

Chapter 1

~ It isn't the hardship of the road, but the leave-taking that pains us most. ~ Nick Cadmus.

I didn't get a summer vacation. I got the wizard version of summer school, with long recess periods. As I stumbled into the kitchen on the last day of our trip to San Angelo, I really didn't want to see this part of it end. My dog Junkyard trotted in beside me, much more alert and happy about being awake than I was. The smell of bacon had us in its grasp, and we didn't want to miss out on our fair share. Dr. Corwyn stood at the old white stove with a pair of tongs in one hand and a plate covered in paper towels in the other.

"Good morning, Chance," he said without turning his head. There was definitely too much cheer in his voice to be human, but he was a wizard, go figure. Not only was he up and chipper, he was clean-shaven and dressed in jeans and a freshly pressed button-down blue shirt. The first rays of sunlight were coming in through the window over the sink to his right, and I swore I could hear a rooster crowing somewhere in the distance.

"Yeah, morning," I grunted as I made my way to the old-fashioned percolator and grabbed one of the thick white mugs hanging under the cabinet. While we had been here, Dr. C had been making his coffee the old-fashioned way, and I'd become a reluctant fan of the stuff. It was stronger than a pissed-off Nazirite, and it tasted pretty decent even black, but one cup was all I could ever handle. With my cup mostly full, I sat down at the table and helped myself to cream and sugar. Junkyard plopped down beside my chair, patiently waiting for anything I might 'accidentally' drop, his big dark eyes almost lost against his brindle fur. He still wore the red bandana Synreah had given him, much loved and a little faded since March.

Lucas shuffled in after I was a few sips into my morning dose of caffeine and followed the same path I had, sitting down across from me. He hadn't changed out of the sweat pants and white t-shirt he slept in, and his shoulder-length black hair was mashed up on one side of his head. I probably looked almost as bad, since my hair was longer than his and tended to tangle.

"Dr. C, could we at least *try* some French vanilla or something?" he asked as he poured his own cream into his cup.

"Not here," Dr. C said. "There are some things you just don't mess with." Lucas looked across the table at me and shrugged, as if to say 'I tried.' I raised my hands to look like I was commiserating, but I knew why plain cream and sugar were all Dr. Corwyn would ever let anyone put in their coffee here. Because of the Horus Gaze we had shared last October, I could relive a thousand happy memories he'd had in this place. Fifteen Christmas mornings, Thanksgivings, and Easter Sundays, thousands of meals, hundreds of nights spent playing cards or dominoes, doing homework or writing letters to friends. I turned to look into the large family room that was just off the kitchen and remember afternoons and evenings watching television in black and white, and then in color. I could remember through his eyes watching the first moon landing when he was eight. I could also remember two funerals, and how empty the house still felt after his parents died.

This house was a big part of who he was, and with the memories of his that I had in my mind, I could feel some of the fierce love for it that he did.

Mom and Dee came in from the short hallway toward the front of the house, neither looking like they were nearly as cheerful as Dr. Corwyn. Both of them were dressed, which was why Lucas and I were still in what we'd slept in. There was only one bathroom, and they had been in it when we woke up. Mom was in one of her more colorful skirts and a loose white blouse, while Dee was in knee-length jean shorts and a University of Texas t-shirt.

"Good morning, ladies," Dr. C said as Mom went for the coffee and Dee opened the refrigerator. Dee grunted something, while Mom just gave a low warning growl. Wanda came in on their heels, looking almost as bright-eyed as Dr. C sounded. For a girl with Goth style, she was disturbingly chipper in the mornings. Of course, she was equally upbeat in the afternoon. In fact, aside from being kidnapped by vampires, I'd never seen Wanda in anything less than a decent mood. She'd gone with black and red striped leggings under a black skirt, with a black button-down shirt that left an inch or so of skin showing

below the hem. A pair of black knee-high boots with red panels added another three inches or so to her height.

“Morning,” she said as she waited for Mom to finish getting her coffee. Dee just gave her a baleful look through the curly mop of her bangs, while Mom just gave her a raised eyebrow as she passed.

“At least she didn’t say it was a *good* morning,” Lucas said.

“Not yet,” Wanda said as she sat down with her coffee.

“It’s about to be,” Dr. C said as he set the plate he’d piled with bacon next to the stack of empty plates on the table. Hands reached for plates and bacon, most at the same time. There was enough that we actually left some on the plate, and the plate of scrambled eggs came next, with hash browns, biscuits and gravy, and a stack of toast right behind it. I dutifully snuck a slice of bacon to Junkyard and grabbed another one to make up for it.

It wasn’t until we were almost done that I realized how much I was going to miss this. This was what happy, almost normal people did. It was what a *family* did. Even if today and every day included the constant training, lessons, and exercises that the last two weeks had, I would prefer it to what waited for me at the end of summer. When September came, I was going to be leaving all of this behind to go to the Franklin Institute. I swallowed around the bitter lump in my throat and tried to put the thought of that out of my head. I still had a couple of months left before that happened. Today was still good.

“Chance, is the Mustang ready to make the trip back home?” Dr. C asked as we finished the last of the bacon.

“Yeah, she’s got a full tank of gas, radiator’s full, and all the tires are good,” I said. “All we need to do is finish putting the new speakers in, but Lucas says we’re almost done with that.” Across the table, Lucas nodded and mumbled something around a mouthful of bacon.

“Are you sure—” Mom started to say.

“More than sure,” Dr. C cut her off with a warm smile. “He saved the world, or at least New Essex. He deserves something better than an eight-track player and an AM/FM radio to listen to for the trip back home. Lucas, what about you?”

“The *Falcon*’s ready to go,” Lucas said. “And the last parts we need for the Mustang should be in already.”

“Good,” Dr. C said. “Your proctor should be here in an hour, and our flight leaves at eleven, so we should see you boys back in New Essex tonight.”

“Mom, I want to ride back with Chance,” Dee asked, her voice bordering on a whine.

“Deirdre,” Mom said with a little bit of iron in her voice. “Dr. Corwyn already bought your plane ticket, and Chance is going to have another person riding with him on the way back.”

“I can sit in the back seat, it’s really big,” Dee said. Mom’s face clouded and she took a deep breath. I’d seen Dee try to butt heads with Mom enough over the past few months to know that Dee was pushing her luck. Whenever Mom paused and took a deep breath, it usually meant that The Law was about to be Laid Down on Dee, and she wasn’t going to like it.

Everyone jumped when the phone rang. Dr. C got up and went to the heavy beige phone on the wall by the cabinet to answer it. That phone had only rung one other time while we’d been here, and that was when the Franklin Academy had called to let us know when the proctor for my evaluation would be here. The conversation was subdued, and when he hung the receiver up, his smile had faded.

“Well, that was the Franklin Academy,” he said. “Your proctor has been delayed by a tropical storm in the Gulf, so he’ll be a few hours late in arriving.” His voice slipped into a very formal, slightly clipped tone for the last part, as if imitating someone.

“Where the hell is he coming from, Bermuda?” Lucas asked.

“Not quite; he cut short his vacation in the Cayman Islands to bless us with his company, so I guess we’re supposed to be eternally grateful for his great and noble sacrifice,” Dr. C said as he sat back down.

“So, we pick him up this afternoon and follow you back a little later than we thought,” I said.

“Like tomorrow morning,” Dr. C said. “Early. Tomorrow morning.” Lucas and I traded a look that promised Mr. Proctor a difficult night and an early wake up call.

“Even if you’re going to be late getting home, we still have to leave today,” Mom said. Wanda looked up and smiled, while Dee moaned about having to pack *again*. Lucas and I bolted for the bathroom. He got there first, but fortunately, he didn’t take long. When we came back, Dr. C was waiting in the living room just off the dining area, a black vest on over his blue button-down shirt. He gestured to me when I came in the room.

“Chance, come with me for a moment,” he said as he headed toward the back door. I followed him out to the back yard with Junkyard at my side, and he wandered over to the carefully tended section that had been his father’s garden. Even though he hadn’t planted anything in it, hollyhock grew against the back fence, spider plant was just beginning to bloom near a patch of St John’s Wort, and wild thyme sprouted in a clump near the corner closest to the house. More than one day of my summer “vacation” had been spent pulling weeds from it and making sure that the wild growing plants were watered. He didn’t say anything as he looked over it, then bent down and plucked a weed that had just poked up near the cinder blocks that ran around the edge of it. The silence stretched out for a full minute, and I stayed still and quiet. We’d spent a lot of time like this over the past two weeks, and I knew he was waiting for me to either notice something or get into the right frame of mind. A mourning dove cooed somewhere nearby, and the first cicada of the day buzzed as I stood there and waited. Junkyard, not being a part of the conversation, decided there were a few places along the fence that needed to be peed on and went to work.

“I’m leaving the LeMat with you,” he finally said. “I left a couple of extra cylinders for it, and a reload for the under-barrel as well.”

“That’ll help,” I said. “Same load as last time?”

“Incendiary spell rounds in the cylinder, yes,” he said with a nod. “But the lower barrel round is different this time. A little hotter mix for a little bigger bang. Here’s hoping you don’t have to use it.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Something’s bothering you,” he said.

I nodded and said, “I had the same dream last night.”

“Exactly the same?” he asked as he turned to look at me.

“Not exactly. I was standing in a circle of lights, like last time, but this time ... there was someone else there. I couldn’t see them clearly; they were standing just outside the circle.”

“And it was silent, like the first one?” he asked. He continued off my nod. “I was wondering if this might happen.”

“If what might happen?”

“Some magi get a vision early in their training, an epiphany that guides them toward something bigger. Not all magi do, though. It’s very spiritual. Ever since you saw the face of the Divine in March, I figured it might happen.”

“You sound worried,” I said.

“Sometimes, visions ... don’t come easy,” he finally said. “The indigenous tribes here in America figured out how to induce them through fasting and communion. In some of the European and Asian traditions, they occasionally came after hardships and trials, or at the end of a quest. You’ve already dealt with your fair share of trouble. I don’t want to see more come your way.”

“Trouble I can handle,” I said, then looked back over my shoulder at the house for a moment. “Just make sure Mom and Dee make it back home safe.”

“I will,” he said. “Watch your back. We got lucky with that warlock in Christoval last week. I don’t want you to get blindsided like that again.”

“I’ve kicked a demon’s ass,” I told him. “I’m pretty sure I can handle whatever I run into.”

“I hope you’re right. I’m not sanguine about letting you travel alone like this.”

“Not a lot of other options,” I said with a shrug. “Unless you think they’ll let us check the Mustang in with our bags. And we can always try to put Junkyard in a dress. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine, sir.”

“You’d better be. I don’t want to have to deal with your mother being mad at me again.” He reached down and took a couple of rounded, dark stones from the cinder block at his feet. “A little bit of lore for you. There is an earth spirit who calls this garden home. I’ve been trying to find out from one of the Lipan

diyin if it's one of theirs, and what to call it, but they don't trust me yet, and I'm not willing to push it. When I visit, I leave it some dried corn and drop some seeds for it to plant, and sometimes it leaves me a little something before I leave." He handed me one of the stones, and I felt it tingle against my palm. "Gifts given at parting have a special importance, Chance. I get the feeling you and your family are welcome in my father's garden."

"Does it always give you stones?" I asked.

"Not always," he said. "Once, it left me a couple of flowers, but it seems to prefer bundles of leaves or seeds. So far, it doesn't seem to have any hang-ups about being acknowledged, so I always say thank you." He turned toward the garden and held up the stone, then inclined his head a little. "*Wado*," he said. I copied him, using the same word, Cherokee for thank you. It was a word his mother had taught him, a small part of her heritage that he kept alive. I shook my head to clear the memories that weren't mine.

Dr. C squeezed my shoulder briefly before he turned and headed back inside. I stayed for a few moments and took in the peaceful morning. From behind me, I could hear a car door slam and an engine start as someone got ready to go to work. One of the things we had been working on was expanding my awareness, not only of what was visible, but of what ran beneath the surface. It was one of the first steps toward being able to project my consciousness outside my body, though that wasn't likely to happen for a decade or so. Across the alley, I could see movement in the house behind Dr. C's, and I felt the chaotic energy of the young couple who lived there. The house to the east had a more placid feel to it as Mrs. Jimenez, the retired teacher who lived there, went about her routine. I took a deep breath and centered myself, drawing my senses back in.

After I filled the water dish for Junkyard, I came back in to barely contained chaos as Lucas and Wanda worked on the dishes at the sink while I heard Mom's voice as she tried to keep Dee focused on one thing at a time in the master bedroom. From the dining room, I could already see Dr. Corwyn's battered leather suitcase and shaving kit by the front door. I relieved Wanda at the sink so she could go pack. By the time I dried the last dish, she was dragging her red suitcase out of what had once been Dr. Corwyn's room with her head bent over her cell phone.

"What if I forgot something?" Dee asked Mom as they emerged from the other bedroom on Wanda's heels. Dee's gaudy purple backpack was perched on her shoulders, a stuffed pony's head sticking out of the top, and she dragged her smaller suitcase along behind Mom, who was carrying her oversized duffel slung over one shoulder.

"Your brother is going to be here for at least another day," Mom said. "If you forget anything we can call him and have him bring it with him. You have Mr. Hooves, and your backpack, so you should have everything you need."

"He's *Doctor* Hooves, Mom," Dee corrected her before she gave an exasperated sigh at the failings of adults. Lucas and I chuckled at that, since Dee wasn't more than a casual fan of the show he was from. He was more social camouflage; Dee was more a fan of another Doctor, even if she didn't get everything about the show. The Doctor was cool, and so were bow ties, evidently.

We made it to the cars before Dee remembered something and dragged Dr. C back toward the gate in the chain-link fence that led into the backyard. Once he had the gate open, she practically sprinted toward the shed in the backyard and hopped up and down until he unlocked it and let her in. Moments later, she emerged carrying an eight-inch tube of brass with various shiny bits attached to it.

"I thought I said no wands," Mom said to Dr. Corwyn when he caught up.

"It's a Sonic!" Dee said before he could answer. "Chance's is a rod, Dr. Corwyn's is a wand, and mine is a Sonic Screwdriver." She waved it around, and the end lit up as it buzzed.

"It's inert," Dr. C said. "I laced it with an iron core, so it's grounded out. Just an LED and a chip to make the sound."

"And I always say they have sonics," Dee said with a triumphant smile. "Because magick isn't real," she recited.

"I'm going to regret this, but okay," Mom said.

“Not nearly as much as I think I’m going to,” Dr. Corwyn said. “Dee, you aren’t going to be able to take it on the plane with you. You’ll have to pack it in your suitcase.” She nodded, but I could tell by her expression she wasn’t happy about that.

A few minutes later, Mom and Dee were in the Mustang with me, and in my rearview mirror I could see Dr. C looking uncomfortable in the passenger seat of the *Falcon* as Lucas backed out of the driveway. The Mustang rumbled to life and I backed out behind him, then followed him as he headed for the airport. The black 1967 Shelby GT model might have been old, but she still looked good, and she was still an eight-cylinder beast under the hood.

“Promise me you’re going to drive the speed limit the whole way,” Mom said as we took the first turn. “I don’t have the money to pay for a ticket. I can barely afford to cover the insurance on this thing as it is.”

“Not a mile an hour over,” I said. “Or two or five or ten,” I added quickly.

“Mom, can we do a scrapbook for our trip?” Dee asked from the back seat, and I thanked her for that, but quietly. As they rehashed the vacation so far, I kept one ear on the conversation, but both eyes on my surroundings. I’d been keeping a pretty low profile since my birthday in March; I hadn’t pissed anyone off for at least a couple of months, and no one knew where we were outside of the Conclave. That hadn’t kept a warlock from stumbling across us a few days ago, though she’d seemed as surprised as we were when she found us. Still, we’d handled her, but I’d been on edge ever since. It wasn’t until we pulled into the parking lot at Mathis Field that I let my grip on the steering wheel relax. The airport itself was a public facility, and it flew an American flag, so it was automatically considered exclusively cowan territory. My shoulders unknotted a little as I shifted the Mustang out of gear and pulled on the parking brake.

Mom let me carry her duffel bag, but Dee was fiercely insistent that she could handle her own suitcase. Lucas and Wanda fell in beside me and we let the adults lead the way. As we headed across the small lot toward the doors, I couldn’t help but notice the grin on Wanda’s face. She’d gained a couple of inches lately, both in height and in curves, something that hadn’t been lost on the local boys. Seeing her standing beside Lucas seemed to make it stand out all the more, especially how her face seemed to have gotten a little leaner.

“This summer vacation thing boring you?” I asked as we walked through the doors and into the lobby.

“I’m a city girl,” she said with a little bit of the local twang.

“None of us are exactly the country type,” Lucas added. “Except Dr. C.”

“I had a good time,” Wanda said. “I’m just looking forward to getting home.” We trooped across the terminal toward the ticket counter on the left. The line wasn’t very long, mostly men and women in uniform, with a few folks in business wear. A few minutes of shuffling forward, and Mom, Dee, Dr. C, and Wanda were checked in, their bags checked, and we had nothing to do but wait.

“Make sure you go through the list twice before you leave,” Mom said. “Stop every couple of hours on the road or if you start to feel drowsy, okay?” Lucas and I nodded in unison. “Do you have enough money for gas?”

“We’re good, Mom,” I said. “We have enough money to drive to St. Louis if we have to.” She smiled and put her hand on my arm.

“I just worry, sweetie. Make sure you give Dr. Corwyn back whatever is left when you get back home.”

“Mara, it’s fine,” Dr. C said. “Chance can deal with anything he might run into, and don’t worry about the money.”

“We’ll call you when we leave, and we’ll check in along the way, Miss Murathy,” Lucas said with a smile. Mom was about to say something else when the PA system crackled to life and announced their flight boarding. Wanda was on her feet, her phone out and finger flying across the screen before Mom could get her purse and Dee’s backpack. I got enveloped in a Mom-hug, then tackled by my sister leaping from her chair into my arms. Even though her feet were still a foot off the floor, I staggered back from the impact.

“What is Mom feeding you?” I asked as I squeezed her hard. “Bricks?”

“Promise you’ll come straight home?” she said as I let her down.

“You know it,” I said. “No side quests along the way.” That seemed to satisfy her, and she accepted her backpack from Mom. I turned to Dr. C.

“You packin’?” I asked. He pulled his vest aside to reveal the butt of his wand sticking up out of the special pocket sewn into the lining.

“That and a couple of touchstones,” he said, which for him was more than enough to handle most armies. “Remember, Lazarus Moon is in Fort Worth, so if you need any help along the way, you can call on him.”

“I’ll be fine, sir,” I said for the umpteenth time. He nodded and put one hand on my shoulder.

“I’m sure you will. I guess I worry a little, too. Your proctor should be here soon, so I recommend staying close by. You don’t want to keep him waiting. We’ll see you tomorrow, then.” He turned and trotted to catch up with everyone else, leaving Lucas and me to watch them file through the security line.

“Is it just me, or is Wanda’s head not in the game right now?” Lucas asked as we watched them shuffle forward.

“Kinda,” I said. “She’s been blowing up someone’s phone all morning.”

“Boyfriend?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Probably. I’m gonna wait for this proctor guy here. If you want to head back to Dr. C’s place and hang out ...” I offered.

“Dude, I’m in this with you,” he said. “You wait, I wait.”

“You don’t have to.”

“In a couple of months, I won’t *get* to, Chance,” he said. “So we’re hanging out as much as we can until then.” I couldn’t argue that.

Five hours later, I was beginning to think he wished I had. By then the folks in the airport’s cafeteria had seen more than enough of us, and we knew the arrival and departure times of every flight for the rest of the day. It was almost three in the afternoon when the PA system called my name and asked me to pick up the courtesy phone by the ticket counter.

“Mr. Fortunato, this is the tower,” the voice on the other end said when I picked up the receiver. “We’ve been asked by Mr. Gage to let you know he’s landing in five minutes. You can meet him at Hangar B.” Without waiting for me to answer, the guy on the other end hung up.

“Great,” I said. “Where the hell is Hangar B?” One of the ladies behind the ticket counter looked up and smiled.

“It’s down the runway a little ways. It’s one of the private hangars,” she said. “Ask at the operations office over there, they’ll have someone take you out there.”

Ten minutes later, we were bouncing along in a golf cart toward a curved building. The sound of a jet engine greeted us as the driver pulled through the open hangar doors, and I could feel the heated gust from its exhaust wash over us. Standing beside it was a blonde guy in slacks and a dress shirt and a blazer. A pile of luggage was stacked beside him, and he looked at his watch as we pulled up. I made him at eighteen or nineteen. His blonde hair was styled within an inch of its life, and his narrow face was deeply tanned.

“I’ve been waiting a full two minutes,” the man said as we pulled to a stop in front of him. “I gave you plenty of notice of my arrival, and I do not like having my time wasted, Fortunato.”

Lucas shook his head and winced at the greeting, and I got out of the golf cart.

“I’ve been waiting five *hours* longer than I planned on,” I told him as I crossed the distance between us. “You’re here to observe me in *my* life, not make me jump to make yours more convenient. You’ve already set me back an entire day, so don’t bitch about two minutes.”

He took a half-step back with a wide-eyed look on his face, then he recovered and shook his head.

“Do you even know who I am? I’m Winthrop Gage, of the Boston Gages. You will not take that tone with me, plebe. Not if you want to even set foot in the halls of the Franklin Academy. One word from me and you’ll be lucky to shine the shoes of a real mage.” He tilted his head back a little and actually looked down his nose at me before he gave me a sniff of disapproval.

I crossed my arms and tilted my head. “You can keep me out of the Franklin Academy?” I asked.

“With a single word,” he said.

“Do it,” I said. “You’d make my day.”

Without a word, he pulled a phone from inside his blazer and tapped the screen. “I have Master Draeden’s personal number on speed dial,” he said. Moments later, he put the phone to his ear and turned away from me. “Master Draeden, Winthrop Gage. This Fortunato boy, he simply won’t do. He’s insolent, slovenly, and he has no notion of how to treat his betters. I’m formally ... no, sir ... no, sir, it isn’t. I understand that, sir, but we have standards ... no, sir, I don’t. No, sir, I haven’t. Yes, sir, I do recall that. And I appreciate your ... yes, sir, I do. But, Master Draeden, those are not the same. I’m a ... no, sir, there is no difference. Yes, sir. One moment.” He turned and handed me the phone, his face set in a stiff expression. “He would like to speak to you.”

“A valiant effort, Mr. Fortunato,” Draeden’s voice came over the line. “But you won’t be getting out of your appointment to the Franklin Academy that easily.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying,” I said.

“I can, but I won’t. Mr. Gage is not there to approve or disapprove of your attendance at the Academy. He is there to observe your character, evaluate your level of skill, and recommend placement upon arrival. Nothing more. If you pull anything like this again, I will personally recommend that you be placed in preparatory classes for the rest of the summer session. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Put Mr. Gage back on the line then.”

I handed the phone back to Gage.

“We’re gonna need a bigger boat,” Lucas said as he walked up beside me. He nodded toward the pile of luggage. “They’re sending another cart for the luggage. Should be here in a few minutes.”

“Do you think he’s got one of those giant hair dryers in the trunk?” I asked.

“If he does, you can slap a tail on my butt and call me Barf.”

Gage walked back toward us as he put the phone back in the pocket in his blazer, looking like he’d swallowed a live slug.

“Well then, plebe,” he said. “Let’s be on our way.”

“Isn’t that a West Point or Annapolis term?” Lucas asked.

“The Franklin Academy predates the military colleges by decades. *They* took many of their traditions from us. You must be his *cowan* friend, Lucas Kale. Where is Wizard Corwyn?” he asked.

“Flying back with my mom and my sister.”

“This is highly insulting,” Gage huffed. “I cut my vacation short to come all the way to this hell hole, the *least* he could do is be here to meet me.”

“You’re seven hours late,” I said. “You’re lucky we were still here to pick you up.”

“I ... I’m lucky?” he sputtered. “You have some nerve, speaking to me like that. You’ll show me some respect. My time is valuable, and you’re lucky to have me here.” By then the second cart had arrived, and the two men in coveralls were putting his bags on it.

“Whatever, Winnie,” I said as I took the front seat in the cart. “Get in or walk.” He got in. The ride back was quiet, not least because of the hundred-degree-plus heat. By now, Lucas and I were used to it, but Winthrop looked like he was about to melt. When we got to the cars, he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the sheen of sweat off his face before he started insulting the guys putting his luggage in the back of the *Falcon*.

“We’re not all going to fit in that little thing,” he said after Lucas and I gave the two porters a few bucks and thanked them.

“You’re riding with me,” I said as I went to the Mustang.

“I suppose it would be overly optimistic to hope that there was even a two-star hotel in this city,” he said as he got in.

“No clue. You’re staying with us at Dr. C’s place.”

“I am not sleeping on a couch or on some fold-out bed,” he started to protest.

“Dude, chill. You’ll be in the second bedroom,” I told him. “Do you bitch about everything?”

"I set high standards, and I don't accept anything less than the very best from anyone." He cut the statement off as if there was more he was going to say. I let it lie and started the Mustang, then pulled out behind Lucas. With the windows down, Gage lost a little of the wilted look to him, though he never got past slightly irritated.

"Where is he going?" Gage asked when Lucas turned off to the right.

"To pick up some stuff we were supposed to grab hours ago," I said as we crossed over the Concho River. Dr. C's place was only a few blocks away by then, so the awkward silence only lasted for a couple of more minutes. Junkyard was jumping and barking at the fence by the time we pulled under the awning and turned the engine off. I got out and went to the fence to say hello.

"Sorry we took so long, buddy," I said to him as I reached over the fence and rubbed his ears. "You want some pizza tonight? Would that make it up to you?" He barked and spun in place before he came back to me and put his paws up on the fence. I smiled at the idea, since Winthrop had no idea what kind of torture he was in for later. Cheese and Junkyard made for a smelly combination, which was why I almost never let him have any. "This is Winthrop," I said, nodding toward our guest. "He's a guest, so no biting him." Junkyard leaned toward Winthrop and sniffed at him, then tilted his head and gave him a sort of huff.

"What breed of dog is that?" Gage asked.

"Best I can tell, he has some Boxer in him, some Rottweiler, and a little Pit Bull. And he's all mutt."

"I agree. Fortunately, pets aren't allowed at the Academy. Only familiars."

"He *is* my familiar," I said.

"You're joking. No, I see that you aren't. That ... bandana won't do. You'll have to get a proper collar on him."

"He won't wear one," I said. "And I won't put one on him."

Gage just gave a short laugh and said, "Your first day is going to be fun to watch. All that aside, can we get out of this infernal heat?"

I nodded and headed for the front door. The window unit was keeping the front room pretty cool, and he closed his eyes as the chilled air hit him. I headed for the door into the hallway on the right, then opened the door on my left. As hallways went, it was really more of a box, with doors on all four sides.

"This was Dr. Corwyn's room," I said as I flipped the light on. A twin bed took up the right side of the room, with a desk on the far wall next to a dresser that sat right in front of the door. Posters covered the walls, including Farrah Fawcett's iconic red swimsuit photo. "You'll be sleeping in here tonight."

"Dear Lord," Gage almost whispered. "Did I go back in time to the sixties?"

"Late seventies," I said. "If you get the urge to boogie down or play that funky music, I'll get the disco ball down from the attic for you. Bathroom's the next door to the right here, and Lucas and I will be in the room across the way." I stepped back and he followed me out of the hall and through the kitchen and dining room to the family room at the back of the house.

"We might as well get started," he said as I sat down in one of the two recliners that faced the TV. "Show me the tools you've made so far."

"Seriously?" I said.

"Very seriously. Cowans have no business dealing in mage affairs, so while he's gone is the best time." He sat in the other recliner and moved the old TV Guide off the end table that sat between them. I pulled my trusty TK rod from my pocket and resisted the urge to use it on him before I laid it on the table.

"Ah, the infamous telekinesis rod. May I?" he said, gesturing at the length of red-leather-wrapped copper. I shrugged and gave him a nod. He picked it up and took a moment to inspect the quartz crystal tip, then looked at the butt end of it, which I'd replaced with a polished garnet for a little extra push. After giving it a critical inspection, he set it down, then put his thumbs and index fingers together and muttered something under his breath. When he moved his hands apart, he kept his fingertips and thumbs touching to create a glowing green sheet of magick in the space he'd just created. Then, with another movement, he pulled his hands apart a few inches and the green rectangle expanded. When he opened his hands, the rectangle stayed suspended in midair. He reached for my TK rod again and held it up in front of the floating green energy sheet.

“Infamous?” I asked as he turned the rod slowly.

“Rumor has it you used it on Wizard Chomsky’s killer, and threatened Master Polter with it.”

“I’ve never used it to kill,” I said. “And the Council had taken it from me by the time Polter and I first met.”

“These sigils,” he said, as if I hadn’t just dispelled all the rumors about me, “fae, I presume?”

“Arianh-Rod’s designs, yeah,” I said. “I did the actual etching, though.”

“It’s a wonder it hasn’t blown up in your hands, then. The execution is barely tolerable. You butchered an exquisite design to the point where it is barely recognizable. Were you my apprentice, I would have destroyed this thing and made you re-do everything ten times. Do you have anything else?” He handed the rod back to me with a sigh of disapproval. I pulled the retrieval ring off my right hand and laid it down in front of him, then pulled my touchstones and my amethyst pendulum from my pocket.

“That’s what I have on me,” I said. He picked up the touchstones, then the amethyst, finally looking the ring over.

“Barely adequate ... crude and limited ... nothing more than a gimmick,” he said as he set the ring down. “Now the necklace.” He pointed at my chest, and I instinctively put my hand over the silver pentacle Wanda had given me. The points of the outward-facing crescent moons dug into my skin slightly, a somehow reassuring sense that it was still there.

“No.”

He did a double take and sat up a little straighter. His eyebrows came together and he took a breath.

“It’s a gift from a friend. And it’s sacred; as in touched by a Goddess sacred.”

For a few seconds, he just sat there, then slowly seemed to deflate. “Very well,” he said with a slow nod of his head. “What other tools have you crafted?”

“Mostly, I’ve been working on casting the TK spell without the rod,” I said. “But, there is this ...” I said as I reached for my backpack. His eyes went wide as it flickered into view. I’d replaced the ever-so-slightly-illegal *neglenom* charm with a chameleon talisman. As long as it was still, the talisman bent light around it, so that you saw what was on the other side of it almost as if it wasn’t there. It still wasn’t perfect; you could see the edges of the bag as a slightly blurry or warped line, but most people never even noticed that. The look on his face was worth a bit of a smirk as I opened the bag to get what I was really after: a small mirror. I had etched runes around the edge of it in green enamel paint, with matching runes on the back side.

“Is your backpack ... armored?” Gage asked.

“Kinda, yeah,” I said. “The original aluminum back plates got pretty banged up a few months ago, so Lucas and I replaced them with titanium. I bought the chameleon talisman, but this uses a spell of my own.”

“What does it do?” he asked as he took the curved mirror from me. I set the backpack a couple of feet away from me and let the talisman hide it again.

“Look at it in the mirror,” I said. He angled the mirror, then frowned as he turned his head to look at the place where he knew the bag was.

“The talisman is decent work,” he said. “How does your spell see through it?”

“Trade secret,” I said. “Those are all of the tools I made. Except for the talisman.”

“You said you bought that,” Gage said.

“I lied,” I said.

“Franklin students do *not* lie,” he said, his voice stern.

“You did when you said my work was crap,” I said. “Demons are pretty demanding masters ... and they lie a lot. So, I know my work is good, and I know when you’re lying to me.” The front door opened and Lucas called out.

“I’m baaaack!”

“I’ll alert the media,” I said as I got to my feet. “Let’s get those speakers installed.” Winthrop gaped like a fish as I walked past him.

“We’re not done yet!” he said by way of protest.

“I am,” I said.

In a two-bedroom house that was built in the forties, there was only one place a guy could get some privacy to meditate: the roof. The sun was almost below the horizon by the time I pulled myself up over the last rung of the ladder and set foot on the cooling tarpaper, but my car now had a working sound system, and I'd even managed to get a short run in. Even with only three people in the house, I preferred the solace of Dr. Corwyn's old retreat. Maybe spending an hour up here every evening for the past couple of weeks had conditioned my brain to see it as a quiet place. Or maybe it was because this was the only place I could talk to my girlfriend uninterrupted. Who could say? Even apprentice magi were inscrutable like that.

My phone was a cheap pay-as-you-go model that Mom could barely afford the minutes for. Texting took me forever on the little numeric keypad, and it couldn't do all the slick things Wanda's or Lucas's phones could, but I could text and talk to Shade, and that was good enough. I slid the top up and followed the menu to the text screen, then slowly put in my message.

– Hey. U there? –

For a couple of minutes, I watched the screen. Every time there was a delay, my brain went into overdrive. Was she out with her parents? Was she laughing with a friend at her boyfriend's dumb text? Was she going to text me back and break up? It was stupid, I knew none of my terrible fears were going to actually happen, but I couldn't stop the thoughts from tumbling over each other in my head. Maybe she was just going to ignore me tonight ...

– Hey, baby. Miss u. :) U coming home tonight? Want 2 c u so bad! –

I smiled as I read her message, fears forgotten and my day instantly better.

– Miss u 2. Had 2 stay 1 more day. Long story. Want 2 hear ur voice. Call? –

– Sure! 2 minutes. –

My smile got bigger and my stomach flipped as I laid the beach towel I'd draped over my shoulder down on the roof and settled on my back to wait for her to call. It took an eternity for the phone to buzz. My finger hit the answer button in a split second.

"Hey, beautiful," I said.

"Hey yourself," she breathed. "What are you doing?"

"Sitting on the roof, trying not to kill the stupid proctor from the Academy. What are you doing?"

"Sitting in the chapel we hid in last October. So, whatcha wearing?" Her tone was playful, and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Sweat pants and a t-shirt. I'm all sweaty from working on my car."

"I like you all sweaty," she said, and I could feel my body react. "Now, ask me what I'm wearing."

"Okay, what are you wearing?"

"Same thing I was wearing that night," she said. Her voice went sultry, and I could feel the heat from it seep into my veins. Just the thought of that night still made my monkey brain sit up and take notice. I swallowed and took a deep breath before I went on, imagining her in the same pink t-shirt and sweats.

"When?" I asked.

"At the beginning. If you were here, though ..." she said, then gave a soft little moan that curled my toes. "Would you stop me this time?" My right hand curled into a fist as I remembered her taking her shirt and her bra off like it was yesterday. I'd stopped her then because it hadn't felt right. We both knew how to use sex as currency, and neither of us had been able to say no until then.

"I wouldn't want to," I rasped.

"But you might?" she said. I didn't say anything for a moment, torn between what she'd said and the thought of what I *wanted* to do. She sobbed, and I sat up.

"Shade, are you okay?" I asked. Stupid question, yeah, but it was all that I could think of. "What's wrong, baby?"

"You ... you're determined to make me fall in love with you, aren't you?" she said, her voice breaking a little.

“Well, yeah,” I said, feeling like I was missing half of the conversation. My thoughts were slow and clumsy, and even I didn’t know exactly where they were going. “And yeah, I might still stop you. But ... not why you think.”

“Then why?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I just ... I guess I’d know what to do if I was there.”

“God, why the hell aren’t you here?” she almost whined, but I could hear more of her wolf in the question than a teenage girl being pouty.

“The proctor guy the Academy sent showed up like seven hours late, so we have to take off in the morning. He’s a real dick, too. He’s a Boston Gage, talks like his teeth are stuck together half the time.”

“I already don’t like him,” she said, sounding more teen than wolf. “He’s keeping my Chance from me. And I get cranky if you’re not here to kiss me and nibble on my neck enough.”

“We’ll have to fix that,” I said, my own voice suddenly husky again at the thought of doing just that. The sound of the screen door opening and closing reached my ears, and I heard Lucas greeting Junkyard.

“Dude!” he called out. “Pizza’s here! I’m not waiting on you.” Over the line, I heard Shade laughing.

“What?” I asked her.

“You’re going to feed Junkyard cheese, aren’t you? You know chemical warfare is against the Geneva Convention, right?”

“I’m a very bad person, I know,” I said. “But he really, really deserves it.”

“Damn straight he does,” she agreed. “He’s keeping my man away from me. When are you leaving?”

“Oh-dark-thirty,” I said. “We’re only stopping for gas and food.”

“Get drive-through,” Shade said, her voice smoldering again. “I can’t wait to see you.”

“I can’t either. I’ve gotta go. I miss you.”

“Miss you, too.”

We hung up and I headed for the ladder. Winthrop Gage was going to regret making me late getting home.