

DISCOVERY

Once upon a time there was magic on the earth. Once upon a time a message could fly at the speed of light to a hundred thousand people. Once upon a time people could fly in silver ships around the world and to the moon and children learnt magic at school. Once upon a time. Before the great catastrophe that almost shook the earth from its axis, so that it teetered for hundreds of years like an egg on a spoon in the race that was still run on sports days in the gwartz schools.

Some things didn't change, though the old learning was lost. Few written scripts had survived the fires caused by the intense heat as the earth's crust burnt when the temperature soared as the earth wobbled nearer and nearer its sun. People who survived dug themselves into the ground, creating subway systems, rather like large rabbit warrens. But survive they did, some of them, the ones who knew how to live in such conditions. The ones who had known that not everything could be supplied by a flick a switch or a push of a button. And gradually the earth stopped wobbling, started cooling again, and the pale, light starved race emerged.

They built homes and scratched the scorched earth to make gardens where they planted their previous seeds, and more children were born. They built temples to the Young Prince Aripo - a long-ago figure who had survived tragedy and come to save the earth from dark forces, and children prayed to his companions, Negra and Ronwe - especially for help in their studies. But now people were losing faith. Temples to the Young Lord were only half full - visited mostly by elderly people. The young ones were looking to the future, beginning to look for something else. It was all too long ago, they argued, it wasn't true, it was only a story. Even the thread of the dark Valdo coming to get them had little effect.

Ronina was one of these young people. Unlike most of her peers, she desperately wanted the stories to be true. That's why she was studying history and archaeology with special interest in the written word. Not that they had found much of the written word— after all paper was flammable. Any they had found was carefully copied by engraving onto thin metal sheets.

There was a shout from the other end of the tunnel in which she was working

“Ronina, come quick”

Lexi's excited shout brought Ronina to her feet. The stylus she was using dropped to the floor. She had been using it to copy the latest findings which, although she couldn't understand them, read - “Waterstones Epsom – 1000 HP and GOF”. Del.28.5.05.

She had only seen one or two examples of this strange script before – so very neat, but nothing like the script they used now in their newly invented printing presses. “Waterstones”. The first bit looked a little like something she had seen before underneath the symbol for river liquid, a very old rendering. She wished she could find a clue. Even her teachers admitted they had very little to go on.

“Come on”.

“What is it?”

“It's a door”

“What's it made of?”

“Not wood, for sure”

“Some kind of metal?”

“Very thick.”

Lexi was scraping away at the centuries of dirt and debris surrounding the opening.

Although the population was recovering, not many people could be spared for archaeology purposes. This was normally undertaken by students as holiday jobs – most people were busy enough growing food and rebuilding to keep up with the growing population.

There was a red button half way down the left hand side.”Push that Lexi”

Obediently Lexi pushed. Nothing happened.

“Just have to wait for Mika.” Mika was their boss on this project – he had the say so to use the tools to break the door.

Disappointed, Ronina returned to puzzling over the brief script and carefully copying it. If only she could find a clue. There was something behind that door - she just had a feeling.

It was six days later when Mika managed to break through the steel. The smell that greeted them was fetid. The floor was covered with debris, while piles of boxes had disintegrated and spilt their contents around - nothing but dust and shreds amongst the skeletons of tiny rodents they now called ratlets. Ronina's heart sank.

“Well, that’s a nice job for some of you!” said Mika.

“Doubt if you’ll find anything of use there.”

But she volunteered – along with Lexi, who shared her interest to some degree, but whose interest was also in Ronina herself. He found himself dreaming of her slim young body when he was trying to write his notes at night.

As the days went by Ronina became more and more depressed. Bucket after bucket of dust and bones, carefully sifted, went into the bins. They were down to the last corner. Her brush came into contact with something hard. She swept more debris away. A strange transparent material appeared. Was it glass? No, it was softer than glass. It was firm, yet soft. Gingerly she tried to move it - pushing it with her brush slightly. It moved.

“Lexi,” she shouted. “Lexi”.

He bounded over.

Together, carefully, they moved the object into the clear area. It was a box. “Fascinating material” said Lexi. There was no lid – the top had a layer of the same

dust and debris which Ronina gently removed using her hands, her brush and a pan, and even more gently lifted out the first object.

“A book” she breathed “Oh Aripo, great Aripo – a book”.

She put it gently down beside her – afraid it would disintegrate, then looked inside the box again. “Another book”. She could see the colours of the cover, red and yellow.

She could see the title – large letters “A B C”. The book itself was slim, but it was of a larger size than the previous one, and the writing was much bigger. The pages had come apart, each was like a tablet. The second page said “D E F”. There were pictures. Ronina danced with excitement.

“Lexi – this is the key – this is the key. Oh, Lexi, Mika must let me do it. He can’t give this to anyone else. This is the key, Lexi”.

But Lexi was looking at what lay beneath. There was another book – strange old script again – colourful cover, decorated with the face of a boy. And on the boy’s forehead was the symbol that decorated all their temples to Aripo – the lightening flash. He couldn’t read the words “HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE”, but he smiled down to Ronina, who was still kneeling in the dust.

“I think you’re right,” he said. “This is the key.”

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