THE SILVER KEY

WHEN RANDOLPH CARTER WAS THIRTY HE LOST THE KEY OF THE GATE OF DREAMS.



NO MORE COULD HIS GALLEYS SAIL UP THE RIVER OUKRANOS PAST THE GILDED SPIRES OF THRAN...



WONDER HAD GONE AWAY...



THEY HAD CHAINED HIM DOWN TO THINGS THAT ARE, AND HAD THEN EXPLAINED THE WORKINGS OF THOSE THINGS TILL MYSTERY HAD GONE OUT OF THE WORLD.



SO CARTER HAD TRIED TO DO AS OTHERS DID...



IN THE FIRST DAYS OF HIS BONDAGE HE HAD TURNED TO THE GENTLE CHURCHLY FAITH ENDEARED TO HIM BY THE NAIVE TRUST OF HIS FATHERS...



BUT WHEN HE CAME TO STUDY THOSE WHO HAD THROWN OFF THE OLD MYTHS, HE FOUND THEM EVEN MORE UGLY THAN THOSE WHO HAD NOT.



CALM, LASTING BEAUTY COMES ONLY IN DREAM...



TRAVEL WAS ONLY A MOCKERY...



...EVEN THE GREAT WAR STIRRED HIM BUT LITTLE, THOUGH HE SERVED FROM THE FIRST IN THE FOREIGN LEGION OF FRANCE.



...THEY COULD NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD HIS MENTAL LIFE. THAT IS, NONE BUT HIS GRANDFATHER AND GREAT-UNCLE CHRISTOPHER COULD, AND THEY WERE LONG DEAD.



THEN HE BEGAN ONCE MORE THE WRITING OF BOOKS, WHICH HE HAD LEFT OFF WHEN DREAMS FIRST FAILED HIM.



HIS NEW NOVELS WERE SUCCESSFUL AS HIS OLD ONES HAD NEVER BEEN...



...BECAUSE HE KNEW HOW EMPTY THEY MUST BE TO PLEASE AN EMPTY HERD, HE BURNED THEM AND CEASED HIS WRITING.



SO CARTER BOUGHT STRANGER BOOKS AND SOUGHT OUT DEEPER AND MORE TERRIBLE MEN OF FANTASTIC ERUDITION...



HE DECIDED TO LIVE ON A RARER PLANE, AND FURNISHED HIS BOSTON HOME TO SUIT HIS CHANGING MOODS; ONE ROOM FOR EACH...



ONCE HE HEARD OF A MAN IN THE SOUTH... HIM HE VISITED, LIVING WITH HIM AND SHARING HIS STUDIES FOR SEVEN YEARS...



...TILL HORROR OVERTOOK THEM ONE MIDNIGHT IN AN UNKNOWN AND ARCHAIC GRAVEYARD, AND ONLY ONE EMERGED WHERE TWO HAD ENTERED.



...EXPERIENCES IN THE DARK... MADE HIM SEAL FOREVER CERTAIN PAGES IN THE DIARY OF A WILD-MINDED ANCESTOR.



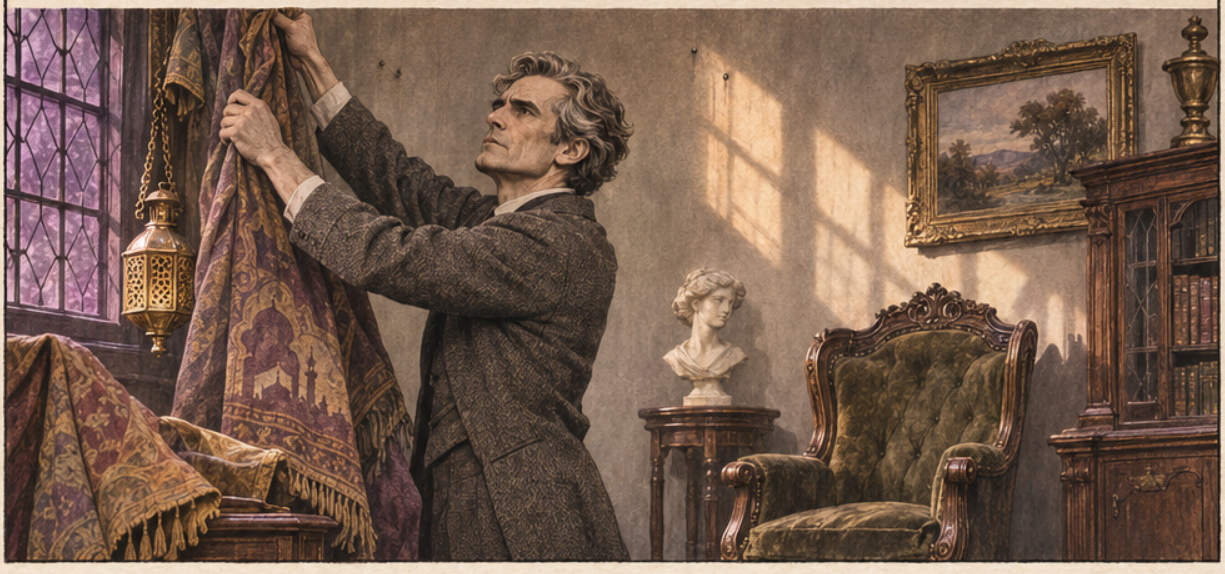
...AT FIFTY HE DESPAIRED OF ANY REST OR CONTENTMENT IN A WORLD GROWN TOO BUSY FOR BEAUTY AND TOO SHREWD FOR DREAM.



HE THOUGHT IT RATHER SILLY THAT HE BOTHERED TO KEEP ON LIVING AT ALL...



INERTIA AND FORCE OF HABIT, HOWEVER, CAUSED HIM TO DEFER ACTION...



...A TOUCH OF MAGIC AND EXPECTANCY STOLE BACK INTO HIS NIGHTLY SLUMBERS.



THEN ONE NIGHT HIS GRANDFATHER REMINDED HIM OF A KEY.



HE SPOKE OF THE FLAME-EYED CRUSADER... AND OF THE FIRST SIR RANDOLPH CARTER WHO STUDIED MAGIC WHEN ELIZABETH WAS QUEEN.





...EDMUND CARTER WHO HAD JUST ESCAPED HANGING IN THE SALEM WITCHCRAFT...



IN THE DUST AND SHADOWS OF THE GREAT ATTIC HE FOUND IT, REMOTE AND FORGOTTEN AT THE BACK OF A DRAWER IN A TALL CHEST.



IT WAS BOUND IN RUSTY IRON, AND NO MEANS WAS PROVIDED FOR WORKING THE FORMIDABLE LOCK.



AN OLD SERVANT FORCED THE CARVEN LID...



INSIDE, WRAPPED IN A DISCOLOURED PARCHMENT, WAS A HUGE KEY OF TARNISHED SILVER COVERED WITH CRYPTICAL ARABESQUES...



THE MAN HAD ALWAYS SHIVERED WHEN HE READ THIS SCROLL, AND CARTER SHIVERED NOW.



BUT HE CLEANED THE KEY, AND KEPT IT BY HIM NIGHTLY IN ITS AROMATIC BOX OF ANCIENT OAK.



THEN HE KNEW HE MUST GO INTO THE PAST AND MERGE HIMSELF WITH OLD THINGS...



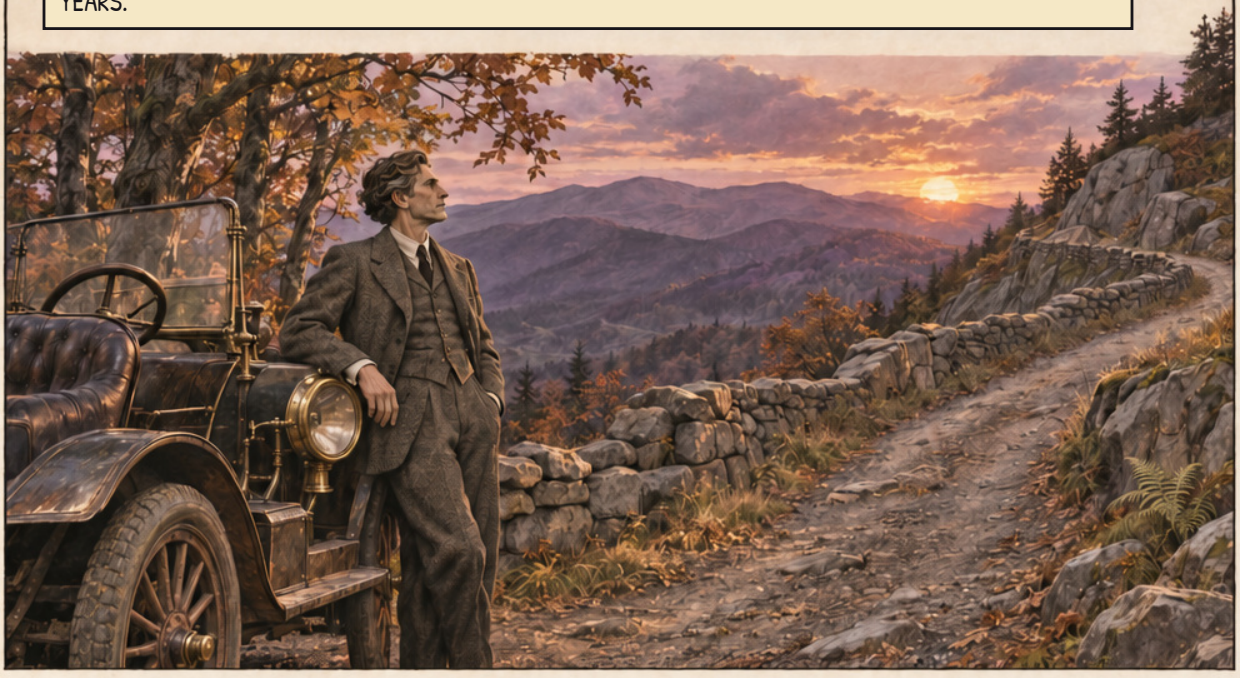
AT ONE BEND HE SAW THE GROUP OF GIANT ELMS AMONG WHICH AN ANCESTOR HAD ODDLY VANISHED A CENTURY AND A HALF BEFORE...



...THE HILL WHERE HIS MOTHER AND HER FATHERS BEFORE HER WERE BORN, AND WHERE THE OLD WHITE HOUSE STILL LOOKED PROUDLY ACROSS THE ROAD...



THEN CAME THE STEEPER SLOPE THAT HELD THE OLD CARTER PLACE HE HAD NOT SEEN IN OVER FORTY YEARS.



SOMETHING MADE HIM FEEL THAT MOTORS DID NOT BELONG IN THE REALM HE WAS SEEKING...



...IT HAD BEEN LEFT VACANT AND UNTENDED THROUGH HIS NEGLECT SINCE THE DEATH OF HIS STRANGE GREAT-UNCLE CHRISTOPHER THIRTY YEARS BEFORE.



...THE OLD CONGREGATIONAL STEEPLE ON CENTRAL HILL IN KINGSPORT; PINK WITH THE LAST FLUSH OF DAY...



...THE OLD WHITE CHURCH HAD LONG BEEN TORN DOWN TO MAKE ROOM FOR THE CONGREGATIONAL HOSPITAL.



OLD BENIJAH COREY HAD BEEN HIS UNCLE CHRISTOPHER'S HIRED MAN...

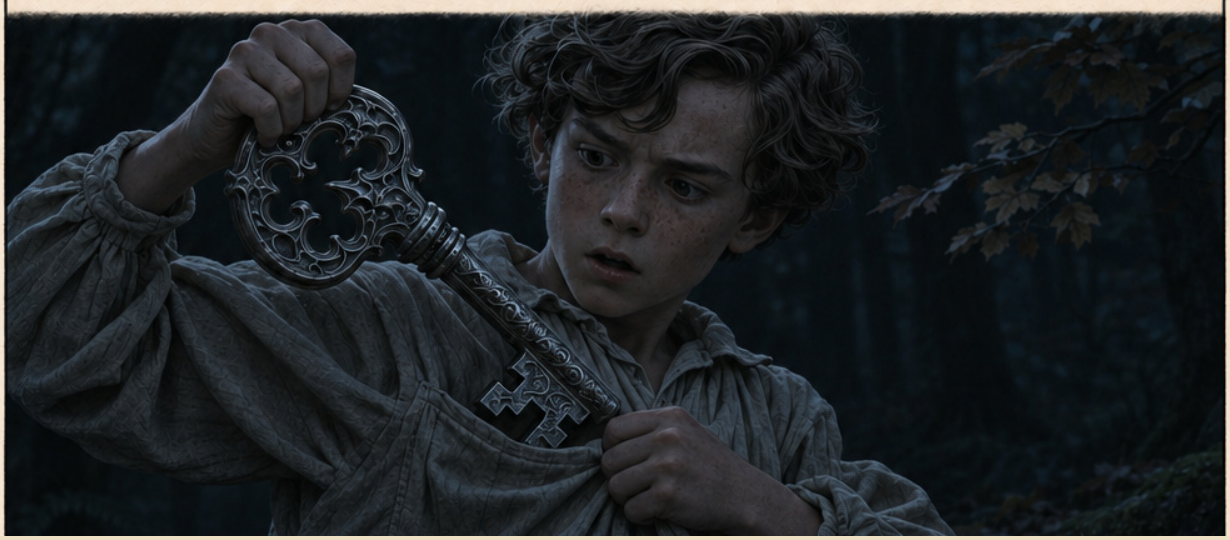




RANDOLPH CARTER STOPPED IN THE PITCH DARKNESS AND RUBBED HIS HAND ACROSS HIS EYES.



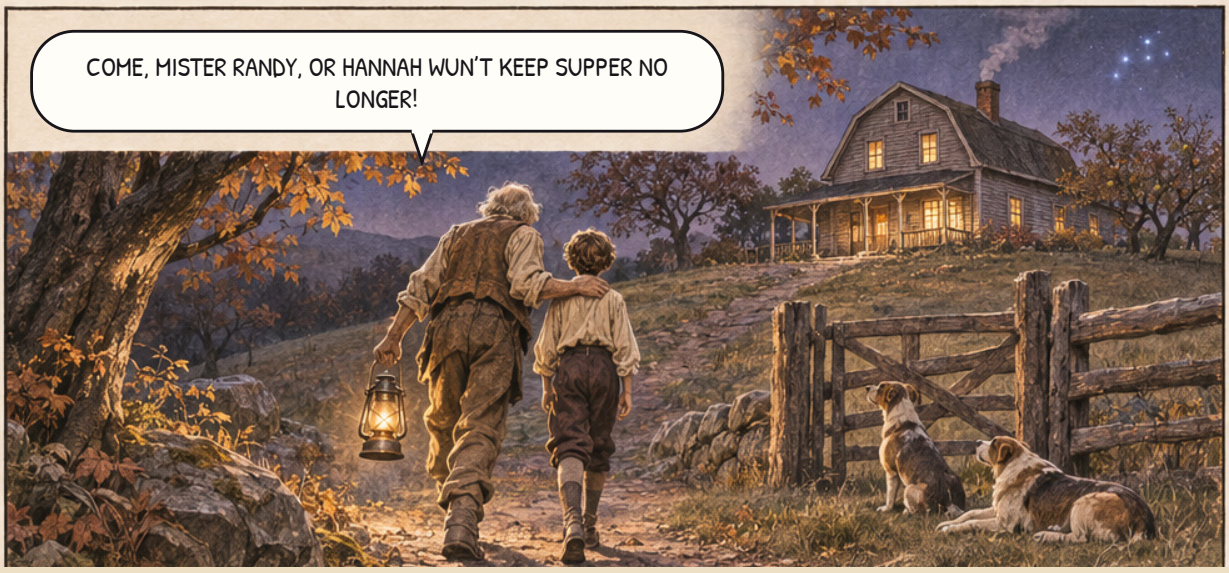
...THERE WAS THE BIG SILVER KEY HE HAD FOUND IN A BOX SOMEWHERE.



A SWAYING LANTERN CAME AROUND THE BLACK BEND...







AUNT MARTHA WAS IN THE DOORWAY, AND DID NOT SCOLD TOO HARD...



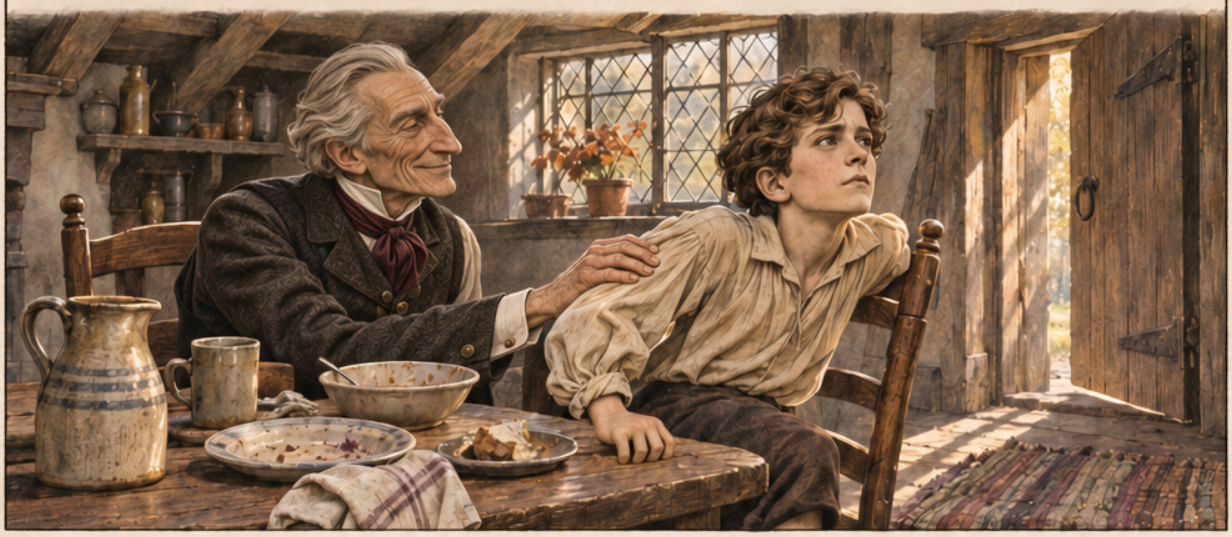
RANDOLPH DID NOT SHEW HIS KEY, BUT ATE HIS SUPPER IN SILENCE...



HE SOMETIMES DREAMED BETTER WHEN AWAKE, AND HE WANTED TO USE THAT KEY.



...UNCLE CHRIS... FORCED HIM INTO HIS CHAIR BY THE BREAKFAST TABLE.



THE TREES AND THE HILLS WERE CLOSE TO HIM, AND FORMED THE GATES OF THAT TIMELESS REALM WHICH WAS HIS TRUE COUNTRY.



...SKIPPED OFF ACROSS THE ORCHARD TO THE RISE BEYOND...



ONCE IN HIS ASCENT RANDOLPH CROSSED A RUSHING STREAM...



THEN HE CAME TO THE STRANGE CAVE IN THE FOREST SLOPE, THE DREADED "SNAKE-DEN" WHICH COUNTRY FOLK SHUNNED...



...LIGHTING HIS WAY WITH MATCHES FILCHED FROM THE SITTING-ROOM MATCH-SAFE...



...A HAUNTING SEPULCHRAL PLACE WHOSE GRANITE WALLS HELD A CURIOUS ILLUSION OF CONSCIOUS ARTIFICE.



...HE INSTINCTIVELY DREW FORTH THE GREAT SILVER KEY AS HE DID SO.



...WHEN HE DANCED BACK TO THE HOUSE THAT NIGHT HE OFFERED NO EXCUSES FOR HIS LATENESS...



...SOMETHING OCCURRED TO HEIGHTEN HIS IMAGINATION IN HIS TENTH YEAR... HE SEEMED, IN FINE, TO HAVE PICKED UP AN ODD GIFT OF PROPHECY...



IT WAS AS EARLY AS 1897 THAT HE TURNED PALE WHEN SOME TRAVELLER MENTIONED THE FRENCH TOWN OF BELLOY-EN-SANTERRE, AND FRIENDS REMEMBERED IT WHEN HE WAS ALMOST MORTALLY WOUNDED THERE IN 1916...



CARTER'S RELATIVES TALK MUCH OF THESE THINGS BECAUSE HE HAS LATELY DISAPPEARED.



...THEY FOUND HIS MOTOR SET CAREFULLY BY THE ROADSIDE...



THE BOX HELD ONLY A QUEER PARCHMENT WHOSE CHARACTERS NO LINGUIST OR PALAEOGRAPHER HAS BEEN ABLE TO DECIPHER OR IDENTIFY.



RAIN HAD LONG EFFACED ANY POSSIBLE FOOTPRINTS...



A COMMON WHITE HANDKERCHIEF FOUND AMONG FOREST ROCKS ON THE HILLSIDE BEYOND CANNOT BE IDENTIFIED AS BELONGING TO THE MISSING MAN.



THERE IS TALK OF APPORTIONING RANDOLPH CARTER'S ESTATE AMONG HIS HEIRS, BUT I SHALL STAND FIRMLY AGAINST THIS COURSE BECAUSE I DO NOT BELIEVE HE IS DEAD.



IT IS RUMOURED IN ULTHAR... THAT A NEW KING REIGNS ON THE OPAL THRONE IN ILEK-VAD...



...WHEREIN THE BEARDED AND FINNY GNORRI BUILD THEIR SINGULAR LABYRINTHS...



...IN ITS CRYPTICAL ARABESQUES THERE MAY STAND SYMBOLISED ALL THE AIMS AND MYSTERIES OF A BLINDLY IMPERSONAL COSMOS.

