

Vandermine: The Sword's Errand
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Chapter 1

There was a high-pitched scream, somewhere--far in the distance. Only vaguely aware of it, Jon fell back into the darkness. After a short while, the darkness thinned and the scream grew closer. Subconsciously, Jon had a restless feeling of impending doom. The scream suddenly rushed at Jon, and the darkness quickly began to dissolve. He fought to stay back in the darkness--away from the approaching scream; but now that he was aware of the struggle, he knew he had already lost. The screaming pulled Jon out of the darkness but not yet fully into its own world. At this point, he became aware that the screaming wasn't constant, but that it came and went like ocean waves crashing against him. The waves came in farther and farther each time until they swirled around him--and dragged him out.

"No ... not yet," he moaned weakly in a semi-conscious state. Jon opened one eye and looked up at the nightstand while the other half of his face remained buried in his pillow. He waited a few seconds for his vision to clear and his mind to comprehend what he was seeing. The offender, a slightly battered electric alarm clock, glared at him with bright red numbers on its face. It kept screaming at him.

Jon tried to reach up to turn it off, but something held his arms down. Jon started to panic; the sound was driving him so crazy it was fully waking him. He couldn't allow this to happen. If he was fully awake, he knew his better judgment wouldn't allow him to sleep for "just a few more seconds." Finally, he was able to free his arm from the tangle

of sheets and blankets that were wrapped around his body like a giant snake. He reached over, hit the snooze button, and swatted the alarm clock onto the floor with a groan.

Hitting the snooze button and knocking the alarm clock onto the floor was a routine that he had developed back in high school. Jon had discovered that if his alarm went off more than a few times his mother would come downstairs and wake him. Now, if Jon's mother had been any ordinary mom she would have shaken him awake and that would have been fine. However, Jon's mother had always been too sweet for that. Whenever she would wake him she would sing cheerful wake-up songs like "Good Morning Merry Sunshine." His mother was a good enough singer, but such a large dose of cheerfulness that early in the morning Jon considered to be more maddening than the scream of his alarm clock. By knocking the alarm clock onto the floor, he had to get out of bed to reach it. This habit tended to reduce the service life of his alarm clocks, but swatting the obnoxious things sure did help him start the day off in a good mood.

Right away, it seemed, the alarm went off again. Jon fell out of bed and crawled around on the floor until he found it and shut it off. He got up and started to stand up straight, but his sore and stiff muscles quickly notified him that that was a little overly ambitious for now. Remembering Friday's football practice he stretched and massaged his muscles, making noises like a dying man. It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't been trying to make the starting line up.

Jon's goal was a high one since he was only in his second year of college ball, but he was much closer to attaining his goal than he thought. He had played as a second string linebacker in the first two games of the season and had done quite well. In

addition, one of the first stringers was having knee problems, and with the extra effort Jon was putting out in practice, he practically had it made.

Jon opened the drapes on his apartment's window to let the sunshine stream in. The warm sun felt good, but the bright light stung his eyes. Under most circumstances Jon felt that waking up before 10 a.m. on a Saturday should be punishable by public flogging--but today was an exception. With a sigh, Jon turned away from the window thinking of all he had to do. Today's schedule certainly didn't fit his usual fun-loving personality. He planned to get lots of studying done for a physics test, take a break by going shopping at the campus grocery store, and then finish studying in time to enjoy the evening with his friends.

After a quick breakfast, Jon showered, got dressed in his Levi's and tank top, and studied tediously in the kitchen-living room of his three-room apartment. He had worked hard over the summer to be able to pay for an apartment instead of living for another year in one of the college dorms. He loved the privacy.

After a couple of hours of studying, Jon tossed aside his physics books and a haphazard stack of notes. The books and notes made a significant "boom" when they hit the floor. With a weak grumble of exhaustion, Jon flicked his pencil across the room.

"This is ridiculous. They might as well ask me to memorize every physics book ever written. I can see the test now: Question #1 - Define the Universe and give three examples. Answer: a) true b) false c) none of the above," Jon cynically said to himself.

No matter how much Jon complained about his classes around his friends, down deep he really wanted to get a serious degree. He was a good linebacker, but he was smart enough to know not to count on going to the pros. Besides, he could never respect

himself if he was spoon-fed through some weak academic program for athletes. For now he was leaning towards a history major. Though many didn't consider history a practical subject due to the limited career options such a degree would provide, that was the subject in which he did nearly all of his free, non-school related reading.

He looked over at the clock, 12:30 p.m. "That's probably just about as much abuse as this boy's brain is gonna take for now. Guess I'll do my shopping now and worry about physics later," Jon reasoned aloud as he grabbed his car keys and headed for the door. He put his hand on the doorknob and cursed. He suddenly remembered he had a history paper on the Medieval period due on Friday, and he hadn't even started on it. "Oh well," Jon mentally shrugged, "I still got a week, and there's always Thursday night!"

Jon tapped the handrail impatiently as he watched the numbers light up backwards from 5 to 1. The doors finally opened, and he stepped out of the elevator and went out into the parking lot. There, waiting for him, was his pride and joy: a 1966 Mustang. He had bought it shortly after getting his license in high school. The owner had sold it to him for practically nothing since it had been in terrible shape. With the help of a mechanic friend, Jon had rebuilt the engine, replaced the suspension, reupholstered the interior, put in a top of the line stereo system, and gave the car a metallic red paint job. He pulled the keys out of his pocket and pushed the button on the car alarm's remote control. The car chirped in response.

"Yes, I love you, too," Jon cooed as he unlocked the door and got in.

Driving was something that Jon really enjoyed. It relaxed his body and soothed his mind. He liked letting his mind wander as he watched the busy city go by. As he drove along, he noticed in the rear view mirror a black Porsche turn onto the street.

"Mmm, sweet car! How would it be to have money like that?" Jon wondered aloud. The Porsche stayed behind him and soon it was almost up on his bumper. Jon looked into the rear view mirror and shot the driver an irritated look. The look didn't last long--the driver was a good-looking blonde wearing sunglasses.

"Think I'd have to give her a solid 8." Jon rated her. The blonde pulled up even closer now like she was in a hurry. Well, Jon thought. I better let the lady go by before she decides to crawl over my back.

As soon as he got a chance he moved into the right lane. He looked out the window expecting to see the Porsche zip on by him, but surprisingly it just came up beside him and stayed there. The girl smiled at Jon and kept looking at him. He couldn't see her eyes behind the sunglasses, but the tempting, mischievous smile told all. Hey now, we might actually have a borderline 9 here, thought Jon as he smiled back. Once a girl showed interest in Jon it was his policy to boost her rating by a point—for demonstrating good taste.

Although the blonde was wearing sunglasses, Jon knew he had eye-to-eye contact. They continued to look at each other occasionally glancing quickly at the road. Abruptly, the tape Jon had been playing in the car stereo started making strange noises. "Damn!" Jon exclaimed realizing it had been over a year since he'd cleaned the tape heads. He ejected the cassette and tried to pull the strands of tape out of the tape deck while still watching the road. He got the last strands of tape out of the stereo just in time

to look up and see the beautiful Porsche pull into the turning lane. The girl waved for him to follow, but before he could another driver cut him off. Jon growled in disappointment as he watched his date for the evening turn and drive off.

Jon pulled into the grocery store parking lot feeling very smug. He was almost too pleased with himself. In fact, he had been so busy congratulating himself on his manly performance that he wasn't even sure how he got to the grocery store. Jon's vivid imagination had him day dreaming fairly often. Luckily, he had the ability to put his driving on autopilot and be completely oblivious to the world—as well as the occasional stop sign.

After trying to fake out the sensor on the automatic doors (and irritating an impatient woman in the process), Jon grabbed a cart and started shopping, wheeling around the store like he was on a skateboard. Later, in the checkout line he spotted a college buddy of his who lived in the same building. Jon punched the guy's arm to get his attention.

"Jared, how's it going?"

Jon's friend turned around slightly startled and then laughed upon seeing Jon.

"Man, I'm surprised they let you in here again after you totaled that potato chip display."

"Well, accidents do happen ya know!" Jon said in mock self-defense.

"Oh, so it was an accident, huh? At the time I thought you were pretending to be Mario Andretti with the grocery cart!"

"Yeah, but when Mario Andretti screws up he crashes a very expensive racing car. I only smashed five bucks worth of chips!" Jon replied. "Besides, I've learned my

lesson - one foot on the cart, one foot on the ground, and only one wheelie per aisle allowed."

They both laughed loud enough to get some funny looks from the people around them. Jared quieted down and became a little more serious.

"Oh, by the way, Jon, have you started your history paper yet?"

"No, not really. I'm not sure where to start. You see, when I was a small child I had a traumatic experience in a library, and ever since then I can't enter a library without undergoing severe emotional hardship. See when I had to write my first book report in fifth grade I went to the library and looked for the shortest book I could find. Finally, I spotted it--the shortest book in the entire library. It wasn't much more than a mere pamphlet. I had to have it. Unfortunately, it was on a shelf too high for me to reach so I climbed the bookshelf to reach it. Just when I got to the shelf the book was on, the bookshelf fell over on top of me. They had to call the fire department to dig me out of a stack of unabridged dictionaries. When I finally got out --"

Jared laughed. "Save it for the professor. If I wait for you to finish this story my ice cream will melt and my milk will turn to cottage cheese! You sure haven't lost your ability to talk a good line-a-bull."

"Practice makes perfect."

"Seriously, though Jon, I did read in the paper the other day that there's a Medieval artifacts exhibit visiting the local museum."

"Thanks, I'll check it out," Jon said as Jared's turn in line came up.

Jon got into the Express "10 items or less" lane behind a guy with at least 25 items. Shaking his head Jon gave the guy his best "you're such a loser" look. While

waiting, Jon noticed the local tabloid on the news rack. He picked up a copy and thumbed through it. There was an article written by a guy who claimed to be a serious scientist. He explained that he only wrote for the tabloid because his colleagues wouldn't publish him. The gist of the article was that man still didn't really even understand the world he lived on. The 'scientist' argued that man doesn't know much more about the earth now than he did when he thought it was flat. In particular, the featured scientist calculated the age of the earth to be 100 million years older than was commonly accepted.

"Sir," the cashier said for the third time.

"Huh? Oh--sorry." Somewhat embarrassed Jon moved forward and emptied his cart. He got through the checkout and headed out into the parking lot. His mental autopilot was engaged before he even reached his car.

After putting away the groceries and grabbing a bite to eat, he was ready to go to the museum. The exhibit sounded interesting, but before getting serious again with schoolwork Jon decided to finish the article he started earlier. "Every few hundred years man makes a discovery that totally shatters his previous concept of the Earth. However, it often takes the majority of the scientific community and the population at large decades or even centuries to accept this discovery. For thousands of years man believed that the earth was the center of the universe and that all celestial bodies revolved around it. In 1514 Copernicus proposed his heliocentric theory of the solar system (the theory that the earth and planets rotate around the sun). This theory was mocked and only started to be gradually accepted in the 17th century. Man, even scientists supposedly searching for knowledge, only slowly accepts the truth when they discover it. I have discovered that

the earth is actually far older than we realize. What happened during these unaccounted for millennia? Could aliens have visited the earth? Could another intelligent race actually have evolved before us and since gone extinct leaving room for man? The possibilities are endless."

Gees, this guy's serious! He's either a genius way before his time or a complete crackpot. Maybe I oughtta get him to write my history paper. It sure would be a lot more interesting than a bunch of artifacts at a museum, Jon thought as he changed out of his tank top in favor of a T-shirt. To him, even wearing a T-shirt was too dressed up to go see things that were dug up out of the ground. Still, it could be worse, he thought. At least he might see some cool weapons and armor rather than old pottery or early drawings of the cotton gin.

Because the museum was across town, it took nearly 40 minutes to get there in Saturday traffic. When he got there, the small parking lot in front was full, so Jon parked his car in the alley next to the museum. He got out, locked the car, and armed the alarm, as was his habit. Jon walked out of the alley and around to the front of the museum. He started jogging up the wide marble stairs to the entrance when he heard an alarm go off and some shouting. Jon stopped in surprise and listened.

A few seconds later he heard a crashing of broken glass and someone running in the alley. Jon dashed down the steps and into the alley just in time to see a man wearing a ski mask. Above the man's head was a broken window on the second story, which the thief had obviously jumped through. Jon could see that the thief was hurt from the jump and that he had something in his hands. The sound of police sirens soon filled the air and Jon was able to notice little else.

The thief panicked and reached behind his back with one hand. Maybe it was all the action movies he'd seen but Jon knew he was going for a gun. Adrenaline pounded through Jon's body, and everything seemed to go in slow motion. Jon turned to run back out of the alley, but he could tell he wasn't going to make it before the thief pulled his gun. Two sharp cracks rang through the alley just as Jon dove out to the front of the building. The police didn't waste any time; before Jon could even get up, a police car came screeching in each end of the alley, trapping the thief. Seeing that the situation was hopeless, the thief soon gave himself up.

Jon got up and tried to stop shaking. He had the sick feeling in his stomach that an adrenaline rush always gave him. He carefully checked himself out to make sure he hadn't been hit knowing that people are often in shock after being shot and don't even realize they've been hit. After a few moments he concluded that he was still in one piece and sat down on the sidewalk while the police handcuffed the thief.

After recovering somewhat from the shock of being shot at, Jon walked over and asked the police what exactly had happened.

An older policeman scratched his head and answered, "I just don't understand it. He stole a large broad sword from the Medieval exhibit worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, but when we arrested him, he didn't have it! It will be much more difficult to prosecute him now, and his bail will probably be set lower since we didn't catch him red-handed."

"You've gotta be kidding! He broke that window and jumped down into the alley right after the alarms started going off. What better evidence could you have?" Jon asked in disbelief.

"Did you see him jump out of the window?" the policeman asked.

"Well ... no."

"Of course the witness didn't see anything, your honor; my client simply happened to be unlucky enough to be walking through the alley at the time the thief stole the sword." mimicked the officer.

"No way!" Jon replied. "You can charge him with attempted murder! He took a couple shots at me just before you got here! I sure as heck saw that--I'm lucky to be standing here!"

The policeman looked pleased but also confused. "Funny, no one else heard any gun shots." The officer suspiciously peered at Jon and then Jon's Mustang.

"I suppose it's just coincidence that you parked your car almost directly underneath the window that the thief jumped out of?"

Jon suddenly felt uncomfortable with the sudden shift in focus of the officer's questions. "Yes, sir."

"Could I please see your driver's license?"

Jon handed his license to the policeman, and the officer passed it on to another who took it over to one of the patrol cars.

"Now, may I please look inside your car?" the policeman asked.

"Sure," Jon replied somewhat hesitantly as they started walking toward his car.

The officer tried to open the passenger's door on Jon's car. The door was locked and the car alarm went off. Jon quickly shut it off, but the officer went over to the driver's side to ensure that it too was locked. Satisfied, the policeman walked back over to Jon. "Well, the criminal didn't have any car keys or an alarm remote control on him so

I can only assume that the alarm would have gone off if he had tried to hide the sword in your car. However, I am going to need you to come down to the station so I can ask you a few more questions and get an official statement."

"Is it okay if I just give you my name and address and come down to the police station later tonight? I've got a physics quiz that I've got to make up, and I really need to study some more before I take it."

"Yeah, right!" The officer shot back suddenly seeming to turn hostile again. "What's the real reason you're so anxious to get out of here? For all I know you could have been the getaway driver."

"What?!" Jon couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You think I was a getaway driver?!"

Before Jon could say anything else the other policeman returned with Jon's license and handed it to him. "He's got a clean record, searge."

"Oh," the sergeant paused visibly disappointed. "OK, I guess you're outta here. If you'd a been a getaway driver I guess you'd a been waiting in the car not running out of the alley. I suppose I'm grasping at straws, but this whole thing doesn't make sense." The sergeant said with a frustrated look on his face. "That guy couldn't have actually been stupid enough to think he could steal that sword and then run out of here on foot like a purse snatcher, could he?"

Jon shrugged, quickly scribbled down his name, address, and phone number on the policeman's notepad, and started to walk back to his car, just wanting to get away from there. Studying in his quiet, boring apartment sounded good about now. He got in his car and drove back to his apartment in a somber mood. The whole incident still didn't

seem real. It was like he had been watching himself in a movie. He didn't even feel like calling his friends to tell them he'd been shot at.

When he turned into his parking space, he was still thinking about getting shot at and had to hit the breaks fairly hard in order to keep from hitting the curb. As his car came to an abrupt stop, to his utter astonishment, something slid from underneath the passenger's seat. Jon sucked in a huge gasp of air. There, before him, was a large broad sword with a gem studded hilt, and, something else. It had slid out of its scabbard far enough to see it had some sort of ancient writings on the blade. Frantically, Jon tried to think of what to do. After a short while the seriousness of his situation dawned on him. If I turn in the sword, they'll think I helped the thief and then later had second thoughts.

Not knowing what else to do, Jon grabbed the sword and took the stairs up to his room as fast as he possibly could. He cleared the five flights in record time. By the time he reached his floor he was sucking wind and sweating heavily. Pushing the stairwell door open an inch, he made sure the hall was empty before dashing to his room. When he was in his apartment with the door closed, he felt safer and relaxed a bit. Jon then carefully carried the sword into his bedroom to get a closer look at it. His wonder for the strange weapon soon overcame his fear.

As he held the sword up to the window, he stared in disbelief as the ancient weapon glistened in the light. Jon touched the cold iron blade, and a shiver went down his spine and slightly shook his body, not totally from the cold temperature of the blade... there was something else. There was something about this old sword that he couldn't quite put his finger on, something distant--something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Jon soon realized that he couldn't let go of the sword, and to his astonishment the metal started to feel warm. He tried to shake the sword out of his hand, but the more he tried the harder his hand gripped the hilt. His attention became totally focused on the sword. Everything else in the room seemed to fade away.

A powerful force began to rise inside him like another adrenaline rush without apparent cause. His arm began to tingle as his muscles contracted as if he were holding onto a live electrical wire. The force filled his body and Jon slowly raised the sword above his head. Jon found himself looking up at the blade which was now taking on an ominous glow. He couldn't take his eyes off of it. He couldn't even blink. It was as though he was watching himself from a distance, not being able to do anything. He started to read the writings on the blade, an ancient language he suddenly found himself able to read, but not understand. Truly frightened for perhaps the first time in his adult life, half of him screamed within his mind while his mouth read on. As he read the inscriptions, the ominous light grew and grew, getting more intense as each word rolled from his tongue. As he finished reading the words, the light became unbearable. Tears streamed down Jon's cheeks as he stared into the blinding light. Suddenly, there was an earth-shattering explosion. Everything lapsed into darkness.