



The *FIVE ELEMENTS* trilogy (*The Emerald Tablet*, *The Shadow City*, and *The Crimson Serpent*) chronicle the adventures of four best friends in modern-day San Francisco, as they struggle to prevent a century-old power-hungry sorcerer from merging Earth with a nightmare shadow dimension called Arcadia. Middle-Grade Urban Fantasy. Published by HarperCollins.

PROLOGUE

1906

The smell came to Jackson Wright first, thick and damp and dark. His eyelids didn't want to open, but he convinced them. When they finally peeled back from his raw, gravelly eyes, he found himself staring at the intersection of four brick arches supporting a stone ceiling fifteen or twenty feet above him.

Where am I? What's happening to me?

He tried to look around, but...*couldn't*. And when he strained to turn his head, pain ground into his temples. He tried to search out the cause of that pain, but his hand stopped short, halted with a metallic *clank*. He couldn't move his legs, either. The sharp tang of panic began to rise in his throat.

I'm shackled! Someone's chained me down to...what?

Jackson's fingertips still worked, so he probed and searched. He lay, helpless, bound hand and foot to what felt like a massive stone slab.

What he'd at first thought to be a distant buzzing in his ears clarified: a soft chanting filled the chamber where he was imprisoned. Jackson felt his panic grow. He didn't recognize the words, but it sounded like dozens of voices, and they were coming from all around him.

Terror stabbed at him like a knife to his guts. *I can't speak!* He couldn't even move his tongue. Was he...had someone *drugged* him? Where had he been, that someone could have slipped something into his food or his drink? The last thing he remembered

was leaving the house with his father for an after-dinner walk. Everything else was...*gone*.

Papa! Papa, help me!

What little illumination the chamber had shuddered and flickered like firelight. A writhing, dancing shadow fell across him, and only the metal strap holding his head in place kept Jackson from recoiling—but then his heart leapt.

Papa!

Jackson's father leaned over him, his fine, white-gold hair—hair the same color as Jackson's—all but hidden by the cowl of a long black robe.

Papa, help me! Get me out of here! Papa!

But Jackson saw something in his father's eyes he'd never seen before. Something hard and cold, like chips of ice. Without saying a word, his father moved away, out of Jackson's sight—

—and another man approached from the other side of the slab. Tall and narrow through the shoulders, he wore that same kind of hooded robe. But his face looked like old, white leather, and his green eyes shone with a radiance that turned Jackson's mouth as dry as sand.

Mama! Jackson thought miserably. *Someone, anyone--help me!*

"Zxarna vrahmu otvortse. Dvai shvioutei pivuntxa." As the green-eyed man spoke, the words buzzed and vibrated in Jackson's ears, in his *skull*, as if a swarm of tiny insects had flown inside his head and begun scratching and gnawing at his brain. As he spoke, the green-eyed man pulled a stone tablet from inside his robe. The stone was green, not entirely unlike the man's frightening luminous eyes. It was crystalline, it's

color somehow both dark and bright at the same time. It looked like a solid slab of stone, but then the man opened it, and Jackson saw that the odd tablet had pages like a book. Yet the man didn't hold it the way other people held books. He held it in the way someone would hold a live, venomous snake: carefully, and with great respect. Maybe even great fear. "*Dvai shvioutei pivuntxa, majia povrunshei taigho shviunta!*"

The bizarre words reverberated, traveling around the chamber—not an echo, but dozens of voices repeating everything the green-eyed man said. This repetition somehow made the harsh words a thousand times worse.

"*Taigho shviunta...taigho shviunta...*" The unseen crowd chanted. Jackson would have whimpered if he'd been able to make any noise at all...because he recognized one of those voices as his father's.

As the incantation continued, Jackson felt the air around him change. He couldn't move his head, but his eyes darted in every direction, and his pupils shrank to tiny pinpoints as a circle of fire exploded into being eight feet above the slab where he was bound. Its heat made the skin of Jackson's face pull tight. The burning ring rotated slowly above him, an enormous, twisted, ghastly version of the haloes he'd seen over the heads of saints in church. Red-orange flames danced and licked around a blinding-white core...

...and as the crown of fire spun, a broad arc of water climbed up through the air from somewhere to Jackson's left, traveling in the shape of a rainbow above the flames. The water churned and frothed far above him, suspended in mid-air as it formed another ring. The river-like arc reflected the fire in icy shades of white and blue and green.

The same hard, cold colors he'd seen in his father's eyes.

Without warning, a blast of arctic wind channeled its way across Jackson's body, running frigid fingers through his hair, and the very stone of the slab beneath him trembled and shivered, pulsing like a great, stony heart.

Jackson's muscles clenched and shook as he tried to free himself, and his inability to scream felt worse than screaming his throat raw. His heart thundered in his narrow chest, and tears hot as lava squeezed themselves out of his eyes.

He watched, stunned, as his tears fell *up*. They left his face and streaked straight up into the broad, terrible arc of water above him, each drop turning to crystal in the instant before the impossible current swept them away.

"I am Jonathan Thorne," the green-eyed man said, and it took Jackson a heartbeat to recognize the words as English. The scratching, hungry echoes of the other language still crawled between his skull and his brain. "I am the opener of the way. I am the leader of the faithful. I am the author of doom and the wielder of power."

Jonathan Thorne pulled a slim silver dagger from the sleeve of his robe and, sliced open the tip of his own thumb without hesitation. Jackson felt his blood turn to ice. In the firelight, Thorne's blood was black as ink. Thorne leaned over and touched Jackson's forehead, painting something there, Jackson couldn't tell what. Straightening up and using the same thumb, Thorne drew a five-pointed star inside a circle on the cover of the strange book.

"I am Jonathan Thorne," he repeated. "I am the seeker of magick. I am the explorer of the lost paths. I am the One Above All Others...and with these words and actions, I unlock a new world of boundless power!"

Slowly, so slowly, Thorne raised the dagger. The knife shifted in his grip, blade pointing straight down. Straight at Jackson's heart.

Jackson's thoughts blurred as panic choked him. *Wake up wake up I've got to wake up! This isn't real, I'm having a nightmare, why can't I wake up why why why WAKE UP!*

A flicker of movement from Jackson's left drew his eyes, and for a second—for just a split instant—he thought he *had* awakened. Because there was his father, coming back to save him! He tried to cry out, tried to force his unwilling tongue to move...

...but he could only watch as his father, with that terrible stony coldness in his eyes, slid off the signet ring Jackson wore on his left middle finger.

No! Papa, what are you doing? Why are you taking Grandpa's ring? Why are you letting this happen?

Jackson's father turned the ring over in his fingers, examining it in the harsh light from the fire circle overhead. Simple, gold, bearing the Wright family crest: an Old English "W," set atop a four-spoked wagon wheel. "You won't need this where you're going, my son," the elder Wright said as he slipped the ring inside his robe.

When his father turned away from him for a second time, Jackson felt his heart break.

Perhaps that was why it hurt so little when Thorne plunged the silver dagger into his chest.

Death.

Jackson had never been a morbid child, but he had given a good bit of thought to dying after his pet beagle was run down a team of horses pulling a mail wagon. He

expected to feel his life slide away from him. He imagined it would be very much like an oil lamp's flame as its fuel runs dry.

But nothing like that happened. Instead, the air around him seemed to coalesce, growing thicker and taking on a crimson hue. He could still hear the chanting voices— "*Taigho shviunta! Taigho shviunta!*" —and still see the pulsing, flickering light from the fire circle, now a horrible blood-red through the...what was it? *A film? Some kind of skin?* Blood seemed to flow upward from his chest, and the strange membrane grew and thickened with it. Soon it surrounded him.

Suddenly the chanting voices surged, became shouts, and the stone slab beneath him lurched. The blocks of the ceiling trembled and shook, and dust and bits of mortar rained down, and from somewhere, from everywhere, a vast, deafening *roar* shook the earth itself.

As the blood-red cocoon tightened around Jackson's body, the chanting voices turned to screams.

"*Earthquake!*" someone screeched.

It was the last word Jackson heard before this world became lost to him.