

Chapter 1

~ When a mortal says they want things to be 'fair,' they really just want to win. ~ advice given to a young demon.

Wizards aren't supposed to be whiny. But Dr. Corwyn was getting close to it. I could feel Shade's shoulders shake under my arm as she snickered quietly. Wanda was carefully looking at something on the far edge of the platform, but Mom looked like she wasn't about to spare his dignity. Even with dozens of people around us on the transit platform, her expression said she was ready to lay into him. Junkyard didn't offer an opinion. He was on an adventure, which was pretty much any time he wasn't at home or Dr. C's place. Any opportunity to mark a new part of the world as his was a good thing, as far as he was concerned.

"This is what I could afford," I growled in response to his latest complaint. In front of us was a teleportation platform, its triple rings dormant and upright. Around it was a series of runes, and the stone floor was inscribed with magickal symbols.

"Master Draeden offered to fly us up on his private jet," Dr. C said. "For free. We'd be there in a matter of hours, and we'd fly in comfort."

"No," I told him again. "I don't want to owe him any favors. And believe me, he'd think he was doing me a favor." Dr. C's lips pressed tight together as he looked at me, then he nodded.

"You're right about that," he said after a moment, his tone resigned. "You do know you're making it harder on yourself though, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I know you get sick when you teleport. I'll deal with it."

"Then so will I ... again." I nodded, willing the memories of his troubles with teleportation back into the box I'd built for them. Ahead of us, a group of Dwarves in gray business suits stepped onto the platform, handing tickets to the man at the opening in the waist high railing as they passed him.

"Last call for Denver Commons. Denmmnver Commons, transiting in three minutes. Last call!" As he finished, a woman in a flowing green dress came bustling up with two boys trailing from each hand.

"Denver Commons, that's us," she said as she let go of the boys' hands and dug in her purse. Moments later, she produced three tickets and thrust them at the man. He took them and gave them a quick glance, then nodded and gestured for her to go on. She grabbed the two boys by the hand again and stepped forward.

"Mom, do we have to take the transit platform?" one of the boys asked. "Barry always gets sick." The other boy was turning a little green around the edges, and the woman's eyes went wide.

"Oh, hell," the mother spat and rushed to the edge of the platform to grab something from a wooden box and hustled back to her sons. "I'm glad you reminded me." The Dwarves shuffled over a little as she returned and handed the less enthusiastic looking boy the paper bag she'd taken from the box. The man at the edge of the railing stepped back and went to a control panel by the upright rings.

"Transiting to Denver Commons," he called out as he manipulated the levers on the panel. "Stand clear of the platform! Stand clear of the yellow line." The nested rings started to spin with a metallic rasp, then the two inner rings rotated on their axis until they were horizontal, leaving a dark blue glow in their wake. A moment later, the inner most ring rotated along the second ring's axis, creating a third axis. The rings started to hum as the dark blue energy obscured the inside of the transit platform. Finally, the first ring stopped, with a rune glowing. The horizontal ring slowed to a stop a few seconds later, a different rune glowing over our heads at the spot where it

intersected with the third ring. Finally, the inner most ring stopped, and I could see the glow of a rune at the top of the rings. The glow pulsed brighter for a moment, then disappeared completely, revealing an empty platform. Dee gave a squeal of delight as the rings slowly started to return to their original position.

“Can I go with them?” she asked. “I wanna teleport!”

“Not today, sis,” I said. “I only bought two tickets. But you and Mom can come up some time.”

“There is a Parent’s Day every month or so,” Dr. C said. “And students can earn off campus passes for weekends.”

“Liberty Plaza,” the transit operator called out. “Ten minutes to transit to Liberty Plaza. All on the platform for Boston.”

“That’s us,” I said. I squeezed Shade a little closer for a moment, and her arms tightened around my ribs.

“I’m going to miss you,” she said for about the thousandth time.

“You know I’m going to be crazy without you,” I said as I kissed her.

“Promise to wither away and die?” she asked.

“I’ll even write depressing poetry about how much I miss you every day.”

“And I’ll lock myself in my room for at least a month and mope,” Shade giggled.

“Could you two get any more dysfunctional?” Wanda asked, adding an eyeroll for emphasis.

“Still a better love story than-” Dr. C started to say. Wanda’s elbow in his ribs cut off the comment.

“Okay, now that the Codependency Channel’s off the air, Lucas sent something for you. He said you’re not supposed to open it until you’ve got your room set up.” She handed me a black gift bag from Lucas’s grandfather’s store, Mitternacht’s Books. “We’re gonna miss having you around to make things interesting. Hopefully, no one tries to destroy the city while you’re gone,” she said as she hugged me.

“I’m sure you guys can handle it,” I said as I wrapped her in a hug.

“Great,” Wanda said with a grin. “Now you’ve pretty much made sure something is going to happen while you’re gone. We’ll be stuck trying to make it an episode where you come back right after we beat the Big Bad and we act all cool like nothing happened, instead of one where you have to rescue us at the last minute from our own stupidity.”

“I got you something, too,” Shade said with a sly smile as she pressed something into my hand. When I looked down, I saw a sleek phone laying on my palm.

“Baby, I can’t afford this,” I said as I tried to push it back into her hands.

“I can,” Shade said, her smile turning a little feral as she closed my hand around the phone. “And it’s not for you. It’s for me. I want to see your face when we talk. I want to talk to you for hours and not have your minutes run out in the middle. And I want you to have something that’s just between us.”

“Like I don’t already,” I whispered. Her hand came up and touched the center of my chest, where the vial with several drops of her blood hung from a leather thong. One with filled with my blood was nestled between her breasts, both given under a waxing moon, so our love would only grow. I leaned in and kissed her, then stepped back.

“Why is it I keep saying goodbye to you every time I turn around?” Mom asked when I turned to her.

“Because life sucks,” I said. Both our voices were a little rougher than we wanted anyone else to hear, but I wasn’t about to go all stoic and stiff-upper lipped on Mom. Dee put her arms

around my waist and held tight for a few moments, then turned and shrugged the straps of her purple backpack off her shoulders. At least today it almost went with the plain blue t-shirt she had on. Lately, she'd taken to wearing plain shirts, refusing to wear even her Dr. Hooves t-shirt, which I was pretty sure was her favorite shirt ever.

"Take Pyewacket with you," she said as she pulled the black stuffed animal from her pack. "I'd give you Dr. Hooves, but I need him if you're not home."

"I'm sure he'll keep me safe," I said as I took the black cat. It had a little hand-made wizard's hat sewed to its head now, and wore a little pewter pendant with symbols carved into it.

"I don't recognize these symbols," I said as I went to one knee.

"I made them up," Dee said. I almost heard Dr. C's shoulders unknot. "That one's so you don't have bad dreams, that one is for protection, and that one is so you don't have too much homework."

I hugged her tight, and tucked Pyewacket into my backpack next to Lucas's gift bag. "I hope that last one works really well," I told her before I stood up and hugged Mom.

"Everything I can give you, I already have," she said as she took my hand in hers. "The gifts of my bloodline, the love of a mother, and a home to return to when your travels are done. I'm proud of you, Chance." I choked up for a moment, so all I could do was hug her to me.

"I won't let you down," I said when I pulled back. Mom smiled and shook her head.

"You never have," she said.

"The gate's open," Dr. C said. I shrugged my backpack on, then grabbed the dolly that had my book trunk on it and wheeled it toward the opening in the railing. Dr. C wheeled the one with my clothes in it along behind me. Junkyard trotted along behind us, carrying his own luggage in the red harness vest that Mom had made for him. His food and water bowls were on either side, and his blanket was rolled up and tied to the harness across his shoulders, with a few little items in the backpack behind that. His most important possession, a big rawhide bone, he carried in his mouth. And as always, he wore his two bandanas around his thick neck. Once we had my stuff on the platform, I went back to the gate and gave one last round of hugs and kissed Shade.

"Liberty Plaza, transiting in one minute!" the transit operator called out. I backed away from everyone.

"You ready?" Dr. C asked when I reached him. I looked down and saw the paper bag he held in his hand.

"No. Are you?"

"Eh," he said with a casual shrug. Junkyard looked up at us and thumped his tail. At least one of us was happy to be there.

"Transiting to Liberty Plaza," the operator called out. Dr. C nodded and turned so that he was facing away from me. His shoulders pressed against mine, and I felt his weight shift as his right hand went to his side, where a pistol would be if he was armed.

"Old habits?" I asked.

"Bare is the brotherless back," he said as the world outside of the platform turned blue. Reality seemed to spin and lurch at the same time, while my mystic senses were bombarded by a scream of static. Then everything stopped at once, and that was almost as bad as the onslaught of sensation. My ears felt like they were cringing and I blinked like I'd just been flash-blinded. As disorienting as it had been, it was a lot smoother than some of the transits I'd made with Dulka to the various Infernal realms. Behind me, I could hear Dr. C moan and gulp.

"You gonna make it, sir?" I asked.

"Oddly enough...I think I will," he said. "That's a first."

The blue haze faded around us, and I was treated to my first sight of Liberty Plaza. Unlike New Essex's Underground, Liberty Plaza was entirely open to the sky. The transit rings rotated back into position, and a man in a long coat and white knee breeches opened the gate set in the wrought iron fence that surrounded the platform.

"Arriving, New Essex Underground," he said. We grabbed my two trunks and wheeled them toward the gate as another man spoke up.

"Preparing to depart, Capitol Greens," the man on the opposite side of the platform said. First call, Puget Sound." Junkyard and I followed Dr. C across the open space surrounding the transit platform as a mixed group waited on the other side to enter the transit stage. Most of the buildings were either white-washed wood or red brick. The one Dr. C led us to had a green sign above the door that read "Brannock's Livery, Est. 1706" in gold letters. We muscled my trunks through the door, and almost immediately, a large man in a blue work shirt and jeans hustled out from behind the counter to help us.

"Good afternoon," he said as he gestured at the trunk Dr. C was pushing. "Welcome to Brannock's. Where can we take you today?"

"The Franklin Academy," I said, reaching into my pocket for the pouch full of trade silver I carried. He turned and looked at me for a moment, then nodded and put a smile on his face.

"We don't get many going out to the Academy," he said. His tone was carefully neutral, but I could see Dr. Corwin's shoulders tense when the man stopped and turned to face us. The man nodded and took the trunk to the back, then came back for mine.

"Is the dog going back with you?" he asked Dr. C after both trunks were stowed.

"He's my familiar," I said. I turned to Junkyard and undid his harness. "It's okay, buddy. Let him take the bone. You'll get it back, I promise." Junkyard gave me a long suffering look, then lowered his head and laid the rawhide bone at the man's feet. The guy slowly bent over and picked the bone up then took the harness from me.

"What's so damn funny?" I asked Dr. C while the livery keeper took Junkyard's stuff back. He was grinning like he'd just heard a dirty joke with a pun for a punch line.

"It's just funny when people underestimate you," he said.

"As long as you're enjoying yourself," I muttered.

"Immensely, my young apprentice," he said. "Now, we have a little bit of shopping to do before we go. You still need a couple of books and your school uniforms." I did my best not to groan at that, and if he heard me, he at least acted like he didn't. We left the livery with the time we'd be going to the Academy, and Dr. C led me toward Hobart's Haberdashery. Like most of the shops in the Plaza, the only thing that stood out about it was its sign, and even that wasn't very original. The name was split up in an over and under style on a white oval, with a spool and crossed needles taking center space. Other than that, it could have been any of the three story red brick buildings. My first impression of Boston was a boring one.

A bell rang somewhere in the shop as we came in, and a stooped little man with thin black hair that was combed over the blank acreage on top of his head emerged from the back. Dr. C handed him his card as he walked up, and the man just about simpered at us.

"Ah, Wizard Corwin," the little man said in a breathy voice that sounded like a passable Peter Lorre impression. He offered one limp little hand to Dr. C, who took it just long enough to give a perfunctory handshake. He nodded to me, then lowered his hand for Junkyard to sniff, which of course earned him the dog's approval and a few points in my book. "So good to see you again. Apprentice Fortunato's uniforms are ready. Shall I have them sent ahead to the Academy?"

“We’ll take one now,” Dr. Corwin said as he wiped his hand on his pant leg. “Have the rest sent ahead, if you please. I’ll handle payment via a draft from Bjernings, as agreed.”

“Of course, of course,” Mr. Hobart wheezed. “So good to see a wizard who still knows the value of tradition. So many apprentices bound for Franklin don’t have a proper master to teach them. These past few decades, it’s been all tutors and family expense accounts. No one properly overseeing their students.” He shook his head as he went to a rack of hanging clothes and started checking tags. About midway through, he stopped and pulled a black suit out, then returned to us with it half draped over his arm. The Franklin Academy crest was on the left breast pocket, and a dark red tie with broad black stripes bordered in white was draped around the hanger. I took the suit, and he offered Dr. C a black box. “You’ll find such accessories as needed to turn your young apprentice out in proper style for today inside. And of course, once he is properly settled, you can order accessories to match his house affiliation.”

“Of course,” Dr. C said with a smile. “We’ll notify you as soon as we know.”

“Houses?” I asked under my breath as we headed for the dressing room.

“Yes, each dormitory is under the house system. You’ll be assigned to one house the entire time you’re there.”

“Sounds a lot like-”

“Yes, it does. Only without that stupid hat. And there’s no cup at the end of the year.”

“You didn’t like the hat?” I asked as I went into the dressing room.

“I didn’t like the idea of lumping all the same kind of people together in the same place. That’s never a good idea. Hell, even the characters in the books knew how that worked out and they still put all the potential power hungry maniacs in the same two houses. And then they act surprised when the same thing happens again and again? But, it’s fiction. I guess I should expect a little creative license.”

“So, she didn’t just make up the part about the houses on her own?” I asked after I pulled the pants on.

“No, the house system is pretty common in boarding schools in Britain,” he said. “It’s also pretty common at boarding schools here, at least the older ones. But the idea is to keep the houses diverse, not homogenous.”

The shirt was a soft white linen, and the jacket was a black wool blazer. I tucked the tails of the shirt in and stepped out with the tie in hand.

“Is there a secret knot?” I asked.

Dr. C laughed. “No, just the usual four-in-hand. Remember, some magick uses knots to bind and release spells, so the Academy has to keep the everyday stuff very mundane. Especially around hundreds of young mages with varying levels of control over themselves and their magick.” He helped me with the knot, then handed me the cufflinks from the box. Unlike the ones I’d seen my father wear, these were two disks connected by a single link of chain. One bore the school colors in diagonal bands, the other with white dots on a red field. Dr. Corwin ran them through the buttonholes so that the two cuffs came together beside each other instead of having them overlap like all my other cuffed shirts did. He held out a slim, rectangular wristwatch on a narrow black band, and I gave him a distrustful look. “Oh, go on,” he teased me. “It’s just a time piece, not a manacle.” I slipped it on and buckled it into place.

“Lucas would probably say something about being a slave to the clock,” I said.

“Most likely,” Dr. C said. “Now, the watch case and the cuff links are made of silver. I know it’s tempting to use them as charm focuses, but that would be frowned on, so don’t do that.” His tone had all the sincerity of a used car salesman.

“Of course not, sir,” I said. “Because none of the other kids are going to be doing it either, right?”

“Not at all,” he said. We went back to the counter where Hobart was waiting. His eyes ran up and down as I approached. He smiled and nodded as Dr. C signed the draft approval, then ushered us to the door.

“A fine fit,” he breathed happily. “A fine fit indeed, Apprentice Fortunato. Wear it in good health and don’t hesitate to call upon me if you need anything repaired or replaced. The rest of your uniforms will be waiting for you upon your arrival at the Academy.”

We found ourselves on the sidewalk with a paper bag that held my street clothes and the accessory box, and Hobart’s business card in our hands, with Hobart himself bowing and smiling behind us. Dr. C turned to the left and headed toward another shop, this one with a white wooden sign in the shape of an open book. “Harper and Taylor, Booksellers” was printed across the white paint in the same kind of black letter as every other sign around it.

“It’s awfully quiet,” I said as we approached the door. I’d seen maybe ten people outside the transit stage, and most of them looked human.

“Boston is home to some of the wealthiest mage families in the US,” Dr. C said. “They don’t *go* shopping. They tell the help what they want, and it shows up later that day. Most of these merchants make a fortune with customers they rarely see or meet.”

“That sounds boring,” I said.

“I wouldn’t know,” he replied.

The smell of Harper and Taylor hit my nose and almost made me feel homesick. It smelled of old paper and leather, a lot like Mitternacht’s did. It was missing the aromas of pipe smoke and coffee, though. Rows of books filled the middle of the space, and the walls were lined with bookshelves as well. A blonde woman smiled at us from behind the counter on our right, her hair smoothed back and gathered into a bun so tight I wasn’t sure even light could escape it, much less a stray hair. Her eyes flicked to Junkyard and her lips twitched a little, but the smile stayed put.

“Good morning,” she said as we approached the counter. “How can we help you?”

“We need these three titles,” Dr. Corwin said as he handed her the small page from his notepad. She took it and held it gingerly between her thumb and forefinger, then snapped her fingers. Almost immediately, I heard the flutter of wings, and a blue skinned sprite flew down from the rafters. He wore a simple white tunic with the back cut out to make room for his wings, with a cord belt that had several small pouches and a net dangling from it. His antennae jutted from his forehead and dipped forward, with three small nodules on the end.

“Zip, help these two gentlemen with their purchases,” she said. Her smile slipped just a little, and there was an almost imperceptible pause before the word ‘gentlemen’ as she spoke. I looked at the sprite, and felt my jaw tighten as my teeth clenched. The little fae dropped down and accepted the list from her, then turned in midair and drifted over the bookshelves, his shoulders slumping as he dipped out of sight. A couple of moments later, he reappeared with a book dangling in the net, his wings tinged red from the effort, and his face a darker shade of blue. He set it on the counter and proceeded to unwrap the book, but Dr. C was there in a heartbeat.

“Perhaps you could just show us where the other two are,” he said as he lifted the book free of the netting. Zip looked over at the woman, his big eyes darkened with worry.

“If sir insists,” he said.

“Sir does,” Dr. C said as he handed the textbook to me. “It’s a personal preference, pay it no mind.” Zip gathered the net up and tucked it back in his belt, then took to the air again, his two antennae quivering as he led us through the stacks. I took a look at the book he’d brought, *History of American Magick: Civil War to 2010*. The next book he led us to was *Transformative Properties: Alchemy In the Modern Age*. It was a thick book, and judging by the orange and red design on the cover, the Modern Age was sometime back in the 70s. Zip led us up a set of narrow stairs and to the back for the third book. Of the three, it was the skinniest, and the smallest. *Counterspells and Wards: Theories of Magickal Defense* was printed in fading gold ink on the cloth cover. I took it from Dr. C with a frown.

“Have I made a mistake?” Zip asked. “Is it the wrong title?”

“No, Zip, you did just fine,” Dr. C said with a smile as he fished in his pocket. “It’s exactly the right book. You certainly know your shop. Your service was exemplary. Thank you.” He laid his hand on one of the shelves, leaving a silver trade bar and a cinnamon candy behind. Zip’s eyes went to the shelf, then he nodded and flew off, his wings making a higher pitched hum.

“I thought it would be... I don’t know, thicker?” I said as I held up the book.

“It assumes you know a lot about the topic already,” he said as he led the way back toward the stairs. “Which you do.” He stopped only long enough to sign the draft approval and gave the clerk a perfunctory nod, then headed straight for the door. Once outside, he stopped for a moment and took a deep breath, blowing his breath out through his lips as he seemed to deflate a little.

“Was it the sprite?” I asked as we walked along.

“I can’t stand the way people treat them sometimes,” he said, his voice tight. I let the subject drop, and we made the rest of the walk in silence.

By the time we made it to the livery office, my feet were beginning to hurt in the new shoes, and I wanted nothing more than to take the damn things off. Preferably to throw them in a fire. I kept them on through force of will, and took a moment to look over the carriage that waited for us. The bottom was a dark red wood polished to a high shine, and the top was black, with a cloth roof that arched forward from the rear. The driver’s seat had its own black awning and a black bench with red cushions. My trunks were tied to the back, with a small basket on top. Junkyard pretty much quivered at the prospect of a ride, and his tail was a blur behind his butt. The driver came out and opened the door, ushering us out to the carriage and opening the door to the carriage as well. As we crossed the wooden patio, I saw what was pulling the wagon.

The front looked like a brass horse, complete with a mane of black hair. But where its shoulders should have been was the edge of a large, spoked wheel. The center of the wheel was cut out, and a horizontal copper ring ran through it. A bright blue nimbus of energy floated inside the copper ring, and a pair of thick bars curved forward and down to connect the carriage to the ring. Junkyard jumped into the carriage and looked back at us, his tongue lolling out. I let Dr. C get in first to spite the pain lancing up from my toes, but I wasn’t above a sigh of relief as I sank into the leather padded seat.

“Shoes?” Dr. C asked. I nodded. “They take some getting used to. Hobart will likely include some stretchers for them. I suggest you use them.”

“I wish I could just wear my sneakers instead,” I said.

“You’ll have to abide by the manual’s instructions,” he said as the cart surged forward. We came out onto a side road in a wooded section. The road curved around until it came out onto a path that followed the Charles River. The track we were on ran parallel to the road, but slightly below it. I could see the slight shimmer of the *glamer* that hid us from the cowan drivers, a little

deflection spell that barely brushed against the brain's frontal lobe and urged it to ignore what didn't fit with 'normal' perceptions. We rode along, keeping pace with the cars on the road to our left with little more than the sound of the wheels humming on the road and the soft whine of the magickal engine. Most of the time, we were actually hidden from view by the trees, but as the road curved to the right, we emerged near a freeway, and I could see three taller buildings ahead and to our right. We followed the river's bank, crossing the water using a lane no one else seemed to see. Finally, we veered away from the banks near a subdivision called Waltham. Once we slipped under the interchange after Waltham, we started seeing more carriages on the road. A couple passed us like we were standing still, both floating along effortlessly.

Eventually, we turned off the hidden road and found ourselves in front of a set of gates with three carriages and a limo ahead of us. Men and women in dark suits flanked the gate with clipboards and wands in hand. One approached the limo and spoke to its driver, checked his clipboard, then waved them through. The carriage after it got the same treatment, but the next one was waved onto a side road to the right. As we pulled forward, I caught sight of a blue robe and a silver ankh atop a silver staff.

"That's new," Dr. Corwin said as he glanced at the Sentinel. Ahead of us, the man with the clipboard was waving the carriage forward when one of the curtains in the cabin parted near him.

"What is the meaning of that?" I heard as an arm emerged from the window. The man didn't exactly point. He swung his hand in the general direction of what he was talking about, apparently assuming the person he was talking to would get the point. Before the staffer could answer, he continued. "I pay enough to send my sons here; I don't want them to have to look at those people all day long."

"The headmaster will explain why they're here, Mr. Abernathy," the staffer said patiently. "Rest assured, Master Carlton and Master Wilforth won't be seeing them any more than is absolutely necessary for their safety and security."

"They shouldn't have to see them at all, and you can be certain I'll be having a word with the headmaster about your attitude as well. When Master Draeden hears about this, he'll have your job and the headmaster's I'm sure." The hand retreated back into the carriage and it pulled forward, leaving us as the next in line.

"Good afternoon, sir," the staffer said as we pulled up.

"Good afternoon," Dr. C said. "Wizard Corwin and Apprentice Fortunato." Up close, I could see that the man had an ear cuff on his left ear. It glowed blue when Dr. C stopped talking and the man nodded. I guessed it was tuned to tell if someone was lying, and it had just verified that we were who we said we were. The staffer ran his finger down the clipboard, then looked up at us, his eyes hooded as he glanced at me.

"Fortunato," he said slowly. "Scholarship. You'll be checking in at Strathorn Hall."

"Strathorn?" Dr. C said. "I thought check-in for all students was at Chadwicke."

"No, sir," the staffer said with a practiced looking smile. "Scholarship students have a streamlined check-in process now. Much less confusing." He stepped back and gestured at the driver, and the carriage lurched forward.

"That's new, too," he said as he frowned and leaned back in the seat. The road curved along the inside of a stone wall on our right that came up about five feet and sprouted iron fencing above that. Square towers of stone supported the fencing every twenty feet or so. I caught glimpses of the school through the trees, but never more than a stolen glance of red brick or white trim. Ahead of us, the woods ended, and the wall went from half-stone and half fence to all

iron fencing except for the intervening stone towers. Outside the forested area, the support columns were topped with painted statues of mystical beasts.

When we cleared the trees, I got my first good look at the Franklin Academy. Like most things in Massachusetts so far, it was mostly red brick with a little white wood for contrast. The doors, shutters and roof trim were bright white. The front of the place looked like one very wide four story building that had sprouted a couple of smaller buildings along its wings. To the left, I could see cars and carriages, and a crowd of students in Franklin black in front of the main building in the middle. The boys were easy to tell from the girls by the flash of pale legs in skirts.

Then we were around the corner, and a much smaller group of people were waiting outside of an older looking building. Cars and carriages were evenly represented here, but none of them looked very expensive. In fact, the newest looking carriage there bore the crest of the livery company we'd rented ours from. As we pulled up, I could see some of the kids lounging near the steps that led into the building. Unlike what I saw at school in the cowan world, this group didn't split off like normal kids did. Some of them were sitting on the lowest step staring at handheld game consoles, while another group was at the corner of the steps and a third was only a few feet away. The corner group was a mixture of different performers. A couple of girls worked with hula hoops, doing impossible twirls and tricks. A trio of guys and two girls spun poi with an intensely casual air, while another kid worked with a set of small rings next to one who was weaving intricate energy designs between his fingers. The group further from the steps was almost all guys, and my summer spent working with Dr. Corwin, Steve Donovan and the Hands of Death, Todd Cross and T-Bone, told me all I needed to know about them. These were the martial artists, or the guys who liked to think they were. Smooth katas were mixed with rapid, jerky sequences of strikes and kicks, each more elaborate than the last.

The carriage stopped, and Dr. C was out the door before I could even sit up straight. When my feet hit the grass beside the road, he was already several steps ahead of me. Even Junkyard seemed to have springs in his feet as he bounded around me. I slung my backpack across one shoulder, then followed Dr. C as fast as I could, and we found ourselves in a large, open room with tall, narrow windows. A large fireplace dominated one end of the hall, and three heavy tables that formed a squared off U shape. Grown-ups sat on the outside of the U, while students filed along the inside of it with papers in hand. Parents and students chatted with each other and the handful of staff in the open area in the middle of the hall. A handful of the parents had a sort of shell shocked look on their faces, mostly those with younger kids in the Academy's uniform beside them.

"Excuse me," a man's voice called out when we were halfway across the hall. "Pets are not allowed." We turned to see a thin faced, blond man in his mid-20s crossing the wooden floor toward us, his leather shoes clomping against the hard surface as he came our way.

"He isn't a pet," Dr. Corwin said, sounding about as irritated as I did when I said it.

"I beg your pardon?" the man asked, pulling up short.

"He's my familiar," I said.

"Where's his control collar?" the man demanded. "All familiars must be under strict control of their owners at all times. You can't control an animal without one. And where are his papers and registration as familiar?"

"I don't own him," I said. By now, heads were starting to turn toward us.

"The bond between mage and animal is the entire point of a familiar," Dr. C said with a frown. "You can't just buy one." The man just smiled and shook his head.

“Typical,” he said. “I’ll take you to Washington Hall and you can make arrangements to send the animal home. Come with me.” He turned and strode toward a side door, and we found ourselves in a hallway that connected the building we were in to the rest of the school. The staffer’s feet clacked on the marble floor as he set a quick pace down an endless hallway. We went through another building and turned left into a larger marble hall. Another building and another hallway passed before we hit the steps leading into the main building. Even then, we ended up going down a long hall with several old wooden doors on either side before we hit the main hall. Through it all, Junkyard stayed by my side, and Dr. C maintained his glare at the other man’s back.

The biggest difference between the two rooms was the number of staff here. And the number of chairs. Row upon row of tables had been set up like individual desks, with one chair on one side, and three on the other. As we entered, a family got up from one of the tables and left the room, and another family was ushered into their place. One half of the room was also given over to a waiting area, with padded chairs and tables covered with bottles of water, soda and juice next to trays of hors d’oeuvres.

“Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Endicott,” the woman on the other side said as they took their seats. “We’ll just have you sign a few forms here, and give you Reginald’s syllabus and student manual, and he’ll be enrolled.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Endicott said as we passed the table. “I have a meeting at three, I can’t be held up with paperwork...” The rest was lost in the low buzz as we headed for a line of kids at the back of the hall. Each of them wore the Franklin school uniform, and all of them had an animal either next to them, on them or in their arms. I slowed down, but the stampede of panicked animals never happened. A few started to act agitated, but at a gesture from their owners, they calmed. I turned and gave Dr. C a confused look, but his glare only seemed to focus down to a laser-like intensity.

“Wait here,” the staffer said and then headed toward the front of the line. I looked back over my shoulder toward the table we’d passed. A woman was handing the over a thick file to the man behind the desk, who nodded at her before she went toward the back of the room. I could see several more runners moving between the tables, pulling files from a long table at the back of the room. I turned my attention back to the line of kids and animals. Winthrop Gage had also mentioned a collar when he’d first seen Junkyard, but we’d fought a demon not long after that, and that little detail just sort of faded into the background. And these kids either had very strong bonds with their familiars, or animals that were familiar material just weren’t phased by all the demonic crap that had stuck to my aura while I was working for Dulka.

“That is just...*wrong*,” Dr. C said through gritted teeth. “Those animals aren’t familiars.” I looked down the line. One girl held a koala, while another had a spider monkey clinging to her shoulder. Two other boys had huge hawks, and a third had a colorful parrot on his shoulder. There were a few exotic cats, all well bred and groomed, and a couple of owls. All bore some sort of jeweled collar or band around their neck or leg.

“What do you mean, sir?” I asked. “They certainly act like it.” He tapped the center of his forehead, then raised his eyebrows at me expectantly. It took a second before I got what he wanted me to do. “Oh, right!” I said, and blinked a couple of times to let my eyes unfocus and my Aura Sight open.

Bright blues and purples covered most of their auras, with curious gaps in places. The animals, on the other hand, had light green aura covering their natural one, with dark red streaks extending from the collar through the overlaid shell. Each of the kids had a small red and green

blotch on their aura, centered on a ring or a bracelet. I looked down at Junkyard, with his bright gold aura, and the streaks of black and red around his heart. A similar patch of gold ran through my aura near my heart chakra, the little bits of ourselves that we had shared when we bonded.

I blinked and shook my head. "There's no bond between them," I said.

"The collar suppresses the animal's will, and the master device lets the owner control them like a puppet." He was almost trembling with anger now, and I could understand why. Dr. Corwin might have been a bad ass wizard, and he sure as hell didn't cut me any slack with my lessons, but as strict and sometimes just flat scary as he was, he had a huge soft spot for anything with fur or feathers. As hard as he pushed me, he spoiled Junkyard twice as much. Seeing this must have pissed him off to no end. Dr. C was usually pretty mellow, but right now, he was almost as angry as I'd ever seen him.

"Dr. C," I said softly. "In the words of your generation, be cool, man." One side of his mouth dipped down as he turned toward me and pulled his head back. "What?" I said off his look.

"Hearing you be the voice of reason is a little...odd," he said.

"I'm the one who knows when fighting is a bad idea, and losing your shit right now...kinda at the top of the whole bad idea list."

"This is definitely not the time, or the arena," he said after a moment. By then, the officious little prick who had pulled us from the enrollment line was dragging another, older man toward us. Most of his hair was gone, leaving gray tufts above his ears that matched his faded eyebrows. His face was round and pink, with wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth that looked like he spent most of his time smiling.

"Really, Mr. Preston," he was protesting as the younger man pulled him forward. "I don't see the need for...oh." He stopped as he saw Junkyard.

"Yes, sir," Mr. Preston said with a quick nod. "We can't have this animal wandering loose.

"You look familiar," the older man said as his eyes fell of Dr. C.

"I was a student here back in eighty-one, Professor Abernathy," Dr. C said as he offered a hand to the older gentleman. "I'm Trevor Corwyn."

"Ah, Wizard Corwyn, yes, I recall you," Abernathy said with a smile. "You did a semester to qualify for Sentinel training. Chomsky's last apprentice. I was saddened to hear of his passing last year; terrible loss. The boy is your student, then?"

"Yes, sir, and the animal in question is his familiar. A real familiar, not some..." he stopped for a moment, then waved his hand toward the line of students. "Not like those."

"An old fashioned bond, eh? Haven't seen anything like that in a while," Abernathy said. "Well, the test should be easy enough to see to."

"But, Professor, the animal's registration and paperwork," Preston sputtered. "We can't let just any animal in here. It has to be from a certified breeder and...and..."

"I told you it had been a while," Abernathy said to Dr. C. He turned and ushered us up the steps to the curtained off stage area, with Preston following behind. Behind the curtain, several men and women in longer coats sat behind a single table. An empty seat waited on the right side, and Abernathy wasted no time in taking it. Still he wasn't fast enough to shut Preston up.

"Professor Abernathy, these traditions have been in place for over thirty years," he said.

"Yes, I know," Abernathy said. "And I've been here for sixty-three years. By your logic, *I'm* a tradition, and an older one at that. Young man, what's your name?"

"Chance Fortunato, sir," I said. "And this is Junkyard." Junkyard took a step forward and promptly sat.

“Junkyard?” the woman to Abernathy’s left asked, her pen poised over a form.

“Yes, ma’am. That’s where we first met.”

“And this is where you shared the bond gaze?” Abernathy asked. I nodded. “Very well then, let’s put him through his paces.”

“How do you propose we do that?” a woman who looked like she was in the early twenties asked. “

“The same way we do all the others. First, we verify the bond.”

“How do we do that without documentation?” the younger woman asked. Abernathy sighed and shook his head, adding in an eyeroll to up the difficulty.

“Have none of you been here more than thirty years?” he asked. Heads shook up and down the table. “Look at the boy’s aura and then at the dog’s. There will be some overlay around the heart. There, do you see it?” Half a dozen pairs of eyes went to me, and I could see the shock and revulsion on their faces as they each got a look at my aura, then glanced over at Junkyard.

“Nadia,” the older man said when one woman let out disgusted sound deep in her throat.

“Are you capable of conducting yourself impartially at this time, or is your objectivity compromised?” The question had the cadence of a formal request, but his tone made it sound a lot sharper to me, as if the question itself was a reprimand.

“I’m okay,” the woman said after a moment.

“Then we’re agreed that a bond exists?” Six quiet acknowledgements answered him. “Mr. Fortunato, please direct your familiar from one side of the room to the other, then back to your starting point.”

I looked down at Junkyard, and he looked up at me. His tail hit my ankle as it wagged. “Over there, buddy,” I said. He trotted to the place I was pointing, then turned and looked back at me. “Other side now,” I said, and pointed to the other side of the room. He crossed the room, turned around and sat, giving me a tongue lolling look. “Back over here.” Seconds later, he was next to me again, and I found myself facing row of frowning faces.

“The familiar failed to complete the task properly,” one of the men said.

“Failed?” Abernathy laughed, “Or exceeded your expectations?”

“There is only pass or fail,” the man said. “He did not do what was instructed. The task was to cross the room and return to his owner. The fault lies with the owner, but that changes nothing.”

“He did cross the room,” Nadia said. “And he did return to his owner. Most students do it as a straight line and back because that’s all they can manage, Harris. Is *your* objectivity compromised? No? Then the dog passed.” Shrugs and head nods answered.

“Very well then, next test,” Abernathy said with a slight smile. “Step forward. Stop. Now, keep the animal in place.” Nadia, Harris and two others stood up and came around the table toward me, stopping only a couple of feet away from us. I looked down at Junkyard and gave him a little nod and smiled, and his tail thumped again.

“So far so good,” I muttered. As if they’d been waiting for me to relax, all four of them closed in around me, almost but not quite touching us. Junkyard leaned into my leg and went very still. After a few seconds, all four stepped back, then took another quick step to one side so that they ended up moving one place to the right. A moment later, they did it again, then did it all in reverse before backing away.

“He handles crowding well enough,” Harris said, each word sounding a little reluctant. “But I still have my concerns about an uncollared animal roaming about.”

“Nonsense, Harris,” Abernathy said. “Familiars roamed these halls uncollared for centuries without incident. It wasn’t until these collars were invented that we even felt the need to test them to make sure they’d be safe. It used to be that you couldn’t go a week without seeing a familiar running or flying back and forth to fetch a forgotten wand or homework or some such. Now they’re about as useful as those little dogs rich *cowan* women carry around in their purses.”

“Then maybe we should make this animal prove it can do that before we let it roam around. At least that way, when it pees in one of the halls, we can justify it!” Harris said, his tone heating as he spoke.

“That is uncalled for!” Abernathy said. As he addressed Harris, I knelt beside Junkyard and whispered in his ear.

“I think it’s entirely called for,” Harris said. “We have to prove to some of the most influential families in America that they’re children are safe from any foreseeable threat while they’re getting the finest education on two continents. I’m not going to let some stupid animal walk unsupervised on this campus.” He leaned toward Abernathy as he spoke, and didn’t see Junkyard raise up on the table and paw his pen toward him. His eyes went wide, though, when he saw Junkyard’s big furry head pop up in front of Abernathy with his silver pen in his mouth and drop it onto the desk in front of him.

“What’s this?” Abernathy asked as he reached for the pen.

“It’s a pen, you use it to write with,” I said. “But that’s not important right now.” Beside me, Dr. C choked on a laugh. “It’s his. Junkyard can go get something and take it somewhere, as long as he’s seen it before and been to where he’s going. He’s still working on doorknobs, though.” Abernathy covered his mouth as his smile widened. He looked at the pen in his hand, then held it back out to Junkyard.

“Would you return this to its owner?” he said. Junkyard leaned forward and gently took the pen in his teeth, then dropped down and trotted back to Harris. This time Harris watched as he put his front paws on the table and leaned forward, his tongue and jaw working the saliva covered pen out of his mouth.

“He’s drooled all over it,” Harris said, picking it up with his handkerchief.

“I don’t think he liked being called a stupid animal,” I said. A couple of giggles made it past tight expressions.

“I believe we are satisfied,” Abernathy said. “Any objections?”

“We’re satisfied for now,” Harris said. The frown on his face convinced me that he wasn’t happy about it, though.

“You may return to your enrollment.”

We turned and headed back through the curtain to the main enrollment area. By now, it looked like everyone who had been at the tables was gone, and a whole new group of kids were being enrolled. Preston was waiting for us, looking like someone had just asked him to smell something nasty. As soon as we came into view, he turned and headed back across the room.

This time, I could see the stares as we walked through what felt like hostile territory. Some of the looks we got were disdainful, some hostile, and a few were just curious and aloof. None of the eyes on us seemed friendly. The whispers started as we passed.

“That’s the demon boy; don’t talk to him and make sure you burn all ...”

“Don’t look him in the eye, son. That goes for all of them, especially those African girls...”

“...if that little fox boy doesn’t try to seduce you, he’ll try to steal your soul...”

“... know my Reginald *earned* his place here. I can’t believe they expect him to mingle with trash like ...”

“I can’t believe you dropped an Airplane reference on them,” Dr. C said as we made our way to the edge of the crowd.

“It seemed like the thing to do,” I said. “You inflicted it on me, I figured I should pay it forward.”

“Inflicted? It was only one night.”

“Yeah, but you made me watch *both* of them.”

“Okay, so the sequel wasn’t as good as the original but that’s because-”

“It was made in 1980?” I said as we left the hall through a side door. There was a cart with bottles of water and soda next to the door, and I grabbed a soda as we passed by. The trip back felt a little shorter than the first time, probably because Preston was walking as fast as he could without breaking into an actual run. When we came back into Strathorne Hall, another man hustled up to us and pulled our guide a couple of feet away.

“I thought I gave you specific instructions to get rid of that thing,” he whispered a little too loudly.

“It’s the boy’s *familiar*,” Preston almost whispered back.

“No scholarship student can afford the collar!”

“Abernathy pushed it through,” Preston sighed. “You’ll have to take it up with him.”

The other man made a disgusted sound. “This complicates things immensely. We’ll have to give him a different room, and he’ll be...well, you know.” Preston nodded. “There’s nothing for it. I’ll get his paperwork started. Contact someone over at Chadwicke and have them send the proper form over.” Preston headed to another door and the other man pasted a smile on his face and walked back toward us.

“So sorry for the inconvenience,” he said as he put his hand out. “I’m Fenton Lowell.”

“Dr. Trevor Corwin. Is there a problem, Mr. Lowell?”

“A minor disruption, nothing to be concerned about. You see, since scholarship students usually don’t bring familiars, we have never needed to request a room equipped to accommodate one. It’s just a matter of requesting the proper form and having you fill it out.” The words flowed smoothly, but the smile he gave us never seemed to reach his eyes as he ushered us toward the tables. A tired looking young woman greeted us as we approached.

“Tabitha will get you started on the enrollment forms,” Lowell said. “Then we can get your housing, meal plan and text book forms filled out.”

“These were already filled out for the students over in Chadwicke Hall,” Dr. C said as we gathered the forms. The woman looked to Lowell.

“I’m sure you must be mistaken, sir,” she said.

“No, I’m pretty sure I saw it clearly.”

“Most of the enrollment paperwork is already filled out,” Lowell said as his eyes flicked to the left. “Some families simply take the initiative to pre-fill the forms we’re taking care of today.” There was a faint note of disdain in his voice, but it was hard to pin down. “It is an option offered to the children of previous alumni. Shall we get started?” I shrugged and Dr. C gave him a skeptical glance before he nodded.

For half an hour, we filled out form after form. I only got the point behind a few, like the one that gave the school permission to give medical treatment. Junkyard laid down beside me as I went to work on my share of the forms. Even after handling demonic contracts for Dulka, the maze of forms was baffling. Twice, the girl on the other side of the table handed me something back and pointed to a place I needed to initial.

Finally, my fingers feeling like they were seconds from cramping, I handed the last form to the weary looking man at the final station. He slid it into the folder with my name on it without looking up and handed it over his shoulder to Preston.

“If you’ll follow me,” he said as he led us out a different door. “You been assigned to Jefferson Hall, and your luggage is being moved there now.” We came out on the lawn behind the school buildings, and he pointed us toward one of the halls at the corner opposite and gave Dr. Corwin my folder. Junkyard trotted along beside me, his tongue lolling out and his tail bobbing as he went.

Dr. C led me through the main door and to the reception desk that sat in the middle of the hall. When he laid my folder down in front of her, the corners of her smile wavered a little, and she looked to him, then to me.

“Dr. Corwin,” she said with a steady voice. “Welcome to Jefferson Hall. We were just notified that Mr. Fortunato will be joining us.”

“Thank you, do you have his room assignment?”

“Not yet,” she said, drawing the two words out. “We’re having to do some rearranging to work out the best placement for everyone.” She glanced to one side, and I followed her gaze to see a tall, blond haired man standing in a semi-circle of people further down the hallway. She brought her hand up when he looked her way and nodded toward Dr. C. He nodded and held up his hands for a moment, then broke free of the group and came our way with a purpose.

“Mr. Emerson, Dr. Corwin is here to-,” she said, but Emerson nodded and cut her off.

“Corwin, I’m glad you finally made it,” he said as he pulled Dr. C. away.

“Just have a seat over there,” the girl said as I started to follow, pointing to a carpeted area with a fireplace. Dark brown furniture contrasted with a pale green carpet with a pattern of small brown squares running through it. The chairs were smooth leather that offered just enough friction to keep me from sliding off if I held very still. I could hear the murmur of voices further down the hall, but the chairs weren’t in line of sight, which eliminated most eavesdropping spells. I set my backpack down on one side of the chair; Junkyard laid down on the other side and put his head on his front paws.

“I’ll take this up with the headmaster if needs be, or would you prefer I contact the Council?” I heard a baritone voice from behind me.

“I share your concerns, Dr. Endicotte,” another voice said, this one higher and speaking faster. “But I’m afraid there’s nothing to be done about it. The boy is here at the order of Master Draeden himself.”

“I don’t care who ordered it, I will not allow some demon worshipping little warlock anywhere near my sons without adequate protection. You obviously don’t care that you’re putting my sons in the company of a boy whose reputation includes a body count! It’s bad enough he’s even at the same school, but in the same *building*? That’s beyond the pale.” I heard steps on the carpet as the staffer and Endicott moved to stand right behind the chair I was sitting in. I felt Junkyard move beside the chair, and I put a hand out to touch his shoulder. He looked over at me, and I shook my head.

“And of course, you know private security is not allowed on the campus for various reasons, Dr. Endicotte. But, I feel I can share this with you in the strictest confidence, in light of your family’s patronage over the years. The headmaster has arranged to have a contingent of Sentinels assigned to the Academy for the duration of Fortunato’s enrollment, though I doubt he’ll last long here. Your children will have the best security available as long as he’s here.”

“Don’t insult my intelligence, young man. Sentinels are soldiers, police officers at best. They don’t know the first thing about security or protecting people. Where is the housemaster? I demand to speak with him.” The sound of footsteps started moving away, and I risked a glance over my shoulder to see a man in a gray suit heading for the reception desk with a staffer in tow. I sat back in the seat, suddenly not caring if I fell on my ass or if anyone saw me. I was a bogey man to most of these people. All they knew or cared about was my past. It was like nothing I’d done over the past year mattered.

“Come on,” Dr. C said from beside me. I turned and looked up at him. I hadn’t heard him come up, but it was going to take more than that to make me jump.

“If I punched a parent, do you think that would be enough to get me expelled?” I asked as I got to my feet.

“Probably just in time for our jail sentence to start,” he said. “Look, Chance, I know this is all strange, but it’s nowhere near as bad as some of the things you’ve faced. No one here is actively trying to kill you.” He led me to a stair case and started up the first flight.

“I can punch vampires and demons,” I said as we climbed the steps. “I don’t know how to fight this kind of battle.”

“You’ll learn,” he said. “Just... learn to fight it the right way.”

“What’s the right way?”

“Most of these kids are going to try to bring you down, somehow. Don’t try to do that to them.”

“Right,” I said, not getting it at all. We kept going up until we ran out of stairs, and came out at the end of a hall. To our left was a big common room, with several couches set around a TV over a fireplace on either side of the room. A set of tables with hard backed chairs sat between the two groups of couches. We turned right and headed down the hallway. Red doors loomed on either side, each one buzzing with faint traces of magic. We reached the end, and Dr. C closed his eyes, put his hand up and held his palm toward the door on the left. After a moment, faint wards traced themselves out in golden light on the wood. Some were elegantly traced in spidery thin lines, while others were precise but blocky. Varying levels of skill had gone into creating each one, and each had been infused with different amounts of power. None of them pulsed with active power, though.

“You could learn a lot from this door,” Dr. C said right before he rapped it with his knuckles. The door opened a few seconds later, and we were faced with a young man a little taller than Dr. C. His black hair swept down across his forehead, accenting a narrow face. He studied Dr. C, his hooded eyes scanning down then up before he moved his attention to me. His eyes widened for a moment, then his gaze dropped to Junkyard, and his expression darkened a little. He had a skintone almost the same as mine, with the distinctive eyelids of Asian ancestry. Just this side of masculine, his looks bordered on pretty.

“I’m Dr. Corwin, and this is Chance,” Dr. C said. “Chance has been assigned as your roommate for the semester. May we come in?” The kid nodded and stepped back.

“Sure,” he said. “I’m Hoshi Nakamura.” His voice was a smooth contralto, hard to tell if it was a guy’s or a girl’s unless you already knew.

“This is Junkyard,” I said as a hundred pounds of fur and slobber trotted in past me and sat down in front of Hoshi.

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “I’m not really... exactly good with dogs.”

“Of course,” Dr. C said. He rattled something off in Japanese, and Hoshi nodded before he responded in Japanese as well. I caught the word for mother in the sentence, but the rest was lost

to me, even though, through the memories I shared with Dr. C, I had some access to the language.

Hoshi turned to me and gave me a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I am *kitsune*, on my mother's side. Her people don't get on well with dogs." Junkyard made a plaintive little noise in his throat that sounded like he was either expressing his dismay at being lumped in with all other dogs, or apologizing for the bad behavior of his species.

"Junkyard's pretty cool," I said. "Hell, he's the only animal that'll hang out with me."

"Excuse me for a moment, boys," Dr. C said and headed out the door.

"So, you must be the second least popular dude here," Hoshi said.

"I was gonna say the same about you. So, what's your story?"

"Mom's a Japanese trickster spirit. What about you?"

"Used to work for a demon."

"So you're the demon guy," Hoshi said as the smile finally reached his eyes. He went over to the bed on the left side of the room and sat down. "Way some people are telling it, you sold him your soul for power, then shafted him on the deal somehow and got your soul back."

"That's a new one. Mostly people just think I apprenticed myself to him. Someone thinks you're going to try to seduce their son."

Hoshi's laugh was a series of musical little sounds, almost like barks, and he rolled his eyes. "I get that one a lot. They think I can turn into a girl."

"Can you shapeshift? I know *kitsune* are supposed to have at least two forms."

"So, far, I can only turn into a fox at night. Other than that, what you see is what you get. What about you? Anything I need to look out for?"

"Just bad dreams," I said. "And sometimes I blow shit up. But I'm doing better about that. It's been about six months since I did any serious property damage."

"That's reassuring," Hoshi said.