

BRAN  
HAMBRIC  
THE SPECTER KEY

KALEB NATION

**PREVIEW: CHAPTER 3**  
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## Chapter 3

### CASH BOXES AND GNOME TRAPS

**B**ran dropped his screwdriver and yanked the box from Sewey's hands.

"Calm yourself?" Sewey spluttered. "What's the matter with you?"

But Bran wasn't listening. He turned the nondescript gray metal box over in his clammy hands. Its contents rattled. Yet it also felt as if there was something large inside that was packed tight so it didn't shift much. His heart was pounding.

Sewey scratched his head. "I thought we searched this town high and low for anyone with the name Hambric years ago, and we didn't find a single one..."

Bran just blinked at it. *Why would anyone leave a box here in her name? Did she leave it there herself, maybe for me to find?* He was anxious to break the lock when he realized that Sewey was right there, staring at him. He caught himself and turned the box over one last time, holding it close.

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“It’s...probably nothing,” Bran said, trying to act natural. “Sawdust, like you said. I’ll just open it when I get home.”

Sewey peered at him curiously, though he finally relented, shaking his head. “Oh well, I’m exhausted anyway, and famished as well. Leave this, and we’ll finish up some other day.”

Bran started out of the vault, clinging to the box so tightly that his knuckles whitened. How many years had it sat there waiting for him? Had his mother hidden it there when she had put him into the vault?

Sewey sealed the vault door, and they made their way through the deserted bank, everything neat and in order in the main room for business the next day. The place smelled of the artificial flower scents Trolan, the janitor, had sprayed before leaving. Bran’s shoes echoed against the hard floor. In the lobby, he passed by the desk of Adi Copplestone, Sewey’s secretary. When Bran’s eyes fell on her brass nameplate he knew exactly where he had to go to open the box: the only really safe place in the city. *Adi’s house.*

She was someone he could trust, a secret mage, just like him. He followed Sewey out into the warm golden rays of the setting sun that fell across Third Street, illuminating the sleepy shops and a lone car parked in the tow away zone. The sunlight made the car look even worse, revealing all the dents and worn paint.

“I just remembered,” Bran said as Sewey locked the door of the bank. “I...got my bike all muddy cutting through the park on the way here. I can’t put it in the Schweezer like that.”

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“You bloody won’t,” Sewey snorted. He reached to his wrist, on which hung a thick shoestring that held his car keys, so he wouldn’t misplace them.

“And there’s no use dirtying the trunk either,” Bran went on. He drummed his fingers on the box as he clutched it. “So I guess I’m stuck with biking all the way home.”

“Too bad.” Sewey sniffed unsympathetically. “Next time you’ll remember to keep your mode of transportation in tiptop condition.”

He climbed into the Schweezer and turned the ignition; the car let out an enormous, street-shaking rumble, coughing fire from the exhaust before wheezing to life. Then he switched gears and pulled out, rocketing down the street in a cloud of smoke.

The moment he was out of view, Bran spun on his heels.

“All right, you got the box to me,” he muttered under his breath. “I don’t know why you did it, but I’m going to find out...”

He started for the alley next to the bank, glancing furtively up and down the street. Before, many months ago, he might have let something like this pass, but now he knew enough to be wary. When strange things started to happen, there was usually trouble lurking around the corner. He ran to his bicycle and carefully placed the box in the basket. Then he hopped on and took off down the street, the pedals wobbling and his heart pounding. He passed the highway and started down a maze of streets that took him into a quiet neighborhood: houses warmly lit, set on grassy lawns.

A short while later, he pulled into Hadnet Lane and parked his bike in front of a two-story, white stone house in

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the middle of the block. He gently took the box and started to the front door, continuing to survey his surroundings as he knocked. Everything beyond it was quiet until he heard the lock slide. The door opened, revealing a girl his age with brown and blond hair, greenish blue eyes, and a black band around her right wrist: his friend Astara.

“Oh, hello,” she said.

Bran was still a little surprised to see her living at Adi’s house, a place very different from where he had first met her at Highland’s Books. The repairs from the fire were nearly complete, but until they were finished, Adi was letting Astara stay with her.

“I, um...” Bran finally stammered. “I need to talk to Adi. Look at this.”

He held the box up so Astara could see the name on the label.

“Sewey found it in the back of the vault,” Bran said hurriedly. “I’ve never seen it before.”

Astara read the name. Her eyes widened.

“You’re right,” she said quickly. She locked the door behind him. The inside of Adi’s house looked like any other regular suburban Duncie home: decorated to the hilt for Fridd’s Day—yellow streamers hanging from the ceiling, yellow balloons arranged on the edges of furniture, even yellow flowers in shiny, gold vases on the tables. The chairs were covered with yellow blankets and yellow pillows, and on the walls, yellow flags bearing the inscription “Jolly Fridd’s Day!” in big, bold letters.

“Getting ready for Fridd’s Day?” Bran half-joked as Astara led him up the stairs.

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“Well, it is this Friday,” she replied. “I just got home from the bookstore—we were decorating there too. He’s hoping to use it as a grand reopening.”

“I just got out of the bank,” Bran mumbled. “But we weren’t decorating, that’s for—”

An awful bang from upstairs, partially muffled through the floor, cut him off in mid-sentence.

“What was that?” he gasped.

Astara smiled wryly and pointed up the stairs.

“That would be Polland,” she said. “He’s working on disarming a gnome trap.”

“By shooting at it?” Bran asked.

“No, just disarming it.” Astara shrugged and pushed open the door, revealing a room with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. There was a large fireplace at the far end; chairs and a sofa were neatly arranged in front of it. The fire was out, though sitting in the middle of the floor was something new: a row of bright orange traffic cones. They stood in a long line, ten of them, though three were in a very odd state. They looked as if they had gotten themselves turned inside out. A stench of gunpowder clung to the room, and a gentle cloud wafted in the air. As it rose to the ceiling, Bran spotted Polland lying in a heap in the corner. Adi was helping him to his feet as he spluttered curses under his breath.

“Blasted bramble of gnome traps!” Polland spat, holding his tall red cap on his head with one hand. He wore a green shirt underneath a pair of dirty, brown overalls with black buttons, and a pair of thick goggles over his eyes; the lenses were coated by a dusty film. Polland was the size of a seven-year-old child, at most, but his thick beard and ruddy

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cheeks proved that he was one of the very things Dunce stood against: a gnome hiding within its own walls.

“You got two yesterday without any trouble,” Adi consoled him. She looked up at Bran.

“Hello, what a surprise,” she said.

Polland pushed her hand off and dusted his clothes.

“Gnome traps...disguised as traffic cones?” Bran questioned.

“Another ghastly invention by the Decensitists, no less,” Polland grumbled. “You can’t even tell which are traffic cones and which are gnome traps.”

“The Decensitists think that gnomes are so stupid,” Adi explained, “that the moment they see something reddish and cone shaped, they’ll immediately run forward and give it a hug.”

“And then...” Polland grabbed a book off the shelf, aimed carefully, and threw it at the gnome trap. It hit against the side of the one closest to them, but instead of knocking it over, there was a pop like a pistol shot and blast of smoke. The gnome trap sprang up, inverting itself and swallowing the book in midair. Bran jumped.

“What a poor fellow who should happen to fall into its clutches!” Polland said, lifting his goggles to reveal a patch of clean skin underneath. “Might very well pin his arms so he can’t escape even if he turns to stone!”

He drew himself up proudly. “I’ve been practicing tactics of disarmament.”

He reached down to the floor for a long stick that looked like a pool cue, held it out at arm’s length, biting his tongue as he did, and gave the top of the next cone a sharp thwack! The instant he cracked down the gnome trap gave a

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wobbly little jump but didn't close and fell back to the ground like a limp rag doll.

Polland rushed forward and seized it immediately.

"Disarmed!" he announced. "Just whack the top, and it turns it off. Trick is to not hit the sides by accident...as I learned the hard way."

Bran laughed, imagining Polland flying across the living room, arms flailing. Adi noticed the box in his hands. "And what's that you've got there?" she asked, stepping closer.

"Read the name," he said. He held up the box so Polland could read it as well. A dark mood fell over the entire room.

"Where in the world did you find this, Bran?" Adi whispered.

He told her about the vault and how he had come to her house to be safe before opening it.

"Smart thing to do," she muttered. "We'll take it up to my office. Do you have a key for the box?"

"I think a screwdriver will work fine," Bran said with a hint of dryness. He followed Adi into a messy office, papers strewn about and the window uncovered, the last bits of sunlight poking through. This room, too, was littered with books, and also held a large cage on one wall that housed Adi's crow, Ginolde. The crow was still, though Bran knew she was alert, her golden beak darkening in the setting sun.

Adi grabbed a hidden handle in the bookshelf, pulling the door open to reveal a long set of stairs. Everyone followed her up to the attic and her secret office.

The air was rather comfortable, though tinged with the scent of wood. The television was muted; on-screen a reporter from the Mages Entertainment Channel 0 jabbered silently. To the left of Adi's desk was a birdcage-shaped



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object covered with a blanket and to the right were boxes of tightly packed books on magic—all kept secret from the City of Duncce. Bran set the cash box on her desk, and they gathered around it. Polland produced a screwdriver, and Bran pushed it into the lock, expecting to break it open as quickly as the others in the vault, but this one wasn't as simple.

“A regular picklock, aren't you, Bran?” Astara said, trying to lighten the room. He dug the screwdriver farther, giving the lock a sharp wrench. All eyes were on him, the air filled with anticipation.

*What if it's nothing?* he thought, but then the latch popped.

“There,” he said, setting the screwdriver aside. He flipped the lid open and drew back so everyone could see.

It was another box, made of thick brown wood, the dark grains of it stained and smoothed to a perfect shine. As Bran lifted it, he could feel there was something inside, sliding about. He turned it and saw that at every corner there was a brass fixture, and around the rim that joined the lid to the base, another length of flat brass, dull and etched with designs. Opposite the hinges was a thick clasp with a keyhole. Whatever this box was, it was ancient and captivating.

Taped to the top was something very out of place—a folded scrap of paper, which Bran couldn't help but peel off. When he did, the burned shape of a crescent moon, carved into the box's surface, was revealed. It was the same shape as his mother's necklace.

“Odd...” he said, studying the mark and brushing his finger across it. It was very plain, but the black burn of the

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shape was so perfect, even to the points, as if seared by a master artist.

“That is odd,” Adi agreed, her eyes filled with alarm. She knew the dark past behind Bran’s necklace. His fingers ran over where the lid was clasped. There was no key to be found.

“I guess I’ll have to break this open, too,” Bran said, but Adi seized his hand.

“Wait, Bran—this box is probably very old,” she said. “It might be better to leave it up to a professional lock picker.”

Bran nodded slowly in agreement.

“I’m on the job,” Polland said. He took Bran’s screwdriver and slid his cleaned goggles back on, which magnified his eyeballs like fish eyes. Then he set the box on his lap and inspected the lock closely in the light.

“Look, Bran, there’s something written on that paper,” Astara said. In his haste, he hadn’t even taken the time to look at the sheet. She moved beside him as he carefully peeled it apart, revealing two words in smooth, crisp black handwriting.

“Nigel Ten,” Bran read aloud, and he looked up. “Who is that, Adi?”

She furrowed her brow. “I haven’t heard of any Tens living around here.”

“Me neither,” Astara said, looking at the page curiously. Bran glanced at Polland, who was struggling with the lock. He had the screwdriver jammed into the latch and was gently trying to pry the lid apart. It didn’t budge, and all of a sudden an invisible force seemed to spit the screwdriver back at Polland, knocking him against the chair.

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“Bother! Stuck tight, that’s for sure,” Polland growled. “I’ve used every trick I know, too.”

“What if I try magic?” Astara asked, and Polland perked up.

“Wonderful idea,” he said. “I’m sure there’s a Netora magic to open the lock.”

He slid out of the chair, sucking his sore thumb, then retrieved a thick book off the shelf behind Adi’s desk and paged through it rapidly until he found what he was looking for.

“We don’t keep Netora books around here,” he murmured. “But this one is a compilation, and almost every book has an unlock spell. If we’re lucky there should be one here...”

He went to the index, using his goggles like reading glasses, and finally found what he was looking for, spreading the book on the desk. There were two columns of words on each page; most of the type was small and hard to read. The pages were very thin, and the text was muddied, but Bran could still read the title that Polland laid his finger on.

### **[158-N] Norton’s Netora Unlock—Norton**

*Very useful and simple spell to open the locks of doors and otherwise*

Hand Out: *Lock coming undone*

Onpe likoca

“Easy enough,” Astara said, stepping forward.

Bran repeated the words in his head, knowing that they might be very useful at some time or another, as Astara carefully placed three of her fingers on the surface of the

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lock. She paused for a moment and took a deep breath to gather up her magic.

“*Onpe likoca,*” she commanded.

There was a great flash of green light, like a blast from a strobe tower, and arcing out of the box, through Astara’s fingers, came an enormous, crackling flare of energy. A sharp breaking sound like thunder exploded through in the room, hitting the ceiling. It broke plaster and sent it raining down in dust, and then suddenly, another thick arm of the green energy burst out and seized hold of Astara, throwing her backward across the room.

## 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](http://www.kalebnation.com).

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