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Opening extract from

Afterworlds: The Book of Doom

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Barry Hutchison

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PROLOGUE

"Yes, Gabriel. What is it?"

"I bring news, sir."

"News? Of the book?"

"Of the book. We have tracked it down."

"You have? Excellent. Where is it?"

"It's... well, it's *down below*, sir."

"What? On Earth?"

"Somewhat further down below than that, sir."

"Oh. Right. Yes. Of course. The blighters. No surprise, I suppose."

"Not entirely unexpected, sir, no."

"Right. Well, now we've found it, what's happening? They going to send it back?"

"No, sir."

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"No? What do you mean, 'no'? They're not playing silly sods again, are they?"

"They have requested that we send someone down to collect it in person."

"You must be joking! One of us? Down *there*? You must be joking!"

"Alas, no, sir. They're quite adamant about it. If we want the book back, we have to send someone to pick it up. They assure us it isn't a trap."

"It sounds like a trap."

"They assure us it isn't."

"If I recall, Gabriel, they're rather fond of lying. Rather adept at it too."

"Quite, sir. But if they refuse to send it back, I don't see that we have much of a choice in the matter. They have us over something of a barrel on this one. We need that book. What with the... current situation."

"Yes, yes. You're right, of course. Bless it all, we're going to have to send someone. But who?"

"I anticipated you might ask that, sir. If I may be permitted to make a suggestion...?"

"Speak freely, Gabriel."

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"What if we didn't send one of us, sir?"

"What do you mean?"

"They didn't specify whom we should send. They just said we should send 'someone'."

"I don't follow."

"If it is, as we suspect, a trap, then it would seem unwise to send one of our own marching in. Better, surely, to send someone from down below?"

"A demon? How would that work?"

"Somewhat *less* far below than that, sir."

"A human. Hmm. He wouldn't like that."

"He isn't around to make the decision, sir. You are. With all due respect."

"True words, Gabriel. True words. But whom would we choose?"

"I have taken the liberty of choosing for you, sir, so that you may distance yourself from any subsequent... unpleasantness."

"Good thinking. Good thinking. Excellent. Off the record, though, who did you pick? No names, just the basics."

"Someone disposable, sir."

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"Yes. Yes. Well, aren't they all? But capable, I trust?"

"Oh, my word, yes, sir. He's capable. He's most capable indeed."

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CHAPTER ONE

Bullets. He hated bullets.

He especially hated bullets that were travelling towards him at high speed, like the one that had just missed his head.

He kept low, zigzagging across the rooftop, his black outfit all but blending him with the night. There was a gap coming up, a space between this roof and the next. Three metres, he estimated. Three and a half at most. Not easy, but doable.

He sped up, straightened, threw himself over the opening. His shoulder hit and he rolled quickly, letting his momentum carry him back to his feet, and then he was up and running again.

He was halfway across the roof when he heard the

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shooter clear the gap. Private security. It had to be. Police couldn't make that jump. Police would've given up long before now. Besides, the cops didn't have guns, and if they did, they probably wouldn't be aiming for his head.

The next roof was closer, but higher. He scrambled up the wall, caught the top ledge and pulled himself over. A chunk of stone pinged from the wall where his legs had been. He threw himself on to the rooftop, face-first, and a third bullet whistled by above him.

He raced forward, a dark shape against a dark background. The edge of the roof came up more quickly than he'd been expecting. He stumbled, tripped, then fell three metres on to the next roof.

The landing hurt, but there was no time to dwell on it. As he scrambled to his feet, something slipped from his pocket and landed with a clatter on the slates. He glanced up at the ledge he'd just fallen from, saw no one there, so wasted a second bending to retrieve the ornate gold cross he had dropped. When he stood up, a gun was in his face.

"You're fast. I'll give you that," puffed the man with the

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gun. "You almost lost me back there. But that cross doesn't belong to you. It belongs to my boss, Mr Hanlon."

Behind his hood and mask, the figure in black remained silent. The gunman was in his early thirties, well built, with hair that was shaved almost to the bone. Ex-military, no doubt. Well trained and in good shape.

"Do you know what Mr Hanlon does to people who break into his home and take his property?" asked the man. "Or, let me put it another way, do you know what Mr Hanlon lets *me* do to people who break into his home and take his—"

The dark-clad figure leaned left and brought his hand sharply up, fingers together like the blade of a spear. The blow connected just above the gunman's right armpit. The man's finger tried to tighten on the trigger of the gun, but there was no strength left in his arm.

The right side of his face went slack. His right leg wobbled as his arm – and the gun – began to drop.

"What... what've you done to me?" he slurred as he folded down on to the rooftop.

"Don't worry, the paralysis is only temporary," the figure in black said. "But I'd consider a safer line of work in future. Tell your boss thanks for the cross."

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The fallen gunman blinked. There was a rustle of fabric, and he was suddenly alone on the roof.



Five minutes later and several streets away, the shadowy figure clambered down a drainpipe into a narrow alleyway. Just beyond the alley mouth he could hear the hustle and bustle of the city. It was midnight, but the city, like him, rarely slept.

He took off the mask. The night air was cool against his skin. He let himself enjoy it for a moment, taking it in through his nose in big gulps, refilling his aching lungs.

"Zac Corgan?"

The voice came from behind him. The accent was New York – Brooklyn, maybe – but Zac didn't recognise the voice. He spun, already crouching into a fighting stance.

An overweight man in a brown robe stood in the alleyway. Moonlight gleamed off his balding head. Despite the hour, he wore a pair of designer sunglasses. Zac's reflection stared back from both lenses.

"Zac Corgan?" the man asked again.

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"Sorry," said Zac, backing away. "I don't know who that is."

"Don't jerk me around, kid. You're Zac Corgan."

"No, I'm not."

"You're Zac Corgan, fifteen years old. Parents disappeared when you was eighteen months, so you live with your grandfather."

Zac hesitated. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The man in the robe gave an impatient sigh. "You wear size nine shoes. You eat mostly eggs and pasta, for the protein and carbohydrate. You're home educated. You got no friends. And you have a birthmark the shape of a smiley face on the back of your hand."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do," the Monk insisted.

"I haven't got a birthmark. You've got the wrong person."

"See for yourself, kid."

Hesitantly, Zac pulled off his gloves. A brown splodge he'd never seen before grinned up at him. He tried to rub it away, but the smiley-faced mark wasn't going anywhere.

"All right," Zac said, pulling his gloves back on. "You've got my attention. Who are you?"

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"They call me the Monk."

Zac glanced from the man's bald head to his long brown cloak. He could just see a pair of sandalled feet poking out at the bottom.

"Why do they call you that, then?"

"Funny, kid. Real funny." The Monk took a step forward. Zac took a step back. "My... employer wants to talk to you. He's impressed with your work, see? Thinks maybe you can help us with a little problem we got."

"I don't do requests," Zac said.

The Monk's voice became cold. "We wasn't making one."

"I'd advise against threatening me," Zac warned. "Tell your *employer* I'm not interested."

The Monk smiled thinly. "I don't think that's so good an idea. You don't know it, kid, but you're in a whole heap of trouble. And that trouble's gonna come find you real soon."

"I can handle myself."

"What, you think just because you can sneak around all dressed in black that you're going to be able to avoid it? You think being stealthy is going to keep you safe? I got news for you – we can all do stealthy. Stealthy ain't nothin'

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special. Check this out: now you see me –" he stepped sideways into the shadows – "now you don't."

"Yes, I do," said Zac. He pointed to a shape in the darkness. "There you are."

There was a soft scuffing of sandals on concrete.

"OK. Well, how about now, Mr Smart Guy? Bet you can't see me now."

"You haven't moved."

There was more scuffing, louder this time.

"All right, big shot... how about now?"

Silence.

"Ha! I knew it. You ain't got the first damn clue where I am, do ya? C'mon, take a guess."

More silence. From the shadows, there came a sigh.

"You're gone, ain't ya, kid?" the Monk said.

And he was right.

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