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PROLOGUE

FROM A DISTANCE, the man struggling up the white face of the glacier might have looked like an ant crawling slowly up the side of a dinner plate. The shantytown of La Rinconada was a collection of scattered specks far below him, the wind increasing as his elevation did, blowing powdery gusts of snow into his face and freezing the damp tendrils of his black hair. Despite his amber goggles, he winced at the brightness of the reflected sunset.

Still, the man was not afraid of falling, although he was using no ropes or belay lines, only crampons and a single ice axe. His name was Alastair Hunt and he was a mage. He shaped and molded the frozen substance of the glacier under his hands as he climbed. Handholds and footholds appeared as he inched his way upward.

By the time he reached the cave, midway up the glacier, he was half frozen and fully exhausted from bending his will to tame the worst of the elements. It sapped his energy to exert his magic so continuously, but he hadn't dared slow down.

The cave itself opened like a mouth in the side of the mountain, impossible to see from above or below. He pulled himself over its edge and took a deep, jagged breath, cursing himself for not getting there sooner, for allowing himself to be tricked. In La Rinconada, the people had seen the explosion and whispered under their breaths about what it meant, the fire inside the ice.

Fire inside the ice. It had to be a distress signal . . . or an attack. The cave was full of mages too old to fight or too young, the injured and the sick, mothers of very young children who could not be left — like Alastair's own wife and son. They had been hidden away here, in one of the most remote places on the earth.

Master Rufus had insisted that otherwise they would be vulnerable, hostages to fortune, and Alastair had trusted him. Then, when the Enemy of Death hadn't shown up on the field to face the mages' champion, the Makar girl upon whom they'd pinned all their hopes, Alastair had realized his mistake. He'd gotten to La Rinconada as fast as he could, flying most of his way on the back of an air elemental. From there, he'd made his way on foot, since the Enemy's control of elementals was unpredictable and strong. The higher he'd climbed, the more frightened he'd become.

Let them be all right, he thought to himself as he stepped inside the cave. *Please let them be all right.*

There should have been the sound of children wailing. There should have been the low buzz of nervous conversation and the hum of subdued magic. Instead, there was only the howl of the wind as it swept over the desolate peak of the mountain. The cave walls were white ice, pocked with red and brown where blood had splattered and melted in patches. Alastair pulled off his goggles and dropped them on the ground, pushing farther into the passage, drawing on the dregs of his power to steady himself.

The walls of the cave gave off an eerie phosphorescent glow. Away from the entrance, it was the only light he had to see by, which probably explained why he stumbled over the first body and nearly fell to his knees. Alastair jerked away with a yell, then winced as he heard his own shout echo back to him. The fallen mage was burned beyond recognition, but she wore the leather wristband with the large hammered piece of copper that marked her as a second-year Magisterium student. She couldn't have been older than thirteen.

You should be used to death by now, he told himself. They'd been at war with the Enemy for a decade that sometimes felt like

a century. At first, it had seemed impossible — one young man, even one of the Makaris, planning to conquer death itself. But as the Enemy increased in power, and his army of the Chaos-ridden grew, the threat had become inescapably dire . . . culminating in this pitiless slaughter of the most helpless, the most innocent.

Alastair got to his feet and pushed deeper into the cave, desperately looking for one face above all. He forced his way past the bodies of elderly Masters from the Magisterium and Collegium, children of friends and acquaintances, and mages who had been wounded in earlier battles. Among them lay the broken bodies of the Chaos-ridden, their swirling eyes darkened forever. Though the mages had been unprepared, they must have put up quite a fight to have slain so many of the Enemy's forces. Horror churning in his gut, his fingers and toes numb, Alastair staggered through it all . . . until he saw her.

Sarah.

He found her lying in the very back, against a cloudy wall of ice. Her eyes were open, staring at nothing. The irises looked murky and her lashes were clotted with ice. Leaning down, he brushed his fingers over her cooling cheek. He drew in his breath sharply, his sob cutting through the air.

But where was their son? Where was Callum?

A dagger was clutched in Sarah's right hand. She had excelled at shaping ore summoned deep from the ground. She'd made the dagger herself in their last year at the Magisterium. It had a name: Semiramis. Alastair knew how Sarah had treasured that blade. *If I have to die, I want to die holding my own weapon*, she'd always told him. But he hadn't wanted her to die at all.

His fingers grazed her cold cheek.

A cry made him whip around. In this cave full of death and silence, a cry.

A child.

He turned, searching frantically for the source of the thready wail. It seemed to be coming from closer to the cave entrance. He plunged back the way he had come, stumbling over bodies, some frozen stiff as statues — until suddenly, another familiar face stared up at him from the carnage.

Declan. Sarah's brother, wounded in the last battle. He appeared to have been choked to death by a particularly cruel use of air magic; his face was blue, his eyes shot with broken blood vessels. One of his arms was outflung, and just underneath it, protected from the icy cave floor by a woven blanket, was Alastair's infant son. As he stared in amazement, the boy opened his mouth and gave another thin, mewling cry.

As if in trance, shaking with relief, Alastair bent and lifted his child. The boy looked up at him with wide gray eyes and opened his mouth to scream again. As the blanket fell aside, Alastair could see why. The baby's left leg hung at a terrible angle, like a snapped tree branch.

Alastair tried to call up earth magic to heal the boy but had only enough power left to take away some of the pain. Heart racing, he rewrapped his son tightly in the blanket and wound his way back through the cave to where Sarah lay. Holding the baby as if she could see him, he knelt down beside her body.

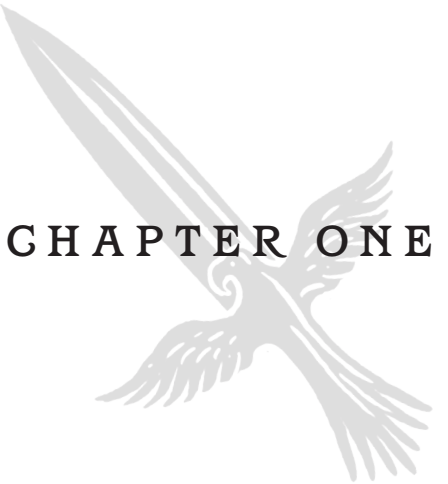
"Sarah," he whispered, tears thick in his throat. "I'll tell him how you died protecting him. I will raise him to remember how brave you were."

Her eyes stared at him, blank and pale. He held the child more closely to his side and reached to take Semiramis from her hand. As he did, he saw that the ice near the blade was strangely marked, as if she had clawed at it while dying. But the marks were too deliberate for that. As he bent closer, he realized they

were words — words his wife had carved into the cave ice with the last of her dying strength.

As he read them, he felt them like three hard blows to the stomach.

KILL THE CHILD



CHAPTER ONE

CALLUM HUNT WAS a legend in his little North Carolina town, but not in a good way. Famous for driving off substitute teachers with sarcastic remarks, he also specialized in annoying principals, hall monitors, and lunch ladies. Guidance counselors, who always started out wanting to help him (the poor boy's mother had died, after all) wound up hoping he'd never darken the door of their offices again. There was nothing more embarrassing than not being able to come up with a snappy comeback to an angry twelve-year-old.

Call's perpetual scowl, messy black hair, and suspicious gray eyes were well known to his neighbors. He liked to skateboard, although it had taken him a while to get the hang of it; several cars still bore dings from some of his earlier attempts. He was often seen lurking outside the windows of the comic book store, the arcade, and the video game store. Even the mayor knew him. It would have been hard to forget him after he'd snuck past the clerk at the local pet store during the May Day Parade and taken

a naked mole rat destined to be fed to a boa constrictor. He'd felt sorry for the blind and wrinkly creature that seemed unable to help itself — and, in the name of fairness, he'd also released all the white mice who would have been next on the snake's dinner menu.

He'd never expected the mice to run amok under the feet of the paraders, but mice aren't very smart. He also hadn't expected the onlookers to run from the mice, but people aren't too smart either, as Call's father had explained after it was all over. It wasn't Call's fault that the parade had been ruined, but everyone — especially the mayor — acted like it was. On top of that, his father had made Call give back the mole rat.

Call's father didn't approve of stealing.

As far as he was concerned, it was almost as bad as magic.



Callum fidgeted in the stiff chair in front of the principal's office, wondering if he'd be back at school tomorrow, and if anyone would miss him if he wasn't. Again and again, he went over all the various ways he was supposed to mess up on the mage's test — ideally, as spectacularly as possible. His dad had listed the options for failure again and again: *Make your mind totally blank. Or concentrate on something that's the opposite of what those monsters want. Or focus your mind on someone else's test instead of your own*. Call rubbed his calf, which had been stiff and painful in class that morning; it was that way sometimes. The taller he grew, the more it seemed to hurt. At least the physical part of the mage's test — whatever it was — would be easy to fail.

Just down the hall, he could hear other kids in gym class, their sneakers squeaking on the shining wood of the floor, their

voices raised as they shouted taunts to one another. He wished just once that he got to play. He might not have been as fast as other kids or as able to keep his balance, but he was full of restless energy. He was exempt from a gym requirement because of his leg; even in elementary school, when he'd tried to run or jump or climb at recess, one of the monitors would come over and remind him that he needed to slow down before he hurt himself. If he kept at it, they would make him come inside.

As though a couple of bruises were the most awful thing that could happen to someone. As though his leg was going to get worse.

Call sighed and stared out through the glass doors of the school to where his father would be pulling up soon. He owned the kind of car you couldn't miss, a 1937 Rolls-Royce Phantom, painted bright silver. Nobody else in town had anything like it. Call's father ran an antique store on Main Street called Now and Again; there was nothing he liked more than taking old broken things and making them look shiny and new. To keep the car running, he had to tinker with it almost every weekend. And he was constantly asking Call to wash it and put some kind of weird old car wax on it, to keep it from rusting.

The Rolls-Royce worked perfectly . . . unlike Call. He looked down at his sneakers as he tapped his feet against the floor. When he was wearing jeans like this, you couldn't tell there was anything wrong with his leg, but you could sure tell the minute he stood up and started walking. He'd had surgery after surgery since he was a baby, and all sorts of physical therapy, but nothing had really helped. He still walked with a sliding limp, like he was trying to get his footing on a boat that was rolling from side to side.

When he was younger, he'd sometimes played that he was a pirate, or even just a brave sailor with a peg leg, going down with

a sinking ship after a long cannon fight. He'd played pirates and ninjas, cowboys and alien explorers.

But not ever any game that involved magic.

Never that.

He heard the rumble of an engine and began to rise to his feet — only to return to the bench in annoyance. It wasn't his dad, just an ordinary red Toyota. A moment later, Kylie Myles, one of the other students in his grade, hurried past him, a teacher beside her.

"Good luck at your ballet tryouts," Ms. Kemal told her, and started back to her classroom.

"Right, thanks," Kylie said, then looked over at Call oddly, as though she were evaluating him. Kylie *never* looked at Call. That was one of her defining characteristics, along with her shining blond hair and unicorn backpack. When they were in the halls together, her gaze slid past him like he was invisible.

With an even weirder and more surprising half wave, she headed out to the Toyota. He could see both her parents in the front seats, looking anxious.

She couldn't be going where he was, could she? She couldn't be going to the Iron Trial. But if she was . . .

He pushed himself off the chair. If she was going, someone should warn her.

Lots of kids think it's about being special, Call's father had said, the disgust in his voice evident. *Their parents do, too. Especially in families where magical ability dates back generations. And some families where the magic has mostly died out see a magical child as hope for a return to power. But it's the children with no magical relatives you should pity most. They're the ones who think it's going to be like it is in the movies.*

It's nothing like the movies.

At that moment, Call's dad pulled up to the school curb with a squeal of brakes, effectively cutting off Call's view of Kylie. Call

limped toward the doors and outside, but by the time he made it to the Rolls, the Myles's Toyota was swerving around the corner and out of sight.

So much for warning her.

"Call." His father had gotten out of the car and was leaning against the passenger-side door. His mop of black hair — the same tangly black hair Call had — was going gray at the sides, and he wore a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, despite the heat. Call often thought that his father looked like Sherlock Holmes in the old BBC show; sometimes people seemed surprised he didn't speak with a British accent. "Are you ready?"

Call shrugged. How could you be ready for something that had the potential to mess up your whole life if you got it wrong? Or right, in this case. "I guess so."

His father pulled the door open. "Good. Get in."

The inside of the Rolls was as spotless as the outside. Call was surprised to find his old pair of crutches thrown into the backseat. He hadn't needed them in years, not since he'd fallen off a jungle gym and twisted his ankle — the ankle on his *good* leg. As Call's father slid into the car and started the engine, Call pointed to them and asked, "What's with those?"

"The worse off you look, the likelier they are to reject you," his father said grimly, glancing behind him as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"That seems like cheating," Call objected.

"Call, people cheat to *win*. You can't cheat to lose."

Call rolled his eyes, letting his dad believe what he wanted. All Call knew for sure was that there was no way he was going to use those crutches if he didn't have to. He didn't want to argue about it, though, not today, when Call's father had already uncharacteristically burned the toast at breakfast and snapped at

Call when he complained about having to go to school just to be removed a couple hours later.

Now his father crouched over the wheel, jaw set and the fingers of his right hand wrapped tightly around the gearshift, changing gears with ineffectual violence.

Call tried to focus his gaze on the trees outside, their leaves just starting to yellow, and to remember everything he knew about the Magisterium. The first time his father had said anything about the Masters and how they chose their apprentices, he'd sat Call down in one of the big leather chairs in his study. Call's elbow had been bandaged and his lip was split from a fight at school, and he'd been in no mood for listening. Besides, his father had looked so serious that Call had gotten scared. And that's the way his father spoke, too, as though he was going to tell Call he had a terrible disease. It turned out the sickness was a potential for magic.

Call had scrunched up in the chair while his father talked. He was used to getting picked on; other kids thought his leg made him an easy target. Usually, he was able to convince them he wasn't. That time, however, there had been a bunch of older boys who'd cornered him behind the shed near the jungle gym on his way home from school. They'd pushed him around and come at him with the usual insults. Callum had learned most people backed down when he put up a fight, so he'd tried to hit the tallest boy. That had been his first mistake. Pretty soon, they had him on the ground, one of them sitting on his knees while another punched him in the face, trying to get him to apologize and admit to being a gimpy clown.

"Sorry for being awesome, losers," Call had said, right before he blacked out.

He must have only been out for a minute, because when he opened his eyes, he could just see the retreating figures of the

boys in the distance. They were running away. Call couldn't believe his rejoinder had worked so well.

"That's right," he'd said, sitting up. "You better run!"

Then he'd looked around and seen that the concrete of the playground had cracked open. A long fissure ran from the swings all the way to the shed wall, splitting the small building in half.

He was lying directly in the path of what looked like a mini earthquake.

He'd thought it was the most awesome thing that had ever happened. His father disagreed.

"Magic runs in families," Call's father said. "Not everyone in a family will necessarily have it, but it looks like you might. Unfortunately. I am so sorry, Call."

"So the split in the ground — you're saying I did that?" Call had felt torn between giddy glee and extreme horror, but the glee was winning out. He could feel the corners of his mouth turn up and tried to force them back down. "Is that what mages do?"

"Mages draw on the elements — earth, air, water, fire, and even the void, which is the source of the most powerful and terrible magic of all, chaos magic. They can use magic for many things, including ripping apart the very earth, as you did." His father had nodded to himself. "In the beginning, when magic first comes on, it is very intense. Raw power . . . but balance is what tempers magical ability. It takes a lot of study to have as much power as a newly woken mage. Young mages have little control. But, Call, you must fight it. And you must never use your magic again. If you do, the mages will take you away to their tunnels."

"That's where the school is? The Magisterium is underground?" Call had asked.

"Buried under the earth where no one can find it," his father told him grimly. "There's no light down there. No windows. The

place is a maze. You could get lost in the caverns and die and no one would ever know."

Call licked his suddenly dry lips. "But you're a magician, aren't you?"

"I haven't used my magic since your mother died. I'll never use it again."

"And Mom went there? To the tunnels? Really?" Call was eager to hear anything about his mother. He didn't have much. Some yellowed photographs in an old scrapbook, showing a pretty woman with Call's ink black hair and eyes a color Call couldn't make out. He knew better than to ask his father too many questions about her. He never talked about Call's mom unless he absolutely had to.

"Yes, she did." Call's father told him. "And it's because of magic that she died. When mages go to war, which is often, they don't care about the people who die because of it. Which is the other reason you must not attract their attention."

That night, Call woke up screaming, believing he was trapped underground, earth piling on him as if he were being buried alive. No matter how much he thrashed around, he couldn't breathe. After that, he dreamed that he was running away from a monster made of smoke whose eyes swirled with a thousand different evil colors . . . only he couldn't run fast enough because of his leg. In the dreams, it dragged behind him like a dead thing until he collapsed, with the monster's hot breath on his neck.

Other kids in Call's class were afraid of the dark, the monster under the bed, zombies, or murderers with giant axes. Call was afraid of magicians, and he was even more afraid he was one.

Now he was going to meet them. The same magicians who were the reason his mother was dead and his father hardly ever

laughed and didn't have any friends, sitting instead in the workroom he'd made out of the garage and fixing beat-up furniture and cars and jewelry. Call didn't think it took a genius to figure out why his dad was obsessed with putting broken things back together.

They whizzed past a sign welcoming them to Virginia. Everything looked the same. He didn't know what he'd expected, but he'd seldom been out of North Carolina before. Their trips beyond Asheville were infrequent, mostly to go to car part swap meets and antique fairs where Call would wander around among mounds of unpolished silverware, collections of baseball cards in plastic sleeves, and weird old taxidermied yak heads, while his dad bargained for something boring.

It occurred to Call that if he didn't mess up this test, he might never go to one of those swap meets again. His stomach lurched and a cold shiver rattled his bones. He forced himself to think about the plan his father had drilled into him: *Make your mind totally blank. Or focus on something that's the opposite of what those monsters want. Or focus your mind on someone else's test instead of your own.*

He let out his breath. His father's nerves were getting to him. It was going to be fine. It was easy to mess up tests.

The car swung off the highway onto a narrow road. The only sign had the symbol of an airplane on it, with the words AIRFIELD CLOSED FOR RENOVATION beneath it.

"Where are we going?" Call asked. "Are we *flying* somewhere?"

"Let's hope not," his dad muttered. The street had turned abruptly from asphalt to dirt. As they bumped over the next few hundred yards, Call grabbed on to the door frame to keep himself from flying up and whacking his head on the roof. Rolls-Royces were not made for dirt roads.

Suddenly, the lane widened and the trees parted. The Rolls was now in a huge cleared space. In the middle was an enormous hangar made out of corrugated steel. Parked around it were about a hundred cars, from beat-up pickup trucks to sedans almost as fancy as the Phantom and a lot newer. Call saw parents and their kids, all about his age, hurrying toward the hangar.

"I think we're late," Call said.

"Good." His father sounded grimly pleased. He pulled the car to a stop and got out, gesturing for Call to follow. Call was glad to see that his father seemed to have forgotten about the crutches. It was a hot day, and the sun beat down on the back of Call's gray T-shirt. He wiped his sweaty palms against his jeans as they walked across the lot and into the big black open space that was the hangar entrance.

Inside, everything was crazy. Kids milled around, their voices carrying in the vast space. Bleachers were set up along one metal wall; even though they could hold many more people than were present, they were dwarfed by the immensity of the room. Bright blue tape marked *x*'s and circles along the concrete floor.

Across the other side, in front of a set of hangar doors that would once have opened to let airplanes taxi out onto runways, were the mages.