

# The Grey

An Internet-exclusive prologue to

## Head of the Dragon

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The evening air outside was cold, and the rain had only just stopped falling on the dark Manhattan streets. Inside a quiet, one-bedroom apartment the heater rattled as it valiantly fought against the outside chill as Jesse Darling, aka Darkane, master of mysticism, lit a clove cigarette and glanced at the nude woman sleeping at his side. Her form was half covered in a sea of blankets, and the yellow light pouring through the blinds curved over her body as she softly snored. He moved some of her chestnut hair out of her face and tried to adjust the flat pillow under his neck without waking her. Her name was Candice, a bartender at a local pub he liked to frequent. They had been dating off and on for about six months, and currently they were very on. He counted the tattoos along her arm, and idly traced one of a rose that went to her shoulder blade. He took a long drag, and made sure to flick the gold ash into a cheap, green ashtray on the cluttered nightstand.

Jesse had wanted to get some sleep, but found it impossible. There were too many voices on the wind, and they all had grave things to say. Some were hushed, muted whispers, but some were loud, blaring warnings about the future. Many were chants or songs, which always annoyed Jesse. He hated dealing with the chanting spirits; they always demanded songs in exchange for their knowledge, and Jesse detested singing.

It was hard to make sense of all the messages he was receiving, but he knew enough. He had asked about Superior Force, his super-powered teammate in the Collective Good. Jesse's involvement in the Collective Good was something that nowadays he viewed as a necessary evil. Initially he had joined for the women and prestige, but eventually the responsibility of keeping the world safe outweighed even the allure of sex and stardom, and one morning Jesse discovered, much to his horror, that he was fully committed to the organization he had once referred to as, "a bunch of fucking wankers." Still, membership had its perks. With the money he earned as a full-time member on the roster, he was easily able to acquire the materials he needed for his spell work.

Superior Force had gone missing after desperately trying to defuse what the press was calling the Catastrophe, when dozens of bombings had rocked the world, all designed to entrap the most powerful being on the planet. Whatever they had done, it had worked. No one had seen or heard from Superior Force in weeks, and whenever Jesse asked the wind, all he received were songs of ice, darkness, and the sound of soft crying. It unsettled him, and that was saying something for a man who would take tea with demons.

He took another drag from his cigarette and tried to focus. The smoke that slowly poured from his chapped lips twirled into a circle, and within it Jesse saw the air flicker and glow. An image appeared, fleeting and disjointed, of a young girl with glowing, white eyes. He thought she looked familiar, but he

couldn't quite place her. Her lips were moving. He tried to focus, and the wind whispered, "*For all of them!*" and then there was silence as the smoke circle broke apart.

More and more, his visions had been like this. It unsettled him. As a magic user he was used to vague symbolism, but these felt more like clear pieces of broken glass that were reflecting an image in a mirror. He had shards, but not enough to really know what was happening. When he had brought this to the attention of the local Spiritual Magistrate, she had laughed hysterically in his face, offered him an orange soda, and then kicked him out the door. Sadly, this was about par for the course when dealing with Nana Schulz, but still, Jesse had hoped for *something* of value.

Candice rolled over and nuzzled him as she sighed in her sleep. She smelled like cheap beer, coconut oil, and cigarette smoke. Even after showering, it was hard to get the smell of the bar out of her hair and skin, but Jesse didn't mind. He thought that added to her allure, and as he lay there thinking about it, he traced her side and seriously debated waking her up. They had recently grown more serious, and he found he didn't mind it. She was hard-working, and trying to get an online degree in event management. They'd had a rough patch a while back, but she had gotten cleaned up (mostly), and things were good. It was a new feeling for Jesse, and he was secretly waiting for the carpet to be pulled out from under him.

As he lay there, he felt something shift. Something was off, and the voices that whispered in the night changed their song. This only happened when a choice was coming that could alter Jesse's fate, and typically it was a bad one. He glanced again at Candice, and then scooted himself out of the bed to find his pants. If trouble was going to find him, he preferred it not be at his flat, and not while he was sober.

Jesse stepped onto the slick concrete sidewalk in front of his apartment building and pulled up the collar on his coat. He wanted some regular cigarettes, some beer, and potentially a burrito. There was nothing decent to eat at his place, and he figured he could bring something back for Candice when she woke up. Pulling his coat closed, Jesse did his best to pretend the cold wasn't bothering him as he made his way to the corner Duane Reade pharmacy.

The store was warm, and the blue fluorescents gave everything a dull, faded look. There was a mom holding a newborn in what passed for the grocery aisle, looking desperately for some generic formula while her infant screamed in her arms. There was a wino cruising the beer stand, and a man buying some smokes at the counter. Aside from that, it wasn't that crowded.

Jesse grabbed a warm six-pack, a bag of ice, three microwave burritos, and waited patiently behind the man buying cigarettes as the young girl working the counter tried to understand the man through a thick accent. Jesse was letting his mind wander when he heard the all-too-familiar sound of a shotgun being pumped behind him, and then the obligatory screaming that followed.

"On the ground! On the fucking ground now!" It was the wino. Jesse turned to see him pointing the shotgun right at his face. The wino was shaking, and had some drool on the side of his mouth and chin. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, and looked vacant. Jesse nodded and smiled.

"Hey man, it's cool. We're all cool here."

The wino turned his shotgun towards the young mother. She was clinging to her newborn who was still shrieking in her arms. The mother was on her knees and sobbing as the wino snapped, "Shut that kid up! Shut him up now! Do it!"

“Please don’t hurt us, please...” the mother choked out. Jesse cleared his throat to get the wino’s attention. The wino swung back around to see Jesse with his hands up and a smile on his face.

“Hey man, it’s cool. You smoke?” Jesse glanced to his right hand, which was holding a pack of cloves. The wino didn’t even register that the crinkled pack hadn’t been there a moment ago. “You want one? You mind if I have one?”

“Just keep your hands up!” The wino screamed. “You, empty the register! Now!” He pointed his gun at the girl working the register. The man buying cigarettes was already on the ground, his hands covering his head.

“Don’t bother with that,” Jesse said. He calmly put his hands down and fished in his pocket for his lighter. “And would you please put your gun down? You’re scaring folks.”

The wino put the barrel of the shotgun so close to Jesse’s face that the mage could smell the gunpowder residue left over from a previous outing. Jesse took a drag off his clove and nodded to the wino. “You can pull that trigger all you like. While you were fucking around, I turned the shells into copper lumps. Go on, try it.”

The wino pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. He tried several more times while Jesse blew a long strand of purple smoke from his lips. The smoke trailed around the confused wino, and then materialized into a coiled mass of snakes. The wino let out a gargled scream as the snakes slithered around his flailing limbs and into his coat. He crashed into a display of energy drinks as he scrambled out the door. Jesse watched as the man dove onto the sidewalk, rolling and screaming, before scrambling to his feet and taking off into the night.

Satisfied, Jesse approached the young lady behind the counter and then pointed behind her. “Pack of Luckys?”

The young woman blinked, not quite registering what was going on.

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The street was eerily deserted as a lone cab splashed through potholes and rounded a corner, leaving Jesse alone with his thoughts. The whispers had said something would happen tonight, that there was a splitting of paths. Jesse wondered if they had meant the wino. The man did have a gun, after all. If the young mother hadn't distracted him, Jesse wouldn't have had time to quickly cast the alchemical spell that transmuted his rounds. Could that have been what they were on about? Jesse shivered and frowned. It seemed too trivial, and not at all like something that warranted this level of caution. He clutched his plastic bag of food and booze and trudged back towards his apartment.

As he slouched down the empty sidewalk, he noticed the sound of his uncomfortable metal-clasped boots as they clanged on the wet pavement beneath him. His torn leather pants and ratty shirt offered little protection from the harsh evening chill, and his thin black trench coat didn't add much, either. He had debated changing his look, but he found that showmanship was just as much a part of the job as actual crime fighting, and he had an established image with the masses. Plus, Candice thought it was hot, so why mess with a good thing?

All of this ran through Jesse's head as he tried to block out the constant whooshing sound of cars flying by at high speeds. It was getting to the point that he was considering casting a red-light spell, just to mess with the evening drivers. He glanced up at a nearby traffic signal, wet his lips, and slid his hands out of his pockets. As he pulled back his collar to get a better view, he finally looked around, and then froze.

The street was completely empty. Slowly, his mind began to register that for a Friday night in New York, this was unheard of. Also, he realized it had been empty since he left the convenience store. In fact, he couldn't recall seeing any vehicles, save for a solitary cab that had flashed by him before he entered the store, but the sound continued.

"What the hell is this?" Darkane mumbled in a voice made rough by too many cigarettes. The puddles around him were still sloshing with ripples, showing a recent disturbance. Aside from that, the whooshing sound had suddenly stopped. He was enveloped in silence. Even the wind had hushed, and for a man who was connected to Shamanistic magic, that always boded ill.

As a cold chill trickled down his spine, he turned around to see a figure in a dark trench coat and fedora calmly standing a good 10 meters behind him. The figure's hands were resting in his pockets, and nothing about this man stood out as particularly dangerous, aside from the fact that he was obviously there for the young mage, and that he also seemed unfazed by the lack of people and traffic. While the man didn't look all that threatening, Darkane tensed as he got a look at the man's face. There were no features visible- it was nothing more than a blank surface.

"Hey," Jesse said in as calm of a voice as he could muster. "Sweet getup. I dig the face."

The figure said nothing. He just continued to stare at Jesse. At least, Jesse guessed he was staring; it's hard to tell when a person doesn't have any eyes. Jesse tried to play it off and grinned at the figure.

"S'cool man. I get it. You're not a talker. You smoke?"

Jesse reached into a side pocket to pull out a special crumpled pack of cloves. The cigarettes were actually filled with a powerful mixture of ground gemstones, cursed bones, and several ingredients from

a lower plane that very few had access to. Jesse had learned long ago to hide his weapons in plain sight, and for some reason, people were usually stupid enough to let him have at least one smoke. He went to fish one out from its crinkled wrapping and reached for his lighter. The mixture would be enough to give him a boost in magical abilities, and with it, he would be able to get off one or two powerful spells. If nothing else, he could use it to create an emergency portal.

Jesse smiled, and then went white as a sheet as the cigarette disappeared from his mouth. "Wha? What the fu..?" He looked at the man in gray. His coat was only slightly ruffled, but there he stood, still ten meters away, now calmly holding up the cigarette in his hand. He crumpled it, and a purple cloud of screaming smoke momentarily erupted from the tobacco before vanishing on the wind.

"Okay, cool. Not much for smoking. I dig." Jesse was beginning to get nervous. He reached into his coat for another talisman, a homemade version of an Infinity knife. He had crafted it from a werewolf's bones back when he was still heavy into nature-based magic. He felt around his hidden weapon's pocket, but his hands grasped empty air. He looked again to the figure, who was now holding the knife up by the blade. The man calmly twirled it in his hand and continued to otherwise stand perfectly still, waiting for Jesse to make another move.

"Okay asshole. You wanna play with the Master of Mystics? Fine. Le...le..." Jesse tried to speak, but his words came in a gurgle. He coughed up some blood, and when he reached for his throat, he found his hand covered in red. Horrified, he glanced towards the man in grey. The knife in the man's hand was now dripping with blood from the slice across Jesse's throat.

Jesse panicked. Most of his spells required a verbal component, but he had some he could still try. He reached for his dream bag, a container of extra dimensional dust, but it was gone. The pouches and containers he had hidden throughout his boots, belt, and coat were all missing. He glanced back to the man and saw all of his trinkets, necklaces, vials, and every other magical knick-knack he possessed piled at the man's feet. Somehow, the man had managed to take every single weapon Jesse had on his person without him realizing it. Even Jesse's shopping bag lay there in the pile of dangerous archaic magical weaponry.

Jesse felt the world slipping away and his vision going black. He tried to hold his throat closed with one hand while he dropped to his knees and began to quickly trace a circle around him with his own blood. It was risky and usually involved some form of infernal pact, but he was desperate. Jesse started to sob as he nearly finished the circle, only to suddenly feel a sharp, tight pressure in his chest. He looked down to see the hilt of the knife sticking out of the front of his shirt. The blade had pierced him through the heart and had protruded out the other side, staining his coat. He suddenly thought of Candice, sleeping soundly in his apartment. He could see her face clearly, and try as he might, that was the only thing his mind seemed to want to focus on. He wondered, as he felt himself slipping away and into the blackness, why such a mundane, ordinary thing would suddenly be all he could see. In his ears, the voices of the night were whispering again. They were singing again, but this time the song was clear. It was his requiem. It was laced with the warnings they had uttered before, when he was safe and warm in his bed, and hadn't paid attention.

Jesse fell backwards and crumpled to the ground. The figure in grey stood there for a moment, as if to make sure the legendary Darkane was truly dead. Then, he calmly slipped a smart phone out of his

pocket. He took a snap shot of the dead mage, sent it via a text, and then gently tucked the cell phone away.

In the blink of an eye, he was gone. Seconds later, traffic resumed travelling down the now-busy New York street.