

THE CHRONICLES OF DECLAN PIERCE

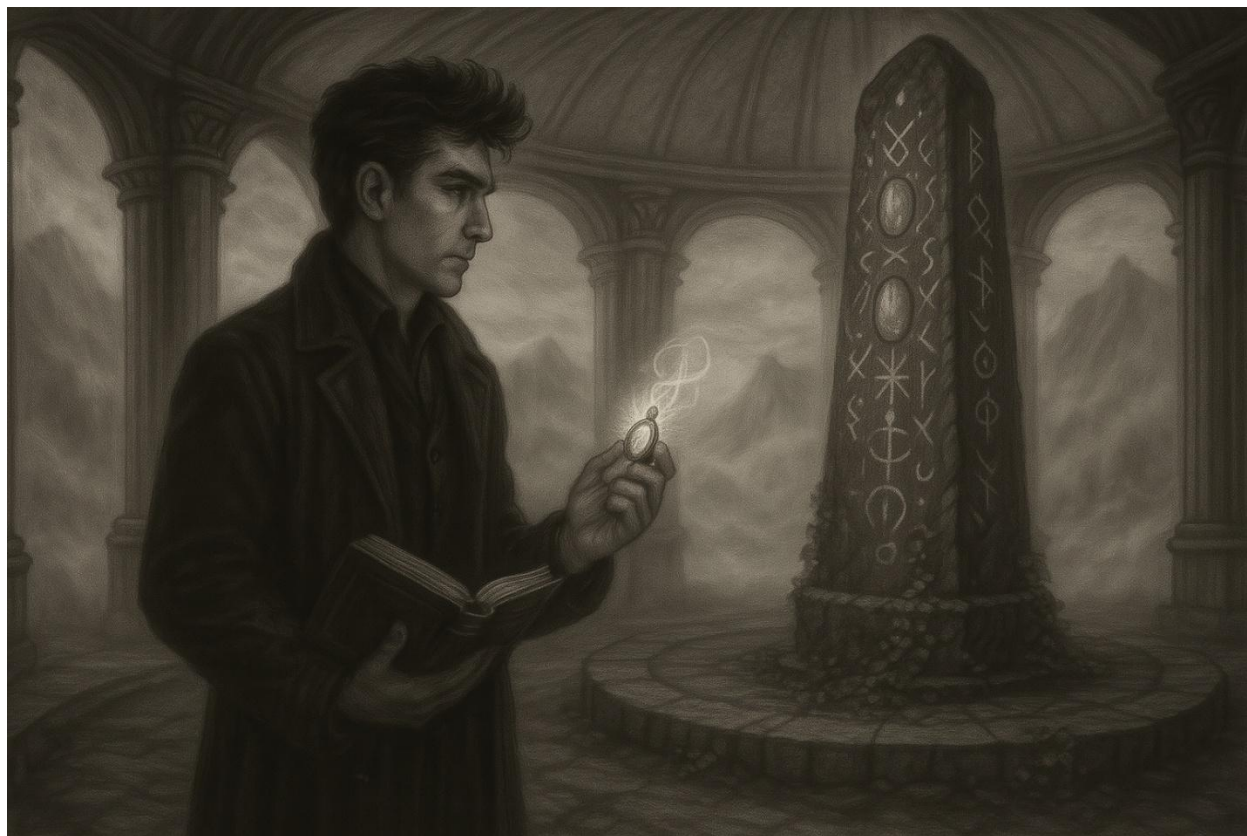


ECHOES OF THE VEILHEART

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Through the Gate	3
Chapter 2. Welcome to Elfhalm.....	10
Chapter 3. Ancestral Echoes	16
Chapter 4. A Way Back	23
Chapter 5. The Gathering Storm	29
Chapter 6. The Elder's Circle	37
Chapter 7. A Bargain for the Veilheart	43
The King's Gambit	48
Perfect Ambiguity	52
Pocket ESP	58
The Nethermind	60

Chapter 1 – Through the Gate



The Waypoint stood open in Garrick's forge, its spiral of dark violet energy casting shifting shadows across the soot-darkened stone floor. It pulsed like a heartbeat – like my heartbeat – synchronized with the amulet still burning warm in my hand. The forge, usually crackling with magical embers and the scent of metal and oil, had gone utterly still.

Garrick hadn't moved, but his hands twitched at his sides, caught between restraint and alarm. His heavy leather apron was dusted with metal shavings, and his soot-streaked brow furrowed with concern.

"Careful, buddy," he said, voice rough with apprehension. "You can't be sure where this thing leads."

He wasn't wrong. But I couldn't shake the pull. The sketch in the book – the perfectly arranged stone circle, the glyphs, the strange familiarity – it wasn't just an image anymore. It was almost like a memory, but one that I hadn't lived. A forgotten dream. A song half-heard and somehow known by heart.

"I know what this looks like," I said. "I can't explain it, but it doesn't feel dangerous. It feels... more like a call to come home."

Vivian crossed her arms. She stood just behind the glow, framed in its unnatural light, her storm-grey eyes narrowed with concern. Though her face was painted with wariness, her voice began to soften.

"Look, Garrick's right – there's no way you can know where this thing leads. But I get it. You feel something. That doesn't mean you should follow it."

I looked down at the book, still open to the page. My thumb traced the edge of the illustration.

"What if I've been there before? Or if something – someone – is waiting for me?"

Vivian's voice dropped low, serious. "I'm all for chasing ghosts and magical conspiracy theories, but you're not doing it alone. At least wait until we understand more."

I looked up at her – those sharp, questioning eyes trying to reason with me. She was right, in every logical way. But this feeling wasn't logical. The magic in the room – the pulling invitation – had already chosen its recipient.

I took a step back.

Vivian's brow furrowed. "Declan?"

I turned, shooting her one final look. "I'm sorry," I said.

And then I ran, plunging through the Waypoint at full speed without a second thought.

Not a second later, I was sprinting across the smooth ground of a completely foreign land. Just as before, when Vivian and I had crossed the Waypoint together in the underground rail station, there was no strange feeling. It was simply like stepping from one world to another without any lag.

I quickly slowed to a walk, my boots crunching softly on lichen-dusted stone. The light hit me immediately. Gone was the dark-lit and muggy air of Garrick's forge. I was outside now. The sunlight was warm but gentle, like early morning gold. I took in a deep breath, and the air felt lighter, cleaner, alive with some kind of latent energy.

I found myself standing on a wide, circular platform of pale, ancient stone. Intricate glyphs curved across the floor beneath my feet, and patches of soft moss crept between the seams. Vines wound their way up carved marble pillars, and the air hummed with an energy that made the hair on my arms rise.

The shrine was here. It was real. Just as the grimoire had drawn it.

A perfect ring of stone columns surrounded a domed center, each pillar inscribed with the same glyphs I'd seen glowing on the amulet. Embedded within the structure were gemstones—purple, crystalline, softly pulsing like magical heartbeats.

And something else. I felt it in my chest, in my fingertips, in the very core of my shadow-born power.

I stood for a few moments, embracing the sensation. It was as if the magic of the Nether was welcoming me, melding with me, empowering me.

I raised a hand and let a ribbon of black mist spiral into the air. It moved as if it was dancing in zero gravity. I shadow-warped ten feet ahead, and it was smoother than I'd ever experienced.

No resistance. Practically effortless.

I did it again, rising up beside a vine-covered plinth. Then again, to the edge of the platform. Standing on the platform I could feel the wind tousling my hair.

I came to a cliffside and could now tell I was on a mountaintop. The landscape from the cliff was breathtaking. Towering mountain ridges curved across the horizon, their jagged spines softened by ancient trees and glowing foliage that shimmered faintly in the light. A river snaked through the valleys far below, reflecting the sky like a silver ribbon.

Then I saw it – a village nestled between the hills. White stone buildings. Spires made of crystal and archways that bent like living bone. It felt alive, ancient, and serene. There was no sound from below, only the whisper of the wind brushing against the trees and through my jacket.

I hadn't realized I was holding my breath until my mind suddenly rang with a familiar voice.

"Declan? Declan, are you there?"

I blinked. The voice was in my head.

“Viv?”

“Holy hell, it worked! Ah, thank God you’re alive!” she said, breathless with relief.

I let out a shallow laugh. “Still standing. But wow. Good to know our link works on an interdimensional level.”

“Yeah, these rings never cease to amaze. So, where are you? What’s it like?” she said anxiously.

“I’m outside at what appears to be a shrine of some sort. It’s just like the one in the grimoire. It’s... incredible here.”

I switched over to our visual link and began projecting my surroundings to Vivian – the sweeping carvings, the pulsing gems, the distant glowing spires.

Vivian’s response was silent awe for a beat, then: “It’s beautiful. Looks like something out of a fairy tale. So, uh... any chance there’s a good map inside that grimoire?”

“I didn’t exactly plan the vacation.”

“You’re lucky, you know. You could’ve wound up anywhere.”

“I know. But I somehow knew I’d be fine. Like I’ve felt this place before.”

“I’m glad you’re okay, but that was still pretty reckless, Declan,” she snapped, her voice cracked with emotion. “I’m usually the one throwing myself into dangerous situations. If we both start being reckless, we’re screwed.”

I smiled, closing my eyes for a second. "I'll be okay. Just give me some time to figure out what this place wants from me."

"Wants from you?"

"I think... it's trying to tell me something. Or show me.... I don't know."

"Okay. But while you're over there figuring out what this place *wants* from you, have you got any idea on how you're going to get back?"

I thought for a moment and opened my mouth to reply –

But then a voice, warm and distant, drifted across the air.

"Hello."

I turned on instinct.

There, at the base of the shrine, stood a figure.

She was tall with luminous skin that shimmered faintly like polished ivory and hair like flowing white silk. Her robes, stitched with silver thread, shimmered with faint starlight, and her eyes – a pale, glowing blue – watched me with calm, ancient recognition.

She stepped forward, tucking a strand of hair behind a pointed ear.

She was an elf.

An angelic, fairytale creature come to life.

"You're human," she said, half stunned, half confused. "How did you get here?"

"Uh, Viv," I thought quickly, "I'm gonna have to get back to you."

“Wait, what? Declan, what did you –”

I shut the link.

My heart thudded in my chest. The elf didn’t move. She didn’t need to.

Her presence alone felt like an answer to a question I hadn’t asked yet.

I took a cautious step forward.

“Hello there,” I replied, trying to remain calm. “I am a human. My name is Declan Pierce. I came here from Earth.... with this.” I briefly showed the amulet in my hand, its glow still pulsing. “Although, I’m not entirely sure where here is.

“Where exactly am I?” I asked in a genuinely curious tone.

Her eyebrows raised, and her expression froze momentarily.

“Mr. Pierce,” she said slowly. “This is the Netherport of Elfhalm.”

Chapter 2 – Welcome to Elfhalm



The Elven beauty watched me for a few moments, her expression unreadable. Finally, she dipped her head slightly and stepped closer. Her tone was gentle but precise, like someone trained for diplomacy.

"Forgive my initial caution," she said. "My name is Nenica."

Her voice held an almost melodic resonance – neither cold nor warm but layered with a kind of thoughtful grace. Her eyes, still glowing faintly like luminous moonlight behind misted glass, scanned me again, resting finally on the amulet in my hand.

"That stone," she said softly. "Now I understand how you arrived. But how in the realms did you come to possess such a thing?"

I looked down at the violet gem pulsing in my palm. "That's kind of a long story," I said, meeting her gaze. "But the short version is... I found it."

Nenica's brow furrowed slightly. "Even if you found it, the attunement alone should be impossible for a human. Those stones were created by my people. They attune naturally to those with elven blood and take considerable training to use by those who don't. The fact that a human with no training just happened to be able to open a Waypoint to the Nether – and to the Elfhalm Netherport no less – seems... well, unbelievable, if I may be so frank."

I could see genuine disbelief behind her eyes, but nothing threatening. I couldn't quite place it, but there was something trusting about her appearance. Likewise, she didn't hold herself in a way that appeared as if she were threatened by my presence either – unbelievable as it may be.

My gut instinct told me to respond with sincerity.

"Well, I wasn't sure I could do it either. And to be honest, I wasn't exactly sure where the Waypoint was going to take me. Only that it felt oddly familiar. Like I had somehow already been here before." I shrugged. "Back on Earth, I can only do shadow magic. The only magic that exists at all on Earth is the magic that's passed down in our blood. Magic users are born into what we call the Orders – meaning you get the type of magic you're born with. Those without magic are oblivious to its existence altogether – which is about 99% of everyone on Earth. We try to keep it that way."

I raised my free hand and let a swirl of black shadows coil around it. They danced lazily around my fingers, then curled around the amulet like they belonged there. The air around us grew colder in their presence, as if the shadows themselves exhaled a chill. "Believe me.

This thing has brought me one unbelievable moment after another ever since I acquired it – starting with how easily I was able to attune to it.”

Nenica tilted her head as if she were calculating possibilities. She didn’t speak, but her eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

I continued, “After attuning with it, my powers grew stronger. Sharper. Faster. Deeper. And with greater ease. A historian friend of mine helped track down some information about the glyphs on the stone that might give us a clue as to what it really was.”

I lifted the grimoire from my coat. “That’s when we found this. It confirmed what we suspected. The stone is a type of teleportation device. My friend said the same thing you just did – that it would take extensive training to use. But I just... did it. It’s surprisingly similar to how I focus my magic while in shadow form. I just think of where I want to go, and my body follows. Teleportation is much more... instantaneous though.”

Before she could respond, I teleported to the far side of the shrine. Then again, reappearing several feet in front of her with a puff of shadow mist and a faint rush of air.

Nenica’s eyes widened. There was a flicker of something in her gaze – recognition, maybe – but she didn’t speak it aloud.

“I saw a picture of this place in the grimoire,” I said. “And the moment I did, I felt something. Like it was calling me. Not just curiosity – it felt... familiar. Like something I once knew but had forgotten.”

I paused. “So, I recited this phrase I found in the book. And the Waypoint opened. It was as if it were calling me to step through. And now I’m here. You said this place is called the Netherport of Elfhalm?”

“Yes,” Nenica said, nodding slowly. “This feeling of familiarity you describe is not your own – but that of the stone itself. It is tethered to the Netherport. You see, Netherports act as beacons – anchors for teleportation stones, binding them and connecting them between realms. This bond is what you felt through the stone.”

She looked to the shrine, reverence softening her features. Her eyes, once skeptical, now shimmered with a quiet melancholy.

“There are only two other ports like this in all of the Nether. Elfhalm, where we are now, is the only land my kind still occupies here. The others belong to different Fae races.”

I studied her carefully. “So, Elfhalm is a... stronghold?”

She nodded. “Elfhalm is now but a remnant of what once was. Many of our kind have long since moved to the Hallowrealm – a separate realm beyond the Nether. Hidden and protected. A sanctuary of sorts. Some, like myself, travel between the two. But few remain here.”

I nodded, slowly absorbing her words. “So... there are other realms out there?”

“More than you likely know,” she said, her gaze distant now. “Each with its own nature. Some allied with us. Others not.”

A silence passed between us, weighty with the scope of what she’d just revealed, before she turned to me again. “Do you know the history of your magic, Mr. Pierce?”

I gave a cautious nod. "Yes... at least the version I was taught."

"Can you tell me a little bit about how your people came to possess magic on Earth?"

I paused for a moment, but then answered figuring I was too far down the rabbit hole to turn back now. "Well," I said. "The story goes that when magic was being drained from Earth during the Great Divide, human sorcerers worked together to create a powerful counter spell. They bound what little magic was left into their blood. Since then, it's simply been passed down through the generations. Each Order can trace their magic back to one of those original human sorcerers."

Nenica's eyes grew wide. "I see," she said. "Clever humans. So, your Order must be that of Shadows, correct?" she asked, her voice steady.

"That's right," I said. "The Order of Shadows. Our bloodline is said to trace back to the original sorcerer – Kael Umbros. He's said to be the first shadow mage. Every Shadow born is descended from him."

Nenica was quiet. Then she smiled faintly, almost sadly.

"That much is true," she said. "But your history is missing a very important detail."

I tilted my head. "What do you mean?"

"Kael Umbros was not fully human," she said. "He was half-Elf."

I froze. "What?"

“His mother was an Elf,” she continued. “His father was a gifted human mage. Kael was the first child born of both races. And his shadow abilities... were only part of what he inherited. The other half – his teleportation magic – was mastered right here in Elfhalm.”

Nenica suddenly vanished in a shimmer of white light.

I turned just in time to see her reappear beside me.

I flinched, startled. My fingers tightened reflexively around the amulet.

“This,” she said softly, “is why you can use the stone. It responds to something in your blood. You’ll need it to cross realms, but you may never have needed it at all on Earth. It seems likely that your entire Order has a dormant ability they are not even aware of.”

I looked down at the amulet again, its glow still steady – its pulse now somehow aligned with my own.

For the first time since I found it, I wondered if it wasn’t I who had awakened something in stone... but the other way around.

Chapter 3 – Ancestral Echoes



Nenica's gaze lingered on the shrine a moment longer before turning back to me. "There's more I could tell you," she said, her voice lowering, "but I think you should see it for yourself. I have a book at my cottage. It may help clarify some of what you've just learned."

She glanced toward the cliff's edge and beckoned me to follow. We walked in silence for a moment, the stone beneath our feet cool and steady beneath the soles of my boots. The air felt charged, humming faintly with lingering magic. As we reached the overlook, she extended a hand toward a distant hill nestled between two forested ridges.

"There," she said.

Following her finger, I spotted it: a quaint cottage perched on the slope of a quiet hill, removed from the main village below. It was modest in size but unmistakably elegant – arched eaves, silver-wood beams, and walls that shimmered faintly under the dappled light filtering through the strange glowing canopy above.

“That’s where I live,” she continued. “I prefer to keep a distance from all the activity of the inner village. Living out there also has the benefit of helping keep certain conversations from becoming village gossip.” She gave me a brief smile. “In your case, I’m not sure I’m ready to alarm the others with news of a human visitor just yet.”

“Understandable,” I said. “What are you suggesting?”

“Do you think you can teleport to my cottage from here?” she said, gesturing below.

I took a second look. The slope was steep, but the path was clear enough. “I’m pretty sure I can manage that,” I said.

“Good. See you there,” she said with a wry smile.

She turned briefly to admire the view from the cliffside, and then she vanished in a blink of shimmering white light.

I looked down at the cottage below. As soon as she disappeared from beside me, she reappeared in the clearing at the foot of the stone steps leading to her front door.

I focused on the same point, anchoring my intent the way I always had. *Shouldn’t be a problem.*

I took a deep breath. A blink later, I stood on the stone steps just outside her home.

Up close, the place was even more remarkable. Vines wove up carved beams, their leaves a silver-green that shimmered faintly in the light. Each window had a high arch, shaped like leaves or wings. The door bore swirling runes I couldn't read but instinctively understood as protective enchantments. I could feel the words like a thin buzz in the air.

Nenica opened the door and motioned for me to enter. Inside, the space was simple but refined. The walls were of rich, golden-brown wood, polished smooth with elegant carvings along the beams – birds mid-flight, trees bent in wind, flowing water captured mid-cascade. The furniture was slender and graceful, made of polished wood inlaid with faint crystal lines that pulsed gently with warmth and light.

There was a gentle scent of dried herbs in the air – lavender, maybe, or something close. It was comforting. A hearth on the far wall glowed with soft magical firelight, casting a steady warmth over the room. A curved bookshelf stood to one side, overflowing with ancient tomes and scrolls.

"Have a seat," Nenica said, gesturing to a long bench covered in soft grey fabric. "I'll put water on. The tea is Sweetroot – it has calming properties, and as the name suggests, a pleasantly sweet taste."

I sat, still absorbing the ambiance. The place felt... safe. Like every part of it had been built not just to house someone, but to *heal* them.

She moved gracefully through a doorway and returned a moment later with a kettle, which she set over a small rune-lit burner beside the hearth. Then she crossed to the bookshelf, scanning it with narrowed eyes.

"I keep it here... somewhere," she murmured to herself. After a few seconds, she let out a quiet, pleased sound and returned with a thick, dark-covered book in hand.

"This," she said, settling across from me, "tells a part of your story your people don't seem to know."

She flipped the book open to a bookmarked page and handed it to me.

The script was all in elven – beautiful, flowing, and completely unreadable to me. But the illustration was unmistakable. A man with piercing eyes, cloaked in swirling shadows, stood between two worlds – one forested and luminous, the other shadowed and angular.

"Kael Umbros," Nenica said, confirming what I already suspected. "Born to an elven mother and a human father during a time when the relationships between the Fae races and the humans were becoming strained."

I looked up. "How did your people react to that?"

"Our history suggests that it was... complicated," she admitted. "Some saw Kael's birth as sacrilege. Others saw it as prophecy. He was raised in both worlds, and though his magic leaned more naturally toward the shadows – a human-developed form of magic, I might add – he helped build the first Netherport here at Elfhalm. He was deeply respected by many."

"But I guess it's safe to say he didn't stick around," I said.

She nodded. "When the Great Divide occurred – when the Fae departed and sealed away their realm, cutting the humans off from the magic of the Nether – Kael chose to remain with the humans. He said they would need protection, guidance. But once the divide was complete, it appears as though Earth was left devoid of all raw teleport stones. There was

no way to construct a port on Earth. The only way to cross the realms would be through a Waypoint – and those all had to be constructed here in the Nether.”

I couldn’t help but interject. “Wait, I know of one Waypoint. Finding it was what led me on the path to discovering this teleportation stone. Are you telling me there are others?” I asked, unable to disguise the anxiousness in my voice.

“Well, yes,” she replied. “There are a few scattered across the Nether. Seems some of the Fae races here weren’t entirely content with cutting off all access to land of the humans. But the Waypoints took years to construct, and as I said, they all had to be built here. Kael never returned.”

“Wow, multiple Waypoints,” I said, pausing to soak in the implications.

I traced the edge of the page with my thumb. The parchment felt soft, almost alive, like it had been grown rather than made.

“It’s strange,” I continued. “No one in my Order even mentions teleportation magic. We all thought Kael was just a shadow mage.”

“And that,” Nenica said slowly, “is what troubles me. Teleportation magic is elven by origin. It runs in our blood. If you can use it so naturally, it must have passed to you. It may very well be a dormant magical gift that every human from your bloodline unknowingly possesses. Kael must have known this... so why would he have chosen to keep it hidden?”

“Excellent question,” I replied genuinely clueless.

The kettle began to whistle softly. Nenica rose, fetched it, and returned with two small glass cups filled with light green liquid. She handed one to me and sat again, her movements

graceful and practiced. Even its aroma was sweet – like mint blended with honey and something more ethereal I couldn't name.

She sipped quietly, then let her expression darken slightly. "But there is one part I still don't understand. How exactly did you find that amulet? There are no known teleportation stones left on Earth. No active ports. No accessible crystals."

I hesitated.

She noticed.

"You don't have to tell me," she said. "But if this is part of something greater, I would be remiss not to ask."

I nodded slowly. "No, it's okay. You've already revealed quite a lot to me. You deserve to know. I'll try to give you the highlights."

I told her about the underground Waypoint the Order of Mist had been guarding. About their dealings with the Kretchin – how they were trading magical amulets in exchange for Earth's gold, jewels, and precious materials.

Nenica's eyes narrowed, a sharp glint forming in their depths.

"The Kretchin," she said bitterly. "Of course."

"You know them?"

"They are infamous in the Nether. Relentless traders. Devious. Their territory is difficult to ascertain, as they live underground. They're mountain dwellers, much like the dwarves –

except without any sense of social etiquette, work ethic, or compassion. Their lust for wealth has shaped their every move for centuries.”

She paused to sip her tea, her gaze drifting toward the window as if she could see into the earth itself.

“Gold is incredibly rare here,” she said. “It’s not just its rarity that makes it so valuable, though. It’s an energy source that powers our machines. Unfortunately, the Nether has exhausted nearly all its natural deposits. There is only one known source left – a mountain range far to the east. Well outside of Kretchin territory.”

I leaned forward. “Who does it belong to?”

“The dwarves,” she said. “They mine it, slowly. However, the machines required to extract it need gold to operate, which is... ironic. They use what little they have to fuel their work. Most of the mining is still done by hand. It will take decades to even scratch the surface.”

I shook my head. “So, if the Kretchin are funneling gold from Earth into the Nether...”

“They may be preparing for something,” Nenica finished. “If they are in league with the Order of Mist, then your world’s resources are just a means to a larger end.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “A power grab. A move to take the mountain by force, perhaps?”

I leaned back slowly, my mind spinning.

The Mist. The Kretchin. The amulets. The gold.

The pieces were starting to fall into place.

And I didn't like the shape they were forming.

Chapter 4 – A Way Back



I stared into my tea for a long moment, letting the weight of everything Nenica had just told me settle on my shoulders. The warm scent of Sweetroot curled in the air like a calm warning. Beside me, Nenica looked equally thoughtful, her fingertips resting lightly on the rim of her cup.

"If what you're saying is true," I began slowly, "then between the Mist and the Kretchin, we could be looking at a potential destabilization and power shift both in the Nether and on Earth."

Nenica nodded. "Precisely. And by the looks of things, the alliance between the Mist and the Kretchin does not appear to be one of trust, or even to achieve any mutual objective, but rather a means of reaching separate ambitions. I fear this is a fuse that is already lit."

I frowned. "What will you do with this information?"

"I may need to take this information to someone I trust on the Elfhalm council," she said carefully. "A confidant who understands the stakes but will know how to keep it quiet, for now."

I shifted in my seat. "Just... be careful. Please. If this spreads too fast or lands in the wrong ears, we may accelerate the very thing we're trying to stop."

She gave me a small smile. "Don't worry, Mr. Pierce. I won't be shouting from the hilltops, I assure you. Discretion is something of a specialty of mine."

I leaned back and let out a slow breath. "So, what exactly is it that you do here, Nenica? Aside from saving confused humans from magical shrines."

Her smile deepened slightly. "I'm an ambassador, of sorts. I serve as a bridge between the village council here in Elfhalm and the Elders of the Hallowrealm. I advocate on behalf of Elfhalm's needs, relay political matters, manage trade agreements, and occasionally mediate disputes. Elves are long-lived, and we try very much to keep to ourselves, even here in the Nether. As Elves, we know that time has a way of resolving most problems. But that doesn't mean we're not without our own daily struggles that could benefit from more timely attention."

I raised an eyebrow. "Would you say this situation constitutes a struggle or dispute?"

She gave a soft laugh. "It constitutes a potential upheaval of the entire realm. But there will be those who will most certainly dispute this claim, which is why it will be best to move this information quietly and with tact. It doesn't help that you're human, either. I wouldn't have believed a rumor such as this had I not seen you and verified your teleportation abilities for myself."

"So, does that mean you won't be sticking to your own affairs this time around?" I said, my tone tinged with curiosity.

"Ordinarily, we do," she said. "But when the reach of a conflict extending beyond your borders has the potential for this much devastation, neutrality can quickly turn to cowardice that ultimately fails to keep you out of harm's way."

That sat with me for a second. I didn't expect to hear her speak with such direct tone.

Then my mind pulled me elsewhere. To Vivian.

"Speaking of borders," I said, setting my cup down, "how exactly am I going to get back to Earth?"

Nenica's expression shifted again – less wary now, more serious. "Yes, well, I've actually been waiting for you to bring this up. And unfortunately, there is no simple answer. Without an Earthport, there's no tether to pull you back. The only way back would be through a fixed Waypoint, and there is no Waypoint here in Elfhalm. We make do fine with just the teleportation stones and the ports. And we've had no reason to create a Waypoint to Earth."

I tilted my head. "So, I'm stuck" I said, already starting to feel the regret building up inside of me.

“Until you can access a Waypoint, I’m afraid so. To cross realms with precision, you need a tether – an anchorpoint that links you to the place you’re targeting. A Waypoint is one such anchor. A port is another. But if there is no port on Earth, there’s no fixed location that the stone can link you to. You need a solid link.”

“A solid link, you say,” I echoed, then paused.

I sat up straighter.

“Wait... what about... a mental link?”

Nenica blinked. “A what?”

“I have a mental connection of sorts to someone back home,” I explained quickly. “Vivian. She and I each wear one of two very special rings – enchanted artifacts called the Rings of Asha. They allow us to communicate mentally. Share sights. Thoughts. No matter the distance, we’re connected. When I arrived here, she connected with me immediately, and we quickly discovered that we were able to maintain contact with each other even across realms.”

Nenica’s brow lifted. “You are full of surprises, Mr. Pierce.”

“Please. Just call me Declan.”

She gave a small nod. “Declan, then. If what you’re saying is true, and the bond is as strong as you say, it *may* serve as a sufficient tether. I can provide you with a suitable incantation. But I can’t guarantee that it will work. You’ll need to connect to her fully. She will have to act as your beacon. She must focus on you, just as you focus on her. A lapse in concentration could... misplace you.”

"That's encouraging," I muttered.

Nenica crossed to the bookshelf and retrieved another volume. She flipped through the pages, her finger skimming old text. The pages were dry and soft, etched in silver script that glittered in the firelight.

"Here," she said, pointing to a passage. "This should be a sufficient incantation that will help further direct the stone."

She scribbled something down onto a thin piece of parchment. As she handed it to me, she spoke the words softly, letting their rhythm hang in the air like a lullaby.

"Valen turiel ekh'nir... Erda sendari."

"You'll need to say this while channeling the stone and holding the mental link open."

"Got it."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. *Viv.*

The link opened easily. She was already trying to reach me.

"Declan? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm trying to get back to Earth. But it looks like I'm gonna need your help."

I explained what needed to happen. That I'd use the amulet, the incantation, and that she had to focus on me – sharply, steadily. I could feel her anxiety spike, but she steadied it with a practiced breath.

"Alright," she said. "Let's do it."

I moved to a more open area in the center of Nenica's living space. She stepped back, watching silently, arms folded loosely across her chest.

I focused on the ring. On Vivian. Her thoughts, her voice, her vision – everything that made her... *her*.

I grasped the amulet firmly in my hand and read the incantation aloud.

"Valen turiel ekh'nir... Erda sendari."

The air thickened.

A pulse of violet light swirled from the amulet. The shadows around me twisted and converged.

A Waypoint tore open in front of me with a low, harmonic hum.

I turned to Nenica. "Well, problem solved, I guess. Thank you. For everything. I'll be back when I have more information. I promise."

She inclined her head. "Safe travels, Declan. You know where to find me."

I stepped through the portal.

The shift was seamless.

I walked forward but then suddenly collided with a couch.

Vivian's couch.

Warm, apartment-smelling air hit me like a wave. Coffee. Dust. Laundry detergent.

Vivian's voice cut through it.

"Oh my God!"

I looked up just in time to catch her barreling across the room.

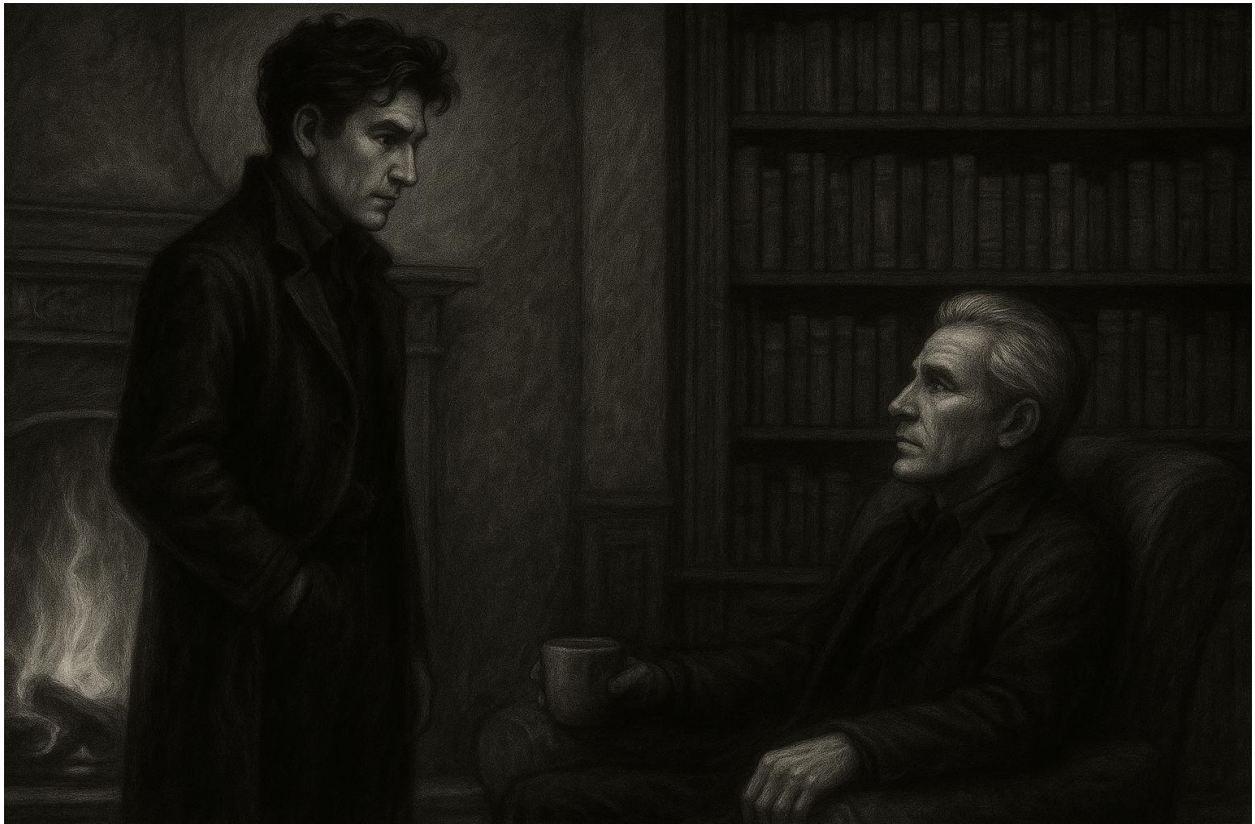
She threw her arms around me. I barely had time to react before I was pulled into a fierce, desperate hug.

"You did it," she whispered into my shoulder. "You really did it."

I smiled, heart still racing.

"Yeah," I said. "But that was the easy part."

Chapter 5 – The Gathering Storm



The coffee and laundry detergent scent of Vivian's apartment was a stark contrast to Nenica's – the earthy sweetness of fresh-brewed Sweetroot still lingered in my memory. I sank into the couch, utterly drained. The Waypoint had brought me back across realms, but the weight of what I'd seen, learned, and felt still clung to me like a second skin.

Vivian handed me a glass of water and sat across from me, concern etched into every line of her face.

"You, okay?" She asked.

"I'm fine," I said, rubbing my temples. "Just tired. Really tired."

She nodded, watching me for a long moment before speaking again. "You gonna tell me what happened?"

"Yeah," I said, taking a deep breath. "But not tonight. My brain is pudding. I promise I'll fill you in tomorrow."

"Deal. But don't think I'm letting you off the hook."

I managed a tired grin before laying back. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Sleep came fast.

The next morning, sunlight slipped past the cracked blinds. I sat on the edge of Vivian's couch nursing a cup of coffee while she perched on the kitchen stool, eyes wide and unblinking.

“So, let me get this straight,” she said. “You met an elf who told you your great-great-whatever-grandfather Kael Umbros was half-elven?”

“Yup.”

“And that means you –”

“Have elven blood. It certainly explains why I’m able to use the teleportation stone so easily.”

Vivian ran a hand through her hair. “Okay, that’s... a lot. So, what now?”

I stood and pulled my coat back on. “Now I inform my father.”

“Ugh. Good luck.”

“Yeah, I’ll need it.”

Pierce Manor hadn’t changed.

Grand. Impenetrable. Intentionally cold.

I moved through the echoing corridors like a shadow tracing familiar paths until the thick double doors of the library came into view. Pushing them open released the scent of aged leather, old candlewax, and a hint of smoke that never quite left the high-beamed room. The fire crackled in the hearth, burning slowly behind a dark iron grate shaped like a coiled serpent.

My father was exactly where I expected him to be – seated in his favorite high-backed chair by the fire, an ancient tome resting in his lap. His posture, as always, was rigid. Precise. A

man who never allowed the weight of years to bend him. The book he held looked older than both of us combined – bound in dragonhide, worn at the corners but well-kept, like everything in this place.

He didn't look up.

"Back with more gripping tales from the Nether?" He said evenly, voice calm and unreadable.

"Gripping," I replied, stepping farther into the room. "That's a fair description."

I took the leather armchair across from him. For a moment, we just sat in silence. The fire hissed. The scent of cedarwood drifted between us.

"Well, let's hear it. I assume you didn't stop by just to say hello," he said finally, closing his book and resting his hands on the cover.

"Well, Dad, I'm glad you're sitting down, because there's quite a lot you need to hear."

And so, I told him. Everything.

I told him how I discovered the Mist were behind the bank heist and other recent robberies. About the warehouse filled with stolen goods. About the amulets – with Nether-forged stones of power – and how the Mist had kidnapped Simon and Nina to get the one I took back.

I pulled the amulet from my coat and placed it on the table between us. The violet gem pulsed faintly in the firelight.

He studied it for a long moment.

“Stones of power, you say?” He asked, gazing at the amulet with something like curiosity.

“Oh yeah,” I said, picking it up. “I discovered pretty quickly that it amplifies my shadow magic. You remember the shadow clone you taught me as a boy?”

My father scoffed. “That silly trick. Yes, what of it?”

“Watch this,” I said.

I conjured the clone slowly and methodically before my father’s eyes.

It came to life fully formed – a perfect walking, talking copy of myself standing proud and confident next to the hearth.

My father’s expression faltered. For him, it was practically a gasp.

“Not such silly a trick anymore,” I made the clone say with a grin.

I continued. “I used this guy to help rescue Simon and Nina. But there’s much more to this stone than just amplification.”

I quickly dispersed the clone and then began telling my father how I used the amulet to open a Waypoint to the Nether. About Nenica, the Netherport, Elfhalm. The truth of Kael Umbros. Our bloodline. The Kretchin’s power play. I told him everything.

He didn’t interrupt once. He just listened with that same steely calm – his eyes fixed on mine, narrowing slightly when I described the teleportation.

I finally stopped to breathe. My chest felt tight.

“So,” he said, “you’re saying you used this stone to cross into the Nether?”

“That’s right. Garrick identified the glyphs on the amulet – he suspected teleportation. Nenica confirmed it. She said teleportation magic is elven in origin, and that these stones were crafted by her people. Normally, someone without elven blood couldn’t use them without extensive training.”

His brow furrowed.

“She showed me a pretty ancient-looking book that basically confirmed the lineage.”

“Kael Umbros was half- elf,” I said. “Which means we’re descended from him. Teleportation magic isn’t just some odd side effect of this stone – it’s in our blood. Dormant, maybe. But there.”

I picked up the amulet again and vanished to the far side of the room. Then, just as fast, I blinked back into the armchair.

My father’s eyes widened.

I leaned forward and set the amulet gently on the side table. “I haven’t tested it out without the amulet yet. But if it’s really in our bloodline... I shouldn’t need it.”

I steadied my breath and focused on a nearby spot beside the hearth.

Here goes nothing.

I snapped my fingers – and reappeared next to the mantle.

“Well,” I said, casually leaning against it, “that confirms it, I guess.”

My father’s eyes widened further, but his expression quickly turned serious. He stood and walked to the tall windows behind him, hands clasped behind his back. His gaze swept the

grey sky beyond the glass, but I could tell his thoughts were elsewhere – calculating, weighing.

“This explains a great many things,” he said quietly. “And opens up a whole world of possibilities.”

“Unfortunately, it complicates even more,” I added. “The Mist don’t know about our bloodline. They just want the stone. Probably think it’ll give them free and clear access to the Nether.”

“But not if they can’t attune to it,” he said, turning toward me. “Which they likely can’t. Not without the right blood – or extensive training, as your new friend Nenica said.”

“Exactly. But they still desperately want this thing back. And I’ll bet they’re royally pissed after I saved Simon and Nina without trading the stone for them. I’d say retaliation seems pretty imminent.”

He was quiet for a beat. Then, with the same calm resolve that had shaped a hundred other decisions, he spoke:

“We need to arrange a parlay with the Mist.”

I blinked. “A meeting? With Silas?”

“He’ll accept,” my father said. “He’s arrogant, but not entirely without reason. He knows the ground is shifting beneath him. And if he wants this amulet badly enough...”

“You think he’ll trade peace for it?”

My father's expression darkened. "After what you've done? Probably not. But we're not giving the amulet back. Still, I believe he can be made to compromise."

"How?"

He returned to his chair, though he didn't sit. Instead, he crossed to a built-in cabinet and retrieved a long, velvet-wrapped object. He held it in both hands for a moment – silent, thoughtful.

"I have something I believe Silas wants more than any teleportation stone," he said at last.

"Something he's been searching for a very long time."

"What is it?"

He didn't answer.

I frowned. "You're being cryptic."

He gave a ghost of a smile. "I relieved Silas of a dangerous artifact many years ago, back when he was still clawing his way up the ranks of the Mist. I saw what devastating things it could do in his hands. So, I decided then that he simply couldn't be allowed to keep it."

"And now you're going to give it back?"

"It's a bargaining chip I'm willing to trade. For the amulet... and a truce."

The fire cracked sharply behind us. I stared at him, unsure if he was bluffing.

"You're serious."

He nodded once. "I'll arrange the meeting within a couple of days. Be ready. You're attending. You've seen more than anyone else. And whether we like it or not, you're the bridge between what's coming and what we might still prevent."

I exhaled slowly. "Alright. Let's end this before it becomes something we can't walk back from."

My father turned toward the window once more.

"No, Declan," he said softly. "This doesn't end. It merely changes. Our job now... is to make sure that it changes in our favor."

Chapter 6 – The Elder's Circle



The wind howled through the Pierce family cemetery, tugging at my coat as my father and I made our way past rows of ancient headstones. The moon hung low and full, casting long shadows across the marble markers like solemn sentinels watching our passage. We moved without speaking – his gait steady, mine more hesitant. It wasn't the dead I feared, but the place they would ultimately lead us.

At the edge of the cemetery stood a mausoleum, gray and unadorned but older than any other monument here. Ivy clung to its weathered stone, and the iron gate creaked as we passed through. My father paused before the tomb, resting a hand against the carved insignia above its lintel – a faded emblem of the Order of Shadows. His palm shimmered briefly as it touched the stone, and with a muted grind of shifting stone, the door opened inward.

The chamber beyond was cold and dark. We descended into the crypt, the scent of damp earth and stone thickening with each step. At the bottom, flanked by four black marble statues of cloaked figures, was the Elder's Circle port chamber.

It didn't look like much. Just a ring of obsidian stone etched with runes that shimmered faintly when my father drew the teleportation glyph in the air with a practiced flick of his hand. The runes pulsed once, then again. With a low hum and a burst of shadowy light, the chamber activated.

"Stay close," my father said without looking back.

"Wasn't planning on sightseeing," I muttered, stepping into the circle with him.

A moment later, the world shifted. My stomach lurched, and in a blink, the damp, crypt air was gone – replaced by something colder. Older.

The Elder's Circle.

The vast hall stretched out around us, its stone walls etched with sigils of every known Order – some I recognized, others long since dissolved. High arched ceilings rose above a ring of marble columns, each carved from a different stone – onyx, quartz, jade, lapis. Braziers flickered along the outer perimeter, casting light that seemed to move slower than it should.

The centerpiece was a massive round table.

It dominated the space like a sentinel in council – massive, ancient, and seamless, as if carved from a single slab of polished obsidian. Twelve high-backed chairs circled it, each bearing the emblem of a different Order.

Today, only four of them were occupied.

Silas Miraveil was already there.

He stood with his back to us, standing before a large window that looked out over the rocky mountain range. When he turned, his expression was calm – too calm. His bald head gleamed under the amber light, and his charcoal black suit fit him like a tailored threat. Years had weathered his features, but his eyes burned cold and sharp.

Beside him stood Sonya.

She was every bit her father's mirror in presence – sharp lines, focused stare – but where he was worn by time, she was in her prime. Long blonde hair fell in loose waves around her shoulders, framing a face too composed to trust. Her suit matched her father's exactly. Sleek. Black. Formal. Like mourning clothes for someone they hadn't buried yet.

"Arthur," Silas said, voice smooth. "And young Declan. We were beginning to wonder if you'd join us."

"Traffic," I said dryly.

My father gave me a warning glance, then moved forward. "We appreciate you agreeing to meet, Silas."

"I barely recall the last time you and I had a meeting like this," Silas said, gesturing to the table. "But let's not waste any time taking a trip down memory lane."

We all took our seats. The stone table felt cold even through my coat sleeves as I rested them on the table.

"Very well," my father said.

Silas folded his hands. "Well, let's hear it then."

I took a breath and started. "I didn't mean to interfere with your operation. I was investigating the bank robbery. I had no idea the Mist were involved. I discovered the warehouse while tracking a lead. Your get-away wasn't as clean as you think."

"And neither was your late-night perusing of our warehouse, or your removal of a certain something that doesn't belong to you from it." Sonya said coolly.

I met her gaze. “Hey, let’s not just glaze over the fact that that warehouse of yours is filled to the brim with *stolen* goods. Still, I might’ve walked out and left the whole thing alone if I hadn’t come across something that didn’t come from any bank vault. No, the interest of your little operation goes far beyond just robbing banks. You guys are interested in something.... Otherworldly, shall we say?”

Silas raised a brow. “And what *exactly* do you think we’re interested in, Mr. Pierce?”

“Magic-enhancing artifacts from the Nether,” I said bluntly. “The one I took certainly had a powerful effect on my magic. And given the fact that you guys seem to be quite the collectors, it makes one wonder if the Mist isn’t seeking to make some sort of power move of their own. And still, I can’t help but suspect there’s even more to the stones than just that.”

That landed. Silas’s posture didn’t change, but something flickered behind his eyes.

My father leaned forward. “We know you have access to the Nether and have been dealing with the Kretchin – trading gold and precious gems for the stones.”

That got his attention.

Silas’s eyes narrowed. Sonya’s lips pressed into a thin line.

My father’s voice was even. “I think what my son is trying to say is that we’re not here to disrupt your affairs. But accessing the Nether and making power-deals with Kretchin is alarming to say the least. We just want to make sure we don’t wind up on the losing side of whatever the Mist is plotting.”

Silas exhaled slowly, like a man trying not to snap a wine glass in his fist. "You have no idea what you're meddling in."

"We know enough," I said. "Enough to understand that the amulet is just one of many. And that the Mist is amassing power for something big."

"You don't know anything," Sonya said sharply.

"You kidnapped my friends," I shot back. "You threatened innocent lives to get just one small piece of your power back. That's not politics. That's desperation."

Silas slammed his palm against the table. "You've got a sharp tongue, boy."

My father rose slowly. "Sharp as my son's tongue may be, he's not wrong," he said boldly.

"Still, we're willing to come to peaceful terms."

Tension coiled in the air like a drawn bow.

Silas stood as well, his voice low and venomous. "Terms," he said with a laugh. "The only terms are to return the amulet. Stay out of our affairs. Or the Order of Mist will consider your interference a declaration of war."

My father reached into his coat.

"I thought you might say that," he said calmly.

He withdrew the same velvet-wrapped object he had retrieved from the cabinet in the library just a couple days prior. With slow, deliberate motion, he placed it on the table and unwrapped it.

The object inside shimmered.

It was a mirror – framed in polished obsidian and silver, etched with ancient runes. Its surface wasn't glass, but liquid shadow – dark and rippling, like ink suspended in oil.

Silas stared, but didn't speak.

Sonya's eyes widened. "Father, is that what I think it is?"

My father stepped back and folded his hands. "Perhaps this will change the *terms* of our conversation."

Silas's composure faltered.

He had instantly become a man dripping with desire.

Chapter 7 – A Bargain for the Veilheart



Silence reigned in the Elder's Circle.

The Veilheart Mirror shimmered on the obsidian table like a living wound – its swirling shadow surface catching the firelight in impossible ways. Everyone stared at it. No one moved.

Except Silas.

His eyes were locked onto the mirror with a hunger that stripped away all pretenses. For the first time since I'd known him, he looked... unguarded. Not weak, but open. And in that openness, there was something desperate.

He reached toward it.

My father's hand moved, just slightly, not touching the mirror, but close enough to make his intent clear.

"Not yet."

Silas pulled his hand back, nostrils flaring. "You've had it all this time?"

"Since before your rise to power," my father said. "You were young and reckless and couldn't be trusted with it then. Funny thing is, after all this time, I still don't think you can be trusted with it."

Sonya was no longer trying to hide her surprise. "I thought this was lost."

"I certainly made it look that way," father replied.

Silas's voice came low and sharp. "Why show it now?"

“To make a point,” my father said. “That we don’t want war, Silas. But we are prepared for it. And if you force our hand, we’ll respond with strength – not fear.”

He gestured to the mirror.

“But we’d rather not. We’d rather come to an agreement. Like civilized men.”

Silas stared at the Veilheart for another long moment. Then he straightened, composing himself. His voice, when he spoke again, was calm – too calm.

“What are you suggesting?”

My father’s answer was immediate. “We won’t be giving back the stone. The Mist is already in possession of many more. We are, however, willing to trade the mirror as a peace offering of sorts. A truce. You get your mirror back and agree to call the matter between the Mist and my son settled. You agree to that, and the Order of Shadows will kindly refrain from any interference in the Mist’s warehouse operations.”

Silas stared long at the mirror.

Then, with deliberate motion, he drew himself upright and squared his shoulders. The weariness in his features didn’t vanish, but it became masked again – layered beneath the quiet, ruthless composure he was known for.

“A truce,” he said finally. “Fine. On the terms you’ve outlined. The Mist will relinquish its claim on the stone, calling the matter settled. And in return, you hand over the Veilheart and the Order of Shadows will keep its nose out of our warehouse operation.”

“Agreed,” my father said, not missing a beat.

They moved without fanfare. From his coat, my father produced a pact shard – a long smooth crystal, veined with channels of starlight that shimmered faintly as it tasted the tension in the room.

No parchment. No ink. This was older magic.

The pact would write itself.

Pact shards are devices that magically prevent those who make a pact with them from breaking their word – a useful device that fortunately or unfortunately (depending on your position) slowly wears over time.

My father pressed his hand to the stone. A whisper passed his lips – barely more than a breath. Next my father spoke his words clearly – stating aloud the agreed upon terms of the pact. A silver script began to burn across the crystal's surface. It hovered in place for a moment, binding the intent behind the words.

Silas gazed at the crystal for a moment, then nodded to himself and grasped the other end of the stone. A whisper passed his lips as well. A few moments passed and then he declared aloud his approval of the pact. The second half of the pact flared into being, intertwining with the first – like vines twining around old iron.

They both reached for their Order's sigils which were pinned to their lapels. Using the pins, they pricked their thumbs, letting a drop of blood fall onto the shard's center.

A sharp pulse rippled through the room. Not bright, not loud – but undeniable.

The pact was sealed.

Magic – deep and old – settled into the air like dust after a thunderclap.

Silas drew back. His fingers curled around the Veilheart Mirror with something nearing reverence. “So,” he said softly, “after all this time, it finally returns to me.”

“Let’s hope you don’t misuse it,” my father said, voice firm but level.

Silas offered a slight smile. “Misuse is a matter of perspective.”

Sonya gave me a long look. Not hostility this time – at least not solely. There was calculation in it. Caution. Curiosity, maybe. Whatever she saw in me, it was something new. Something that made her uneasy.

She turned and followed her father.

At the threshold of the Elder’s Circle, Silas paused. “I’m almost certain you’re holding on to more cards than you’re showing, Arthur. No matter, though. For now, the truce stands.”

Arthur met his eyes. “Then I assume that concludes our business for the day?”

Silas held his gaze a moment longer, then gave a sharp nod. “Indeed.”

They vanished into the darkened corridor.

When the echoes of their steps had faded, I looked to my father.

“You think they bought it?”

“They bought what they needed,” he said, slipping the pact shard back into his coat. “And we gave what we could afford to lose.”

I nodded slowly.

The truth hung silently between us.

The Mist didn't know I could cross into the Nether on my own. That I'd seen the alliances they were building beneath the surface. That I now had connections of my own.

The truce was real – but it only bound what they knew.

And they didn't know everything.

As we exited the Elder's Circle, the great hall faded behind us, quiet once more. The shadows stretched long across the ancient stone floor, reaching ahead like threads waiting to be followed.

And I intended to follow them.

The King's Gambit

The *King's Gambit* is an impossible prediction style effect that makes use of the *Shadow Subtraction* sleight previously detailed in the *Shadowcast* routine of Volume 4 – but in a completely different way. You will need to procure 5 duplicate cards. I prefer to use the King's of Spades, and I will be using them for explanation purposes below. You will also need a blank billet (I prefer double-blank sided U.S.P.C.C. playing card stock) on which you will write the words "*You Will Place Me On The King Of Spades*". Of course, if you prefer to work with Jack of Clubs – you'll write the Jack of Clubs instead. This will be your prediction. Fold your prediction in quarters so that the message cannot be seen and place it in your

pocket or wherever it can easily be retrieved. Finally, place all 5 duplicate Kings of Spades on top of the deck *face down* and you are ready to go.

You can start by removing your folded-up prediction billet, standing it upright on the table in full view. You can state that it is a prediction that you will have your participant handle later. Next, you can introduce the deck of cards by performing any manner of false shuffles and/or cuts that you prefer in order to enhance the illusion of presenting a thoroughly mixed-up deck of cards. You will start by slowly spreading the cards and offering your participant to touch 5 random cards as you spread them from your left hand to your right hand one at a time. You are now going to perform the *Shadow Subtraction* procedure. This is necessary so that your participant can have a free selection of all 5 cards, but one of them will be the King of Spades.

Note: If your participant by chance happens to select one of the top 5 Kings of Spades – the Shadow Subtraction procedure is not necessary. Simply move directly into the secret addition procedure that follows.

As your participant touches cards, you will up-jog each card touched, leaving at least three quarters of the card protruding forward from the deck as you continue to spread. Do this for the first 4 cards touched. When the fifth and final card is touched, you will up-jog it like the rest but only protruding half as far forward as the rest. When you close the spread, the bottom protruding card will be hidden beneath the top 4 and you will be able to secretly reach your left index finger to its top edge and push it in square with the rest of the deck. See Fig 1 for an exposed view.

Fig 1.

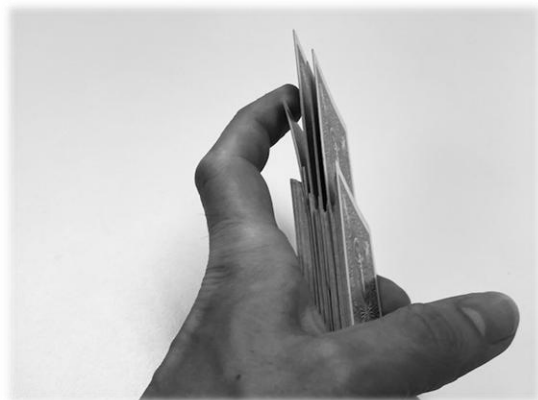


Fig 2.



You will do this as your right hand comes over the top and strips the up-jogged cards out in an arcing motion to the right. See Fig 2.

These stripped out cards then immediately get thrown *face down* on top of the deck and then you immediately thumb off the top 5 cards and offer them to your participant for inspection. It should appear as though your participant has selected 5 random cards that you have just stripped out and handed to him. In reality you only stripped out 4 random cards and added one of the King of Spades that was already on top of the deck.

As your participant is looking at his selected cards, grab a pinky break beneath the top 4 cards of the deck. Casually inquire if the cards appear to be a random selection. Your participant will agree and then ask the participant to hand you his selected cards so that you can see what was selected. Upon receiving the cards, turn them *face up* placing them on top of the deck adding them squarely to your pinky break of the top 4 cards. As you do this, you want to make sure that the King of Spades is at the bottom of the *face up* group being

placed on top. This should not be a problem to rearrange them as you are still just casually looking at the cards.

Now you are going to perform a secret addition as you call out the identity of each face up card. With the right hand in overhand grip, pick up all the cards at the break. Call out the identity of the top card. Then with your left thumb, strip off the top card to the left while using the right-hand packet to flip it over *face down* onto the left-hand packet. See Fig 3.

Fig 3.



You will do the same thing for the second and third cards. Call out the identity of the card, strip it off, use the right-hand packet to flip it over *face down* onto the left-hand packet. When you get to the fourth card, you will call out its identity, but when you flip it over *face down*

with the right-hand packet, you will immediately drop the two cards in your right hand as one on top of the left-hand packet. Immediately, you will then push over the top *face up* card with your left thumb calling out its identity (It will be the King of Spades). Now flip it *face down* on top of everything. The 5 random cards have now been secretly switched for the 5 kings which are now on top of the deck.

Deal these cards out onto the table and allow your participant to give them a thorough wash mix so that no one can possibly know which card is which. Now have your participant line up the five tabled cards in *face down* row. Next, call attention back to your prediction

that has been standing in full view the entire time. Have your participant pick up the prediction and place it on whichever card he wants. You should do your best to dramatize this selection process. They only get one choice. Whichever card they place the prediction on will be their chosen card. Of course, it doesn't matter which card they choose because all 5 are Kings of Spades. When your participant places the prediction down on their chosen card, casually remove the remaining 4 cards from the table (keeping the faces down) one at a time stating that your participant chose not to select this one, this one, this one or this one. Place these cards *face down* on top of the deck. Next, have your participant flip over their selected card to reveal it. It will of course be the King of Spades. Finally, invite your participant to unfold and reveal the message that is written on your prediction. It reads – “You Will Place Me On The King Of Spades.” Take a bow.

Perfect Ambiguity

Perfect Ambiguity is actually one of my more recently created effects. It has nevertheless skyrocketed to one of my top-ten personal favorites. The level of impossibility is absolutely stratospheric. You will need a trim card (I.E. any *face down* card that has been slightly trimmed/rounded down in the top left and bottom right-hand corners). There is also a small setup which is well worth the minimal extra effort. Create a stack of cards from the bottom up starting with any spot card followed by the same spot card of a different color (let's say the 7 of Hearts and the 7 of Clubs. Next will be any court card of the matching suit to your first spot 7 (let's go with the Queen of Hearts). Then your trim card. On top of this

will be the rest of the deck with the matching Queen to your second spot 7 on top (which will be the Queen of Clubs in this case). From the bottom up, your deck should be as follows. 7H, 7C, QH, trim card, the rest of the deck, QC – all *face down*. Now you're ready to begin.

You can start in your preferred way of false shuffling or false cutting the deck in order to present an apparently mixed-up deck of cards. Next invite your participant to *touch* any card in the middle as you spread the cards from left to right. When they touch a card of their liking, up-jog the selected card slightly, leaving it up-jogged on top of the left-hand packet. You are now going to perform the *prophecy move*. Turn your right-hand *face down*, gripping the selected card with the right thumb as seen in Fig 4.

Fig 4.



Fig 5.



Once you have grabbed a hold of the selected card, turn your right-hand back *face up* but bringing it to the bottom of the left-hand packet, thereby sandwiching the up-jogged card in the middle as seen in Fig 5.

This is a subtlety move that looks as though you are simply flipping over the selected card to reveal it while completely overlooking the fact that in so doing, you have now placed your participant's selected card between the top and bottom card of the deck – exactly where you need it to be. Fig 5 shows a 6 of Diamonds but it does not matter the identity of this selected card. You are going to use it for a much more devious purpose.

Tell your participant that you want them to think of the card they selected as only *part* of a prophecy of sorts. State that the 6 of Diamonds is a perfectly good and randomly selected card, but like any good prophecy there is always a certain level of ambiguity – meaning its open to more than one interpretation. Now point out the fact that your participant's randomly selected card is positioned between two equally random *face down* cards (one on top, one on bottom). Have them remove their selected card along with the card above and below. They will be holding three cards. You will refer to these three cards as their prophecy. You will of course know the identity of the middle *face up* card, but your participant is to keep the other two *face down* cards a secret. These two cards will be the Queen of Clubs and the 7 of Hearts that you have just used the *prophecy move* to force onto your participant.

Again, restate to your participant that you want them to treat the cards they are holding like a prophecy that is open to interpretation. Tell your participant that you want them to create a card in their mind using the two *face down* cards. They can create a card using the suit of

the card in their left-hand and combine it with the value of the card in their right-hand. OR they can go the opposite way by combining the suit of the card in their right-hand with the value of the card in their left-hand. They are to create this card in their mind, keeping it to themselves. Again, this will act as their personal prophecy. They have a truly free choice in which way they want to go to create their thought of card, but unbeknownst to your participant, you already know that they can only come up with one of two potential outcomes – a 7 of Clubs or a Queen of Hearts. Fortunately for you, you are prepared for both possible outcomes.

Also, at your utility, is your trim card which is now conveniently positioned directly above the Queen of Hearts and the 7 of Clubs in the middle of the deck. Have your participant think about their card. State that “sometimes prophecies take years and require numerous things to occur before they can be realized.” Continue by saying that “in other cases, prophecies just happen. Like the *chosen one* will simply appear out of nowhere.” As you say this, riffle down the upper left-hand corner of the deck with your left thumb until you hit the break naturally caused by your trim card. Use your right fingers to quickly up-jog this card leaving it exposed *face down* as seen in Fig 6.

Fig 6.



Remove your right hand, but leave the cards in this position in your left hand giving your participant a moment to let sink in what has just happened. The implication may not be immediately clear. Ask your participant to call out the prophecy card they created in their

mind and have only been thinking about this entire time. The card you have protruding from the deck in your hand will be the Queen of Heart (or whatever court card you decide to use). It is statistically more likely that your participant will have created a court card in their mind instead of a spot card.

If your participant calls out the Queen of Hearts, you can simply have them remove the protruding card themselves and reveal that it is in fact the Queen of Hearts. If by chance your participant calls out the 7 of Clubs, you are far from out of luck. State that your participant's 7 of Clubs could be anywhere in the deck as you spread through the cards until you reach just a couple of cards past the protruding card. Close the spread but grab a pinky break beneath the card just below the out-jogged card. See Fig 7 for an exposed view.

Fig 7.



You are now going to perform a typical touch force; except this time without the touch part. State that your participant simply thought of a card, and then out of nowhere, you made the *chosen one* appear. Your right hand comes over the top and will apparently lift at the up-jogged

card to show what it is. What you really do is lift the cards up with your right-thumb at your pinky break at the back while pushing the up-jogged card in with the right fingers at the front – all in one fluid motion. See Fig 8.

Fig 8.



Fig 9.



In this way you are essentially lifting and showing the card that was just below the protruding card – as if it *were* the protruding card. See Fig 9.

Again, this is all done in one fluid motion and should appear as if you simply lifted the cards up to finally reveal the up-jogged card. Show the card and ask “So, how’d I do?”

Pocket ESP

This is a baffling demonstration of mind reading with a packet of ESP cards. As the name suggests, you will require pockets (preferably from wearing a jacket) and a deck of ESP cards (the ESP cards must be marked). Remove the star, square, wavy lines and cross and arrange them in this order from the bottom up. Place them in your right jacket pocket leaving them in this order with the faces facing your body. Leave the remainder of the ESP cards in the case and place them in a different pocket.

Once you have a willing participant, remove the deck of ESP cards from their case and then remove one card of each symbol placing them in a row *face up* on the table. Arrange the cards left to right in cyclical order – circle, cross, wavy lines, square, star. Place the left-over cards to the side *face down* on the table. Ask your participant to think of any one of the symbols and commit to it in their minds. You are going to try to mentally determine which card they are thinking of.

State that they may choose to think of their favorite symbol (assuming they have a favorite), or they can choose to think of a symbol that they believe you will not suspect. Once they have committed to a card of their choosing, pick up the cards by stacking them one on top of the other from left to right. State that you will place these 5 cards into your pocket, and without looking, attempt to remove the card that your participant is thinking of.

You will now place them in the same jacket pocket that already holds the 4 cards you removed earlier. When you place the stack of cards in your pocket, as before, place the faces towards your body, but on top of the stack already in your pocket. This will leave the face of

the bottom circle card touching the back of the top cross card in your pocket. Remove your hand and show that it is indeed empty and then ask your participant to concentrate on their chosen card. Pretend to pick up on their mental vibes as you place your right hand back into your pocket. Remove the outermost card of the packet from your pocket, but do not reveal it. Place it *face down* on top of the left-over cards stating that you are sure this one is *not* their card.

You will continue in this manner for the next 3 cards. You will reach into your pocket and always remove the outermost card. You do not reveal the cards removed from your pocket. Simply place them *face down* on top of the left-over deck saying, "I'm sure this one is not your card either." Eventually you will have removed 4 cards, and your participant will believe that you only have 1 card left in your pocket. In reality your pocket contains all 5 card symbols placed in cyclical order.

Note: For those of you who don't know, a cyclical order for ESP cards is circle, cross, wavy lines, square, star, circle, cross, wavy lines, square, star, etc. The stack cycles back around to the beginning after every 5 cards. The order is easily memorized as such because a circle is drawn with 1 line, a cross with 2, wavy lines with 3, a square with 4 and a star with 5 lines – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. – easy.

Ask your participant now to finally state out loud what symbol they have been thinking of the entire time. Let's say they say the cross. Given the fact that the cards in your pocket are in cyclical order, you will be able to locate the correct card with just your fingers from inside your pocket. The cross will be second from the top. Do not rush this phase though. You should recap for your participant what has happened thus far, building suspense as you

slowly locate their card and remove it from your pocket. When you locate the card, slowly remove it from your pocket. You can now reveal in epic fashion that the symbol of the card in your hand matches your participant's thought of symbol – thereby proving that you accurately read your participant's mind.

The Nethermind

This is a pure mentalism routine from a pack of double blank-faced cards. The presentation comes directly from a routine created by the amazing mentalist *Spidey*. *Nethermind* is, however, a very different handling of essentially the same premise.

A participant removes a card and secretly writes the name of something precious to them on the face of the card. The card is lost in the pack. The performer states that he has a rough idea of *where* the card is, but he has no idea *what* is written on the card. The participant, however, knows exactly *what* is written on the card but has no idea *where* it is. He then states that in a moment, the reverse will be true – that the performer will be able to divine *what* is written on the card while the participant will be able to intuit *where* their card is.

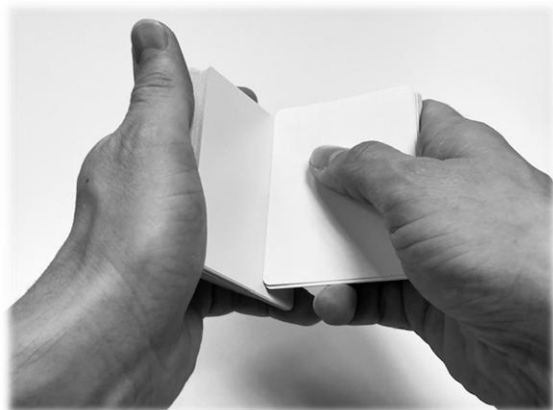
For this effect you will require a deck of double-blank cards. You will need them to handle just like a normal deck of cards. As I've said before, there is no better place to turn to than U.S.P.C.C. playing card stock. They are very affordable and if you don't already have a pack of your own, you can pick one up by clicking the link here – [DOUBLE BLANK BICYCLES](#). You will also need a black sharpie or any other writing utensil that writes and shows up easily on playing card stock.

There is otherwise no real setup involved. With your deck of double-blank cards in hand, a sharpie in your pocket, and a willing participant, you're ready to begin. Start by showing that all the cards you hold are blank on both sides. Spread the cards from your left hand to your right hand, offering your participant the chance to remove one. When your participant takes a card, hand them the sharpie and ask them to think of any object they own that is precious to them. Ask them to write down the name of this object on their card and keep it to themselves.

Note: You should also add that if they happen to have a special name for their precious object, please write down what the object is and not its name. For example, if they are thinking of their favorite stuffed animal named Pooky, you (the performer, and the rest of the audience for that matter) are not going to know what Pooky means. Make sure your participant is aware of this so that it does not turn into a problem later on.

When your participant has finished writing down their object, you are going to ask them to return it *face down* to the middle of the pack. You will do this using the *Decepticut* move taught in volume 1 in the *Calispo* routine. Spread the cards again from left to right, separating them at the halfway point. Tap the right-hand packet against the left-hand packet to square up the right-hand packet as seen in Fig 10.

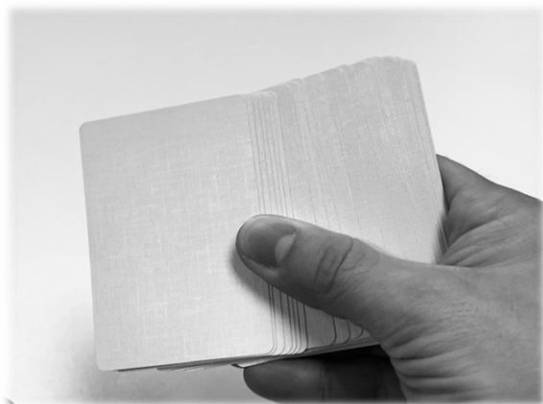
Fig 10.



Keep your head turned away as you move your left hand closer to your participant inviting them to replace their card *face down* on top of the packet in your left hand. While this is happening, your right-hand drops to the side and you will use your right fingers from below

and the thumb on top to reverse the spread as seen in Fig 11.

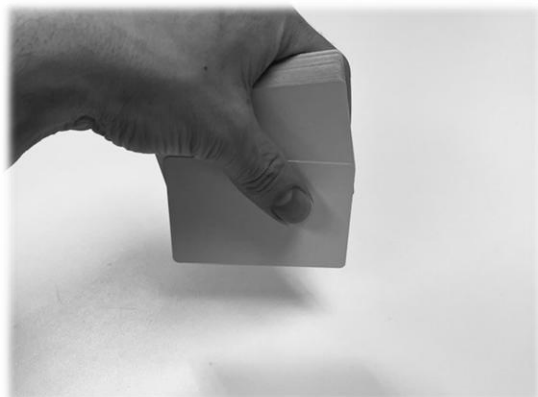
Fig 11.



When your participant replaces their card onto the left-hand packet, keep your head turned away while you use your left thumb to push over the top card halfway to the right. Turn your wrist clockwise down to give your participant one last glimpse of it. Ask if they can clearly read it from

that position because you want to show it to the other spectators watching. See Fig 12.

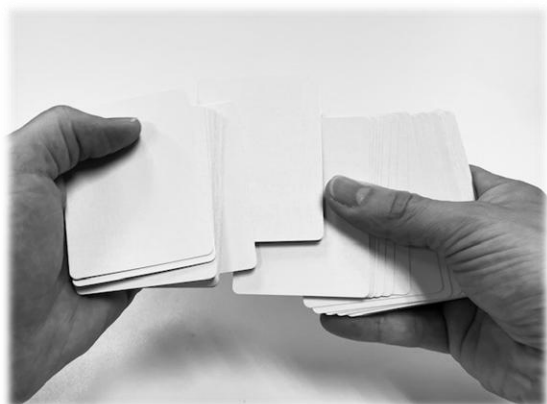
Fig 12.



When they say yes, show what is written on the card in this fashion to all other spectators watching the performance. Look out to your audience and verify that everyone knows what is written on the card. As you do this, your left hand turns counterclockwise *face up*. As your wrist

turns, your left-thumb will pull the top card back flush with the top of the deck while your left-hand fingers simultaneously push out the bottom card from underneath. This all happens as the right hand brings its packet toward the left-hand packet to close the spread (apparently back to its original position). See Fig 13.

Fig 13.



It should look as though you are closing up the original spread of the cards, leaving your participant's card in the middle. In reality, your participant's card is *face down* on top of the deck. Fully close up the spread and state that, at the moment, the situation is that the participant has

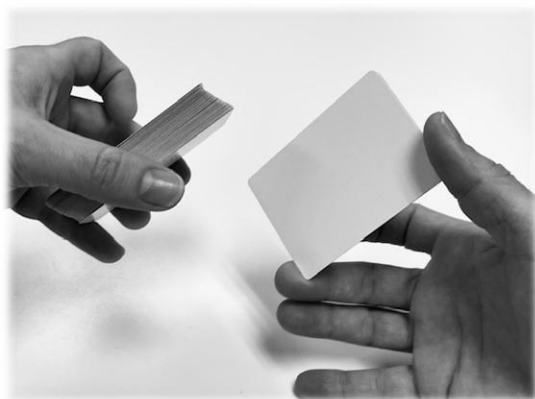
a card in the deck that she knows *what* is written on, but she doesn't know *where* it is.

Correct yourself by saying that she *may* have a vague idea that it is somewhere near the

middle. Now execute a standard overhand shuffle by drawing the top two cards off one at a time bringing them to the bottom, and then continue shuffling the rest of the cards off randomly on top. State that after a quick shuffle like that, now they are likely a little less certain.

Your participant's card should now be *face down* second from the bottom. Flip the deck over in your left hand so that your participant's card is now *face up* second from the top. Continue talking as you use your right thumb to help set a left pinky break underneath the top two cards. State that given the fact that you have been handling the cards the whole time, you have a little bit better idea of where their card is, but you can assure your participant that their card is not on the bottom or on top of the deck. As you say this, lift the top two cards as one in an overhand grip. You will turn both wrists exposing the tops and bottoms of both the deck in your left hand and the apparently single card in your right hand. See Fig 14.

Fig 14.



Replace the right-hand double on top of the deck and ask to be handed back the sharpie. When you receive the sharpie, state that you're going to attempt to switch roles with your participant – meaning you (through the powers of your mind) will know *what* is written on the card and your

participant will intuit exactly *where* their card is. Now hold the deck with your palm facing

towards you and lift the top card from the deck. This is the moment you will finally see what is written on your participant's card. Turn the deck *face down* and place it on the table. Your participant's card will be the bottom card *face down*. Now, on your card, you will write down the name of the object that you saw written on your participant's card. You will then leave this card *face down* on the table in full view.

Now pick up the deck holding it in the same *face down* position in the left hand. The right-hand positions itself over the top in *over-under* position. State that you have committed yourself to what you think the participant's precious object was; and that now it is time for your participant to intuit *where* their card is. Give them a moment to concentrate. Say that a specific number may come to mind, but maybe not. Maybe they will just *feel* when they get to their card. All your attention should be on your participant at this moment. While your participant is concentrating, you will pull down the bottom most card of the deck with your left pinky finger. Covered from underneath you can use your fingers of the left hand to flip the bottom card *face up* executing a *half pass* as seen in Fig 15.

Fig 15.



Your participant's card is now *face up* at the bottom of the deck. Tell your participant that you are going to remove cards one at a time from the top of the deck and that they are to call stop whenever they would like. Again, they may wish for you to deal to a certain number or simply stop

you whenever the moment feels right.

Begin dealing cards one at a time into a pile on the table. Keep dealing until your participant calls stop. When they do, inquire as to whether or not they stopped at a specific number or if the moment just felt right. As you ask this, drop the remaining cards in the left hand down onto the table but turn your wrist *face down* as you do so. This will secretly place your participant's card *face down* on top of the deck. Regardless of your participant's answer, you can recap and clarify that you have *removed* a number of cards from the deck according to your participant's direction. Flip over the top card of the left-over packet of cards revealing that your participant was able to intuit exactly where their card was.

At this point you can make remarks about your participant's chosen object. Perhaps you might ask what it meant to them. Use this information to make vague connections to why you got the impression that you did when you wrote down what you saw in your mind. All you have left to do is reveal what you wrote on your card is an exact match to your participant's card.