

GEORGE CARACOL

HOLY EMPIRE

THE SOUL PENDANT



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PROLOGUE

IT WAS A DARK, COLD NIGHT. The thundering storm could be heard outside. The rain poured down incessantly, but could only be heard softly in the inner rooms.

So where were we? In a pitch-black room. A few candles were the only source of light. A young woman was sitting in an armchair, her face covered by a hood. She was holding a baby on her lap, gently rocking it back and forth. It looked at her with wide eyes, unsure of what was happening around it. Almost equally unsure, she returned its gaze and held out her finger to it, which it grasped with the whole of its small hand. A man was standing next to her. He put his hand on her shoulder. It was quiet in this dark little room. Apart from the flickering candles, nothing could be heard. Long, dark curtains hung along the walls. At one end of the room was a wooden door, at the opposite end the woman sat next to a small table covered with a pile of books and glasses.

The lady waited for quite a while until the door finally opened inwards. In stepped a hooded figure completely wrapped in a cloak. She was followed by two others. When the last person entered the room, they closed the door behind them and locked it. The lady with the baby stood up.

Lady: "We are here."

Hooded figure: "I am glad that you have decided in favour of this. What we're going to do here is this."

The figure pulled something out of its coat pocket and held it out to the lady. It was a necklace with a sparkling red stone as a pendant. Engraved on its

frame were the letters M.R.. Apart from the fact that it looked particularly mesmerising in the candlelight, there was nothing that stood out about the object.

"Is that it?", the lady asked. Immediately afterwards, however, she found herself looking intently at the stone once more. It wasn't its appearance that captivated her. It was the strange feeling it gave her. For a brief moment, a shiver ran down her spine.

The cloaked person in front of her pulled the pendant back towards them and clasped it in their hand.

"I believe you have already sensed why this is the object." The person removed their hood with their free hand. It revealed the face of a middle-aged lady, pale, large eyes. The others did the same and took their hoods off their heads. The other two were young boys. The lady with the child on her lap unveiled her golden-locked hair, while the tall man next to her, seemed to have thick eyebrows and a pale look on his face.

"Now then," said the woman with the pendant, "shall we begin?"

The lady and her companion nodded. So, the lady took a glass with a red liquid in it from the table, opened it and began to draw a circle and other shapes on the floor. Everyone watched her in silence. The man raised his voice:

"And it won't hurt him, right? You promised us that it wouldn't harm my child, Gabriela." Without turning away from her drawing, the woman replied:

"It's just like I said. It won't cause any physical harm to the boy." She paused briefly. "As for the mental state, I can't give you any information. The child's not normal anyway, I'd say. We wouldn't be able to predict how the dev..... cursed child would have developed regardless."

Everyone present remained silent after that, while she finished drawing the magic circle. The smaller of the two boys stared mesmerised at everything she drew. When she had finished, she stood up, walked over to the table and picked up the top book from the pile. It was a thick, leather-bound book with

yellowed pages. Gabriela tried her best to prevent anyone but herself from seeing what was written in the book. She skimmed through a few pages until she finally seemed to have found what she was looking for.

Then she stepped into the centre of the circle and asked the two parents to join her, but without blurring what she had drawn. The mother, however hesitated. Her husband looked at her and recognised the worry written all over her face.

"Everything will be fine. If we want to help him, this has to be done. You know that." He took her in his arms and kissed her. She looked into his eyes and then nodded. With a single, decisive step, they entered the circle, their son in her arms. To begin the ritual, she put the pendant on the child.

The lady began to read something aloud in an unknown language:

"Soma kai psyche. Kante dyo xechorista. Syndete ta metaxy tous. Anthropos kai kosmema."

Everyone in the room suddenly began to feel a strange pressure. Warmth began to rise. The candles began to flicker. The woman took out a small needle and, with the parents' consent, pricked the baby's finger. She took a single drop of blood and let it fall onto the jewel on the necklace.

"Anaireste te moira. Desmeumenos gia te aionioteta. Allaxte to mellon."

Suddenly, the circle and the symbols on the floor below them began to glow. A gust of wind blew out all the candles in the room and yet a bright blue light illuminated the room. Slowly, however, this light began to fade again and before it could go completely dark, the candles lit up again. The strange feeling and the pressure had disappeared. Everyone stared around cluelessly.

It was done. At that moment, the child suddenly began to scream and wail loudly.

"This is only part of the solution," Gabriela noted coolly.

"We know," the man bluntly replied to her.

"Well then, I bid you farewell for the time being." Gabriela gestured towards the door while the lady tried to calm the child. The man glared at her and said, "I think you forgot your good manners." She only stared back with a blank look. "This is not a public setting my lord."

"Come on, darling. We're leaving." - "Yes, I'm coming," said the woman in a very subdued voice.

CHAPTER 1

THE CURSED CHILD

IT WAS A SOMEWHAT CHILLY MORNING. It had rained outside overnight, but now the sun was shining through the gap in the curtains again. The cock outside began to crow.

That noise woke Wenzel. He always was a very light sleeper anyway, if he fell asleep at all that was. Unfortunately, there were often whole nights when he didn't get a wink of sleep. That was normal for him, though. So, Wenzel got up and opened the curtains and the window, to air out the room briefly. He leaned out of the window just a little to get some fresh air and looked down onto the courtyard, several storeys below him. Aurel got up from bed at the same time.

"Good morning," Wenzel said to his brother. "Mornin'!", it came back. The two of them began to get dressed in their school uniforms and would soon be heading to have breakfast in the dining hall. It was a few hundred metres away, in another building.

As they were walking out the door, Aurel paused for a moment. "Wait!" He patted down his pockets, then went back to his bedside table and reached for an object wrapped in a small cloth. "I almost forgot," Aurel noted briefly. Wenzel just looked at him emotionlessly or, to be precise, looked at the object he was pocketing. Aurel gave him a sinister eye and slapped Wenzel on the forehead with the palm of his hand. "Come on, let's go," he hissed and pushed himself out the door.

As always, they had porridge for breakfast. In general, they almost always had porridge, unless it was a public holiday or some kind of celebration. Well, then. Wenzel took his bowl, sat down at the end of the long table and began to eat. As usual, he didn't speak to anyone and ate his porridge without distraction. Not that he was able to talk to someone, anyway. No one was sitting next to him and even if he had sat down with others....no, Wenzel didn't even want to think about that. Everyone avoided him. Nobody liked him. Why should he even try to sit with a friend group, who he didn't even know? That's what Wenzel's reasoning behind that was.

In contrast to him, it was relatively loud in the rest of the dining hall. All the students were chatting with each other, some were joking and laughing. Wenzel only glanced at them occasionally, perhaps trying to make out what was so funny. The thought always hovered in the back of his mind that perhaps they were laughing at him, although he knew for a fact, that this wasn't the case. Nobody thought of him as "funny". The pupils avoided him because they didn't like him. Why was that? Because Wenzel was supposedly cursed, or so the rumours went. If only they knew.....

Aurel sat away from Wenzel. His brother also didn't keep Wenzel company. He liked him just as little...., in fact he liked him even less than the other pupils did. But Aurel was still his big brother. He was his guardian, who Wenzel had to listen to. He was responsible for "the most important thing". After Aurel had finished eating, he stood up, came over to his brother and pulled him by the arm. "Time to go, Wimpel!" Wenzel hated this stupid nickname of his, but he followed without argument.

After breakfast, it was time for class. The main school building was in the same compound as the students' accommodation. What all the buildings had in common, however, was that they were old and venerable. The pupils, including Wenzel, walked in a long stream along the carefully laid out and well-kept paths of the park towards the school. The corridors of said building were

long and wide. The classrooms were also large and had very high ceilings. If one tilted their head back and looked up vertically, intricate stucco work and often even pictures by painters could be seen up there. In short, it was a very elitist boarding school for the upper class. This was also reflected in the students' clothing. There was a school uniform and it was compulsory. For boys it was a white shirt, a dark blue jacket, an equally dark blue tie and long trousers. It was the same for girls, except they had to wear a blazer, which had a slightly different look from the jacket, and a skirt. All quite noble.

Today was a long day at school. First there was a writing lesson, then they had maths and in the third lesson they had history. Wenzel had to pay particular attention here. He didn't like history, but the last time the teacher checked Wenzel's notes, he was found out. He often didn't take notes in class, so he was made to rewrite all the missing stuff! That's why he would be writing down everything he was told now.....at least with this teacher. The date was being written on the blackboard:

12.4.461

It was the year 461 of "God's mandation".

Wenzel hurriedly began to copy with quill and ink. His hand was already tired because of the exhausting writing lesson he's had earlier today. But there was no helping it. His fingers would be hurting today.

Today's topic was the overthrow of the Melgarions 80 years ago and the accession of power by the current ruling house. The Melgarions were the descendants of Melgar the Great, who founded the Ordanian Empire. His seizure of power marked the beginning, the year zero of the current era, that's how important he was! Today our country is called the "Ordanian Confeder-

acy". The teacher went on to explain that the fall of the Melgarions meant "the end of tyranny" and that the current rulers of Ordania no longer oppressed the people with "diabolical witchcraft".

The teacher patrolled the aisle to make sure that everyone was properly taking notes. He went to the back row, where Wenzel was sitting alone on his own table, to check on him, too. This gave Wenzel at least a brief moment to take the pressure off his fingers, which had been plagued by the pain of constant writing. But the writing continued for the whole hour. Wenzel hated it!

Finally, the lesson ended, and he was allowed to leave.

His tiredness was already starting to set in, even though Camenian and etiquette lessons, as well as P.E. were still on the programme for him today. He was also beginning to suffer from a slight headache. Well, there was no helping it anyway. Wenzel packed his things and followed the rest of class to the next lesson.

He always did well in Camenian lessons. Many of the words were not that different from Ordanian. Only the way of expressing oneself was different, but even that was more a matter of getting a feel for the language than logic. Others probably didn't agree with him on this. Today they were practising grammar. First, they all repeated the past tenses together, then they had to fill them into the gaps on a worksheet correctly. Disheartened groans could be heard from somewhere. Nobody liked grammar. Even Wenzel wasn't necessarily a fan of it, but he didn't mind doing a few simple gap-filling tasks.

Whilst completing the assignment, Wenzel suddenly felt something smack against the side of his head. He reached over and felt something wet. Giggling could be heard from next to him. He turned his head over to see who had shot spit balls at him and immediately found out who it was: Bert

and his stupid seat neighbour! He briefly looked over to Wenzel and laughed again, covering his mouth with his hand so that the teacher didn't hear him right away.

Wenzel ignored him and turned back to his sheet. Less than two minutes later, he got the next paper ball. He tried to speak quietly to Bert to tell him to stop, but the teacher only admonished him to get back to work. This would happen a few more times during the rest of the lesson. Some other pupils saw what was happening and laughed about it, too. But nobody helped Wenzel! That made him really angry, but he swallowed all the anger. Fighting them would only cause him more problems.

Then it was time for the lunch break. Today herring fillet with rice was on the menu. It might have been a normal meal for Wenzel, but it was something reserved for the upper classes. Especially the rice, which had to be imported from Camenia because it didn't grow in these latitudes, was something high-class. As always, Wenzel was eating alone.

As he sat at the table, however, he glanced over at the girl clique from his parallel class. They were sitting somewhere else than usual today. His gaze lingered on Amalie. Normally, Wenzel always tried to avoid eye contact with others, as they would only judge him even more than they already did. This time, however, he couldn't take his eyes off her. Her beautiful face mesmerised him. When she raised her head, apparently chatting with the others, her eyes met his. Shortly afterwards, she lowered it again, but Wenzel kept staring for a moment longer before turning back to his food. What a strange feeling. But Wenzel knew exactly what it was. He was sure, that he had a crush on Amalie.

Be that as it may, the lunch break didn't last long, and everyone made their way back to the school building. On the way there, which led through the park, the sun peeked through the clouds again. Wenzel paused for a moment. Holding his hand to his forehead, he looked towards the light and the nature

that presented itself in front of him. Time stood still for a moment. Last night's rain had finally washed away the last remnants of snow and the first flowers were beginning to sprout. The first birdsongs of the year could also be heard. In the distance the high wall that enclosed the school grounds could be seen.

Wenzel soon realised that he was standing here all alone. "Damn it!", it slipped out of his mouth. He had to get to class as quickly as possible. He turned out to be only a minute late. But he still got a scolding from the teacher. The rest of the lesson was boring. In "etiquette" they were taught about how to behave in high society. Wenzel didn't listen half the time. It wasn't because he wasn't interested, but because his headache had worsened a lot. And it would get worse and worse as the lesson went on. Wenzel felt nauseous and dizzy. He was feeling really bad, so bad in fact, that he was relatively indifferent when the lesson ended. He couldn't go on like this.

When the class left the room, he informed the teacher of his condition. The teacher sent him to Mrs Adele. Of course he did. Mrs Adele wasn't a nurse, but whenever something like today happened, she would help him. How did she do that? The answer is, she didn't do anything. IT was the answer.

When Wenzel entered her office, he had to sit down and wait. Mrs Adele, a tall lady with long black hair, small round glasses and a stern look, called for Aurel. Soon afterwards, he came traipsing in at the door with a lax gait.

"Are you trying to cheat your way out of class again, pipsqueak? Huh?"

Wenzel quietly replied: "No, I just can't bear it anymore. I.." - "Stupid excuse, as always!" Aurel fished something out of his pocket and handed it to Mrs Adele. It was the cloth from this morning.

"Young man, that's no acceptable way to behave!", Mrs Adele admonished him. "Besides, how many times have I told you that we lift our feet properly when we walk! - "Sorry," Aurel replied half-heartedly.

She gestured for him to leave. He left the room. "All right!", said the lady. "I'll give you an hour, as usual. Tell me how you're doing afterwards." Wenzel nodded and replied with a short, "Yes."

From the cloth, Mrs Adele took out a pendant with a sparkling red stone embedded in it. She took great care not to touch it directly with her fingers, but only through the cloth. Wenzel accepted it ...without the cloth. He sat down in an armchair and looked out of the window. Meanwhile, Mrs Adele "supervised" him, doing paperwork on her desk.

Wenzel immediately started to feel better. Much, much better. His headache was swept away in an instant and a deep sense of relaxation set in very quickly. Outside, he could see the branches of the trees, whose very first buds were already visible, swaying in the wind. Further back, he saw the compound's boundary wall again. How he wished he could fly over it and see the world beyond. Away from this oppressive prison. Yes, the boarding school was like a prison to him. He just wanted to get away, that was his innermost wish. Out through the clouds, to see the fields, forests and cities of the world.

Wenzel saw his brother walking next to him in the corridor. "When we get back to the room, you'll start your homework straight away. Is that clear? No shirking your lessons! Your grades are bad as is!", he said in a stern voice. Then Wenzel heard a soft voice calling his name. "Wenzel!" It grew louder and louder. It was Mrs Adele's voice. Suddenly, Wenzel snapped back into consciousness. He had obviously dozed off. When he opened his eyes, he could see Mrs Adele from above. She had turned her head up towards him. Wenzel was floating on the ceiling! "Damn!", he thought to himself, "Once again I've failed!"

"How many times have I told you that we want to prevent this from happening, Wenzel! If you fall down, there's nothing I could do!", he got scolded by his overseer. Wenzel immediately lowered himself slowly from the ceiling again. He had a good enough feel for it, so that nothing could go wrong with the landing here. But unfortunately, Mrs Adele didn't understand this. He

apologised and sat down again. The boy had no idea how much time had passed, but obviously the hour was not yet up. He had held the stone firmly in his hand the whole time. He opened it and looked at the glimmering red object. On its frame one could make out the letters M.R..

He wouldn't be able to hang on without this stone. But that was only logical. It contained his soul! Wenzel was a sorcerer, a devil, as many would say. That meant he had magical powers that were considered dangerous and "diabolical". To prevent him from being burned at the stake, Wenzel's soul was separated from his body. The magic he possessed was bound to his soul. Therefore, Wenzel would pose no danger as long as he didn't have the pendant, as his soul and, therefore, his magical powers were separated from him. The only problem was, that his body needed his soul and began to suffer without it. This was the cause of his frequent headaches, nausea, tiredness and insomnia. But it had to be this way, because Wenzel was not like the others. He was cursed, cursed by the magic he possessed! But he couldn't be completely without his soul, so when his condition became overwhelming, he would get his soul back for an hour to recover. The result was what had just happened. Total relaxation.

When the hour had passed, Aurel returned and was handed back the pendant. The two said their farewells and left Mrs Adele's room. Aurel, as the older brother, was essentially Wenzel's guardian and, therefore, also had responsibility for the pendant. That was what their parents had decided.

"When we get back to the room, you'll start your homework straight away. Is that clear?", Aurel ordered him right off the bat. "No shirking your lessons! Your grades are bad as it is!" Wenzel hesitated for a moment. He had foreseen this scene earlier. Deja-vu indeed. He then answered, "But I only missed gym class. It wasn't anything important."-"Shut up! You won't amount to anything anyway! But at least try to make an effort. If your grades are bad, mum will scold me again!"

"Yes, I will," Wenzel simply replied. He hated his brother but didn't dare to oppose him.

CHAPTER 2

THE STONE

DAY AFTER DAY PASSED in the same monotony: getting up, eating breakfast, school lessons, lunch, more lessons, going home, homework, studying, going to bed and every now and then he was allowed one short hour with the pendant. Wenzel hated this daily routine and he had no one to talk to about it. He did change one thing about himself, though. He worked on his self-control when he had time with his pendant. In the future, he would no longer allow his mind to wander off into cloud cuckoo land while who-knows-what was happening around him, just because he was too drunk on his own magic. That had been the last. He had vowed to himself to do this in the past, but now he had actually done it. What Aurel had once done to him would never happen to him again.

Today, everything went ahead as usual. He got up and ventilated the room. Aurel still seemed too tired to get out of bed. As Wenzel stretched his limbs after another sleepless night to at least somehow get going, his gaze fell over to his soul, which for once lay uncovered on Aurel's bedside table. As always, he was gripped by the desire to snatch it, to take it for himself, where it belonged. Then his common sense kicked in again and he dismissed the stupid thought.

However, Aurel had seen this brief moment of wavering with the eyes he had only just opened. Instantly, his right hand shot out from under the blanket and snatched the pendant. "Don't you think you can try anything stu-