

BRAN
HAMBRIC
THE SPECTER KEY

KALEB NATION

PREVIEW: CHAPTER 2
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Chapter 2

THE BOX IN THE BANK VAULT

THE CITY OF DUNCE sat directly east of the wild and forbidden West Wood and was generally avoided just as much. Even without terrible beasts and horrifying legends, Dunce was notorious as the only city in the world that outlawed gnomes and magic. Anyone even suspected of being magical was as good as jail-bound, and gnomes might as well have worn big red targets on their backs just for stepping a foot past the sign outside the gates, which proudly declared:

no gnomes
no mages
etcetera

Sewey Wilomas was manager at the Third Bank of Dunce, which was where he happened to be as the sun set on a late Wednesday evening on the fifteenth day of August. All the other employees had quickly left early when Sewey decided to stay late, and anyone on Third Street who

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happened to be passing by the bank hurried away like scared rabbits. He was in a bad mood, as usual—and since no one else was around to help clean out the vault, fifteen year-old Bran Hambric was left to take on Sewey by himself.

“Oh rot!” Sewey shouted, hitting his head on the bottom of a shelf in the bank vault for the hundredth time that evening. Bran looked up from his pad of paper just in time to see a money bag come flopping down from the shelf. It burst open, spilling sawdust all over the floor.

“There goes another one,” he said, tallying it on the pad. “That makes one hundred and four of sawdust and...” He counted his marks. “...only three bags of money.”

“Blasted shelf!” Sewey roared, rubbing the top of his head. He kicked the wall with fury. “Bran, I told you not to tally the bags of sawdust! Do you want every bank examiner in Dunce upon us?”

Bran stole another glance at the gray walls lined with shelves stretching high up to the ceiling, filled with bags of what were supposed to look like bank funds, most of which were obviously not. Sawdust had spilled in heaps across the red-carpeted floor along with the random coin or withered sib note. Even seasoned spelunkers might have easily gotten lost if they ventured toward the back, which was filled with precarious towers of cash boxes, some dating back decades.

“You’re lucky the examiners don’t dare step inside,” Bran mused. “We might have a third bankruptcy and the Fourth Bank of Dunce on our hands.”

“Rubbish!” Sewey dismissed, sweeping his black moustache free of sawdust specks. “One of my first classes in banker school was Covert Defense of Bank Examiners to the Avoidance of Audits.”

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Bran knew it was best to keep his mouth shut. He started to scoop the sawdust back into the bag. It felt odd and almost creepy to be here in the vault, the same place where he had been found nine years ago at the age of six. His very first memory was of Sewey opening the vault door and seeing him there. From then on, the Wilomases were stuck with him, and vice versa. He didn't know what they might do if they found out that his mother, Emry Hambric, had been a magic criminal, killed as she hid Bran in the bank—or what they might do if they found out he was a mage as well.

His secret was safe, though. He had his mother's brown eyes to remind him he was her son and her necklace under his shirt to remind him that she had changed before she died. He reached up and touched the small charm—silver and shaped like a crescent moon. It felt warm today, and it seemed to warm him inside as well.

“Blast it all, I'm through,” Sewey grumbled, flinging yet another bag of sawdust aside. He jumped up and, again, his skull was greeted with the bottom of a shelf.

“Great rot!” The shelf jumped but didn't give in, and he tripped forward, tumbling to the floor and colliding with a mound of sawdust. Bran had to stifle a laugh.

“Stupid shelf.” Sewey coughed and sneezed in the cloud of dust. “Must have been put in by—cough!—filthy gnomes.”

Bran shook his hair free of dust, starting another storm. His usually brown hair was getting sawdustier by the minute. Sewey kicked some bags out of his way as he steadied himself, then stumbled over to Bran's tally pad, wiping his brow furiously. They were miserable figures.

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“This is preposterous,” he said. “How do we ever stay in business?”

His eyes narrowed. “And Bran, what the rot did you put down here at the bottom?”

Bran had distracted himself by penciling a sketch of Sewey hitting his head on the shelf, on which was sitting a very grim, dwarfish bank examiner who didn’t look at all happy to have Sewey bumping his seat.

“That’s you,” Bran said. “I got bored.”

“Bah!” Sewey snatched the pad and threw it aside. “Enough bags for one evening. We’re getting busy with those safe deposit boxes and the crates, before I single-headedly break every shelf in the Third Bank of Duncel!”

Bran shuddered. He was not looking forward to that job. Some of the safe deposit boxes were ancient. Many dated back to the First and Second Banks of Duncel, and since Sewey had never taken the time to clean the vault out before, the new boxes simply appeared in front of the old ones like fresh mold.

“I say we start in the back, get rid of the older stuff,” Bran said, following Sewey deeper into the vault. The back room was lit by long, dim lights in the ceiling, but Bran still had to watch his step for the occasional crate, sack, or filing cabinet someone had dumped and forgotten. The air grew darker and mustier the farther they went.

“Blasted piles of junk,” Sewey mumbled. “All of it’s rot, just rot, and now I’ve got to be the one who’s told to clean it out before Fridd’s Day comes along.”

Fridd’s Day was yet another celebration that—like Twoo’s Day and Wendy’s Day—was renowned as an event that everyone had to observe or else be talked about behind their backs by all their neighbors. Unlike Twoo’s Day,

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which was celebrated in the park, or Wendy's Day, which was celebrated in a hot-air balloon, Fridd's Day was traditionally celebrated at formal in-home parties, beginning the night before—Fridd's Day Eve—and running late into the next morning. The Wilomases were to host the Third Bank of Dunce's company party at their house that year. The bank had a tradition of inviting all the board members and the fifteen richest investors. Sewey anticipated it with both excitement and dread.

Finally they reached the back of the vault. Some of the stacks of deposit boxes had fallen to the floor and were lying in piles, with no way of telling what they were except for thin tabs stuck on the front, labeled with the name of the owner, the date... or simply a big X. The X could have meant anything from "This one's expired," to "This one's owner is dead," to "This one's owner is soon-to-be-dead."

"We'll start back here and work toward the fresh air," Sewey said, sniffing. "Anything expired is going up for auction next week, and I don't care whose ghost comes for it afterward. And since old Jim Primbletons ate the pages of our key ledger when we fired him last year, looks like we'll be needing these."

He held up a pair of screwdrivers. "Time to put on our burglar hats," Bran said with a grin, and Sewey gave him a salute. Bran started for a pile of large crates to the right, but Sewey caught him by the arm.

"No sir, I get the crates," Sewey ordered. "If there's any treasure to be found it's me who's going to find it."

Sewey waved at the pile of cash boxes. "That's where you'll be working, since there probably won't be anything worthwhile in them for you to bungle with. I'll handle the big, adult stuff."

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He pointed to a cash box on a shelf in the far corner. “But don’t touch that one.”

Bran peered closer at the label, on which was written SEWEY WILOMAS, INHERITANCE.

“So you did decide to save it,” Bran said, turning to Sewey proudly.

“Of course not!” Sewey said, dashing Bran’s hopes. “But since one needs a permit to own or operate an elephant in Dunce, my purchasing plans have been postponed.”

Bran sighed and grabbed the box on top, reading the tab.

“Mortimer Snakebob.” He didn’t recognize the name, so he jammed the tiny end of the screwdriver between the lock and lid. It only took a few twists to get it open, revealing a handful

of colorful feathers and some dirty old coins.

“A pirate?” Bran wondered aloud with a smile. He dumped the gold coins into a pile beside him and tossed the box into the back, reaching for the next one.

“Pamela Perkins,” he said. Again, he had the lock popped in a minute, discovering that Pamela collected antique western karaoke records and red cowboy boots.

“Throw all that junk away,” Sewey commanded. Bran dumped them out, and at the bottom of the box, he found something else: a handful of glittery gold bracelets and earrings.

Sewey leaned out from the crates. “Great Moby...” he said as Bran added the valuables to the pile. Sewey attacked his first crate and, with much heaving and hacking, finally split it open. It was stuffed with a worthless collection of

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balloons and streamers. They were so old that the air itself made them crumble to dust. He threw it aside in disgust.

“No jewels here...” he muttered, jealously eyeing Bran’s pile. He started on the next crate with vengeance, breaking the lid only to find the box filled with one-eyed rocking horse heads.

“Double rot!” he cried, flinging it away.

Eventually he meandered his way over to Bran’s stack of cash boxes and sat on the floor across from him. Piles of things grew around them, and the heap of empty boxes multiplied in the dim light. Sewey reached to the top of the pile, sliding off a box. He peered at the tab and then squinted.

“Hmmm,” he said.

“Come on, we’re supposed to be doing these quick so we can leave soon,” Bran said.

Sewey went on blinking at the box. “What a curious oddity.” He looked up at Bran. “Have you been poking about in the vault lately?”

“Not until this evening,” Bran said, rattling the lock. “At least, not since...you know...the Accident.”

“Well, that’s strange,” Sewey muttered, “because this one’s got your name on it.”

“My name?” He was curious, though Sewey was probably just pulling a prank.

“Well, your last name, at least,” Sewey said, still perplexed. “It’s a different first name.”

Bran sat up straight. “What, who is it?”

Sewey squinted at the tag. “Well, it’s hard to read, it’s so small. But I think it says...Emry Hambric.” Bran froze.

It’s my mother’s.



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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