

Stefan Gemmel: Vol. 1, IN THE SIGN OF THE CRYSTAL BALL - THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

Bd. 1: Im Zeichen der Zauberkugel - Das Abenteuer beginnt

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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THE FORBIDDEN DOOR

It's now or never!

Alex ran up the stairs as though a ghost was after him. He took two steps at a time but suddenly the tip of his sneaker caught the top of a step and he tripped. Luckily, he was able to break his fall with his hands.

"Oh no!" His hands ached as if a whole house had fallen on them. Never mind that! He had to keep going! He only had a few hours at the most. He pulled himself together and ran more carefully up the last few steps. At last he could be in the attic without being disturbed. Finally!

Today was the day he was going to open the forbidden door which he had discovered hidden behind the ruin of an old cupboard on his last visit to the attic. The forbidden door - at least that's what his grandma had called it when he'd mentioned it at dinner at the beginning of the week. Sounded like something from an old adventure book, but grandma was serious: "Promise me that none of you will go through that door! Do you understand? That door is out of bounds for you! For everyone in fact! There are things in there which you don't need to see. Whoever goes through the door won't be getting any dinner. Or breakfast either!"

Grandma Ilse tended to deal with all problems using her cooking skills. In doing so she first pulled a stern face and shook her index finger menacingly to show just how serious the matter was. Then she threatened the person in question with food deprivation or a whole week of lentil soup for lunch. She was very strict like that. Although of course, her response had just piqued Alex's interest all the more. A quiet dinner wasn't possible that day. His imagination was already working overtime – a forbidden door?

Of course, Grandma Ilse had noticed that Alex was distracted during dinner. She had shaken her head and murmured "Just like his grandfather." Then she'd

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sylvia.schuster@carlsen.de

carried on gently stroking Cadabra the cat who had stretched herself out on grandma's lap. But Alex wasn't sure that he hadn't just imagined grandma's murmuring. Because officially Grandpa Aurelius wasn't to be spoken of in the family...

Sally and Liv were from New York, his half-sisters. But if you rated them purely on how annoying they were, they were really like full sisters. Both of them were unbelievably irritating pests.

A little over two years ago, the twins' father John, had moved from New York to live with Alex's mum. Life with his new family was actually pretty cool, even though his parents didn't have much time for him. But Alex was used to that already with his real dad. And so mostly he was able to do whatever he felt like. Since then Sally and Liv were always around. Alex tried to keep them from actually getting involved in anything because, truth be told, they drove him completely up the wall. The pair were only harmless when they were sleeping – and even then, Alex wasn't a hundred percent sure. Together those girls were a two-component bomb. But now they were a family, or something like it, and so they were spending the holidays together at Alex's Grandma Ilse's house.

Grandma even seemed to quite like the girls, if that was even possible!

Right at this moment, in fact, the three of them were out shopping in town together – again! "Girl stuff...", murmured Alex and enjoyed the silence in the house. No irritating giggling, no banging of pots and pans in the kitchen. No: just silence! And, of course, the opportunity to open the forbidden door. Yesterday, while Grandma Ilse was taking a walk with the twins, Alex had cleared out the ruined cupboard in front of the door and pushed it out of the way. That had cost him a whole hour!

To reach the attic you had to climb the old, dark staircase behind the little door on the top floor of the house. Beyond that stretched the huge attic. Although

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nobody was home to hear him, Alex tiptoed towards the forbidden door which was right at the far end of the attic. He carefully stepped over creaking floorboards which hadn't seen daylight for several decades. Cautiously Alex reached out for the door handle and pushed down on it. He estimated he had around two hours left. Two hours in which he alone could discover the secret...but the door wouldn't open! Alex pushed the handle down more vigorously, shook it, but the door didn't give an inch. Locked! But then he noticed that there was no keyhole. Just this door handle.

"Strange", whispered Alex. He lay flat on the floor and squinted through the narrow gap under the door. The room beyond must be pitch-dark, as he couldn't see anything but blackness.

He stood up and shook the door handle again. But it was just the same – the door wouldn't open. He sighed in disappointment. This couldn't be happening! How could a door without a keyhole be locked? Alex looked around himself thoughtfully. By now he knew the attic inside out – after all, he had spent countless hours amongst all the stuff that found itself up here: old sofas which were falling apart, rotting cupboards which were slowly crumbling. Window frames without windows and picture frames without pictures. Tatters which had once been clothes, and clothes which now served as rags. Hobs which no one could cook on anymore and sinks which no one would dream of washing themselves at. And between it all: dust and dirt and droppings and junk. Time and again Alex was drawn to this place and he had had his hands on pretty much everything up here – aside from the droppings and dirt, of course. Some things he'd looked at very carefully and a few things he'd even named. For example, he'd named the standard lamp in the corner "Darky" because it'd probably never light up anything ever again. And the stuffed badger on top of the cupboard he'd dubbed "Cross Eyes" because one of its glass eyes was set so badly that the badger had a terrible squint.

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But none of that interested Alex today. No – today he wanted to open the forbidden door. By force if he had to.

He stood up and pushed against the door. At first carefully but then with more and more force and eventually with all his might. And finally, the door opened a crack! So it wasn't locked! Something was blocking it from the other side. Alex pushed again and gradually he managed to open the door wide enough to squeeze through the gap. A musty smell hit him in the face. A dim beam of light shone into the room through a tiny window in the ceiling and lit up dust motes which appeared to dance with each other in the air. Alex felt for a light switch next to the door and to his relief found one. He flicked the switch and as the light bulb lit up the room, his heart skipped a beat in sheer amazement.

Contrary to his expectations the room wasn't messy at all. While the attic was filled to the brim with all his grandparents' junk, this room was absolutely spick and span. Shelving units as high as the room itself stood against the walls and were filled with neatly-ordered books and files full of papers. Boxes and cases of all descriptions stood next to huge bottles all filled with things Alex had never seen before: chains, amulets, rings and also stuffed animals such as scorpions, spiders and a giant salamander. Alex felt as though he was in a museum or a library. One thing was clear to him, though: it would take him years to look at, touch and explore all the things in here. The main thing was that he had a tingling sensation in his stomach. Not just because he was excited about his discovery. No, the tingling was mainly due to hope. For the first time ever, he had the feeling that he had taken one step closer to solving the great mystery of his life. He looked slowly around himself. Was the solution to the mystery here? Would he finally find some answers?

Without realising what he was doing, Alex rubbed his hands together in anticipation. His eyes roamed from object to object. And just as his eyes flew around the room so too were his thoughts flying around his head. One thing was

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clear: the room and everything in it belonged to his grandfather. It must be the contents of grandpa's old study. He had been a professor and had dedicated his life to research. He had travelled the whole world and here was Alex, standing in front of all the treasures his grandfather had brought home with him. At this moment, Alex felt closer to his Grandpa Aurelius than he had a long time.

On Alex's fourth birthday the telephone had rung and Alex had been excited by the thought of talking to his favourite grandpa on the phone. However, his mother had quickly disappeared into another room with the telephone. She had whispered into the phone and reappeared a short time later with swollen eyes. Alex couldn't remember what had happened after that. He only knew that Grandpa Aurelius had disappeared whilst on one of his research trips. Neither Alex's mother nor grandmother liked to talk about it; the pain of it all seemed to be simply too much for them. In particular, Grandma Ilse had mourned for a very long time. But then, during one of their visits in the holidays, there had been a change. Alex had been seven then. His mother had suggested that they pack up grandpa's things and take them up to the attic. And indeed, since then Grandma Ilse had appeared to do much better and nobody talked about the Professor anymore.

Alex didn't understand it. He had so many questions. Alex couldn't imagine anything better than spending his whole life doing research, discovering things, travelling the world and solving unanswered mysteries. The things grandpa must have seen! However, Alex's family had never seemed to appreciate grandpa's work. In fact, it was quite the opposite: when Alex used to ask his father what exactly his grandfather was researching he'd always got the following answer: "Your grandpa is a professor of tomfoolery and idiocy. He chases delusions and researches ridiculousness."

Only his grandmother gave Alex somewhat clearer answers to his questions. She had been just as excited by Grandpa Aurelius' research as Alex was. The only thing was that she didn't exactly know what he did.

"Grandpa Aurelius dealt with the occult.", she'd once said to Alex. "That is, he researched magic and rituals from around the whole world. I've never met anyone who knows as much about magic as he did." Oh, how he wished he could ask his grandpa the questions himself! And even more so – how he wished he could explore this room together with him. "Maybe this room will finally give me some answers," he whispered to himself while gazing at the shelves, chests, and cupboards. Yes, Alex could just imagine that perhaps in this room he would find some answers. Where better than here? He stood in the middle of his grandfather's world, in the midst of his collection of magical secrets.

Alex looked around. Where on earth should he begin? Which book should he read first? Which box should he open first? What out of everything here might give him the answer? The answer to the one question which even now slipped past Alex's lips in a whisper, as if his thoughts had, like his body, squeezed into the room. Alex heard himself whisper: "Grandpa, where are you? Where on earth did you disappear to?". The sound of his own voice appeared to calm Alex somewhat. His heart beat slower, the tingling in his stomach stopped and his glances became more focused until finally his eyes rested on a chest. That was probably the reason why the door had been so difficult to open. An old, wooden chest had been lying in front of it! Alex asked himself how that was possible. How had the last person to leave this room pushed this big, solid chest in front of the door from the outside?

Alex crouched down. Suddenly he heard a noise from the attic in the next room. He stayed completely still. Grandmother and the two Terror-Twins couldn't be back already! The forbidden door swung slowly open and Cadabra slipped into the room. The cat sat down and looked at the chest with curiosity. Alex knelt

down next to her. What a fright! He gave her a quick stroke along her spine and then turned back to the chest. The lid wasn't quite closed. A book was wedged in the crack. It looked old. Alex peered at the tattered pages which were poking out of the leather binding. He felt himself being pulled towards the book to look at it more closely. On his knees, he slid closer to the chest and carefully pulled the notebook out. Dust puffed out with it. Alex looked closely at the front cover. "The Research of Professor Baumann – Spells, Magic and the Occult" had been written in a neat script on the front cover. Alex recognised the handwriting immediately – it was his grandfather's! His hands were shaking with excitement, Alex opened the book and saw a note written on the first page:

"I have always tried to view my research in a purely scientific light. The results of my work are collected here for posterity. In this book, I have included old legends which I have been able to prove are true, spells which I have personally tested or whose efficacy I have directly witnessed, and magical implements whose function I have investigated."

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