

# THE BOOK OF THOTH – A GOTHIC NOVEL

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## Extract: The alchemist's laboratory

Adam and Dimitri stood at the top of the stairs, hesitating, as if on the edge of a precipice; the smell was stronger now, fuller. The air making its way up the staircase was also hotter than that in the office.

‘Shall we go?’ enquired Adam.

Dimitri swallowed and nodded. *Yes.*

They started down the rough stone stairs. This was not a recently-built staircase by any means; the steps were irregular and worn out in their centre. There were about twenty of them going down in one single spiral. When they reached the last step, they stopped, taken by surprise.

They found themselves in a large crypt-like space with brick-vaulted ceilings; this was clearly several hundred years older than the house above and possessed that elusive quality of places infused with history. It was also incredibly crowded, crammed with objects from floor to ceiling.

They cautiously moved forward, instinctively sticking together to face whatever challenge would lie ahead. All their senses were on high alert. A very small amount of natural light originated from a long narrow strip of latticed glass running along one side of the room, at the very top of the wall. The laboratory was lit up by a few oil lamps scattered around the place; some were attached to the walls, some had been left on tables, chairs and other pieces of furniture. Only a few of them had been left burning and the light was low, leaving whole sections of the cellar swallowed up by shadows.

The visitors' eyes kept catching wavering patches of light gleaming in various corners of the room. Their ears could distinguish some low bubbling and hissing sounds; betrayed by the acoustics of the room, they couldn't be sure about the provenance of the noises. And the air was full of smells: a mixture of organic, earthy flavours and more artificial, chemical particles. It felt like walking inside the stomach of a giant bilious beast: it was hot, moist and quivering... The whole place felt strangely *alive*.

When their eyes had managed to accustom themselves to the low light and the crowded space, what they saw filled them with anxious awe: there were pots, jars, tins, amphoras, retorts, vases and containers of every shape and size scattered around the place.

Strange antique contraptions were hanging from the ceiling like curious mechanical birds; a collection of antiquated compasses and other measuring instruments occupied two glass cabinets, and ancient maps, framed ephemera and medieval charts showing esoteric images as well as unknown alphabets and symbols covered the walls in no logical order.

A large U-shaped work surface had pride of place in the middle of all the chaos. The gurgling they had heard came mostly from a large, convoluted alembic that had been left to work on a heated plate.

Close by were aligned a series of decanters containing worryingly coloured liquids and metal boxes full to the brim with all kinds of tools essential to scientific experiments: spoons, pipettes and metal thongs, several retort stands, test tubes and swabs, small metal pans and crucibles, mortars, pestles and graters. All looked like they had been recently used, washed and prepared to be picked up again in the near future.

Pinned to a large cork board above the worktop were creased pages covered in complex calculations and equations that had been thrown onto the paper in a fussy, spidery handwriting alongside sketches and illegible notes. Some dirty rags, stiff with dubious dried stains, had been thrown on the floor underneath the tables. Near the work surface stood a blackboard that had recently been wiped with a wet cloth which had left a white smear across it.

As he approached the board, Dimitri felt something crush under his shoe: he had just stepped on a bit of chalk that had rolled onto the hard stone floor; his sole was now covered with the stuff. Either Saturnin or Vangelis had done something similar before going up the stairs and had left those powdery footmarks on the floor of the study, betraying the entrance to the laboratory.

The boy traced a shadowy line across the badly wiped surface with his index finger. He really wanted to scribble something on the blackboard, to feel the satisfaction of the piece of chalk rub against the slate. The first thing that came into his head was a big, round 'HELLO!' He wasn't sure why he was feeling the urge to write this. Maybe it was because he felt observed; it was an uneasy and uncomfortable feeling, because he *knew* there wasn't anyone in the laboratory apart from Mr Tuckfield and himself. He couldn't detect any human aura, and there certainly wasn't any ghost in there. No, it was more the persistent, insistent sensation that something or someone couldn't take their eyes off him and was following his every movement. With a shudder, the boy put down the stick of chalk he had been turning round and round in his fingers and joined his tutor.

A large sculpted oak cupboard was bursting with pots and jars full of mysterious-looking substances. Its contents were spilling out over the nearby mantelpiece upon which yet more

containers were closely aligned. Adam was scrutinizing the glass bottles, his face as close as possible. Some contained herbs and powders, others liquids of varying thickness and viscosity. The faded labels on the jars were all written in Latin. As he slowly made his way along the mantelpiece, his nose picked up some pungent, stinging smells and he sneezed several times. Dimitri, who was too short to be at eye level with the bottles, asked in a low voice:

‘What are they?’

‘I’m not sure... Herbs, powders, roots, maybe?’

‘Are they like medicine?’

The boy thought about the small bottles he had often glimpsed in his mother’s hands.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know at all, Dimitri.’

‘But if it’s not used to cure illnesses, what do you use them for?’ insisted

Dimitri.

Adam looked around him, still puzzled.

‘I’m afraid I do not have the answer to that one.’

Together, they moved further along the room. They discovered a small furnace in one corner and two small simmering alembics in another. Much like Adam’s ancestor Aloysius Dean, Vangelis Chronos was not only a respected scientist, but he had also been called to the other side, and had succumbed to the terribly seductive attraction of the occult. This had been Aloysius’s laboratory and it had been brought back to life by the present occupant for his own experimentation. So what exactly were an Egyptian god and an alchemist plotting together down here?

‘Mr Tuckfield! Look!’

The boy had stopped and was pointing at the back of the cellar. They had almost reached the far end of the room. On the wall was embedded a large sculpted golden disc adorned with hieroglyphics all around its outer edges. And right in its centre was a large eye, not any eye: it was an Egyptian eye, a symbol Adam recognised for having seen it so often. What was it called, again? ‘The Eye of Horus’, wasn’t it? The elongated, kohl-rimmed eye and its elegantly arched eyebrow were supported by a falcon on the left and a cobra on the right. This was an exquisite piece of work indeed, made of faience, lapis lazuli, carnelian and gold. Adam’s hair stood on end. This was the real thing, plucked from the obscurity of very ancient times.

Standing motionless in front of the mysterious object, both the boy and his tutor felt oppressed and scrutinised; Dimitri thought that this had probably been the origin of his earlier unease. Could it have been the eye he had felt on his back?

‘You are shaking, Dimitri,’ said Adam, glancing at the boy’s shivering frame. ‘What’s wrong?’

The boy's wary eyes came back reluctantly to the Eye of Horus.

'I don't know.' Dimitri's voice was choked by extreme anxiety; he was fighting to regain some control over his limbs, whilst the tremors grew more frequent and longer. 'I don't... really... like this thing.' He nodded in the direction of the golden disc.

Both felt at the same time repulsed yet attracted by The Eye. An invisible stream of irresistible power emanated from the ostentatious inanimate object.

The glare of the gold gave it a strange, unnatural aura. Adam understood that they were in the presence of some kind of totem; a very ancient, revered symbol whose significance neither him nor his young charge could even begin to grasp.

The young man could see Dimitri's neat little profile at his side and couldn't help being struck by the contrast between his innocent white flesh and the shiny, opulent antiquity of the golden idol. The boy was bewitched by it. Suddenly, his eyes widened and he let a small gasp escape from his lips. The shaking increased at a worrying pace. Adam forgot his own unease, seized the boy's arms and stepped in between him and the bejewelled Eye. Dimitri's head was now thrown back, his eyes rolling in his head.

'Dimitri!' shouted Adam, now in the throes of panic. He turned round and glanced furiously at the impassive Eye of Horus. Adam surprised himself when he hissed:

'You're not having him.'

Adam swiftly lifted the boy off the ground, threw him over his shoulder and made his way to the other side of the room and back up the stairs as quickly as he possibly could, leaving the gurgling laboratory behind him. The child's body didn't weigh a thing, but Adam could feel his shaking limbs through the material of his clothes. Holding onto the boy with one hand, he manoeuvred the bookshelf mechanism with the other and soon, the entrance to the basement was invisible again. The shaking stopped instantly.

Adam deposited his charge in Vangelis Chronos's armchair as carefully as possible, and sat on the edge of the desk, keeping a concerned eye on the boy. After a whole minute, Dimitri slowly came back to his senses and looked around with foggy eyes.

'What happened?' he asked weakly.

Adam jumped down from the desk and crouched in front of the armchair.

'I'm afraid I don't know, Dimitri. You started getting unwell whilst looking at the Eye of Horus downstairs.'

The boy instinctively turned his head towards the entrance of the laboratory, now once again concealed.

'Was it really bad to come here, Mr Tuckfield?'

‘What’s done is done, Dimitri. Do not worry about it.’

The young man glanced at his pupil’s white face. Dimitri’s skin was so thin, very much like his mother’s; the kind of skin you know would bruise incredibly easily. There was no sign of the grown man he would eventually become: his features were elfin-like. The tutor was overcome by a surge of affection for his young charge, a desire to protect this fragile yet acutely intelligent boy against the world. Where had that come from? He didn’t know. He felt like a big brother and an accomplice more than a figure of authority. Maybe Dimitri reminded him of his younger self.

Adam was now on a mission to protect the boy’s innocence against the brooding menace whose presence he could feel all over the estate. If that meant exceeding his job description – and by teaming up with Dimitri to break into his employer’s office, he had *definitely* gone beyond the call of duty – then so be it. After all, he himself had been tricked into coming to the estate. If his so-called employers had misled his trust, then it was within his rights to retaliate by betraying theirs.

‘Are we... Are we going to get punished if we get caught?’ enquired the boy.

‘But we are *not* going to get caught.’

Adam wondered whether his voice had betrayed his doubts. Somehow, his words had felt heavy on his tongue. At a loss about how to put Dimitri’s mind at rest, Adam rested his hand on the boy’s shoulder and squeezed it lightly.

Dimitri stretched in the armchair; he was feeling stiff and achy, as if the shaking fit he had suffered from had strained his muscles, joints and nerves.

He looked around the room one last time, as if to imprint every detail onto his memory.

‘I guess we’d better leave now,’ he declared. ‘Maybe we could go to the kitchen and ask Mrs Abbott for some tea?’

He then extricated himself from the armchair, stood up and straightened his jacket; he was back to being his calm and composed self. A wave of relief swept over Adam.

Before getting back into the narrow bathroom and retracing their steps to the East Wing, Adam turned round to check that everything had been left as it had been before their visit. The gloomy study was perfectly still. It looked like the sepia photograph of a private museum belonging to an eccentric Victorian aristocrat – airless and lifeless, secretive and macabre. The display cabinets and their ghoulish contents were about to be shrouded in silent and dusty stillness once again.

Adam and Dimitri carefully slotted the bathroom panel into place and retraced their path to the more familiar East Wing. With each step they took further away from the study, they were

able to breathe a little bit more comfortably. By the time they reached the classroom, their lungs had managed to flush out the tainted and oppressive air of the laboratory.