

FOR CENTURIES HIS TOUCH BURNED.
UNTIL AN ANCIENT MAGIC CHOSE HER.

AWAKENED ASH *and* ALCHEMY

PARADOX ACCORDS

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEL A ROWE

AWAKENED ASH AND ALCHEMY

PARADOX ACCORDS – BOOK 1

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AWAKENED ASH AND ALCHEMY

Paradox Accords, Book One

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“They have been through the fire,
and what fire does not destroy, it
hardens.”

—*Oscar Wilde*

ONE

In Angela's defense, she'd been having a perfectly terrible night long before the alley tried to kill her.

Flanked by brick walls that seemed to lean inward, Angela's heels clicked along the uneven pavement as the narrow alley stretched ahead of her. Somewhere above, a neon sign flickered, casting erratic bursts of red light across overfull dumpsters and grimy walls.

She shouldn't even be here. Normally, she'd stay on the main street by the restaurants where the traffic flowed and people crowded the sidewalks.

But she'd been stood up. *Again.*

She was fine with it. Really. She enjoyed being single. Choosing dinner based on what she wanted, not what someone else considered date food. What was so interesting about potentially negotiating time with a man who'd eventually resent her work hours and life choices?

Now adding blind dates to that list of things to permanently avoid.

So when the flustered, elderly European couple stopped her outside the bistro, gesturing at an address scrawled on a crumpled napkin, Angela had smiled and dug into her rusty high school French.

"Par ici, suivez-moi." Although she might have said *chicken-cake-balloon-candle* at one stage, which is how she ended up escorting them three blocks out of her way, pointing out landmarks, and making sure they found their restaurant.

They thanked her profusely, pressing her hands between theirs as if she'd saved their lives instead of just their dinner

reservation. By the time Angela turned back toward her car, she was way off course.

The alley was faster.

Right?

So here she was...

Pulling her coat tighter, walking down this alley, her breath misting in the chilly night air. The sound of the street soon faded, swallowed by brick walls and shadows filled with secrets.

Then the temperature dropped. As that crawling sensation she'd get whenever someone walked too close behind her at night, making her skin tingle and senses heighten. But never this strong.

It was nothing, right? Cities had alleys. Alleys had dumpsters, rats, and the occasional homeless guy or junkie. So that metallic, faintly sweet, and overwhelmingly putrid aroma was perfectly justifiable.

Except her body didn't believe her. Not with that annoying trickle of fear crawling up her spine, like some useless alarm bell from a primitive age.

Ahead, the alley split into a T-intersection. Left led to the street she wanted. Right led deeper into the shadows.

Angela hesitated. She should go left, but her gaze drifted right to a soft sound coming from behind a dumpster near the far wall. It wasn't a cough or a laugh. And it wasn't good.

Inside her handbag, her fingers dug past her change purse, the lip gloss, receipts, and tissues to finally close around her trusty pepper spray.

"Hello?" Her voice echoed back, so tiny.

Of course, the alley didn't answer.

It was probably just a cat.

Still, there was this wrongness in the air itself, which had thickened into a deeper blackness, carrying a stench that made her eyes water. Along with a low, choking sound that made Angela's skin crawl.

She took one step forward.

Then another.

What are you doing? her brain screamed. *Go back. Go left. Go anywhere else.*

But her body kept moving, drawn by some compulsion to look at the broken thing and try to fix it.

She edged past the dumpster where the smell swamped her as if stepping into a tent full of badness. It was metallic. Hot. And oh, so wrong-wrong-wrong, coating the back of her throat like rust, making her gag.

There was a man sprawled on his back, half in shadow, his jacket open to reveal a green uniform, like nurse's scrubs. His mouth moved, shaping words that made no sound. His head jerked weakly, as his terror-filled eyes pleaded with her.

Crouched over the man was a being wearing a long black cloak that didn't move the way fabric should. It seemed to be absorbing the light into its dark folds. The hood obscured the face; where not even a nose or a mouth was visible. Just darkness, with one pale, thin hand pressed against the man's throat, making his breath stutter.

But it only got worse, as that cloaked being gave a soft, satisfied sigh of pleasure.

Angela wanted to be sick, to run.

Instead, rage mixed with horror made her voice crack through the alley like a whip. *"Get away from him!"*

The cloaked figure slowly turned its head, showing no face or any clear shape under that hood.

Angela lifted the pepper spray with shaky hands. *"Get off him. Now."*

The thing unfolded to a height taller than any man. Its too-long limbs were strangely fluid as if the air moved with it. From under the hood, the male voice was low and slithery, like a whisper heard through water. *"You... see me?"*

Angela's throat tightened, as did her grip on her pepper spray. *"Of course I see you."*

The hood tilted, as if curious. *"But you should not see. The*

Accords—

“You’re standing right there.” Her eyes burned from the stench rolling off him in waves. She had to do something, anything, even though she wanted to run and call the cops. “What are you? Part of some sick cult?”

A hollow laugh scraped out of the darkness. “Mortal words. Mortal comfort.”

It took one step toward her.

Angela stepped back, her heel skidding on the alley’s gritty floor. “Stay away from me.” She was so stupid. What on earth had possessed her to do this?

The thing paused, as if amused by her attempt at authority.

Then it suddenly moved too fast, closing the distance between them in a blink.

Angela jerked the pepper spray up, and it hissed, releasing a stream of chemicals hitting the darkness under the hood.

But it never even flinched.

Instead, it laughed.

Mercy.

Angela’s eyes watered from the chemical sting. “Get away from me.” She fired again, flooding the air with pepper and desperation as she stumbled backward.

But it did nothing.

The cloaked being’s voice became eerily intimate, the kind that would give her nightmares for the rest of her life. “That is not a weapon for my kind.”

It lunged.

Angela screamed. It was raw and ugly, as if dredged from the depths of her very soul, into a scream that echoed in the alley amplifying it a thousand times over.

You’d think someone would have heard her.

But the cloaked being’s hand closed around her throat, with fingers stiff as frozen bones, in a grip that wasn’t human.

The pepper spray canister slipped from her fingers,

clattering onto the concrete to roll under the industrial bin, as the thing lifted her by the throat.

Her spine click-clack into alignment; the muscles in her neck and shoulders strained as her feet left the ground, while she clawed at the hand gripping her throat.

The pain, the lack of air, and panic blended with black spots that danced with the stars in her eyes. Then it leaned closer with that hood to reveal red, hungry eyes.

Terror flooded through her. She struggled to breathe as it crushed her throat, forcing her to stare at evil itself.

"Put her down." The deep male voice cut through the alley.

The cloaked being paused.

Its grip loosened just enough for Angela to draw in a breath. She spotted a man standing at the mouth of the alley, half-hidden in the spill of the streetlights.

He was dressed in thick black leathers, worn and scarred as if they'd seen too many nights like this. Topped off with a heavy black coat that opened, not to reveal a gun, but...

Silver blades.

His eyes caught the light. A pale sea-glass blue like a crystalline teal, too bright and too clear to be real.

How was any of this real?

Angela's breath hitched. The hand around her throat tightened, crushing her windpipe before she could scream. She slapped at it as she tried to kick out and get herself free. "Help."

"Shh, my lovely, won't be long now." The cloaked being crushed her throat and all hope of air.

The man stepped into the alley, carrying a wave of dry heat that seemed to roll over them, making the air shimmer. "Put her down. *Now*."

The cloaked thing laughed, still holding Angela aloft. "Captain Zarek, Sworn Exarch of the Vanguard, it is an honor. Even if you are too late."

Captain Zarek moved. In less than the blink of an eye, he

appeared closer, the way lightning flashes. One moment distant, the next he was right there, followed by a flash of silver. The cloaked being's arm was severed at the elbow with an impossibly clean slice.

Angela hit the concrete hard. Her breath exploded from her chest. Pain flared through her shoulder and hip as she coughed, dragging ragged lungs full of air through her burning throat.

Above her, the cloaked being shrieked in a way that wasn't human or animal, but something that belonged in horror movies.

Zarek didn't flinch. He just stepped into the shriek, raising his blade.

The cloaked figure lashed out with nails like black talons, slicing for Zarek's face.

Zarek twisted aside with impossible speed as heat cracked through the air, unleashing a flame that flared out in a sharp burst to catch the black fabric of her attacker's cloak. In seconds, it smoked and burned, forcing the creature to stagger back. Its shrieks echoed within the alley's shadows so loudly it hurt her ears.

But Zarek kept moving, driving the silver blade straight into its chest as the entire thing ignited into a violent, raging red fireball that exploded outward in a sudden sphere of heat.

Angela threw her arm up, shielding her face as the blast washed over her.

And then...

Nothing.

The fire vanished like faded fireworks disappearing in the sky.

Angela blinked as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Zarek had buried his blade in the creature's chest, which had hardened into gray stone as a furious network of cracks spread outward from the blade.

Zarek removed the blade, and the statue shivered, then

collapsed into ash, hitting the ground like a shower of dust.

Angela stared as her brain struggled to catch up.

Monsters didn't turn to stone.

Stone didn't turn to dust.

And people didn't carry swords and set the air on fire.

A breeze threaded its way through the alley, scattering the remains of what had tried to choke her moments earlier. She pushed herself up on shaky hands. Her throat ached, and her eyes still stung from the pepper spray and shock. It was a struggle to stand.

Zarek turned toward her. The moment his gaze met hers, her world tilted. His sea-glass eyes held too much depth and power, along with a pull that should have made her want to look away.

So, of course, she didn't.

Zarek's expression flickered with alarm before he looked away.

"What—" she croaked, then swallowed, wincing at the hot, angry welts around her throat. "What was that?"

Zarek's gaze snapped back to her. "You shouldn't be here."

"No kidding." Angela coughed, using the wall to help her stand as her knees trembled. "That thing—he—whatever that was, hurt that man."

The injured man was still sprawled on the floor, breathing deeper than Angela could through her tender throat.

Zarek crouched beside the male victim, pressing two gloved fingers to the man's temple. A faint shimmer moved beneath his fingertips, and the injured man's eyelids fluttered.

Angela wasn't sure if it was some new CPR technique, a pressure point trick, or literally anything that belonged to the world she understood. But clearly her eyes, teary from the pepper spray, were doing a terrible job of seeing what was real. Especially when Zarek lifted his gloved hand over the victim's head, and the man's face slackened, as if he'd fallen

asleep.

"What did you do to him?" Why wasn't anyone calling the police? Ambulance? And where was her handbag?

Zarek stood, turning to face her. "He won't remember."

"That's not an answer."

Zarek lifted his hand toward her.

"Don't." Angela flinched. Her arm came up to shield her as her back pressed against the brick wall. "Don't come any closer. Please."

With his gloved palm half-raised, his fingers lightly curled back under. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"Then what are you trying to do?" Her voice shook as badly as her legs.

"I'm trying to help you. You shouldn't remember this."

"That would be nice." She let out a short, breathless laugh that held no humor at all. Her gaze flicked to the scattered ash at his feet, then to the empty space where the black-cloaked thing had been standing moments ago.

None of this was real, expecting to wake up any minute now. But the ache in her throat, and a shopping list of pain wracking her body, that as ugly as it was, she'd never been more awake in her life.

"I don't think my brain is ever going to make sense of that... this... you..."

The man, dressed like some warrior from another time, narrowed his eyes at her. His head tilted, making his angular cheekbones stand out against his strong jawline. Of course he had to be handsome.

"I can make you forget."

Surprisingly, the way he said it wasn't threatening.

"I wish I could forget..." She licked her dry lips. "Or this is the worst mugging in the history of muggings." Her car was just down the alley, near the lights, and the restaurant was just on the other side. This was supposed to be a simple shortcut. That's all.

Zarek's brow creased as he studied her. "You're not reacting the way you should."

"Seriously? I just watched a man turn into fire, stone, and ash. I think I'm allowed some flexibility in my reactions. I don't think there are any textbooks for this, are there?"

"You should not be able to see me."

"Oh, really?" Angela arched her eyebrow at him. "That's exactly what the black-cloaked thing said. Are you two doing some cosplay drama and forgot to tell the extras what was happening?"

"They're called Black Cloaks."

"Right."

"Mortals don't see us unless—"

"Mortal? What?" Angela's fingers curled against the brick wall, trying to rationalize all of this.

Zarek didn't answer. Instead, he lifted his gloved palm towards her.

Angela braced, waiting for him to touch her the way a paramedic checks for wounds.

But nothing happened.

Again, he tilted his head, as if listening to some hidden sound.

"Who are you?" She wanted to ask *What are you*, but the answer would have been too much for her mind and body to cope with right now.

Zarek turned away from her. "Go home."

"No." *Yes* is what she should have said. "I—he, you—"

Zarek's gaze snapped back in her direction. A dry warmth brushed against her skin, as the air shimmered near his shoulders like heat on an open desert highway.

Angela was searching for her escape, and her handbag, when that indescribable wrongness returned. Stronger this time, making the air taste of old metal and blood threaded with the cloying sweetness of rotting fruit. The stench hit her all at once, making her stomach turn.

It wasn't just bad.

It was *evil*.

But not from one presence. *Two*.

Angela's eyes widened. "Behind you."

Zarek turned as two more Black Cloaks slid out of the shadows like smoke learning to walk. Their hoods hid their faces in a darkness that looked too thick to be empty.

The air dropped to near-freezing temperatures, making the alley seem smaller as Zarek's posture shifted. Blades already in hand, they flashed once. Twice.

Abruptly, both Black Cloaks stopped mid-step, hardening into gray statues. Their stony shells cracked and collapsed to become more ash that scattered across the alley's floor.

Zarek spun around to face her, frowning. "How did you see them before I did?"

Angela's mouth opened, then closed. She didn't know the answer, when she was still struggling to comprehend what she'd seen, ready to run except her legs still felt like borrowed things.

Zarek stepped in close enough that the heat came off him in waves. With his eyes fixed on hers, he paused, as if something were wrong.

And that was the only normal thing about this entire confrontation.

"One green eye," he murmured. "One blue."

People always noticed. And they always stared, sometimes asking what had happened, like she owed them an explanation for being born wrong.

But Zarek didn't ask. He just looked at her as if she were a problem he couldn't solve. "What are you?"

Angela's spine stiffened. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

He hadn't hurt her. And she couldn't ignore the traitorous flicker of gratitude that rose inside for being able to breathe. But she couldn't trust any of this either.

"What about him?" She nodded to the injured man. "You

can't just leave him here."

In one move, Zarek lifted the man with impossible ease, hoisting him over his shoulder like dead weight.

"Right. Okay. Sure. This is all perfectly normal."

Zarek's eyes flicked back to her. "Go home."

Finally, her instincts, the ones that had screamed at her to run, were getting their way.

She pushed off the wall with unsteady legs, nearly tripping over her handbag. It took a few tries before her fingers latched onto the handle to start backing away.

Zarek watched her the entire time with those bright eyes, as if memorizing her.

Angela reached the edge of the alley where streetlights were too bright as the noise of the city rushed back, filled with cars, laughter, and a distant siren.

She turned back to find Zarek, standing deeper in the alley's shadows, the injured man over his shoulder, while ash drifted around his boots. His gaze locked onto hers again, and somehow the air tightened, like an invisible thread pulled taut between them.

Angela's throat burned that she could only whisper, "Thank you, Zarek."

Zarek's jaw clenched so hard she saw the muscle jump. As if gratitude were a language he didn't know how to speak.

It was enough to send Angela stumbling out into the street, pushing through the crowd as if normal people could shield her just by existing.

Her car felt like a fortress when she finally reached it. Her hands shook so badly she fumbled with her keys, slamming the door and locking herself inside.

For a long moment, she just sat there, breathing hard, gripping the steering wheel to stop the trembling while clenching her teary eyes shut. Only for her mind to replay the three Black Cloaks turn to stone, then ash, all from the flash of those silver blades wielded by a man made of heat, with eyes like pale sea-glass teal blue, with that deliciously deep

voice telling her to forget.

She wished she could forget.

What's more, she should have been sobbing hysterically or calling the police about a mugging she couldn't properly describe. Instead, she sat there... Her gaze flicked up to the rear-view mirror, reflecting the alley. For a second, she thought she saw a black shadow with impossible eyes fixed on her car.

But when a bus drove past, he was gone.

Angela's pulse didn't slow as she started the engine. With shaking hands, teary eyes, and a straight spine, she drove into the night, while the world she knew quietly cracked down the middle.

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