

ALAN BAXTER
BOUND
ALEX CAINE BOOK 1



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*For Halinka and Arlo
And for Haines*

1

A distant roar rose and fell, rose again. Dark grey concrete underfoot, bloodstained, hard. Alex circled to the left. He peripherally registered each panel of chain-link, each steel upright, never taking his eyes from the figure in front of him. The man known as Bull Finley.

Below a heavy brow Bull stared back, cautious. But not scared. He exuded feral, predatory strength, a calm resolve. His hands, raised before his face, were calloused and rough, like Alex's. Bull's energy pulsed. Alex watched the man's *shades*, the aura of his intentions, shifting around him, saw purpose swell, muscles bunch. One of Bull's meaty hands swept within an inch of Alex's nose, breath grunting out between clenched teeth, forward momentum carrying him through. Alex let him go by, twisted, gathered and whipped out a leg in a turning kick to the ribs.

Bull's exhalation finished its escape in a rush, his face registering shock more than pain. Alex pressed the advantage, following in, hands a blur of strikes and counterstrikes. Bull blocked well, but not well enough, his upper lip and nose flowered scarlet.

His intent changed, a slight desperation entering his mind. Alex saw the shades move, felt the man's desire to grapple, take the fight down to the hard stone floor. He disengaged, slipped out of reach even as his opponent made the conscious decision to grab. That surprised expression again. Confidence to surprise, surprise to concern, concern to fear, fear to defeat. A journey Alex had seen play out time and again. His opponent's eyes widened slightly, the corners of his mouth twitching downwards. Surprise to concern. Alex smiled inside. *So it begins.*

For several seconds they circled, the roar rising, falling, rising, falling. Bull's bulky frame heaved with his breath. Alex, leaner, more athletic, waited. He was calm. Bull looked for an opening, a gap that wasn't there. Alex feinted in and out, his opponent flinching, lips tight. Concern to fear.

The tension grew. Alex drew his breath in deep, sank his energy low, gathered himself. A deliberate drawing away, taunting his opponent to follow him in, to attack. Fear brought with it a lack of focus, lack of patience, a desperate desire to take back control. That desire pulsed off Bull like a wave. Alex moved in and to one side exactly as Bull made his assault. A clumsy move, all physical strength, no breath, no finesse. The man closed the gap to where Alex had been, launching fast punches. Alex exhaled, struck back across Bull's arms, drove a knee up hard and sharp. The big man's nose and ribs cracked almost simultaneously, pain escaping in red and black waves. As his opponent stumbled, Alex whipped in one last punch and a kick to finish him. Broken and unconscious, Bull collapsed against the chain-link fencing as though his skeleton had been removed.

Alex turned away as the dull roar boomed into his ears. He honoured his opponent by not relishing the defeat as he let the rest of the world back in. The stench of steel and concrete, blood, sweat and popcorn. The glare of overhead halogens, the stamping of hundreds of feet on wooden stands, hundreds of throats screaming approval, baying for blood. A loud, brash voice burst over loudspeakers and Alex walked past the man with the microphone, as he always did. A gate swung open and he let the darkness of the tunnel to the dressing rooms swallow him away from the spectacle.

Alex pulled a T-shirt over his sweat-slick chest, ran a hand over his close-cropped dark hair. He stretched as event officials jostled around him in the tiny room. A clipboard was thrust under his nose, accompanied by a chewed biro. He signed without reading, knowing the agreement by heart.

‘Way to go, Alex. Man, how are you so fast?’ He ignored the question, kept his head down, resumed his stretching. ‘Ha! You’re a legend, man, a fucking legend!’

The man with the clipboard scurried away. A doctor tipped Alex’s head back, shone a tiny light in each eye. ‘Anything?’ Alex shook his head. The doctor nodded once and left, scribbling on a clipboard of his own.

Alex rubbed his face and hair with a towel and concentrated on his breathing and stretching as the activity around him faded. He heard movement in the hallway, a voice raised in concern. Another voice, angry, and a man walked into the dressing room. The man was big and ugly, a product of mean streets and bad attitudes. An obsequious little rat scurried in behind. Alex sighed. ‘Go away, Eugene,’ he said. ‘You too, Karl.’

Eugene sneered. ‘You gotta fight for us, Alex Caine. The boss won’t have it any other way.’

‘*Your* boss can kiss my arse.’

‘You can’t talk like that about King Scarlet,’ Karl said, his voice piping.

Alex laughed. ‘Really? Still calling himself King Scarlet? It’s like a bad Saturday morning cartoon. Fuck off, the pair of you.’

Eugene took a step forward, meant to be threatening. Alex watched his shades, saw the nerves and concern drifting off him like a bad smell. He stood quickly, took one fast step forward. Eugene staggered back, sudden concern clear on his face. He bumped into his insubstantial friend, sent Karl bouncing off the doorframe.

‘Fuck off,’ Alex said again.

Eugene waved one finger. ‘You do what King Scarlet wants, Caine. Or else.’

Alex raised his chin. ‘You threatening me, Eugene?’ He made the man’s name sound like a disease.

Eugene shoved Karl ahead of him out the door. ‘This isn’t over.’

Alex ignored them, let them leave. Finally everything was silent and still.

A moment later, a quiet presence moved just outside the door. Alex sighed. *No peace at all tonight.* 'Can I help you?' he asked, not looking up.

'I know your secret.' The voice was soft and friendly, with an upper-class English accent.

The man in the doorway was elderly, though vibrant looking, well dressed in an old-fashioned suit and waistcoat, impeccably polished shoes. 'My secret?' Alex asked.

The old man gestured back over one shoulder. 'Problems?'

'Nothing I can't handle.'

'You know, you really are very good.'

'I've done it for a long time.'

The man considered Alex for several seconds. Alex let him, wondering what this man could want. People always wanted something. He read the man's shades and saw nothing but calm curiosity.

'Why here?' the Englishman asked eventually. 'Aren't there organised events held all over the world? Big promotion, massive prize money, fame and glory? Better rules and protective equipment? Legal?'

'You've just listed all the reasons I'm not interested.'

The old man's eyebrows raised. 'Even the money?'

There was a cough and movement in the corridor. "Scuse me." A small, gruff-looking man with a shiny bald head pushed into the room. 'Shit, Alex, one of these days you're gonna at least get hit, aren't ya?'

Alex smiled. 'I get hit pretty often, Gary. Just not tonight.'

Gary let out a strangely high laugh. 'Thanks for stepping in at such short notice.'

'No problem. Your other fighter going to be okay?'

'Yeah, just a training injury. He'll be fine.'

'Glad I could help. Thanks for the chance.'

'Any time. Dunno what I'd do without ya.' He handed over an envelope and slapped Alex heavily on the shoulder.

'You still want me in next week?' Alex asked.

'Ah, give it two weeks.'

'Sure. But I'm going to fight in London next month. Might stop in LA on the way back.'

'Don't be out of Sydney too long.' Gary turned, nodded at the old man before slipping back out the door, yelling to someone down the hallway. Alex held up the envelope with a half-smile.

'Is it as good as the mainstream prizes?' the old man asked.

'I get by.'

'Which brings us back to my original point.'

Alex leaned back against the wall, annoyed. 'Which is?'

'I know your secret.'

'Right. So what secret is that?'

'I see what you see. Not nearly so well, I think, but I see it.'

'What do you mean?'

'Patrick Welby, by the way.' The Englishman extended a hand.

'Alex Caine.' He shook the man's hand, noticed manicured nails and very soft skin. He did his best to be polite, but wondered why he was bothering.

'I know. It took me a while to find you. These dos are a bit hard to track down.'

Alex ran out of patience. 'That's kinda the idea. Listen, I don't have time for chitchat.' He gestured at the door.

Welby's shades became urgent. 'You fight for money, away from the limelight, you live quietly in the country and have very little interaction with anyone.'

'So?' Alex said, hiding his concern at the extent of the stranger's knowledge.

'Am I right?'

'I trained to fight and never really had much interest in anything else. I don't play well with others.' He gestured at the door again. 'Now, out.'

The old man held up both hands. 'Please. I've been seeking someone like you for a long time.'

Alex pushed down his anger, but let it burn gently below the surface. This old man bothered him. 'Someone like me?'

Welby took a long breath. 'I know that when you fight you see what people intend to do before they do it.'

Alex raised one eyebrow, spooked. 'Is that right?'

He had never really been able to explain his abilities, even to himself. He sensed a change in the shade of the air around a person, a sensation most similar to vision, but not something he actually saw. Sometimes that sense would blossom into waves of colour at powerful moments. He could read it and know what people intended to do. In the scenario of a fight it became particularly clear, less so in other aspects of life. 'I've been told I was born for fighting,' Alex said. The old pang of grief cut through as he remembered his Sifu's words.

Welby's face was sympathetic. 'Is that why you don't play well with others?'

Alex shrugged. 'The more you get to know someone the easier they are to read. Sometimes it's better not to know.' He cleared his throat. 'You need to leave, now. I've got nothing for you.'

Welby's shades became agitated again. 'You can't go on making a living like this forever.'

Alex moved to the door. 'My house is paid for and I don't get hit often. You have no idea what I can or can't do.'

'But I can show you so much more, help you understand yourself.'

'What's in it for you?' Alex asked.

Welby smiled broadly. 'Good lad! Always the most important question. Well, I think that you'll be able to read a book that I can't, and I really want to know what this book says.'

'That's it?'

'This particular book requires something special. I can pay you with knowledge you wouldn't find anywhere else, or money if you'd prefer. Or both.'

Alex stared long and hard at Patrick Welby. Something was certainly being held back, but it was unclear. 'No, man, sorry.'

Welby frowned. 'I can show you wonders. There are things you should know.'

'I don't need any complications.' He held the door open.

The old man reluctantly stepped out. 'You like to stay in control, don't you?'

'Who doesn't? I just make sure of it.'

'You'll lose that control.'

Alex hardened his expression. 'That a threat?'

'No. Just knowledge.' Welby's shades fluctuated between defeat and hope. And something else fluttered like a dark moth, unreadable. 'If you change your mind ...'

'I won't.' Alex closed the door, alone at last.

2

Alex walked along a dim alley, heading for the main street and a taxi to his hotel. He always treated himself to a fancy suite after a fight, a good room-service feed and a big bed. The two-hour drive home in the morning was easier that way. Two silhouettes stepped into his path, one large, one small. They held long heavy weapons, bats or bars of some kind. Alex sighed. *This is getting old.*

‘Piss off, you monkeys!’ he shouted. ‘I don’t work for anyone.’

‘The King thinks differently,’ Eugene called back. ‘You cost him a lot of money tonight.’

They faced each other, thirty metres apart. Alex read their shades, recognised the shifts and colours as nervous, especially the little one, Karl. But they both intended to do their boss’s bidding. There would be a fight here. Alex shrugged his sports bag off his shoulder, put it down out of the way. ‘Come on then,’ he said. ‘Bring it!’

The shades throbbed and swam around the men as they raised their weapons and rushed him. Baseball bats, he noted. These guys were gorillas, street thugs using intimidation and numbers to win fights. They were no threat at all, even with bats. As the gap closed, Alex danced between them, striking out as the bats whistled past. Two strikes each and it was over, the men squirming on the bitumen, groaning in pain.

A third man, not ten metres away, pointed a revolver. Alex cursed. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

‘You’re costing the King money, Caine. We can’t have that.’

Alex frowned. ‘Your king should start betting on me instead.’

‘Doesn’t work like that. He controls. You’ll work for him. Or you’ll die.’

Alex vaguely registered a car slowing at the mouth of the alley. 'I don't work for anyone.'

The man gestured with his gun. 'You are in no position to negotiate. Come with us now or I kill you right here.'

Alex tried to figure the best angle to move. The man knew what he was doing, positioned close enough that he would be unlikely to miss, far enough away that he would be hard to reach without getting a shot off. Alex centred his breath, about to launch forward, and a bright orange glow erupted over the man's shoulder. He yelped as flames licked the side of his face. He frantically tried to beat at his back, Alex and the gun forgotten. Alex rushed, wondering if more guns were trained on him from the car parked at the end of the alley. *How the hell did he catch alight?*

The man dropped and rolled, trying to smother the flames, and Alex leapt over him. He skidded to a halt when he saw Patrick Welby's face smiling through the window of the car. 'Need a ride?' the old man called out as he pushed the passenger door open.

Alex jumped in and Welby peeled away as the man with the gun staggered, smoking, to his feet. A concussive crack followed them as he squeezed off a shot.

'What was that?' Alex said angrily.

'Looked like you were about to be shot.' Welby's hands were steady on the wheel, a slight smile played about his lips.

Alex scowled. 'I don't fucking need your help.'

Welby said nothing and they drove in silence. Alex thought over the events. Why was nothing ever simple? Always someone trying to get a bite of your pie. The image of the flames bursting across the gunman's back returned. Welby slowed for a red light. 'How did you do it?' Alex asked.

'Do what?'

'You know fucking well what.' He caught his breath, catching his anger with it. 'Did you throw a petrol bomb at him or something?'

'Never so ham-fisted.'

'So how?'

'I simply threw fire at him.'

'Threw fire?'

'Can I buy you a drink?' Welby asked. 'I'd really like to talk with you some more.'

Alex felt his world spinning, his control slipping away. He refused to let other people dictate his life. 'No, you can't. Just take me to my hotel. I'm at the Four Seasons.'

Welby lifted a hand from the wheel, wagging one index finger at Alex. 'How many people have you told about your ... ability? The things you can see?'

'My life has nothing to do with you, Welby.' Alex's anger burned. 'Stop the fucking car, I'm done here.'

'I can help you!' Welby said, desperation in his tone. 'You don't owe me anything, but at least talk to me until I get you to your hotel. Please? How many people have you told?'

Alex ground his teeth. There was no point in denying the obvious. 'None really.'

'Why?'

He saw where the old man was heading with this. 'Because in the first instance it's very hard to explain and in the second, it's unlikely anyone would believe me.'

'And why wouldn't they believe you?'

'Because it's a hard thing to prove.'

Welby grinned. 'Exactly. But who has the better understanding of reality? You? Or them?'

Alex chose not to answer. Rhetorical question. Let him blather on, he didn't really care. He wanted to be in his hotel room, alone.

Patrick Welby said nothing for a few blocks. Then, 'Your talent could be far better. If you can see as you do, that means you have the ability to do all kinds of other things most people would consider supernatural. Magical. You just need to know how.'

Alex smirked. 'Magical? I'm an open-minded guy, I know most people wouldn't believe me about what I can see, but it's not magic.'

‘Isn’t it?’

‘Mine is just a well-developed natural aptitude,’ he said.
‘Empathy.’

‘Why do you resist the truth?’

‘Resist?’

Welby pulled the car over to the kerb. They were nowhere near the hotel. ‘What are you doing?’ Alex asked.

Welby took a bottle of water from the back seat. ‘I want to show you something.’

He unscrewed the cap and raised his right hand before his chest, palm out, holding the bottle in his left. Alex watched the old man’s hand curiously. Welby gestured subtly with his chin, drawing Alex’s eye to the bottle. A sensation of static rose, coppery, tickling across the skin. The air seemed to swell slightly and he saw subtle shades shifting through the space between himself and Welby. The water shivered. Then it rose in the centre, a finger of clear liquid standing up through the bottleneck against gravity.

Alex jumped like he’d been stung. Welby curled his fingers slightly and the column of standing water twisted in a graceful spiral, glittering in the light from the dashboard. Welby gestured again and the spiral of water unwound, stood taller, and fell back with a soft splash. Alex stared, his eyes hard.

‘You *felt* it too, didn’t you?’ Patrick Welby said quietly. ‘You didn’t just see it, you felt the magic.’

Welby was patient as Alex pondered. Some kind of trickery? He had been less than two feet away and watched everything in crystal clarity. He had felt the swell of something in the air between them, the charge of something preternatural occurring. And he knew he had felt it before. *Fucking magic? Really?*

Welby screwed the cap onto the bottle. ‘I realise all this is a lot to take in, but you really deserve to know the potential you have. It deserves to be nurtured.’

Alex pursed his lips. ‘And you want me to look at this book,’ he said.

‘You use your vision in a very practical way. I’m aware of my limitations. I think you’ll be able to see what I can’t.’

‘What’s so special about this book?’

‘There are many in the world that are powerful. The contained knowledge makes any book a magical item. Do you like to read?’

‘Yes.’

‘Some books are designed to be specifically magical — grimoires that impart arcane knowledge, ancient secrets, dangerous truths that men have killed and died for.’ Welby reached into his jacket and pulled out a small, leatherbound tome. It looked like an extra-thick address book, but for the weathered age of its cover and the edges of its pages. As soon as Alex saw it, he knew it was something infused with more than the leather and paper and twine of its construction. ‘You can feel it, can’t you?’ Welby said. ‘Already you’re learning. Just by knowing there is more to know, you are improving.’

Alex said nothing. He saw slight shifts in the shades around the small book. If he concentrated, he could see them gently moving up over Welby’s hand, up his arm and sleeve, like questing tendrils of translucent smoke. As if the book not only had some kind of power, but the power itself had a presence. A simple sentience that sought its own experience.

‘This is a potent little item,’ Welby said. ‘It contains secrets of the elements, of air, water, earth, fire. It teaches methods of drawing on those elements. There’s some commanding knowledge in here, more than the trickery I just demonstrated.’ He reached out, offering it.

Alex didn’t move. ‘I’ll take your word for it.’

‘You don’t want to see? You don’t want the understanding?’

He was certainly curious. So much so that he physically ached to open it up and read. But the way the book’s magic slipped and slid around Welby’s hand gave him pause. ‘Can’t you see it?’ he asked tightly.

‘The magesign? Does it bother you?’

‘Is that what you call it?’

‘It has many names. Everything magical gives off ‘sign. That’s the name the ancient magi and wise men used. You could call it an aura or energy field or whatever you like.’

‘It’s like the way I see people, only so much clearer, more intense.’

‘Yes. Arcanes, magical folk, have an aura like a lighthouse on a dark night. The more powerful they become the brighter they shine, so they learn to mask themselves. That’s something you’ll need to do. You shine quite brightly. It’s something I can teach you.’

Now Alex knew why Welby’s shades seemed obscured. The old man masked himself. ‘It’s creeping around your hand. As if it’s trying to escape and climb up your arm.’

Welby cocked an eyebrow. ‘Is it?’ He looked down curiously. ‘You truly have a clarity of vision.’ He held out the book again. ‘Really, it’s harmless. Some ‘sign can carry dangerous energies, but that would be very obvious, especially to you.’

Alex took the book. It buzzed between his fingers, the magesign even clearer now he held it, swirling around lazily. But the sensation of sentience had passed. It seemed no more malevolent than the steam from a kettle, a simple by-product of the thing itself. His head ached as he tried to take everything in.

He flicked open the cover. The page was dense with tiny characters and diagrams, the writing unlike anything he had seen before. ‘This looks like a tough language to learn,’ he said, trying to discern the swirls and ellipses of the text, like a strange kind of Arabic or Sanskrit, complicated and beautiful. He read a line that poetically described the personality of water. With a start he looked up sharply.

The old man was pleased. ‘It’s an eldritch language. A magical language. Those with talent can learn to read it. I must say I’ve never seen anyone decipher one quite so quickly.’ Welby’s face was alight with an almost childlike joy. ‘You can hang on to that,’ he said through his mirth. ‘A token of my goodwill. It’s worth a fortune and it might teach you some useful skills.’

Alex closed the book, his heart racing. 'This isn't what you wanted me to look at?'

'No, just an example. A way to show you the method of looking. I thought you might need a bit longer to get the idea but your skill is remarkable. What I need your help with is far older and more obscure. It's about the oldest and most powerful book I've ever seen, but I can't read it. No one I know can. The language is intricate and dense, something only someone with a rare clarity of vision could decipher. Which is why I've spent so long seeking someone like you.' He sat back.

Alex's curiosity burned. 'All right. So you want me to look, and then what? Translate it for you? Do you have it with you?'

Welby shook his head, becoming serious. 'No, I don't. It's not actually in my possession. It's owned by ... an acquaintance of mine. I'm hoping if I take you there to see it, and if you can read it, that he'll sell it to me. Perhaps I'll have to agree to share the information with him, I don't know. I wanted to find someone capable of reading it first. Will you come with me?'

'Where is it?'

'A small place in London.'

'London?' Alex laughed. He held out Welby's gift. 'Take me to my hotel.'

Welby's face fell. He pushed the book back. 'Please, Alex. Aren't you fighting soon in London anyway? I overheard you in your dressing room. You're facing a bit of trouble here right now too. Perhaps a sojourn might be a good idea, till the heat's off.'

'The heat? This King Scarlet fool is going to continue hounding me. I can't just run away.'

'That man was prepared to shoot you. To kill you.'

'But he wouldn't have succeeded.'

Welby's eyes narrowed. 'Are you really so in control of everything around you?'

'Yes, I fucking am. Take me to my hotel.'

Welby sighed. He pulled away from the kerb and they drove to the Four Seasons without speaking. Alex sensed the old man's

frustration. He felt sorry for him, but not enough to upend his life. Too much had happened tonight, way too fast, and he had his own problems. He had contacts. He needed to get home, make some calls, sort out this King Scarlet thing.

They pulled into the driveway of the hotel and Alex recognised two of Scarlet's goons from previous encounters. They loitered just inside the lobby. 'Shit!'

'What's the matter?'

'How did he know where I was staying?'

'This Scarlet fellow?' Welby asked.

Alex gestured to the hotel. 'Two of his men are in there. Maybe more I can't see.'

Welby slowed the car to a crawl. 'He's not playing games, is he?'

'No.'

'You can stay at my place,' Welby said. 'I have a flat here in Sydney.'

Alex stared through the tall, plate-glass windows, his brow furrowed. 'My stuff is in my room, my car parked underneath.'

'I daresay they've got that covered. He seems to have some influence.'

'Drive into the car park. There's not much in my room, I was only going to be here overnight. Fuck it. I'll drive myself home now and sort things out tomorrow.'

Welby nodded and headed for the garage doors. He used Alex's room key to access the basement car park and drove down the winding concrete path. As they reached the second level, Alex cursed when he saw his car at the other end, the tyres slashed, lights and windows smashed, ugly scratches scarring every surface. Two men in suits stood nearby.

Alex slipped out of his seatbelt and dropped into the footwell, curling up out of sight. 'Keep driving,' he hissed.

Welby said nothing. He reached back and pulled a jacket off the back seat and dropped it over Alex. From under its edge Alex watched his face, impassive as he drove by. At the end he turned

and the car began travelling up, spiralling back towards street level. 'We're clear,' the old man said.

Alex sat up into his seat. 'My car! What the hell is wrong with these people?'

'You must be costing this Scarlet a lot of money. He's taking things very seriously.'

'Maybe you setting his man on fire hasn't helped!'

Welby looked contrite. 'I'm sorry. I was trying to save you.'

Alex sighed. 'I know, I'm sorry. It's not your fault.'

'You want to go to my flat while you decide what to do?'

'Yes, I suppose so.' Alex's fury boiled deep in his gut. 'Thanks,' he said through gritted teeth.

The flat was stylish. 'Can't be cheap to keep a place in Double Bay,' Alex said.

Welby closed the door, dropped his keys into a bowl on a mahogany bookshelf. 'I'm very fortunate when it comes to money. Old family fortunes and all that.'

'How long have you lived here?'

'Oh, I don't live here. I have a few places around the world. I tend to travel a lot. People pay good money to lease places like this for a few days or a week at a time and it gives me somewhere readily available when I need it. They pretty much pay for themselves.'

Alex made a noise of derision. 'If you have the money to get them in the first place.'

'Well, yes. But let's not talk about money. It's an ugly subject.'

'Fair enough.'

Welby seemed uncomfortable. Alex let him wallow in it. Given how strange this evening had been already and how freaked out he was by it, he certainly wasn't about to make things easy for this weirdo. He realised on some level he wasn't being fair to Welby, but nothing seemed very fair right now.

Welby cleared his throat nervously. 'Listen, Alex, I am sorry. I'm aware this whole turn of events must be incredibly unsettling.'

'You could say that.'

'What do you plan to do?'

'It's late and I'm tired. If you don't mind me crashing here, I'll make some calls in the morning. I've had enough for now.'

'Not a problem. And please, consider my offer to come to London. I mean it when I say you have much to gain from this. Knowledge is the most valuable thing in the world and I can give you a lot of it.'

Alex made a wry expression. 'Knowledge can be a dangerous thing.'

'Of course. I'm going to go to bed now, leave you to think and have some space. That door leads to the guest bedroom. Make yourself at home.'

'All right then.'

Welby pointed to the pocket of Alex's olive-green combat surplus jacket. 'Have a look at that grimoire before you go to sleep. Read about the elements.'

'Maybe I will.'

'Good. Night then.'

Welby turned and strode across the room, disappearing behind a dark oak door. Alex slumped down on the soft leather sofa. A remote sat on the coffee table and he reached for it, flicked on the oversize television. A few channel skips found a mindless late night American chat show. He watched vacuous Hollywood celebrities trying to convince an equally vacuous audience they really did have causes they believed in. Empty programming that gave him something to stare at while his mind ticked over.

This situation had become serious, but there was nothing to be done right now. Some calls would hopefully start to put things right. Perhaps he would have to avoid Sydney for a while. There were plenty of other venues. It pissed him off that Scarlet was making his life difficult.

His thoughts drifted back to Welby's water trick in the car, the uncanny, beautiful moving sculpture the old man had conjured.

It was mind-blowing. Something seemingly simple that obviously wasn't stage trickery.

A new part of him had woken up. His ability seemed so much more than he had ever imagined. And the fact he knew, absolutely, positively knew, that he had felt people practising magic before, weighed heavily on his mind. He hadn't recognised it for what it was. What else did the world have to offer? What else had been concealed under this patina of normality? He remembered his father, sitting with him in a sunny garden. It had been mid-summer, hot and bright. He had been barely in school. *This world is an amazing place, son, full of fascinating things. Take a moment once in a while to look around and take it all in.* His father spoke a deeper truth than either of them could have realised at the time. The familiar old rock in his gut grew heavy, as it always did when he thought about his parents. It brought with it the usual melancholy and cold rage.

He pulled his leatherbound book from the pocket of his jacket. Welby was certainly trying to buy his favour. For a long time he held it, watched the drift of magesign around it, gently swirling and twisting, mesmerising. He realised there had been times in the past when he'd seen magesign, only he'd had no idea what it was. And not knowing meant he hadn't really seen it properly, hadn't focused on it. The thought made him uncomfortable, made him feel like a fool. Perhaps the world was peppered with people laughing at folks like him, *Look at the blind idiots, stumbling through life.* But he wasn't blind any more. A veil had lifted. Now he planned to spend every minute with his eyes wide open.

He turned to the first page and began to read. It took a moment for the words to become clear, like adjusting a pair of binoculars until the image sharpened, but once through it stayed. He read it as easily as a newspaper. It described the nature of the elemental forces in the world, the physical and magical properties of water, air, fire and earth. It talked of their personalities and how they could be manipulated, conjured, controlled with the fifth element of will. Magic.

He read for a long time until his eyelids grew heavy and he began to blink long and slow. He was keen to read on, but his tiredness outgunned his resolve. The knowledge seemed to settle deep in his brain, more than words, mere information. He realised the book contained more than the script on the pages. It imparted magic directly to the reader. 'Fuck me,' he breathed.

3

A sharp, insistent rapping. For a moment he stared at the fancy glass light fitting above and wondered where the hell he was. 'Alex? Are you awake?'

Welby's accent brought everything back into focus. 'C'm' in,' he managed through dry lips.

The door cracked open and Patrick Welby's face slipped into the gap, his expression almost comical in its concern. 'Ah, you're ... er ...'

Alex rubbed his eyes. 'I'm still here. I must have slept like a log.' He sat up, stretching muscles that hadn't moved since he lay down hours before.

Welby came into the room. 'I was mildly concerned that you'd slipped away in the night. I can see you're still tired.'

'Really?'

'Magesign. Remember I told you how the magus has to learn to mask himself? It doesn't do to wander around like a beacon.'

'Right.'

'Hungry?'

Alex raised an eyebrow. 'Bloody starving.'

'Come on, I have eggs boiled and bread in the toaster.'

Alex sat sipping gratefully at a large espresso, his stomach full of eggs, toast and sweet, fresh tomatoes. 'You're looking after me well,' he said over the rim of his mug.

'I'm still hoping you'll help.'

'How old are you?'

Welby looked up from his plate, toast halfway to his lips. He stared deep into Alex's eyes. Alex maintained his gaze, looked

carefully at the play of shades around the Englishman. Something told him Welby was older than he seemed. A lot older. He thought about how much more he might be able to see if he put his mind to it. Welby's lips curled in a smile. "Trying out some new tricks?" he asked, and pulled his shades in dramatically, like an old-school thespian whipping a voluminous cloak around himself.

Alex willed his sight to pry under that thick cloak of shades, to see past them all. To his surprise the shades burst open again, laying bare all the colours Welby had to show. Welby's eyes widened in shock and Alex realised he could see not only past the shades Welby had pulled about himself, but past shades even the poor man could not have known about or controlled. He felt as though he had mentally stripped Welby naked and flayed him as he sat before his breadcrumbs and eggshells. He saw Welby for the age he truly was, saw everything about the Englishman laid bare, wide open, raw. He could see the fibres of the man's being and he knew everything there was to know. He pulled away his vision, mentally and physically, turning his head. 'Fucking hell, I'm sorry!'

Welby's hands flopped to the table, his shoulders slumping. 'Good gods.'

Alex couldn't bring himself to look at the old man, turned in his seat to further avert his gaze. 'Really, Patrick, I'm so sorry. I didn't know I could ...'

'It's all right.' Welby's voice was weak. 'By all the gods, you have some power.'

Silence, heavy and uncomfortable, for several moments. Eventually Welby said, 'So you see me a little more clearly now?' There was humour, sarcasm in his tone.

Alex kept his back turned. 'You're, what, a hundred and fifty years old?'

'Almost. One hundred and thirty-eight. I was born at the height of Victoria's reign, a truly marvellous time of innovation and expansion. For those of us who could afford it, of course. I began studying the arcane arts as a young man. When we develop our

skill we also develop an unusual longevity. The magic tends to preserve us.'

Alex sat stunned, still reeling from what he had been able to do to Welby as well as the revelations that kept coming. He knew now what he hadn't been able to see before. Welby's everyday shades were a construction, a mask of normality placed over the real colours the man bore, concealing all the truths about him. Alex had torn everything away and seen deep inside.

'It really is all right,' Welby said. 'You'll have to face me again eventually. I've never been laid quite so naked before in my life, but at least you know beyond a doubt now that my intentions are as I stated them.'

Alex swallowed hard. 'Your intentions are also a bit crude.'

'Well, forgive an old man his desires. But I would never have let on about those feelings, much less acted on them. More's the pity.'

Alex could hear a measure of mirth in Welby's voice and couldn't help smiling himself. Some of the tension, the shock, lifted from the room. 'I guess I should be careful what I search for.'

'Just be careful how hard you look. You said yourself not long ago that it was easier not to learn too much about people.'

'I had no idea how much I could know.'

'Now you do.'

Alex was unable still to turn around. He knew Welby's mind, his intentions, desires, fears and elations, almost as well as he knew his own. He had looked into the very soul of the man and absorbed nearly one hundred and forty years of life experience and emotion in an instant. He felt as though he had run full speed into a solid wall, his mind and body battered by the experience. But more than that, he bore an incredible sense of guilt, of sorrow. He had committed an unforgivable invasion of privacy. He didn't know what to say.

Welby moved around the table to stand in front of him, forcing him to look. 'Let it go, Alex. It's all right, really. This will be harder for you to reconcile than for me to forgive.'

He looked into Welby's eyes and knew him in minute detail. He refused to focus on the shades, but he could see peripherally that Welby meant it when he said it was all right. 'I'm sorry,' he said again, quietly.

'I probably shouldn't have been quite so theatrical. I rather tempted you to pull against me. Of course, I had no idea how easily and deeply you would be able to go.'

Alex realised he had learned something else. 'I know how to do that now, how to mask.' He willed his own shades, his presence, his personality, to draw within the confines of his skin and wrapped it down with the intention that no one would be able to see his true aura. He created a sheen of normality — a shield — so that no one would know he was anything but a normal man.

Welby looked him up and down, eyebrows rising as he did so. 'Very good. I honestly can't see a thing.' He felt Welby's mind probe over him, like the stroke of a ghostly hand. The old man barked a short laugh. 'Not a thing. Good lords, boy, your talents are manifold! You appear as mundane as a post box.'

'I can stay like this too. It doesn't feel like it would take any effort to remain like this as a ... well, as a sort of default position.'

Welby nodded. 'And so you should. You'll attract much less attention that way. So what now?'

Alex pulled his phone from his pocket. 'I need to make a call.' 'I'll give you some privacy.'

Welby left the kitchen and Alex dialled a number. After a few rings a voice said, 'Alex, you dog! Long time, my brother.'

Alex felt immediately reassured at the sound of something normal, familiar. 'Hey, Amir. How's things?'

'Oh, you know, fucken.'

As if Amir would ever tell him what was really going on. 'I need some help,' he said.

'Anything, brother.'

'You know this King Scarlet dickhead?'

Amir made a noise of disgust down the line. 'He's a pain in my arse. Starting to get heavy all over town.'

'He's insisting that I fight for him. Really insisting.'

'We fight for no one but ourselves, brother. Since Sifu died anyway.'

'I know. But he's starting to get upset. Last night I had a gun pointed in my face and he trashed my fucking car, man.'

Amir cursed violently in Lebanese. 'There's a bit of a war going on, my friend. I've heard rumours of the moves he's making and your name has come up a few times.'

'You didn't think to warn me?'

'Ha! You can look after yourself, fucken! But you shouldn't even be here this week.'

'Gary called me to step in for an injured fighter. Now I'm thinking that guy was Scarlet's plant, supposed to take a fall.'

'I can see things have escalated,' Amir said, his voice resigned. 'I hoped he would leave you be, but you're too good, my brother.'

'Can you help me out?'

'Sure. But not quickly. There's a lot of balls in the air here. I can put you in my stable, but Scarlet won't take that lying down.'

Alex pursed his lips. 'No offence, but I don't want to work for anyone, even you.'

'Of course, of course, but Scarlet doesn't need to know that. I tell him you're mine and it's just one more thing we're fighting about.'

'I'd really appreciate it.'

'But he won't be happy. He'll come for you. I can try to sort this out, but maybe you should take a holiday for a little while. These guys are getting serious.'

Alex stared at the tabletop, seeing his control spinning away again. He hated relying on anyone for anything. Right now it seemed he had little choice. 'There is something I could do for a week or two, overseas.'

'Anywhere is good to be safe. I'll keep you up to speed.'

Alex sat back, morning light through the window bathing his face. 'Take this fucker out, Amir. And get me his car.'

'For certain, fucken! I'd like nothing more. Leave this with me.'

'Thanks, brother.' Alex hung up and wandered into the lounge.

Welby sat reading a newspaper. 'Any luck?' he asked.

'Sort of. For us both really.'

'Is that so?'

'I have friends who can hopefully sort this out, but I've been advised to leave town for a while.'

Welby folded the newspaper onto his lap. 'So maybe a trip to London is just the ticket?'

Alex shook his head, frustrated these decisions didn't seem to be his own. 'Just the ticket,' he said. 'Sure.'

'We can go right away. All expenses paid, of course,' Welby added.

'I need to pack some stuff, Patrick. And get my passport.'

Welby stood, dropped the newspaper onto the coffee table. 'Money is no object. I can buy you anything you would have packed and fly you first class.'

Alex paused, taken aback. 'My passport is at home,' he said eventually.

'I can teach you how you don't need one. I can show you how you really don't need any of the things most people consider essential, even compulsory.'

Alex let out an exasperated breath. 'Fair enough then, Patrick Welby. Show me.'

'Excellent! I'll get us on a flight this afternoon.'

'Really?'

'Certainly. We can buy a bag and some clothes and things for you at the airport shops after we check in.'

Alex sighed. *What the hell is happening to my life?*

At Sydney airport's international terminal Alex stood nervously in line. He had listened to everything Welby had explained, marvelled at the mind tricks he pulled on their taxi driver, making

the poor man take wrong turns and do weird things with the radio and indicators. All with nothing but insubstantial will. He had listened, seen and understood, but remained anxious. He wasn't sure how Welby would use those trickster skills to get them through airport security.

The airport employee smiled. 'Tickets and passports please,' she said with practised jollity. Welby handed her two tickets and Alex focused in on his magesign, watched the shades as Welby's mind worked. He saw and felt the 'sign swell, ebb and flow. 'Any luggage to check in?' she asked with another broad smile.

'No, thank you. Just carry-on.'

'Thank you, sir. Departing at gate 36. Have a nice day.' She handed over two boarding passes, waved them through. The old man glanced back and winked before walking away. Dumbfounded, Alex followed, the only thought in his mind being, *These aren't the droids you're looking for.*

He followed Welby through to the departures area, dropping his phone and wallet into a plastic tray as he went through a metal detector. On the other side numerous shops enticed with bright neon and shiny displays, coaxing weary travellers to empty their wallets while they killed interminable hours before take-off. Shopkeepers smiled and opened their palms, offering succour from the boredom of international travel. Inside an hour Welby had bought Alex a stylish leather travel bag and stocked it with new jeans, a few T-shirts, a collared shirt, a warm jumper and underwear. He bought a washbag and filled it with toothbrush, toothpaste, shaver and more. Alex pulled his phone from a jacket pocket. 'I'll need a charger for this,' he said. Within minutes he had one.

It was something of a revelation that if one had the money, nothing else seemed necessary. Welby's wealth had taken care of everything. Combined with his magical skill in negotiating the red tape of modern living, there seemed very little that couldn't be accomplished. *Magic and money. All you need.*

'Something amusing?' Welby asked.

‘Just trying to get my head around the last few hours. It was only last night that I was doing what I do best. I fought, I won, I collected my pay and I planned to go home. Since then the world has flipped on its axis.’

Welby gestured to a seat at the departure gate. ‘And I must say you’re taking it all extremely well. It’s not often, even in my long life, that I’ve opened up this world to people. On the few occasions I have it’s been difficult and slow. Not with you. You soak it up like a dry sponge drinks water.’

Alex sat, rested his new bag between his feet. ‘I hope my mind can continue to keep a grip on it all. Why do you need money when you can mind-fuck people into believing they’ve seen our passports?’

‘Good question. When someone expects to see a passport it’s quite easy to convince them they have. They hold on to nothing but the knowledge. When they’re expecting to take money and keep it, well that’s very hard when they clearly have no bills to put in the till.’

That made a kind of sense. ‘So much to take in.’

‘We have twenty-four hours on a plane,’ Welby said. ‘First class really does pamper a person. You can actually lie down. Let’s call this next twenty-four hours a new experience-free zone. Give you time to catch up a bit, eh?’

The thought appealed. ‘Sounds good. Though I want to read more of that element book.’

‘Grimoire.’

Alex smiled. ‘Right. Grimoire. It’s amazing, not like learning. The words seem to become a part of my mind.’

‘That’s right. Reading eldritch texts is itself a kind of magic, if you can decipher them. Therein lies their power.’

The lamplit streets of London were a blessed relief from the cramped and artificial confines of airports and aeroplanes. Even in the comfort of ridiculously expensive seats the fluorescent lights, air conditioning and pressurisation all got under the skin

after a while. Alex breathed deeply of the cold, polluted air. Only after flying for twenty-four hours would taking deep breaths in central London feel refreshing. However filthy it might be, it was real, with genuine smells and sounds carrying through it. He had insisted they get out of the taxi a few blocks early in order to stretch their legs and take in something tangible. Welby had looked as though he would never have considered such a thing, especially at night, but clearly appreciated it as he walked alongside, looking around as though seeing things for the first time.

Alex felt swollen from reading the grimoire. He'd been fascinated, unable to put it down. For hour upon hour he had consumed the knowledge in its pages, absorbed the fantastic things it had to say until he'd read everything. Then he read it again. Now he understood the elements in a way he could never explain. He knew them like close friends, understood their personalities and intricacies. He knew intrinsically their make-up, and more, the energies that bound them to each other. It frightened him when he considered how much understanding that tiny book had forced into him. How much stuff like that could a mind take? At the same time he felt invigorated by it, desperate for more.

After a walk not nearly long enough to really appreciate the freshness of an English autumn evening they arrived at Welby's place — a tall three-storey Victorian house in a row of similar stately two-storey homes. The street was quiet and tree-lined, with flagstone pavements and high, rough-hewn kerb stones dropping into deep gutters. Crackling brown leaves like fragments of old parchment skittered across the ground in a chill breeze, the leafless fingers of the trees scrabbling silhouettes against the night-darkened sky. Dark but with a gentle orange sheen, cityglow from the bustle beneath.

'Let's get inside, shower and change,' Welby said jovially. 'The best way to recover from travelling is to wash off the experience.'

Alex had to agree. 'Sounds good to me.'

‘And then we’ll go and have a look at this book.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Certainly. We don’t need to worry about the opening hours of this particular shop.’

‘For a man who’s been around as long as you, you don’t seem to have much patience.’

Welby stopped, his key in the lock unturned. ‘I suppose it would seem that way,’ he said. ‘It’s just that I’ve looked for so long for someone like you.’ He twisted the key and pushed open the door, stepped back to let Alex through.

Inside the house was immaculate and elegant. Fine art and antiques throughout, leather sofas and armchairs. Extensive bookshelves, all bowing under the weight of books, seemed ubiquitous. It appeared to be a cross between a museum and a library, but it had the general feel of a home, lived in and cared for. ‘I spend as much time as I can here,’ Welby said. ‘This house has been the only constant thing in my life.’

They passed through a lounge room into a dining room and on into the kitchen. Turning, Welby led the way back through a hallway to the foot of the stairs by the front door. An informal tour of the ground floor. Welby took the stairs. At the landing he pointed to doors in sequence. ‘Bedroom, bathroom, bedroom. That one’s yours.’ Without waiting he headed up to the top floor, casting a strange smile back over his shoulder as he went. As they climbed, Alex shivered, static lifting the hairs on his arms and neck.

At the next landing Welby pushed open a door and stepped back. ‘This is my favourite place.’ The room was large and lined floor to ceiling with books. A desk with a computer stood under the only window, a large leadlight bay recess. In the middle of the space were more leather armchairs and sofas. ‘This is the actual library, my personal study. All the most important volumes are here.’

Alex opened his vision to see the magesign. Every shelf swam with it, the whole room seemed soaked in magical energy. He whistled softly.

Welby grinned. 'This is a priceless collection, which is why it's also protected. You felt the wards as we climbed the stairs?'

'Is that what that was?'

'Yes. Without a considerable ability to break the spells you wouldn't even see those stairs leading up here. From the outside this appears as a two-storey house like the others. You'd never suspect anything more than the roof would be where we're standing now.'

Alex didn't feel like letting on that he had seen three storeys from the outside without even trying. 'So much to learn,' he said instead.

Welby nodded. 'Indeed. That's my bedroom over there. Go on back down, shower, change, whatever. I'll meet you back in the front room in half an hour or so.'

'Fair enough.'