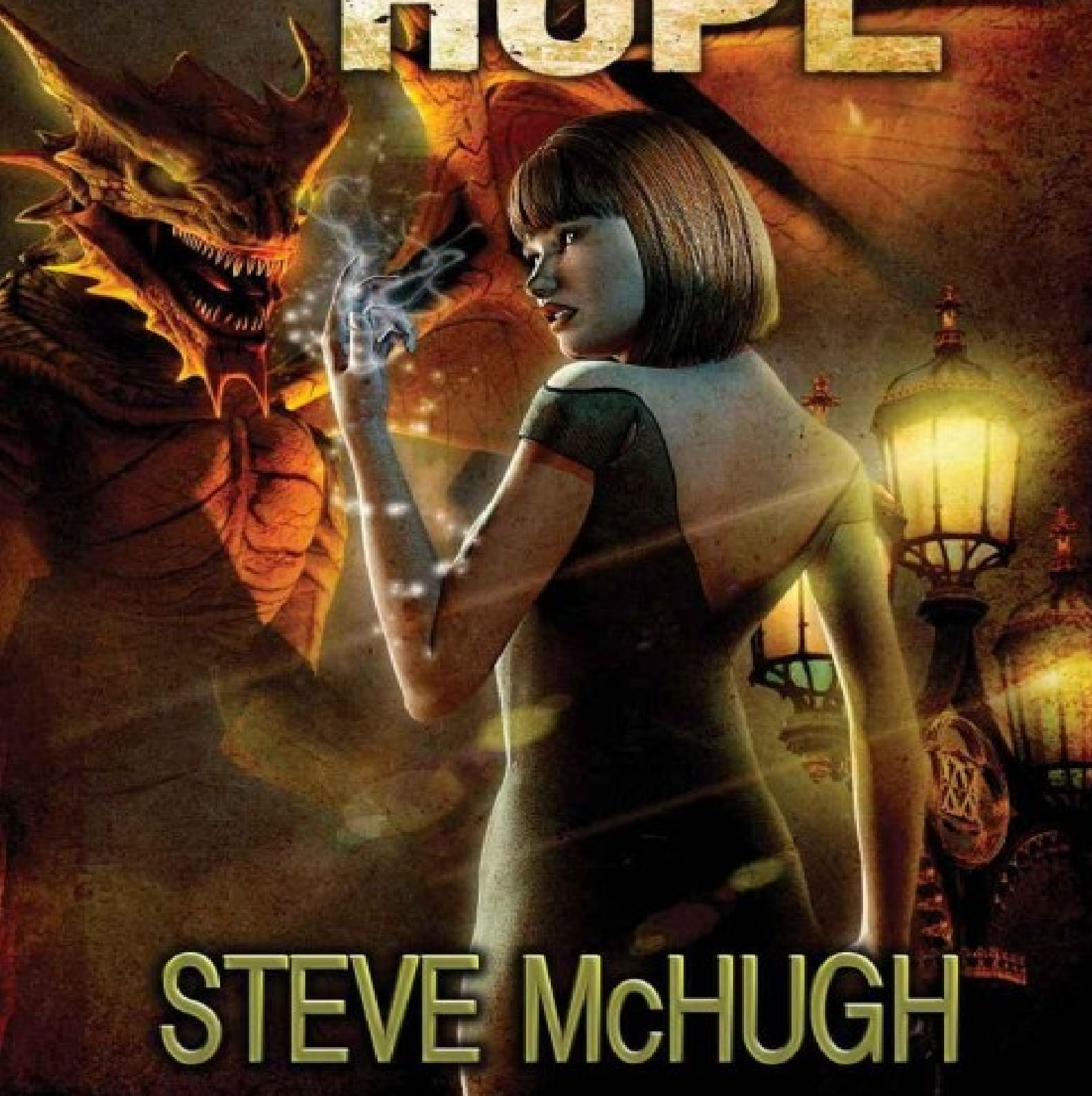


THE HELLEQUIN CHRONICLES

PRISON OF HOPE



STEVE MCHUGH

PRISON OF HOPE

By Steve McHugh

Crimes Against Magic

Born of Hatred

With Silent Screams

Infamous Reign (A Hellequin Chronicles novella)

PRISON OF HOPE

STEVE McHUGH

47NRTH

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Harley, our very own little Quinzel.

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LIST OF CHARACTERS

Flashback

- Nathan (Nate) Garrett:** Sorcerer. Once worked for Merlin as the shadowy figure Hellequin.
- Lucie Moser:** Half enchanter. Employee of Hades.
- Kurt Holzman:** Werebear. Employee of Hades. Married to Petra.
- Petra Holzman:** Werewolf. Employee of Hades. Married to Kurt.
- Selene:** Dragon-kin. Daughter of the Titan, Hyperion. Sister to Eos and Helios. Married to Deimos.
- Pandora:** Created by several gods of the Greek pantheon. Able to enthrall those she touches.
- Hope:** Immortal host for Pandora. Was a human girl.
- Magali Martin:** Human. Ally of Pandora.
- Helios:** Dragon-kin. Brother to Selene and Eos. Son of Hyperion.

Current Timeline

- Nathan (Nate) Garrett:** Sixteen-hundred-year-old sorcerer. Once worked for Merlin as the shadowy figure, Hellequin.
- Thomas (Tommy) Carpenter:** Six-hundred-year-old werewolf. Owner of a security company. Nate's best friend. Partner to Olivia. Father of Kasey.
- Kasey (Kase) Carpenter:** Fourteen-year-old daughter of Tommy and Olivia.

Hades's Family, Friends, and Employees

- Hades:** Necromancer of incredible power. Husband to Persephone and adopted father to Sky.
- Persephone:** Earth Elemental. Wife to Hades and adopted mother to Sky.
- Sky (Mapiya):** Half Native American. Birth parents murdered when she was a child. Adopted by Hades and Persephone. Necromancer.
- Cerberus:** Werewolf. Controls the Tartarus compound when Hades isn't there.
- Kurt Holzman:** Werebear. Ex-employee of Hades. Owns restaurant in Mittenwald.
- Petra Holzman:** Werewolf. Ex-employee of Hades. Owns restaurant in Mittenwald.
- Wayne Branch:** Guard at the Tartarus compound.

Avalon Members

Sir Kay: Director of SOA (Shield of Avalon). Brother to King Arthur.

Lucie Moser: Half-enchanter. Ex-employee of Hades. Current Assistant Director of the SOA (Shield of Avalon).

Olivia Green: Director of southern England branch of LOA (Law of Avalon). Water Elemental. Partner to Tommy. Mother of Kasey.

Witches

Mara Range: Coven member. Mother to Chloe.

Chloe Range: Fourteen-year-old daughter to Mara Range. Friends with Kasey.

Emily Rowe: Coven member.

Tartarus Inhabitants

Carion: Ferryman for Tartarus. Member of the Titans.

Atlas: Siphon. Member of the Titans.

Cronus: Sorcerer. Husband to Rhea, father of Zeus. Member of the Titans.

Rhea: Sorcerer. Husband to Rhea, mother of Zeus. Member of the Titans.

Lorin: Griffin. One of the guards of Tartarus.

Brutus, Friends, and Employees

Brutus: Sorcerer. King of London.

Diana: Half werebear. Roman goddess of the moon, the hunt, and birthing. Brutus's lieutenant.

Licinius: Sorcerer. Brutus's lieutenant.

Justin Toon: Head of security for Brutus.

Hera, Family, and Allies

Hera: Sorcerer. Head of one of the most powerful groups within Avalon.

Ares: Negative empath. Son of Hera. Husband to Aphrodite.

Deimos: Negative empath. Son of Ares.

Demeter: Earth Elemental. Mother of Persephone.

Aphrodite: Succubus. Wife to Ares.

Eos: Dusk walker. Sister to Selene and Helios. Daughter of Hyperion.

Selene: Dragon-kin. Sister to Eos and Helios. Daughter of Hyperion.

Hyperion: Dragon-kin. Father to Eos, Selene, and Helios.

Miscellaneous Characters

Donna Preston: Thirteen-year-old friend of Chloe and Kasey.

Robert Ellis: Australian. Vanguard member.

Sarah Hamilton: Witch.

PROLOGUE

Berlin, Germany. 1936.

The two Nazi soldiers stood outside the imposing four-story building, watching those on foot pass them by. The heat from the midday sun must have been hell on them; their shiny, smart uniforms weren't something I'd want to be wearing when I was standing out in the baking sunshine for a large portion of the day.

I placed the newspaper, an obnoxious piece of journalism that painted the Nazis as some sort of savior, beside me on the park bench and watched the two men nod to a pretty woman who walked past. The men were young, blond, and everything those in charge would want to show as their *master race*, whatever the fuck that was meant to be.

Nearly eighteen years previously, Germany had lost the Great War and was then humiliated by the British, French, Americans, and anyone else who happened to want a piece of their pie. The German people were angry and hurt by what happened, and that allowed someone like Hitler and his merry band of thugs and killers to come into power. It only took a few years for the Nazi flags to fly proudly on every street and for those deemed lesser, in their narrow vision, to be removed from sight.

For those people the regime had targeted, the Olympics had brought a brief respite, publically at least, but I knew it wouldn't last. The rumors of people forced to relocate to camps if they were the *wrong kind* of people, were rife. The rest of Europe, if not the world, had its head firmly buried in the sand, hoping against hope that the frankly obvious war that was looming wouldn't start anytime soon.

With the Olympics only a few weeks away, and the world watching, the Nazis had done the equivalent of putting their hands in the air to show they weren't carrying any weapons, while pushing a stack of guns under the table with their feet.

The majority of Germans were good people, but the minority held the power, and they were going to use it to do whatever they liked, no matter how many lives they destroyed in the process. And what they held in the building before me was going to make that destruction a thousand times greater than anything people could imagine.

As the civilians on the streets thinned out, the sun began to creep toward the west, painting the sky orange and purple. I picked up my fedora from next to the newspaper and after putting it on, I walked across the road. There were few cars about, although no matter what country I'd traveled to

more and more seemed to be appearing with every passing year.

—“*Guten Tag*,” I said to the two soldiers.

They stared at me, but there was no hostile intent in their body language; they appeared calm and relaxed. “How can we help you?” one of them asked.

I glanced past them into the empty reception area of the building. “I’d like to speak to Captain Dehmel.”

The men glanced at each other.

“This is the Gestapo HQ for Department F, yes? He’s expecting me.”

One of the men removed a key from his pocket and unlocked the door, holding it open for me to step inside. Both men followed me into the expansive, but empty, foyer; the one closest to me pulled his revolver and aimed it at my head.

“You will come with us until Captain Dehmel can confirm your appointment.”

I glanced over at his partner, who had also drawn his revolver. Both men were confident and experienced, and I had no doubt that they’d pull the trigger without hesitation if I gave them a reason.

I took a few steps and then stopped. “What floor is Dehmel on?”

“No questions,” the first Nazi snapped, shoving me forward.

“Are you not listening to us?” the second Nazi demanded when I stopped walking. “We say move or we will shoot.”

He shoved me again, but I rolled to the side and spun around, pushing his arm aside as I pulled the trigger, so he ended up removing a portion of his partner’s head. The dead Nazi crumpled on the floor, while the sound of the gunshot echoed around the room.

A split second of hesitation on the part of the second Nazi, presumably brought on from the killing of his comrade, was all I needed, and within moments I’d removed his revolver and hit him on the jaw hard enough to knock him to the floor.

“Where’s Captain Dehmel?” I asked.

“Go to hell,” he snapped, so I shot him in the leg. Any pretense of getting to the captain quietly had evaporated the second the first explosion of sound had flown around the floor.

“Don’t make me ask you again,” I ordered as he writhed on the floor.

“Fourth floor,” he said immediately through gritted teeth.

“How do I get there?” I aimed the gun at his good leg.

“There’s a key to get onto the left stairwell. It’s where all the experiments are run.” With some awkwardness and pain, he fished the sizeable iron key from his belt and passed it over.

“*Danke*,” I said.

“Are you going to kill me?”

“You never should have taken her,” I said and shot him once in the head, dropping the gun onto his body.

I picked up my hat, which had fallen to the floor as I’d disarmed the second Nazi, and ran down the left side stairs. I used the key to unlock a silver gate that sat in front of the door and then continued my run toward the top of the building.

As I opened the door to the fourth floor, the silence hit me. There was no one in the hallway directly outside of the stairwell, and a few seconds of checking the nearest rooms showed there was no one anywhere. I was about to curse my luck and wonder if the Nazi had given me the wrong direction when I heard the unmistakable sound of a scream, followed by a gunshot.

I made my way toward the noise, passing by laboratories with doors torn off and blood splattered inside. One room had a blackboard with smudged white chalk on it. What had been

intelligible was now covered in blood splatter. Paper littered the floor, and a man sat hunched over in the corner, a puddle of blood underneath him. I took a step into the room as more screams sounded from the far end of the floor, and I quickly changed my mind.

The entrance, an airlock door, had been scorched and twisted, and was covered in even more blood. A young man lay beside it, a revolver in his hand. As I got closer, I saw the bullet hole in his head. A second man lay farther inside the airlock, his charred remains jamming the opposite door open.

There was a crash from the room beyond, and I darted inside, confronted with a dozen bodies, most of which appeared to have been bludgeoned or stabbed to death.

“Hello, Nathan,” a woman said to me as I stepped over the body of a man in a now-red lab coat. “It’s nice to see you again.”

She was quite beautiful, her olive skin and long dark hair a product of her birth millennia ago. Her deep red eyes were from something much less human. She was naked. To many, she appeared to be a perfect woman; to others, she was the devil incarnate.

“Pandora,” I said with a slight bow of my head, “it’s good to finally have found you.” Scorched marks licked the remains of the shattered window, and a man in a German officer uniform cowered in one corner, his eyes darting between Pandora and me.

“Dehmel?” I asked him.

He twitched slightly and then stood, waving a scalpel in my direction.

“What’d you do to him?” I asked Pandora. “And where did those burns come from?” Several small fires had been started on the far side of the room, destroying books and documents that had been piled up.

Pandora glanced over at the window and then down at a badly burnt soldier. “We had a friend who helped us. These men should not have overstepped their boundaries while we were in their company.”

“I assume you allowed yourself to be taken. You could have left at any time, so why didn’t you?”

“We wanted to see if they could help us with our needs. Obviously, their helpfulness has ended.” Pandora always spoke about herself in the plural—some people call it “the royal we.” I guessed that was what happened when you stuck a human and a monster in the same body. It took some getting used to.

She took a few steps toward Dehmel and whispered something to him. He immediately slit his own throat, dropping to the floor beside Pandora, who was busy putting on a pair of trousers and some boots that had been placed neatly on a nearby table.

“If you’ve got plans to run, Pandora, don’t. It only makes things worse.”

“Oh, my dear Nathan, things are going to get much, much worse.” After she finished getting dressed and lacing up some army boots, she ran at the window, then jumped through without pausing.

By the time I’d reached the window, Pandora was speeding away on the back of a motorbike, her helper in control of the machine. I sighed and looked around the room. I walked over to the fire and found several singed documents that hadn’t yet been consumed by the flames, but nothing was intact. More information about North Africa, and something about human test subjects. I put the documents in my pocket and searched for any survivors, but there was no one left alive to help me find Pandora’s destination. And help was the one thing I really needed. Because if I didn’t find Pandora soon, the Nazis would no longer be the worst thing that could happen to Europe.

CHAPTER 1

France. Now.

My mistake came in the form of saying “yes”—a simple, but powerful word that along with its brother, “no,” can do a lot of good or a lot of damage. Once that first word had left my lips, I was dumbly bound to follow through. I could have come up with an excuse to get out of it—hell, I could have shown myself and said someone was trying to kill me. Should have, would have, could have. Instead, I convinced myself it wouldn’t be bad, that it might even be fun. I was wrong. It was hell in a carriage.

I’d agreed, for some foolish reason, which I liked to believe had to do with drugged food and alcohol, to accompany Thomas Carpenter and his daughter Kasey on a school trip to Germany. Traveling along with my closest friend and his teenage daughter were over a hundred of her school friends, several parents and guardians, and their teachers. All spread out over a four-carriage train.

Avalon—the hidden true power of our world—arranged the trip, like it did for all Avalon-funded schools. But teenagers are moody and temper prone at the best of times. Throw in the beginnings of their powers, be those magical or otherwise, and you had the makings of a tense atmosphere.

Many of the kids with parents in attendance pretended that their parents didn’t exist, while most of the parents silently watched their offspring with the attentiveness of an eagle searching for its next victim. Occasionally, one of the teenagers would say something inappropriate and receive a chastised glance or a discreet cough aimed in their direction, which in turn made the teen sigh or roll their eyes. It was like the Cold War all over again. I was half-expecting someone to turn up and start building a really big wall between the two sides.

Even Kasey, normally one of those rare teenagers who didn’t mind sitting with her parents, was some distance down the ornate train carriage, surrounded by an unknown number of other teenage girls.

Fortunately for my sanity, I’d decided to take an eBook reader with me. Unfortunately, Tommie didn’t have anything to do, so I’d managed about three pages in the hour and a half since we’d left London.

I glanced through the touch-activated tinted window beside me, as the scenery flew past. The train’s interior reminded me of the Orient Express: everything was of the finest quality, and n

expense had been spared. Despite the antique feel to many of the fixtures and fittings, there was nothing antique about the technology contained within. The exterior was no different; the train looked like one of Japan's bullet trains and was capable of speeds that easily matched them. Hades' engineers had worked wonders with the train, which was now in regular use, ferrying school trips from whatever country they came from to the compound in Germany.

"So, what's the book you're reading?" Tommy finally asked after holding his tongue for far too many miles.

I glanced up across the small table that separated his seat from mine, picked up the reader, and placed it in front of him. He touched the screen and tapped it a few more times as he read a few pages.

"This is a grimoire."

"Yes, it is."

"It's in eBook form. Aren't they meant to be old and dusty?"

"Hades had his people change them to electronic form for ease of access. It used to take weeks to find what you were looking for; now it takes minutes."

"Why would a sorcerer even need a grimoire?"

It was a valid question. A sorcerer's magic is part of us. We think what we want to do, and if we're powerful enough, we do it. Only witches, or something else without an innate magic, use grimoires on anything close to a regular basis, by permanently tattooing their bodies with runes, and even then that's only if they really want to blow themselves up. Grimoires aren't really books of spells. They're books of ideas that you can use with the magic at your disposal—and in some cases, knowledge on how to access that magic.

A lot of grimoires show rune work and how someone with zero innate magical abilities can apply certain runes to their body to allow them access to some exceptionally powerful magic. It's why they're so dangerous; they can teach people who have no innate ability how to access magic, but not necessarily how to wield it safely.

"Yes, well, I'm trying to figure out how to do something and I thought maybe this would help."

Tommy tapped a few more screens and his eyes widened. "Do you know who this book belongs to?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"It's fucking Zeus's," he whispered in return.

"I just said I knew that."

"The last time someone took one of his grimoires, it started the Titan Wars. Prometheus chained to a rock, the creation of Pandora? You know all the really *fucking bad* stuff that happened."

"Right. First of all, you're beginning to get high-pitched and sound like a girl," I pointed out. "Second, Hades *gave* it to me. Zeus disappeared hundreds of years ago; I don't think he's going to miss it."

"What's the problem?" he asked in an abnormally deep voice, which made me smile.

"Look, you know how I can only use air and fire magic from the four elements that make up the first set of magic?"

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Yes, it's come up once or twice in the previous six hundred years we've been friends."

"Sarcasm's the lowest form of wit."

"That's puns. Get on with it."

I opened my mouth to argue and wisely closed it when I noticed the smile creep onto Tommy's face. Bloody wind-up merchant. "Right. Well, once you've learned those two types, and before you

can move onto the Omega magic stage, you can learn how to merge your elements. So, fire and earth can create magma—that sort of thing.”

Omega magic is only available to the millennia-old sorcerers and consists of mind, matter, shadow, and light magic. For the time being, they were beyond what I was capable of, but being able to merge my two elements was a distinct possibility, and something I was very keen to master.

“So, what about fire and air? What do they make?” Tommy asked, all sense of teasing now gone.

“Lightning.”

Tommy blew out a long breath. “Well, I understand why you’re reading Zeus’s personal grimoire. You can learn how to wield lightning?”

I shrugged. “Not sure. Not all sorcerers can merge their elements.”

Unfortunately, when Zeus wrote his grimoires, he believed only he would ever use them, and since he was already a powerful sorcerer, he had no need to explain control or patience. Besides, back in the day, Zeus didn’t have a lot of either of those to go around. So, actually mastering something that Zeus didn’t feel the need to explain in detail involved a lot of trial and error, but mostly a lot of throwing around dangerous levels of magic.

“Is the book helping?” Tommy asked, passing my e-reader over to me.

I put the device in my bag, which I made sure was shut tight. “I think so; it’s just a matter of practice. When I absorb a soul, I can access it easier. I blew up a toaster at home.”

For most of my entire sixteen hundred years of life, I’d had six dark, constantly changing marks on my chest. A few years ago, someone I’d considered a friend had sacrificed her life to save my own. It had the side effect of beginning the removal of the marks. An increase in my power and manifestation of necromancy were the first steps on my path to discovering what the marks were hiding. Four marks still remained, waiting until some arbitrary point when they’d vanish too. In the meantime, I practiced my necromancy, which comes in a lot of different varieties; mine allows me to absorb the spirits of those who have died fighting.

“Why would you blow up a toaster?” Tommy asked.

“Well I didn’t mean to. I just sort of lost control. Earlier in the day, someone came and asked me to go with him and his teenage daughter to Germany. Shockingly enough, he mentioned nothing about the entire bloody school year accompanying them.”

Tommy’s face was a picture of innocence. “Don’t know what you’re talking about. I remember very clearly whispering about the school trip part. Besides, we’re going to see Hades—it’s not like that’s the worst trip ever. I thought having you around might make the whole trip more bearable. Olivia had to stay in England, and dating an LOA director doesn’t really make the other parents want to be too friendly with me.”

Olivia was Kasey’s mum and head of the southern-England branch of the LOA, or Law of Avalon, which is best described as Avalon’s police force. They’re a sort of mix of the FBI and Interpol. They’re not always the most popular people, even to other Avalon members, and despite Kasey’s school being Avalon funded, a lot of the parents would have loyalties to people who might have very different interests to Avalon’s power and influence in the world.

Tommy had found making friends with some of the other parents to be hard work. Avalon politics is full of long memories and longer feuds, and Tommy’s association with some powerful members of Avalon made people wary of him.

“It’s nice to see you both for more than a few minutes at a time,” I admitted. I’d been away from England on and off for just over two years, ever since my necromancy reared its head. I’d missed

spending time with Tommy, Olivia, and Kasey.

“Will Sky be there?” Tommy asked.

“Probably—she does like to enjoy my misery.”

Sky was one of several people whom Hades and Persephone had adopted over the years. She had been born in America a few hundred years ago to a female European missionary and male Native American chief, the latter of whom worked for Hades. When she was very young, rivals within the tribe had murdered her parents, who were both necromancers; their power had been inherited by Sky. After that, Hades and Persephone had taken her into their home. Hades had also erased the man responsible from the face of the earth. It isn't wise to piss him off.

“You know, I never understood something about grimoires,” Tommy said, taking the conversation back a few minutes.

“And that would be?” I asked after a few moments of waiting for my friend to continue.

“What was the point of putting in all the runes about how to access magic? The original grimoires were written by sorcerers, so surely they shouldn't have needed the knowledge.”

“I don't really know the full answer, but basically a lot of sorcerers reach a point when they've mastered so much magic that they try to look into new ways of increasing their strength. Runes are a popular choice. And then, once Zeus's grimoires were given to the humans, they started practicing and making their own versions of the books.”

“Hence, witches,” Kasey said as she stepped out from beside me.

I turned to the young teen. “You need to start wearing a bell.”

“Sorry, Nate,” she said with a sly grin. Kasey was every inch her father's daughter in personality, although in looks, thankfully, she took after her mother, with long red hair, green eyes, and an elegant face. No teenage girl wants to be short and stocky with a permanent five o'clock shadow.

A few years ago, a then twelve-year-old Kasey had put herself between me and something so evil that I was certain I couldn't have beaten it. She'd stopped me from getting hurt more than I already had, possibly saving my life in the process. Considering the attention he'd get from both Tommy and me, I almost pitied the first boy she'd bring home. Almost.

Kasey sat opposite me, and I noticed that one of the parents farther down the carriage was giving me an evil glare. She'd been doing it on and off since I'd arrived at the train station, although I had no idea what I'd actually done to earn her wrath.

“Her name is Mara Range,” said a young woman sitting on the opposite side of the aisle from Tommy, Kasey, and me. She had dark hair that was almost black, tied back in a ponytail. She wore a simple light-blue T-shirt, the same color as her eyes, with a picture of Led Zeppelin on the front. She hugged her figure, showing off both her athletic body and the tattoo that stopped just above the crease of her elbow. I couldn't make out what it was, but the reds and purples certainly made it appear colorful.

“Sorry—I saw you glance over at her. I'm Emily Rowe,” she said quickly and shook my hand, then Kasey's and Tommy's. “I'm one of the lucky people chosen to help with the rabble. No offense.” She aimed her last words at Kasey.

“None taken,” Kasey said. “Your nails are awesome.”

Emily wiggled her fingers, and indeed the little skull and crossbones on each nail must have taken some time and effort to achieve.

I had slightly more important things to consider, though. “And why does this Mara woman suddenly have an issue with me?” I asked.

“She’s a witch,” Emily said. “A lot of the coven members are on this trip. Unfortunately, because most of the higher ranked members stayed home. Mara is in charge of the coven.”

I sighed. “Great. Nice to know there’s going to be a frosty reception for the next few days.”

“Why?” Kasey asked. “I don’t understand what you’ve done. You’ve never even met these people.”

“A lot of witches don’t like sorcerers,” I said.

“Why?”

I opened my mouth to explain and then stopped, I wasn’t really sure how much to tell her. On the other hand, if I avoided the question, she’d never stop asking. “What do you know about witches?”

“They can use magic, but don’t have an innate talent for it,” she said as if she were reading from a book.

“Something like that, yes,” I said. “Basically, witches are, for all intents and purposes, human. They could easily live a normal human life with no magic at all. But a long time ago, some humans were taught how to use runes to access magic. Unfortunately, where I have the innate ability to use magic from birth, they have to make themselves access it. And whenever witches use magic, instead of extending their life, it actually takes time away from it. The more powerful the magic, the more life is taken.”

“So they can’t extend it at all?” Kasey asked, slightly shocked.

“There is very dark blood magic that allows witches to extend their life by hurting and killing other people. Some witches aligned themselves with certain powerful people in Avalon who convinced them that sorcerers were keeping the magic from them. That was a few thousand years ago, and over time, witches have maintained a very bad view of sorcerers. They think we’re trying to keep them down and not allow them to reach their potential—that we show off just to rub their noses in it.”

“They’re jealous?”

I nodded. “That’s the sum of it. After such a long time of being told it, many witches believe it’s the lie.”

“And what do sorcerers think of witches?” Kasey asked.

“We don’t,” I said with a shrug. “They’re not powerful enough to concern us for the most part, and those that are will kill themselves well before they become noticed by Avalon. Occasionally, one of them does some dark stuff—killing a sorcerer for blood was an old trick of theirs—but for the most part, witches are seen as people to ignore. Because they’re aligned with Demeter and Hera, they have enough members that they can affect a vote in Avalon, but that doesn’t happen often.”

“Why align with Demeter?” Kasey asked, clearly in her element of being able to ask even the question her quick mind could think of.

“Demeter, Hera, and a few others were the ones who convinced witches that sorcerers were out to get them. They arranged the witches to support them in Avalon matters in return for information on how to obtain true power. Information I don’t think they’ve ever actually followed through with.”

“So, do all witches think this?”

I shook my head. “No, just the stupid ones. I’ve met some very smart and pleasant witches. And I’ve met some evil ones too. A witch in a quest for power has the worst of human nature wrapped up in the ability to hurt a lot of people.”

“A lot of witches are very nice people,” Emily said, making an attempt to show that not every witch was a power-hungry nutcase. “Some of them only use magic to help others and try to spread a message of peace.”

“Unfortunately, those who are in league with Demeter undo a lot of that good work. The

witches think they have power and a say in what happens, when actually they're just being used further the aims of those who would throw them to the wind the second they needed to."

"Yes, but like I said," Emily stated, "not all witches are like that. Some actually use the brains and don't want to follow like sheep."

"I'd like to meet more of them," I said, and then a horrible thought occurred to me. "You're witch, aren't you?"

Emily nodded, and Tommy laughed out loud, gaining a few glances in our direction from other adults.

"Are you a member of the coven?" I asked, ignoring my friend.

Emily nodded again. "Have been for a few years now. You don't seem all that embarrassed. I could have been offended."

"But you're not, so you either agree with me, or you don't care. I'm going with the former."

"I agree with you. Too many witches crave power and are easily swayed to a life of serving those who don't really care about us. A portion of the coven would slit their own throats if Demeter told them to. Fortunately, they're in the minority. The coven leaders normally manage to shut them down before they start ranting."

"And Mara belongs to that smaller group, I assume," I said.

"Yes, she's probably in charge of it, although I have no proof of that. She's certainly not shy about her feelings toward sorcerers."

"Thanks for the warning."

"My pleasure. They're mostly all talk, though." Although she smiled as she spoke, it was the word "mostly" that stuck in my mind.

CHAPTER 2

“Why couldn’t we just fly here?” Kasey asked as we all exited the train in the town of Mittenwal after a journey of over twelve hours.

“Because some of the children are unable to fly,” Emily said. “Not every species on earth likes to be tens of thousands of feet up in the air.”

Tommy chuckled. “Yeah, ask Nate.”

Emily looked at me, a question ready on her lips.

“Don’t like flying,” I admitted. “Not unless alcohol is involved. Trains I’m okay with.”

All along the private platform, more and more people piled off. The noise from so many people talking grew every few seconds until it was just an indistinguishable din. I had the sudden urge to go back on the train.

Several of the teachers motioned for everyone to follow them, and soon we were all setting off once more. It was like some weird version of the Pied Piper, with a clipboard and whistle, leading the children and adults out through the small train station and into a huge car park, where three massive buses were parked. Each bus was a long single-decker, all of them painted yellow and blue.

Kasey had met up with some of her friends and had merged into the throng of school children, leaving Tommy, Emily, and me to sit back and wait to see what happened.

“Have you been here before?” Emily asked me while I watched the teacher in charge try to actually *take charge*.

“Lots,” I said. “Those buses are what they use to ferry all the kids up to the main complex.”

“Are they safe?”

“Run-flat tires, bulletproof windows, and reinforced shells,” Tommy said. “I’ve seen these things take a point-blank shotgun slug to the engine and keep going. Nothing short of a missile strike is going to stop it.”

“Are you worried we’ll get attacked?” I asked.

Emily shook her head. “No, I just worry about driving in places I’ve never been before.”

“The hotel for everyone is ten minutes outside of town, next to Lake Ferchensee. It’s another twenty minutes to one of the single most secured places on the planet. It’s why the kids come here from every Avalon school all over the world. Hades and his people do this every month. Besides that, that’s why the parents and guardians are here.”

“The guardians are mostly witches, who by your own words aren’t something most worry about.”

“*Most* sorcerers,” I corrected. “And I’ve met a few witches I wouldn’t want to cross. What’s she doing?” I asked as the woman who had been glaring at me, Mara Range, was ushering select

people onto a fourth bus that I hadn't thought was part of the trip. It was more of a mini-bus, although it had clearly been modified for more rugged travel. It was all happening much to the obvious irritation of one of the teachers.

"She wants all the witches and their children to travel separate from the rest," Emily said.

"Why?"

"Because she's a fucking idiot," Emily snapped and walked off toward what was hastily turning into a row between Mara and the head teacher, a large woman who was possibly part troll.

"She's going to get her head torn off," Tommy said as he rejoined me after going off to help. Kasey put their bags on the buses. Kasey and five more young teenage girls were alongside him, although I didn't recognize any of the newcomers.

"She's nuts if she thinks segregating the witches is a good idea," I said, and one of the girls with Kasey said good-bye and stomped off unenthusiastically toward the ruckus.

"Mara is Chloe's mum," Kasey informed me. "They don't get on."

"Poor kid," I said, mostly to myself, although I heard a giggle from one of the girls standing with Kasey. "What about her dad?"

Kasey shrugged. "She was close to him, but he left her mum a year or so ago. Mara started to go a little . . ."

"Crazy," Tommy finished for her. "You should see her at parent meetings; she's like a tiny, slightly less mustached Stalin."

"She still wears her wedding ring, though," Kasey added. "Although if anyone brings up Chloe's dad to her, she goes mad."

Emily eventually reached the arguing women, and whatever she said appeared to work, as the head teacher threw her arms in the air and Mara smiled triumphantly. She ushered the children and adults onto the bus, including Emily, who stopped to say something that made Mara bristle. Mara's daughter, Chloe, was last on the bus, which caused Mara to stop her from getting on and say something that clearly upset the young girl.

"I don't like her," Kasey said.

"She's horrible to Chloe," agreed one of her friends, a short ginger girl, whose face was covered in tiny freckles.

"I can't say that I'm a big fan," I said as the bus's engine roared to life and slowly moved off of the lot.

"Nice of them to wait for everyone else," Tommy grumbled. "I guess this is setting the standard for her behavior for the next few days."

"I think it's more than just her," I said, as the clearly irate headmistress ushered everyone else onto the remaining buses. "If what Emily said was true, there are several witches here who think the same as Mara. It could make for a very long stay."

"We'll just avoid them," Tommy said as we climbed onto the bus and found seats near the rear. We were soon joined by Kasey and her friends, who kept glancing over at Tommy and me, probably sensing that there were more interesting things to come if they stayed nearby. I really hoped they were wrong.



The hotel near Lake Ferchensee was a sizeable ten-story building that held enough rooms for nearly five hundred people. In the various meeting, conference, and dining rooms that it contained, you could easily have walked its halls for several days without seeing everything it had to offer.

It took well over two hours to get all of the children, their minders, and teachers booked in, and even after another hour the massive foyer was still full of people asking for information or telling the staff that their room key didn't work.

I took my bags up to the ninth floor, dodging various teenagers who were without constant adult supervision and had decided that the hotel was now their playground to run around in at will.

Tommy, Kasey, and her friends had already gone up to their rooms on the eighth floor. The school had wisely put into place a policy that ensured a certain percentage of adults on every floor. Tommy's room was next to Kasey's, so I imagined he was facing down nights of staying up to ensure she'd gone to bed at the appropriate time and checking for boys every five minutes—even though Kasey wasn't really the type to either stay up all night or party with boys.

I dropped my suitcase on my comfy-looking bed and slumped down on a leather armchair next to the large window, which gave me an exquisite view of the lake and woodland surrounding Germany. Germany has always been a beautiful country, especially in the autumn and winter months, and the southern part of the country was one of those places that was just a little too special to stay away from for long.

It helped that Hades and his family often spent a lot of time in the area; I always had a place to stay. Even when the country was scarred by war and evil, Hades and his compound had remained untouched. Hades helped where he could to ensure that those who needed to vanish from the ever-present gaze of the authorities at the time did so without fuss, but he was reluctant to get too involved. The war was a human problem, and if Hades had fully involved himself, there was no telling how much it might have escalated. Hitler and the Nazis had support of the nonhuman variety too. People will always want more power, no matter how much they wield, and some will align themselves with madness to gain it.

I remember wondering at the time, if Avalon and its allies *had* involved themselves, whether the war would have even taken place, but the answer was probably still yes. The only difference is that it would have been much, much worse.

I cast my melancholy aside and took the kettle that was on a nearby table to the modestly sized bathroom, to fill it up in the sink before returning it to the table and switching it on. I liked to have a cup of tea after a long journey; it was nice to just take a few minutes to sit and relax while taking in new surroundings. I knew a few people who did something similar with alcohol, but I doubted any school trip would be too impressed with one of the guardians producing a bottle of scotch and settling in for a few hours, so tea it was.

I prefer white tea, which isn't tea with milk in it, but will gladly drink green or black. Never instant, though, which is pretty much like drinking muddy water. I grabbed a small sachet of brown sugar and tipped it into the mug before dropping in the green tea bag and pouring the water in. I'd just settled down to enjoy the drink when my mobile rang, the sounds of "Behold a Pale Horse," by Martin O'Donnell and Michael Salvatori, filling the room.

I sighed and picked up the phone and discovered that it was Tommy calling. I placed the tea on the table before answering. "This had better be good," I said.

"You should come down to reception. Quickly."

I was about to ask what had happened, but Tommy had ended the call, so with another sigh I stood and left the room, grabbing my jacket on the way.

I took the lift down to the ground floor, where the sounds of shouting reached me before the doors fully opened to reveal an irate Mara Range screaming at the hotel manager.

I found Tommy nearby, standing next to several more adults from the trip, all of who appeared to be watching with a mixture of interest and humor. “What the hell?” I whispered, unsure what the acceptable volume of speech was while watching a witch shout at the hotel manager.

“She’s pissed off,” Tommy explained.

I stared at him for a second. “No shit, really? I did wonder what the yelling was for. Any idea why?”

“She’s mad at you.”

That made me pause while my brain processed the new information. “Umm . . . what?” I eventually managed.

Before Tommy could reply, Mara turned toward me and raised a bony finger in my direction. “I refuse to share a floor with filth like him,” she snapped.

I glanced with mock surprise all around me before looking back at Mara, as those to either side of me made a point of quickly stepping aside. I was unsure whether Tommy didn’t move out of loyalty to me or a desire to be closer to the action. “What did I do?”

“Sorcerer!” she almost shrieked. “We were told that the witches had the ninth floor, and that *only* witches would be allowed there. Instead, you place one of *his* kind there too.”

“I’m very sorry for your upset,” the manager tried to explain—something I imagined he’d been trying to do calmly for some time. “But whoever booked Mr. Garrett was clearly unaware of the arrangement,” the manager—a tall, thin man with a somewhat haggard expression—said.

“Then remove him from floor nine this instant.”

“As I’ve explained several times,” he told her, this time with slightly more force, “we will not make anyone move rooms just because another guest tells us to.”

“Would you be happy sharing a floor with a member of the Nazi Party?” she demanded to know.

The manager’s face hardened, and I got the impression that Mara may have just launched herself over whatever line of good taste existed when one was accusing someone of being a psychopath. “Madam Range, I think there’s a difference here between someone having to share a floor with those who actively hate others, and you having to share a floor with Mr. Garrett, who, to the best of my knowledge, has done nothing untoward to either you or your witches.”

“I don’t hate witches,” I very happily told everyone. “If it helps, I’m not a member of the Nazi Party either. Just sayin’, in case this conversation goes in that direction.”

There were stifled laughs from those behind me.

“See?” the manager told Mara. “He wishes you no harm.”

“We’ll see how that goes when he’s murdering us in our sleep,” she said.

“I promise to clean up after I’m done,” I said.

The manager gave me a “Was that really necessary?” look while someone behind me made an effort to conceal his or her snigger. Apparently my time of helping was over.

Mara Range stomped toward me and placed a finger on my chest. “I’ll be watching your attitude toward my witches on this trip. If you step out of line, you will regret it.”

I looked down at the digit and wondered for a second if I should remove it for her. I decided that would make matters much, much worse and ignored it. “So, I guess asking you out for a drink isn’t going to work?”

“You’re not taking me seriously,” she snapped.

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