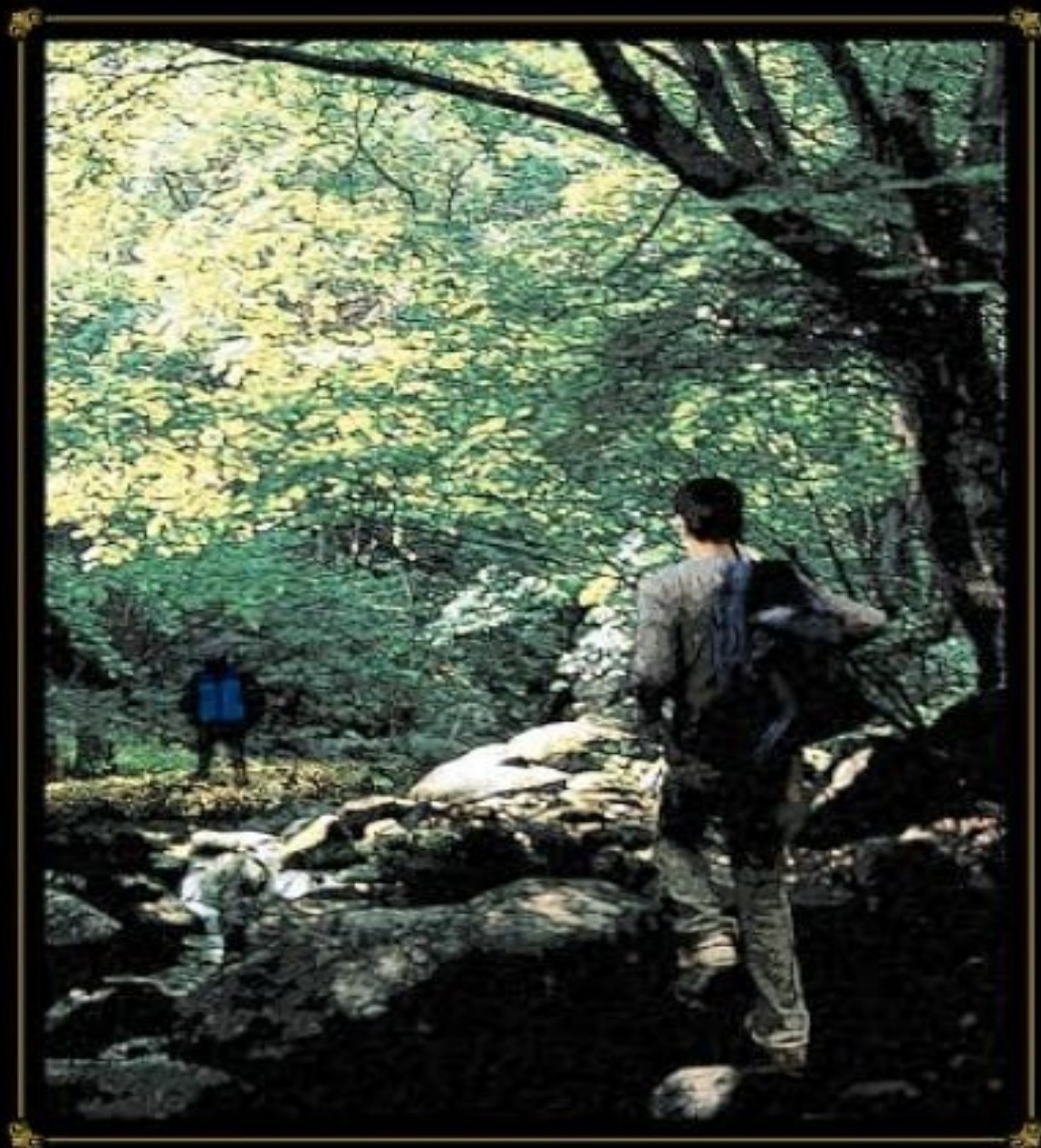


THE UNSUSPECTING MAGE

Book One of the Morcyth Saga



Brian S. Pratt

The Unsuspecting Mage

The Morcyth Saga

Book One

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Above all others, this book is for my children; **Joseph, Breanna, and Abigayle**. I would like to thank my **brother**, who took the time to read the entire work and make critical criticism. I would also like to thank my **mother**, without whose steadfast belief in me this work would never have been completed. And lastly, all my students who patiently endured my enthusiasm. Thank you.

Chapter 1

Having your nose in a book may be a great way to spend your spare time unless you do it to the exclusion of everything else. You get up, grab your book, then read until night comes when you're forced to put it down for sleep. Oh sure, you have the occasional interruptions in the pattern like eating and school but that, I suppose, must be tolerated. James Reese, a young man currently in his senior year of high school, does just that. Unless something of dire importance demands his attention

he will be found lying upon his bed deep within a current, favorite book. He sees nothing wrong with spending every available moment reading. Reading to him is grand adventure, new ideas and keeps him out of trouble. His main interest is fantasy-adventure books, though he does dabble in an occasional sci-fi just to not get burnt out with fantastical worlds. Every book he has ever read fills shelves lining his walls. Now pushing over five hundred titles, it is the one thing he takes the most pride in.

An obtrusive knock at the door brings him back from the middle of a particularly exciting battle. “James,” comes his grandmother’s voice from the other side, “breakfast is almost ready. Put down your book and get ready or you’re going to be late for school.”

Unable to continue, he reads another three paragraphs until reaching a break, then carefully inserts a well-worn bookmark and places the book gingerly on his nightstand. He’s read it before. Many of his books have been read several times over the years, and most are still in very good condition. Those that know him best believe that he cares more for his books than for anything else. There are times when he thinks they may be right. Some of his friends kid him when they see him deep within a book he’s read before.

“Don’t you ever get tired of reading the same book over and over?”

James just grins and shakes his head. “Nope.” Then he invariably asks, “I suppose you haven’t ever watched the same movie more than once?” Having made his point, they would leave him alone.

He grabs a shirt and a pair of jeans from off the floor that don’t look too dirty and gets dressed. After slipping on his shoes, he slings his ever-present backpack over his shoulder and leaves the room.

The mouth-watering aroma of scrambled eggs, bacon and biscuits fills the house. His grandmother is busy in the kitchen where she is putting the finishing touches on breakfast. “Have a seat, James. Breakfast will be ready in a minute.” His grandparents have raised him for the past five years, ever since his parents were killed by a drunk driver.

At the table, his grandfather reads the morning paper. So intent is he on an article that he fails to notice his grandson taking his place at the table. James has some trepidation about disturbing his grandfather. For the last few months, his grandfather has been encouraging him to find a job. Almost daily, he points out ads in the paper that he feels James might be interested in.

It’s his senior year in high school and the summer’s almost here. He knows he needs to make some decisions about his future but has never been that great when trying new things. Some call him antisocial; he thinks of himself as merely non-social. He doesn’t hate being around others, just prefers time to himself with his books.

The noise of James setting his backpack on the floor next to his chair draws his grandfather’s attention. James silently groans as his grandfather leans over to show him what he is sure to be another ad that more than likely he will not be interested in. To his surprise, what his grandfather proceeds to show him has nothing to do with finding a job.

Local Teen Missing

Seth Randle, a teen from Haveston, was reported missing when he failed to return home ~~Wednesday evening~~. The police have issued an Amber Alert and teams of volunteers are busy combing the local area. Thus far they have been unsuccessful. He was last seen on Wednesday afternoon on his way home from Haveston High School where he is currently enrolled as a senior. If you have any information please call 911...

“Isn’t he one of your classmates?”

“Yes, he is. But I don’t know him very well. He’s on the football team and is well liked by everyone. Hope he’s okay.”

Further conversation is forestalled by the emergence of his grandmother from the kitchen bearing a platter filled with eggs and bacon in one hand, and a pan holding a dozen biscuits in the other. James eagerly takes charge of the biscuits and deftly transfers one to his plate as he sets the warm pan on the table. He helps himself to a big portion of his grandmother’s jam. It won 2nd place at the county fair last year; old Widow Jones took 1st place. His grandmother claims that Widow Jones puts too much sweetener in her jams and that is why she wins every year. About to take a bite, he hears her say, “James, let’s say grace first.” She has that look in her eye. Giving her a sheepish grin, he sets the biscuit on his plate, folds his hands and bows his head for prayer.

His grandfather prays. “Dear Lord, please bless this food to our good, watch over us and guide us. And *please* help James find a job! In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

“Leave the boy alone, John,” his wife chides as she places her napkin in her lap. “He’ll find one when the good Lord is ready.” Turning her attention to James she adds, “Make sure to find one that you will be happy with. There is nothing worse than spending your life at a job that is dull and lifeless. One should come along when the time is right. Now hurry and eat or you will be late for school again.”

Stuffing his mouth full of eggs and bacon, he mumbles, “I better eat on the run, then.” He tucks several biscuits in a napkin and stuffs them in the top of his backpack. Her biscuits, especially when they are warm, are hard to resist. “Thanks for another award winning breakfast,” he says before giving her a peck on the cheek, then heads for the back door.

“Don’t forget your lunch, it’s sitting by the door.”

“Got it!” he hollers as he stuffs it too within his backpack.

Once out the back door and in the garage he grabs his bike, hops on and quickly makes his way down the road toward school. Haveston High isn’t much more than a mile away and it only takes him a few minutes to arrive.

Police cars, both marked and unmarked, are in and around the parking lot. Two officers stand amidst a group of students while three officious looking men in business attire enter the office.

Pulling into the bike rack, he grabs his chain and starts securing his bike. His best and only friend Dave rides up as he pushes the lock closed and parks his bike in the adjacent slot.

“Hey, did you hear that Seth is missing?”

James glances to his friend and nods. "Yeah, I saw it in the paper this morning. Wonder what happened to him?" He spies a nearby policeman and he and Dave head that way

Approaching the officer Dave asks, "What's going on?"

"We're questioning students about Seth Randle. His mother says he's been missing since Wednesday evening. Would you boys know anything about it?"

"No," replies James, shaking his head. "We barely know him."

"That's right," Dave adds.

The officer hands each of them a card bearing pertinent contact information. "If you see or hear anything that might help us locate him, please call."

"Sure."

"If we hear anything we'll be sure to let you know," James adds.

Heading to class, they both can't help but wonder what's happened to Seth.

The rest of the day, all anyone could talk of was Seth. They had an assembly before lunch where they were told the facts surrounding his disappearance. Evidently, he had been heading downtown after school and that was the last time anyone had any contact with him. They were given the standard lesson on strangers and what to do in emergencies, the basic "Don't talk to strangers" lecture they've had for years.

Lunchtime finds James and Dave in their regular spot in the lunch room. Both are brown-bagging but Dave is not very enthusiastic about the contents of his. Reaching in, he pulls out a poorly wrapped sandwich. He turns to James and holds it up.

"How about a trade? My mystery meat for whatever your grandmother made for you?"

James removes a six inch homemade hoagie from his sack and smiles. "Not on your life, bud. My stomach isn't that strong. Besides, after all these years of your mom's infamous cooking, you should be used to it by now."

Taking a bite, Dave replies, "I suppose so. No use in subjecting another living thing to this stuff."

Hearing a sigh from his friend, Dave looks over to see James looking at a small piece of paper.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I had gotten off easy this morning. You know how my grandfather always mentions jobs he thinks I would like?" When Dave nods, he continues. "Well, instead of pressuring me about it this morning, he slips one in with my lunch." He gazes at the ad as he bites off a good-sized portion of his sandwich.

After another bite had been taken and swallowed, he says, "This one is at least interesting, if a little odd."

"What do you mean?"

James offers him the ad. "Here, read it."

Wiping his hands on his pants, Dave takes the ad:

Magic! Real Magic! Ever wanted to learn?

We require someone with intelligence and a disciplined mind. Those well versed in fantasy novels and role playing games a plus. May need to travel. Only those of good character need apply. No appointment necessary. For preliminary interview, drop by at:

1616 Commercial Ave

Room 2334

Haveston, CA

"That is different, I'll give you that," affirms Dave as he hands the ad back.

Putting the ad in his wallet, James asks, "What do you think?"

Pausing for a moment to think while he finishes a mouthful of food, Dave replies, "Well, it is right down your alley. You have read more books than I could even hope to get through, and we play D&D every once in a while. Maybe you should look into it. You've always said you would like to travel and see the castles of England, maybe this will be your chance. It sounds like some traveling magician something like that."

"Yeah, you're right. Maybe I'll go down tomorrow and see what it's about. If nothing else, should please my grandfather and maybe get him off my back, at least for a day or two." Taking another bite of his hoagie, James ponders the ad, thinking it might be worth looking into.

Pointing off to the right Dave says, "There's Alyssa. You should go invite her to the dance next week. I know you have a thing for her."

James takes a brief glance her way and sighs. "I haven't quite worked up the nerve yet. I've tried twice, but my mouth gets all dry and I can't find the words. I'm afraid I'll look like an idiot."

"You need to get out of that room of yours more. Stop spending so much time in there alone with your books and start living a little more in reality. She's nice and I believe still available."

"I know. Maybe I'll ask her on Monday."

"If you ask her at all." Dave's attempts to bring him out of his room have met with very little success, but he keeps trying.

Once they have finished eating, the boys leave the lunch room and make their way over to the che

room where they spend the rest of their lunch break role playing. James is usually the one running the game since he enjoys making the campaigns more than Dave does. Back in his bedroom he has a whole collection of campaigns that have never been played. He likes designing them almost more than playing them.

Dave on the other hand prefers to be the character, or characters such as what he is doing today. He's playing a thief and a mage who are currently trying to find the third ring of Xanak, the god of fire.

James sets up his godwall and removes the dice and papers from his backpack. He always keeps meticulous notes during his campaigns. Dave gets his papers, dice, and the player's rulebook ready as well. Once everything is ready, they begin.

"Your mage and thief had infiltrated the Red Rogue's Lair," he begins giving a brief recap of where they left off the day before. "You had just found a flight of stairs and were beginning to descend."

"On to fame and fortune!" Dave exclaims with a grin. "My thief is checking for traps as they go down the steps."

James nods. "No traps were found. Upon reaching the bottom step, you discover a long hallway stretching far into the darkness ahead. A sound can be heard coming from out of the dark, and it seems to be coming toward you..."

The rest of the day goes along pretty much as usual; classes, including the dreaded PE class that James is on the verge of flunking. He simply is not much into sports or anything else that requires one to sweat. His gym teacher tells him he needs to show more enthusiasm for the physical side of life, but his teacher's arguments do nothing to sway him in that direction. It's not that James is fat or anything; he actually appears quite fit. He just doesn't go for that sort of stuff.

After school at the bike rack, Dave informs him that he plans on accompanying him to the interview. For moral support, as he puts it.

"You don't have to come with me, you know."

"I know. But you stand a better chance of following through if I do."

James secures the chain beneath the bike seat then glances to his friend. "Are you afraid I am going to chicken out or something like that?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, yes I am!" Dave flashes him a grin.

"I plan on catching the 512 at 9:00 a.m. If you're serious about coming, meet me at the bus stop."

"I'll be there."

"Okay, see ya tomorrow!" With that, James hops on his bike and heads for home.

At dinner, he tells his grandparents about his decision to go to the interview.

“Now remember, James,” his grandfather says, “when you are at an interview you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. Never settle for conditions that you are not going to like. Be assertive.”

James nods his head. “I will. I don’t plan on making any decisions on the spot. I am simply going there to find out about the job and how much it pays. It sounds interesting.”

Showing concern on her face, his grandmother says “Be careful while you’re there. The last place anyone saw poor Seth was heading into town. Watch yourself.”

“Please don’t worry about me, I’m almost eighteen. Plus, Dave plans on coming with me. I’m sure that between the two of us, we’ll be able to handle any situation.” Knowing that it is love that prompted his grandmother’s concern, he gives her a reassuring hug.

A little after dinner, James is in his room reading when there comes a knock on his door.

“Yes?” he hollers without ever removing his eyes from the pages of the book.

“James. You should come and see this.” It was his grandfather.

“Now what?” he mumbles. Slipping his bookmark within the pages, he sets the book on his nightstand and makes his way out to the living room. There he finds his grandparents raptly watching the news.

“Another person is missing,” his grandmother says. “This time a girl”

Interest piqued, James sits next to her on the couch.

An image of a young woman who looked to be in her teens was pictured behind the reporter. The news reporter goes on to say that this is the second person who has come up missing in the past week. There are no leads, no connection between them. They come from different cities in the same area and how both just up and disappeared without a trace. The report continues with interviews of family members of the two missing people.

“This is getting serious,” his grandfather says. “You need to be extra careful tomorrow when you’re in downtown.”

“I will,” James assures him. He watches the report on the missing teens until the reporters begin repeating themselves. Then he returns to his room where he resumes his position upon his bed and picks up his book.

He found it difficult to concentrate on the story. After realizing he read the same paragraph three times he decides that it’s a lost cause and returns the book to the nightstand. Thoughts and worries about the interview tomorrow make him far too nervous to be able to concentrate on reading. The anxiety continues running through his mind,

...well versed in fantasy novels and role playing games...

...may need to travel...

It sounded exciting.

Maybe Dave was right. It could be a traveling magician.

Different theories and thoughts run through his mind until it's time to undress for bed. After crawling beneath the covers, he sets the alarm for seven thirty before switching off his reading lamp. He lies in the dark, enjoying the cool air as it drifts in through the window above his bed. Eventually sleep triumphs over tomorrow's worries and he's able to fall asleep.

It felt like he no sooner fell asleep than his alarm went off. Hitting the off button, he rolls onto his back and tries unsuccessfully to keep his eyes open. He is simply way too comfortable and almost doesn't have the energy to pull the covers off and get the day going. His sense of responsibility eventually overcomes his laziness and he manages to drag himself out of bed. Also, Dave would never let him hear the end of it if he left him waiting at the bus stop.

After a quick shower, he throws on some of his better clothes. Not his church clothes to be sure, but ones good enough to look nice. Once he's dressed, he takes his backpack and empties his role playing paraphernalia onto his bed. *I'll clean this up when I get back.* He puts a clean handkerchief in his backpack along with the book he's currently reading. Pausing a moment, he decides to take the two candy bars that are lying in the pile on his bed and places them inside as well. Shouldering his ever present backpack, he opens the door and goes out to see about breakfast.

Sausage, eggs and biscuits are already on the table. His grandparents had been nice enough to wait for him before eating. "My, don't you look nice," his grandmother says.

Coming to the table, he gives her a grin. "Thanks. I better eat on the run, or I might miss my bus." He throws together two sausage, egg, and biscuit sandwiches. Wrapping them in a napkin, he heads for the back door. His grandmother's "Good luck, James!" follows him through the door.

He hurries down the road to the bus stop where he'll catch the 512 and manages to finish his breakfast before arriving. Dave is already there, waiting.

"Good morning," offers a cheerful Dave. He'd always been a morning person, which usually irritated James.

"Good morning yourself," growls James somewhat moodily. He definitely was not a morning person.

Keeping an eye out for the bus, Dave says, "I hear they have a new laser tag area at the arcade. Wanna try it after your interview? The loser pays for lunch."

"You're on, I can almost taste the burgers now," boasts James as he, too, keeps a lookout for the 512. When he sees it turn the corner he announces, "Here it comes." Picking up his backpack he readies to board the bus. The 512 pulls up and they have to wait a moment while an elderly woman departs before they can get on. Showing the driver their passes, they move to the back of the bus and take their seats. The 512 will take them most of the way before they'll need to transfer to the 33 for the last leg to Commercial Avenue.

When the bus pulls out of the stop, Dave glances to James. "Nervous?"

"A little. I'm glad you decided to come along; it's partly the reason I am even here. When I woke up this morning, all I wanted to do was lay there. But knowing you were going to be at the bus stop waiting for me helped get me out of bed."

“I thought so, that’s why I’m here,” Dave grins. He’s glad that he could help his friend.

“You know,” Dave begins after a few minutes, “you didn’t have to go and kill my thief that way.”

Feigning indignation, James asks, “What do you mean? Is it my fault the guy had an IQ of a turnip? He never should’ve rushed in like that. He was greedy.”

“Maybe. But I’ve been playing him for over a month now. He was all the way to level five.”

“Oh well, that’s life.”

As they get closer, James turns quieter as he dwells more upon the upcoming interview. Dave makes a couple attempts to get him interested in further conversation but his mind really isn’t on it. Finally, Dave gives up and they ride the rest of the way in silence.

When the Park and Ride is announced where they need to transfer to the 33, James grabs his backpack and pulls the cord. When the bus pulls in, they disembark and go over to a nearby water fountain for a drink.

Dave glances at his watch. “About five minutes before the 33 shows up.”

The 33 does a loop through downtown and passes right down Commercial Ave. Going over to Berkeley 4 where they will board, James and Dave stand in line behind several other passengers. Dave nudges James when he sees a pretty girl wearing short shorts and a snug t-shirt, but James is too preoccupied with what lies ahead to pay much attention. The mere thought of the interview is making his stomach do flip-flops.

Once the 33 arrives, they board and take the last leg to Commercial Ave. Had James been alone, he would have stayed on the bus. But since Dave is there, he pulls the cord when a tall building bearing the numbers 1616 comes into view.

The bus pulls to the curb at the next stop half a block away. Butterflies were congregating in James’ middle as he steps to the sidewalk and turns toward 1616 Commercial.

Dave slaps him on the shoulder. “Come on. It won’t be that bad.”

James gives him a half-hearted grin and nods. The butterflies in his stomach were turning into vampiric bats.

Passing through the front door, they cross the lobby en route to the elevators and Dave presses the UP button. While they wait, Dave notices James looking at the building’s list of businesses. When he moves to join his friend, James glances at him,

“There’s no listing for 2334.”

Dave shrugs and says, “Maybe they just moved in and haven’t had time to get the sign adjusted.”

“You’re probably right. Or maybe they don’t want to advertise who they are. That way if they are well known and rich, the applicants won’t know to ask for more pay.”

Shaking his head, Dave says, “You and your conspiracy theories. You always think someone is playing an angle or something.”

Shrugging, James just smiles.

Ding!

The elevator door opens and they enter along with several others. James presses the button for the 23rd floor. It takes a few minutes before they arrive as the elevator makes several stops to allow people on and off. By the time they reach the 23rd floor, they are the only ones remaining. Another ***Ding!*** and the door opens. Stepping out, they turn down the hallway to their right and come to the door marked 2334.

James pauses at the door. He turns to Dave. “Should I knock or what?”

“Naw, just go on in.”

Marshalling his courage, James opens the door and enters. Dave follows right behind. The room is empty except for several chairs and two end tables, each boasting a neat pile of magazines and a couple books. Across the room a door stands closed; it bears a sign saying *Private* in bold letters.

“I guess we should sit down and wait.”

Dave glances at the door. “How are they going to know that we are here?”

“There’s probably an alarm on the door. Someone will most likely be out in a minute.”

Looking through the material on a nearby table, James fails to find anything of interest, so he crosses the room to the table next to the door marked *Private*. Lying atop the other reading material sits a small brown book with a peculiar design inscribed in gold leaf upon the cover. Intrigued, James picks up the book but quickly reflexively lets it go when the contact results in a shock of static electricity. The book hits the edge of the table and tumbles to the floor where it lands on its edge, and a piece of paper slips out.

The paper is folded in half. When he picks it up and opens it, he discovers a brief message.

“Welcome and thank you for coming. Glad you found the book. If you could read the first page and then walk through the door, we can begin the interview. If you brought anything with you, please feel free to bring it along.”

James picks up the book and looks at it with increased interest. He turns to Dave and shows him the book and letter. “Look at this.” When Dave joins him, he hands him the letter. While Dave reads, James says, “That’s a dumb way to start an interview. What if I had never found the piece of paper? I could’ve been sitting out here for a long time!”

Dave looks up from the letter and shrugs. “You’re right. This guy must be some kind of an eccentric or something. In the ad, he mentioned role playing games. Maybe in his mind this is some kind of test.”

Nodding agreement, James sits in one of the chairs and opens the book to the first page.

Underlying Principles of Magic

The practice of magic is quite simple and basic. Magic is the process by which an individual taps into the reservoir of strength, or power within himself, and manifests it into changes of the world around him. Each individual contains the ability to manipulate this power. Some have the ability to do very little while others can literally bring down mountains.

Looking up from the book, James turns to his friend. “Unless I am mistaken, this book is going to explain the workings of a magic system. Not Houdini type, but more along the lines of Merlin and Gandalf. It’s talking about using the power within you to manipulate the world around you.”

“Weird. This guy must be a nut,” Dave jokes.

“Yeah, but character or not, a job’s a job.” Turning back to the book, James finishes the first page quickly. Closing the book, he climbs to his feet and the vampiric bats return in full measure. He glances to the door marked *Private* and almost fails to go through with this as he’s never been one to initiate contact with anybody. Sighing, he turns to his friend. “Wish me luck.”

“Luck!” replies Dave, giving his friend an encouraging thumb’s up.

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder he gathers his courage, tucks the book under his arm and heads for the door. Pausing momentarily, he takes a few deep, soothing breaths to calm his nerves and then opens the door and steps through.

The crunch of dried leaves beneath his foot, coupled with the scene before him brings him to a stunned, and sudden stop.

A meadow nestled within a forest of trees stretches out before him. Birdsong fills the air and the wafting of a gentle breeze only adds to the impossible scene. Off to his right warbles a babbling brook that cuts its way through the heart of this pastoral scene.

He remains rooted in dumbfounded shock as his brain tries to make sense of what he’s seeing. Turning around to ask Dave if he’s hallucinating or what, he receives another shock upon discovering that instead of the doorway he had just passed through, a stand of trees rise majestically to the sky nearly ten feet away.

Did I just cross over into the Twilight Zone?

Unable to believe what his own eyes are telling him, he rubs them and then looks around the clearing again as he works to make sense of it. Trees swaying in the gentle breeze; birds soaring against the backdrop of blue sky above; and the soft trickling melody of the stream as it makes its way across the meadow to disappear within the trees on the far side give this place a surreal feel.

Movement out of the corner of his eye draws his attention to the far side of the stream near a fallen log at the edge of the forest. What he sees nearly convinces him that he’s lost his mind. For sitting atop the log is a strange little creature; about four and a half feet in height with skin a dark-green.

color. Wearing a blue vest and a crazy felt hat, it looks out of place in such a surreal scene as the Intelligence peers out from behind eyes of yellow and they're looking right at James.

I'm having a hallucination. This can't be real!

Unsure what to do, he walks through the grass of the meadow toward the creature. He pauses at the stream in wary apprehension when he sees the creature hop off the log and get to its feet. When no hostile action is forthcoming, he leaps across the water and walks the few remaining feet until he is standing before the creature. Staring into those yellow eyes nearly unnerves James completely. Somehow, he summons the courage to say, "Hello."

To his utter astonishment the creature replies with a coherent "Hello."

James' eyes widen in surprise. "You can talk?"

Putting hands on hips, the creature's expression transforms into one that could only be considered sour. "Of course I can talk. Any intelligent creature can talk. But not many have anything worthwhile to say."

Before James can get out his next question, the creature says, "*Where am I?* Was that to be your next question? You're not where you started out, boy. My master has set me here to get you started and that is all I intend to do. I am not here to hold your hand or wet-nurse you, do you understand? The creature gives him an intent look as it waits for a response.

Nodding his head, James gives a weak, "I think so."

"Good. Now listen up and listen well, for I am here to tell you some things and I will only tell you once."

"First of all, magic works here. Read the book you have in your hand. It will help you get a hand on it. Your survival may well depend on it. Scratch that. Your survival *will* depend on it."

"Secondly, you can't go home, at least not right now. Don't try. We won't stop you, but take it on faith that the way is simply not open to you."

"Lastly, get your sorry butt to the village of Trendle."

With that, the creature leaps backward into the air, and with a faint popping noise, disappears.

James ol' boy, he thinks to himself. *You're screwed!*

Chapter Two

His mind whirls in an attempt to come to grips with the enormity of the situation. *There has to be a rational explanation!* The forest surrounding the meadow appears like any forest that might exist back on Earth; pine trees, birds singing in the distance, insects buzzing here and there; normality. Nothing strange, except for the little detail that there is no way he could have arrived at such a place by stepping through a door. This was something straight out of one of his books.

The ad said "traveling". Well, I have traveled. The ad also said that being well read in fantasy novels and experience with role playing games would be a bonus. Thinking of the little creature he had just encountered, James can see the logic in that as well. Such a background might enable a person to more willingly accept these odd occurrences. *Provided of course, that all this is real.*

Okay, let's take this one step at a time. What actually happened to you? You were on the 23rd floor of an office building, stepped through a door and then you find yourself in the middle of this meadow talking with an odd looking little creature. Have you lost your mind?

After taking a quick mental check, he decides insanity is not the culprit. But could an insane person tell? No odd thoughts or urges run through his mind. No hallucinations, unless this meadow and the creature could be considered as such.

Reaching down, he runs his fingers across the grass. *Feels normal.* He again takes in his surroundings. Everything looks and feels quite real. *So, if this is real, then what happened?* A breeze ruffles his hair which only adds to the sense that all this is real. Closing his eyes he takes a deep breath, holds it for a second, then slowly exhales. Opening them again, he finds the meadow unchanged. He didn't really expect that to change things, but it's what everyone does who gets into these sorts of situations.

I'm not in the Twilight Zone. I don't see Rod Sterling over to the side talking to the viewers. At this point, he would hardly be surprised if he did. Then if this place is not a hallucination, it has to be real.

Holding up the book acquired in the waiting room, he takes a much more interested look at it than he did before. An odd design is embossed on the cover, and the book holds not very many pages. *Think, James, think! Let's for the moment consider the possibility that all this is in fact real. What now? You were brought here for some reason; that goes without saying. Why else would that little creature have been "set" here to deliver the message? Could this be for your benefit? Probably not; never is.* James reflects on various books read over the last several years. Some dealt with this sort of thing and if memory serves, the main character rarely has a fun time of it.

For the sake of argument, let's suppose this is in fact, a true guidebook on magic. And let's further suppose that since I was brought here and told to bring it with me, then it stands to reason that I should be able to gain some benefit by the information contained within. Why else would they have bothered? And who exactly are "they?" Realizing some questions are going to have to wait, he opens the book and rereads the first couple paragraphs. Two sentences grab his attention:

Rhyme and meter are the most effective forms of spell construction.

Maintain a visualization of the effect you wish to produce.

Sounds easy enough. What the heck, let's give it a try. Best to keep it simple. He spies a small stick lying on the ground. Concentrating, he creates a visualization of the stick rising off the ground. No words for the words...

Little stick that I have found,

Float three feet off the ground.

Mimicking the action of a dozen different wizards from literature and film, he raises his hand toward the stick and speaks the incantation. With the utterance of the first word, an odd sensation grows deep within his body. Sort of like water rising behind a dam. The growing pressure is not an entirely unpleasant feeling. The utterance of each word causes the pressure to build. As soon as the last word is spoken, the dam breaks and the power surges forth. He can almost see the magic flowing from him to the stick, though it's probably just his imagination.

The stick slowly rises from the ground. It reaches nearly a foot in the air before he becomes so excited at the effect he has wrought that his concentration breaks and the stick falls back to the ground with a clatter.

I DID IT!!!! James ol' boy, you are one amazing wizard! Cavorting around with jubilation, James races over and examines the stick which just a moment before had been floating in the air. He hesitantly reaches out and touches it. Seeming normal, he picks it up and examines the wood more closely but doesn't see anything out of the ordinary. Feeling a little cocky, he formulates another set of words, visualizes the effect he desires, then tosses the stick into the air yelling,

Stick who once on the ground did lie,

Stay your course there in the sky!

His verse wouldn't win any poetry contests; but then, at the moment he's more into functionality than artistry. This time he is determined to maintain the visualization. With the utterance of the last word, the power once again surges forth. The stick's flight through the air comes to a sudden halt three feet above the ground. As it floats motionless in the air, James controls his excitement so as to maintain the visualization and not disrupt the spell.

He comes to the stick and grins while walking around where it hovers in mid-air. Moving his hand over and under the stick, such as what a magician might do to prove to his audience the absence

supporting wires, he encounters nothing. He then reaches out and places his index finger upon the wooden surface. The stick moves the barest of a fraction, but otherwise maintains its position. Placing his hand under the stick, he ceases concentrating upon his desire for the stick to remain motionless in the air and it drops into his hand.

“Yes!”

Quite pleased, he smiles at his success. *I could get to like this.* Then sadness comes over him when he thinks of how his grandparents are going to feel when he doesn't come home. *I may never make home. Oh my God! What about Dave? He saw me go through the door. How will he take it? I guess the best he can, that's all any of us can do.*

Reaching into his backpack he removes one of the candy bars he had brought along and munches on it while contemplating his next course of action. *Savor it while you can. No telling how long it will last before you can get another.* Then the reality of his situation sinks in. *What am I going to do for food? Shelter? Toilet Paper???* The thought of using leaves doesn't bother him half as much as it had before that one camping trip with his dad oh so long ago. He smiles wistfully at the memory.

Realizing that leaning against the log isn't going to improve his situation, he finishes the candy bar then takes a really good look around the clearing to determine by which direction he should leave the meadow. Other than the stream, there was naught but trees and more trees. Each direction looked as densely forested as another.

By the position of the sun, it is a little after midday. Which kind of surprises him as it had once been mid-morning when he and Dave departed the bus on Commercial Avenue. *Maybe time works differently here?*

One of the things that little creature had said was “to get your sorry butt to the village of Trendle wherever that may be. The forest looks unforgiving, lacking even the most rudimentary type of path. He'll have to forge his way through a tangle of underbrush when he leaves.

Trendle. *It would've been more helpful if he would have at least told me which way to go!* Sighing he pulls a quarter out of his pocket, **Heads-** North or South, **Tails-** East or West. Flipping the coin into the air he lets chance be his guide. He grabs the quarter on its descent, flips it on the back of his hand and looks, **Tails.** East or west then. Taking the coin one more time he tosses it up into the air. **Heads-** East **Tails-**West. This time he allows the quarter to fall to the ground and come to rest. **Tails.** West it is.

Determining where West lies by the position of the sun, he shoulders his backpack. A touch of excitement mingles with his fear and apprehension. Sure, he had no clue where he was or even if he would ever find his way home. But beneath such a beautiful blue sky on a warm summer day, things didn't seem quite so bad. He *had* worked magic hadn't he?

En route across the meadow to the forest's edge, he spies a sturdy branch lying upon the ground. After removing the smaller twigs and branches, he soon holds a stout walking stick. Turning back toward the forest, he pauses upon reaching the edge. His excitement dims as he stands there about to enter an unknown world. *What lies beyond these trees? What secrets may be hidden within? Beneficial ones? Or those less so?* Taking a deep breath, he pushes a tangle of undergrowth out of the way and enters the forest.

Using the walking stick to aid in clearing a path, he forges through the underbrush lining the edge of the clearing only to find more beyond. James had always liked being in the woods, even ones overgrown as this. Time spent in the outdoors had always brought him a peace that could never be found in a city or around other people. His dad used to take him camping in forests similar to this one when he was little. Good times.

James soon realizes that this forest is nothing like the tame camping areas where his dad had taken him. For one thing, this one has no paths. The bushes and trees have become an entangled mess, sometimes forcing him to push his way through, often with painful results. Walking across the uneven ground soon has his ankles aching. Bleeding from a myriad of scratches and scrapes, his feet protesting, the adventure was over and all he wanted to do was go home.

An hour into the forest, a growl from his stomach reminds him that his last meal had been some time ago. Within his backpack still remained a single candy bar. But not wanting to consume the last of his food, he sighs and leaves it where it is, much to the loud protest of his stomach.

Time passes as he continues making his way through the forest. The sun gradually makes its descent toward the horizon. The shadows begin growing long. In the deepening gloom, his imagination turns the surroundings into a veritable host of frightful beasts. Every sound makes him jump, every shadow contains a monster. After the sixth murderous beast bent on his destruction turns out to be an old stump overgrown by a bush, he figures it to be time to find a place to hole up for the night.

But there was no place. All about him was nothing but trees and more trees. Sleeping upon the ground held little interest as he didn't want to be awakened by a hungry carnivore. He turns his attention to the upper boughs and locates a sturdy one forming a crook with the trunk that has accessible lower branches. Climbing never having been one of his strengths, it takes several attempts before making it off the ground. He reaches the limb chosen to be where he will spend his first night upon this world and settles down in the crook. Leaning his back against the tree trunk, he tries and fails miserably to get comfortable.

The forest descends into a place of haunting shadows and mysterious noises as the night gradually deepens into darkness. Hungry, scared and exhausted, he clings to the tree. His body hurts from hundreds of scratches received from pushing through obstinate bushes all afternoon. The throbbing from his feet and ankles lends another level to his misery. Shifting around as best he can, he simply can't find any position that is comfortable. It's not long before his bottom begins to hurt then grow numb, forcing him to continue moving about in a fruitless attempt to alleviate his discomfort.

In the tree scared and alone, the light gradually fading away around him, for the first time he truly knows what it means to be alone. The intricate canopy of leaves prevents even the smallest glimmer of starlight from coming through. He sits there in the dark, head resting against the bole of the tree and listens to the sounds of the forest. Off in the distance he can hear the passage of some large creature as it makes its way through the underbrush. Not long after that, from off in another direction comes the sound of two animals fighting. Hoping nothing finds him in his perch, he hugs the tree all the harder.

I want to go home! Tears of loneliness and fear roll down his cheeks. Somehow, though long in coming, he does manage to fall asleep.

Howrrrrrrrr!

Startled awake, teeth chattering from the cold, James is hit with the realization that he hadn't been having a bad dream after all. Another howl brings him fully awake. Off in the distance comes the sound of a wolf pack on the hunt. With every howl, fear that he may be found causes him to grip the tree all the tighter. Face pressed tightly against the bark, his eyes dart to and fro in an attempt to pierce the shadows of the forest and see those that hunt the night. All the while he silently prays to remain undetected.

The darkness of the night is alleviated somewhat by slivers of moonlight that have somehow managed to breach the thick forest canopy. The sparse rays give the forest an aura of ghostly light. Perched in his tree, James remains still and quiet while listening to the hunting pack.

Minutes pass and it's soon apparent that the hunt is taking them toward his tree. Fear such as he has never known springs to life within him. Suddenly their cries alter, becoming more intense as they crash through the underbrush straight toward his tree. A moment later, three dark shadows race through the darkness not far below his feet.

“Get away! Help Me!”

Cries of terror from off in the distance split the night. *They're not after me!* Relief at not being their target is followed quickly by shame at being glad it is someone else. For a fleeting moment he considers doing something to help, perhaps shouting for the man to climb a tree. But fear stills his tongue. He does not want to die.

Off in the distance, he caught sight of the man racing through a patch of moonlight. Hot on his heels, two wolves passed through the moonlight a split-second later.

Tears stream down his cheeks as the man's fearful cries for help sound once more. A bloodcurdling scream; then the night turns deathly silent. James shakes with fear and shame; fear that he may be next, shamed by his own cowardice.

There was nothing I could do! Had I gone to help, I would have been torn to shreds as well. Getting little comfort from such selfish reasoning, he presses his face against the bole of the tree and tries to think of home as he attempts to shut out the sound of the wolves. Sometime later, he hears the wolf howl as they race off through the forest. As the woods grow quiet once more, he tries to keep his imagination from replaying the scene of the man's grisly death. Sleep, when it does come, is filled with dreams of moonlight and wolves.

The morning sun wakes a very tired, cold and sore James. The events of the night before show him that to remain in the forest will mean his death. *I gotta get out of here. No more pussyfooting around, I have to cover ground before night comes!*

Making sure the forest floor holds no menacing predators, he makes his way from the tree. He then takes care of his morning business, realizing that plant leaves are not a good substitute, and turns his mind to food, or rather his lack thereof.

Nearby stands a bush bearing little pink berries. In his starved state, they look delicious. Walking over to the bush he pulls off one of the berries. Holding it between his fingers, the thought occurs to him that the berry may very well be poisonous. He contemplates his chances of survival if it is in fact poisonous; they aren't good, but the growling of his stomach cannot be denied. Figuring one won't kill

him, he puts it in his mouth and bites into the firm flesh of the berry just hard enough to squirt forth a small measure of its tart juice. ~~Not very ripe but not entirely unpleasant either.~~ Chewing it slowly, he waits to see if there will be any unpleasant reactions. When none materialize, he swallows it.

Picking several more of the riper ones, he wraps them in a leaf before putting them in his backpack. If he doesn't get sick in an hour or two then he will eat the rest.

Recalling the events of the night before, he wonders if the man killed by the wolves might have something that may be of use. James grabs his spear and heads in that direction, not looking forward to what he will find. It doesn't take him long before coming to a scene right out of an old slash-and-burn movie. Bones litter the ground; blood was everywhere. The man's clothing had been shredded.

Horror takes hold of James as his gaze falls upon what's left of the poor guy's jacket. The letters *A-V-E-S...* are still discernable across the remaining portion of the jacket's back. It looked very much like a letterman's jacket from his high school. Using the end of his walking stick he turns the torso over. Stitched in gold lettering is the name "Randle."

His legs give out and he drops to his knees. "Oh, Seth." Shrieking, he cries, "There was nothing I could do!" Guilt and shame at his weakness last night leave him shaking and wracked with sobs. *I should have done something!* Would the knowledge that it was Seth being pursued by wolves have made any difference? Ashamedly, he realizes it wouldn't. *Coward!*

"Though there was nothing I could do for you last night, there is something I can do for you now." With that, James grabs a rock and begins digging a hole, a grave for his former classmate. It takes him some time since the ground is firmly packed, but he manages to excavate a cavity large enough. He then sets about gathering the grisly task of gathering the scattered remains of Seth and lays them in the grave. When the job is complete, James covers Seth with dirt then makes a cairn of stones. Tying two sticks together with vines for a makeshift cross, he hammers it into the ground with his stone as the head of the cairn.

Taking a moment, he says a few parting words before picking up his backpack and walking stick. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to settle his shaky nerves, he sets out once more westward. Hopefully, he'll come across this Trendle before the wolves pick up his scent. The woods no longer bring him peace as they had yesterday. Wariness and dread fill him today.

As he forges through the at times unyielding brush, James thinks about what it means that Seth had been in this world too. Could he have gone to the interview just as James had? And if so, there could be others. Thinking back to the newscast the night before taking that fateful trip to Commercial Avenue, he realizes there could be at least one other person that had passed through the door marked "Private" a girl. *Could there be more?*

After jumping for a third time at the loud cry of a nearby bird, James comes to the conclusion that he is going to need more than a walking stick should the wolves return. Judging by his slow rate of progress through the forest, it's unlikely that he will break free before night comes again, and he may not remain unmolested.

Thinking about his walking stick, and how it is in many ways like a spear, he gets an idea. Pausing for a moment, he opens the book on magic and makes sure he understands what he must do. First, he forms a visualization of his desired outcome, then puts together the words. He leans his walking stick against the side of a tree, takes three steps back and says:

*As straight and true as a spear can be,
Filled with the strength of an old oak tree.
Make it sharp, to penetrate steel,
And perfectly balanced for user to feel.*

With the last word comes the surge of power from deep within him. He watches as the walking stick slowly changes, becoming the mirror image of his visualization. Its surface smoothes, the end of the ground rounds off while the other comes to a very fine point. When the spell runs its course, where the walking stick once stood, now stands a dark brown spear.

James waits a moment to ensure nothing else may happen, such as the spear exploding or something equally unpleasant. When nothing does, he steps forward and tests the sharpened tip with his finger. He jerks his hand back and a drop of blood wells out. *Sharp, I hardly even gave it any pressure.* Feeling somewhat better for having a weapon, he takes the spear and once again sets off toward the west.

What about armor, magical shields, spells of protection? As handy as having those would be, James simply didn't wish to push his luck as far as magic goes. *I'm new at this. Keep it "Simple and Stupid."* Besides, he hadn't the faintest idea how to create something like that. He didn't know enough about how to make a suit of armor, so how could he create one with magic?

As a Dungeon Master, he had forever stymied his players when they had attempted to use wish spells. They wish for a million gold pieces, they would receive a million gold pieces fused together, usually in a very remote locale. They wish for a suit of +100 plate armor, they would receive it. But when the armor is two feet thick and weighs a ton, it doesn't do much good.

No, he figures to come at this magic business slowly, gradually growing in proficiency over time. He only hopes this world will allow him such a luxury.

Late in the morning, he comes upon a small clearing. He pauses at the edge upon spying several rabbits. His stomach has been grumbling for the past hour, those berries hadn't done much to satiate his hunger. As he gazes upon the rabbits, a memory of when his father had once caught and cooked a rabbit during one of their camping trips makes it even worse.

Knowing that his skill rating with a spear was probably somewhere near zero, he comes up with a spell to help his aim. Holding his spear and preparing to throw, he quietly says:

*Spear of mine please strike true,
Strike the rabbit and go right through.*

As the last syllable is spoken, he takes aim at the nearest rabbit, draws back his arm and throws. When the spear leaves his hand, he again feels the surge of power. The spear flies unerringly through the air to impale the rabbit. True to the words of the spell, the tip of the spear passes completely through the rabbit and embeds itself deep within the ground. The attack causes rabbits to scatter in all directions. In no time, the clearing was deserted save for the lone, dead rabbit.

Yeah, Baby! Excited, James runs over to the rabbit, watching as it kicks in its death throes. It took some doing to pull his spear from the ground. Next time, he may have to alter his wording so as to only have the spear only kill the rabbit, not pass all the way through. But what's the difference, he has done it!

Once the spear came free, he turns his attention to the rabbit. Gazing at it, he suddenly realizes he hasn't a clue what to do now. His only experience with this sort of thing was during the one camping trip in which his dad had caught and skinned one. *Didn't dad use his knife to remove the skin?* James wishes he had spent more time watching and less time skipping rocks on the water.

The only thing he has that could be considered sharp is the spear which will be little use in skinning a rabbit. Looking around the clearing, he spies a hand-sized stone. Striking it against a larger one, the smaller stone splits in two. One half has a semi-sharp edge; it should work.

Very carefully he uses the rock to slice off the head and feet. Feeling slightly nauseated, James takes the rock and slowly peels off the skin. The rock is definitely not the best tool for the job but he eventually has a rabbit ready for the spit.

His blood soaked hands remind him of Seth, and a shudder runs through him, his gorge rising. *Steady boy, don't let the past rattle you. You did the best you could for him.*

Placing the carcass on a layer of leaves, James uses dirt to rid his hands of much of the blood before gathering kindling. After clearing a site for the fire, he stacks the wood together then places bits of dried moss beneath.

Moss I placed under the wood

Ignite so I can cook my food

Hokey though his wording may be, they prove effective. The moss begins to smoke, then bursts into flame. He kneels and gently blows on the flickering flame, coaxing it higher until the kindling catches. Satisfied that the fire will continue on its own, he gathers several sticks to create a makeshift spit.

Once it's set and the fat from the rabbit begins dripping into the fire, he relaxes against a tree trunk. Every once in a while, the far off cry of a wolf echoes through the trees. His fear of being discovered spikes each time. He definitely does not wish to spend another night in the trees, but what choice does he have?

The wolves are remarkably like the ones you would expect to find in a forest back home. In fact, all the animals he has seen so far have been very Earth-like. If it wasn't for the little creature and the fa-

that he can do magic, he could very well be back home on a campout.

He and his dad had gone camping a time or two. It was one of his few good memories of his parents. They would go up around Yosemite and backpack, do the nature thing. His dad would catch fish and they would have a fish fry. When they returned home they would tell his mom about all the fish they had caught, both real and imagined. She would then say how good he is and how proud of his little man she was.

What would dad say if he could see me now? I'm starting a bit rough but I have food and a weapon as well as my health; I'm managing.

"You're doing fine son," his dad would say.

"I wish you were here with me, Dad. I don't remember all that you tried to teach me. I sure miss you."

"You're alive James, be happy. You're in a bad situation but you're making the best of it. I taught you self-reliance and I'm mighty proud of you." His father stands there with a smile, the smile he always wore when James did something he especially liked.

With a tear in his eye James walks over to his father and gives him a hug. His father returns the hug warmly.

Crash!

Startled out of his daydream, James finds the spit that had once held his lunch burning in the fire and his dinner running away in the mouth of what looks like a small dog. *Stupid, daydreaming fool!* Lurching to his feet, he races after. Running under bushes and around trees, the dog quickly out-paces him and is gone, along with his lunch.

"Damn!"

Returning to his fire, James takes his spear and looks around the clearing for more rabbits or a more acceptable substitute. Nothing! His yell and the chasing of the dog must have scared everything away. *No use sitting around here!* Using his foot, he puts out the fire by covering it with dirt. Grabbing his backpack, he stalks off with self-deprecating recriminations running through his mind, and a fiercer growl in his belly.

No more than half an hour goes by before he has found, killed and begun roasting another small animal. Not sure exactly what it is, or was, it kind of looks like a squirrel but the size of a small cat. This time he keeps his wits about him and remains alert for any scavengers who might happen by.

The aroma of roasting meat makes his stomach cramp. Impatient for the meat to be done, he removes it from the fire when it has cooked "enough." Taking the meat to a nearby tree, he sits with his back against the trunk and proceeds to eat.

As he bites into the roasted meat, the juices run down his chin. *Never has anything tasted so good. Of course, I've never been this hungry before in my life. Wonder what grandma would do with this*

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