

THE HELLEQUIN CHRONICLES

CRIMES AGAINST MAGIC



STEVE MCHUGH

**CRIMES
AGAINST
MAGIC**

CRIMES AGAINST MAGIC

STEVE McHUGH

47NORTH

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Text copyright © 2013 by Steve McHugh
First published in 2012 by Hidden Realms Publishing

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by 47North
P.O. Box 400818
Las Vegas, NV 89140

ISBN-13: 9781477848081
ISBN-10: 1477848088
Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2013941256

Cover design by Eamon O'Donoghue

CRIMES AGAINST MAGIC

STEVE McHUGH

47NORTH

For Vanessa.

My better half in every sense of the word.

Thank you.

C O N T E N T S

<u>PROLOGUE</u>
<u>CHAPTER 1</u>
<u>CHAPTER 2</u>
<u>CHAPTER 3</u>
<u>CHAPTER 4</u>
<u>CHAPTER 5</u>
<u>CHAPTER 6</u>
<u>CHAPTER 7</u>
<u>CHAPTER 8</u>
<u>CHAPTER 9</u>
<u>CHAPTER 10</u>
<u>CHAPTER 11</u>
<u>CHAPTER 12</u>
<u>CHAPTER 13</u>
<u>CHAPTER 14</u>
<u>CHAPTER 15</u>
<u>CHAPTER 16</u>
<u>CHAPTER 17</u>
<u>CHAPTER 18</u>
<u>CHAPTER 19</u>
<u>CHAPTER 20</u>
<u>CHAPTER 21</u>
<u>CHAPTER 22</u>
<u>CHAPTER 23</u>
<u>CHAPTER 24</u>
<u>CHAPTER 25</u>
<u>CHAPTER 26</u>
<u>CHAPTER 27</u>
<u>CHAPTER 28</u>
<u>CHAPTER 29</u>
<u>CHAPTER 30</u>
<u>CHAPTER 31</u>
<u>CHAPTER 32</u>

[CHAPTER 33](#)
[CHAPTER 34](#)
[CHAPTER 35](#)
[CHAPTER 36](#)
[CHAPTER 37](#)
[CHAPTER 38](#)
[CHAPTER 39](#)
[CHAPTER 40](#)
[EPILOGUE](#)
[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)
[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

P R O L O G U E

Soissons, France. 1414.

Rumors of how the French had murdered their own people reached me long before I'd arrived at Soissons. Even as an Englishman, and despite the never-ending conflicts between our countries, I couldn't accept that the French would do such a thing. But when I walked through the city's open gates and saw the multitude of bodies lying side by side, I believed.

The town had been ripped asunder in an act of exceptional brutality, the inhabitants torn to pieces—men murdered as they defended their families, women brutalized and raped until their captors tired of them and left them to die. Not even children were spared, killed alongside their friends and families. The carrion took over, desecrating the remains even further. A city of a few thousand people reduced to food for crows and rats.

It soon became apparent that there would be no survivors to the massacre. My search of the city only brought more dead, even more questions, and few answers. Most had obvious sword and axe wounds, or heads crushed by hammer, but some had claw marks across the throat and torso. Something far worse than simple armed soldiers stalked the city.

I stopped by a partially eaten body. The man's sword had fallen onto the path beside him. His abdomen was covered in bite marks. Whatever had attacked him had devoured his internal organs. The bite marks could have belonged to a large wolf, but I knew I wasn't going to be that lucky.

Dusk was beginning to settle. Birds flew home for the night, a brilliant red sky lighting their way. A low growl resonated from the end of a row of houses close by. I placed my hand on the hilt of my *jian*, drawing the Chinese sword a few inches out of its sheath as I continued toward the noise.

I reached the end of the houses and peered around the corner. The stench of death had hung in the air from the moment I entered the city, but it mixed with something else, something more animal than human.

In the center of a large courtyard, a beast sat hunched on muscular legs, its maw

deep inside the stomach of a dead man, feasting loudly. Intestines had spilled out of the wound and now rested beside the body on the blood-slick ground. Several more dead men were littered around, none of whom appeared to have been devoured.

I looked up at the sky. “It’s shit like this that makes me hate you.” The man I worked for couldn’t have heard me—there was an ocean separating the countries we were in—but it made me feel better to say it.

I stepped into view. The beast immediately stopped feeding and looked up at me. “Live food,” it growled.

A sigh escaped my lips. “You don’t have to do this.”

The beast stood on two legs, stretching to its full height. It was over a head taller than me, and its muscular frame was covered in dark fur, now matted with blood. The beast’s hands consisted of an elongated palm with long fingers, each tipped with a razor-sharp claw. I should know how sharp those bastards were—I’d fought enough werewolves in my time.

The werewolf lifted its nose and sniffed the air. “I can smell your blood, little man.” It stepped forward and opened its mouth, showing me the dozens of wickedly dangerous teeth dripping with gore.

“That’s very impressive,” I said. “You know what I’ve got? This.” I tapped the *guan dao* strapped to my back—a Chinese halberd, consisting of a one-and-a-half-meter-long wooden pole with a curved sword edge on one end and a sharp spike on the other.

The werewolf shrugged. “You’re just a human. I can kill you before you even draw it.”

“Maybe.” I hurled a silver dagger into the throat of the beast. It dropped to its knees, desperately trying to remove the dagger as panic set in. Its long fingers were unable to get a good grip on the slick hilt, and it started to choke as blood filled its windpipe. The werewolf raised its eyes back to me, utterly afraid, as I covered the distance between us and drove my silver-laced *jian* into its chest, piercing the heart and killing it instantly.

I held onto the *jian*’s hilt and placed one boot on the werewolf’s chest, dragging the blade from the dead beast with a sucking sound. A loud thud accompanied it a second later as the sword came free and the corpse hit the ground. I retrieved and cleaned my dagger before checking on the five dead men lying about the courtyard. The huge muscles in their shoulders and arms made them appear almost deformed, and each one was missing his middle and index fingers. Deep claw gouges sat in their flesh, and one of them had lost his entire face when the werewolf had struck. Their uniforms showed that they’d been English archers, and they’d died in a horrific manner.

Then one of them opened his eyes. And screamed.

C H A P T E R 1

Southampton, England. Now.

I love this part. The thought rattled around my brain. The first few minutes of a new job always started the same—excitement built in my fingers and toes, moved to my arms and legs, and then settled in my stomach just long enough to give me butterflies.

The feeling bubbled away as I passed my party invitation to one of three huge bouncers at the mansion's front door. It was an official invite, so I was unconcerned about being denied entrance. For the amount of money I'd bribed a staff member to get hold of the damn thing, it should have come in a solid gold envelope. A friend of mine had given me the job a few weeks earlier. Initially, I'd been reluctant to accept. Most jobs went through my partner, Holly, and she recommended the best ones to undertake. I was a thief, and a good one at that, but I'd stayed off most law enforcement radars because I never had any contact with my clients. It was all done electronically via Holly.

Saying yes to the job brought a whole new set of problems to deal with. My friend needed me to steal something from a house, despite the fact that he was fully aware of how much I hated breaking into homes. For a start, the occupants were much more likely to call the police and freak out to the media, but mostly I hated them because the variables for a home break-in are astronomical. Anything can go wrong. There are neighbors and pets to consider. And children. Will the inhabitants wake up in the night for a drink? Does one of them work the late shift and get home just as I'm getting started? Even after researching the owners, I considered home jobs a damn minefield of crap, to be avoided like the plague. But my client was a good friend, and the pay was excellent. Besides, I owed him. And he's the sort of man who collected on his debts.

The bouncer waved me through, and a waiter offered me a glass of champagne. Personally, I've always hated the stuff, but as everyone in the huge room beyond had a glass of champagne in hand, I decided that blending in would make life easier, so I accepted the drink.

The hosts lived in one of Southampton's high-class neighborhoods, one of those frequented by footballers and others with too much money and not enough taste. Case

in point, the massive foyer I found myself in had a large zebra skin rug on the marble floor. It lay miserably between two ornate staircases leading to an empty landing above. More bouncers stood at the top of each set of stairs, turning people away when they tried to get to the upper floor. I'd have put money that the owners of the house would use that area to address the crowd below, thanking everyone and looking down at them all from their lofty perch.

I walked through the house and noticed several small mahogany display cabinets. Each one contained a collection of bronzed statues of ancient Greek warriors and the occasional vase from the same time period. People congregated around them, pointing and talking about the host's acquisitions.

"Nice suit."

I turned to see a young woman, champagne flute in hand, running one perfectly manicured finger gently down the crystal stem. It was either a subconscious gesture of nerves or a conscious gesture of seduction. I hadn't decided.

"I've not seen you before," she continued. Her eyes were large and deep brown, with thick lashes, and her full red lips looked moist and inviting. A golden dress clung to her voluptuous body, leaving little to the imagination. She licked her bottom lip slowly, never taking her gaze from me. Okay, she knew exactly what she was doing.

"I haven't seen you either," I said.

"You know the birthday boy well?" She moved forward ever so slightly and brushed my shirt cuff. "A bit of fluff," she lied, using the distraction as an excuse to get a good look at my ring finger.

"Thank you," I said with a smile, ignoring her question. "I'm Nate."

"Jasmine." She moved again and her golden dress rode up perfectly toned thighs. Just a small amount, but it was enough to gain my attention. She caught me watching as she readjusted herself, and smiled. "So what do you do to afford such beautiful clothes? Footballer?"

If I'd been drinking the champagne, I probably would have ruined the moment by spraying it all over her immaculately made-up face. Instead, I just chuckled. "I've never kicked a football in my life. I'm a thief."

Jasmine raised her hand in front of her mouth to hide her smile. Most people would rather hear a reasonable lie than the fantastical truth.

"And what do you steal?" she asked. "Women's hearts? Their virginity?"

It was my turn to smile. "It's been a long time since I've stolen a woman's virginity. I was under the impression that virginal women no longer exist."

"And hearts?"

"You can't steal what is given freely."

Jasmine smiled again. It was a beautiful smile, and I regretted that I would never see it again once the job was over. I glanced past her at a clock hung high on the wall. Almost ten. The party had only been going on for a few hours, and it would be a while before it hit full swing.

"A lot of women turned to watch you as you walked in. As did their boyfriends. They don't like it when a new man enters the equation, especially one who turns their dates' heads."

I'd noticed a few of them moving between me and their girlfriends or wives. "So where's your boyfriend?"

“My boyfriend is an asshole who thinks that playing football gives him an excuse to cheat on me with that bitch in the corner over there.”

I took a step to the side and followed Jasmine’s gaze. At the end of a throng of people another stunning woman leaned against a faux Roman pillar, drink in hand, and pretended to be interested in the young muscular man who spoke to her. Every now and then she glanced briefly at the expensive watch on the man’s wrist. “He why you’re flirting with me?”

“He was to begin with. But now I’m enjoying myself.” Jasmine blushed slightly, downed her champagne in one motion, and picked up a second flute as a waiter walked past. “Maybe if I had fake tits I wouldn’t have been left here all alone.”

“You don’t need to change a single thing. If he can’t see that, then he’s a fool.”

I moved back to my original position, facing Jasmine, who looked pleased.

“Yet I stay with *him*. What does that make me?”

I hadn’t counted on being a relationship counselor. “You want to go for a walk?” I asked out of a desire to get her off topic.

She watched her boyfriend for a few seconds. “Yeah, let’s go outside.”

Jasmine took my arm as we threaded past dozens of people, most of whom appeared as fake as the woman with Jasmine’s boyfriend. A few of the men, obviously friends of theirs, gave me evil glares, but no one stopped us.

We walked past a huge swimming pool and down to some secluded benches. I turned back to get a good view of the bedrooms on the top floor. *This might be easier than I’d imagined.*

Jasmine sat on the bench and crossed her legs, allowing the skirt to move up her thighs again. We continued to flirt, and eventually she asked, “So, Mr. Thief, what are you really doing here?”

I leaned up against a giant stone gargoyle, its face a permanent snarl that not even a mother could love. “I’m going to steal a book.”

She laughed. “A book? *Really?* Is it expensive or important?”

Her tone of disbelief was almost identical to the one I’d used when told what I was stealing. I shook my head. “No idea. I’ve been asked to steal it, and I intend to go through with it.”

“So what about me?”

“You’re a...*complication.*” I smiled.

Jasmine returned the smile and shook her head before looking around the garden. “Are you planning on ravishing me in the darkness?”

I glanced at my watch. Eleven p.m. I wanted to get this job finished sooner rather than later. “Do you want me to?”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “God, yes.” Her voice was raspy. She moved back slightly, uncrossing her legs. “I know how to get into the bedrooms upstairs without going past those idiots on the staircase.”

“Lead the way.”

Jasmine led me up to the house and through a side door, where steps led down into some sort of game room. A pool table and dart board occupied one side, a huge TV and several leather couches on the other.

We passed through the room and walked down a dark corridor. Jasmine stopped me at the foot of a set of stairs and looked around the corner before dragging me past

them to a lift. She shoved me inside and hit the button for the top floor. She pushed herself against me and kissed me hard.

“I’ve only just met you,” she whispered.

“Does that matter?”

Jasmine shook her head. The lift began to ascend and she moved away from me. “It’s been so long since anyone’s made me feel like this,” she sighed and kissed me once more. A small moan escaped her lips as she started to kiss my neck as my hands roamed her body.

I stared up at the ceiling of the lift and silently wondered whom I’d pissed off in a previous life. Having to upset a beautiful young lady who wanted to do unspeakable things to me was not going to make me happy.

The lift stopped and the doors opened with only a tiny squeak. Jasmine grabbed my hand and led me quickly across the hallway and through a set of double doors. As we dove into the room I caught a glimpse of the bouncers at the top of the stairs, their eyes never wavering from the front door.

The bedroom was huge, with a four-poster bed to one side, an ornate dressing table next to it. Another huge TV hung from the cream-colored wall opposite the bed. Everything was white, cream, or a variation. Even the bed’s wood had been dyed cream. It was vaguely disturbing, like the room had been covered in milk.

“Is this the master bedroom?” I asked as I looked through the large windows down onto the back garden.

“Yeah,” Jasmine said, followed by the click of the door locking.

I turned around to discover that she’d removed her dress, letting it fall freely to the floor as she walked toward me. She rubbed her hands over her exposed breasts, squeezed them slightly and smiled as I watched. She definitely didn’t need work done. Stunning was too timid a word to use. “You like?” she asked.

I nodded and walked toward her. “I want you to know something.”

“Now?” she asked as she played with one of her nipples.

“You can do better than your boyfriend. Not all men are assholes, and you deserve to find one who isn’t.”

“Are *you* an asshole?” Jasmine licked her finger and ran it down her body to her pierced bellybutton.

I tried not to watch her move—I didn’t want to let my own desire overtake me. “You need to know something about me.”

Concern flickered over her face. “If you’re married, I won’t do that.”

“No, nothing like that.” I raised my hand, so that the back faced Jasmine. She stared in shock as lines of brilliant white crisscrossed my skin. If I’d been shirtless she would have seen it continue up my arms and across my chest and back.

Wonder changed to panic as Jasmine fought for breath. “I’m sorry,” I said as she passed out into my arms. “I’m a sorcerer,” I whispered as I laid her on the bed and pulled the covers over her body.

I don’t like to do violence when on a job. I’ve always thought it sloppy and unprofessional to hurt people just to make your life a little easier, and while Jasmine would wake up after twenty minutes with a headache, that was the extent of the damage I’d done by removing all the oxygen from her lungs.

I made my way over to a large painting opposite the bed. It depicted the party

hosts in some sort of regal pose. A small dog sat in the woman's arms. The whole thing looked ridiculous.

I pulled the painting off the wall, placed it gently on the floor, and turned back to the now-exposed safe. The steel was cold as I placed my palm against it. A moment later the white, spider web pattern re-emerged across the back of my hand and wrist. After a few seconds of concentration the steel began to buckle and warp. Soon after, the air pressure I'd created was enough to bend the safe's door, snapping it free of its hinges. I tossed the metal door with ease onto a thickly padded armchair nearby, where it landed with a soft thud.

Inside the safe was a large quantity of money, some jewelry, and a small black box, just big enough for a paperback book. I ignored the money and jewelry and removed the box, opening it to reveal the leather-bound book inside. The pages looked old and worn, and the leather appeared singed in places. It seemed like a complete waste of vast quantities of money. But then it wasn't my money that had purchased it.

I dropped the box back into the safe and placed the book inside a satin pouch I'd brought with me. I slipped it into my jacket's inside pocket before replacing the painting and hiding the ruined safe door behind a chest of drawers. It would give me some time before anyone noticed something was wrong.

One last glance at the still unconscious Jasmine and I left the room, taking the key with me. Once in the hallway, I locked the door and pushed the key back into the room through the crack between the door and carpet, allowing Jasmine to let herself out when she was ready. I wasn't worried about her telling everyone she'd seen me—eyewitness reports were notoriously unreliable, and besides, she'd probably be so embarrassed to wake up naked in her friend's bed that mentioning what had happened would have been the last thing on her mind.

I was going to use the lift and make my exit through the back garden, but one of the bouncers at the top of the stairs was arguing with a few guests who wanted to go upstairs. I used the opportunity to walk past undisturbed and continued down into the foyer and out the front door. The cacophony from the party guests followed me down the drive and past five 4X4 BMWs that had probably never seen an off-road path in their lives. The noise faded when I reached my car on the street.

I climbed into the black Audi TT I'd stolen earlier and felt a twang of guilt over Jasmine. Hopefully she wouldn't get into any trouble for what I'd done. I pushed the emotion aside and removed the book from my pocket, holding it up to the car's interior light. A smile broke across my face and a thought entered my mind.

I love my job.

C H A P T E R 2

A fter finishing the previous night's job in Southampton, I'd driven to London and stayed at a prebooked hotel room, ditching the Audi on a nearby road. As it was only seven in the morning, I had plenty of time before I needed to meet Holly. She lived in London, not too far from St Paul's Cathedral, giving her amazing views of one of the most beautiful buildings I'd ever seen. Granted, I only remembered ten years back, but it would have probably been pretty high up the list of impressive structures even with full recall.

Holly had arranged to meet me near her place. There were a lot of restaurants and bars close by, and we regularly used them to meet after a job. It was easy to blend in with all the business workers and lawyers constantly having meetings. My hotel was close to Tottenham Court Road, so it only took five minutes at most to get there on the tube. In fact, it took longer to get through the tube stations than to actually use the train.

I took the Northern line to Embankment, crossed to the District line, and took another tube to Whitechapel. Whitechapel is famous for one reason—Jack the Ripper. Mention the place to almost anyone on earth and their first thoughts will be those six murders back in late 1888. In a sea of death and horror at the time, people remember only those six. It was probably because he was never caught, but giving publicity to brutal murders and the perpetrator felt...wrong. After a hundred years, the line between murderer and celebrity blurred to the point of nonexistence.

I made my way past the start of the Jack the Ripper tour, where a large group of people were all waiting for their chance to walk in the steps of history. I continued on to an alley about halfway down the street. At the end of the alley stood a large, barrel-chested man in a dark suit.

"He know you're coming?" he asked in a deep voice.

"No, I thought I'd just pop in. It's been a while since I've last had a good girlie chat."

"Don't piss about, Nate. You know he gets shitty if I don't ask."

"Yes, Jerry, he knows I'm coming." I glanced at my watch. "Although I'm about two hours early."

"Ah, fucking hell, he doesn't like that." Jerry rubbed the dark goatee that was a few inches long, cut to a point to resemble a hairy spear tip. The cogs turned as he thought about what might happen if I went in early. "Okay, you can go in, but if he

complains, I'll say you threatened me."

I stared at the almost seven-foot-tall, three-hundred-pound frame of the mountain in front of me. If I threatened him, I'd better do it from behind a tank. "Say I used mind control on you," I suggested.

Jerry smiled and moved aside, showing the door he'd been hiding. He pulled back the steel gate with a nasty creak and nodded as I opened the thick wooden door and stepped inside.

On my first trip to Jerry's boss many years previous, I'd expected the door to lead to a small office or shop. Instead, it led to a tiny room with dingy white tiles on all the walls. You could go from one end to the other in about three steps. But Jerry certainly wasn't trying to stop anyone from gaining entrance to a tiny, dirty hole. His presence was to stop people from using the stairs it contained.

Easily the length of the longest tube station escalators, the stairs started in the tiny room and led down. I followed them as the lights on the stairs flared to life, illuminating the same dingy white tiles lining the walls.

After a few steps the door behind me slammed shut. A rush of air flew over the back of my neck and I sighed.

"You know the whole *creepy* vibe doesn't really work well when I've been here dozens of times before." I continued to the bottom of the stairs and out onto an abandoned subway station. It was so old that no one knew its original name. I'd heard that it wasn't even on any of the old Underground maps. A nice little hidey-hole, tucked away for use only by a select few.

At one end of the small station platform was an archway, which led to the portion between where I was and an identical platform on the other side of the station. It contained a makeshift shop with dozens of items all set out on dark wooden shelves and benches. More items hung from metal hooks welded to a large metallic grate next to an arch identical to the one I'd walked under. A middle-aged man sat behind a large metal desk. He was examining a pocket watch through an eyepiece. His other eye was covered with a black patch.

He looked up at me. "You're early." He brushed his long gray hair off his shoulders, revealing a deep scar along one cheek.

I glanced at the huge man sitting in the corner, his arms crossed over his gargantuan chest. He nodded at me once and went back to pretending to be invisible.

"Robert will never speak to you, Nathaniel," the middle-aged man said.

"Too well trained," I said. "And the name is Nate, or Nathan. You know this."

Francis smiled and gestured toward the silent bodyguard, who opened his mouth to show a stub where his tongue should have been. "You see, someone cut it off a long time ago. He cannot talk."

For all the times I'd been to see Francis, his bodyguard's lack of tongue had never come up before. I just thought he was quiet. "I'm sorry," I said to Robert. His shrug suggested he'd gotten used to it long ago.

"And why do you care what I call you? Do you even know if Nathan is your real name?"

"No matter what I may have been called, I'm now Nate. That's real enough for me."

Francis waved away my concerns. "So, *Nate*, did you bring it?"

A small smile spread across my lips. “Of course I brought it. You hire me and I deliver.”

I removed the satin pouch from my pocket and placed it on the shining counter by Francis. He hungrily spilled the contents onto a velvet cloth.

“I take it that little book is exactly what you wanted.”

Francis carefully turned the leather-bound book over and over in his hands, a smile of glee across his lips. “Do you have any idea what this is?”

“It’s a book. I assume an old, expensive one.”

“It’s a *very old* copy of the *Iliad*.”

“Someone wanted a copy of Homer’s *Iliad*? Couldn’t they get one from the library?”

“A client requested that I find her a copy. A very specific copy, in fact.”

“Why that copy?”

Francis shrugged, causing his hair to spill over his shoulders. “No idea. But she paid quarter of a million for it. And for that I don’t ask too many questions.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Oh yeah, getting paid that much money for an old book is perfectly normal.”

The noise from the man in the corner almost sounded like a chuckle. Francis didn’t seem to find the humor in it. “I did check her out, *Nathanial*,” he said tersely. “But this book is nearly two thousand years old. The amount of money I was paid for this is but a fraction of its true value.”

I knew Francis was exaggerating, but I decided it was best just to take his point and let him live in his moment of happiness. “So do I get paid then?”

Francis carefully inserted the book back into the pouch and placed it on the counter, which he reached under and withdrew a small black bag. “Fifty grand,” he said. “And more important, you no longer owe me any favors.”

I had no concerns that he was going to steal it back from me or that he’d have his men attack me. That wouldn’t be good for business. Contrary to popular belief, there is honor amongst thieves. It just comes in a monetary form.

A decade previous, I’d woken up in an abandoned warehouse with no memory of anyone or anything, including myself. Beside me was a Heckler and Koch USP compact, with a full magazine of silver bullets. Along with the gun, there had been a wooden cane with a sword inside and a piece of paper with the name Nathan Garrett on it, which I discovered was in my own handwriting.

It’s hard to explain how it feels to know nothing about yourself, but there’s a lot of fear involved. Fear at the unknown, fear that there are people who know exactly who you are but that you may never meet them, and, at least for me, an all-consuming fear that you’re not safe. That something was terribly wrong. It was a horrible experience, which is probably why a few minutes after panicking about my predicament, I used magic for the first time.

The windows on the warehouse exploded out, embedding the glass deep in the nearest tree trunk a few dozen feet away from where I sat. Originally, I thought I’d gone mad, but over the next few days I used magic over and over again. Just a little here and there, but eventually I started to hear voices. They told me to keep using magic, to let it flow out of me. That shook me enough to stop using it altogether as I started my search for who, and what, I was.

Francis had been the man to not only tell me about the world I live in—and I couldn't possibly thank him enough—but also make me aware of exactly what I was, a sorcerer.

He explained that a sorcerer's magic is bound to two different schools. The first is Elemental—water, earth, fire, and air. Most users of magic start in this school; the magic I'd used in my target's bedroom was air, hence the white glyphs, which crossed over my arms. Each type of magic corresponds to a different color glyph—white for air, orange for fire, green for earth, and blue for water.

Sorcerers start by learning one form of magic in the Elemental school. But over time, anywhere from decades to centuries, they can learn a second. In my case, the second element I had control over is fire, meaning I was a lot older than my early thirties appearance suggested. This second form can never be the opposite to one already learned, so I could never learn earth or water magic, no matter how much I tried.

The second school of magic is called Omega magic. This magic is too powerful to be wielded by a novice. For this reason, any sorcerer wishing to use Omega magic is usually millennia old at least. It consists of mind, matter, shadow, and light. As with the Elemental school, each magic corresponds to a different color, although I wasn't powerful enough to use any of the four types.

Over the years, I'd heard rumors of a third school. Blood magic. But I'd never found anyone willing or knowledgeable enough to talk about it at length. The only thing I did learn—it scares the shit out of people.

Without Francis, I'd probably still be living on the streets, using just enough magic to keep myself alive. But even after the discovery of what I was, I'm wary of using too much magic; the idea of having the feeling of being able to do anything with magic was not one I wished to repeat.

"The robbery isn't on the news yet," he said, bringing me out of the memory of his teachings. "How did it go?"

I stuffed the money in my backpack. "Easily. Footballers have too much money."

Francis chuckled. "Do you have any other jobs on?"

I shook my head. "I plan on relaxing for a few weeks."

"When you need more work let me know. I can always find something for you to...*acquire* for me."

"Enjoy the book," I told Francis, who hurried away to make a phone call. I said my good-byes and left the station, opening the main entrance door and nodding to Jerry as I stepped back outside into the daylight.

The cold, crisp air was a bit of a shock to the system after the heated Underground, but I soon warmed up once I'd made my way back to the tube station.

As I descended the steps, deep in thought about the possibility of some time off, an attractive young blonde woman bumped into me, brushing her hand against mine. I was about to apologize when suddenly my world started to spin. I steadied myself against the side of the stairwell as a noise rang in my ears. By the time I'd recovered, I'd noticed that the mystery woman hadn't even paused. She'd continued on her journey up out of the mouth of the tube entrance, vanishing into the increasing crowds above. I darted up the stairs after her, but searching produced no results. I rubbed my

hand where she'd touched it and wondered what had just happened. I wasn't poisoned, I was certain of that, and the noise and dizziness had left me as suddenly as it had arrived. Maybe I was tired, or maybe my memories were beginning to come back. Either way, I felt normal once again, so I shook my head and continued on my journey.