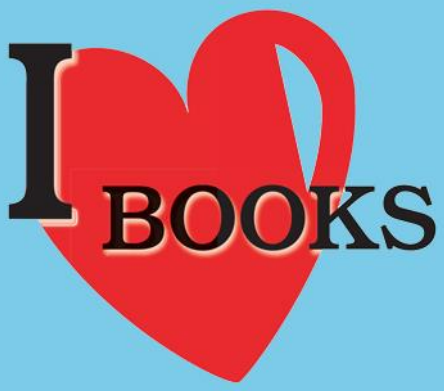


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Warning: Do not attempt any of the techniques described within the book. These can be highly dangerous and result in fatal injuries. The author and publisher take no responsibility for any injuries resulting from attempting these techniques.

To Archie, Elizabeth, Magnus and Helen Caithness
A truly wonderful family

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CHAPTER 1
MESSENGER

The Near Future

Troy felt his skin frying to a crisp as blue arcs of electricity surged over him. His muscles jerked and twitched out of his control. The awful stench of his own burning hair filled his nostrils and his throat was sore from screaming.

Troy had never imagined he would die like this – at the hands of a teenage girl with a talent to conduct electricity at will. Bolts of lightning sparked from her fingertips and curled their jagged tendrils around Troy's

helpless body as he flailed on the concrete floor of the subway platform.

"*Stop!*" Troy begged. "*Please stop!*"

To his surprise, she did. The killer current died as she dropped her hands. Troy groaned in relief and trembled as he lay on the dark platform. The girl stared at him with the cold interest of a snake eyeing its prey.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

All Troy could do was give a feeble nod.

"Good," she said. Her pale face contorted in glee and her fingers crackled as she shot another flash of super-charged energy from her palms.

Troy was powerless to stop the attack. His own talent made him bulletproof, but he had no defence against a high-voltage shock. As the deadly electricity flooded through him, he screamed in agony. The pain ripped him apart

from the inside, darkness filled his vision and his body fell limp.

"That's enough, Tricity!" The Judge ordered.

"But he isn't dead yet," Tricity said. She lowered her glowing white-hot hands. The purple tips of her jet-black hair still stood on end with static.

Troy drifted on the edge of passing out. He was all but dead as The Judge's black-and-white mask floated like a ghost before his eyes. With its smile and its tears, the Janus mask seemed to mock Troy's fate.

"We *don't* want to kill him," The Judge said.

To Troy, his gruff voice seemed to come from far away, like an echo in a cave.

Beside The Judge stood a boy with spiky hair and large coal-black eyes. He was Eagle Eye, the terrorist super-sniper Troy had followed

into the subway. "Why shouldn't we kill him?" Eagle Eye asked.

"This bulletcatcher can be of use to us," The Judge explained. "He can be our messenger."

"Our messenger for what?" Tricity asked.

Troy *had* to hear their plan. He fought the pain, determined not to black out.

"Our divine mission is to purify Terminus City of the Council and all sinners," The Judge said. "Tricity, before you began this bulletcatcher's execution, I told him that we intend to kill Mayor Lomez and his daughter Pandora next."

"But aren't we –?" Eagle Eye began.

"Don't dare interrupt me!" The Judge back-handed him hard across the cheek.

Eagle Eye winced then bowed his head in apology.

The Judge carried on as if he'd done nothing to the boy. "When our messenger tells SPEAR of our plan, Medusa will send the bulletcatchers and the rest of her security force to the mayor's mansion. Once they are there, we can exterminate them all in one go."

The Judge looked up and clasped his hands together in prayer.

"And then our work will be done."