty, destroyed by the ravages of

time. The huge project had been abandoned. No one spoke of it these days.

A huge, muddy construction site. Just a frame and building material; nothing else was left.

Alex failed to notice some rebar sticking out of the ground, tripped, and landed face-down in the mud. He just lay there. The raindrops splashed on his back, the back of his head, his exposed ankles. His face was covered in mud.

He laughed.

If that HR-recruiter could see him now! Alex could picture him, though, with his clean, tailored suit, pursed lips, raised brow. After all his effort, he hadn't got the job. Why? They even told him why. Because he came from here, from the end of the world.

Again, Alex laughed; he couldn't stop.

To leave Brixton, he needed a job. But to get one, he had to leave Brixton.

A proper paradox, right? The Sisyphean task that kept him tied to this life.

Alex got up, crouched, hands propped on his knees, his upper body bent forward, looking down at the ground. Mud and dirt. Is that what his future looked like?

His gaze moved to the sky.

Lightning struck one of the towers. Thunder followed.

Infuriated, he tensed his muscles. The anger was becoming overwhelming. He yelled, letting his hatred of the cruel, unfair reality loose as tears ran down his cheeks, sparking even more resentment.

"Is that all?" he yelled at Destiny. "Is that what you want? To see me lying in the mud?!"

And Destiny responded.

Alex closed his eyes.

What was that? A green glimmer pierced through the blackness, coming to a stop right above his head. A glowing ball of pure light.

Alex stood up.

Was he imagining it? Was he finally going nuts?

The ball melted. What had once been smooth became amorphous.

Then it shot forward.

Right into Alex.

He howled. His insides were being torn apart and reassembled. Nothing remained hidden, every fiber of his being came to the surface, joined with the green, interwoven threads that began to take shape.

First, it began to shimmer around his body.

Aura, something inside him whispered.

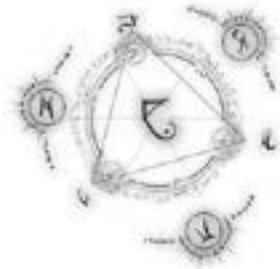
His body was torn away from gravity, glided upwards, and came to a stop a few yards above the ground. He was hanging between the elemental forces, feeling the harsh storm and the rain against his skin. His hair was just a wet mess stuck to his skull.

The green thing joined with the aura and they became one. He couldn't describe it any other way. Alex became one with what was inside of him. It took shape and color.

A blazing pain whipped through his mind.

Alex screamed into the night, letting his scream become one with the elemental forces. And as pure fire flowed through his veins, an ancient force awoke deep within.

1. Memories



A few hours before

Fog floated in the light of the approaching day, its fingers slithering around the dewdrops that dripped from the leaves. She walked through the damp grass, between the stone angels that had long since lost their old glory. Their wings were broken, the bodies cracked, yet their hands remained stretched out to the heavens as if salvation was waiting for them there. Weeds had overgrown the finely carved faces.

Jen pushed the twigs of a hedge aside.

The garden behind the dilapidated house resembled a jungle. The only thing holding the small pagoda upright were a few ivies, the roof having long since caved in. The columns had slid down into the gnarled undergrowth. In summer, this wild growth might still have a certain charm, but in late autumn it just seemed desolate.

Even the mighty oak that had reigned over the center of the garden for generations, spreading its wide branches like arms and always exuding stability and confidence, could not take away the oppressive feeling that seized Jen here.

It was always like this.

With every step that brought her closer to the graves, the memory inside warred with forgetting. A fight, Jen knew, that she'd lose in the end. She wanted to lock away the images, not relive the events, just leave all that behind. But the guilt was always there. Sometimes weeks or months passed as everyday life kept her trapped. That helped her to forget.

At some point, however, the images would come back as soon as they

had lurked long enough in the depths of her consciousness. Usually this happened when she couldn't fall asleep and her mind would start wandering. Sometimes even when she was asleep in her dreams.

She finally reached the tombstones.

Three of them. Two large ones and a smaller one, a reminder that her sister had been a teenager when she died.

There were only a few moments in her life when she regretted being a wizard, fighting to protect the mystic Wall. The magic had been awoken in her, the sigil set ablaze and she had since stood on the side of light. Getting to know the hidden world of magic was like a breathtaking roller coaster ride, alternating between horror and euphoria. Constantly. She made new friends who became her family. She had long called the Castillo home.

But she was always aware of the terrible price she'd had to pay.

Or, more precisely, the price you all had to pay.

She stroked Jana's simple tombstone tenderly. How often had they argued as children. Typical sisters.

Jen smiled.

Although she was the only survivor to inherit the family fortune, she kept the graves simple. It wasn't about pomp or size; no, the reminder was sufficient.

Her hand went to her mother's stone. The first tears came. She remembered the loving look, her soft facial features and dreamy eyes. Her mother's hair had always smelled of flowers, her breath of mint. Only later another smell crept in which the mints couldn't mask any longer. But at least she had tried.

Unlike him.

As if she would burn her fingers, she pulled her hand back to keep it from touching his tombstone.

She looked at the engraved inscription.

What you are, I once was. What I am, you will become.

"You would have loved that line, wouldn't you, Dad?" She wanted to spit. "Roast in hell."

The images came in a sequence of biting pain. Her mother's black eye and split lip. Jana's screams amidst the rain and thunder. Raw knuckles. Laughter.

Jen felt her concentration waning.

The sigil inside of her reacted to the pain. Violet flashes flickered, dancing over her skin and fingers.

One of the highest rules that every wizard had to internalize at the beginning was also the simplest: Never use magic when you're emotional. Maximum concentration, that was the credo. Otherwise spells could degenerate and the consequences could be catastrophic.

Who knew that better than her?

"Jen?" She heard Mark's voice in the distance.

She cursed. "Here!"

She quickly turned away from the graves and went back to the building that had once been her home.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said.

"Was that so obvious?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Habits. Everybody has them, specially in a bad mood. For example, Max puts his earbuds in and listens to music for hours. I find that much healthier than constantly visiting the graves of your dead parents."

Only Mark could give such an assessment with such ease and not hurt her. Quite the contrary. His sunny disposition immediately improved her mood.

"So you wanted to pull me out of my misery and buy me a cup of coffee?"

He shook his head. "Nope. We've got a new assignment."

"It was worth a try."

He laughed. "But we'll have coffee after. Maybe, on the way, you'll tell me what actually happened."

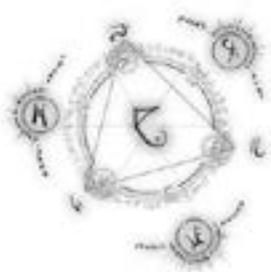
Together they left the overgrown garden.

Jen didn't look back toward the house. It was just an empty building, its rooms echoing with the laughter and pain of a time long past.

It's over.

She left the memories behind in order to tackle the future with Mark. The way she always did. Until next time.

2. The Folio



I wish there was a portal that's closer," she grumbled.

"Jennifer Danvers," Mark said, before quickly correcting himself. "Jen. Did we cast the first spell with the wrong hand today?" He had a roguish look in his eyes and laugh lines appeared. His blond hair was wild and uncombed. Despite his dislike of catacombs, he did not let any magic touch the hair either.

"Forget it," she waved it off.

"Come on, spill. I've been patient long enough. Honeymoon's over, Danvers."

She knew he'd keep poking. Sighing, she looked out over the green hills. The portal had dropped her off at a safe house in London. From there, however, they had to use public transport to get closer to their destination. All the other portal exits were farther away. Jen decided to ask the Portalkeepers once more to let the network in the British capital grow more extensively. After their long odyssey, however, they were now seated in one of the signature black cabs and rattled their way over uneven gravel roads.

"It's the council," she finally admitted. "I've been given a reprimand."

If that was possible at all, Mark's grin grew even wider. "I'm not surprised."

"Hey!" She lightly punched his side.

"Oh, come on," he said, giving her a challenging look. "How many times have you broken the rules? The Council had to react. Just be glad Joan's got your back."

Jen just gave an angry grunt in response. Joan of Arc was the only immortal of the six on the council who violated the rules every now and then.

The rest usually looked down their noses at her. It was probably due to their long lives that they regarded everyone younger than a century as a child.

You always had the feeling that you could never live up to their expectations anyway. How good did someone have to be all their life to end up immortal and be called to the council?

“You’re taking too many risks, Jen.” The laughter vanished from Mark’s face.

“That’s what they said, too. Idiots.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Before they could continue the conversation, the cab reached its destination. Mark paid the driver while Jen got out. Gravel crunched under her boots as she took a few steps to take a closer look at the old manor house. It was hidden in the green, far outside the city. The façade looked neat, flowers covered the veranda, the windows must have been cleaned recently. “Very Downton Abbey,” Jen murmured.

“Don’t start with that relic again,” Mark said, as his gaze glided across the façade.

Together they walked up to the entrance.

“You’re an ignoramus,” she replied. “Someday I’ll tie you up in front of the TV and make you watch every season.”

“That would be torture. What would the council say to that?” He gave a cheeky grin, she jabbed his side again. Her next parry in their verbal duel died on her lips. “Do you feel that?”

He nodded. With precise movements, Mark began to trace symbols in the air. His finger left a trail of green fire. Each wizard left behind a unique trail when they wove symbols.

The magical symbols began to arrange themselves. He mumbled a word. A shock wave rushed forth, tearing apart the illusion spell that had been cast on the manor house. A run-down house appeared. Wilted flowers lay on the ground, the blind windows looked at the hilly woods. The smell of death and decay hung in the air.

She absorbed every little detail of the building and could feel the danger lurking behind the walls. Kevin had done some research in the library for a case that he’d been investigating. One of the search globes had received a signal. Whenever powerful artifacts were used in the world, a black or white dot lit up on the magnified item. The outburst of magic on the outskirts of

London had been clearly visible on one of the search globes.

Mark looked around with extra care. “An unmasked outburst of this magnitude and an illusion spell: I don’t like it.”

“Well, we don’t have a choice.” It’s going to be fun.

Her last duel with enemy forces had been quite a while back. Thanks to the interventions of the council, she was constantly out on research missions. She had Kevin to thank for putting her in the middle of the action this time. He had informed Mark first and, after a suitable delay, the council.

As they approached the mansion shacks, each created a sphere of protection against possible attacks with the Contego spell for themselves. At the same time, Jen let her senses wander. There was nothing here. Everything was quiet and peaceful, if it weren’t for the whiff of evil that lay over the estate like a dark mist.

“Should we knock politely?” Mark asked.

She nodded.

As he reached for the wrought-iron ring that merged into a goblin’s head, Jen created two fireballs in her hands. This would let her respond in the blink of an eye if necessary. Reflexively, she checked her sigil. It was pulsing evenly, emitting its violet magic essence .

It would take an army to put me in danger.

The loud knocking of the ring clanging on wood echoed in the silence. Nothing. Mark didn’t try again. Instead, he took his essence staff into his hand, set it against the door, and burned a magical symbol into the obstacle. It briefly flared on the wood of the door, then it disassembled into a fine mist.

Together they entered.

The air was full of mold and rot, blended with the unmistakable smell of death. Blood. The hair on Jen’s arms rose. Whatever happened here, they were too late. Instinctively, she followed her nose, left the foyer and went up the stairs. The ubiquitous carpet dampened every step. Mark took up the rear. He too had created fireballs, albeit in the green light typical of his magic.

The bodies were in the salon.

Four men and three women, all dressed up. There was a residual hint of black magic in the air. Someone had sucked the life force out of them.

“Shit,” Mark uttered. “I hate when we’re too late.”

There was a moan.

Jen ran up to one of the men on the floor and knelt down. “Everything’s okay,” she said, “we’re here.”

Words of deceptive hope. Strands of white hair lay all over the carpet, his skin was covered in age spots. The man would die. Whatever his age might have been a few hours ago, he now was an old man.

“Book,” he wheezed, “they wanted the folio.”

“I don’t understand...”

The old man interrupted her by using his last bit of strength to grab her wrist. Jen became aware of the pain as it spread through her body. An image appeared, showing an ancient folio bound in brittle leather, fragile pages being turned by a spirit’s hand. Symbols not unlike Chinese characters written in black ink covered the paper. She collapsed. Trembling, Jen lay on the carpet, her face covered in sweat.

Mark came running. “What happened?”

“Guardians,” she managed to squeeze out. “The dead were guardians.”

His eyes went wide. “But how can that be?”

Jen got up and shrugged. In the library of the Castillo, there was a directory. Listed inside were all the guardian groups and the artifacts under their protection. Many of these objects were so dangerous that they could not be stored with other things. That’s why guardian groups exist. The globe should have told Kevin that when the magic erupted.

Jen went down on her knees next to the now dead man, pulled out her smartphone and took a picture of the man’s wrist. A symbol with intertwined decoration had been burned into the skin. “As soon as we get back, we’ll check that out.”

“Should I contact the Castillo? Kevin can get started with the research.”

“Not necessary,” Jen said, dismissing the suggestion. “He,” pointing to the old man, “sent me a vision.” She ran for the door. “It’s a folio.”

Together they entered the library. Enormous rows of shelves reached high over their heads, filled with books. The usual kind. Fiction, technical literature, books read by non-magical people. The fading sunlight at the end of the day fell through the high windows, immersing the room in an interplay of light and shadow. The scent of old paper that makes every library special was heavy in the air. On a side table lay a newspaper, two days old, as the date revealed, and next to it stood a cup made of the finest porcelain

and embossed with a coat of arms.

Jen picked up the cup and smelled its contents. “Black tea.”

“It looks like someone was interrupted here during a leisurely reading session.” Mark pointed to the floor next to the table, where a book with a stained cover lay.

She nodded. It became clear at first glance that someone had been looking for something here. The foul, rotten smell of dark magic drenched the place. “They attacked a group of guardians and succeeded,” Jen whispered. She walked across the room slowly. “How is that possible? This house must have been a fortress, guardians watch over the most dangerous items. And how did they even find out about it?”

Mark went to the shelf and stroked the spines of the books. “Honestly, who can predict what Saint Germain and his mad entourage are hatching next. Nothing good, that’s for sure.”

Mark closed his eyes. Frowning, he stepped into the middle of the room. “They tried a localization here.”

“They wanted the folio, but weren’t successful.” Jen strode up to one of the shelves, climbed up the attached ladder, and pulled out a thin volume.

“Okay,” Mark said, “if you call that a folio, we need to talk about the definition again.”

“Smart ass.” He knew perfectly well that appearances could be deceiving.

Jen placed the book, an old dime novel, on the reading table. The cover showed a brazen-looking pirate with a naked upper torso on the deck of his ship. A woman kneeled in front of him, her head slightly tilted to the side and turned towards the viewer. The pirate’s lips touched her neck.

“Admit it, you’re dying to read it,” Mark said.

“Absolutely. I adore romance novels,” she said, grinning. “They’re particularly useful for lighting a fire.”

She pulled out her essence wand. The spell she was about to cast required the magic to pass directly into the item. It wasn’t enough to draw the magical symbols in the air. In order for them to have an effect on the material, an essence wand was necessary. It channeled the magic and transferred it to the object. Nowiz, which was what the magic people called those who were ‘not a wizard’, would probably have called it a magic wand.

She drew the image of disillusion on the paper and linked it with the painting of the group of guardians. A completely new symbol of magic

appeared. Her essence wand formed the spell from purple essence which then seeped into the paperback.

The next moment the book twisted, getting larger, thicker, heavier.

“Ta-da!” Jen said.

“So this it is,” said Mark. “Strange, I don’t see any black magic emission. What did the Dark Wizards want it for?”

Good question. “Maybe it’s part of the undefined magic and they wanted to shape it.” She opened the pages. The characters remained illegible, resembling something like Chinese characters, but on closer inspection, they appeared to be Celtic. “I need a librarian to look over this.” She closed the folio.

Jen froze as she felt the magic.

Cloaks fluttered as numerous people emerged from the air. Horrified, Jen stared at the new arrivals, all wearing dark monk’s robes and hoods. A black eye had been carved on the forehead of every dark monk. Their invisibility spell had been so perfect that she hadn’t noticed anything wrong. These wizards were not part of Saint Germain’s entourage.

One of the dark monks stepped forward. “The folio!”

“No, I don’t think so,” Mark said.

Then it all happened fast. One blow hit Jen, throwing her to the side. Out of nowhere a wooden totem about a foot long appeared. The folio flew into one of the dark monk’s hands while the totem landed next to Mark. He screamed. Wooden tentacles drilled into his chest as if the totem were alive. Blood sprayed everywhere. She heard bones crunching.

Jen rose.

The dark monks disappeared before her eyes, as if they were nothing more than wisps of fog that just happened to take the folio with them.

Jen turned to Mark ...

... and froze.

Her friend and comrade was surrounded by a sphere of fog. He was slowly being raised into the air. The figure pulsed like the beating heart of some unholy creature. She could sense what that thing was doing.

“Run,” Mark croaked.

“Forget it.” Jen executed several power strokes in the blink of an eye. But the fog fended them all off. She tried to remain calm. Some of the knowledge she had received at the awakening of her magic had been lost, as

happened to everybody. She hadn't worked on recovering. But she was still familiar with the essential laws of balancing magic.

She grabbed her sigil and transferred her own magical essence into the sphere. A balance was struck. It bought her time. But the creature reacted. It recoiled, throwing Jen across the room and against a shelf. The artifact continued to feed on Mark's magical essence like a parasite.

"Run," he squawked. "Or we'll both die."

Jen clenched her fists. Rage bubbled up. There had to be another way. "No."

"Yes," Mark said gently. "You only have minutes left."

She turned off all emotion, turned around, and ran. As she ran, she touched the contact stone under her shirt in an attempt to inform the Castillo. The black magic that hung everywhere in the air prevented it.

In her mind, she saw the last magical essence in Mark's sigil being consumed.

Once that happened, every wizard was in mortal danger and had to stop all magical activity immediately. Otherwise, the spell woven over the sigil was consuming aura energy.

She ran down the stairs, rumbling, but her ability to see through walls let her keep an eye on her friend and comrade.

Mark's aura flared up into a greenish sphere in the shape of his body. The artifact drained everything from it, consuming the last protective shell normally intended to tame the sigil and protect it at the same time.

Jen crashed against the front door in mid-run. The fog was long gone. With trembling fingers, she raised her essence wand and drew the symbol for a matter transfer.

Wood to fog.

Finally the obstacle disappeared and she rushed out.

A look back showed her that the end had come. Mark's aura had disappeared. There was no essence and no aura left, nothing that could hold the sigil. It expanded abruptly. An aura of pure fire instantly turned Mark into ash. The entire manor house trembled, its walls crumbled, the window panes exploded. The shock wave flung Jen away from the house and she lost consciousness.

3. Aura Fire



Kevin's body knotted up with tension. From one moment to the next, he was wide awake. A huge green flame blazed in his mind before it was swallowed by blackness. Groaning, he rolled to the side, crashed to the floor, where he stayed, trembling. Tears prickled in his eyes.

Mark is dead.

The network that linked the team had transmitted the moment of Mark's death to all the others. At the same time, the moment the sigil erupted and transformed into the pure essence of magic, was perceptible to wizards all over the world. The fabric of magic cried out because one of its own was gone.

"Hey," a tender voice rang out. Max was suddenly next to him, placing Kevin's head into his lap. "Breathe in and out slowly."

An eternity seemed to pass. His muscles relaxed. The physical pain retreated. But the other pain, that of his soul, remained. Understand, realize, process: every thought was molasses-slow.

Max looked down at Kevin with sadness. His dark blond hair was still tousled and the last remnants of sleep were still visible in his brown eyes. He was only wearing shorts. "Who is it?"

When they became an item three years ago, the council had taken Max off Kevin's team. When wizards start a relationship or an affair, they are no longer allowed to belong to the same mission team. So Max had only sensed that someone had died, but not who.

"Mark," Kevin said. Trembling, he rose.

"What about Jen? Weren't they both out there?"

"Yeah. But she seems to still be okay." He staggered briefly. The image

of the aura fire still left an afterimage in his mind. Now they had to act quickly. He slipped into jeans, put on a shirt, and tucked his essence wand behind his belt.

Then he ran out.

The Council had to be informed, as did the others. Fellow wizards came up to him in the corridors. The shock of the aura fire was written all over their faces, as they wondered who had died. He ignored the questioning looks.

Only the cold on the soles of his feet made him realize that he had run out of the room barefoot.

He couldn't care less.

He shoved a newbie aside, ran into a librarian, and just barely missed crashing into a member of the protectors of order. Then he finally reached the chamber. From here a narrow spiral staircase led down to the catacombs under the Castillo. Kevin almost stumbled as he rushed down like a human bullet. He could have broken all his bones, but he found his balance again at the last moment.

Sweat-drenched and out of breath, he had reached the crypt. She was already there and greeted him with a nod. "Kevin. What a loss your team has suffered. I'm sorry."

He gulped. No matter how hard Joan of Arc might try to move on their level, she remained an immortal with the life experience of centuries. It was almost impossible to be in her presence and not feel the sublimity that surrounded her like an halo. "Thank you. Has it reacted yet?"

"No," Joan said. She wore her strawberry blonde hair in a ponytail. A fashionable white blouse, jeans, and simple cloth shoes gave her the look of a woman in her early forties who was just bubbling with strength. "But it won't be long now. The aura fire is extinguished, the sigil' is now pure energy. In a few minutes it will manifest again... somewhere."

In somebody.

Nobody knew how a sigil chose a successor, but the legacy of magic would arise in them. A new wizard would be born, leaving behind his or her old life as a Nowiz.

Joan and Kevin were now standing in front of the most precious thing the wizards possessed: a solid stone of black onyx. Their most important task after protecting the mystic Wall was to protect it from the hands of the

dark wizards. For over a century now, dark forces had been trying to tear down the mystic Wall so that they could once again rule over all magic. The barrier had erased people's memories of the supernatural and concealed magic from the eyes of the Nowiz. But, to keep the wall standing, it drew the essence necessary to keep it stable from all magical creatures, which cut the power of all wizards.

The onyx stone seemed to be somehow connected to the mystic Wall. The council knew its secret, but didn't share it with anyone. Normally Kevin would be vibrating with curiosity when confronted with the artifact. But not today. He only felt grief, combined with the pain of losing a friend.

Someone gasped.

Max stormed in. He greeted Joan with a "Hi" and threw sneakers at Kevin's feet. "Did you forget? It might be cold down here. Are you okay?" He had managed to tame his hair a bit. Right then, Kevin would have loved to hug him close. But not here. Not now.

So he just replied "I'm okay."

Someone sobbed. Soon after, Clara entered the crypt. She wiped away the tears and lifted her chin. Her long, silky-black hair, smooth features, and deep brown skin made her look like some African princess. They hugged.

"So your team is almost complete," Joan realized. "Chris is in an area without a portal and Jen won't be here in time either. I sent a portalkeeper to London; he'll check on her. The protectors will also want to question her."

"What about Chloe?" Kevin asked.

"She's still on her mission. She'll be back in a few days."

He nodded gratefully. Jen, Mark, Clara, Chloe, his twin brother Chris, and he: that was their team. They had their adventures together, sat chatting until late at night, and were bound to one another by magic. Mark's death had left them all with a void. Silently, he prayed that nothing would happen to Jen and instinctively reached for his chest where his contact stone was hanging.

"I already tried," Clara said. "No contact. Wherever she is, black magic has enveloped her like some force field. There's no getting through."

Before he could reply, the onyx stone began to change: the dark surface became milky white, forming striations. Contours emerged, a shadowy silhouette.

Joan frowned. "Something's wrong."

Kevin had only been here once before when the Onyx cube had sought out an heir. Back then, a series of clear images had manifested, showing a face, a place, exact information.

They waited.

After what felt like an eternity, a black spot in the shape of a country emerged. “England,” Clara saw. “How likely is it that an heir is chosen from the same country the last wizard died?”

“One in four hundred thousand,” Joan replied. “And it’s not just the same country. It’s London, the same city.” The councilor was usually seen with a smile on her face, but now she seemed worried.

She is afraid, Kevin understood. “What’s wrong?”

The striations continued to swirl.

Max, who had been silent so far, said, “London’s a big place. Can’t it be a little more specific?”

Joan raised her hand, silencing him. In a firm voice she spoke words of ancient magic and wove a spell. At the same time, her fingers left a trace of fire in the air. A billow arose over the surface of the onyx stone, at its center, a quickly growing dot appeared. It was like looking at a television screen that was constantly expanding.

There was a man in his mid-twenties. He had a three-day stubble, a striking face, short dark hair. He was attractive and, as Kevin noticed, knew it. Only brand name clothes, open shirt, expensive watch. He recognized the type immediately, had fallen for them once too often before Max. The unknown man and a friend were headed for a club in London’s Soho district. The knowledge of the local coordinates suddenly came to Kevin.

Joan staggered and fell to her knees. The picture shrank.

“There, at the edge.” Clara pointed to the outer edge of the onyx stone.

Black striations formed. Not on the stone, no. They were a part of the scene.

“Dark magic manifests itself in this place,” said Joan. The councilor seemed spent. “Nothing’s as it should be.” Her hand rested on the stone wall.

“I’ll send a team right away.” Kevin reached for his contact stone. “If they take the portal to the city center...”

“No,” Joan said with a clear, commanding voice. “Jen’s closer. She’ll find him and take him to the Castillo. No one else.”

Max gasped. “But... she just lost her partner.”

“Then it will be an honor for her to guide his heir to safety.”

Kevin stared at the councilor in amazement. What was wrong with her?

Curiosity had driven the grief away, at least in part. As soon as Jen got back, he'd know everything. Until then, he had to be patient.

“Let's go upstairs.” Clara said.

Kevin nodded. With Clara on one side and Max on the other, he left the crypt.

Joan remained behind. Lost in thought, the councilor looked at the onyx cube.

... End of Reading Sample

You find the complete Book of the Immortal Wizards here:

<https://www.amazon.com/Awakening-Immortal-Wizards-Book-ebook/dp/B08NPG2CD7>