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Books by Alan Baxter

Bound
Obsidian
Abduction

ALAN BAXTER
OBSIDIAN
ALEX CAINE BOOK 2



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*For lost people everywhere;
May you find your way home.*

1

The midday sun beat incandescent against everything, the sky impossibly blue. Eddies of sand shifted through crowded streets, hawkers pushed barrows, well-fed owners stood in the shadowed doorways of shops and cafes, coaxing passers-by to sample their wares. Somewhere a camel moaned its dissatisfaction with life and an ancient jeep roared and rattled along the packed dirt road. Voices shouted and cajoled, striped awnings rippled in a hot breeze. In a dim, quiet bar Claude Darvill chewed a plastic straw in frustration, the glass condensing in the dry heat, ice-cold against his hand. He perched his long, lean frame on a bar stool. A broad leather fedora-style hat shaded his face, shadows in his hollow cheeks, tufts of sandy hair escaping all around. Darvill's free hand pressed an old phone handset to his ear, the black plastic making him sweat where it touched. He sucked frosty Coke through the gnawed straw, chewed again. Finally a female voice crackled. 'I'm sorry, sir. I'm still getting no response.'

'I've never had a problem on this line before,' Darvill growled. 'It's private, always redirected.'

'That may be so, sir,' the woman said, clearly humouring him. 'But there's no one answering. I can try again if you like, but the connection is simply going dead.'

'Right. Fine.'

Darvill hung up and stared at the old bakelite phone with venom. Something was definitely up. He had felt it weeks ago, a ripple of concern. A psychic alarm bell he'd long since learned to trust, but had been so deep in the field, so engrossed in the chase, he had ignored it. Now that felt like a terrible mistake.

There was nothing else for it. He dialled again, watched the

number wheel burr back with each digit. It rang three times, then a breezy English voice answered. 'Black Diamond Incorporated, how may I direct your call?'

'I need to speak with Mr Hood, please.'

'I'm afraid Mr Hood isn't available right now. Can I ...'

'This is urgent, woman. Get Hood on the line now.'

There was a pause, the receptionist presumably biting down against his rudeness. 'Mr Hood has been away from the office for some time and I can't tell you when he'll return. Perhaps I can direct your call to a member of the board?'

'What do you mean "away"?'

'He's been out of the office on business for several weeks.'

'Then get me Sparks.'

'I'm sorry, sir, Ms Sparks left with Mr Hood. I'm sure someone else in the company can help if you'll just let me ...'

'Who's been liaising with them?' Darvill demanded. Politeness be damned, this was serious. He should have come in when he first felt the disruption.

The receptionist finally lost patience. 'Sir, I don't know who you are and I don't much care for your tone. Mr Hood is unavailable. May I redirect your call to a member of the board?'

'No, you may not. But you can give them a message.'

'Certainly.'

'Tell them they better have a thorough report ready in twenty-four hours and be prepared to brief me on everything that's happened since well before Mr Hood left.'

'I don't imagine they will appreciate ...'

He cut her off again. 'I don't give a fuck what they will or will not appreciate, miss. Tell the board exactly what I said and tell them the message is from Claude Darvill, Robert Hood's son. Tell them I'm invoking the Lazarus Protocol. They might have to look that up.'

Alex Caine ducked under a looping, clawed hand that brushed his cropped dark hair. He swept his leg around, shin connecting with

iron-hard muscle, and the creature's knee buckled sideways and it crashed to the ground. Alex watched the shades and colours, auras he saw with preternatural clarity, to see what would happen next. But the thing was already up again, bull-rushing him. *So fast!* He leapt to one side, adrenaline surging, magic pulsing from the shards of the Darak power stone embedded in his chest. He drew on its energy and thrust an arm full of muscle and magic into the creature's face, his fist hard and fast. He felt bone, or this thing's equivalent, crack beneath his bleeding knuckles. The creature turned, raked red-hot claws across Alex's arm and chest.

Alex hissed in pain, used the sensation to empower him further. With a flurry of blows he closed the gap between them and drove a palm under the wide, scaled jaw. The creature's head snapped up and Alex leapt, grabbed its wrist and swung one leg over the monster's face. They crashed to the ground and Alex cranked the massive, armoured arm across his hip, roaring with pleasure at the creature's howl of pain as its elbow joint disintegrated.

Alex rolled up onto one knee and drove swift punches and an elbow into the creature's face. It split, cracked and bled dark ichor, mixing with Alex's own blood as he let his magic pump through his arms. Gathering every bit of energy he had, he rammed steel-hard fingers into the creature's chest and ripped out its heart. It bucked violently, squealed high and long, and dropped still.

Alex staggered back, gasping for breath.

'And the winner is Alex Caine!' The voice was brash over the loudspeaker.

Alex stood in the centre of the ring, panting, blood running with sweat over his body. The corpse of the scaled, horned creature before him slowly crumpled into ash and dust. He flexed his hands, the energy of his magics ebbing with the adrenaline. The cracked stone of power, the Darak, pulsed in his chest, a part of him, burning with arcane power. Where his flesh and the three obsidian-like shards merged seamlessly, tiny arcs like electricity crackled and sparked, then stilled. He looked up, scanned the

cheering crowd, and sighed. It wasn't the same. It would never be the same again.

Silhouette ran into the ring. 'Are you okay?' Her pale blonde hair framed her face as she looked closely into his eyes.

Alex kissed her, felt the buzz of magic between their lips. He nodded, put one arm around her shoulders and turned her, led her away.

The roar of the crowd dulled as they entered a corridor away from the auditorium. In a cool, concrete change room, little more than a broom cupboard, Alex slumped onto a stained gurney and checked his wounds. Gashes from teeth and claws scored his arms and chest. A large flap of skin hung from one calf. He touched it gingerly, gasped in pain. As the adrenaline disappeared, the real hurt rose.

'You're a fucking idiot,' Silhouette said quietly, though her eyes held nothing but love.

'What the hell *was* that?' Alex asked.

She shrugged. 'I have no idea. Some demon entity, I guess.'

They were silent for a moment, then Silhouette spoke again. 'After everything we've been through, to nearly get killed in there is ridiculous. You know that, right?'

Alex laughed softly, despite his pain and frustration. 'Yeah.'

'So is it out of your system now?' She sat astride his lap, her firm curves enticing through denim and leather.

Alex sighed, felt lost. 'Yes, I suppose it is. I used to make my living this way, Sil. It was my life. It always fulfilled me.'

'Against other human martial artists, Iron Balls. When *you* were a simple human and knew nothing else. Before this.' She ran one fingertip over a shard of the Darak, sending a shiver through him. 'You're not the same any more.' She continued to run her finger over his abs, back up his arm and shoulder, tracing the lines of well-developed muscles.

'A simple human. I thought perhaps bouts like before, only with opponents more like ...'

'Like you?' she asked.

Alex hung his head. 'I'm not a demon.'

'You're not entirely human any more.'

He looked up into her blue eyes and kissed her.

She smiled as they parted. 'You can't expect to replace what you had before with the same thing amplified, Alex. It doesn't work like that. And now, getting yourself killed in a ring fighting monsters would piss me off.'

He grinned at her. 'I didn't though, did I? I kicked that fucker's arse.'

'Yes, you did. You fought brilliantly, as you always do. But look at you. You're hurt. You can stop fighting for sport, Alex. Let's just accept you've gone beyond that.'

He slumped against the wall, ran his hands over her thighs and hips. 'So what do I do now?'

'We only got back from Iceland a few weeks ago, yet you almost immediately managed to find a non-human cage match. Really quite a feat in itself. But it's irrelevant. You don't have to know exactly what you do now. There's plenty of time. Let's just chill, find our feet.'

'That's what you've been saying all along, huh.' He felt a bit stupid, almost juvenile. In a very short time his human life had flipped upside down and now he had powers and knowledge that still freaked him out. He'd been determined to return to the life he knew, or at least a ramped-up version of it. Determined to take control of his destiny again. But Silhouette was right. He wasn't that person any more, no matter how much he adjusted the process to match his enhanced abilities. Silhouette herself was proof enough of that, a pariah among her own supernatural kind. His Kin monster. At least he had her, to love and to love him. On his own he would truly be lost.

She ran one hand over his hair, ignoring the sweat and blood. 'You needed to know that yourself. You needed to feel it.'

'Well, you were right.'

'I know.' She kissed him again.

'So now what?'

‘Now let’s get you fixed up and head home.’

A knock at the door distracted them. A Kin male stood there, all gothic leather and extended canines, affecting the classic vampire look. He smiled broadly. ‘Your reputation preceded you from London, Caine. Seems it’s well deserved. You’ll be a star here in Sydney in no time.’

He had already been a star in Sydney. Before he left. Before he changed. ‘Thanks. I think.’

‘I’m Wilhelm, I run this outfit. After that, I wanted to pay you personally.’ They shook hands. Wilhelm handed over an envelope, thick with cash. ‘You’ve earned this. Fantastic fight. When will we see you again?’

Alex took the envelope, hefted the weight of it. Plenty of profit to be made, far more than when he fought before. ‘I won’t be fighting again,’ he said quietly.

Wilhelm’s face fell. ‘Really? Come on! You’re Alex Caine, the great warrior. You’ve defeated all your enemies. It’s in your blood.’

Alex remembered a hotel room floor in Canada, trapped under the hard, sharp insectile body of the Subcontractor, beaten and about to die. He remembered the concussive blast of the hotelier’s shotgun, the Subcontractor’s head exploding all over him. He hadn’t defeated everyone. ‘No,’ he said, more firmly. ‘Sorry, mate. This is something I needed to get out of my system. But it’s time I moved on.’

‘What to?’

‘That I’ve yet to determine.’

Wilhelm raised both hands. ‘Well, if you ever change your mind, you know where to find us. I’ll be glad to have you here any time.’

‘Thanks. I appreciate that, really.’

‘Do you know any Fey dealers?’ Silhouette asked.

Wilhelm turned to her, his eyes suspicious. ‘Just like that? No euphemisms or preamble?’

‘Why bother? I figure a man who runs underground cage fights against demons and Kin has malleable morals.’

Wilhelm laughed raucously, slapping Silhouette on one shoulder. 'I like you, girl! What do you need?'

'A few ingredients is all.'

The tall Kin pulled a business card from his pocket, black with a stylised skull motif. Gothic script curved across the skull, *Leather & Lace*. An address and number were printed underneath. 'This is a little place in Newtown,' he said, handing it over. 'Fetish shop. Tell them I sent you and that you need to see Crabapple.'

'Crabapple?'

'He'll sort you out, don't worry.'

Silhouette nodded, pocketed the card. 'Thanks.'

'No problem.' Wilhelm turned back to Alex. 'Seriously, any time.'

A small man carrying a leather case entered the room, the tiny space suddenly very crowded. Alex nodded his thanks to the tall Kin.

'I'll leave you with the Doc,' Wilhelm said. 'Until next time.'

'There won't be a next time,' Alex insisted.

'We'll see.'

Wilhelm left and the Doc crouched down to see Alex's wounds. He tutted and shook his head, pulled out gauze and unmarked bottles. Alex and Silhouette exchanged an amused glance, but let him get on with it. Alex gritted his teeth against the searing burn as his injuries were cleaned and bound. Before long the Doc stood and patted his shoulder like a kindly uncle. 'Tremendous fight!' he said, voice low and gravelly, and scurried away.

Alex watched through the door after the small man for a moment then inspected his dressings. 'Good job,' he said with a smile.

Silhouette shrugged. 'It'll do for now. Let's go and see this Crabapple fellow and I'll mix up a batch of the good stuff. Have you healed up in no time.'

'Just as well I've earned a big pay cheque,' Alex said. 'I don't imagine this trip is going to be cheap.'

Three men sat in a room, dark but for the orange glow of a few flickering candles. Heavy curtains obscured the windows. Large Renaissance oil paintings covered almost all the available wall space, portraits mostly, with other images scattered here and there among them — mythical beasts and arcane symbols, Dante's *Inferno* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, represented by masters of the past. The men faced each other across a small mahogany table, round, with carved serpents crawling up its three legs. They rested their hands, palms down, on the smooth wood, their heads bowed. Each man's fingers were splayed, smallest fingers touching at the tip, connecting them. A low hum came from deep within each man's chest, rising and falling like a summer insect, unbroken as they breathed in time. A barn owl, like a sand and ivory ghost, gripped a perch in one gloomy corner.

The owl started, jet-black eyes reflecting candle flames, as the men changed pitch in unison, their vibration rising an octave, the intensity increased. They raised their heads slowly, their own eyes flickering open, each as smooth and black as the owl's. One man, a small, wiry fellow with a tidy grey goatee beard and shining bald head, spread his mouth wide, his hum expanding into a high, falsetto note that reverberated around the room. The owl tipped its head in curiosity. The other men joined; first the fat, sweating man, with untamed brown curls of hair tumbling around his face, raised his voice to match, then the tallest of the three, long black hair in a ponytail, his beard a furious mass covering half his chest. The three voices rang seamless and strident, before simultaneously stopping dead. Silence fell. The owl blinked.

The men stared into nothing and the fat man spoke in a clipped English accent. 'I am Nicholas Haydon, know my true name. I travel the mysteries and seek the arcana. I am the vessel for gnosis. Speak through me.'

The small, wiry man intoned next, his accent broad Slavic. 'I am Darius Grabowski, know my true name. I travel the mysteries and seek the arcana. I am the vessel for gnosis. Speak through me.'

The tall man, his huge beard rippling with his words, his accent a deep growling central European, said, 'I am Salay Armand, know my true name. I travel the mysteries and seek the arcana. I am the vessel for gnosis. Speak through me.'

They all spoke together. 'We are three, three is power, speak through us.'

For a moment the men were silent before Darius said, 'Seek the place where the power resides, the nexus of the mystery.' His voice was a hissing whisper, his Polish accent gone completely, replaced with something like Gaelic brogue.

Nicholas spoke next, his voice the same Gaelic whisper. 'At the nexus lies death and danger. At the nexus lies revelation.'

Salay's deep, guttural voice was replaced with the same whispering burr. 'Lines of power lead thee, power of three bind thee.'

All three men spoke at once, in perfect synchronicity. 'Three by three thy power be, use stone and line divine paths see.'

The men slumped, gasping for breath and blinking rapidly in the gloom. Their eyes were normal once more, pupils dilated to the low light. They scrabbled for notepads and pens, the scritch of their writing the only sound other than their heavy breathing.

Darius held up his pad and read, his broad Polish accent returned. 'Seek the place where the power resides, the nexus of the mystery. At the nexus lies death and something. At the nexus lies revelation. Lines of power lead thee, power of three bind thee. Three by three thy power be, use stone and line divine paths see.'

The other men consulted their pads. 'Danger,' Salay said in his own deep voice.

Nicholas nodded. 'Yes, death and danger. That's the clearest, most complete message we've managed yet.' His voice was his own again too.

'But what does it mean?' Darius asked. 'Clearly we need to use our combined power. But we know that already. That's how we

started all this.'

Salay stroked his beard, long fingers combing through the dense black hair. 'Yes, but this is the first time this ritual has produced such clarity. The nexus. We must seek this nexus. Death and danger, but also revelation. That's where we harness the power we've discovered.'

'And we find the nexus by following stone and line,' Nicholas said. 'You think that means stones like stone circles, and ley lines? This ritual was found at a stone circle, after all.'

Darius nodded, still staring at his notepad. 'Possibly. But where to start? If stones and ley lines are going to act like a map for us, we need a place to start.'

'And I still urge caution,' Salay said. 'We don't really know what it is we've contacted.'

Nicholas sat up straight, threw his pad onto the table. It landed with a slap, startling his owl. 'Well, I suggest we start at the nearest stones and try to commune with our new friend there. See if we can't narrow things down and learn more about it. Sunkenkirk is just down the road. And somewhere around here I've got some old maps of ley lines.' He opened an oak door into the next room, a library with shelf upon shelf bowed under the weight of books, and began rummaging earnestly. The other men followed him and the owl closed its eyes.

2

The two-hour drive south from the city was peaceful and they arrived at Alex's house late. The summer night, warm and close, buzzed with insects that gathered around the light over the garage. Alex stretched and winced. 'I'm looking forward to that concoction of yours.'

Silhouette patted her pocket. 'Let's get in and I'll have it ready in no time.'

'I didn't expect Crabapple to be a Kin,' Alex said, remembering the dingy shop in King Street, the transaction that felt like a back alley drug deal.

'Who did you expect to be trading with Fey? Humans?'

Alex shook his head. 'I guess I expected Fey.'

Silhouette barked a harsh laugh. 'In this realm? It's hard enough to deal with a Kin who has direct connections with Faerie. Dealing with an actual Fey? Fuck that. You've got a lot to learn.'

'Yeah, I'd like to know.'

Sil fixed him with a hard glare. 'No. You wouldn't.'

Alex chose not to pursue the subject further. For now. But Silhouette was half Fey, one of the few first generation Kin in the world, her human mother raped by a Fey. He would take his time and pry gently, but one day he would learn more.

They turned towards the house and froze. Alex sensed a presence nearby and knew Sil had spotted it too. They said nothing, both trying to get a better feel, letting their shades drift into whatever might be out there. Alex knew his vision was far more developed than that of pretty much anyone or anything he'd met thus far, but this felt different. He faced back up the

driveway, the presence clear as a bright light in a dark room. It wanted to be noticed.

'Hi there.' The voice was male, the colours definitely human. The feel of the shades reminded Alex of Patrick Welby, the old magus in London who had died for him. He had taught Alex about his true nature, had set him on a path of mastering elemental magic. The person who had cursed Alex with Uthentia's grimoire and the Darak stone. All so recent, yet it seemed a lifetime ago. This man seemed of a similar age and ability to Welby, a magus of average skills.

'What do you want?' Alex asked.

Silhouette moved silently from his side, disappeared into the shadows. Her Kin instincts guided her and Alex knew she would burst from cover with animal fury if even the slightest threat presented itself.

'My name is John Doe. I'm here as a representative for Armour. We want to ask for your help.'

'John Doe?'

'I can explain everything. Really, I'm no threat. I made myself as plain to you as I could. I just want to talk.'

Alex had always preferred his own company and the peace and quiet of the country. He was more than happy to make an exception for Silhouette these days, but that was about it. 'I don't want whatever you're selling. Thanks anyway.' He turned to his front door, pulled a set of keys from his pocket.

'We really need to talk. I'm not going anywhere till I get a chance to explain.'

Alex turned back, his eyes hard. 'How about you fuck off right now? I don't want to have to make you.'

John Doe stepped forward, into the light from the garage. He was a tall man, strong-looking, with short dark hair and a square jaw. Regardless of the true age Alex sensed, this man appeared much younger than Welby had. Perhaps his power was greater than Alex had first suspected. He wore all black, army boots, cargo pants, T-shirt. 'You could make me, Alex Caine. I

wouldn't stand a chance against you. Or her.' He tipped his head to the bushes behind him to the left where Alex knew Silhouette circled. 'But then they'd send someone else. Someone stronger. Then they'd send a team. Then they'd decide to treat you as an enemy rather than a potential ally and they'd make sure to shut you down.'

'You really shouldn't be threatening me.'

'It's not a threat. I'm just explaining how it works. Right now we want to be friends and I'd really like to talk to you. But this won't end.'

Alex sucked his teeth in frustration. 'No choice, huh?'

John Doe hitched his shoulders, raised his palms. 'No choice. But please, let's be friends. Let's talk.'

Alex opened the front door and went inside, flicking lights on as he headed through to the kitchen. Silhouette slipped from hiding and into the house without a word. Doe let out a relieved breath, shut the door behind himself as he followed them.

Alex filled the kettle. 'Tea? Seeing as we're going to be friends.' He did nothing to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

John Doe inclined his head. 'Thanks.'

Silhouette took the recently purchased ingredients from her pocket — Moonflower and Grief Water, Bloodheart seed and Mer-hair. Alex remembered their names, wondered at their origins. She took down a mortar and pestle, and other ingredients from a locked drawer, and began grinding and mixing. She said nothing, concentrated on her work, but her attention was piano wire taut and focused on Doe.

Alex made three cups of tea. 'So, John Doe? Hiding behind an alias, especially such a weak one, is no way to start a friendship.'

The big man smiled. Alex saw he was fit, strong, built like a fighter. He looked to be around thirty, maybe a bit more, but his shades spoke in decades beyond a century, something Alex had got used to surprisingly quickly.

'We're all called John Doe in the field. Except the women, of course, who are Jane Doe. No names outside.'

‘Must get tricky when you’re all out together,’ Alex said.

John Doe raised an eyebrow. ‘We manage. This is my ID.’ He pulled a leather wallet from his pocket, flipped it open. It held a silver badge, an intricate design of circles overlapping each other that reminded Alex of the more complicated crop circles he’d seen online. Among the circles were other symbols — pentagrams, triquetra, the Illuminati eye. In raised gothic letters across the circles was ARMOUR and under that a number, 1888-0065391-01. Doe ran his fingertip along the number. ‘Year of joining Armour, ID number, gender identity. 02 is female, 03 is indeterminate.’

Alex nodded, choosing not to question what indeterminate sex might mean. ‘You joined this Armour the same year Jack the Ripper was busy.’

Doe grinned at him. ‘You know your history. That’s no coincidence either, except back then he was still known as Leather Apron.’

Alex handed him a cup of tea. ‘Milk, sugar?’

‘No, thanks.’

‘So, what’s Armour then? Some fancy acronym for an occult society?’

‘No, it’s a perfectly accurate name. Armour is an organisation that guards against threats supernatural and magical. We’ve been around a long time.’

‘How long?’

‘The organisation originated in 1149, at the end of the second Crusade. A group of magi learned of a plan by the Knights Templar that would have had massive ramifications across the world. They fought to interfere with the Templars’ plans, were successful, barely, and decided to codify their existence in case anything like it happened again. We have a motto: “Born Of Cataclysm To Prevent Cataclysm”. Quite literally, armour against disaster.’

Alex sipped his tea thoughtfully, unsure what to say. What did they want with him?

‘I’ve heard of you,’ Silhouette said quietly. She carefully dripped

Grief Water into the mix. It had an aura that filled Alex with such melancholy he had to look away as it hissed and vaporised almost immediately.

‘Yes, you probably have. You’re from Joseph’s Den.’ It wasn’t a question. Doe was demonstrating his knowledge.

Silhouette stopped grinding, looked over her shoulder. ‘You screwed up one of Joseph’s plans but good. For months every other thing out of his mouth was, “Fucking Armour this” or “Fucking Armour that”. But he never did tell us what the problem was.’

‘I wasn’t on that case. I could find out, if you want.’

Silhouette shrugged, turned back to her mixing. ‘Doesn’t matter. My bridges with the Den are pretty much burned these days. I’m a lone Kin, like so many others. Den life is over-rated.’

‘Not exactly alone though,’ Doe said. ‘You and Mr Caine here are quite a team.’

‘What exactly do you know about us?’ Alex asked. He wasn’t comfortable with the imbalance of information.

Doe sipped his tea again, then set the mug down on the counter. He seemed uncomfortable standing around the kitchen, but Alex was not about to offer the man a seat and make him feel welcome. He wasn’t.

‘We try to monitor all kinds of activity that could be a threat to the stability of life as we know it,’ Doe said. ‘We operate outside government control, though most governments and agencies are happy to work with us, or at least tolerate us. We do the dirty work, after all. There’s no way we can stay on top of everything that happens, but something makes enough noise, we take notice and get involved. You two made a lot of noise recently.’

‘We took care of ourselves, thanks very much.’

‘Yes, you most certainly did. We were playing catch up all the way. We first noticed the massive magical explosion that turned out to be the destruction of Patrick Welby’s house.’

Alex winced. He still felt a pang of guilt at the old man’s death. ‘That was the work of Uthentia.’

Doe's eyebrow raised and Alex cursed himself, realising he'd given away something Armour hadn't known. He determined to offer nothing more. 'That soon?' Doe asked.

Alex remained silent, so Doe carried on. 'Fair enough. Anyway, long story short, we came across a number of disturbances: the fight in the London Den, the creature you killed in the hotel room in Newfoundland, the disruption in Rome, then Iceland. We talked to Joseph and Lorenzo. In truth we don't really know what the hell went on, only that you had a pretty huge challenge and you rose to it. And all the people we spoke to told us what a remarkable vision you had, how much power you'd gained very quickly and how determined you were. They were stunned you'd managed to recover all the pieces of a power stone long thought lost. Is it true you bonded with it? It's part of you now?'

Alex raised a hand to touch his chest, where the shards were a constant warm presence, pulsing in time with his heart. 'The stone and I are one now, yeah.'

'Can I see?'

Alex lifted his T-shirt. Doe leaned forward, looked with eyes and mind, though his magical probing was soft, polite. 'Fascinating,' he said, standing back. 'And given what little you let me feel then I can see you mask yourself brilliantly. You are potent.'

'I'm still learning. This is all a bit new to me.'

Silhouette drew a glass of water, sprinkled a pinch of brown powder into it and handed it to Alex. It effervesced and turned purple. She had a good amount of the medicine made, which she folded into a dark green leaf and tucked into a leather pouch. Alex swallowed the bittersweet concoction in one gulp and felt the healing buzz through his body almost immediately. His wounds began knitting back together, the pain in his leg finally subsiding. He kissed her. 'Thanks.'

She smiled, but her distrust and concern for the presence of John Doe remained undiminished. She sat on a kitchen stool and sipped her tea.

‘So what is it you’re after?’ Alex asked.

‘We kinda hoped you’d think about joining our ranks.’

‘Not a chance.’

‘Which is what we thought you’d say. But even if you won’t join us, perhaps you’d help us?’

‘Why should I? I don’t need more complications in my life.’

John Doe rinsed his empty mug, put it upside down on the draining board. ‘How was your fight today?’

Alex chose not to be surprised that Doe knew about Wilhelm’s place and his part in it. ‘Unfulfilling, to tell you the truth.’

‘That’s what I thought. I’ll be honest with you, Mr Caine, we’re a little scared by you. Worried what you might do, what impact you might have. So we’d really like you to be an ally, not an enemy. But I think that’s a given anyway. You’re not a bad person.’

Alex smiled sardonically. ‘Gee, thanks.’

‘But given what we’ve learned about your ability to find things, we’d love to have your assistance. There’s one particular case bothering us, and it could be the kind of thing you’re almost custom-built to help with.’

‘What’s in it for me?’

‘Purpose. Fulfilment. Money. We’d pay you *very* well as an Armour subcontractor.’

Alex winced at the word, reminded again of the fight he’d lost. The fight that would have killed him if it hadn’t been for a scared woman and a shotgun and some very fortuitous timing. But the things Doe said did make some sense. He couldn’t fight any more. The thrill and challenge of that had gone and he was likely to keep upping the ante until something killed him. Yet he wasn’t ready for retirement and painting watercolours yet. He’d spent all his savings dealing with Uthentia and needed an income.

John Doe held up a hand. ‘I don’t need an answer now. I’m grateful you let me have this chat with you and I’m sure you want to think things over. I’ll come back tomorrow and we can talk again.’

‘There was an implied threat before,’ Alex said. ‘You mentioned

a lack of choice.'

Doe smiled. 'Well, that was before you chatted with me. I'm fairly comfortable you'd be no threat, but Armour does like to keep an eye on things. It might be better to be on their good side and they're more likely to leave you alone.'

'That threat is still implied.'

'There's always choice, Mr Caine. I'll see you tomorrow.' He nodded politely to Silhouette and left, closing the front door behind him.

'Feeling better?' Silhouette asked.

'Yes, thanks.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'Just as well we did get some more healing powder today. You're thinking about accepting his offer, aren't you?'

'You think I shouldn't?'

Silhouette stretched and brought her arms down around his neck, kissed him. 'Actually, no. I think it might be a good idea. You need something to focus your attention and we do work very well together.'

He returned her kiss. 'I was kinda looking forward to a bit of a rest, lazing around here with you.'

'We've had a few weeks already and let's be honest, you've been pretty antsy.'

He pouted, mock outrage.

'You just spent your evening fighting. You ripped the heart out of a demon, Alex!'

He laughed, unable to pretend any different. 'Yeah, I guess I always need to fight something. But I don't want to become part of this Armour group. I'm not going to end up a card-carrying John Doe.'

'You don't have to. Offer them your services on your own terms.'

'What do you think he wants me to do?'

Silhouette took his hand and led him through to the bedroom. 'Who knows? Guess we'll find out in the morning. But I know

what *I* want you to do right now, and that's all that should concern you.'

Claude Darvill strode into the Black Diamond Incorporated tower in London's Docklands and headed straight for the private lift at the back of the foyer. He'd only ever been in the building on a handful of occasions, always after hours. Seeing the place busy and populated was strange. A burly security guard stepped forward, eyes roving up and down Darvill's desert boots, khaki combat pants, flannel shirt, leather fedora.

'Hold up, Indiana Jones,' he said, putting a hand out to Claude's chest.

Darvill grimaced. Everyone was a comedian. He would have to watch the film one day and see what all the fuss was about. He pulled a laminated card from his shirt pocket and held it up.

The man leaned down to study the picture, then appraised Darvill again. 'Haven't seen you before, Mr Darvill. Sorry about that.'

Darvill pocketed the card. 'No need to apologise. I'm never usually in the office. But call me Indiana Jones again and I'll have your bollocks for a necktie.'

The big man frowned. 'Yes, sir,' he said grudgingly and stepped aside.

Darvill entered the lift and hit the button for the executive floor. Only two floors sat above the boardroom — his father's offices and his father's penthouse — but he would see the board first.

He stepped out of the elevator moments later and a rather plain, middle-aged woman in a business suit and skirt stepped forward. 'Mr Darvill?'

'Yes.'

'Welcome, sir. I'm Sue Carruthers. I do apologise, but everyone here is a bit taken by surprise. Most of us had no idea you even existed.'

Darvill smiled at her, completely without humour. 'That was

rather the idea. They ready?’

Sue turned, indicating the corridor to the boardroom. A harried exec scurried in as they approached, casting a nervous glance over his shoulder. Sue left him at the door and Darvill walked in, scanned the room.

Six men and two women sat around an oval mahogany board table. The harried man just made it into his seat as Darvill planted his hands on the table. ‘So who’s going to tell me what the fuck is going on?’

The group looked to one another, all too nervous to speak.

‘You’ve explored the Lazarus Protocol?’ Darvill asked. When no one spoke he pointed to the man who had arrived late. ‘You. Have you?’

‘Y-yes. Yes, we have.’

‘Well?’

The man shuffled his papers, pulled out a printed sheet. ‘In the event of my death or disappearance,’ he read in a shaking voice, ‘full control of Black Diamond Incorporated passes to my son, Claude Darvill. Should Claude Darvill approach the company in my absence and invoke this Protocol, the entire company will treat him as they would treat me, until I return.’

Darvill nodded, pulled out a chair to sit. ‘Right. So we’re all clear on that.’

‘Well, there is something else ...’

‘What’s your name?’

‘John Turner.’

Claude poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher in the centre of the table. ‘Right, Turner. What else?’

‘Well, the Protocol does have a threefold method of identifying you.’

Darvill scowled.

‘We didn’t even know you existed,’ one of the women said. ‘This is all a big surprise for us.’

‘Name?’

‘Jean Chang.’

‘Well, Chang, do you know what the three methods of identification are?’

‘You should have a company laminate, with your picture and an encoded chip.’

Claude flipped the laminate he had shown the security guard onto the table. ‘Pass it around. Number two?’

Chang looked briefly at the laminate and passed it on. ‘You have a tattoo on your chest of a dragon.’

Darvill pulled his shirt up to show the Chinese emperor dragon, twisting between clouds and waves, which covered his body from navel to collarbone. Once everyone had had a good look he dropped his shirt back down. ‘And number three?’

Chang looked to her colleagues, ran slim fingers nervously through her jet-black hair.

‘Don’t be a fool, woman, are you a Black Diamond board member or a bloody schoolgirl?’

Chang pulled herself up, her face hardening. ‘Number three. You will perform an act of magic.’

Darvill smiled at her. ‘You know the nature of our business. We deal in mystical treasures. My father made his considerable fortune trading those tools. He didn’t much care for the arcane himself; he was more drawn to the wealth. But me? I’ve always pursued the esoteric skills. You people haven’t heard of me for a reason. I’m an insurance policy. My father’s business would always expose him to considerable danger, so he kept his most valuable asset, his son, secret from everyone. Even Sparks knew nothing of me. I’ve worked outside of this business for years, collaborating with my father on ... acquisitions. And that’s how I like it. I don’t want this company. I want to stay out there. I want to further my own studies. I want my father back where he should be, sitting here, talking to you lot. So let’s make that happen.’

He stared at Chang, pinning her back in her seat with the force of his gaze.

‘The ... the act ... of magic?’ she ventured.

‘Good girl. This company needs strength at the helm.’

He stood and pulled a handful of desert sand from his pocket. He let it trickle into a pyramid on the dark tabletop. Muttering under his breath, he moved his hand in a small circle. The pile of sand reduced, the grains disappearing from view. Everyone around the table leaned forward, sharp intakes of breath and murmurs. John Turner began to cough.

Darvill continued, channelling the slippery magic of translocation, until all the sand had gone. John Turner gasped and spluttered, clutched at his throat. Other board members jumped up to help, asked worried questions. Turner hacked again and gagged. He stood, red-faced and wheezing. He fell forward, put his hands on the table to catch himself, and retched. A splat of wet sand hit the dark wood. He coughed and gagged again, more wet sand splattered out. He gasped, retched and spat, until finally he could breathe again, the table before him a mess of sand, spittle and traces of blood.

Darvill sat down, leaned back in his chair. ‘Don’t ever be late to a meeting with me again, Turner. Is that understood?’

Turner slumped into his chair as the other board members returned to theirs. He nodded dumbly, out of breath, hatred plain on his face.

‘Now then,’ Claude went on. ‘Where the fuck is my father?’

One of the other men cleared his throat while people either side of Turner helped the man wipe the table before him and gave him a glass of water. ‘My name’s Clarke,’ the man said. ‘International liaison.’

‘Go on.’

‘Well, there’s really not much to tell. We’ve been trying to track Mr Hood for some weeks. It’s not unusual for him to disappear for extended periods, but there’s usually some contact. He’d been rather obsessed with one particular issue right before he vanished and we can only assume that’s the issue still at hand.’

‘Explain it to me.’

‘Well, it seems Mr Hood learned of a man who had a couple of

very powerful items, and decided he wanted them. It took some work, by all accounts, but he ended up finding the man. He flew out with Ms Sparks, then nothing.

‘We tracked the plane and the pilot said Mr Hood hadn’t made any contact since landing. We sent reps out there and found absolutely nothing. The hostess on that flight did a runner, but it turns out your father ... er ... well, he asked things of her during the flight out there that she ... er ...’

Darvill waved a hand. ‘I know all about my father’s deviant sexual proclivities, Clarke. So this hostess walked?’

‘Yes, sir. And that’s about it. The trail is dead. Both Mr Hood and Ms Sparks have vanished into thin air.’

Darvill nodded, rested his chin on interlocked hands. ‘Well, it seems to me that whoever my father was tracking rather got the better of him in one way or another.’

‘That’s our fear, yes.’

‘So the obvious path is to track down whoever my father was after.’

‘Yes, sir, exactly what we’ve been trying to do.’

‘And?’

‘Your father keeps a lot of secrets, so no one really knew who he was chasing. We know he employed the Subcontractor, but he’s gone. Jackson is also gone. It seems anyone close to your father has fallen victim to this situation. But our IT folk managed to crack the encryption on Ms Sparks’s laptop and have finally found some relevant notes. It seems your father had been after an Australian fellow, name of Alex Caine.’

Darvill stood. ‘Right then. Get me everything you can on this Caine. Do we know where in Australia?’

‘As far as we can tell, he lives not far from Sydney.’

‘Then I’ll contact you again when I get to Sydney. By then I want to know everything there is to know about Alex Caine.’

3

Nicholas Haydon, Darius Grabowski and Salay Armand sat in soft moonlight among the almost perfect circle of the stones of Sunkenkirk. They shivered in the winter cold, breath steaming, mist drifting around the grass in questing tendrils. Facing each other, hands linked, they began to chant, at first low and sonorous, and their magic swelled. Combining their power, the tone of their mantra rose, the pitch and intensity increased. The magic rose with it. Their eyes flickered open, jet black and glassy, stared at nothing in the night.

Nicholas spoke, his voice not his own. 'Found some more power, and with it direction.'

'The light leads the lines leads the mages three,' Darius continued in the same voice.

Salay opened his mouth, the strange voice taking its turn with him. 'Follow the light and the line all the way, to the nexus, the power, the danger and revelation.'

The men's heads dropped and they gasped, eyes returning to normal. 'What did that mean?' Salay asked.

Darius opened his mouth to speak but Nicholas silenced him with a raised hand. His finger trembled, pointing behind the other two men. His heart hammered as he enjoyed being right. They turned to see a ghostly line of light, undulating like a dragon breathing softly in its sleep. It disappeared directly away from them, unbroken, arrow straight. 'I think that's what it meant.'

Haydon was no fool. He knew something new empowered their practice, something not entirely friendly. Occult studies, summonings and entreaties had yielded barely verifiable results in the past. Now he felt a fresh and intoxicating energy coursing

through him. They had conjured physical manifestations of their will. Or the will of whatever they had uncovered. It excited and scared him.

‘We follow it?’ Darius asked.

‘Yes, but not literally perhaps.’ Nicholas dug around in a backpack, pulled out a map. He unfolded it, laid it out on the damp grass, turned it. ‘I feel it’s more of an indication, a direction, don’t you?’ He had noticed his friends’ rather literal interpretations of this magic from the outset and wondered if it would be a problem. But finding compatriots in this game was not easy. ‘Here. It seems to match this one.’

The map showed a network of ley lines. Haydon’s finger indicated one. He traced the map, just east of north, following the line until his fingertip stopped at Keswick. He looked up, one eyebrow raised.

‘What?’ Darius asked.

‘You know the stones and lines,’ Salay said, annoyed. ‘Don’t expect us to understand.’

Nicholas shook his head, amused at their consternation. ‘Just outside Keswick is Castlerigg, and there lies another very powerful stone circle.’

‘So we go there and do the ritual again?’ Salay ran his long fingers through his beard. Nicholas noticed that habit more often lately and had begun to associate it with the Hungarian’s nerves.

‘I think so, yes. It seems this entity is guiding us somewhere, using stone circles and ley lines.’

‘Why doesn’t it just tell us?’ Darius was frowning, another habit Nicholas had logged. This one manifested when the Polish mage worried he was being played. It had taken Nicholas some effort to convince him of the ritual in the first place and that frown had featured regularly.

Nicholas shrugged. ‘Perhaps it’s playing with us. But think about what got us here. Those archaeology students thought they’d uncovered an ancient carved manuscript, preserved in the peat beneath the Avebury stones. I managed to convince them

it was just a modern hoax when they brought it to me. A clever hoax, but nothing of any value. I took that risk because I saw the real value of it. My professorship, all my studies, all my *life*, has been leading to a moment like this. We have something amazing, my friends, we know that. Even if it is gaming with us, don't you want to know why?'

Darius's frown stayed put, but his eyes softened. 'It could be dangerous.'

Salay shrugged, standing suddenly. 'Of course it is. It told us so itself. So what? We can assess the danger as we go along and stop if we decide it's too much. For now, let's see where it leads.'

Nicholas smiled, turned his attention to Darius. He could always rely on Salay's fire and enthusiasm, even if he was a worrier. 'Are we in accord? It takes the power of three, we know that.' He stood, reached down to help Darius up.

Darius took the offered hand. 'Yes, we are in accord.'

Nicholas kept hold of Darius's hand, taking Salay's in the other. 'Mages in accord, uncovering ancient mysteries. We need a name. The Accord. Yes?' He ignored the niggling voice at the back of his mind, the cajoling that made his stomach squirm in fear.

Salay laughed. 'We tread carefully, but we see this through together.'

Darius let his frown melt slowly. 'The Accord. Very well.'

Nicholas laughed, slapped his friends on their shoulders. 'Good! Let's get to Castlerigg and try again. As I understand it, we can only operate this ritual between midnight and three. Wherever we're directed from Castlerigg we can follow up tomorrow.'

He turned his friends and they trudged across the cold, damp grass back towards the road and Nicholas's Toyota. Occultist, they had called him. Dabbler, madman, weirdo. He knew the other academic staff at the university laughed at him and his hobbies, unbecoming for a professor of anthropology. But he would have the last laugh. Those students at Avebury had found far more than they had realised, and their disappointment was palpable when he told them it was worthless. He rubbed his hands together, as

much from excitement as to combat the biting cold.

As they passed from the circle, heading back across the fields to the car, something dark slipped around the stones like a shadow, laughing softly as it watched them leave.

Alex and Silhouette lounged on the veranda, soaking up bright summer sunshine, coffee mugs and toast crumbs scattered across the table.

‘This is what you get when it’s winter in London?’ Silhouette said. ‘I could get used to it.’

Alex laughed, slumping deeper in his chair. ‘We get winter too. July and August are pretty cold.’

‘How cold?’

‘Well, cold by Aussie standards.’

‘Snow? Ice?’

Alex laughed. ‘No. Very occasionally we get a frost.’

‘Fuck you. I’m never going back to London.’

‘Famous last words. You never ...’ Alex stopped speaking, eyes narrowed.

‘I feel him too,’ Silhouette said, scanning the gardens of Alex’s acre in the country.

Alex stood, headed into the house. ‘He’s at the front.’

Moments later he returned with John Doe.

‘Morning,’ Doe said, with a slight bow.

Silhouette nodded, said nothing. Alex watched her expression. She clearly didn’t trust this guy and he didn’t either, but there had been nothing but honesty thus far. At least, that was the way it seemed. He would be wary but open and see what happened. With the power of the Darak a part of him, his knowledge and experience so much more than he had ever imagined, and his growing mastery of elemental magic, he could hardly get a job in any normal field and feel even slightly fulfilled. But he needed to make a living and Silhouette’s Catwoman lifestyle of stealing and coercion didn’t appeal to him. He needed to provide for himself, and perhaps Silhouette too. Maybe occasional pay cheques from

this Armour group was the way to do it. If that pay was enough.

‘Considered my offer?’ John Doe asked.

‘How much will it pay?’

‘Depends on the job.’

‘I made a very good living cage fighting. I need to make a living again.’

John Doe smiled, sat opposite them. ‘Trust me, the money you made fighting is chump change compared to what you’d make working for us. You’d be on expenses, so you’d incur no costs. We’d pay you lump sums for subcontracted jobs that’d pay off this house in a flash.’

‘This house is paid for already.’

Doe lifted his palms. ‘Then you’re laughing. Any time you go on any job for us you automatically score a base payment of twenty-five thousand pounds. And that’s just the beginning. We are a wealthy organisation.’

Alex and Silhouette exchanged a glance. Her eyebrows and smile confirmed his own thoughts. They could survive easily on one or two jobs a year and maintain a comfortable lifestyle. ‘I’ll listen to your proposal about this first job then, and see how I feel from there.’

Doe nodded once, stood. ‘Good. That’s all I ask for now. Let’s go.’ He pulled a phone from his pocket.

‘Go where?’ Alex asked.

‘Armour Regional HQ in Sydney. I’m just a runner on this one. We can only brief you at base.’ He dialled a number, paused, then said, ‘This is three ninety one. Let’s go.’ He looked down at Alex. ‘Won’t be a moment. Shall we?’ He gestured to the back lawn.

Alex and Sil exchanged another grin and shrug and followed him out onto the grass. After a moment a deep thrum disturbed the summer peace and resolved into rhythmic rotors. A helicopter swung in over the house and settled a short distance away. John Doe ducked and headed over, shouted back over his shoulder. ‘Here we go then.’

‘I’d better lock up,’ Alex said and ran to the house. Silhouette

followed and they gathered phones and wallets, checked the locks and headed to the garden.

Silhouette put a hand on Alex's shoulder. 'Got everything you need? We might not be back for a while.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Just a hunch.'

Alex pursed his lips. 'If I learned anything with you recently, it's that I really don't need much. Even passports and stuff are pretty irrelevant now.'

Silhouette smiled, kissed his cheek. 'Attaboy, Iron Balls. You're getting it.'

Alex smiled, though a part of him lamented his lost life. His human existence. Everything he had ever worked towards seemed suddenly pointless, the rug pulled out from under him. It was liberating too, exciting in its own way. He had little choice but to run with it. 'You got your healing powder?'

Silhouette patted the pocket of her short leather jacket. 'Right here.'

They ducked under the barrage of downdraught from the rotors and joined Doe on board. The chopper powered up and away, over Alex's house, and headed north. The pastoral land undulated beneath them, the Pacific Ocean glittered to their right. Not bothering to talk over the engine noise, Alex took Silhouette's hand and they watched the country slide by. Rolling hills became scattered towns and suburbs and before long they were scudding over the densely populated southern Sydney urban sprawl. The chopper swept over the central business district and headed towards the harbour. They were treated to a beautiful summer view of the Harbour Bridge and Opera House before they dropped down among trees and landed in the Botanic Gardens.

John Doe hopped out and they followed. He waved to the pilot who took off again without a word. Crowds of Sydney-siders and summer tourists watched in surprise.

'This can't be a legal place to put down,' Alex said.

'We have some privileges,' Doe explained. 'We'd get in

trouble if we pushed too much, but we have a kind of diplomatic immunity thing happening to help us get around. Bit of a walk now, I'm afraid. This way.'

He strode off across the grass without waiting for an answer. They crossed manicured lawns and the carefully managed trees and flowerbeds of the Gardens and headed out onto Macquarie Street. They travelled a few blocks south to the top end of Hyde Park where they crossed into the massive courtyard of the sandstone majesty of St Mary's Cathedral. The place crawled with tourists taking photographs and teenagers skateboarding on the smooth flagstones. Doe pointed them around to the eastern side and a small wooden door, with iron studs and a heavy black ring in the centre. An electronic scanner was mounted on the wall beside the door. Doe took out his badge and held it by the scanner for a moment. A buzz and the door popped open.

'This way,' he said with a smile.

Behind the door were sandstone steps leading down into darkness. Silhouette leaned forward, whispered to Alex as he followed Doe. 'There are tiny cameras and other sensors in the roof. Can you see them?'

Alex shook his head, not even seeing Doe clearly any more. Silhouette's natural night-vision was far greater than his. 'Keep your eyes peeled.' He opened his preternatural vision and saw the magic swimming around the place, got the sense of the electronic surveillance.

'Don't worry,' Doe called through the gloom. 'Only a few steps.'

'Why the dark?' Alex asked.

'Better for the safety of the place, and the sensors all around. It's just a staircase going down. I'll warn you when it levels out.'

As Alex carefully picked his way forward, his annoyance rose. Perhaps he needed to take some control back and show off a bit of what he had. Breathing deep into his stomach and drawing through the stone embedded in his chest, his power flowed through it and amplified. He used some of the elemental

skills that were Welby's legacy to him. He drew warmth from the air, gathered it tightly together, agitated heat from nothing and a small flame popped up on his palm, flickering in the breeze of movement. Dancing orange light flooded the thin stairway, reflected off lenses placed every few metres along the ceiling. The stairs continued down for another twenty metres or so then levelled off to a small area of flagstones before another door. Silhouette laughed softly behind him as Doe turned in surprise, squinting.

'Very impressive,' Doe said, 'but you really don't need to worry.'

'I don't like being blind.'

Doe's smile faded as he saw the seriousness in Alex's eyes. 'Fair enough.'

They reached the foot of the stairs and stopped. After a moment the door opened, fluorescent light flooded over them. Alex clenched his fist, extinguished the flame. A man dressed in black fatigues like Doe stood back to let them in. He was small, thin, but exuded a kind of tight power. He regarded Alex and Silhouette with suspicious eyes, remained silent as they passed.

The room they entered was an office of sorts, not unlike a doctor's waiting area, with a desk and scattered easy chairs. Doe strode through as the thin man sat behind the desk, ignoring them.

The next room, beyond a heavy steel door that Doe opened with his badge over another scanner, was vast. Like a military command centre, computers lined the edges, various workstations dotted the open area and in the middle was a giant scalloped table. Images and data in a holographic display shimmered and hovered over the dish-like surface as people moved around, conversing and interacting with the holograms. Shades of magic pulsed and undulated around the technology.

'This is like something from a science fiction movie,' Alex said.

Doe laughed. 'What did you expect? Monks scrawling with quills on parchment?'

‘I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this.’

Other people milled around or sat at desks, working diligently. Some glanced up but seemed unsurprised or unimpressed by their presence. Alex let his senses out, read the shades of the workers. Many were adepts of some description, some of mortal years, some far older. A few had shades that implied a decent level of magical ability and Alex was sure one or two at least were Kin. He looked at Sil and saw she recognised the same thing.

‘Interesting bunch,’ he said.

Sil nodded, scanning the room. One of the Kin caught her eye, came over. He was a big man, broad, dark islander skin and black-haired, with a heavy brow. They said nothing, eyes locked. A glimmer of Silhouette’s favoured cat-like form shifted briefly across her features. The Kin facing her showed a ripple of something dog-like. They clasped forearms and nodded, smiles emerging.

‘Once of Joseph, London, now Clanless. Silhouette.’

The other nodded, released Sil’s arm. ‘Once of Petero, Brisbane, now Clanless. Jarrod.’ His accent was strong New Zealander, Maori. He gestured to encompass the room. ‘Though I suppose this is a Clan of a different sort.’

‘I guess so.’

‘If we could go this way,’ John Doe said politely, indicating a door on the far side of the huge room.

Jarrod and Silhouette held each other’s eye for a moment, then parted.

‘Was that a bit weird?’ Alex asked as they followed Doe.

Silhouette took his hand, squeezed, though her eyes were distant. ‘It’s a Kin thing.’

‘I’ve never seen you like that with anyone before.’

‘There’s a lot about me you don’t know. And a lot you don’t know about Kin.’

Alex frowned, stung. ‘Okay. I don’t mean to interrogate you or anything. It’s unusual, is all.’

Silhouette glanced back over her shoulder to where Jarrod stood at a workstation. He watched them, a folder in one hand. 'Sorry, Alex,' Silhouette said. 'Let's just call it a Kin thing and leave it for now. Okay?'

'Sure.'

John Doe knocked on a door marked *COMMANDER* and waited. After a moment a voice called from inside. 'Come.'

Doe opened the door, held it for Alex and Sil, then followed them in. A giant of a man with a shock of grey-white hair and a huge iron-grey handlebar moustache sat behind a desk.

'Commander,' Doe said, 'this is Alex and Silhouette.'

The Commander stood, leaned over to shake their hands. 'Marvellous. Welcome, welcome, do sit down.'

Alex studied the man's shades and knew he shielded himself incredibly well, his arcane appearance almost bland in its normalcy. As Alex looked, the old man let his guard open slightly, a polite allowance. He was ancient and not entirely human, but before Alex could quite figure out what he might be the shades slipped closed again like a safe door swinging shut, letting not even air escape. The Commander sat and indicated they take chairs too.

'I'm so glad you agreed to come along,' he said, his voice a deep baritone. 'I really think you might be able to help us.'

'I don't want to become part of this organisation,' Alex said, deciding to lay the bottom line early. 'But I'm considering subcontracting for you.'

'We can work with that. Let me explain the situation.' The Commander leaned back, tugged gently at one side of his huge moustache. 'Rather than try to explain everything we do here, I'll just give you the key points. Understand that our job is to intercept and neutralise threats outside the remit of the governments, police and military forces of the world. Threats that are not mundane.' He paused, raising an eyebrow at Alex.

'I get it,' Alex said. 'Go on.'

'Righto. Good. So, in this endeavour we utilise various seers

and psychics. They tend to get wind of things and give us a heads up early on. We've often managed to stop a threat before it actually becomes a threat. Sometimes we've failed miserably. In this case we have one particularly ... gifted seer, called Rowan. He's stumbled across something very concerning.'

The pause in the Commander's speech didn't go unnoticed. Alex logged it for later, something unsaid. 'Okay,' he said, determined to give nothing away. Let this Commander say everything first.

'Yes. Right. So, Rowan has been shuddering with something rather nebulous but he doesn't doubt the veracity of the menace. A small group, indeterminate number, but not many, are uncovering some ancient magics and a danger lies in that activity. It really is nothing more than that, but Rowan is quite disturbed at the scale of the danger he's perceiving.'

The Commander stopped talking and Alex realised he would have to speak. They were assessing each other, both reluctant to be too open. Time to give something back. 'So what about your other seers?' he asked. 'If this thing is so big, can't they sense it too?'

The Commander smiled broadly. 'Good question! And the answer is no. It's not unusual for one person to hook into a thread of something in the aether others can't perceive. We've tried to corroborate Rowan's fears and failed. However, we have noticed some ripples in the areas of his concerns and we never ignore anything.'

'Shuddering? Ripples?'

'Arcane activity, supernatural activity, has a resonance, yes? You mask your magical self very well, so as not to stand out to others with vision, for example.'

Alex knew all about what he called shades. His whole life had turned upside down because of them, his first life a success and his new life a mess due to his exemplary clarity of sight. In very short order he had gone from a highly skilled fighter with a supernatural talent of reading the intent of his adversaries, to

a cursed and powerful being far more than human. ‘Sure. But seeing and feeling magic at work is something that only happens in the presence of it, no?’

‘Usually, yes, but there are methods, both arcane and technological, to see those things remotely, from afar. To tune in to them, if you like, just as a radio picks up broadcasts. That’s a lot of what we do.’

Alex flicked a thumb back over his shoulder. ‘That big room out there?’

‘Exactly. There are Armour command centres like that all over the world, constantly monitoring. We’re busier than you might imagine.’

Alex laughed, without any real humour. ‘You’d be surprised. So where do I fit in?’

The Commander leaned forward, planted his elbows on the desk. ‘You’ve been through something very recently that registered on radars all over the world. Let’s not bother with the details now, suffice to say that you’ve proven yourself adept at tracking things down and facing threats. We’d *very* much like you to do that for us.’

Alex sensed an implied intimidation in the request — the suggestion that not doing things for Armour would pit him against them. It irked him that little choice seemed to be available, but he needed a job. He could walk away if he chose. ‘So you want me to track down this little group you mentioned and find out what they’re up to?’

The Commander pointed one meaty forefinger across the desk. ‘Precisely. And we pay very well. You up for it?’

‘If I say no?’

‘We’d be awfully disappointed.’

The two of them sat still, eyes locked. Alex opened his vision, read the man’s shades again. He was blank, showed nothing. But his gaze was flint. Eventually Alex nodded. ‘Okay. I’ll take this job, but I reserve the right to walk at any time.’

The Commander’s moustache lifted with his grin. ‘Of course.

There's always choice, Mr Caine.'

Alex winced internally. How many times had he heard that recently, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary?

The Commander stood. 'You'll obviously work with the lovely Silhouette here. Rowan, the seer, will go with you, and we'll send along an Armour field operative to liaise and help wherever needed. You'll be in charge, of course.'

Alex shook his head, standing to see the Commander eye to eye. Alex's six foot height only reached the old man's chin. 'I'd rather work alone. Just me and Silhouette.'

'Not negotiable, I'm afraid.' He looked from Alex to Silhouette and his eyes narrowed slightly. 'I'll send Jarrod along with you.'

Silhouette jumped slightly, drew in a quick breath.

'Everything okay?' Alex asked.

Silhouette took his hand. 'Of course. We could probably use the help and we don't have to live in each other's pockets.'

Alex was not happy and opened his mouth to protest but the Commander spoke first. 'Splendid. It's decided then. Let's go and see Rowan.'

Alex opened his mouth again but anything he planned to say was drowned out by a sudden, insistent claxon and a flood of red light through the room. A brash voice sounded over a tannoy system. 'Breach! Breach! Breach!'

The Commander and Doe became deadly serious and hurried to the door. 'Stay close to us,' Doe said urgently. 'Do nothing, go nowhere else.'

'What's going on?' Alex asked. He let his vision out, felt as far through the complex as he could, but magic drenched the place making any detail impossible to pinpoint.

They strode through the command centre, several people travelling with them, headed for a corridor on the opposite side. 'Something's trying to get to us,' Doe said over his shoulder as they went. 'These incursions happen every so often.'

'Incursions from where? By who?'

'We're about to find out.'

The corridor led to a large meeting room. A huge board table had been upended and darkness twisted in a vortex in the centre of the open space. Magesign, the resonant echo of magic visible only to the arcane eye, whipped around it in waves. Three men were huddled together on the far side, crouched against the wall. Two looked like Doe, Armour operatives. The third was a small, skinny man, dressed in a tie-dyed shirt and Thai fisherman's pants like a hippy on the backpacker trail. He had a mop of curly, black hair and his face was twisted in terror.

The operatives spread around the edges of the room. Their magic, their shades, burst out, completely unfettered, unguarded. Alex had never felt such a concentrated explosion of power from humans. The overlapping shades, the mixed personalities, were almost overwhelming.

The spinning vortex of darkness began to whip up a wind, folders and papers flew in a cloud. A high keening noise rose with it, tearing at ears and minds.

'It's a realm breach,' the Commander roared. 'We need a handle on where from.'

Three agents turned away from the vortex, linked hands, heads down. Alex felt their magic turn inwards, their intent focused on amplifying themselves, the sum greater than the individual parts.

The vortex began to flex and pulse, like something inside kicked and punched to get out. A jet-black hand, huge and taloned, surged through briefly. Scorching heat came with it. Then again and again, then two hands. A foot kicked out, massive, shining black and clawed like a dragon.

'It's escaping!' someone cried.

The gathered operatives began a chant as the three who had turned away spun back, running around the vortex, sketching a circle and sigils on the floor in lines of pure, bright light that sparked and hissed against the carpet.

The vortex burst, sent shards of darkness out in an explosion that scorched the walls and floor wherever it touched. Silhouette cried out as one sliced across her upper arm. Alex turned to

protect her, but she snarled and shook her head. 'I'm fine.'

A huge creature stood in the room, smooth black skin taut over bulging muscles. Shining obsidian horns curved up from its brutal skull, its eyes a fiery red deep under its heavy brow. It lifted its head and roared. The sound made Alex's bowels turn to water and a primal fear flooded through him. He sucked in a deep breath, calmed the adrenaline as if before a fight, taking back control. The operatives finished their magical drawing as the beast rushed forward and it bounced against an invisible barrier, roared again. Magesign swirled about the edges of the containment.

'Well done, lads!' the Commander shouted. 'This is a tough one. Let's begin.'

They all raised their voices, speaking in unison. It sounded to Alex like Latin and the creature roared once more.

'It's a demon,' Silhouette said in Alex's ear. 'The thing they're chanting is an old exorcism.'

'How do you know?'

She smiled at him and winked. 'I've been around a long time, don't forget.'

Alex watched with eyes and mind, tried to understand the magic of the binding circle as well as the process of exorcism. The thing was far more powerful than the creature he had faced recently in the ring. This one exuded age and malevolent evil, reminding him of the moment Uthentia strode towards him across the smoking ground in Iceland.

The demon thrashed at the binding circle and the enchantment began to waver. 'Come on, people!' the Commander yelled. 'It's breaking free!'

'It's too strong!' someone shouted.

'Not an option. Concentrate!'

Alex noticed different shades, crossing and interrupting the work of the operatives. It took a few moments to trace it, unravel it from the maelstrom in the room, but he finally tracked it back to the hippy who sat in the corner, ashen and trembling. A large,

damp stain covered the front of his burgundy fisherman's pants. The shades tied to him were interesting. Alex couldn't understand the magic, but he could see it. As ever, his vision far outmatched his understanding, but one thing was certain. This hippy was empowering the creature, his shades directly at odds with the efforts of the exorcism. And it seemed as though he was not even aware of it.

The three men ran around the circle again, trying to shore up their defence, but Alex could see them weakening, tiring.

The demon slammed and crashed against the invisible barrier and the magic creaked and screamed in protest deep in Alex's mind. Every operative focused their entire attention on the task at hand, all exorcising, none seeing.

Alex pushed past the Commander and hurried around the burning, howling storm. He pulled the hippy up by his tie-dyed shirt and slammed his fist across the man's jaw, knocking him senseless. The small man slumped in his grip and the combined power of the gathered operatives swelled in the room like a sunrise. The demon screamed, ear-shattering in its volume, as the circle's glow intensified. The voices boomed louder, the Latin chant pushed over all other sound and the demon staggered back. Its form wavered and shifted, like a television picture not quite tuned in. With a sucking rush of air and heat the demon vanished and the room fell into a deafening silence. Papers and people fluttered to the floor, gasps of breath the only sounds.

Alex lowered the unconscious hippy to the floor as the Commander turned to face him, his face split in a broad grin. 'That was rather bracing, no?' he said. 'Never a dull moment here.'

'Bracing?'

'Well done spotting that,' the Commander said, pointing to the small man slumped at Alex's feet. 'Got himself rather entangled there, didn't he.'

'You could say that,' Alex said. 'Bloody liability, a bloke like this.'

The Commander smiled as the hippy came to, groaning and

rubbing his jaw. 'You're not wrong, Mr Caine. A bloody liability indeed.'

Alex frowned. 'Why are you so amused?'

The Commander walked over, pulled the unfortunate man to his feet. He staggered, unable to completely support his own weight, hanging against his clothes in the Commander's grip. He looked at Alex and winced, shying away. 'Alex Caine,' the Commander said. 'This is Rowan. The seer you'll be working with.'

Claude Darvill landed at Sydney's Kingsford Smith airport and strolled refreshed from First Class, slightly tipsy on champagne. A twenty-four-hour flight was a breeze in the kind of comfort his money could buy. Or, more accurately, his father's money. He needed to reinforce the cash flow and get back out to his work. One meeting with the board had been enough to convince him he wanted nothing to do with running the company. But if Hood could not be found he would have little choice.

He lined up in immigration control, selected a fake passport from his collection. Today he would be Charles Kennedy, philanthropist, visiting Sydney on a well-earned holiday. He pulled his phone from his pocket while he queued, stabbed the button for Black Diamond.

'Jean Chang speaking.'

The best of a bad bunch, he had decided to keep direct contact with her only, much to the chagrin of the rest. 'It's me,' he said. 'What have we got?'

'Not much, I'm afraid. Seems Alex Caine is a bit of a non-entity. I've got a varied schooling history; he was orphaned young, grew up in care, caused a lot of trouble. Found martial arts and cross-trained in a few styles, but mostly with an old Chinese master who's long dead now. Caine became a champion in short order. Around his late teens he started disappearing. Some digging seems to indicate that he fought in underground matches and made good money at it. That seems to be pretty much all he

does. We have an address for him and really nothing else. He's about two hours south of Sydney.'

'Any idea what my father wanted from him? Any reason they crossed paths?'

The sounds of papers shuffling came over the line. 'No, not really. According to the few notes on Sparks's laptop, Caine had something, or some things, that Hood wanted. We can only assume they were arcane items of some power for your father to pursue them so relentlessly. Sparks kept most of her notes on her netbook, and that disappeared with her and your father, and was never synced back here.'

Darvill nodded, frustrated. 'Text me through the address you have.'

'Yes, sir.'

It didn't take long for Claude to get through passport control. He had no checked luggage, everything he needed in his weathered canvas satchel. He rented a small car and followed signs out of the airport onto the freeway heading south, the calm English accent of the GPS guiding him slowly through heavy early morning traffic.

A little over two hours later Darvill pulled off a country lane along an unsealed driveway, gravel and rain ruts grinding against the tyres. A neat low house stood among gum trees and bushes, surrounded by a simple lawn and beds of unkempt flowers and shrubs. A vegetable garden off to one side of the house was overgrown and rambling, several things gone to seed. Claude killed the engine and sat quietly, sensing the place. It felt empty.

He climbed from the car and strolled up to the front door, knocked loudly. Nothing. He scowled. *Why can things never be easy?*

A lap of the house proved the place to be locked up tight, but a table on the back deck had two coffee mugs on it, the dregs still damp in the bottom. They couldn't have been there more than a few hours. He wondered if this Alex Caine character was simply out and about, due to return any time, or further afield.

He had methods to find out.

Lifting the table out of the way, Darvill sat cross-legged on the dark decking in its place. He dumped his satchel on his lap and rummaged inside, pulled out a small plastic tub of capsules. Vitamins, according to the label and as far as any authorities were concerned. In reality they were intensely strong psychotropic drugs, bought at considerable expense from a Peruvian shaman and worth every penny.

He put one capsule in his mouth, gripped it between his front teeth. He put the tub back and pulled out a small, wand-like object carved from a single piece of quartz crystal. It gleamed in the hot midday sun as he scratched symbols into the wood of Alex's decking — an eight-pointed star, runes learned in Scandinavia, an amplifying sigil. Muttering an incantation, muffled as he held the capsule in place, he laid the wand across the star and closed his eyes. When his chant ended he bit the capsule, acrid powder scattering across his tongue, and swallowed.

For a few seconds nothing happened, then ice-cold momentum flooded across his brain. He gasped, hanging on as though a runaway rollercoaster threatened his life. Forcing his own intentions over the power of the drug, he guided the rushing energy. He leaned forward, placed his hands over the carved runes either side of the eight-pointed star. 'Show me,' he hissed.

Spinning, frozen colours tumbled over each other in his mind, snatches of imagery danced through like mayflies tapping the surface tension of water. He grabbed for them mentally, tried to snag a moment, control it. After several attempts he got one, a young man, maybe late twenties, placing two steaming mugs on the table that had occupied the space where he sat. *Alex Caine, is that you?*

He let the images slip past, holding on, the ride less chaotic. Snatches of conversation came through, *Coffee before all else ... a woman laughing ... a tender kiss ... winter in London? ... cold by Aussie standards ... a sensation of concern ... a man in black ... Morning ... I'll listen to your proposal ... Go where? ... Armour*

HQ in Sydney ... A helicopter, locking the house, three people boarding, flying away.

Darvill gasped, pulled his hands from the runes. The maelstrom of images disappeared as he opened his eyes and cursed. He had just come from Sydney. And there had been the distinct impression Caine wouldn't be back any time soon. Armour HQ in Sydney. What the hell was that?

The drug coursed through his veins, caused spikes of euphoric adrenaline. Unempowered by magic it felt like high-quality cocaine, and Darvill had no problem with that. He couldn't prevent a grin pulling his cheeks tight even as he ground his teeth against the rush, frustrated.

This was his world. He found stuff. He sourced intel, tracked things, got what he wanted. His life was his favourite game and this should be treated no differently. If he let the frustration take over, he would lose focus and miss his goal. He knew what Caine looked like. He knew Caine hung out with a very tasty blonde, with a cracking body. And he knew they'd taken a chopper that morning to Armour HQ in Sydney.

He pulled his phone from his pocket, stretching his jaw against the tightness the drug drove into his muscles, dialled.

'Jean Chang.'

'I need to know what Armour is.'

There was silence for a moment, then, 'Well, protective clothing. Is that what you mean?'

Darvill closed his eyes, then quickly popped them open again as the drug swam through his mind, a psychedelic shark looking for thoughts to consume. 'No, you idiot. It's a ... I don't know, a group or a society or something. Caine's gone to Armour HQ in Sydney. I'm going to drive directly back up there. It'll take about two hours. I expect a call from you before I arrive telling me all I need to know about this Armour. Got it?'

He hung up, not waiting to hear if she got it or not. She was a smart one, she would figure it out. He went to the garden and picked up a rough-edged rock from a border, scrubbed away the

carvings on Caine's deck. It made a mess of the wood but masked his work. He took a mug from the table, put it with his pills and crystal wand in his bag, and walked on spongy legs back to the hire car. He headed down country lanes, making his way to the freeway, feeling like he was playing a video game as the drug soared through his veins in pulsing waves.