

# CHAPTER ONE

**F**OR THE FIFTH time this evening, I wished that I had accepted the Oracle's offer to give me visions of the future all those years ago. I rejected it at the time because I thought that knowing the future sounded boring, but looking back, that was just me being a dumb kid more than anything. If I had accepted the Oracle's offer, I could have foreseen how a number of different cases I took up would have turned out, which would have made it easier to tell which ones to accept and which ones to reject. It would have saved me a lot of time, pain, and money if I had just been smart.

Unfortunately, hindsight is twenty-twenty, especially when you find yourself hanging upside from the ceiling like a cow about to be slaughtered. Thick ropes—reinforced by magic to make them hard as steel—wrapped around my body as tightly as a boa constrictor. The blood was rushing to my head, making me feel light and dizzy. The scent of blood and mud entered my nostrils, but I was so out of it that the smell barely registered in my mind.

Surrounding me on all sides were six Mana smugglers, some of whom had biceps as big around as my head. Each one wore identical silver and red robes, which indicated that they belonged to the Crimson Silver smuggling ring, a small but rapidly growing gang that was already feared by some of the smaller gangs. Under ordinary circumstances, I would have been able to save myself, but right now I was in no shape to do anything, much less free myself.

The room in which I hung wasn't very pretty, either. As far as I could tell, it was the basement of their main hideout, which was a large, seemingly abandoned warehouse just outside the city limits of Accord, Texas. I said 'as far as I could tell' because they had put a bag over my head when they caught me and so I didn't know exactly where I was. Nor did I know where the stink of blood and mud was coming from or what they did down here, though it was probably not clean.

A small growl made me glance to the side. A black and white cat with purple eyes stood in a cage just a few feet away from me. He was clawing at the bars, attempting to break them, but the thick metal was clearly too strong for his claws. He would stop every now and then, focus on the bars, and then his eyes would glow brightly before returning to their normal brightness, at which point he would resume clawing at them again.

Gotta admit, Simon—my cat and my familiar—was a bit more persistent than I was, even though he knew that that cage had been designed to negate the magic of familiars. He put up a good fight back there, too, but in the end, the two of us had been overwhelmed by the Crimson Silver members and were now their prisoners. The only question now was when they were going to kill us.

Creaking door hinges made my eyes shift over to the door at the top of the stairs. The door opened and someone stepped inside, but I was unable to see who it was before the door closed shut and the room was plunged into darkness again. The only light came from the single flickering light bulb hanging from the ceiling above us, although some of the Silvers were channeling light magic through their wands to provide some illumination.

"Noah House," came a deep, imperious voice from the shadows. "Son of Kent House, former Chosen One of the Oracle, Killer of Lord Raith, and the Butcher of Souls."

A figure stepped into the circle of light around me. He was an older man, probably middle-aged. He was completely bald and had a silver-lined monocle covering his right eye. Like the other Silvers, he

wore a set of red and silver robes, but his looked fancier and more refined than the ones worn by the rest of the gang. He also smelled like roses and chocolate, for some reason.

I grinned. "Oscar Acton, leader of the Crimson Silvers."

Oscar Acton scowled. "Why are you smiling? Is it just nerves?"

"Nah," said Simon from the cage nearby. "Noah here was just contrasting the lack of titles you have compared to him. Seriously, Noah has four and you just have one. Seems kind of pathetic."

One of the Silvers kicked Simon's cage suddenly, causing Simon to meow in shock briefly and retreat to the back of the cage, his eyes wide with surprise and fear.

Oscar snorted. "The number of titles one has doesn't determine their standing in life. True aristocrats earn their standing and titles through the deeds they perform."

My grin widened. "You should know, shouldn't you, Oscar since you got cast out of your very proper and aristocratic family when they found out you were involved in Mana smuggling?"

Oscar glared at me. "I see you did your homework, which is fitting with your reputation as a methodical detective."

I shrugged as much as I could in my ropes. "What can I say? I don't like rushing into situations unprepared. I like to at least know the name of the guy whose ass I'm going to kick before I do it."

"Seems it didn't help you much, given your current position," said Oscar, gesturing at my ropes. "Unless you have some kind of backup plan that I am unaware of."

"A magician never reveals his secrets, Oscar," I said, still grinning. "That's a saying I picked up among the amages. It means I still have a few tricks up my sleeve."

In truth, I didn't have a backup or escape plan. I hadn't even been intending to be captured at all. But I wasn't about to let Oscar know that. Better to let him think I had a plan than to know I didn't. Gave me more time to think of a way to escape.

"Amage sayings are always so awkward and forced," said Oscar, shaking his head. "The sayings of our ancestors, on the other hand, are far more eloquent and deep. That you are sincerely repeating amage sayings shows just how far the 'Chosen One' has fallen."

"True, I'm not a big fan of amages, but they're not as bad as you think," I said. "At least amages haven't tied me up and hung me upside down from the ceiling like a slab of beef."

"Amages have also not tried to interfere with our Mana smuggling business," said Oscar, "unlike a certain disgraced mage I am aware of. Why are you even here, anyway?"

"Sorry, but I never reveal my clients' information to anyone," I replied. "Not even to former aristocrats like you."

That was the truth. As a private investigator who specialized in magical crimes and cases that the American Magical Government and other detectives wanted nothing to do with, I kept my clients' private information confidential. It was how I had managed to build my business—as small as it was—and how satisfied clients would recommend me to other people they knew via word of mouth.

Oscar's right eye twitched, but when he spoke, it was in a calm, aristocratic voice. "What wonderful business sense you have. I would admire it ... if you hadn't nearly destroyed our Mana stores and ruined my own business overnight."

"Hey, it wouldn't have been a complete waste," I said. "The Mana would have just gone back into the Well. Of course, your 'business,' as you call it, would still fall apart, but that's what you get for working illegally. Maybe you should have gone into a more legitimate industry."

Oscar bent down until his face was level with mine. "You talk too much. My own father told me that members of the House family could talk up a storm, but I didn't actually believe that until just now. Or perhaps it's your nerves talking."

"I'm not nervous at all," I said, shaking my head. "Even though I know you're going to try to kill me —"

"Kill you?" Oscar repeated. He chuckled softly. "Ah, that would be too simple, Butcher. You still have a lot of information I want, such as the identity of your client who hired you to snoop around in my business. If I killed you now, then I wouldn't know who to kill next."

"As I said, that information is confidential," I said. "I won't give it to you no matter what."

Oscar smiled coldly. "When did I ever say I would ask you to give up that information *willingly*?"

Oscar ran a finger along my forehead. His finger was cold to the touch and made me freeze, feeling the smoothness of his thin finger as he ran it across my forehead.

"Have you ever heard of my family?" said Oscar. "The Acton family is a very well-established magical family. Our genealogy stretches all the way back to the Middle Ages when Lord Oscar Acton I — who I am named after — received a small plot of land from a local English king for his services to the country as the court mage. He created the Acton family crest and founded an unbroken family dynasty which has gone down to the modern day."

I tried not to show how nervous I was under Oscar's touch. "Yeah, I think I heard about your family. Wasn't one of your grandfathers a maniac who tried to kill a Master Mage and start a war between mages and amages?"

Oscar paused. I could tell I had gotten to him. "The Acton family has, I will admit, always been ambitious, and perhaps we have, at times, punched above our weight and not always to our benefit. Nonetheless, do you know the one magical area my family has specialized in, the original technique which earned my ancestor his title and plot of land, which formed the basis of the Acton family dynasty?"

"No, I don't," I said. "What is it?"

Oscar's smile suddenly became quite devilish. "Telepathy. More specifically, we are good at extracting information from the minds of our enemies against their will. Most mages, I am sure you know, can learn limited forms of telepathy, but this specific form my family practices is unique to my family and my family alone. I suppose mages outside of our family could learn it with practice and study, but there's a good reason we've kept this particular technique limited to the family because in the wrong hands, it could be quite dangerous."

My heartbeat increased, but aloud I said, "Seems a little too late for that. You *are* the wrong hands."

"What a terrible joke," said Oscar. He shook his head. "Never mind. I have wasted enough time as it is, explaining my family's secrets to you. I might as well cast the spell and get what I want already. It is what my ancestor would have done, after all."

Oscar suddenly put his whole hand on my forehead and squeezed.

"Just a warning, however," said Oscar, his tone colder than ice. "This technique is not painless. It also had a tendency to leave the target a gibbering idiot afterward, which isn't that much different from how you are now. The human mind is a fragile thing and this technique I am about to perform is very much like smashing a glass window with a sledgehammer. Just a heads up so you can enjoy your last moments of sanity because they will be the last you ever feel."

My eyes widened. I tried to break free of the ropes holding me, but they were too tight and thick for me to break or loosen. I also couldn't cast any spells, because the ropes were negating my Mana. It didn't help that all of the blood had rushed to my head, making it hard for me to think.

Right before Oscar could cast his spell, however, the ceiling exploded open. Chunks of plywood and sheetrock rained down on us, while all around me the Crimson Silver members fell down with their hands over their heads. Even Oscar let go of my head, though instead of falling to the ground, he was

looking up at the hole in the ceiling behind me. I tried to look at it, too, but it was hard to do thanks to the position I was in.

“What in my ancestor’s name is this?” said Oscar, staring up at the hole disbelievingly. He looked down at me. “You didn’t tell me you had backup.”

“I *don’t* have backup,” I said quickly. “Simon is my only friend. We didn’t even *tell* anyone we were going to be here tonight.”

Oscar’s eyes narrowed like he didn’t believe what I said, but it was the truth. Owing to my being exiled from the magical community, I didn’t have too many friends or allies aside from Simon. And Simon, of course, was locked in a Mana-proof cage, so he definitely hadn’t come to my rescue.

A brilliant blue light shone from the hole above and a blue magical orb floated down. The orb was about the size of an average adult human, but it was glowing too brightly for me to make out who—or what—was inside it. I could barely even look directly at it, it was so bright.

Then the light faded, revealing an elderly-looking man in golden mage robes standing where the orb had been. Although clearly in his seventies, he appeared to be in excellent shape for a man his age, with a full head of silver-gray hair that seemed to shine by itself. He stood upright, with his shoulders back and his chest out. He looked almost like those superheroes that amages like to read about and watch, only he was one hundred percent real.

“Who are you?” said Oscar, a tremble in his voice. “Are you an ally of the Butcher?”

“Hardly,” said the man. “Though I have met Noah once before, we’ve never been very close.”

“You still haven’t identified yourself,” said Oscar. “Are you with the Government?”

The man chuckled. “I am *above* the Government, Oscar Acton. I am Adam Franco, the Master Mage of North America. And unless you let Noah House go right now, I will not hesitate to kill you in cold blood.”

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