

ALEX WESTMORE



BEFORE THE
ECHO

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An Echo Branson Investigation: Prequel

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To Kari Knight for your patience, your willingness to live with a crazy person, and your overwhelming desire to keep me well-stocked in Marvel toys. It wasn't always a smooth ride, but I am a better person for having been loved by you.

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CHAPTER 1

“P-PLEASE... PLEASE... YOU don’t have to do this,” the twenty-something stammered as he pressed his back against the rough brick wall. “Please...” he struggled to move his arms, pinned to the wall by an unseen force.

His plea fell at the feet of the five siblings standing in a semi-circle around the young man. Three women and two men all with the same dark hair and intense dark eyes kept their gaze on him without blinking, without emotion.

“Of course we don’t *have* to do this, Simon,” the tallest of the young women said coldly. “We are the *Obscuri Sensus*, and there is little we ever *have* to do.” She stepped forward and leaned into him. “But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

“What... what do you want with me?”

“We’ve heard you are quite the magician.”

“Magician? I’m not a magician.” Simon’s eyes darted left then right; a small dotting of perspiration appeared on his forehead. “I swear. I’m not.”

“Perhaps that was just a rumor then,” she said, flipping her dark hair over her shoulder. “We’ve heard you are adept at *Simon Says*. Was that a lie?”

“No.”

“If I release your arms, you won’t try to use them against us, will you?”

“What do you think? There are five of you and only one of me.”

She cocked her head as if considering his math. “Indeed. You must know, of course, that trying to escape will cost you your life. You wouldn’t want to test that, would you?”

Simon stood up straighter and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“Excellent. So, just show us what you can do, and no one gets hurt.”

Simon glanced over at the other four before throwing his hands in the air. All five mimicked his actions. “That’s really about it.”

“Please tell us you can do better than this pathetic little parlor trick,” one of the guys said as he lowered his hands.

Simon’s eyes grew wide. “Wait. How—”

“How did I release your lame-ass hold on me?” The young man shook his head in disgust. “If you are lucky enough to be born a superior being, then you ought to possess superior powers. Surely that mediocre display was not the best you can do.”

Simon’s eyebrows knitted together. “You didn’t track me down and corner me in a parking lot to test my powers.”

“Why else would we seek you out?” The taller woman asked. “To discuss your baseball card collection? Your rather shoddy

grades at university? Your inability to get a girlfriend? Which area of your pathetic little life would be worth our time?"

Simon threw his shoulders back. "Screw you."

"Oh, *now* he gets balls," one of the other girls muttered.

Simon's fists shot out and both men punched one of the other young women in the face. He pivoted away from the taller woman and took four steps before stopping in his tracks. "My eyes! I can't see! What the hell have you—" He dropped to one knee, his fingertips touching his eyelids. "I'm blind!"

One of the brothers helped his sister to her feet. "Sorry."

"I hope she just ends him. What a douche."

"We're so disappointed," the tall woman said, as she approached Simon. "Quite frankly, we expected... well... more." She nodded to her sister, who angrily thrust her hand toward Simon.

Simon clawed his left hand, pressed the tips of his fingers and thumb into the sides of his own throat and *squeezed*. His eyes gaped, betraying the surprise he felt at being incapable of stopping himself.

The leader bent over Simon. "In case, as I suspect, your Latin is terrible, *Obscuri Sensus* means Dark Senses... as in the five senses; two of which are no longer under your control. That's why you can't see and why you are currently choking yourself."

"P-Please... stop."

"You're a supernatural, yes?"

"Y-Yes." Simon's face grew redder.

"Then stop it yourself."

Nothing happened.

"That's what I thought." She turned on her heel. "He's no good."

“You sure?” One of the men folded his arms, still looking at Simon.

“Kind of a cool power,” one of the young girls said as she gingerly touched her cheek.

“For children’s party games, maybe. No. This one is a waste of space.” The lead woman took her sisters’ hand and the rest of them made a chain until the fifth sibling reached out and put his hand on Simon’s head.

Simon froze. His body went rigid for a protracted moment before slumping to the ground... dead.

“That’s a shame,” the woman said, staring down at Simon’s corpse. “I’d had such high hopes.”

“We don’t really have time to waste on low level purposes.”

“We don’t really know how high or low until we make contact. Well, we made contact and he left us wanting. Who’s next on the list?”

“A *Medicus Naturae*.”

She groaned. “Not another one of those. I find them terribly boring.”

“Well, let’s hope he’s better than ol’ Simon Says there. This dude was broken.”

“It’s a she and she’s supposed to be the real deal. Found by none other than Melika herself.”

“Oh, now that *does* sound promising. Melika has a reputation for attracting the more powerful beings.”

“She’s not all that,” the shorter woman said. “Everyone thinks she’s some sort of super star. I think she’s just lucky.”

“Shut. Your. Mouth,” the leader barked. “Melika is a well-respected *iuvenum disciplina*. I’ll not have any of you denigrating

her. She has done a great deal for our kind. I agree she is a bit of a relic, but she still deserves our respect.”

“Whatever. Her whole *kumbaya*, give peace a chance vibe is really antiquated. Why train us only to tell us *not* to use our powers? It makes no sense.”

“We going after the *Medicus* or what?”

“No, we have been told to leave her to Templeton. He’ll be disappointed we had to fry poor Simon, but he had his chance. Templeton will understand.”

“I don’t know about that. He hates it when we destroy other supers.”

“He can’t have it both ways, you know. Our job is to recruit those who will make us stronger and destroy those who might make us weaker. Survival of the fittest and all that.”

“So far, all we’ve managed to find are broken supernaturals who use their powers for money.”

“Maybe we are not searching in the right places,” the leader said softly. “And perhaps, we ought to pay more attention to where Melika gets hers.”

As the quintuplets started out of the parking lot, the lights flickered and dimmed, leaving Simon’s still-warm body in the shadows.