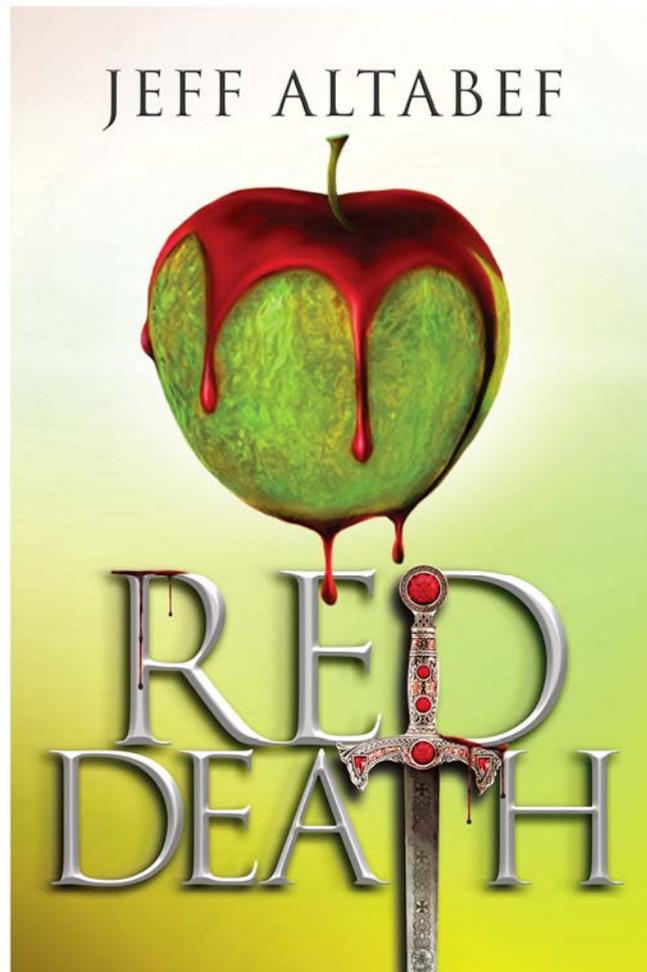


RED DEATH

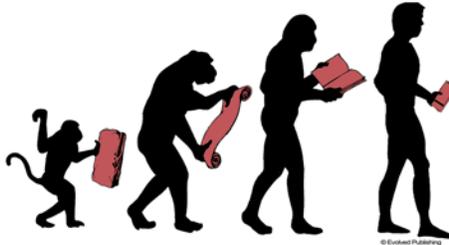
Book 1 of Red Death



Jeff Altabef

SPECIAL 5-CHAPTER SNEAK PREVIEW

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### RED DEATH

#### Red Death - Book 1

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*Editor: Lane Diamond*

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Book 1: *Red Death*

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WIND CATCHER:

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Introduction

In a sweeping adventure like this one, set in a faraway time, you will find many new characters and places to love. To aid you in keeping track of them all, author Jeff Altabef has created a handy “Cast of Characters,” which we’ve included immediately following the last chapter.

We’ve added links to the “Cast of Characters” at the end of each chapter, to make it easier for you to reference if necessary.

If you prefer to review it before starting the story, as we know many of you will, please just click the link below.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

We really love this dystopian adventure, loaded with memorable characters that are sure to stay with you long after you’ve finished reading the story. The characters really are the heart and soul of this story. Yet the author also raises some interesting questions about the nature and fate of humanity, which make the story all the more compelling.

We think you’re going to enjoy it as much as we did.

Dave Lane
Managing Publisher/Editor



Chapter 1 - Aaliss

Aaliss nearly growled, her mood foul. Weary from a long day, she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed, stuff her head under a pillow, and fall blissfully asleep. Instead, she found a note perched on top of her bed like a bad omen. She sighed and carefully unfolded the paper and read her young brother's precise handwriting.

He wanted her to come to his lab, and although he phrased it like a request, he was really summoning her.

For a long moment she stared at her bed, tempted to slip under the sheets, but she really had no choice. Wilky would wait for her all night and the next day until she came for him, and she didn't want him sleeping at the lab again.

She trekked across the Compound to his lab and stood before him.

Wilky crossed his arms against his thin chest. He was a good-looking boy with bright blue eyes, the family's jet-black hair, strong features, and a thin muscular frame. "We're starving them."

Aaliss glanced behind her brother and into the holding pen. Three Guests her age, two girls and one boy, sat slumped with their backs against the wall.

They do look gaunt.

Somehow the unwanted thought bullied its way into her mind before she could prevent it. Wilky had a way of doing that – making her see the world differently, the way *he* saw it – and now, when she looked at the captives, she saw only skin and bones and desperation.

She waved at the Guests in what she hoped would be a dismissive gesture, but she failed miserably and felt a little foolish. "They're Soulless, Wilky. The devil has claimed them. We're not supposed to worry about the Soulless."

Her words sounded hollow even to her, and a chill swept down her spine. She had begun to doubt Eden's most fundamental teachings, which scared her. Once doubt crept in, where would it lead?

Wilky stayed silent and intensified his glare until his eyes carved straight through her chest and into her soul. He might be thirteen, but he had the eyes of someone much older and wiser, someone who knew truths he should never have known.

Time ticked on, the two locked in a silent tug of war Aaliss knew she would never win. Born stubborn, Wilky would stay, arms crossed and eyes glaring, for as long as it took for her to cave in.

A fire three years ago had claimed their parents, and she had been responsible for him ever since. Sometimes she wanted to strangle him, but he was her brother, and she loved him, and the two had forged a team of sorts. Piers, their oldest brother, completed the group, but he was... well, he was Piers, and that made him more of an honorary member of the team than a full-fledged participant.

They do look hungry.

She sighed. "Okay, I'll find Piers and see if he can rustle up some food. But you know I'll get into real trouble if a Priest catches me sneaking into the Parsonage."

Wilky shot her a sideways glance and a small smirk.

They both knew she was too highly trained, too skilled to get caught.

"This can't wait until tomorrow?" she asked.

He shook his head.

She groaned as she left the lab, retraced her steps through the Labyrinth, slipped her way to

the stone circular staircase that led to the Parsonage, and cringed when she saw a full moon through a narrow window. She didn't believe in superstitions as much as other people she knew, but a full moon portrayed an ominous sign. She didn't scare easily, but the devil used the moon to create mischief, and a full moon meant danger.

No one else traveled the staircase at this time of night, so she crept up the steps unseen until she reached the top landing and a locked door. Unlike the other doors into the tower, which were made of wood, a heavy steel door protected the Parsonage where the Priests lived. A red light glowed by the handle, with a keypad to its side.

She approached warily and peered through a small window. The full moon reflected back at her as if spying on her, waiting for her to be discovered. She had no excuse to visit the Parsonage this late, and if the High Priest caught her, she would get in trouble. If he suspected dark motives, her punishment would be severe. Still, she had come this far and could not disappoint Wilky. She said she'd go, and she kept her promises.

She pressed six on the keypad three times, and held her breath as the light turned from red to green. The combination for the lock changed daily, but a glitch in the system allowed three sixes to work every time.

Wilky had told her the secret.

She had no idea how he had discovered it. She assumed he must have overheard someone talking about it, but when she asked him, he would not say.

"I must be crazy," she muttered to herself, and exhaled as she edged the door open just far enough to peek down the hallway.

Flickering candlelight danced through the corridor, casting shadows that looked like living creatures, as misshapen and dangerous as those that lived in the Zone – the heavily wooded buffer area between Eden and the Soulless.

Aaliss patrolled in the Zone. As a Guardian, part of her job was to make sure the Soulless never learned of Eden's existence. In that darkness, she was one of the dangers for the unwary. Not so here in the Parsonage. Priests ruled in Eden.

She focused on her destination and ignored the shadow creatures, willing them away. *You are not real.* With no one in sight, she slipped into the hallway and glided toward the fourth door on the left.

A tall, thin Priest knelt at a small wooden altar in the small chamber. Two years older than Aaliss, the handsome nineteen-year-old wore the robe of the newly initiated Priests. He had many of the same features as Wilky – chiseled chin, short straight black hair, and bright blue eyes – but that revealed only part of her brother's story.

The fire that took their parents had severely damaged the other half of Piers's face, the side not visible from the doorway. Half his body had been badly burned, leaving him disfigured and suffering with weakness and pain in his left leg and arm.

Relieved to find him alone, she entered the small prayer room and silently closed the door behind her. As the smallest and plainest chamber in the Parsonage, it had just enough space for the small altar, a chair, and perhaps four people standing close together. Although simple and small, it was Piers's favorite place to pray. She'd known she would find him here, as he always prayed before he went to sleep.

He knelt on alternating black and white marble tiles. All the floors in the Parsonage were made from the same tiles – white for truth and purity, and black for lies and evil. Just like the Priests' robes – the initiates wore black with white sashes, and the fully-ordained Priests wore white robes with black sashes. Only black and white existed in Eden – gray and the doubts that accompanied it had no place here.

She crept toward him, shadow-quiet, a sly smile creasing her lips. She could move like a ghost when necessary.

His lips moved as he concentrated intently on his prayers. He knelt at the altar, his back rod straight with his head bowed piously.

When she had snuck close to him, she poked him on the shoulder.

He leaped forward with a start and let loose a soft shriek.

She forgot about the moon and the shadow creatures, and laughed freely while he scowled at her. It felt good to laugh; she so rarely laughed anymore.

"Are y-you crazy?" he stammered as he straightened his black robe. "You almost sent me to the next world!"

"You're always so easy to startle." Her smile faded as she studied her brother's face and lifted her hand to touch him. "You have a bruise on your cheek."

He looked away before she reached him. "What are you doing here? You could get into real trouble."

She balled her hands into tight fists. "Did *he* do that to you?"

"I spilled the Sacred Drink yesterday. I was careless. My leg gave out, so I had to be taught a lesson. The Book of Jacob tells us it is a sin to waste food."

"But it was an *accident*. He has no right to hurt you. Doesn't the Book also tell us to be kind to our fellow Edenites, always, especially those who are hurt? 'Care for your brothers and sisters, always, for in this world you are each others' keepers against the Soulless ones.'" She narrowed her eyes. "I'd like to teach him a lesson about following the ways of the Book."

Piers turned and gently wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "It's okay, Ally. It doesn't hurt, and I spilled the Sacred Drink. Besides, he *is* the High Priest. The Creator speaks through him. Sometimes he must be severe to teach the proper lessons. There's a plan, and the Creator has given us the High Priest to explain it to the rest of us. These mysteries are hard to understand, but we must accept them."

She softened in his grip and spoke false words. "You know what's best." She still wanted to teach the High Priest a lesson, maybe punch him in that round face and feel her knuckles crush his flat nose, but she told her brother what he wanted to hear. Life was hard enough for Piers without adding to his burdens.

He smiled with the only side of his face that could, but it made her feel better.

When he released her, he stepped backward and frowned. "Your hair looks long."

Guilt ripped through her. As a daughter of Eden, she knew the consequences of bending the rules – shame and humiliation if caught by a Priest.

She smoothed her black hair. "Hair grows. I've been gone for two weeks!"

"Your hair is almost touching your shoulders. You know the Word. Vanity is a sin. You should cut it before anyone notices."

"Yes, *Father*, if you say so." She bowed her head.

He failed to take the bait and renew one of their old arguments. Instead, he asked, "So, why did you risk coming here? I planned to see you and Wilkiford tomorrow."

She frowned. "It's our Guests in Wilky's lab. He's upset. He says we're starving them, and I think he's right. They're thin, Piers, and they have a wild look in their eyes. It's not right to treat them that way."

He raked his hand through his hair and started pacing, limping slightly, his left boot swooshing quietly against the marble floor. "Do you care about how the rancher treats the cattle or the farmer the chickens?"

"Don't sermonize to me, brother!" Heat flushed her face. "These people are human beings."

I've spent time with them. I've gathered some of them. They have no souls, but they're not livestock."

He stopped pacing and let his arms drop to his side. "Yes, but the Creator has stripped away their souls. They're not like you or me. They are the *Soulless*. He's punished them for their wickedness! We risk His wrath if we have anything to do with them. It's all written in the Book of Jacob. "Though the Creator has saved but a few of us for His greater glory and the promise of a new beginning, ever be on your guard."

No one quoted the Book like Piers. His piety had become almost all-consuming since the fire, and Aaliss hated it. Before the fire he was fun, daring, even rebellious. Now he'd wrapped himself up so tightly in the Book that none of the old Piers had room to breathe.

"I know all about the Book, brother. I listen to the Reflections every night when I'm not on patrol. It's easier to believe the Soulless are damned here in the Parsonage. You don't spend time with them, or gather them from the Zone for our experiments." Tears rushed unbidden to her eyes. "You know how Wilky gets. When he grabs onto something he won't let go."

"I understand. Our Wilky is a special boy." He sighed. "What do you want from me?"

"All I need is a loaf of bread. Everyone knows food is plentiful in the Parsonage. The rest of us aren't so lucky."

"It's important that we Priests have enough energy to care for Eden's spiritual soul. I don't..." He paused when he saw the tears in her eyes. "I suppose it's natural for Wilky, of all people, to become attached to the Soulless. Stay here. Let me see if I can find something in the Pantry."

He limped from the room, careful to close the door quietly behind him.

Left alone, Aaliss studied the two portraits that hung on the wall behind the altar. One depicted Jacob, the original *Guardian of Eden*, and the other, the High Priest. Both wore identical robes and expressions. She wondered how long it had taken the High Priest to copy the prophet's confident yet solemn face.

The weasel would have wanted it just right.

Both sets of eyes seemed to stare at her, boring into her, questioning her. Unnerved, she slipped to the window. The view from the Parsonage stretched to Eden River and the Zone beyond. The moonlight sparkled off the river, but the Zone crept beyond it like a long black shadow. Her heart raced as her keen eyes searched for the evil the full moon would surely bring.

She wondered about the world outside of the Zone. *The Zone is wild, but what lies beyond it?*

The Priests told stories of the Soulless, describing them as wicked, uncivilized, cannibals even. But how could they know? None of the Soulless she had gathered or killed seemed much different from the Edenites. And no one ventured beyond the Zone. The land of the Soulless was forbidden, a place shrouded in mystery.

Piers returned carrying a round loaf of bread in a fine but plain linen cloth. "The moon has no power over us. We are Believers. Purity, Faith, and Strength."

He understood her better than anyone else, and sometimes she thought he could read her mind. "I know, brother. Purity, Faith, and Strength."

Would his opinion change after a night in the Zone under a moonlit sky?

He triumphantly handed her the bread as if it were a trophy. "This was all I could find."

"Thanks. I knew you would help."

He held onto the bread for a few seconds before releasing it to her. "I'm going to speak to Wilky tomorrow. This cannot continue. He has to understand the difference between Edenites and the Soulless. It is not good for him to get so..." He seemed to search for the proper word.

“...Confused.”

[Click Here to View the CAST OF CHARACTERS](#)

Chapter 2 - Aaliss

Aaliss watched as Piers shuffled down the hallway and into the flickering candlelight. She'd be happy to leave the Parsonage. She never felt comfortable here. She always got the odd sensation that the Parsonage was more dangerous than the Zone – a silly notion, but it rippled through her now.

Piers stopped a few paces from the door and gave her the “all clear” signal.

For a moment the firelight lit his scarred face and the shadows played their games, creating a version of Piers Aaliss didn't recognize – morphing him into something wicked.

That's not my brother. It's simply the shadows and the full moon up to their tricks.

She shook her head to clear it, eased her way into the hallway, and headed in the opposite direction from her brother, back toward the circular staircase. She moved swiftly until she noticed light seeping from the cracks in the doorway that led to the corner room, the one closest to the staircase. Someone had left the door open by the slightest amount.

Her heart hammered against her chest as hushed voices escaped from the other side of the door.

She glanced back at her brother, who waved her on toward the staircase, yet the door with the light and the voices pulled her. The staircase led back to Wilky and her bed and rest. She wanted to go that way, yet her eyes focused on the sliver of light inviting her to the other door.

She couldn't just turn away from the voices, so she crept toward them and quieted her breath to sharpen her hearing. The words became clearer as she drew closer, and she glimpsed into the light.

The High Priest stood with his back to her, but she'd recognize him anywhere. As a large man, his ample flesh waggled when he spoke, and he still wore the purple robes from preaching the Reflections only a few hours earlier. If that wasn't enough to identify him, she saw the thin braid that fell halfway down his back like a serpent. As a direct descendant of Jacob, he never cut his hair. Everyone else in Eden had short hair. Only the male Blood Relatives were allowed to wear their hair long, and tradition decreed that they must always wear it in a braid.

When she was a child, she dreamed of yanking that braid. Now she wouldn't mind doing far worse to the High Priest as payback for all the vicious things he had done to Piers.

The High Priest spoke in a hushed baritone voice. “The Creator works in mysterious ways. He has fulfilled the prophesy through the strange boy. We have what we need.”

The large bulk of the High Priest blocked the second speaker from view and muffled his words. She inched the door open to better hear the conversation and perhaps see the identity of the second speaker, but the High Priest stood in the way like a boulder.

“Malachi, are you sure we have the formula?” asked the mysterious voice.

“Yes, I'm certain. It was right there in front of us for hundreds of years, though it took that strange boy to find it. A simple mushroom and a flower, and the cure works instantly. The Red Death will have no power over us. Our blood will remain pure. We have been delivered.”

She inched the door open, desperate to see the face of the other speaker. She wanted to know who this ‘strange boy’ was that he kept mentioning.

“This changes everything. How quickly can we make the cure?” The second voice became clearer and sounded familiar, but she still couldn't identify it.

The High Priest shifted his weight as if he stood on uncertain ground, and lowered his voice. “Making the cure will not be a problem, but we must be careful. The cure presents us

with a unique opportunity. Eden Day is less than three months away. Everyone partakes of the Sacred Drink at the high festival. We could slip the cure into the drink and inoculate the entire community without them knowing."

She pushed the door open another inch to hear the reply, her heart dancing in her chest. If the High Priest turned, he would spot her, and she would spend a long time underground in the jails. It was possible he'd never release her.

"The Creator speaks through you," the mystery man said. "If we secretly slip them the cure, then we can claim responsibility for this miracle. Our power would be absolute."

The High Priest chuckled. "Exactly. We could march two or three Soulless among the people without fear. The prophesy will be fulfilled, and no one will dare question us. Ever."

She gripped the bread hard, breaking the crust as sweat soaked her back. She glanced at her brother, who still lurked in the hallway as a lookout. Unaware why she had stopped, he waved for her to continue to the staircase, but she could not move. She needed to hear more.

The High Priest turned, and for a heartbeat it seemed as if he would walk out the door and straight into her. Luckily, he stopped halfway and grabbed a cup from a table.

"What about the boy and his family?" asked the stranger. "They will know the truth. They create too large a loose end."

The world stopped spinning.

The boy and his family? Her mind spun. *Are they talking about Wilky and my family?*

The High Priest answered, "Do not concern yourself with them. Jacob has shown me the answer in a vision. Now I understand why He told me to assign the boy as a researcher at such a young age. Tonight will be their last. The scarred one is still useful. His devotion is strong, and I can bend him. Also, it would look too suspicious if the entire family vanished. Some remember the unusual circumstances behind the fire and the popularity of their parents."

The High Priest moved to the side, sliding just enough to reveal the face of the second speaker.

Aaliss's stomach soared and she tasted bile.

"Agreed." Her uncle, President Aibel, smiled with a slight lift of his chin, as he raised a pewter cup of the Sacred Drink to toast the High Priest.

A jolt ripped through her, and her knees buckled. The High Priest and her uncle meant to murder them tonight. Rage burned inside her.

Do I have time to save Wilky?

She glanced at the door to the staircase, not sure if she should run or confront them. If she entered the room and shut the door, she could hurt them both badly, and then kill them. They deserved a painful death, and it wouldn't take long. Yet Wilky's safety had to come first. The High Priest's men could already be on their way to the lab, and Wilky would stand no chance against them without her.

Piers's voice wafted down the hallway. "Father Isaac, what are you doing up at this time?" He shifted his body between Aaliss and the Priest to shield her from view.

Jacob's Braid!

She cursed the full moon. She had no time to spare for the High Priest and her uncle — she'd have to come back for them.

With her head spinning and chest heaving, she dashed toward the staircase and plunged back into the darkness. No lock barred entry from this side of the door. After all, no one worried about the Priests leaving the comforts of the Parsonage.

The High Priest heard voices in the hallway. He wobbled to the door and looked for the

source, but found the corridor empty. Doubting his own ears, he turned back to the President, who poured another cup of the Sacred Drink.

Crumbs on the otherwise spotless floor crunched under his sandal—a few bits of bread on a white tile.

“Curious,” he muttered to himself.

Aaliss raced forward taking the stone steps two at a time. She automatically switched into her Zone state, senses on high alert, and stopped only when she reached the ground floor and listened for the sounds of pursuit. No shouts, footsteps, or doors slammed—no sign that anyone had noticed her.

With any luck, the High Priest expected them to be sleeping in their residence. That should buy them some time, maybe enough to escape.

She pulled open the door to the Compound and plunged forward into the building’s sprawling ground floor. She sprinted forward until she reached the shiny steel door that led to the Labyrinth, and unlocked the door with a key from a chain around her neck.

As she reached for the doorknob, a deep voice grumbled from behind her, “Hey, you, what’re you doing out so late?”

She had been reckless in her haste and silently chastised herself. Caught, she turned and smiled, her boots squeaking against the tiled floor as she came face to face with two Monks.

Monks patrolled the hallways late at night, looking for unholy behavior. Most people feared them. Their authority stemmed from the High Priest, which made them virtually all-powerful.

She faced two Monks who could not look more opposite from each other.

One cast a big shadow, literally. Big and burly, he towered over her, a red cloak straining tightly around his broad shoulders. He held a whistle in his hand, but upon seeing Aaliss, he pocketed it in the folds of his cloak, and an unfriendly sneer twisted his ugly face.

The second one was short and thin with a long face and scary-looking hollow eyes.

“I’m just headed to the Labyrinth.” Aaliss tried to appear annoyed, rolling her eyes and tapping her foot. “I’ve got work that can’t wait. They treat us like slaves.”

The big Monk stepped toward her. He smelled of that night’s dinner, which, in truth, hadn’t smelled good when it had been served. “What’s that you’re carrying?”

Jacob’s braid!

She’d forgotten the bread. “It’s just something for... for my brother. He missed dinner tonight because he’s working late.” She tried to keep her tone light, as if being caught with food was not a major infraction of the rules, but it was.

The Monk’s beefy fingers flipped open the linen wrapping. “Priest’s bread.” He smiled at his partner. “Thievery is a major sin, Abner. What should we do with her?”

Abner smirked, his long face turning cruel as he looked Aaliss up and down with nasty, appraising eyes. “She’s cute. I’m sure we can think of some way for her to do her penitence.”

Aaliss acted on instinct and tossed the bread at the big Monk’s face. When he lifted his paws to catch it, she kicked his left knee hard. The blow buckled the brute, dropping him to his knees, and she swung her right elbow into his temple. The Monk groaned and wobbled, and she immediately chopped the edge of her hand against the base of his neck, which sent him to the floor unconscious.

Abner tried to grab her, but she caught his wrist and brought his arm down hard against her knee, dislocating his elbow with a sick popping sound. He groaned, and she grabbed him by the shoulders and rammed his head into the steel door. The Monk staggered back a step, his

nose bloody, and she knocked him unconscious with a roundhouse kick to the head. Just to make sure he was out cold, she booted him hard in the ribs, and and grinned slightly at the sound of bone breaking.

You deserved that and worse, you pig!

The Monks would never have approached her if they knew she was a Guardian, but she was young, in plain dress, and didn't have any weapons, so they had been none the wiser.

She dragged them one at a time to the other side of the steel door, and remembered to grab the bread right before it closed. She bound their hands with the rope they used to cinch their cloaks, and tied their feet with their bootlaces. They'd be unconscious for a while, but eventually they'd wake and bring others.

Time was short, but she'd known that already.

Three stories below ground level, the Labyrinth consisted of a honeycomb of tunnels and labs where a dozen different research teams worked. Wilky was the youngest researcher in Eden's history and, accordingly, assigned the smallest, least convenient space – farthest from the entrance door and closest to the Zone.

She flew down the concrete steps, praying he would be safe. No one else was working in the Labyrinth at this time of night, so she expertly wove her way past dark labs and through empty hallways. She held her breath when she reached his workspace, used her key, and shoved open the heavy metal door.

He calmly sat on a stool waiting for her, safe.

She exhaled. "I've brought food, Wilky, but we've got to go." She pushed the bread toward him, her hands shaking. "Something terrible has happened."

He casually slid from the stool and took the bread.

"You don't understand. They're coming for us. We've got to run!"

Wilky strolled past a desk littered with a dozen test tubes, two microscopes, and one computer, and stopped at the holding area. Two-inch thick glass walls separated three holding pens. One contained the three starving Soulless, one held a single girl about the same age as Aaliss, and the third was empty.

Aaliss glowered at him as he opened the food delivery chute and dropped the loaf into the pen that housed the three Guests. It landed softly, and the largest of the three, a boy a few years older than Aaliss, snatched the bread and broke it into pieces to share with the other two.

She started to urge Wilky on, but then noticed some provisions by the door that opened to the tunnel, which led to the Zone – four woolen cloaks, four leather satchels, her small crossbow, a two-foot curved short sword, and her full-body black ostrich-skin jumpsuit. The ostrich skin was extraordinarily soft and warm, and well broken in. It was her most precious possession – her Guardian uniform.

"How did you know we needed to leave?" She placed her hands at her hips. "Did you overhear something and not tell me?"

He ignored her question and asked one of his own. "Piers?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't get him, but he'll be fine. They won't harm him. I heard the High Priest and our uncle talking. They need him for *appearances*. You and I, on the other hand, they'd rather not have around."

His eyes became suddenly wet, and tears trickled down his cheeks.

She hadn't seen him cry since the fire, and her heart twisted. "He'll be okay, Wilky. Don't worry about Piers. Our brother knows how to take care of himself."

He nodded, but she thought he didn't really believe her, so she added, "We don't have much time. I'll come back for him later. We'll figure something out."

He pointed at the girl who sat alone in one of the holding pens. "Need," was all he said. She sighed and shook her head. "We can't bring her. We have to move quickly, and she'll just get in our way. All we need is each other."

He stood firm by the door to the holding pen, and said, "Need!" – with more conviction this time.

She knew that *look* on his face; no one could argue with him when he got that look. One time he went four days without washing because he didn't like the texture of his soap, of all things. She had to whittle off an inch and practically sand it to make it smooth enough for him.

She could drag him along by the ear, but they would get caught that way. He needed to move and move quickly, which would only happen on his terms.

"You know the alarm will ring when I open the door to the tunnel. All the Monks will know something is wrong!"

He folded his arms against his chest.

She sighed. "Do we need the other three or just this one?"

He shook his head. "Only the girl."

"Okay, we'll take her, but we have to go now!" She stomped her foot in frustration, retrieved two gas masks from the table, and checked to make sure they had a full two-week charge. That's the maximum amount of time they would have together, as they could not risk being in contact with the Soulless girl unprotected.

The Red Death was easily transmitted through air, so just being near a Soulless would cause infection. Those contaminated died young, never lasting beyond the early twenties. If an older person encountered the disease, death came almost instantly. No known symptoms foretold the disease except what showed in the eyes. The children all knew the rhyme: *...eyes turn red, you'll soon be dead.*

Aaliss watched Wilky as she changed into her jumpsuit.

He held two beakers in his left hand and a dropper in his right. He squeezed fluid from each beaker into the steel door's lock. Smoke spiraled upward and an acidic odor filled the room, as the metal fused together and melted the lock.

"Nice work, Wilky." Fully dressed, she approached the holding pen with her key in hand, and looked back at her brother. "Are you sure we have to take her? This is crazy. She's going to slow us down."

"Need!" He grabbed his cloak and glared at her.

She regarded the girl again, whom she'd gathered two days earlier. The girl had been odd and constantly talked to herself in a language Aaliss did not understand, but she'd taken direction and seemed harmless.

Aaliss donned a gas mask and made sure Wilky had his on securely, and then she opened the glass door and waved for the girl to follow her.

The girl tentatively stepped forward.

Wilky gave the girl a cloak and a satchel, and motioned for her to follow him.

Aaliss unlocked the door to the tunnel into the Zone. Dread filled her as she peered back at the lab.

A large framed picture of Jacob hung by the door. Underneath the photograph was the Guardians' sacred motto: *The Soulless are Not Human. To Kill in Jacob's Name is Just.*

Red lights flashed.

An alarm blared.

She grabbed her supplies and turned to push them forward, but Wilky and the girl had already started to run – straight toward the Zone and the full moon.

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Chapter 3 – Piers

Piers smiled as bright sunlight kissed his face. The pain in his arm and the weakness in his leg had vanished, and he stood tall and straight, strong and whole. He rubbed both sides of his face and felt nothing but smooth skin – the scars had disappeared. His toes brushed lightly against the soft grass in the courtyard on a perfect spring day.

Rebecca stood beside him – lovely Rebecca, his Rebecca. Red highlights sparkled in her short wavy brown hair, and her wide chocolate eyes shined lovingly. They both wore plain ceremonial wedding robes the color of freshly fallen snow. A yellow rosebud hung from Rebecca's neck, fastened by two strings of white twine twisted together. The flower symbolized their love, and the twine the life they would lead together.

Piers's parents hovered next to him, with Aaliss and Wilky at their side. They all looked happy, dressed for a great celebration and feast.

Admiring Edenites gathered for the festivity and crowded the rest of the open space. The scene felt familiar to Piers, having dreamed of this moment with Rebecca many times before....

Before the fire?

A harp played soft music in the background, signaling the beginning of the ceremony.

Piers turned to face the High Priest, who plastered a wide grin on his doughy face. He was clad in his rich purple ceremonial robe, the one reserved for significant festivals such as this.

The High Priest nodded to the harpist so he could begin the service, but the music didn't stop. The harp grew louder, its notes turning from light and whimsical to harsh and discordant, as if a child were scraping his hands across the strings.

Piers winced, and a scowl darkened Rebecca's beautiful face. The noise grew louder still, splitting his ears.

The High Priest grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around. His eyes blazed crimson as he slapped Piers hard across the face.

Piers tasted blood and woke with a start to find two Monks inches from his face.

One had a nasty welt on his neck, and the other shook him. "Wake up, scar face!"

The large Monk with the bruised neck grabbed him by his sleeping shirt and yanked him to his feet. "Time to get up, Father. The High Priest would like a word with you."

Piers barely had time to grab his simple black robe from the bedpost and slip it over his head, before a harsh shove sent him skittering into the bed of the novice who slept next to him. Six other novices shared the sleeping chamber. Though they all appeared to be asleep, he knew they were faking. No one could have slept through that commotion.

The two Monks took turns pushing him into the hallway and toward the High Priest's office.

He had difficulty keeping up with them as he dragged his bad leg, scraping it against the floor. By the time he reached the office, sweat drenched his sleeping shirt and anxiety rippled through him. He had never heard of a Priest being treated with such disrespect. What could he have done to deserve such shabby treatment?

The big Monks rapped on the door three times.

Piers cringed at the loud noise. He tried to calm his thumping heart with a few deep breaths, but with little success – it felt as if it would explode in his chest.

There must be some mistake.

The High Priest bid them to enter.

The smaller Monk opened the door while the large one tossed Piers forward with a heave. Piers stumbled into the office, fell to his knees, and braced himself with both hands against the floor.

The High Priest sat on his tall throne chair behind a massive oak desk. The chair had armrests shaped like lions' heads, and velvet cushions the dark red of dried blood. The desk looked sturdy and simple with straight, clean lines that glistened with the sheen of hundreds of years of careful polishing. Two white candles flickered on both sides of the desk.

In contrast to the simple desk, the rest of the office was ornate: elaborate wall sconces provided soft yellowish light, carved cherry paneling stretched halfway up the walls, and paintings of dozens of past High Priests hung above the wood paneling. All the men were memorialized in the same pose, and with the same solemn expression on their faces.

"That's not necessary, Josh." The High Priest sounded friendly, but his eyes burned hot. "Help our friend up and bring him over here."

Josh, the big Monk, yanked Piers to his feet, dragged him to a chair opposite the desk, and shoved him onto it.

"You can leave us now." The High Priest dismissed the Monks with a wave of his hand and a phony smile. When the door shut, he turned his attention to Piers. "Is this the first time we've had an official meeting in my office?"

Piers wiped sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his robe. He wanted to vomit, but he choked down the acid that rose in his throat. "No, your Grace, I was here three years ago, after the fire."

"Ah yes, how could I have forgotten?" The High Priest folded his hands contentedly on the desk. "That was a bittersweet day – the bitter news about your parents, offset by your sweet decision to join the priesthood. I trust you haven't regretted your choice?"

"No, I have not." The question alarmed Piers.

"That's so good to hear, my son. I knew we could count on you."

We?

A shadow glided from the corner of the room, and Piers's heart skipped two beats.

The shadow morphed into a man. Gray hair speckled his neat black goatee, slate gray eyes glimmered in the candlelight, and a thin braid shifted on his shoulders. He moved silently and confidently in his black ostrich-skin suit, which showed the well-sculpted lines of his arms and torso. Two curved short swords hung from both of his hips.

Piers knew him instantly, although he had never met him.

They called him the Viper – the Priest in charge of the Guardians, the High Priest's nephew, and a Blood Relative. Stories swirled about him – horrible, violent stories.

Piers dismissed them as exaggerations, or myths even, but watching him now, he believed every one of them, and a frost spread throughout his body.

"We can count on you, can't we?" The High Priest ignored the Viper, who remained ominously silent.

Piers nodded. "Yes, of course. I'll do... anything you ask."

"Do you know the story behind this desk?" The High Priest leaned forward. "It's very special. It's the Desk of Jacob, the very same desk where he penned the Book of Jacob. The Creator spoke to him while he sat behind this desk. No one can lie in its presence." The High Priest lovingly rubbed the desk's smooth surface with his pudgy hands. "Do you believe that, Piers?"

Piers tried to focus on the High Priest, but it was impossible with the Viper skulking toward him, so he ended up dancing his eyes between both men, never settling on one for long.

"If you tell me it is true, I will believe it with all my-my soul." His voice cracked as fear threatened to consume him.

"Where are your siblings?"

The Viper glided even closer, his arms within reach.

"I don't... know. They should... be sleeping."

"They should be sleeping, yet they are not. When was the last time you saw your sister?"

They must have caught Aaliss with the bread.

Piers regained a measure of control and sat straighter. Only his desire to protect his sister could overcome his fear. "Aaliss visited me tonight. She was worried about the state of the Guests in my brother's lab. She thought they were starving. I gave her a loaf of bread for them. It was my idea and my fault. I accept full responsibility." He lowered his head in submission. He could have refused her, should have refused her. Now he just hoped he could take all the punishment for the rule breaking.

The Viper moved closer still.

Piers smelled apples and imagined the man's breath against his neck. He tried not to tremble, but his hands shook like leaves in the wind.

"You gave a loaf of my bread to the Soulless?"

"Yes, your Grace. I beg for your forgiveness." He kept his gaze downcast.

"What else did you do with your sister? Did you conspire with her to betray us?"

He lifted his eyes. The High Priest's face had turned purple, and Piers's stomach lurched.

What else has she done?

He spoke quickly in one burst. "No, your Grace, I just gave her the bread. She would never betray Eden."

The High Priest shared a glance with the Viper and the purple drained from his face. "Oh, but they have, Piers. Your sister and brother have betrayed us. They made a deal with the Soulless. They freed a Soulless girl and fled to the Zone." The High Priest rubbed his hand through his hair. "They went arm-in-arm and face-to-face with a Soulless girl. They took no gasmasks. I can only imagine how the Dark One tempted them, but now they are traitors and contaminated, their souls forfeit."

Only a slight tremor in the High Priest's left eye betrayed his dishonesty, but the news had shocked Piers so much, he couldn't be sure whether he'd imagined it.

His body felt as if it had turned to liquid. If he had not been sitting, he would have ended up on the floor in a puddle. "There must be some mistake, your Grace." He leaned heavily against the desk, an apple-sized lump having formed in his throat. "Aaliss and Wilky would never betray us. It makes no sense. Why would they submit to the Red Death? Their souls will have been taken."

"The Dark One works in mysterious ways." The High Priest nodded to the Viper, who grabbed Piers's arm.

He struggled, but the Viper held him firmly and jerked his scarred arm hard toward the desk.

"Now, tell me everything," said the High Priest. "Where are your sister and brother, and what are their plans?"

He stammered, "Th-there must be-be a mis-mis-mistake. I know nothing." Blood pounded inside his head and drowned out any thoughts.

The Viper slid the nearest candle toward his arm.

Piers struggled more fiercely, but he couldn't free himself from the Viper's iron grip. "N-n-not the fire."

Images of the fire three years ago flooded his mind's eye. He remembered carrying Wilky through the smoke and then racing back for Aaliss, who was trapped in her room by a burning beam. He had kicked it aside, pulled her out, and pushed her toward the front door and safety. Then when he had turned to his parents' room, he heard screams and tried to reach them, but the flames had grown too large and wild. They jumped everywhere, burning higher and hotter, blocking his path. They leaped at him, eagerly licking his body, consuming him. He remembered strong arms carrying him away as his parents screamed, and then darkness had overtaken him.

The Viper pulled Piers's arm over the flame.

As he cried out, the smell of charred skin replaced the scent of apples.

The High Priest smiled beatifically, drumming his fingers on the Desk of Jacob as if listening to a concerto only he could hear.

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Chapter 4 - Aaliss

Aaliss slammed the tunnel door shut.

Thud!

And with that ominous sound the unthinkable had become real. Her Guardian code would never open the door again, and without the tunnel, they were stranded in the Zone with the Soulless and the full moon. She could take care of herself, but Wilky would be practically defenseless in the wild.

Being responsible for him had become second nature to her, but she could manage him in Eden, a safe place filled with quiet rooms where distractions wouldn't overwhelm him. The Zone was different. Dangers filled the Zone, seeping into the very trees and grasses, and the Red Death made even the air lethal.

How am I going to keep him safe here?

Wilky and the Soulless girl bent at the waist, gasping for breath from the sprint through the tunnel.

He looked fragile, and she worried that the rough world outside of Eden would swallow him whole.

She cursed her uncle under her breath. That snake had betrayed them. She had never trusted the High Priest, his low character as obvious to her as a foul stench, but she had hoped for more from her uncle. Admittedly, they were never close, but to betray his own kin? A special place in hell waited for him, and she wanted to be the person who sent him there. She'd die happy, if only she could strangle the life out of him first.

You'll get yours, Uncle, even if I have to die to do it.

Revenge would have to wait, however. She groaned and pounded the door a half dozen times. It felt good to hit something, even if it *was* just a steel door.

The door blended seamlessly with the surrounding forest, as if it belonged to a thicket of shrubs and small trees. A computer projected the camouflage onto the steel. It changed with the time of day and the seasons, thus always ensuring an almost perfect match to the surroundings. Only those trained to find the slight tells could actually see them – tiny imperfections that differentiated the digital image from the natural forest that surrounded it. Everything about Eden involved trickery and deceit, even the way in.

She frowned and turned to face Wilky and the Soulless girl. Speaking more to herself than her brother, she said, "Okay, which way shall we go from here?"

The Zone consisted mostly of dense forest. Mature oaks, maples, and evergreens competed for space with giant gray ghost trees. Ferns, mosses, and thick grasses covered the forest floor.

"We could travel along the main way." She pointed to a path straight in front of them. "Or we could venture out to the north." Barely visible, the thin northern trail wasn't wide enough even for Wilky's slim frame. "We need to put as much distance between them and us as possible. They probably have four teams of Guardians in the Zone. The Monks should have radioed them by now, so they'll likely converge on us by way of the main path. But if we go north, the going will be slow and noisy, and you don't have the proper training to navigate that narrow trail. Any fresh team they send after us will easily track and overtake us."

Wilky frowned, but she had always told him the truth, no matter how difficult, and she refused to change now. Lies were for other people, scum like the High Priest and her miserable worm of an uncle.

No lies in my family, not between my brothers and me.

Wilky spun in a slow circle, and trembled. This was his first time in the Zone.

Fear is a good thing. There's much to fear here.

She spotted two Eyes perched in a nearby oak. One pointed at the tunnel door, and the other away from it. Battery-operated Eyes peppered the Zone, transmitting images to the Compound. She unsheathed her blade, climbed up the tree, hacked at the cameras to knock them from their perch, and watched as they tumbled to the ground, useless.

She jumped from the tree and stomped on them with a satisfied grin on her face.

The Eyes were only one of the obstacles they would have to overcome. The Edenites had added all sorts of traps to the buffer area. Aaliss knew what to look for – strategically placed mines, spring traps, and poisonous gas canisters, all designed to prevent the Soulless from wandering too close to Eden – but Wilky had no idea what was dangerous, and he might trigger one without realizing it. She'd have to keep him close.

He tugged at her arm. "Water."

She sheathed her blade. "We don't have time for a drink now, Wilky. I've got to decide what to do, and we need to move fast."

He crossed his arms over his chest and shot Aaliss that familiar stubborn look again.

"You've got to be careful in the Zone. Dangerous creatures roam out here. You have to do what I say and follow close behind me and try not to make much noise." Aaliss turned to the Soulless girl.

The girl stood mesmerized by the closed tunnel door, as if she couldn't quite understand what had happened to the tunnel.

Aaliss grabbed her shoulders and spun her around. "Listen, you, I don't care if you follow us or not, but if you come with us, you do as I tell you and you keep quiet. I'll leave you behind at the first hint of a problem. I'm not going to risk our lives for a Soulless girl."

The girl stayed mute with a glazed look in her eyes.

Wilky tugged on Aaliss's arm. "Eden River!"

She shook her head. "We can't go back to Eden, Wilky. The river is mined, and even if we made it back they would find us. Who knows what story they've spun? They'll brand us as traitors and execute us. Our necks will be on the headman's block in no time. We need a plan first, and maybe some help."

A howl tore through the night from the forest just in front of them, and a chill crept into her blood.

It's a firefox!

Their distinctive cry sounded longer and higher-pitched than regular foxes. Extremely dangerous, they usually traveled in packs. The size of wolves, they had strong jaws with two rows of razor-sharp teeth, and amber eyes that glowed in the dark. Their fur started deep red at the base, lightened to orange, and then blazed bright yellow at the tips. When the sun hit the fur just right, the animal appeared as if were on fire. Beautiful, if only they gave you time to appreciate it before they went for your throat.

Aaliss glared at the full moon and stepped closer to Wilky. He'd be defenseless against one of the predators. "It's getting late, and the moon's lost most of its power by now. We should be all right."

She scanned the forest in search of the firefox. She didn't see any signs of the animal, and turned to...

Wilky and the Soulless girl raced toward the river, crashing through brush and stomping long grass.

"This is crazy," she muttered as she ran after them. "The river is a dead end!"

Within a few minutes, Wilky skidded to a stop where the forest ended and the river began.

Eden was only a half-mile across the water, yet it felt a lot farther away. As a peninsula, Eden connected to the mainland by a narrow strip of land littered with landmines called the Bridge. Only a fool would try to cross the Bridge without the map pinpointing the landmines, and they didn't have it. Eden River protected Eden's other three sides, its water fast and wide, and also treacherous with numerous mines. The fishermen could navigate those explosives, the information passed down from generation to generation, but they never shared that knowledge with outsiders.

From here she could see the massive wall that circled the city, the tops of the four towers that stretched above the wall, and the pitched roof of the cathedral that stood in the center. A few lights twinkled from the Parsonage, and her ire rose.

"I bet the High Priest is making plans to capture us." She turned toward Wilky. "Now what? I told you we can't go back to Eden!"

"We take Eden River that way." He pointed downriver.

She grinned, surprised at her brother's quick thinking. "Good idea! The current will carry us a few miles downriver. As long as we stay along the bank, the mines should be no problem, and they won't know where to look for us. We'll need some dead wood to make a raft."

She had always thought of the river as Eden's protector. Its fast currents and mines kept unwanted visitors from the community, shielding the Edenites from the Soulless and the Red Death. Now the river had become their ally, the only chance for two Edenite runaways and a Soulless girl. Perhaps the moon still had some power left, turning things upside down.

Another firefox answered the first's howl. The shriek came from their left, hungry and close.

Aaliss rested her hand on the hilt of her sword. "Sounds like a hunting call. Let's move fast."

They had no problem finding dead wood along the riverbank. Using rope from their satchels, they bound four long, wide branches together.

Aaliss pointed at a rocky portion of the riverbank that jutted into the water. "Let's launch the raft from there."

She studied the river with trepidation and tried to see how deep the water flowed, but no luck. She couldn't swim, and the current moved swiftly. She watched as white water splashed up and over nearby rocks, and a tree branch raced downstream. She followed the branch's path until it crashed into a rock and split in half.

The river flowed south. She had never gone south before, having been warned away from that part of the Zone. Even though she'd finished first in her class, she had only been a full Guardian for less than a year, so her superiors prohibited her from patrolling the most dangerous parts of the Zone, and everyone considered the southern sectors the most dangerous.

Another firefox howled to their right, and the hair on her neck stood on end. This one sounded even closer than the last, and she felt the trap tightening around them—at least three beasts hunted them.

Bending low, she tapped the water with her hand, testing it.

Will it save us or drown us?

"The water's cold, Wilky, but not too cold. I'll stand in the river and hold the raft steady. You and the Soulless girl jump on. Be careful to stay on top. We'll take it downriver for as long as we can last and avoid those rocks."

Another howl. Tall grasses by a nearby tree swayed, and a flash of red mingled with the green in the moonlight.

Wilky edged away from the forest. Even he realized the firefoxes were close now.

They snarled and she smelled their wild fur. Better to risk death in Eden River than face a hungry pack of firefoxes.

Aaliss huffed, pushed aside her fear of drowning, plunged into the water, and battled to keep her footing on the slippery riverbed. The water reached her waist and the cold knocked the breath out of her.

"Come on, Wilky, I've got it steady." She clenched her teeth.

He clumsily jumped on top of the raft while the Soulless girl nimbly swung her body next to his.

Once both of her passengers were safely on their stomachs, Aailiss kicked off the riverbed and deftly pulled herself up to join them. She thanked Jacob that the wood stayed afloat as the strong current raced them downriver.

She chanced a look over her shoulder and found four disappointed firefoxes sulking along the bank. Their amber eyes sparkled in the moonlight as they howled their displeasure at a meal missed.

She exhaled, wrapped her left arm around her brother to help him cling to the raft, and watched Eden with a heavy heart as they floated downriver.

When the towers and the Compound disappeared, she muttered under her breath. "They'll pay for this."

Aaliss lost all feeling in her right hand and both feet, which dragged in the river. Her teeth chattered incessantly, and her left arm and shoulder had cramped under the strain of holding her brother tight to keep him safe.

"We have to g-get off the water. It's t-too cold." She kicked with her feet, pushed hard with her right hand, and guided the raft to the bank, where she beached it onto rocky sand.

They had lasted half an hour on the river, having traveled six miles or so.

Good enough.

She shoved the raft back into the water, hoping to throw off anyone who would pursue them.

The full moon still cast enough light to guide them. "Let's follow this path." She pointed to an active deer trail. "We need to put distance between us and the river. Try to be quiet."

This part of the Zone felt different from the areas she usually patrolled. Although it had the same trees and vegetation, more giant ghost trees dotted the landscape. The trees' massive size and broad branches created wide swaths of clear space on the ground.

An eerie silence settled into these woods as the three of them traveled quietly for a long time, until Wilky began to stumble from fatigue.

She stopped in a grove of four vast ghost trees. She liked to camp among the giant trees. The higher branches were usually safe from predators and an easy place to hide.

"Okay," she said. "We've traveled far enough. Let's make camp here. We'll climb up and sleep in our hammocks. It'll be light soon, so let's get a few hours of rest. We'll start out again at daylight."

She helped her two charges up the largest of the four trees. They climbed thirty feet and settled on an intersection of three wide branches. She removed hammocks from their satchels, firmly secured them to the tree, and placed hers close to Wilky's.

She whispered to him, "Okay, everything is quiet, and we're safe for now."

He had difficulty communicating, but if he grew familiar with his surroundings, and she removed much of the outside stimulus, the words would come.

"We don't need to rush, but there are things I need to know."

He nodded.

"I overheard the High Priest and our uncle talking. They said you've discovered a cure to the Red Death. Is that true? Have you figured it out?"

He smiled slyly.

Edenites had been searching for a cure from the beginning, more than eight hundred years. The idea that her sweet, slightly odd brother could have solved the mystery sent a jolt through her. It was both miraculous and shocking at the same time.

"How did you do it?"

"I saw it." He spoke slowly, each word strained. "It came like a dream. I saw the virus in the microscope, and then I saw the cure. I can't explain it any better." He shook his head, obviously frustrated.

She could see that he wanted to say more, to explain it to her in a way she could understand, but he simply couldn't—not now, in the middle of the strange forest and the giant trees. Maybe he'd be able to later, when things became more settled.

If things ever become more settled.

"What's the cure? They said something about a mushroom and a flower. Is that all it takes?"

"Everyone can be cured."

Aaliss paused to consider his words, not sure she understood their meaning. "Everyone can be cured?" she repeated. "Does that mean that the Soulless can live free of the disease? And we don't have to worry about catching it?"

The moonlight twinkled in his eyes. "*Everyone.*"

"That's incredible!"

The Priests had always discussed a cure for the Red Death in terms of an inoculation, a drug that would shield Edenites from the curse. They'd never mentioned the possibility of curing the Soulless, and the fat pig of a High Priest certainly said nothing about that.

"The High Priest and our uncle plan to cure the Edenites on Eden Day," she said. "They want to add your cure to the Sacred Drink and make it seem like a miracle, but that wouldn't work with you hanging around. You could tell someone that you developed the cure, and then their miracle would become yours, not theirs. They assumed I would know what had happened and would protect you."

She sighed as the truth of their circumstances fully dawned on her. It was even worse than she suspected. "We're too dangerous, too much of a threat to their grand plan to keep alive. They'll do anything they can to find us and kill us."

Wilky shrugged, and the Soulless girl turned her head toward them.

"What's her name? I can't continue calling her the *Soulless girl*. She must have a name."

Guardians never asked the Soulless they captured their names. Names were dangerous—Edenites had names. Better to refer to them simply as "Soulless."

"Gemma."

"Can she speak our language?"

The girl stared blankly into space, and Aaliss wondered if she knew what was happening.

"Yes," Wilky said. "She uses our words, only she mixes up the sounds a little. If I listen closely, I can understand her."

"So she understands what we say?"

"Yes."

"And we still need her?"

Wilky didn't say anything, but she knew his answer by the stern expression on his face.

Glancing at Gemma, she spoke loud enough for the girl to hear. "She can come with us, but I'm not responsible for her. If she gets in the way or causes trouble, I'm cutting her loose."

She lowered her voice and whispered to her brother, "Try to get some sleep. It will be light soon. I'll wake you in a few hours."

"Can't sleep."

Her heart ached. He sounded so small and young and scared.

"Sing to me," he said.

"We should be quiet now. Just close your eyes."

"Can't sleep. Sing to me."

New places and things frightened Wilky. He had a hard time managing them.

She could only imagine what effect their predicament and the Zone had on him. She hated to sing, but if singing would make him feel a little better, she could not refuse him. "Okay, just for a moment."

He closed his eyes and she sang him a song, a lullaby their mother sang to them when they were young.

*Sleep and let God attend thee,
He's sent Guardians to protect thee,
Soft the darkness comes a creeping,
The Red Death comes a sneaking,
You will be safe while you are sleeping.*

~~~

*Angels watch over thee,  
Jacob keeps the Dark One away from thee,  
Soft the darkness comes a creeping,  
The Red Death comes a sneaking,  
You will be safe while you are sleeping.*

The gasmask distorted her notes, but the song worked. By the time she finished, both Wilky and Gemma had fallen asleep.

The night sky started to lighten and turn gray. She didn't expect to fall asleep, but exhaustion overtook her. Right before she drifted off, a troubling thought tried to break through her fatigue.

*The forest is too quiet, even for this hour.*

She was too tired to understand what it meant.

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## Chapter 5 – Eamon

Eamon studied the faces around the campfire, worry etched on his own as he wondered whether this would be the last time they would all gather together. He sat between his two older brothers, King Dermot and Prince Fintan. Dermot had lived six winters more than Eamon had, and Fintan one, yet *he* was the planner and worrier. Often he wished he could be more like them, but he never stopped fretting about tomorrow, the next season, the next winter.

All the council members, twelve in total, joined them this night, forming a loose circle around a campfire that had started to lose its intensity. They met in the Courtyard, in the middle of the Stronghold, a small city protected by a sturdy stone wall. The Stronghold stood in the center of Dermot's kingdom between the Outpost to the north and the Settlement to the south.

When Eamon realized everyone had stopped talking and were looking at him, he remembered what they had been discussing. "We'll have to slaughter more cattle this year. The tribe's grown since last winter." The answer was obvious to him.

"The herd's also added numbers this year, my Lord," added Keenan, the Cattle Master. Built broad and strong like a steer, he had been Cattle Master for three years, and Dermot trusted him. "I reckon we could cull the herd by another twenty over last year and still maintain the size."

All eyes turned toward Dermot. His reign had already lasted six years, almost an eternity. The Sword of Power lay across his lap, a long sword so heavy that it required two hands to wield it in battle. Its blade gleamed in the firelight, and the many rubies in the gold and silver hilt sparkled brilliantly. An inscription, written in a language no one understood, ran down both sides of the blade and glimmered in the firelight. The smithies could no longer make a weapon like the Sword of Power. That knowledge had been lost. They made other swords, fine ones, victorious ones, but none so grand. Only the King could wield the Sword of Power, the tribe's finest.

"Twenty more will do." Dermot sounded tired, his energy waning with the dying fire.

"The butchers will need help," Eamon added, always worried about the repercussions from their decisions no one else seemed to consider. "We lost four to the Red Death this year, including the prior Master."

Everyone spit when he mentioned the Red Death, to ward off evil spirits.

Clay the Cleaver, the new Butcher Master, nodded his head gravely. He had lived only seventeen winters, but Dermot had judged him most capable. He was Keenan's younger brother, although the relationship was impossible to tell by looking at them. Clay resembled a cleaver, wiry of build, face thin and angular, with small black eyes sharp and dangerous.

The tribe's main industry involved livestock, so the number of their cattle and the quality of their butchering made a big difference in their fortunes. Prices at The Exchange where they bartered with other tribes varied. Known for offering the best meat, the Butcher Tribe fetched the highest prices, earning them more silver for the supplies they needed, such as steel for their smiths and wine for their feasts.

Dermot turned toward Fintan. "How many new swords have you added to your ranks this year, brother?"

"Thirty, but our northern neighbors grow increasingly bold by the day. We can not be left unprepared if they develop the nerve to attack us." Emerald flecks in Fintan's dark brown eyes flashed angrily in the firelight.

Eamon knew Fintan wanted to say more, but that he felt uncomfortable discussing it at an open council meeting. Eamon could see it in his brother's eyes, the clenched jaw, and the tense muscles in his shoulders – he had plans, ambitions. Eamon could guess what his brother wanted, but would surely find out later.

"With thirty new swords, you can temporarily spare ten." Dermot glared at Fintan, which silenced his protest before he voiced it. "Your new soldiers can practice their steel work on the cows, and then you can have them back."

The full moon shone down on them. The council met on the evening of each full moon, and this meeting had been longer than any Eamon remembered. He glanced at Dermot, looking for signs of the Red Death even though he knew he was being foolish. Only red eyes warned of the disease, and his brother's eyes had thankfully remained his natural brown. Still, his imagination played evil games on him.

*Have the edges of his eyes turned red? If I stare closely enough, will I see crimson?*

He shook his head to clear away such nonsense.

"That's the final item for us tonight." Dermot lifted his face and gazed at the stars. "May the herd forever be strong and the heavens guide us in all matters!"

The council repeated the short prayer and the meeting ended. The members dispersed, except for Eamon and his two brothers, who remained by the fire.

Fintan and Dermot were shorter and wider than Eamon. Both had long brown hair pulled back in a thick ponytail, unlike Eamon whose hair fell to the top of his shoulders in a curly mop. Eamon shared the same oval face and angular features with his brothers, but the lines of his face had a certain softness that his two brothers lacked, which had earned him the nickname *Eamon the Handsome* among the Stronghold's women. His eyes also burned a deep blue, while both Fintan and Dermot had their mother's chestnut-colored orbs. Eamon could at least remember that his father's eyes had been blue. He couldn't recall much about his mother, just a warm feeling, really, but Dermot had told him of her brown eyes, and that was good enough for him.

When the three were alone, Fintan pleaded his case, as Eamon knew he would. "We should attack the Painted Ones now, Derry. Let's teach them a lesson and take the fields to our north!" Fintan swung his head back and forth from one brother to the other, looking for support and finding none. Undaunted, he pressed on. "They have good fields, fertile land. We could grow corn and wheat for our herds. We'd become more prosperous and our power would grow!"

Eamon knew what Fintan desired – power for the tribe and glory for himself. Not necessarily in that order.

*Some things never change, eh, Brother?*

Dermot listened quietly to his brother's fervent plea, and when Fintan finished, Dermot glanced to the heavens. After a long moment, he turned back to Fintan, his expression hard as steel.

The older brother Eamon loved had vanished, replaced by the king of the Butcher Tribe, and as such, he ruled with certainty. "I will not be the one to break the peace, Fin. We have enough lands, and our time in this world is short enough as it is."

Fintan turned away from his brothers.

Dermot continued in a conciliatory tone. "Still, I will not ignore threats to our security. Send two more guard units to patrol the northern boundaries. To *patrol*, Fin. We will not break the peace. Understood?"

"Yes, my king." Fintan's voice simmered. "If you would excuse me, I grow weary from this long night of council."

Dermot nodded, and Fintan stalked off.

Eamon watched him leave. When they were children, Dermot urged his brothers to balance their studies between warcraft and learning, but they separated at an early age. Fintan excelled at swordplay and at other weapons, while Eamon read the more advanced books and did the more difficult calculations with the same natural ease Fintan showed with a sword or a bow. Eventually, they stopped competing against each other and focused on what each did best. Still, some wounds never truly healed, and both brothers held their grudges.

"You know Fin will start a war. It's just a matter of time." Eamon frowned at Dermot. "It's all he thinks about."

"Maybe, but the weight of this sword is heavy. He will not defy me." Dermot tilted the sword's blade upward and smiled wryly. "Was I any different when I was his age?"

"How can you say such a thing? You've led us in peace for four years now!"

Dermot placed a hand on his shoulder. "You were young when I first started ruling, and don't remember those early days well. We fought wars for the first two years of my reign, with the Horsepeople to the south and the Painted Ones to the north, before I finally made the peace."

"But those wars were necessary!"

"Were they? I thought so at the time, but as I think about them now, they could have been avoided. War can be intoxicating, the high indescribable, but it doesn't take long before you realize the cost—the lives ruined. Not just the deaths, but also the injuries—those who lose an arm or a leg, or maybe the death of a brother, a father, a friend. That can hurt as much as any wound."

Dermot shook his head and lifted his hand from Eamon's shoulder. "Some images haunt my dreams, but you can't go back, only forward and learn from your mistakes. There's nothing I can do about them now. I'm old, Eamon. I've already lived twenty-three winters—more than most."

Eamon spit repeatedly. "We don't say the number out loud! You know it only invites the Red Death." After another dose of spitting because he had mentioned the curse, his mouth had gone dry.

"Numbers cannot hurt me, brother. What lives inside me and grows by the day is the problem." Dermot prodded the fire with the blade from his great sword. Sparks flew in the air and the flames recovered some of their lost vigor. "I need you to promise me something."

Eamon sensed a trap—all this talk of death and age, and now a promise—so he spoke carefully. "What would you have me do, my Brother?"

Dermot bore his eyes into him, carving past skin, bone and blood, and into his soul.

Eamon had seen him use his gaze as a weapon many times, but never aimed at him. He had to admit, it was effective. He felt some of his resolve wither.

"When I pass, I don't want you to challenge Fintan in the Circle of Destiny. He will be our next king."

Eamon's face turned as hot as the embers of the fire. "I've been training! I'm getting much better! I might best him." He had spent much time practicing of late. His arms had grown stronger, and his skills had greatly improved, not that Dermot had noticed.

Dermot nodded. "Your sword is quick, and of your courage there can be no doubt, but Fintan's sword is faster and his shield stronger. He's been preparing for this moment his entire life. You have spent much of your time in studies. You are not to oppose him in the Circle of Destiny."

*Has he no faith in me?*

Eamon felt the sting of Dermot's words. "If not me, there's no one else. The cousins are still

too young. He will be king and lead us into war.”

“Your life is too important to be wasted. Your work with the Books of Wisdom is essential to the tribe’s future. We must collect our knowledge to guide future generations, or they’ll be destined only to repeat what we have done, and never advance. No one but you can finish them. Promise me, Eamon.”

Eamon looked away and tears welled up in his eyes, not because of the promise his brother sought, but because of the truth of his words. The Red Death would take him soon, as it did everyone but the witches. Dermot had always been there for Eamon. He could not imagine a world without Dermot.

*There must be some way to break the cycle. If anyone deserves to cheat the Red Death, it’s Dermot. Surely the heavens will recognize this.*

“Promise me,” Dermot persisted.

*How can I refuse him when his end is so near?*

Eamon managed to put a stoic expression on his face as he tossed a rock on the fire. “If it’s your wish, then I so promise.”

“Good. Now, tell me how the books are coming. Do we have enough paper?”

Eamon stared at the campfire. “They’re all underway. We’re mostly finished with the book on livestock. That was my first priority, but all the others have been started. If we’re careful, we should have enough paper. Jillian’s letters are small but legible.” He shrugged. “Of course, it depends on Renny the Round. You know how much our Master Builder likes to talk. His words are more numerous than the stones he uses for the walls.”

Dermot laughed at the small joke, and Eamon joined him, the tension broken between them.

“Shall we go inside?” asked Eamon. “The hour is late.”

“No, I’d like to watch the sun come up.” Dermot sounded distant.

“Shall I call for Bree or Shannon to keep you company? I can’t keep up with you. I don’t know which one you favor.”

“No, they sleep peacefully in their beds. I don’t want to disturb them. You stay with me. We can watch the sunrise like we did when you were small. Besides, they don’t call *me* Eamon the Handsome.”

Eamon glared at his brother, sending invisible barbs at him that, if real, would have skewered him. “I can’t help what they say. I’m a warrior, just like you and Fintan.”

Dermot chuckled, his face soft and warm. “I know you are. I only tease you. You are as ugly a brute as we are.”

“I’m happy we settled that.” Eamon leaned back on his elbows and stared up at the starry sky. The full moon seemed to smile down on them, and lifted his spirits. “Derry, do you really think the gods watch us from the heavens?”

“Haven’t we decided this already?”

Eamon laughed. They had repeated this conversation so many times it felt as comfortable as his favorite shirt. He hoped this would not be the last time.

Dermot flexed his right hand with a pained expression on his face.

Eamon knew the Red Death had no symptoms beyond the red eyes, yet he wondered if his brother could feel it burning in his blood.

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**END OF SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW**

**For the full book, please click on the appropriate links on the product page at our website, and purchase from your favorite retailer for which we have a link.**

## RED DEATH: Cast of Characters

### EDEN

Eden is a society dominated by religion, physically isolated on a peninsula surrounded by Eden River and a narrow strip of land called the Bridge, which connects the peninsula to the Forbidden Mountain. The High Priest and an elected President rule Eden. Their motto is “Purity, Faith, and Strength,” and their symbol is an elaborate capital J for “Jacob,” the founder of their religion. Apples are their main crop. Eden is the only known society not affected by the Red Death. They maintain their purity by prohibiting contact with the outside world, or the “Soulless,” as they refer to others outside of Eden. Eden’s high holiday is known as Eden Day, the one day a year that frivolity and mischief are allowed – at least a little.

**Aaliss** is the middle of three siblings and a highly-trained Guardian. She patrols the area around Eden known as the Zone, to keep Eden secret from the Soulless. She is seventeen, graduated at the top of her class, and has been a full-fledged Guardian for only one year.

**Aibel** is the uncle to Piers, Aaliss, and Wilky, and the second most powerful person in Eden as their elected President. He’s not one to let family get in the way of ambition.

**Estienne** is a Guardian who favors the standard issue crossbow to the short sword.

**Father Luke** is the Priest who runs the Orchard. He was Malachi’s only childhood friend, though they had a falling out when Malachi became High Priest.

**Gabriel**, also known as the **Viper** and the **Priest of the Guardians**, is a direct descendent of Jacob. He holds great power as the leader of the Guardians. He earned his nickname because of his lethality and his proclivity to spend time alone in the Zone, where he feels closest to Jacob.

**John** is an apprentice Guardian.

**Jonas** is a Guardian and the Viper’s old instructor. Though past his prime, he remains dangerous. No one would want to get between him and apple wine known as the Sacred Drink.

**Malachi**, more commonly known as the **High Priest**, is a direct descendant of Jacob and the head of their religion. The most powerful person in Eden, he’s also unquestionably the largest. His size provoked a panic at his investiture, when the ceremonial robes had to be enlarged to accommodate his girth.

**Mark** is a Monk who enjoys patrolling Eden looking for unholy activities. He has a short temper.

**Michel** is a tall, reed-thin Guardian who is friends with Aaliss, Piers, and Wilky.

**Piers** is a novice priest with a photographic memory, and the oldest of three siblings at nineteen years. Badly burned in a fire three years ago, which killed his parents, he suffers scars and weakness on the left side of his body.

**Samuel** is a senior Guardian with a quirky sense of humor.

**Sarah** is a tall, red-haired Monk with sadistic qualities, who is bitter because she wasn’t selected to be a member of Jacob’s Choir.

**Wilkiford**, more commonly known as **Wilky**, is the youngest researcher in Eden’s history. He has a way of seeing things. He’s also Aaliss’s and Piers’s youngest sibling at thirteen years old.

**Zeke** is a novice priest who chats incessantly. Having failed to remain quiet during two of the three Great Silences over the past years, his future as a Priest is suspect.

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BUTCHER TRIBE

A king rules the Butcher Tribe. He is chosen from the royal family line through an ancient

battle ritual called the Circle of Destiny. The tribe is known for high quality meat they sell at The Exchange. They have three main towns, the Stronghold, the Settlement, and the Outpost, with the Stronghold as their capital, located in the center of their territory. They have vast land holdings for their herds of cattle and sheep, and believe that prior kings help govern them from the stars. They recite, "May the herd forever be strong" at all official events. Their symbol is a jeweled sword known as the Sword of Power, which can only be used by the King. Their main holiday is Naming Day, when the names of all newborn members of the tribe get carved into the vast ghost tree that centers the Stronghold.

Cattie works in the Nursery. She is not well liked and has a habit of making poor choices.

Cormac is a brawny man, the Captain of the King's Guard and Fintan's best friend. He didn't rise to Captain because of his brains, but he's quick with a blade.

Dermot is a popular king, old at twenty-four and near the end of his reign. He is also known by several nicknames, such as *Dermot the Just* and the *Blade of the Butchers*. Early in his reign he led the Butchers through two successful military campaigns, one against the Horsepeople to the south and another against the Painted Ones to the north. His reign has lasted six winters, which is the longest in memory, and he has kept the peace for the last four years.

Eamon, also known as **Eamon the Handsome**, is a royal prince who is in charge of the Books of Wisdom, where Dermot hopes to record the tribe's collective knowledge. He is younger than his two other royal brothers – Dermot by six winters and Fintan by one.

Fintan is a royal prince who is four winters younger than Dermot and the head of the King's Horsemen. He spends most of his time studying war craft and dreaming of ways to unleash his unlimited ambition.

Gemma is Eamon's twin and considered odd. She speaks a weird version of their language that only Eamon and Jillian, her best friend, fully understand, and usually gets distracted by details for hours.

Jillian, best friends with Gemma and Eamon, is often tasked with keeping an eye on Gemma. She also works as a scribe to help record the Books of Wisdom.

Maeve is Cattie's younger sister, who also works in the Nursery, but is well liked and considered beautiful. Few people see the family resemblance between the sisters.

Scotty the Snake, a member of the King's Guard, is known to have psychotic tendencies.

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## THE PAINTED ONES

The Painted Ones are a matriarchal society that elects a female "Tribal Mother" to govern with the help of a series of females known as Vestals. Only female members can vote for the Tribal Mother. The tribe is known for the female members' distinctive tattoos. On her tenth birthday, each girl gets her own tree of life tattoo signifying that she is now an adult member of the tribe. Most members of the tribe live in small huts with varying colored fabric roofs, the colors and designs of which indicate different family histories. Their grandest celebration is the annual Awakening Feast that they share with the Orions. Every ten years they have a Renewal Feast where they swap girls who are thirteen harvests old with similar girls of the Orion tribe, to further bind the two tribes together and increase understanding of their ways. In addition to their tattoos, the Painted Ones are known for intricately woven fabrics and the poison darts they use to defend themselves.

**Kalhona** is the best Artist in the tribe and P'mina's older sister.

**Merina** is P'mina's friend. She is also thirteen and scheduled to be swapped with the Orion girls, but, unlike P'mina, Merina appreciates the honor of representing her tribe.

**P'mina** is Kalhona's younger sister at thirteen harvests and scheduled to be swapped with the Orion girls of the same age at the Renewal Feast. She is very learned in plants and somewhat of an outcast in the tribe because her mother became a red witch.

**Tania** is Kalhona's toddler daughter who loves to spin in circles and mispronounces P'mina's name.

**Tribal Mother** is a robust woman considered extremely beautiful. She is a beloved leader of the tribe.

**V'ronica** is a beady-eyed ambitious Vestal who serves and advises the Tribal Mother.

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RED WITCHES

The Red Death does not kill everyone. Some women wake to find they have transformed overnight into red witches, with thick auburn hair, pale skin, and red-specked eyes. Though they are not all evil, red witches are feared and outcast, if not killed by most tribes. Their magic powers entice the brave or desperate to seek their help in times of need.

Eris is the head of a group of witches who fly the Red Raven banner. She worships the Goddess of the Night and has designs to lead other witches to take control over all the tribes. She currently "advises" the chief of the Bloody Wolf tribe, although many would say she controls him.

Santra follows Eris and is a particularly nasty witch. She keeps the company of firefoxes.

The Witch goes by no formal name. She is near the end of her life and has her own banner of the Red Fish. She tries to follow the light but has been deceived from time to time by dark spirits.

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## **BLOODY WOLF TRIBE (Also Known as the Northern Invaders)**

This aggressive northern tribe is ruled by a chief, and divided between warriors and farmers. Because of a drought, their farmland has become barren, so the majority of the tribe has traveled south in search of new lands to conquer. The warriors wear beards they never shave. They tie the beard with twine, and usually add hair from a victim they have killed. A red wolf head with blood dripping from its mouth is their symbol, and they honor two gods: Baltrix and Feyreh. Baltrix is a male warrior with a red wolf head and a human body. Feyreh is a female agricultural deity who is human above the waist, with a tree trunk below.

**Tynchek** is a midlevel warrior sent to trade coin for Sweat Leaf with the witch Santra.

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ORIONS

The Orions are governed by a leader and his *Circle of Counselors*. The leader always takes the name Orion. Subsequent leaders are chosen by the existing Orion and the Circle of Counselors. The society believes in an omniscient Hunter God who is usually depicted as a man drawing a bow. They are well known as excellent archers and hunters. Young men take a brand on their chest of the Hunter God when Orion considers them of age. Upon the death of a member of the society, his or her name is etched into a stone and tossed on top of the Bridge to the Next World by their family. The tribe is closely allied with the Painted Ones.

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A book like *Red Death* can only become a reality with many helping hands. Over five years in the making, I can't possibly list everyone who has encouraged me on this project or helped in its creation. Of course my family remains my rock and I'm thankful for their patience and love. I also offer a special thanks to my beta readers who gave me such compelling suggestions and whose passion for these characters have overwhelmed me. I would be remiss if I didn't point out my friend, Melissa Kanovsky and her epic contribution to this book. Her fingerprints touch upon the entire tale. Her encouragement and suggestions were so good, they were worth much more than the sushi lunches we spent discussing the story.

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Mallory Rock, as always, proves why she's the best cover artist in the business. This time she received some help from the talented artist, Sarima, who helped develop the apple for the cover. Mallory and Kira McFadden teamed up to create the amazing map. They basically took an awful sketch and created artwork. I think that's magic!

[About the Author](#)



Jeff Altabef lives in New York with his wife, two daughters, and Charlie the dog. He spends time volunteering at the Writing Center in the local community college as a certified writing instructor. After years of being accused of “telling stories,” he thought he would make it official. He writes in both the thriller and young adult genres. As an avid Knicks fan, he is prone to long periods of melancholy during hoops season.

Jeff has a column on The Examiner focused on writing, designed to encourage writing for those that like telling stories.

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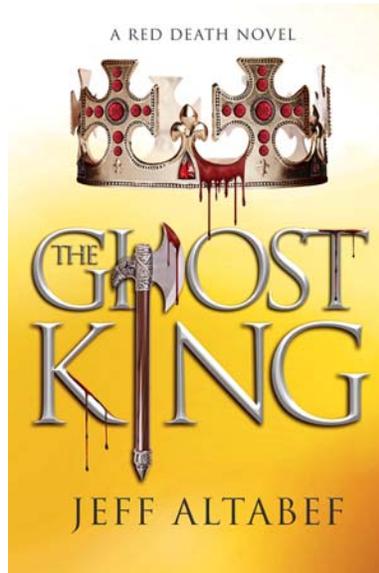
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THE GHOST KING Red Death - Book 2

Watch for the second book in this dystopian science fiction adventure to release in the spring/summer of 2017. For more information, please visit the [Evolved Publishing](#) website.

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Aaliss and Wilky find themselves in the center of a storm. Hunted by powerful forces, will they survive long enough to unite the three tribes against the Bloody Wolf Tribe and the Witches of the Red Raven? Can Wilky find a way to prevent his shocking vision from becoming a reality?

The Ghost Riders hold the key and one will emerge – the Ghost King. But will he be their savior or doom?

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**SEE NEXT PAGE FOR A SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW:
Chapter 1 of *The Ghost King* (Red Death - Book 2)**

SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW: THE GHOST KING

Chapter 1 – Wilky

The rain fell in sheets. A flash of lightning lit the sky and thunder shook the ground.

Wilky had never seen rain fall so hard or violently before.

A voice shouted, "Reform the shield wall! The devils will be back on us in no time!"

Another flash of light and another boom.

Wilky stood on a hill, charred wood and thrashed buildings spread before him – a ruined village.

Flags waved: the bloody wolf and red raven before him; and behind him the jeweled sword, the hunter drawing his bow, and the tree of life.

The air smelled rank, acidic from blood and sour from the foul stench of fear and waste and death.

The dead littered the ground around him. He tried not to breathe.

A horn blast carried into the field and was followed by a wild war cry.

Time moved erratically, punctuated by jutting spear points and the whistle of arrows. Steel axes collided with wooden shields as men cried out, cursed, prayed, screamed.

He looked frantically for Aaliss and spotted her in the distance.

She swirled, flashing steel in a tornado of death as bodies fell all about her.

Another flash of lightning illuminated a giant with a multi-colored beard that dropped from his chin like daggers. He stalked toward Aaliss, the ends of his beard glittering whenever lightning lit the sky.

Not him.

Wilky wanted to scream, but he had no voice here. The mud churned with blood under his feet. Death more than hovered over the field. He could see black-winged shades, their leathery skin stretched tight and their eyes nothing but black pools without end, swoop across the small hill. They dragged souls from those who had fallen.

Wilky pulled his eyes away, sat up in his bed, and breathed. The air came fast and hot. He should have been braver, and lasted longer to see more of the vision, but he couldn't watch anymore.

If only the images were part of a dream, he could try to forget them, but he knew better. He didn't sleep much these days and this nightmare was no dream; it was a vision that revealed flashes of the future.

Is that future set?

He hoped not. He hoped he could alter it, and thought he could, but he wasn't sure how yet.

He glanced at the bed next to him and saw his sister sleeping, curled around a wool blanket. He wanted to spare Aaliss this future, but that would only happen if he tried harder and found another way. Until then, all he could do was shudder.

A future with light was the most important thing. Some sacrifices would be necessary for that future... and that light.

He strolled to the window. The first rays of dawn had not yet brightened the horizon.

Soon he would have to see the whole story. Soon he'd have to find the courage to know who would win the war, and how he would lead them to the light.

Soon, but not today.

He sighed and glanced back at his sister.

I must find a way. Some sacrifices are too much. I can't let death take her. Piers was enough.

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WIND CATC HER:

Lies. Betrayal. Destiny. A choice that changes everything.

My name is Juliet Wildfire Stone, and I am special. I see visions and hear voices, and I have no idea what they mean.

When someone murders medicine men in my sleepy Arizona town, I can't help but worry my crazy grandfather is involved. He's a medicine man and more than a just a little eccentric. He likes to tell me stories about the Great Wind Spirit and Coyote, but none of it makes any sense. I thought I knew the truth, but in order to clear his name I dive into his alien world and uncover an ancient secret society formed over two hundred years ago to keep me safe—me! And I can't help but to start to wonder whether there's some truth to those old stories my grandfather has been telling me.

I just want to be an average sixteen-year-old girl, but apparently I've never been average. Could never be average. I didn't know it before, but I'm a Chosen, and those voices I've been

hearing... well, they're not just "voices." I've started to develop abilities, but they might not be enough. A powerful entity called a Seeker is hunting me and he's close—really close.

I thought I knew the answers but truth is, I don't. Betrayed by those I love, I must choose to run or risk everything in order to fulfill my destiny. I hope I make the right choice. Don't you?

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### **BRINK OF DAWN:**

The second book in the Chosen series picks up where the multiple-award-winning *Wind Catcher* left off, but it can also be read as a stand-alone novel.

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They walk among us as if they're gods.

Only we know what they are.

Only we know to fear them.

And only we can defeat them.

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My name is Juliet Wildfire Stone, and I barely escaped my sleepy Arizona town alive. A Seeker almost murdered me. Lucky for me, I killed him first. I thought that was my test—that was my destiny—but it seems as though fate isn't done with me yet.

I'm a Chosen, a human-alien hybrid. There are three others like me, each with different abilities. I have to find them, and all I have to go on is a weird symbol, and a location—New York City. Hopefully my best friend Troy and I can figure out the rest once we get there.

An alien race is plotting to enslave the world, and only the Chosen can stop them. We'll have to kill their leader before he kills us. We'll all be tested, our flaws exposed. Each one of us will learn what, or who, we really care about, and we'll have to decide whether to fulfill our destiny... or run.

Those helping us have told me I'm the Alpha and only I can lead the others, but how can I trust these people I've never met? I don't know much about my powers or my potential, but I do know one thing—I'll do anything to stop these aliens. I will not give up. Even if I die trying.

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SCORCHED SOULS:

Fate and destiny clash in the explosive, heart-pounding conclusion to the award-winning Chosen series.

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*Survival is not enough: alliances will be formed; loyalties tested; a choice made.*

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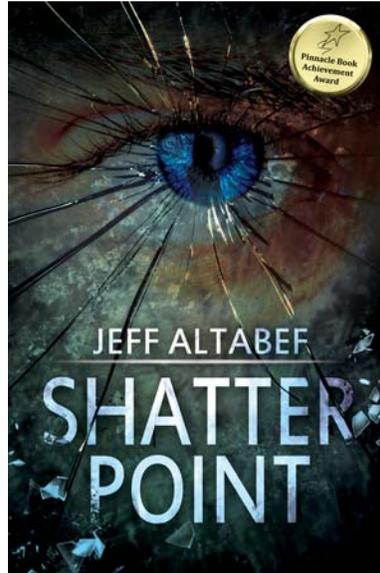
Juliet Wildfire Stone is not just a Chosen, she's the Alpha. The fate of Earth may well rest in her hands, but when she meets the Prime Elector at last, the mortal enemy at the center of her new destiny, he proves not to be what she expected.

Plunged into a conflict between two ancient foes, one that threatens to rip Earth apart, Juliet must navigate her new path, form unlikely alliances, and solve ancient mysteries. She needs to set aside her fears, make the tough choices set before her, and become the Alpha Chosen once and for all.

The cost to Juliet does not matter; too much depends on her. She cannot allow Earth to be cast into a darkness from which it might never escape.

Yet she cannot do it alone. Will the other Chosen follow her? Or will the people of Earth be enslaved for all time?

For lovers of suspense thrillers that blend together many different elements, suitable for readers 16 and older:



SHATTER POINT
By Jeff Altabef

This multiple award-winning suspense thriller is now available. For more information on this book, please visit the [Evolved Publishing](#) website.

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When her 19-year-old son Jack miraculously recovers from a serious head trauma, Maggie is sure her luck has changed. But when she's abducted by a shadow from her past - a phantom with dangerous sapphire eyes - it's up to Jack and his younger brother Tom to unravel the mystery and save their mom from a deadly psychological battle.

The brothers seek help from their colorful great aunt, who exposes them to a world of nefarious family secrets, explosive government conspiracies, and a series of horrific murders. Together they must navigate a dark underworld full of political subterfuge and class warfare.

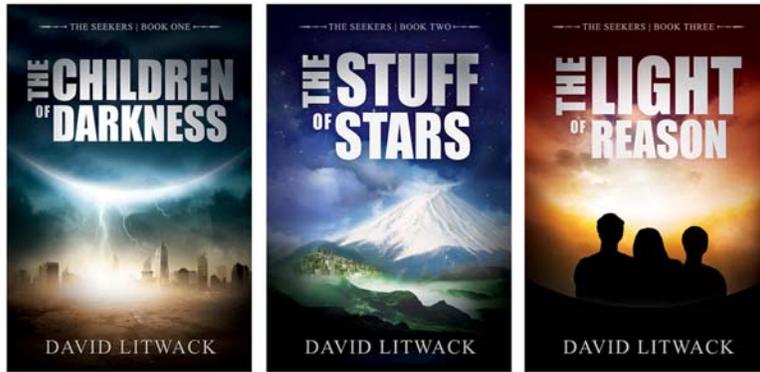
Yet as they search for their mother, Jack changes – he's raked by skull splitting headaches and weird visions. How exactly did he recover from his coma, and how does this tie into the psychopath who's abducted their mother?

Will Jack and Tom save Maggie before Cooper reaches his shatter point? Does Jack have enough time left?

More from Evolved Publishing

We hope you loved *Red Death*, and all of Jeff Altabef's great books. If so, you're sure to enjoy these fantastic books, too:

For lovers of dystopian science fiction, this series is suitable for readers 13 and older:



THE SEEKERS

By David Litwack

Book 1 - *The Children of Darkness*

Book 2 - *The Stuff of Stars*

Book 3 - *The Light of Reason*

This dystopian sci-fi series offers a post-apocalyptic look at the battle between religion and reason, offering not just extraordinary settings and circumstances, but memorable characters.

For more information on these books, please visit the [Evolved Publishing](http://www.evolvedpublishing.com) website.

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#### THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS:



*"But what are we without dreams?"*

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A thousand years ago the Darkness came – a terrible time of violence, fear, and social collapse when technology ran rampant. But the vicars of the Temple of Light brought peace, ushering in an era of blessed simplicity. For ten centuries they have kept the madness at bay with “temple magic,” and by eliminating forever the rush of progress that nearly caused the destruction of everything.

Childhood friends, Orah and Nathaniel, have always lived in the tiny village of Little Pond, longing for more from life but unwilling to challenge the rigid status quo. When their friend Thomas returns from the Temple after his “teaching” – the secret coming-of-age ritual that binds young men and women eternally to the Light – they barely recognize the broken and brooding young man the boy has become. Then when Orah is summoned as well, Nathaniel follows in a foolhardy attempt to save her.

In the prisons of Temple City, they discover a terrible secret that launches the three on a journey to find the forbidden keep, placing their lives in jeopardy, for a truth from the past awaits that threatens the foundation of the Temple. If they reveal that truth, they might once

again release the potential of their people.

Yet they would also incur the Temple's wrath as it is written: "If there comes among you a prophet saying, 'Let us return to the darkness,' you shall stone him, because he has sought to thrust you away from the Light."

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**Praise for *The Children of Darkness*:**

"A tightly executed first fantasy installment that champions the exploratory spirit." – *Kirkus Reviews*

"The plot unfolds easily, swiftly, and never lets the readers' attention wane.... After reading this one, it will be a real hardship to have to wait to see what happens next." – *Feathered Quill Book Reviews*

"The quality of its intelligence, imagination, and prose raises *The Children of Darkness* to the level of literature." – *Awesome Indies*

"...a fantastic tale of a world that seeks a utopian existence, well ordered, safe and fair for everyone... also an adventure, a coming-of-age story of three young people as they become the seekers, travelers in search of a hidden treasure – in this case, a treasure of knowledge and answers. A tale of futuristic probabilities... on a par with Huxley's *Brave New World*." – *Emily-Jane Hills Orford, Readers' Favorite Book Awards*

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THE STUFF OF STARS:

"But what are we without dreams?"

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Against all odds, Orah and Nathaniel have found the keep and revealed the truth about the darkness, initiating what they hope will be a new age of enlightenment. Yet the people are more set in their ways than anticipated, and a faction of vicars whispers in their ears, urging a return to traditional ways.

Desperate to keep their movement alive, Orah and Nathaniel cross the ocean to seek the living descendants of the keepmasters' kin. Those they find on the distant shore are both more and less advanced than expected.

The seekers, caught between the two sides, face the challenge of bringing them together to make a better world. The prize: a chance to bring home miracles, and a more promising future for their people.

If they fail this time, they risk not a stoning, but losing themselves in the twilight of a never-ending dream.

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THE LIGHT OF REASON:

"But what are we without dreams?"

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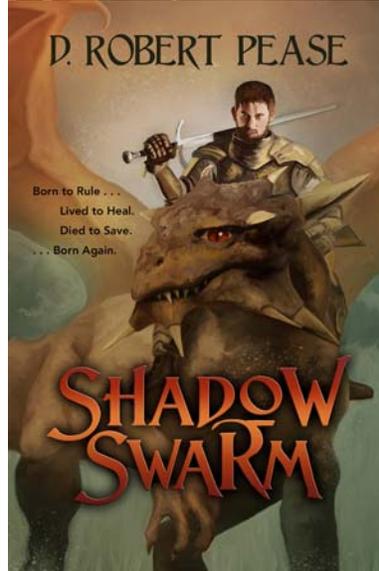
Orah and Nathaniel return home with miracles from across the sea, hoping to bring a better life for their people. Instead, they find the world they left in chaos.

A new grand vicar, known as the usurper, has taken over the keep and is using its knowledge to reinforce his hold on power.

Despite their good intentions, the seekers find themselves leading an army, and for the first time in a millennium, their world experiences the horror of war.

But the keepmasters' science is no match for the dreamers, leaving Orah and Nathaniel their cruelest choice – face bloody defeat and the death of their enlightenment, or use the genius of the dreamers to tread the slippery slope back to the darkness.

An award-winning epic fantasy suitable for readers 13 and older:



**SHADOW SWARM**

**By D. Robert Pease**

Don't miss this epic fantasy adventure spanning millennia, set in a world full of magic and dark forces where creatures of legend come alive. For more information on this book, please visit the [Evolved Publishing](#) website.

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**Mom's Choice Awards
Gold Medal: Fantasy & Science Fiction**

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Aberthol Nauile doesn't know that he once led legions in a war that had raged since the dawn of time, against an enemy that could not be killed. He doesn't know that he rode on a dragon with his father, or that his mother died while giving birth to him. He doesn't know that he once saved his great, great, great grandfather by defeating the black enemy on the slopes of a volcano.

Aberthol doesn't know that he beheld the creation of the world, as his grandfather eight generations before took the planet, ravaged by a war of the gods, and began anew.

All he knows is that he awoke in a coffin deep within a tomb, and now the whole world thinks he is their savior. All he really wants to know is his name, and why he keeps hearing voices in his head.

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Praise for *Shadow Swarm*:

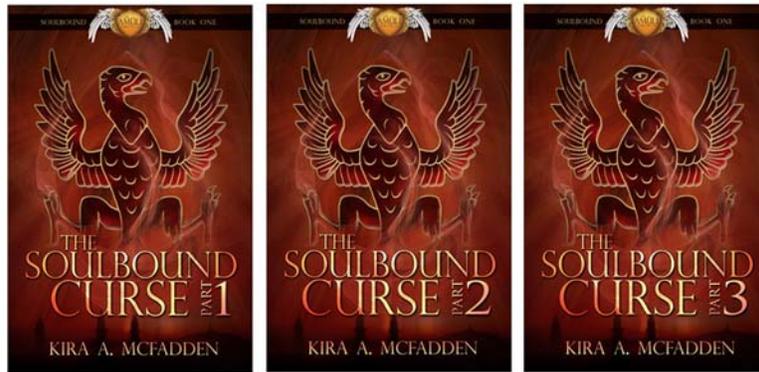
"It's extremely poetic and something I haven't seen done in any other book that I've read."

- Tara Lee

"*Shadow Swarm* is a new novel that goes beyond touching the surface of fantasy and takes the reader into a whole new level of fiction." - Lois Ann

"Having read other offerings from this author, I quickly found myself fully immersed in the story, unable to willingly set it aside for anything but short periods of time. The quality of writing was such that, as I tell my students, I was able to "see a movie in my mind"; a key, I tell them, to tell whether or not you're encountering good writing. The development of the characters made them believable, realistic, and genuine." - *usafe7ret* (Reviewer at Amazon)

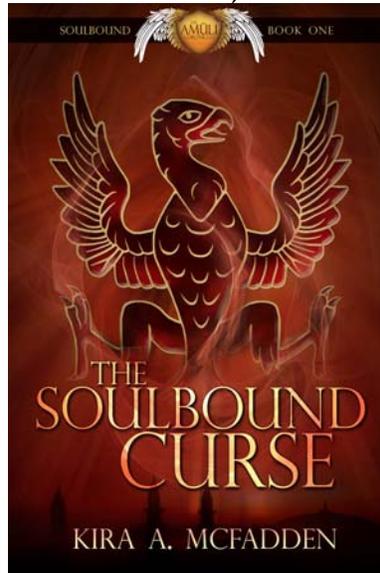
An epic fantasy suitable for readers 15 and older:



THE SOULBOUND CURSE
The Amüli Chronicles: Soulbound: Book 1
By Kira A. McFadden

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Available in 3 Parts as eBooks (picture above), or as a single paperback edition (pictured below).



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Discover the fantastic world of the Amüli, rich with characters, languages, and world-building. For more information, please visit the [Evolved Publishing](http://EvolvedPublishing.com) website. And watch for the second part of *The Amüli Chronicles* to arrive in 2016 and 2017, with the release of *The Soulless King*.

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The angelic amüli race has spent thousands of years perfecting immortality by binding their souls to human hosts. That tenuous grasp on life is slipping because an increasing number of stillborn amüli infants are born without souls.

When Marik's daughter is born Unsouled, he strives to find out why. Many amüli believe disease is to blame for the Unsouled births, but Marik believes his half-human cousin Clae may be the real catalyst. The Amüli Republic's oligarchy refuses to take a public stance on Clae's involvement, instead instructing Marik to capture him in secrecy. Should Clae's association with the Unsouled epidemic become public, the amüli would rise against all half-breeds and

throw the Republic into chaos.

If Marik captures Clae and proves he is causing the mysterious deaths, the Republic may flourish once more. If he fails, his people will descend into a bitter civil war, destroying everything they have accomplished.

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Praise for *The Soulbound Curse - Part 1*:

"Not even sure where to begin with this book! I so loved it! The characters are lovable & complex. I got so entangled in it! I cannot wait to get my hands on part 2!" – *Kimberly*

"The world McFadden has created is so complex and alien and strange that it feels real. More than once I almost believed I might be carrying the soul of an amüli." ~ *Lizard Duck*

"Kira's use of imagery is nothing short of spectacular. She was able to describe an entirely new world for the reader. The characters and story lines were well developed and delightfully entertaining. I am astounded by Kira's vivid imagination and her ability to create a new world, culture, political structure, and way of life." – *Stephanie*