

BLOOD AND ASH

PREVIEW EDITION

BLOOD AND ASH

MANUEL PEREZ

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SHADOW BURN

CHAPTER 1

SHADOW BURN

The furious storm that had been pounding New York City for the past few hours had subsided to a light rainfall. It was late, and the streets were empty. The neon lights of closed stores flickered in pools of water covering the asphalt. A beat-up red sedan sat parked down a lonely alley. The window was cracked open, and the gray puffs of smoke that oozed out were slowly dispersed by the drizzling rain.

Steam poured out of a manhole farther down, creating a fog that obscured the visibility at the alley's end. A lone figure emerged from the mist, his boots making ripples in the puddles as he walked, destroying his reflection with each passing step. His long dark cloak floated barely out of reach of the water's surface.

The man in the car lifted his arm and used the edge of his coat to wipe away the condensation that had collected on the interior of the windshield. Between the swaying of his windshield wipers, he saw a figure approach. As his heartbeat quickened, he lifted his shaking cigarette to his lips. Given his frail condition, he really shouldn't be

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smoking at all but needed something to calm himself down. He inhaled deeply and wheezed as he exhaled.

When the man in the cloak reached the car, he pulled his hand from his pocket and knocked on the driver's-side window. Using an old-fashioned hand crank, the man inside slowly rolled down the window. He looked out, but between the rain and the height of the man outside, he was unable to make out the figure's face.

"Are you Aleister?" the man in the car stuttered.

"Yeah, that's me," replied the figure in a British accent.

His voice was firm and confident, reassuring the man in the car that he had made the right decision to meet with him. He let out a sigh of relief.

"I almost didn't think you were going to show up. Do you really think you can help me?"

"I've helped many men like you, men with much deeper and darker issues. It all depends on how far you're willing to go," said Aleister.

"Thank God. I didn't know what I was going to do. I mean—"

"First things first," interrupted Aleister. "Did you bring what I asked for?"

"That old case...yes, of course." The man reached over and rummaged through a pile of items on the seat beside him.

"You have no idea how important that 'old case' is," replied Aleister.

At that moment, a shadow loomed over the already-darkened alley and was soon followed by something falling from the building above. It smashed into the roof of the sedan with a force that crushed and flattened it. Glass exploded from all sides of the car, sending Aleister flying into a brick wall behind him. Blood poured down the

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sides of the vehicle. The man inside was killed almost instantaneously.

Aleister was in tremendous pain and clutched his side as he brought himself to his feet. A few drops of blood ran down his arm and dripped to the ground. An inhuman-looking figure stood before him on the now-flattened roof of the car. The creature was more than six feet tall and hunched over, its pale-white skin glistening in the falling rain. Instead of eyes it had two holes of pure darkness that stared at Aleister. With a terrifying howl that pierced the air, it exposed its razor-sharp teeth.

“Yeah, this is not good,” said Aleister.

*

A siren roared as a police cruiser headed to the crime scene. Detective Nicholas Valle sat in the passenger seat. As he exhaled from his thick Cohiba cigar, the smoke billowed through the slight crack in the window like a tornado seeking its last breath before its eventual dissipation. He had been sound asleep only twenty minutes earlier, but they needed him for this case. Valle specialized in cases that would drive most detectives straight into the nuthouse. This was his calling—to solve cases that other detectives couldn’t even wrap their minds around, and according to the reports, this one was a doozy.

Detective Valle was a forty-five-year-old man of average height and build—well, if you consider a slight beer belly average. His hair was gray but speckled with black. Every day he wore what appeared to be the same suit: black pants, a white dress shirt, a red tie, and a worn yellow jacket. But his most distinctive characteristic was his bushy mustache, which looked as if it had been teleported straight out of the 1970s and onto his upper lip.

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The driver of the cruiser was Detective Ethan Kent, a relatively young cop in his midthirties. Kent's auburn hair was cut short, and he was well groomed. He was relatively fit and dressed in a simple navy-blue suit. When he had first become partners with Detective Valle almost a year ago, the stench from Valle's cigars was almost unbearable. Now, much like a man who'd been working in the sewers for many years, Kent had acclimated to it. However, this didn't stop him from wearing looks of annoyance and disapproval whenever Valle smoked in the car.

As they got closer to the crime scene, the flashing red and blue lights of parked police vehicles, as well as spotlights atop cameramen's shoulders, lit up the area. Crowds of news crews and curious onlookers leaked into the streets. Kent honked his horn a few times to part a sea of reporters as he drove up to the cordoned-off alley. After he parked, the two detectives made their way to the scene. He lifted a strand of the yellow tape that sectioned off the area, allowing Detective Valle to duck underneath, then followed him in. Valle didn't waste any time and immediately addressed the police officers already on the scene.

"So who here wants to give me the lowdown?" he asked.

A young female officer, who had been conversing with some of the other cops on the scene, turned around. She was wearing a standard-issue dark-blue uniform with a silver badge over the left of her chest. A peaked cap covered most of her light-brown hair, which was pulled back into a neatly braided bun.

"I will," she answered. "I'm Officer Cameron. I was first on the scene and was in charge until your arrival."

"Pleased to meet you, Officer Cameron. I'm Detective Valle, and my partner over there is Detective Kent. Now please walk me through the scene."

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"Well, over here we have the vehicle," she said, pointing at a red sedan with its roof smashed in. "As you can see, it appears something fell from one of the buildings and crushed the driver inside."

"What fell?" asked Valle.

"So far we haven't been able to find any objects in the area."

"That doesn't make any sense," he said. "Whatever crushed the car must have weighed hundreds of pounds. Are you telling me someone just dragged it away?"

"No, sir," she replied. "Even if someone managed to drag whatever fell away, we would have found scuff marks on the ground. Whatever caused this seems to have vanished."

"Nothing simply vanishes," said Valle. "Double-check the roof of the car and scrape it for clues. Send absolutely everything to the lab. Whatever fell must have left something behind."

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"Anything else unusual?"

"Well, there's this," she said, pointing up at the wall behind the car.

The dark outline of a tall, deformed-looking man appeared to be etched into the brick.

*

Aleister rose to his feet as the creature raised one of its grotesque arms toward the sky. The air crackled around its hand, and a dark-green energy was drawn into the beast's outstretched fingers. With a flick of its wrist, the creature hurled a glowing ball of emerald flames at Aleister. As if in slow motion, Aleister rolled out of the way.

Aleister reached into his cloak and removed a black rod with a bright golden gemstone on its tip. In a swift motion, he swung it

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outward. The bar extended itself to almost two feet in length. He held it above his head and pointed it directly at the creature.

In a hissing voice, the beast said, "Where is the boy, Aleister? You can't hide him from us!"

Aleister shrugged. "What boy?"

The creature growled and once again drew in green energy around its clawed fingers. Aleister quickly chanted in an arcane tongue, "م ر ا (MA-RIM)." A bolt of green plasma emerged from the creature's other hand and flew toward him. But this time, just before it struck him, a field of glowing golden energy formed around the tip of Aleister's outstretched rod to block the incoming attack. The green energy pushed hard against the shield, forcing Aleister to press his feet up against the wall behind him to withstand its might.

"How much longer do you think your pathetic field can last, mage? The boy belongs to us! Tell us now, or we'll end your life right here!" spewed the creature.

"We'll see about that," responded Aleister as he dropped his shield and turned his body sideways to dodge the attack.

The green energy smashed against the brick wall behind him, resulting in a brilliant explosion so intense that it caused a giant cloud of smoke to fill the spot where he once had stood. The smoke was so thick that the creature lost sight of Aleister. It jumped down from the car and moved its head around as it sniffed the air in search of him. When it thought it had found his scent, it tore into the mist with its claws, but it found only emptiness.

A glowing golden aura grew in strength from within the cloud. The beast snarled as Aleister chanted, "ك ن ا (KI-NAS)." The golden aura turned into a concentrated beam then shot toward the creature. A brilliant energy engulfed it, and an intense yellow light

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filled the alley. The creature screamed in agony, and then it was gone, leaving only its shadow burned into the wall behind it.

*

“What the hell is that?” asked Valle as he looked up at the wall.

“This is why we called you, Detective Valle,” replied Officer Cameron. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It looks like pictures from the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombings. I remember them from high school.”

“Found something!” yelled Detective Kent, who’d been examining an area on the other side of the flattened sedan.

Detective Valle and Officer Cameron glanced over in his direction. Detective Kent emerged from behind the car and lifted something into the air. It appeared to be a solid ebony scroll case engraved with Nordic runes. He carefully carried it over to his partner and held it in front of him.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Kent. Open it,” said Valle.

“You know...something tells me that isn’t the best idea,” Kent replied. “I get a weird feeling just holding this thing.”

Sarcastic expressions came over the faces of Detective Valle and Officer Cameron as they simultaneously stared at him. Though neither spoke a word, their expressions said, “Seriously?”

Valle extended his open hand. “Well, then, hand it over, son. I’ll do it.”

Kent hated it when Valle called him “son.” It infuriated him, but he felt even uneasy about holding the case, so he handed it over without argument. As Valle held the case, he too felt something strange. Though the case didn’t move, a slight energy pulsed through his glove and into his fingers. Not dissuaded, he gripped one end with his other hand and slowly tried to pry it open. Then all

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at once the case flew open. Hundreds of tiny pieces of parchment spilled into the air and onto the ground.

“Damn it!” yelled Valle. “Someone get those!”

Kent and Officer Cameron hopped into action. They quickly gathered the pieces from the wet pavement and even managed to catch a few in the air. Meanwhile, Valle resealed the case to prevent any further pieces from escaping. Within a few minutes, they had collected all the pieces and placed them into two small plastic bags. Valle emptied the rest of the case’s contents into a third bag. They each slowly lifted their bags into the air and held them up against the light of a streetlamp.

Valle raised an eyebrow. “They’re all blank.”

“So are mine,” replied Kent and Officer Cameron in unison.

Valle stashed his plastic bag in his left suit pocket while at the same time removing a cigar from his right. After placing the cigar in his mouth, he reached back into his right pocket to retrieve his lighter. He rotated the cigar slowly as he lit it and puffed it to life. Then he inhaled deeply and seemed to hold his breath for a few moments. Finally he exhaled several large puffs of gray smoke.

“Well, this keeps getting weirder,” said Valle.

CHAPTER 2

BRILLIANT ASHES

Ashley Drake had just entered his senior year at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Since his first name wasn't a typical boy's name, he always introduced himself as "Ash," and that was how most people knew him. He was a handsome though somewhat lanky kid, with shoulder-length dirty-blond hair and light-blue eyes. Though he was nearsighted, he rarely wore his glasses and often walked around with everything in the distance in a slight blur.

On paper, Ash was studying mechanical engineering, but he spent far more time feeding his addiction to playing video games than going to class. Fortunately for him, he also was quite brilliant and always managed to pass his classes with a minimal amount of effort. To him video games were an escape from an otherwise ordinary and uneventful life into worlds in which he was a hero embarking upon a great adventure. He had no idea what he wanted to do with his life after college or in general.

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Ash had moved around a lot as a child and, despite being somewhat shy, had learned how to quickly make new friends, and MIT was no different. However, at the same time, he had become so used to people coming in and out of his life that most of these relationships weren't deep, and he had few close friends. He was never very social and often relied on others to pry him away from his books and video games to do nearly anything.

He lived in a small, unique dormitory on campus called Bexley Hall, which sat along the Charles River. It was a maze of staircases and hallways that connected suites of rooms. The dorm had both single- and double-occupancy rooms, and this was Ash's first year living in his own room. He shared a suite with two other guys he had just met but hardly spoke to.

Before moving to Cambridge, he had lived in California. His parents had divorced when he was fourteen, and he'd spent most of his teenage years moving from place to place along the West Coast with his mother, Kimberley. Ash never heard from his father again after his parents separated, and he never missed him. He had his mother, and she was all that he needed. They eventually settled in San Clemente just before he started his junior year in high school.

San Clemente was a small surfing town snuggled against the ocean, and whenever he told people where he was from and they saw the way he looked, they assumed him to be the type of person who was at home on the beach or in the water, but this wasn't the case. He'd always been a somewhat geeky kid who preferred escaping into the fantasy worlds of comic books and novels; they always seemed more interesting than his life.

He had a particular fascination with a genre known as steampunk. It was a mixture of science fiction and fantasy based on an alternate version of the world, with nineteenth-century-inspired

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aesthetics and technology. It was both retro and futuristic, both of which Ash loved, and contained spellbinding, beautiful machines with exposed gears running on steam power. He found the designs and fine details of this world so intriguing that it was one of the things that had inspired his attraction to the field of engineering.

Outside of the imaginary realms of books and video games, his life was in a bit of a rut. Every day seemed the same as the last. He'd get up, go to class, come home, read, play some video games, then go to bed. He was caught in a never-ending repeating pattern that would one day at best replace school with work. His view of life was even reflected in his unchanging wardrobe, which was pretty much the same every day: jeans and a black T-shirt. For as long as he could remember, he never felt he was doing what he was supposed to be doing and longed for something more. He just didn't know what that was.

It was Friday night. While many MIT students would be going to a party or one of the many bars in town, this was a big gaming night for Ash. In his favorite game, *Knightmage Online*, his character was an elven mage named Rath10n, and tonight he would be joining the rest of his guildmates on a raid to take down Malphas, the demonic prince and ruler of the Bloodcrown Keep in the northern region of Kalmar. At 8:30 p.m. he donned his gaming headset and sat down to play. Many hours of caffeinated beverages and mouse clicking lay ahead of him.

Hours passed as the guild made its way through the digital dungeon. It was now one o'clock in the morning. Suddenly a strange, faint voice whispered in his head.

"What did you say?" Ash replied, thinking it was one of the other people in the game.

"No one said anything, buddy," replied one of the players.

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Thinking nothing of it, Ash continued to play. The guild had entered into the chamber of Malphas's guardian, Lilith, a half-dead witch queen with the ability to control some of the characters and conjure pools of boiling acid on the ground. This was an extraordinary difficult battle and required a high degree of coordination among all the players. The raid leader, who was playing a female dwarven cleric named Harl3y, addressed the guild.

"Okay, let's buff up," said Harl3y in a high-pitched voice.

"Thanks, get ready to pull on my mark. Are we ready?"

Though Ash had no idea how old Harl3y actually was in real life, her voice sounded like that of a twelve-year-old girl, which he always found a little disturbing.

"Yup."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hells yes."

"Let's rock out!"

The characters that were designated as tanks marched forward. Their job was to engage and occupy Lilith's attention while the other characters attacked. The battle was long and arduous, but despite a few fallen comrades, the guild was doing extremely well this evening and was about halfway through when the voice came again. Though it was still faint, this time Ash could tell it was that of an older man, and he could make out the words.

Ash, you are needed, it whispered.

Right after he heard this, his monitor flickered then went completely blank. With increasing brightness, the outline of a white rectangle slowly emerged in the center of the screen.

*

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For a moment, Ash was no longer in his room. He stood in pure darkness with a door far off in the distance. Light poured out from its edges, creating a bright, illuminated rectangle.

I need you to wake up, said the voice.

Confused and disoriented, Ash replied, "What?"

You've been asleep, Ash. Within you are untapped power and potential, said the voice. *You're needed, and we're running out of time. Walk through the door, and we can begin. I can't make you do it. You must make this choice on your own.*

Even though the whole thing felt like a dream, and he was pretty sure he had inadvertently passed out while playing *Knightmage Online*, an uneasy feeling came over him. The dream was too vivid, too real, and the man's voice was somehow familiar, as if he'd heard it before but couldn't remember who it was. Despite these feelings, something inside him compelled him to make his way toward the door. With each step he took, the door seemed no closer than the last. His vision began to blur as he forced himself forward.

Don't fight to get to the door. You'll never make it, said the voice. *You have to let yourself go.*

The blurriness continued, and then there was darkness.

*

"Rath10n, what the hell are you doing?" yelled Harl3y through Ash's headphones. "Get out of the damn acid! You're going to wipe us!"

Ash was back in his room, staring at his screen, and yup, Harl3y was absolutely right. His character, Rath10n, was standing right smack in the middle of a pool of acid. Ash quickly gripped his mouse and attempted to move his mage, but it was too late. The guild had wiped, and the yelling ensued.

"What were you thinking?"

"Pay attention!"

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"We almost had it!"

"Damn you, Rath10n!"

The gamers vented their anger and aggravation. The banter continued until Harl3y finally jumped in.

"Rath10n, we needed you on this," she said. "What happened?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I kinda blanked out. I think I might need a break," replied Ash.

"Damn it!" exclaimed Harl3y. "Okay, everyone take a break. Be back here in five."

After rubbing his eyes, Ash took off his headset and placed it next to his keyboard. Then he sat there and stared at his monitor for a few moments, watching as some of the remaining characters moved around on the screen. While he was prone to daydreams and more than once had passed out on the couch while playing video games as a teenager, nothing like this had ever happened before. Though he didn't feel ill, he thought perhaps he was running a hallucinatory fever and put his hand on his forehead; his head, however, didn't feel any warmer or colder than usual. Deciding to chalk it up to exhaustion, he let out a long sigh, slowly pushed his chair back, and stood up.

He walked out of his room and down the hall to the shared kitchen area. The hallway was unlit, but the kitchen was illuminated by the light of streetlamps creeping through the window. Ash put his hand on the handle of the fridge, paused for a second, then opened it. He reached in, grabbed another bottle of soda, and closed the door. On his way back to his room, he unscrewed the cap and guzzled the drink. Though he was far from tired, he thought the caffeine might help him stay alert.

Back in his room, he sat down in his chair and rolled it toward his desk. He grabbed his headphones and put them on. After taking

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another swig from his soda, he placed it to the side of his mouse. He shook his head a few times to try to clear out any remaining thoughts of his recent hallucinations, but the remnants of the dark room with the glowing door still lingered.

A few minutes later, Harl3y came back on and said, “All right, guys and gals, hopefully everyone—that means you too, Rath10n—is ready to roll this bitch!”

On the next attempt, the guild executed its attack flawlessly and successfully defeated Lilith. They celebrated and bragged among themselves for several minutes before moving on to the next portion of the dungeon. The guild slowly cleared its way to the final boss. It was close to three in the morning when they reached the entrance to Malphas’s lair.

“This is it, guildmates, the last and final boss of the evening,” said Harl3y. “I know this guy has given us some trouble in the past, but I have a strong feeling this is our night for victory!”

Harl3y was obviously a wee bit optimistic this evening. Ash and his guild had been playing this dungeon for several months. Each and every attempt they had made against Malphas had ended in utter failure.

As Harl3y reviewed the battle plan, Ash’s senses started to fade. Her voice washed out into a whisper, and Ash had to strain to hear anything. The room grew dim, and he could barely see the screen in front of him. Beneath his fingers, he no longer could feel his keyboard or mouse. Finally there was nothing but darkness and silence. Then the voice came again.

We’re running out of time, it said.

*

Ash awoke the next day with an aching head. He felt as if he’d been on an all-night drinking binge and was now desperately trying to

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reconstruct exactly what had happened, but nothing came to him. He didn't even know how he had managed to make it to his bed. After pulling himself up, he sat for a moment and rubbed his face a few times. Then he glanced at his computer. The entire screen was black, but strangely his monitor was still on.

He walked over to his computer and moved the mouse around to see if his cursor would appear, but nothing happened. Next he tapped a few random keys, but still nothing happened. Still feeling partially asleep, he glanced at his alarm clock, wondering what time it was; it was 7:07 a.m.

He looked back at his computer to find the inner edges of the monitor glowing brightly. The glow intensified until the entire screen was illuminated and the room was filled with white light. Ash lifted his arm to shield his eyes. He slowly stepped backward from the screen. Then suddenly it went dark, but the afterglow of the light was still burned into his vision, as if he'd been staring at the sun.

When Ash's vision returned, he saw a moving black-and-white pixelated image on the screen. From the details he could make out, it was an older man with a light-colored beard; the upper portion of his face was covered by a dark hood.

The man's lips moved. "I hope you're feeling okay. I'm sorry I can't be there in person. I know this must all be very strange for you. I imprinted what I could into your memories last night."

"Imprinted? What are you talking about? Who are you?" asked Ash.

"I wish I had more time to explain, but they're already tracking us, and I can't risk your safety. You're too important. A package will arrive for you in a few moments. It'll have to suffice for now until I can throw off their scent and make my way to you," replied the man.

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“What are you talking about?” Ash asked again loudly. Then, as it slowly dawned on him that he was having a full-blown, very loud conversation with his computer, he lowered his voice and repeated, “What are you talking about?”

“They’re coming now! I have to go!” said the man, as his image slowly dissipated, leaving Ash staring at a blank computer screen.

Ash closed his eyes, put his face in his palms, and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, his screen was displaying a gigantic “Disconnected from Game” message. Behind the message, he saw an open chat window with an unending list of angry words from his guildmates. He sighed and looked over at his dorm-room door; somehow he felt a presence approaching.

He went to the door and quickly pulled it open to see if anyone was there. With his hand ready to knock, a well-dressed middle-aged man in an all-black suit and wearing horn-rimmed glasses stood before him with a package tucked under one arm and a clipboard under the other. There were several odd things about this situation. First, it was far too early in the morning for anyone to be out delivering packages. Second, Ash lived on the fourth floor of his dorm, and packages were always collected at the front desk. Third, how did Ash just feel that the man was there? And fourth, who delivers packages in a tailor-made suit?

“Good morning, sir,” said the man. “I apologize for disturbing you at this early hour. The young lady downstairs was kind enough to let me in. I’m told that you would be Mr. Ashley Drake. I have a package for you.”

“Yes, I’m Ashley Drake,” replied Ash, sounding bewildered.

“Excellent. Sign here, please,” said the man, as he pulled out the clipboard and handed it over.

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“Aren’t you kind of well-dressed for a deliveryman?” Ash asked, as he signed his name at the bottom of a form.

“We service an exclusive clientele, Mr. Drake. And someone wanted to be very sure that you received this exact package at this exact location at this exact time,” replied the man as he took the clipboard back.

The man started to hand over the package to Ash, who just stood there with a look of astonishment. He slowly took the package into his hands, almost as if it were a robotic response.

“Have a good rest of your day, Mr. Drake,” said the man, before he headed down the hallway.

Ash closed the door and meandered over to his desk. He set down the package in front of him. This was by far the strangest start to a day he’d ever had. It was so strange, in fact, that something in the back of his brain was desperately trying to convince him that none of it actually was happening and perhaps he was still dreaming.

He sat and stared at the package for what seemed like hours, trying to come to grips with what was going on. Even if he had dreamed the rest of it, this box sitting in front of him was very real. It was wooden and had two latches on the side that held its top in place. There were no postal markings or addresses on its surface. He slowly undid the two latches, and the top separated from the base. As he opened the box, a thought raced through his head. He felt like an explorer who had just reached the end of a great adventure and was about to discover a treasure that had been hidden away for ages.

The inside of the box was laced with black velvet. A letter sealed with a mulberry wax stamp bearing the letter *W* lay atop four burgundy velvet bags. Ash removed the letter from the box and broke open the wax seal. He carefully unfolded it and read the handwritten letter:

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Ashley Drake,

Within this box are the tools you will need to unlock your abilities.

I will join you as soon as I can.

—W

Ash put the letter to the side and dug through the rest of the box's contents. He opened the largest velvet bag first. To his surprise, inside was a pair of virtual reality goggles. He had only read about them online, but these were sleeker and much more high-tech in appearance than anything he'd ever seen. A slim, glossy, black visor with silver trim ran across the front of the glasses and was connected to a small pair of over-ear headphones with a single adjustable head strap along the back. The next bag contained some sort of disc player. It was made entirely of metal and bore no manufacturer's mark. The third bag contained what appeared to be a wooden disc case. The case opened effortlessly to reveal a disc constructed out of some kind of shiny black rock. The last bag contained a single clear, smooth gemstone about the size of a large marble.

He became excited by the thought that perhaps he was destined for something greater, and this device was the key that would pull him out of his ordinary, repetitive life. It didn't take him long to decide he was going to try this thing on. He plugged the goggles into the metal box then searched for where to insert the ebony disc. Though he couldn't find an obvious "eject" button, he noticed a thin, discreet slot along the side about the width of the disc. He slipped the disc into the slot. When it was about halfway inserted into the metal box, the rest of it sucked itself in. A flicker emanated from the goggles then slowly died down.

"All right, here we go," he said out loud as he put the goggles on his head.

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At first all he saw was darkness. Then the headphones over his ears made a quiet humming noise, and a dim red line appeared on the horizon. The red line glowed brighter and brighter as it moved up and down. Ash realized it was scanning his eyes.

Suddenly he found himself in an old medieval room. The walls were made of stone blocks, and huge tapestries hung on all sides. The illustrations on the tapestries were out of focus, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't discern what they were. The room was otherwise bare, with no visible doors or windows, yet it somehow was illuminated. As he looked down, he noticed he was sitting in a white circle that was etched into the ground. Along the edges of the circle were symbols that he didn't recognize. The resolution and detail of the virtual reality were astonishing; Ash tried to find the pixels in the image but was unable to do so.

A monotone voice echoed in his ears: "Blessed initiate identified. Starting program."

The circle surrounding Ash suddenly glowed, as if it were being illuminated from a light source underneath the ground. Then the light slowly pulsed in and out, as though it were following the rhythm of his breath. Around the edges of the circle, the symbols rotated clockwise around him, at first slowly then faster and faster until they turned into a blur of light. Even though he thought this was a simulation, he felt as if some sort of energy were building and surrounding him.

A figure of pure light materialized a few feet in front of the circle. At first the being was so bathed in bright-white light that Ash could only discern a few features and was barely able to make out the shape of a person. An enormous set of glowing wings unfolded from the figure, filling the room from edge to edge. Then, as if a vacuum

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were pulling the light into the being, the figure of a female angel slowly emerged.

The angel's long auburn hair seemed to dance in the air like a slow flame swaying in the breeze. Her skin was pure white, and each of her facial features was etched to perfect distinction. She wore an impossibly long white robe with a shorter red cloak draped over her shoulders. Both swayed in slow motion. Her eyes were self-illuminating and appeared as bright-white gems.

With a sweet voice she said, "Greetings, initiate. I'm Elysium. I'm here to guide you through your training. I've also been designed to answer some basic questions. You can call for me at any time merely by saying my name. Do you understand?"

Ash, frozen for a moment in awe, finally responded, "Yes."

"Good. Then let's begin with the basics. First I'll explain what magic is."

He had more than a little trouble believing what he'd just seen and heard. While his comics and video games were filled with mystical elements, he had found nothing in the real world that made him believe such things actually existed. Yet the dark room with the bright door, the old man on his screen, the strange deliveryman, the package, Elysium—all of it was adding up, giving his mind just enough doubt to accept what she had to say.

"It'll be easiest for you to think of magic as a pyramid, formed by the mind, body, and soul," Elysium said, conjuring an inverted silver pyramid before her. "At the bottom we have the soul," she continued, as a glowing symbol appeared below the bottom corner of the pyramid. "The soul is connected to the universe and acts as the fuel for all your arcane abilities. Every being is born with a certain amount of energy. That energy can be used either consciously or subconsciously to influence the world around each individual. This

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energy can deplete over time with the use of spells but will always replenish itself.”

Another glowing symbol appeared above the top-left corner of the pyramid. “Next we have the mind, which is often erratic and unfocused. It wanders from thought to thought throughout the day. It’s driven by and connected to the soul. The mage uses the ancient tongue in the form of mantras to bring focus to the mind, allowing it to communicate directly with the energies of the soul.”

A ball of cyan light emerged at the bottom of the pyramid, glowed more intensely, then split into two. One part remained at the bottom, while another traveled up the left side of the pyramid, leaving behind it a trail of energy. As they separated, the light at the bottom slowly changed to blue, and the ball traveling upward changed to green. When it reached the corner of the pyramid, it stopped and pulsed for a few seconds before the light faded from the image.

“Finally we have the body or, more aptly put, the physical,” said Elysium, as a glowing symbol appeared above the top-right corner of the pyramid. “The body too is connected and driven by the soul. For a person to draw magical energies into the physical universe, these energies must pass through the body. A mage generally will employ a gem or wand to direct the energies.”

Once again, a ball of light appeared at the base of the pyramid. This time it was magenta. After splitting in two, one of the balls rose up the right side of the pyramid. It changed from magenta to red, while the light remaining at the bottom changed to blue. A trail of illumination was left behind it until it reached the corner of the pyramid. The light pulsed for a few seconds then faded from the image.

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“A mage uses his conscious mind, focused by a mantra and directed by his wand, to bring the pure energy of his soul into this world and change the reality around him. With the proper training, nothing will be beyond your abilities,” Elysium explained, as another glowing white ball appeared at the base of the pyramid.

This time the luminous ball split into three parts. One remained at the bottom, while the other two traveled up the left and right sides of the pyramid, creating a flaming path of energy as they ascended. As they traveled upward, the light on the left changed to green, and the ball on the right changed to red. When they reached the corners of the pyramid, they paused for a second and pulsed with energy. Then they continued along the top edge of the pyramid on a path to meet at its center. When the two collided with each other, a brilliant flash of yellow light appeared.

“Do you understand?” she asked.

Elysium was asking the wrong question. Did he understand it? Yes. It seemed like a simple description based on additive color mixing. Did he believe it? That was the real question. Well, he was still doubtful of that part but was definitely intrigued enough to continue listening.

“I think so,” he replied.

“I can answer any questions if you need clarification.”

As Ash was pondering a proper question to ask, his mobile phone beeped from outside the simulation. He must have just received a text message. He was hoping it was from April, a girl he had been flirting with in class and had invited out for brunch earlier in the week.

“I’ll be right back,” said Ash, as he removed the helmet from his head.

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He looked down at his phone. The message read, "Hey, Ash. Sorry, but I can't make it to brunch today. Something came up. See you in class."

This was the second time April had canceled at the last minute, and it was becoming very apparent that she had no interest in hanging out with him outside of school. With a look of disappointment, Ash sat there for a few moments, staring at his phone. He wondered why he had such trouble with girls. They always wanted to be his friend and nothing more.

He sighed and responded to the message: "All right, see you in class."

Ash felt more than a little disheartened and rejected, but as he gazed at the virtual reality helmet, these feelings were replaced by a piqued interest in continuing his exploration of this fascinating new world he had just discovered. He smiled as he enthusiastically put on the visor. Within a few moments, he was back in the medieval training room. In a glimmer of light, Elysium emerged, hovering before him.

"Greetings, Blessed initiate," she said. "Do you wish to continue your program where you left off?"

As he sat before this angel, fully immersed in the vivid virtual reality, some of his previous doubts crawled away from his conscious mind. Just as he was partially starting to accept what was going, a thought came to him.

"Elysium, I have a question first," he said.

She nodded. "I've been designed to answer some basic questions. Please ask."

"Why was I chosen to receive this training?"

"Initiates are selected and approved by members of the council."

"Okay...what can you tell me about this council?"

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"I'm sorry. You don't have the required privileges to access information regarding the council."

Ash felt a little uncomfortable with her response. He didn't get the impression that she was hiding anything from him but rather thought that her responses, no matter how lifelike she seemed, were automated. She appeared to be some sort of sophisticated artificial intelligence, more than likely constructed by these mysterious council members. He wondered who they were, what their intentions were, and whether they could be trusted. But did the answers to any of these questions even really matter? What was he going to do? Go back to his ordinary, repetitive existence and pass up what might be the most amazing opportunity of his life?

He sat in silence, until Elysium again asked, "Do you wish to continue your program where you left off?"

He put his questions and any lingering hesitations aside and replied, "Yes."

"Next in your training, you'll learn the words to use in mantras."

She spread her arms in front of her with her palms facing up. A large leather-bound tome materialized, floating above her hands. As if she were commanding it by her will, it slowly opened and the pages turned. Eventually the pages stopped; apparently she had found what she was searching for.

"The words you'll use to focus your mind are special," she said. "They're from an ancient tongue that can communicate directly with your soul and the universe as a whole. These words are very precise and powerful. While mortals will be able to hear them, few if any will be able to pronounce them."

"The ancient tongue can't be taught using any known traditional methods of instruction," she continued. "In fact some believe it can't be taught at all and can only be remembered. This program will

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make use of various brain frequencies that will alter your state of consciousness to allow an easier imprinting of the ancient tongue into your mind. You should make sure you're comfortable and will be undisturbed for several hours, as you'll lose consciousness during this process. The imprinting isn't easy and will take several sessions to complete. Do you wish to begin?"

Ash lifted the bottom of his visor so he could partially see his room. The effect of being in two worlds simultaneously caused him to feel slightly dizzy and a little woozy, as if he had just stepped off a slowly spinning amusement-park ride. He gave himself a few moments to regain his sense of balance. Then he took the disc player from the table and stumbled over to his bed. After lying down, he pulled the visor back over his eyes.

"Let's do this," he said eagerly.

Elysium waved her hands, and the book vanished. She spread her arms out to her sides, her palms facing Ash. Both her hands glowed with a bright white light. The light grew and grew until it encompassed all of Ash's vision. Then, in a blink, everything turned to darkness.

"We'll be shining light and transmitting the imprinting through your closed eyelids," said Elysium. "Make sure they're closed. Please confirm when you're ready."

"I'm ready," Ash told her, then closed his eyes.

A low-frequency tone emerged in his ears. As the sound slowly intensified, light flashed before his eyelids. The tone and the lights synchronized and settled into a pleasant frequency and rhythm. A vibrato resounded in the tone, and he felt increasingly relaxed as his brainwaves navigated from beta to alpha.

The frequency of the sound and lights changed several times until Ash eventually fell into a dreamlike state. His mind drifted, and

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then he felt as if he were rapidly coming in and out of a daydream. He saw himself in different places with different people doing different things. For a moment he was a child again, riding in the car with his mother down a seemingly endless stretch of road. The ocean was out the window on his right. A calm breeze carried the fresh scent of salt water through the window. Next he was in class. His professor was handing out midterm exams. Ash totally had forgotten there was a test and hadn't studied. Then he was in a bathroom looking at himself in the mirror. He was wearing medieval chainmail covered by a royal-blue tabard. He glanced down at the sink. It was overflowing with water, dripping onto the floor. Then slowly all thoughts faded, and his mind became clear and empty.

Glowing symbols emerged in front of him, floating in the distance then rapidly hurtling toward him. They appeared to be heading straight for the center of his forehead. As they struck his head, he heard them echo in his mind, but it was more than that. He was learning their pronunciation and deeper meaning. This continued for several hours.

When Ash finally awoke from his trance, he removed the helmet from his head and rushed over to his desk. Any lingering doubts were now completely gone. What he had experienced was very real. He felt compelled to write everything down so he wouldn't forget any of it. The truth was that when one was imprinted in this manner, there was no need to write anything down. The transferred knowledge was just as if one had studied another language over a period of years, but faster. Once mastered, a language was yours to keep.

Ash opened a notebook that was sitting on his desk. He flipped past some notes he had taken in his thermal-fluids engineering class

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and found the first blank page. After grabbing a pen, he wrote down some of the key words he had learned.

ك (KI) = to compel by force

ك (IK) = to request politely

ك (HAVA) = to explain in a manner that can be comprehended

ك (NAS) = to cause to depart or drive away

ك (SER) = to obscure a form so it can't be seen

ك (RIM) = to protect a person or thing

ك (OR) = to adjust so as to leave a space, allowing access

ك (CU) = to move a person or object in a particular direction

ك (ONA) = to discover the exact position of an individual or object

ك (INUNI) = to brighten with light

ك (RO) = to put in a particular position in order to obstruct an entrance

ك (TIMO) = to view past events that relate to a person or object

ك (VU) = to move a body upward from the ground and often forward

ك (OHIV) = to cause to rise or float in the air

ك (AVA) = to separate the soul from the body

ك (ARI) = to correct or improve bad effects

ك (AWA) = to appeal to the emotions or senses by stimulating interest

ك (RES) = to become aware of the presence of a person or thing

ك (OM) = an entrance to a room or building

ك (AME) = a rodent that resembles a large mouse

ك (AN) = a cord or strand

ك (SI) = a young woman

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CE (CEM) = a hard, solid, nonmetallic mineral matter of which rock is made

CA (CA) = a single sheet of paper that is part of a collection of pages

There were so many words and definitions that his hand grew tired from writing. He put his pen down and glanced at the clock. To his surprise, it was already past six in the evening. His mind felt exhausted, so he decided to lie down for a quick nap. Within a few minutes, he was fast asleep.

*

The next day and for the days that followed, Ash continued his training. Elysium taught him many things. He learned to master the words of the ancient tongue, and though his vocabulary was limited, he spoke the words he knew as if it were second nature. He also learned how to empty his mind and use the clear gemstone from the wooden box to focus his energies. His training was far from complete, but he had progressed to the point that he was ready to cast his first spell.

Ash cleared a spot on a floor a few feet from his bed. Earlier in the morning, while strolling outside, he had picked up a small pile of pebbles from the ground. He placed the rocks on the floor.

He sat on the edge of his bed with the pile of stones between him and the window. As he looked around the room, he realized his window was still shut. Since he was going to attempt to push the rocks through the window, this obviously wasn't going to work. He walked over to the window, unlocked it, and lifted the pane from the bottom until the window was wide open. The window was facing the Charles River, but being extra cautious, Ash poked his head outside to double-check that no one was standing below. Seeing that the coast was clear, he returned to his seated position on the bed.

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With nervousness and excitement, he gripped his clear gem tightly in the palm of his right hand. He could barely believe what he was about to do. He looked down at the piles of stones then at the window, doing this several times until he felt he had a clear picture of what he intended to do. Then he closed his eyes and began to calm his mind, trying his best to suppress his heightened emotions. He recreated the scene in his head, but this time he imagined the stones slowly floating into the air, flying out of the window, and landing safely in the river.

Ash opened his eyes and chanted the mantra “ॐ ॐ ॐ (MANAS-CEM).”

His eyes took on a bluish glow as azure wisps of energy poured out their sides. At first it seemed as if the floor were shaking, causing the stones to vibrate up and down. Then suddenly the rocks flew into the air and shot straight through the opening in the window. Ash raced over to watch them splash into the river; however, they didn't. The stones flew fast and long, heading over the Charles River from Cambridge straight into Boston. They soon disappeared from his sight.

Somewhere in an insurance building far away, the pebbles burst through a window. It shattered it into a hundred pieces, and the rocks embedded themselves in the wall behind it.

With wide eyes and an open mouth, Ash slowly ducked his head out of sight. He had cast his first spell and, though it wasn't the exact effect he had intended, it was powerful indeed.

CHAPTER 3

MISS SARAH BLAKE

The girl's name was Sarah Blake. She had found shelter from the cold and rain in an abandoned barn off one of the main roads. The entire building swelled and leaked. Water dripped from the ceiling and splashed into puddles on the hay-covered dirt ground.

She had been walking in the rain for several hours and was soaking wet. Her long blond hair clung to the sides of her damp face, and her drenched clothing—a white blouse and pink skirt—hugged her thin frame. She was in her midteens, far too young to be out here on her own. Her harlequin-green eyes welled with tears.

It hadn't always been like this for her, homeless and on the run. Once, she had lived in a warm home with a loving family, but that all was over now. She never could go back. Thoughts of what she had done sped through her head then bubbled to the surface.

"I killed Billy!" she screamed. "God forgive me!"

She collapsed on the ground, crying.

*

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Sarah was the daughter of two schoolteachers, Elizabeth and Tom. Before finding out about Elizabeth's pregnancy, they lived in Charlotte, North Carolina. They'd been dating for slightly more than two years and had just moved into a one-bedroom apartment. Both were planners by nature, and this was the next logical step. It was all part of a plan they'd set in their minds, a series of small but well-calculated steps in their relationship and their lives.

Though they both loved kids dearly, neither had plans for having children any time soon. They had just started their careers and were busy enjoying each other's company and the company of friends. Though they didn't have a lot of money, it was enough. The two frequently ate out at restaurants, watched movies, drank at bars, and enjoyed many other activities their city had to offer.

Finding out about Elizabeth's pregnancy changed all this as well as their well-laid plans. They quickly decided to arrange a wedding ceremony. Their parents and many of their friends often had questioned their relationship, and the rushed wedding just raised more questions. That was unavoidable, but the way they saw it, with all this questioning and judging, at the very least they could have unquestioning, unjudging wedding photos before Elizabeth began to show too much. Despite the hurry, the wedding turned out to be lovely.

There was no honeymoon after the wedding. Instead the couple hopped straight into the daunting task of trying to find a suitable home to raise their child. Neither Elizabeth nor Tom had been raised in a city, and they wanted the same experience for their child. So they searched for the best place they could afford in the suburbs. Eventually they found and closed on a modest home in Concord only a few weeks before Sarah was born. The neighborhood they moved into was quiet and quaint. Their old lives were officially over.

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Shortly after Sarah's birth, Elizabeth quit her job and became a full-time caregiver. At first she was hesitant about giving up her career, but all that changed the first time she held Sarah in her arms. She loved that child more than anything in the world.

*

"I love you, Mommy," said a six-year-old Sarah as she leaned over to blow out the candles that decorated her birthday cake.

With a huge grin on her face, she closed her eyes, made a wish, then blew. As the candles went out, all the children and their parents clapped and cheered.

Elizabeth had spent the past few weeks planning and organizing the birthday party down to every last detail. She stood proudly, staring at her daughter with a smile, one that only a loving mother could wear. Everything had turned out exactly as she'd imagined, and Sarah was jubilant. This was the kind of day that made everything worthwhile.

Sarah looked over at her mother with a cake-smearing grin. Elizabeth smiled back and mouthed, "Presents?" The girl's plentiful smile grew even larger. Elizabeth and a few other parents left the room to collect the gifts.

Sarah watched as her mother walked out, then glanced across the table at her friend, Billy Windsworth. He was slightly older than her and had light-blond hair and deep-blue eyes. He was busily trying to scrub off some icing from a horrible polka-dot tie his mother had made him wear. Eventually he gave up, looked over at Sarah, and shrugged. They both broke into laughter.

When Elizabeth and the other parents returned, they were carrying what, from Sarah's perspective, seemed to be a hundred or more gifts. All the children jumped up and rushed over to find a good spot behind the birthday girl. Each one wanted the best place

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possible to watch the presents as they were unwrapped. Billy wanted to be the closest to Sarah, so he opted for a less-scenic route. He crawled under the table then pushed his way through until he was right beside her.

Before long, the entire table was filled with piles upon piles of wrapping paper, and Sarah was on her last present. It was the largest of all the boxes and was from her mom and dad. She searched the room to find her parents. Finally she spotted them standing directly across from her, smiling broadly. In Tom's hand was a camera. As Sarah opened the box, he took a picture. The flash was almost blinding.

*

Lightning illuminated the sky outside as thunder crackled. The weather wasn't getting any better, and the old shutters and doors on the barn whipped back and forth. They made a horrible rattling sound followed by a loud bang. Wet and shaking, Sarah curled up in a ball. She opened her eyes and watched the water drip down the cracked wooden slats of the walls.

Outside, along the road, a lone figure walked toward the building. As it grew nearer, Sarah sensed something wasn't quite right. She pulled herself up and, standing there, holding herself and shaking, awaited the entry of the visitor.

As the door swung open, Sarah had every intention of screaming but instead stood frozen. Standing before her, obscured by the shadows and the rain, was a dark figure.

"Greetings, Sarah Blake. I've been looking for you," said the figure in a low-pitched, ominous voice.

"Are you Death?" she muttered with a hint of fear.

"Some may have called me that in the past, but my name is Nihalus, and I mean you no harm," he replied. "I know you've been

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running, not only from your home but also from yourself. I'm here to help."

"I don't need your help! I don't need anyone's help!" she yelled. "Stay back. I don't want to hurt you."

She thought of Billy as she said this. She hadn't meant to hurt him.

*

Billy and his parents lived in an upscale home a few blocks from Sarah's house. His parents were busy, successful professionals driven by their careers, spending more time at work than at home. Often they relied on Elizabeth to take care of some of their parental duties. This wasn't without its benefits. They paid her extremely well, and Sarah's parents could use all the extra income they could get. Neither had fully anticipated how expensive it was to raise a child.

By the time they were in kindergarten, Billy and Sarah had become the best of friends, and their friendship would carry them well into their teenage years. Sarah often called Billy her brother, and he cared for as if she were his sister.

One summer Billy's dad had a giant tree house built for him in their backyard. It wasn't only massive but also extremely well constructed—the best tree house money could buy. Sarah thought it was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen. It was a maze of ropes and ladders, with a full room located at the top, and featured electricity, lights, and an integrated heater for chilly nights.

Billy's parents sent him to a private school, while Sarah's parents could only afford a public education for their child. But every day after school, without fail, the two children raced home and met up at the tree house, where they spent hours playing and talking. It was in this tree house that Sarah first told Billy about her imaginary friends.

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Her mother had insisted that she quit talking to them, and this was the first time she had told anyone else. Billy was fascinated.

“There were three of them. They spoke in a language I could only hear inside my head, like faint whispers. They told me their real names, but I never could pronounce them. So I called them Jinx, Kynx, and Lynx.

“They looked like gargoyles of different sizes and colors. Jinx was the smallest. He wasn’t more than a foot tall and had dark-blue skin. His sister, Kynx, was only a few inches taller and changed colors from a brownish orange to a rusty yellow. Their leader, Lynx, was almost two feet tall and was dark red, with a slight fiery glow about him. They all walked hunched over, with their wings curled up on their backs.”

“Didn’t they scare you?” asked Billy.

Sarah paused for a second to consider the question then continued. “Well, at first I was scared. I used to scream at the top of my lungs when they crept around the corner. My mother would have to rush in and calm me down, but over time I realized they weren’t there to hurt me. They were just there to watch me.”

“Watch you? Now that’s pretty creepy!” exclaimed Billy.

“Maybe a little,” replied Sarah, “but they became my friends. One day I held back my screams and let them get closer. They were so curious about me. They walked forward slowly then crawled all over me. It was as if I had some quality they couldn’t quite figure out.

“I was very upset the day my mother told me they weren’t real and not to talk to them anymore, but I wasn’t as angry as they were. They snarled and hissed as I turned away from them.”

“Do you think they were real?” asked Billy inquisitively.

“I don’t know...They felt real to me, but they probably weren’t. Guess it doesn’t really matter anymore. After I started ignoring them,

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they started showing up less and less, and then one day they were gone.”

*

“I know you didn’t mean to hurt your friend,” said Nihalus. “I sent my minions to help you learn to control your gifts before something like this would come to pass, but once you turned away from them, they turned away from you.”

“Jinx, Kynx, and Lynx?” asked Sarah in a crackly voice.

“If that’s what you called them. I’m sorry, Sarah, but this will all be easier when you understand what you are.”

“What am I?” Sarah yelled, her eyes wide. “Am I a monster?”

Nihalus stepped forth from the shadows that had covered most of his face and body and walked toward Sarah. He wore a long dark cloak drenched in water. His face was obscured by a hood that covered the upper portion of his face. A mostly human-looking mouth with a black goatee was visible at the bottom. As he looked down at her, she saw that his eyes weren’t human at all. They were of pure darkness, and behind them danced a smoky crimson fire.

He stretched out an arm, and his cloak fell to reveal his hand. His fingernails were short but sharp dark claws. He glanced down at his hand, and as Sarah watched, the nail on his pinky finger grew until it was several inches long. As she stood in horror, he thrust his finger through her blouse and into her shoulder then quickly pulled it out. The pain was sharp but quick. He then lifted his hand to his face and licked the blood from it.

“A monster, no—your blood tells me a different story entirely,” he said. “Within you dwells an ancient power. You asked me what you are. You are one of the Touched. You are the drainer of men’s souls. You are the succubus!”

*

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Billy and Sarah were teenagers and entering high school. Together they had grown from children into young adults. Through the years they had remained best friends.

Because of Billy's poor grades, the prestigious private high school in the area had rejected his application. It wasn't that he was a dumb kid; he just didn't find school very interesting and preferred playing sports over studying. So, with no desire to relocate, his parents reluctantly sent him to public school. Billy didn't mind at all, and for the first time since they'd known each other, he and Sarah would attend the same school.

They walked to high school together each morning, often laughing and giggling along the way. At school they took many of the same classes and more than once were sent to the principal's office for what their teachers called "having too much fun in class." They were the closest of friends and had deep feelings for each other; however, the nature of their feelings was very different.

Over time Sarah's platonic feelings had changed to fascination and love. She often imagined her and Billy together, getting married one day and having children of their own. These daydreams always brought a smile to her face.

Billy was, for the most part, oblivious to Sarah's romantic feelings for him. To him she was still like a sister. He had an interest in other girls and a particular interest in a girl named Natasha. Although she was older and a grade ahead of him, that didn't stop him from pursuing her. While this filled Sarah with jealousy, she still wanted to be close to Billy. If all she could ever be was his friend, she would be sad, but she would accept it.

One day, when Billy's parents were out of town to attend a business conference in Atlanta, he invited Sarah and a few other friends over to his house for a party. Sarah was happy to find out

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that Natasha had once again declined Billy's invitation to hang out, telling him she was going to the movies with a friend. It wasn't that Sarah hated Natasha; she just didn't like the way Billy acted when he was around her. One of Billy's friends from the lacrosse team brought some beer over. Everyone laughed and danced as they listened to loud rock music and drank their beverages. Eventually they found themselves in the backyard.

They sat and looked up at the sky as the sun began to give way to the night. As they gazed upward, something in the tree house caught Sarah's attention from the corner of her eye. The door at the top was slightly ajar, and three tiny dark figures appeared to be peering at her. Slowly she got up and moved toward the tree house, never taking her eyes off the top.

Billy noticed and asked, "Where are you going?"

As Sarah turned around to look over at him, he saw that her eyes had taken on a slight hint of red. He thought perhaps it was just a reflection of the sunset, but whatever it was mesmerized him. He kept looking into her eyes and she into his. Something had changed. She always had wanted Billy, and now he felt an uncontrollable desire for her as well. His fixation on Sarah was so single-minded that all sound around him except the beating of his heart faded into silence. The other kids quickly quieted down and stared at the two of them staring at each other.

Sarah gestured with her head up toward the tree house as she gripped a rung of the ladder then started to climb. Billy wandered over slowly, as if in a daze. The other kids giggled as the two made their way to the top. As they ascended, and well before the door to the tree house closed, everyone else decided it was time to leave. They gathered their belongings and headed down the street. Silence

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set in within the confines of the tree house as the kids' voices faded in the distance. Sarah and Billy were alone.

Sarah pulled him toward her, and he fell into her uncontrollably. Slowly she tilted his head back, embraced him, and kissed him deeply. Her eyes never closed but instead stared at the six glowing eyes across the room.

With each kiss, Sarah felt more and more alive. She felt Billy's very life essence pour into her soul. Her senses heightened. She saw all the finer details of the wood grain of the tree house. She heard the tiniest sounds—from the creaking of the floor to the kids chatting down the street. The pumping of her heart grew deeper, and a newfound strength coursed through her veins. Her insecurities and self-doubts vanished, replaced with a profound feeling that she could do and accomplish anything. All the emptiness and rejection she had felt in the past gave way to a replenished, fulfilled passion. Even as she felt Billy weaken, she couldn't stop. The feeling was uncontrollable. It was everything to her.

Eventually Billy's body grew limp in her arms, and he sank to the wood floor, his body twitching. She pressed the back of her hand against her lips, as if wiping her mouth after eating a delicious meal. A smile came across her face as she looked at Billy's convulsing body.

Then suddenly the horror of what happened set in. Sarah's smile transformed into a look of panic. She fell to the floor and shook Billy, whose body finally had stopped moving.

"Wake up! Wake up!" she pleaded.

Slowly the door to the tree house swung open, and the sound of thunder entered from outside. The three tiny gargoyles huddled next to the base of the doorway. The largest one, Lynx, extended his

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gnarled finger and motioned for Sarah to follow. It started to rain outside. It was going to rain for a long time.

*

Nihalus opened his arms widely and gestured his hands gently, extending an invitation to Sarah to embrace him. She wrapped her arms around herself to keep herself warm and to comfort herself. Her feet stepped forward slowly, one by one, toward the man in the dark cloak. She closed her eyes and fell into his arms. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his right hand upon her head.

“There, child. You are with me now. Everything will be okay. I’ll take care of you,” he whispered in her ear.

In his arms, Sarah felt a deep sense of darkness mixed with comfort and understanding. Somehow she knew there was no other place she belonged. No one else would be able to understand her. No one else would be able to help her. No one else would be able to forgive her. No one else would be able to love her. She gave up the last of her will and surrendered to him.

The rain continued to pound the outside of the barn. Lightning lit up the skies. Inside, Nihalus and Sarah were gone.

CHAPTER 4

THE MAP

In Egypt, deep beneath the Pyramid of Khafre, there lay a secret, one that had remained hidden, unknown, and undiscovered by the mortal world for thousands of years. It was a series of chambers that formed the home for a group of mages who came together to protect this world from the relentless and ever-present darkness. This place was called Archmedea.

In the city of Giza was a small coffee and pastry shop, the Greeno Café. On the bottom floor of this establishment was a bookcase. With the proper incantations, the bookcase moved to reveal a long, winding staircase that led down into the depths. At the bottom of the staircase lay a mile-long tunnel that housed a shallow river. Traveling down this river was the only known method for entering Archmedea.

In the center of Archmedea was a circular room called the Great Chamber. This room had walls as high as a cathedral, with giant bookshelves and tapestries that ran its length. At its top was a

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stained-glass dome. Though it was well beneath the surface, it appeared as if sunlight were pouring through the glass, illuminating the room. On the floor below, arcane symbols were carved into the stone blocks. A circular table made of dark oak rested in the center. Ten chairs, each carved out of a single piece of wood, surrounded the table.

Sebastian, the leader of the mages, sat in the chair farthest from a pair of giant wooden doors. He was an elderly man dressed in a dark-gray cloak that was decorated with white stitched magical symbols that ran down its sides. The bangs of his long silver hair were pulled back and braided, while the rest hung below his shoulders.

Beside him were two similarly dressed men, Christopher and Robert. Christopher stood to Sebastian's left. He wore a long orange cloak and had scraggly brown hair. On Sebastian's other side stood Robert, who donned a dark-green cloak with a hooded top that covered his head.

Deeply engaged in conversation, the three were reviewing some parchments on the table in front of them.

"We can't just sit here and wait," said Christopher.

"We can and will wait," asserted Sebastian. "We already have two mages out there, and until such time as one of them reports back with some new information or they cease to exist, I'm not inclined to send anyone else. The last thing we need to do is rush out there and stumble around blindly."

Directly across from them, the pair of thick wooden doors swung open. A man with a dark cloak covering most of his body and face entered the room. The cloak floated behind him, dancing as if carried by a breeze. He approached the table and placed his hands along its edge. With his right hand he pulled down the hood from his head,

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revealing a man with short blond hair and a slightly darker blond goatee. His eyes had a swirling golden glow about them. Aleister had returned home.

*

It was late in the afternoon. Detectives Valle and Kent were at the police station. It had been a few days since they had started investigating the crime scene in the alley. To date, they had made little progress, though on this particular day they had a new clue to review. That morning forensics had delivered the pieced-together parchment from the scroll case the detectives had discovered.

Both were in Detective Valle's windowless, very messy office. It was rare for anyone in the precinct to have his or her own area, and this was more of a repurposed closet in the basement than anything else. Valle's sergeant had moved him down there a few years ago, when he no longer wanted to deal with the complaints from some of the other officers. They said he talked too much and was interrupting their work, but the truth was that they thought he was too damn weird. His cases always seemed to involve some tie to the occult, and his so-called witnesses gave them the creeps.

Detective Kent was seated in a chair on the opposite side of a desk facing a large blank sheet that was tacked to a corkboard. The desk was covered with papers, many of which bore circular coffee stains. Lying in the center of the desk was the rune-engraved ebony scroll case. Detective Valle paced in front of Kent before pausing for a moment, reaching into his pocket, and placing a cigar in his mouth.

"You know you can't smoke in here, right?" asked Detective Kent.

"It helps me think," replied Valle, as he started to light his cigar.

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Within a few puffs, the cigar was lit, and Valle resumed his pacing. With each exhale, more and more smoke collected along the ceiling of the office.

Kent glanced up and spotted a smoke detector beneath the gray clouds above. "You know you might set off the fire alarm, right?" he said.

"I disabled that stupid thing years ago," said Valle. "Now focus, Kent! What do we know?"

"Well, we know we aren't missing any pieces of that thing," responded Kent, as he pointed at the large blank sheet of paper tacked to the board. "That's the good part. Unfortunately the bad part is that we also know the damn thing is completely blank!"

"Right," exclaimed Valle, as if the two of them had just now discovered this. "But what does it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything! The damn thing is blank!" Kent repeated, throwing his hands into the air. After taking a moment to calm down, he rubbed his face with both hands, sighed, and continued. "Well, the damn thing appears to be blank anyway."

"You're absolutely right!" exclaimed Valle. "It *appears* to be blank—but perhaps there's something you and I can't see. Let's bring it down to forensics and have them use their gizmos on it. Maybe they can find something our naked eyes are missing."

*

Sebastian and his two companions immediately halted their conversation and focused their attention on Aleister, who had just barged into the room. The leader of the mages looked over at the doors and nodded slightly, signaling to Christopher and Robert that they should leave the room. After they gathered their parchments from the table, the two mages exited the chamber, closing the heavy doors behind them.

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"Welcome back, Aleister," said Sebastian. "Judging by your expression, I'm guessing you didn't retrieve the map."

"They knew we were coming!" exclaimed Aleister.

"I need you to calm down," said Sebastian, placing his hands into a prayer position in front of him.

Aleister took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Master."

"It's all right," said Sebastian. "Just tell me what happened."

Aleister continued, "I tracked down the map in New York City. It was in the hands of David Higgins, a trader in antiques. As he described it, he always had been able to find rare and unique items. It was if he could somehow sense them. I later determined that this ability was a latent magical talent. Unfortunately, as he was untrained, the use of this power drained the longevity from his body, and he had become quite frail and ill over the past few years.

"He acquired an ebony scroll case with Nordic runes on it during one of his trips to Augsburg, Germany. This case matched the last-known description of the map's container. My spells confirmed that the case was indeed in an area near his shop, but something was blocking my ability to sense its exact location. It was as if my vision were clouded."

"This is the spreading of the darkness," interrupted Sebastian. "My detection incantations are faltering as well, which will make it much more challenging to find the one we seek."

Aleister nodded. "Per your instructions, I was to obtain the map without harming any mortals. Using the opportunity that had been presented to me, I offered a cure for the man's illness in exchange for the map. He agreed, and we arranged a meeting. Shortly after I arrived, we were attacked by one of the Touched. This one was unlike any I had encountered before. He bore only the vaguest

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resemblance to a mortal being. He was also stronger and had command of a powerful energy similar to that wielded by ourselves.

"This creature knew my name, and though he didn't know I was there for the map, he did know we were looking for a boy. I managed to dispatch him, but I was injured and had to flee before I could retrieve the map. I'm not sure where it is." After finishing his story, Aleister asked, "How would they know about the child?"

"My dear boy," replied Sebastian, "though we reside on opposite sides, we and they are part of the same coin. Our stories are their stories; our legends are their legends—they're just told from a different vantage point. Now that their champion has risen, they know we will search for ours."

*

Detective Valle was sitting reclined in his office, drinking a cup of coffee. An ashtray with a lit cigar in it rested on his beer belly. The phone on his desk rang. Slowly he looked at it and let it ring a few more times before moving. After grabbing the ashtray with his free hand, he put his feet on the floor, placed his coffee mug on a pile of papers, and picked up the phone.

"Hello. Detective Valle here," he muttered.

"It's Kent," said the voice on the other end. "Forensics just called. They said they completed their examination."

"And?"

"You were right. They found something."

Hearing this news, Valle stood up so hastily that he accidentally bumped his desk, knocking over his coffee. The spilled coffee quickly drenched the papers beneath it. Kent was still talking as Valle slowly let his phone arm fall to his side. He stared at the coffee, which was now dripping on the floor, with a look of annoyance. For a few moments, he did nothing else. Then he glanced over at his cigar,

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picked it up, placed it in his mouth, and inhaled deeply. After releasing a large puff of smoke into the air, he returned the phone to his ear.

"I missed that last part, Kent," interrupted Valle. "Can you repeat it?"

"Which part?" Kent asked.

"The part right after you said they found something."

Kent sighed. "So you're telling me you haven't listened to a word I've been saying."

"Yeah," Valle mumbled as he glanced back at the mess on his desk. "I had a work-related incident. Just tell me what they found."

"I'll just skip to the important part," said Kent. "When they applied a mild heat to the surface of the parchment, it revealed a map. You know, like when kids write hidden messages with lemon juice that can only be exposed using a candle."

"Lemon juice, right. So what's it a map of?"

"They said it was a highly detailed map of Pangea."

"Should I know what Pangea is?" Valle asked sarcastically.

"Seriously?" replied Kent in an equally sarcastic tone before pausing then continuing. "Before the world was as we know it today, there was one supercontinent. It slowly separated over hundreds of millions of years into seven continents. This supercontinent was known as Pangea."

"Why would someone have a hidden map of Pangea?"

"I have no idea—I was hoping you might. Do you want to see it?"

"Yeah, let's have a look at this thing," said Valle. "Bring it on over—and while you're at it, can you grab me a fresh cup of coffee and a stack of napkins?"

*

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Aleister awoke in his bedroom within the halls of Archmedea. It was a simple room with stone blocks for walls and housed only a small bed and desk. On the ceiling was a moving image of clouds with sunlight creeping through. It reflected the state of the early-morning sky far above him. As Aleister stared upward, the image shifted and distorted until he saw the face of his master, Sebastian.

"Aleister," said the image. "I'm sorry to wake you so early. Your presence is needed in the Great Chamber."

"I'll be right there," replied Aleister.

Aleister quickly donned his cloak and made his way to the Great Chamber. When he opened the doors to the room, Sebastian was seated on the far opposite end, accompanied by Christopher and Robert at his sides. He was taken a bit by surprise to see the other mages there. They looked as if they'd been interrupted from an extended discussion.

"Have a seat," said Sebastian, motioning toward a chair along the left side of the circular table.

"Yes, Master," replied Aleister, as he walked over and sat down.

"We have new information," Sebastian said. "Our sources tell us the map is in police custody. It's being held in the seventh precinct on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. We also know Detective Nicholas Valle is involved."

Aleister knew who Detective Valle was; few mages who visited New York City didn't. This particular police officer had a knack for sniffing out and getting involved in the strange and unusual.

Sebastian continued, "As you know, the map would have allowed us to pinpoint the exact location of the Blessed One. Since it has slipped from our grasp, we have no choice but to shift our priorities to a less direct approach."

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"You mean to use the Seer's Gate?" asked Aleister, with a slight look of shock.

"Absolutely not!" Sebastian exclaimed. "You of all people should know how dangerous that thing is. It has powers that aren't meant to be tampered with. The risk would be far too great."

"But we know it can—" said Aleister before being interrupted.

"Aleister, this isn't a discussion," Sebastian said sternly before calming his tone and continuing. "The council has decided to focus our attention on the girl. It is foretold that she will give rise to the Blessed One's full potential. We intend to track her down."

"What do you need me to do?" asked Aleister.

"You will remain here," stated Sebastian in a calm but assertive tone.

"What!" Aleister exclaimed, as he rose from his chair.

"Yes, Aleister!" said Sebastian, raising his voice as he stood as well. "We can't allow your personal feelings to get involved here. You'll remain in Archmedea. We'll dispatch another mage to find her when we're ready."

"You can't pull me out!" yelled Aleister. "You have no right! I'm part of this council too!"

"You gave up that right the first time you lost her," said Sebastian loudly. "Now sit down. We have other matters to discuss."

Aleister gripped the edge of the table tightly in protest and frustration. He wasn't at all pleased with this decision. Slowly and with the appearance of being calm, however, he took his seat. If this council wouldn't allow him to be involved, he would do it without their approval.

*

The parchment had returned to its tacked position on the wall of Detective Valle's smoke-filled office. This time, though, rather than

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staring at a blank sheet of paper, he and Detective Kent were looking at a highly detailed map of Pangea, the ancient supercontinent. They both rested against the desk with somewhat dumbfounded expressions.

"You know," said Kent, "if I cross my eyes, I can almost see the continents drifting apart."

"Staring at this thing is getting us nowhere," muttered Valle.

"Seriously, just cross your eyes," repeated Kent.

"Quit kidding around," Valle said in an annoyed tone.

"What do you want me to do? This weird stuff is your area of expertise, not mine. I just see a map of an ancient landmass with a weird compass in the corner."

"Compass?" asked Valle.

"Yeah, this thing." Kent got up and pointed to the bottom right-hand corner of the map.

Valle couldn't see anything near the edge of the map. He got up and walked over to have a closer look as he sucked on his cigar. Still unable to see anything, in an act of frustration, he blew out a large puff of smoke at the map. As the smoke rippled across its surface, something odd appeared in the corner. It wasn't a compass at all; it was a set of arcane symbols—"ⓈN"—in the center of a circle.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Valle.

"You see the compass?" asked Kent.

"That's no compass."

"Then what is it?"

"I've seen these symbols before," responded Valle as he put his hands on his hips. "I could be wrong, but I think it means 'blood.'"

Kent just stood there, unable to think of a reasonable way to respond.

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“We might need some extra help on this one, Kent,” continued Valle. “There’s this guy Dorian I’ve used in the past on matters like this. He lives in Salem, Massachusetts. Grab your coat. We’ve got a long ride ahead of us.”

CHAPTER 5

BLESSED ASHES

Ash was sitting on a bench in the Boston Commons. He had a bag of bread crumbs beside him and was slowly dispensing its contents to a small gathering of pigeons. So much had happened to him over the past few days, and he needed some time to get away from things. As he sprinkled a few more crumbs on the ground, he felt a presence behind him. As it grew stronger, Ash slowly reached his other hand under his jacket and gripped his gem.

“You won’t need that,” said a voice that surprisingly came from the seat right next to him.

Ash turned his head to see a man dressed in a dark-purple cloak sitting beside him. The man looked oddly relaxed and motionless, as if he’d been there a long time. From under the man’s hood, Ash made out that he had a short white beard. He recognized this man from the pixelated image that had spoken to him on his computer. Not knowing his name, he would simply call him the Wizard. He

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slowly let the gem rest in his pocket and placed both hands on his knees.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here. I had to take many roads less traveled to lose their scent. I couldn't risk letting them get to you or detect your presence before you were ready," said the Wizard.

"Who's after me?" asked Ash, an uneasiness in his voice.

"They're known as the Touched, and at this moment, all you need to know is that they're very dangerous and will stop at nothing to get to you."

"But why are they after *me*?"

"They are simply after you because of what you are and your importance."

"Why am I so important?" asked Ash.

"For now let's just say I believe you have tremendous potential. It isn't wise to know too much too soon. Knowledge is required for you to understand your purpose, and by its nature, it must be acquired and can't be given."

"Great, more riddles," muttered Ash.

"Then perhaps I'll give you something more practical, but first I have a question."

"Okay, what's your question?"

"Why are you feeding these pigeons?" asked the Wizard.

"Because pigeons like bread, and I could use the company," answered Ash somewhat sarcastically.

"Why not just draw them to you without the bread?" The Wizard motioned his open palm over the flock of pigeons.

"Well, first of all, I actually like feeding the birds," said Ash, lifting a finger into the air to signal the number one. "Second, isn't it just plain wrong to control minds—even the minds of birds—by

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taking away their free will?" he said sternly, as he raised a second finger. He raised one more finger. "And third, I don't know how the hell to control minds, even if I wanted to!"

The Wizard shook his head. "My boy, I wasn't suggesting you control their minds. To do so would walk you down a dark path from which you might never return. There are lines that should never be crossed, because when you do, the lines slowly will disappear. Power can easily corrupt. What I suggested is entirely different. I suggested you *ask* the pigeons to join you. A request by whatever means is just a request, no different than a verbal invitation. It would be up to the pigeons to decide whether they wished to join you. Do you understand the difference?"

"Yeah, I understand. Okay, so how do I *ask* the pigeons?"

"Well, that would be kind of pointless. The pigeons are already here," said the Wizard, as if Ash weren't aware of the obvious.

"I think you know what I meant," Ash said with some frustration. "What if I wanted to attract something else?"

"The technique is no different from the other skills you've already developed. For this type of spell, since it isn't directed at something in particular, you could choose to use your wand or simply hold your gemstone in your hand. Casting with your wand will always have a greater effect, as your powers will be amplified as they pass through it into the gemstone. However, it should go without saying that whipping out a wand isn't always the wisest choice, as doing so could draw unwanted attention."

The choice to use a wand or not was a simple one for Ash, as he didn't have a wand. He reached back into the pocket of his jacket. Then, within his clenched fist, he pulled out his gem.

The Wizard waited then continued. "You already know the tongue that is used to focus your mind. Think of a word that means

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'attract,' making sure to preface it with an invitation. Though it isn't necessary, many initiates are able to cause a greater effect by amplifying their voice. Again, always use your best judgment. Yelling in the ancient tongue can also draw unwanted attention. For now let's simply try something slightly louder than a whisper."

Ash nodded. "Got it. Now how do I decide what to attract? Can I attract a lion from the zoo?"

"Let's try to keep it to another city-dwelling creature. Extending your reach too far might cause something else to feel your presence, and we wouldn't want that."

"How about mice or rats?" Ash asked, pointing to a manhole at the edge of the park.

"Perfect," replied the Wizard. "Now you have two choices in focusing your power on these creatures. The first is the easiest. Simply include their names as part of your mantra in the ancient tongue. These words will act as a conduit to your higher mind, and it will know what you mean. The second is a bit harder but also, in many cases, more powerful. You can picture in your mind the events you wish to occur as you speak your desires in the ancient tongue. This is more difficult because the mind tends to drift, and random thoughts can cause effects that you don't want. Until you learn to completely quiet your mind, it can also be very dangerous." The Wizard waved a wrinkled hand in the air. "We were just talking about lions. You were just thinking about lions. In fact now that I've just mentioned them, you probably have an image of a lion in your head right now. Your higher mind can't tell the difference between these thoughts and what you're truly trying to focus on."

The Wizard chuckled for a moment to himself, as he too was picturing a scene in his head. In his imagination, he saw ten thousand lions pour into the park with their tongues hanging out the

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sides of their mouths, like in a silly cartoon. In his mind, the herd pounced forward, eventually tackling Ash to the ground and licking his face.

While still wearing a smile, the Wizard continued. "For now I suggest you be specific and use the ancient word for 'rodent.'"

Ash pondered for a few moments then stood up. He clenched both fists and held his gem tightly in his hand. As he whispered, his eyes took on a bright bluish glow. "ᐃᐅ ᐅᐅ ᐅᐅ (IK-AWA-AME)."

The manhole cover he was staring at slowly shook. Then he heard a rumbling farther down the street. Suddenly all the manhole covers in the area were shaking.

"Too strong. I suggest we leave—quickly," said the Wizard.

*

A group of students were sitting on a large couch in Bexley Hall in front of an old television. An open box of pizza lay on the table in front of them, with several pieces missing. They sipped on beer and snacked on pizza as the newscast started.

"It seems the Pied Piper paid a visit to Boston today," said a female anchor, "as thousands of rats invaded the Commons."

Ash, who was standing in the doorway behind most of the other students, smiled.

"At this time officials are still trying to determine the cause of the disturbance," said the anchor as the screen shifted to an aerial view of the Boston Commons.

Seas of rats were swarming everywhere. As the camera panned, the flashing of police cars could be seen around the entire perimeter of the park.

One of the students turned around and asked, "Ash, didn't you say you were going to the park today? Were you there when this happened?"

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Ash, who was sipping a beer, coughed as he nearly swallowed it down the wrong tube. “Did I say that? Nope, I’ve been studying all day—big test tomorrow. In fact, I’d better get back to it,” he said, making his way out of the room.

The guy shook his head as if to say “okay” then turned back toward the TV. After Ash had left, the guy, with a puzzled expression, turned to the girl sitting next to him and said, “Isn’t tomorrow Sunday?”

*

The next day was bright and sunny. The Wizard and Ash strolled alongside the Charles River near Harvard University. They saw crew boats shuttling down the river, and many joggers passed by them as they walked. Despite the Wizard’s odd attire, they went unnoticed. Not a single person glanced in their direction, and those who passed them from behind did so as if they were on autopilot, making their way around them.

“That was quite a performance yesterday in the park. You have the basics down and are clearly more gifted than I’d imagined,” said the Wizard. “I warned you about some of the potential dangers and risks of using your abilities. What you did won’t go unnoticed. I’ve done what I can to mask our presence here, but I fear that dark forces will soon be on the move.”

“But for now I think we’re safe,” he continued. “Boston is a big city, and it’ll take them a long time to track us down, as long as we don’t use our abilities. So for today, I have a story to tell you. It’ll be difficult to separate fact from fiction in this tale, but by now you should realize that the boundary between what is real and what is a dream is much fuzzier than most people believe. Reality and dreams often pass from one to the other then back again.”

Ash looked at the Wizard and nodded in acknowledgment.

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And so the Wizard began to tell his tale.

“As the story goes, humans are born of both light and dark. They have a spirit, and that spirit is good. The soul longs to bring the blessings of the spirit to all works that it creates. It is selfless, brave, caring, and kind. These are the forces that drive people to help others, protect the innocent, seek nature, and seek love.

“Humans also have flesh, and that flesh is evil. The flesh longs to bring chaos and destruction to everything it touches. It cares only about itself and quenching its own desires. These are the forces that drive humanity’s quest for wealth, power, lust, and war.

“All people struggle with these forces. In the end, though they might think otherwise, the creator saw fit to leave the choice up to them for what type of people they eventually would become. They face these choices every day. This is what it means to be mortal.

“However, some of us are born different. When children are born of evil, they’re said to be touched by darkness and are often referred to as ‘the Touched.’ Legend has it that the Touched are created when a demon and a mortal mate. I can’t say whether this is true, but I can tell you they’re definitely very real and very dangerous.

“When children are born of good, they’re said to be blessed by the light. As with the Touched, they too have a nickname, ‘the Blessed.’ They also have an origin story. It’s said the Blessed are the result of angels and mortals falling in love and having a child. I can definitely say that’s simply not true. Both my parents were mortals, and I would guess yours were as well. Perhaps it’s a legend that applies only to the first of us—or perhaps for each of us this life is simply one of our many lives. Again, I can’t say.

“Both the Touched and the Blessed are born with extraordinary gifts and can do many things mortals can’t. The Touched generally manifest this ability naturally, through a single, strong, supernatural

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power. Some have multiple gifts, but this is rare. Even rarer, some of the Touched can wield dark energies that allow them to do almost anything they desire. All of them possess physical strength and agility well beyond that of ordinary mortals. The Touched are extremely deadly, even more so when they're properly trained to use their abilities, and they'll usually kill you on sight, just for what you are.

"The Blessed typically don't manifest their abilities naturally. Instead, it's as if they all house incredible untapped power deep within themselves that will remain untouched without the proper discipline and training. Yes, there are also some rare exceptions with the Blessed as well. Some individuals are able to manifest magical powers without proper training, but it's almost always a minor ability and never results in anything beyond the ability to perform a few simple parlor tricks, like levitating coins, finding an unmarked card in a deck, or such other nonsense. But with the proper training, focus, and a wand at his or her side, one of the Blessed can accomplish almost anything.

"Since the dawn of what we perceive as time, the Touched and the Blessed have been at war. The Touched have always hunted us, and we in turn have always hunted them. It's a deadly game that has stretched many lifetimes, but the true threat to mortals came only a few thousand years ago. The Touched, unable to win the battle with the Blessed, began to recruit easily influenced mortals into their ranks. One would think these individuals were swayed by the use of deceptions and lies, but more so they were converted by the Touched playing to the greed and desires that already lived in their souls. Such acts were forbidden to the Blessed, as they believed in choice and freedom.

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“Massive wars raged that engulfed the whole of the world. Through strategic strikes, the Blessed still managed to drive back the Touched time and time again, allowing for rays of light between the stretches of darkness. But now a new darkness is coming. I feel it growing stronger every day. It will stand against the Blessed, and it will be too strong for any or even all of us to face. It will soon have enough power to destroy us all.

“As the legend has foretold of the coming darkness, it also has predicted the light that will drive it back—a boy of immense power. He’s referred to only as ‘the Blessed One.’ We’ve been searching for him.”

After the Wizard finished, Ash asked his first question. “So our fates are bound by our birth, either for good or evil?”

The Wizard shook his head. “Not at all, Ash. Whether we’re born as one of the Touched, one of the Blessed, or a mortal being, we all have a choice regarding what we’ll do and who we’ll become. We all have impulses and thoughts, probably hundreds or thousands per day. Granted, some of us have darker thoughts than others, but these thoughts don’t determine who we are. Our *actions* determine who we are. Think about what I told you yesterday. You asked the rats to come visit you. You didn’t force them to do so. And in the end, despite all the nonsense and commotion, the whole episode was harmless.”

Ash stopped for a moment, then turned and wandered over to the railing and looked over the Charles River into the city of Boston. The Wizard followed and rested his arms beside Ash.

“I have another question,” said Ash.

“I thought you might. Please, ask me what you will.”

“In your story you mentioned a boy called the ‘Blessed One,’” said Ash. “Am I him?”

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The Wizard smirked slightly. "Ash, I have many abilities, but I'm not a seer. Though some of my peers might disagree, I feel we're all the creators of our own story, and we choose who we want to be. The future is an ever-fluctuating wave of possibilities. Are you the Blessed One? This I can't say, but I do know you have an important role to play in things to come."

The Wizard's answer puzzled Ash. He felt immense power within himself, power that was far greater and stronger than that of the man next to him. Why would the Wizard have sought him out if he wasn't the Blessed One?

"Come now," said the Wizard. "I have one more thing to show you today."

They walked quietly along the river for several more minutes, until the Wizard stopped in front of a small abandoned warehouse. He pointed to the building. "This is where we'll continue your training."

It didn't look like much, but any building along the Charles River must have been worth hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars. Ash was also surprised that the Wizard already had a place in town. As far as he was aware, the Wizard had been here only for the past day.

"How did you find this place?" Ash asked curiously.

"The Blessed have many locations around the globe, and this is just one of them. We were very fortunate that we had one so close to your dorm. Do you want to have a look inside?"

"Absolutely," replied Ash.

*

Over the days that followed, the Wizard continued to instruct Ash. They either met up at the abandoned warehouse, or on some days when the Wizard felt so inclined, he would meet Ash at his dorm,

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and they'd walk over there together. Before each practice session, the Wizard would seal the area with a magical barrier to prevent detection from any outside entities that might be watching or listening.

Ash had more raw talent and ability than any other mage the Wizard had instructed. However, he lacked control, and his results often were chaotic and unfocused. For example, rather than bring up a small shield of protection, Ash's spell would erect a giant, immovable barrier that filled the length of the warehouse. Rather than summon a small ball of illumination, he would conjure a nearly blinding light.

The Wizard often joked, "One doesn't need to use a gun to kill a fly."

Ash also learned there was a great depth to the ancient tongue. Each word carried multiple interpretations that only a focused mind could decipher. The word "OR," for example, could be used to open a door but could just as easily be used to open a person's mind and read his or her thoughts. There was also something mathematical about the language, as if it had been crafted by the engineers of a race that had a deep understanding of the inner workings of the universe.

Along the way, a sense of overconfidence and arrogance grew within him. He could sense his own power and what he was able to do. He often thought about how much longer he would need the Wizard's training before he could truly put his magical abilities to the test. Some of the Wizard's advice and riddles began to bore him. He felt as if he could accomplish anything, and the world no longer held any boundaries for him.

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The Wizard arrived early in the morning at Ash's dorm. Ash was still in bed, but he quickly rose to his feet when he felt a presence

BLOOD AND ASH

approach. He hastily put on a pair of jeans that were lying on the floor and by the time the Wizard had reached the door to his room, Ash was already opening it.

"Did I miss the memo? Are we starting before the sun comes up today?" Ash asked as he moved aside to let the Wizard enter the room.

"I need to leave," said the Wizard abruptly.

"What?" Ash rubbed his eyes, trying to gain focus.

The Wizard paced the room, his hands behind his back. This was very uncharacteristic of him. He clearly was worried about something.

"I need to leave," repeated the Wizard. "Something dire has come up that requires my attention. I should be gone for only a few days...a week at most, less if I can manage it."

"Maybe I could come and help?" Ash asked eagerly.

The Wizard paused, as if momentarily contemplating the option, then said firmly, "No. I need you to stay here, and while I'm gone, I need two things from you."

Ash nodded. "Of course."

"First, I need you to promise that you won't use any of your abilities while I'm gone. This will be a dangerous time for you, and it'll be all too easy for the Touched to sense your location."

Ash nodded again. "Okay. What else?"

"Second, your abilities have progressed rapidly, and for the next steps of your training, you'll need a wand. It's time that you have one crafted for you. I need you to travel to Salem. I wanted to take you there myself, but that's no longer an option. Tucked away in an alley between New Derby Street and Front Street, you'll find an old bookstore called the Raven's Foot. There you'll find a man named Dorian. He'll help you through the process."

BLESSED ASHES

Ash's expression changed from one of worry to excitement. Images of himself casting more powerful spells filled his head as his eyes glowed a slight blue.

"Do you understand?" asked the Wizard in a slightly louder voice, waking Ash from his daydream.

"Yes. No magic. Get a wand. Raven's Foot. Dorian. Got it," replied Ash.

The Wizard walked over to the door and opened it. Before he left, he glanced back at Ash. "Take care of yourself. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He walked out of the room and quickly disappeared down the hall.

"I will," said Ash as he slowly reached into his pocket and gripped his gemstone. He whispered, "MA RO OM (MA-RO-OM)," and the door slammed shut.