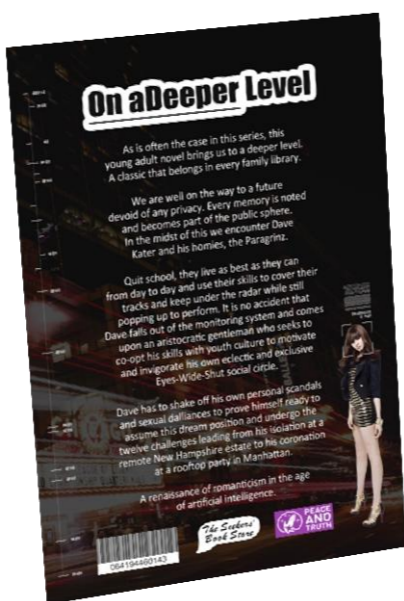




From the series
The Books of Life®



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Reading sample 3

Dinner for Two

The dark hall with the long, eighteen-foot-high neo-Gothic windows above the portal is dimly lit by antique gas lanterns. It is going on 6 o'clock. From the sound of it, the light drizzle has increased to a poring rain again. It drips onto the paving stones from cornices and gutters. And the view through the side window gives way to a darkening shade of gray, rapidly turning into pitch-black night. Behind Dave, who is standing facing the Baroness and the stone staircase behind her while stuffing his gut with Chateaubriand and green beans in morel sauce, the candles flicker glaringly. The Baroness in her cream-white MADELEINE NICKI-MORNING COAT with intricate sequin work and wine red-and-black leaf patters on the lapels gives Dave to understand that this mysterious room is the main meeting hall of the New England branch of the Club, comprised of 2,248 members. The room is used for social as well as ritual purposes. And if he minds is p's and q's, he will find out the secret that manifests itself as capabilities exhibited by these chillers this very evening.

"The first guests will start arriving at 8 o'clock", she utters, dipping her roll in her cup of coffee, and inquires as to whether he is prepared for the event: "Did you read what Alf brought up to your room? You cannot entertain any doubts about it. If you have doubts before you start to experience it, then the entire experience will be denied to you.

The thunderclap of enlightenment does not fall upon you out of the blue. Nobody comes to understand from one day to the next. In order to create the explosion, you have to slowly and persistently cover the terrain. Only after you have internalized it, when you can summon the experience from your memory, will you feel the blow that dispels all doubt and darkness of you."

Dave chews loudly and looks askance at the Baroness.

"The Baron places a great deal of hope in you, my son. He has not left this residence for more than 35 years. The castle and its surroundings are his home, a place without time, cares and worries, from which he expects he will depart this world. And in avoiding the world outside, he has never married or sired children. Someone has to become his heir, someone to continue what he began years ago. You, Dave, you are to be his successor. One day, this will all be yours. You will be the Lord of Castle Soiron. If you act wisely, my son can adopt you and bequeath everything that he knows, everything that makes up his world. That is why Fate brought you here to us, and Fate never errs. The Club will live on with you; the future will be passed into your hands. Are you aware of your responsibility, do you understand what this does mean for you?"

For a moment Dave hesitates. He has a gnawing thought, a new feeling, something that prevents him from swallowing. His palms grow damp, a nasty shooting pain erupts in his temples. Is this really more

than he can handle?

"We'll mamage juft fime", he replies with his mouth full. But he feels a pain, one he has never sensed before. Something like self-doubt. And no wonder. For the first time in his life is he within reach of what he has always been after. But that is not the only thing that is new to him: Dave feels abandoned. He misses having his crew to cover his six. For the first time, he had been left entirely to his own resources. He is the only one standing between himself and his future. It all depends on him. He alone has to snatch up the Golden Calf, which he already imagines to be an entire cattle ranch of pure gold, and lead it to the slaughter. With this image before him, he decides to accept the Soirons' offer without any further ado. "Whatever the Grand Poobah orders is my command", he says to the old woman with the silver CARTIER TANK SOLO, "I shurly will beat every single syllable into my brain."

"Marvelous, simply marvelous" The Baroness claps her hands. Observances begin at 8 o'clock and your grand debut will come at 10."

"What, my grand debut?"

"The guests await your inaugural address. They want to see *and* hear the Child of Fate. They want to know about your arrival. The Baron, my applause-hungry son, could not contain his joy. But not to fear, young man! We have three months' time, enough to convince the members that *you* are the Promised One. Tell the assembled guests whatever you would say otherwise. Just be *yourself*. Trust in Fate, which never errs. Alf, the Elixir and two

glasses!"

"Heeheehee. Very good, two glasses as you requested, my Baroness!"

"What is that, the Elixir of Life?"

"How old do you think I am, Dave?"

"Well, after women hit twenty, it's hard for me to tell."

"Last week I celebrated my 108th birthday. This elixir prolongs life, hence the name."

"Damn", Dave mumbles, chewing his fingernails. All at once, he opens a crack looking onto an ominous future. "If this lady is still kicking at 108", he thinks in a panic, "how long will her son still be around! What if I have to wait 20 or even 50 years to take over the shop?"

Dave's euphoria has suddenly been shot to shit. But then a shimmer of hope: What if her son is a lot older than he looks, Dave asks at once:

"And your son, the Baron, my mentor, how old is he?"

"Andrew is turning 86. Doesn't he look a lot younger?" She turns to her pasty butler and says: "Thank you, Alf", and to her charge: "Drink it, it will make you feel a lot better right away."

Dave lifts the glass critically and inspects the green-yellow concoction from all sides. Then he sticks his nose into the glass and sniffs.

"Ewwww, smells like some old skank's cunt!"

"Just drink it!"

"Is that Dover sole in vinaigrette?"

"Sea cucumber", replies the Baroness, "Down the hatch!"

Dave places his lips to the edge and sips a drop.

"Gaggg!"

"Young man!"

"I am about to barf". He grimaces, pushing it away. "Nobody could possibly choke this down."

"The first time it can taste a bit peculiar, but you will start to get used to it."

"Get used - to that", Dave protests, "Tastes like panther piss filtered through a dead dog's eye sockets!"

"It will give you courage, strength and elan", the Baroness assures him. Then she switches glasses and downs the contents in one gulp. Now it is Dave's turn. And while he hears Mozart striking up from some hidden source, and a scantily clad mulatto girl steps provocatively out of the darkness and spurs him on with encouraging gestures, he manages to knock it back.

"Gaaaaaaah!" he slams the glass down. "Where did that mocha dream get off to?"

"The ladies are preparing for their performance. Now go to your room and get ready for *your* speech. People want to get to know you. You are a star, the Child of Fate, never forget that. Alf will be up to fetch you just before eight. Now you must excuse me, I also have to prepare for the banquet."

"Alf come get you at e-e-e-eight!"

The Show is About to Go On

Before Dave hunkers down to work, he daydreams a bit. Images of a party, chicks, megabucks and fame drift through the drive-through cinema in his mind. Ever since he took part in the finale of the Sky Blue TV Kiddie Contest and was crowned Mega Kid of the Year, he has lived with the deep conviction that he was predestined for something special

that would someday be revealed to him. I cannot tell you...

End of reading

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