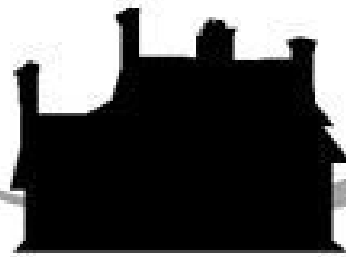


THE CURSE OF ARKADY

THE MAGICKERS #2



EMILY DRAKE

DAW BOOKS, INC.

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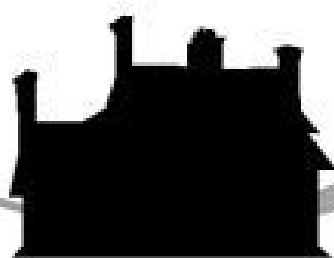
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Wolfjackal!

The trees and shrubbery crackled as something pushed through, running after him. He picked up speed, glancing back over his shoulder. It exploded through a hedge, crashing onto the grass and racing after him. It growled low and harshly, ivory fangs slashing at the air, huge silvery body poised to catch him.

Impossible! In the real world, here, now, and after him! He could hardly breathe at that thought. Wolfjackals came from the netherlands, borne on Magicker mana . . . how could they be so strong here, so far away from the Gates and Heavens?

Jason had no doubt they would be as deadly here as they'd been at Camp Ravenwyng. He bolted.

Also by EMILY DRAKE

The Magickers
The Curse of Arkady
The Dragon Guard

THE CURSE OF ARKADY

THE MAGICKERS #2



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Dedicated to wishers and dreamers everywhere,
and especially my children,
James, Jessica, Aaron, and Maureen.

ALARMS

HE'D been there before. But this time, in his dreamwalk, he'd already been through the shifting sand on the beach below, and through the cemetery that wrapped about the castle ruins like a moat guarding it. He'd already tripped the dragonhead lock that held the gates shut and would spout flame if opened improperly. He had already gone into the ruins and fallen downstairs into the catacombs beneath.

He'd done all that, time and again. This once, Jason seemed to be starting where he'd always finished before. Maybe it was because now he knew how important a dreamwalk could be, as it had been explained by Tomaz Crowfeather. Maybe it was because he was different now. Trouble was, that made the dream more dangerous, not easier to escape.

A cool wind from nowhere sent chills along the back of his neck. He looked down. The cuffs of his jeans and his sneakers dripped with sea water from his trip across the beach. His toes felt like icicles and he squooshed when he took a step, but he had to keep moving down here. Silvery moonlight rays streamed through the broken castle roof and fell in spidery lines across the tunnel. It left behind shadows sharper than the night itself. Jason took a deep breath and strode forth. Although unsure exactly where he was going, he knew his journey led past the catacombs and he had to get there, had to get *through*.

Behind him, the wind picked up, keening, its voice beginning to howl. Jason paused, listening intently, his head tilted. No! Those *were* howls. Echoing eerily along the walls of the tunnels, faint but getting closer. Wolfjackals, racing down the stone pathways, after him! He couldn't be caught, not now, not here.

He threw caution to the wind. He put his lean body into a run, through the turning tunnels, no need to remember the way if he had to go back, because going back would lead him right into the eager jaws of the pursuers. Jason knotted his fists, pumping his arms to drive his body forward. His left hand ached as though he'd caught it on something, but it was an old injury, one he knew well. The catacombs turned sharply to the right and he went with it, and then it suddenly opened into a large cavern room, dark with shadows.

He plowed to a halt, seeing no passage out of the cavern. He knew this room, too! His heart pounded heavily in his chest at the sight of the carved tomb, with the still figure resting atop it. Anyplace but here! Jason looked around wildly, but the scant moonlight filtering down from above gave little illumination. The shadows seemed to leap at him, and he swerved away instinctively, bumping into the sarcophagus itself, rapping his leg sharply and throwing his weight over it. He scrambled back, but his shirt caught on the sharp edges of the tomb, capturing him. No matter how hard he pulled, the fabric only stretched and refused to come loose.

Jason braced himself and yanked. The howling wolfjackals sounded closer, far too close. The sarcophagus refused to yield. He had two choices: remove his shirt or stay and face the wolfjackals.

The cold figure on the tomb moved. An icy hand reached out and grabbed his wrist, gripping him tightly with fingers that felt like marble.

Make that three choices!

Netted between shirt and hand, Jason froze, his heart drumming loudly in his chest. He twisted his wrist till his skin burned but the tombstone hand stayed fast around him. It pulled him down, near and nearer to the finely carved face with its curled dark hair. It wanted him. He could feel it . . . inhaling him. Drawing him in. He would sink into that figure until he was part of it!

In sheer panic, Jason fought, thrashing, his wrist growing bloodied and his shirt finally ripping free though it did him no good. He remained captured, as if a steel trap held him, and he was as eager to be free as any wild animal. He fought till he couldn't struggle anymore, exhausted, shivering—and he realized the wolfjackals had stopped howling. He turned on one heel, and saw them, eager feral faces with eyes glowing green in the darkness, blocking the tunnel out.

The hand pulled him close. He bucked and battled against it, feeling the warmth being sucked right out of him by the icy fingers, his sneakers slipping and sliding against the gritty flooring. He couldn't feel the heat in his body rushing out of him. In moments he would be as cold as the figure that gripped him!

"No!" Jason's voice echoed sharply back at him, and the wolfjackals bunched up, growling and snapping at the sound. Their eyes let out green sparks as they watched him. He braced his feet against the base of the tomb and pulled with all his might. No use!

Dream world or not, he was falling! Jason felt his body go limp and icy, unable to stand and slumping over the sarcophagus. The hand about his wrist tightened even more till he wanted to cry out in pain, the crescent scar livid and pulsing. Spread-eagled over the tomb, he knew he would never leave unless he did something desperate, and NOW. He dug his free hand into his pocket to grip his crystal tightly, focusing his thoughts into the red alarm beacon that was one of the last lessons he'd gotten from Gavan Rainwater, Magicker extraordinaire.

He could feel the very last shard of his warmth spearheading into that thought as he collapsed. In his mind's eye, he could see himself like an arrow shooting away. . . .

Gavan Rainwater's office at Ravenwyng was just as he remembered it. Cluttered, with a massive desk of scarred wood, and a huge, somewhat battered high back chair behind it. It was empty of all but a clutter of old books and papers spilling out of a corner bookcase, cascading down a dented metal filing cabinet, and covering (more or less) the top of the desk. Odd lumps of quartz and semiprecious rocks, some polished and shaped and others not, were lying about haphazardly wherever they seemed to have been tossed. One massive golden topaz stood like a proud lantern, its rays catching the beams of an unseeable moon or sun and spreading the light throughout the musty office.

His shout for help came blood-red through the topaz, a single crimson ray of alarm. It pierced the quiet disorder of the office, but there was no one there to take notice of it. Jason himself saw nothing clearly as his eyelids began to close. A dark shadow fell across his vision, clouding the golden topaz.

Blacker than the shadows of the office, a raven hopped upon the desk. With a ker-aaack! it investigated the topaz, clacking its beak against the massive gemstone. It eyed the red beam and then, with another clack-clack of its sharp beak, spread its wings and launched into a low, lazy flight from Gavan Rainwater's office. He sensed its glide through the corridors of the empty Gathering Hall and then in the night, sailing over the lake waters, silhouetted by the low hanging moon. Was it going for help? Was there anyone at all who could help him now?

He had no more time to wonder!

The wolfjackals trotted into the cavern chamber now and raced once around the stone-and-marble tomb, then surrounded it, growling, crouched low on their paws. He could smell their heated breath and drool, like putrid steam upon the icy air. The leader paced forward, his tail making one slow wave of triumph.

He opened his sharp-toothed lined jowls, hunching his neck and shoulders in the painful effort to speak like a human. “You are *mine*,” he reminded Jason, and ran his scalding raspy tongue over the throbbing hurt that Jason’s left hand had become.

The pain of it jolted him. So shocking was it, that he flinched wildly, throwing himself off the top of the door. He smashed onto the floor. The wolfjackals scattered as he landed, and the pain of hitting the stone floor with his cold brittle body shattered his dream into a thousand sharp pieces and he . . .

Came awake.

Jason lifted his face from the lined paper under his hand. A string of drool followed him, and he wiped it away quickly. His notebook lay across his desk, open, and he’d been working on homework. WHAT I DID ON MY SUMMER VACATION. Under it he had written: Found out I was a Magicker. And then he crossed that out. Learned to use crystals for Magick. Scribbled across that. Made new friends in summer camp. That had stayed. Was bitten by a wolfjackal and fought off the Dark Hand of Brennard. . . . His pencil lay over that line, as if he hadn’t quite got a chance to blacken through it before he’d fallen asleep.

He lifted his other hand, stretching. From his attic bedroom, he could hear the normal, comforting sounds of the McIntires down below in the entertainment room, laughing at something on television. The hearty bellow of William “the Dozer’s” big laugh, echoed by the more delicate tones of both Joanna and Alicia sounded faintly to his ears, ever so much better than the eerie wailing of the wolfjackals. He took several breaths.

The porthole window of his attic bedroom stood open to the night breeze, which had grown very cold, and he leaned over, closing it. He knocked down his latest Mercedes Lackey book while doing so, and the unicorn bookmark in it fell out. Jason left it lying there on the carpeted corner near his bookcase. No one would bother it. This was his part of the world and nothing uninvited ever pulled down the trapdoor stair to come in. He liked it like that.

Jason tore the paper out of his notebook and wadded it up. With serious thoughts in mind, he pushed his dream away, and began to craft an essay that would make his Honors English teacher happy and not mark him as a candidate for a straitjacket. His room gained some warmth as he wrote of bright summer days and campfires and friends like Bailey with her twisted sayings and the pack rat she captured for a pet after it had pilfered many shiny items from her cabin. The words flew across the pages. Not once did he say anything that would jeopardize any of his comrades as Magickers in a world that knew nothing about them.

He came to a stop as he tried to finish the paper. What he had really done on his summer vacation was learned a lot about himself, as well as making new friends. But how much of it did he dare reveal? He tapped his pencil point on the desktop, pondering. Tap, tap. Although the time spent at Camp Ravenwyng was weeks in the past, his thoughts seemed to be stalled back there.

TAP, TAP.

Jason jumped in his chair.

TAP.

He stood up, glaring at his window. A black shape winged past it, and Jason threw himself at the pane, to catch a glimpse of it as it flew past. Raven, again!

He opened his stair and clattered down them, determined to catch a glimpse of the bird, if he could. He grabbed the trash from the kitchen as he went, it was his night anyway, and could serve as a cover. Then he headed out the back door, into the night-darkened backyard and driveway where the Dozers had the trash cans lined up like solemn soldiers. He tossed his bag in the appropriate can . . . not “Papers Only,” or “Yard Cuttings!,” but the one marked “Plain Old Garbage,” then ducked across the

yard, where he could see the yellow moon glowing through the eucalyptus and slippery elm trees.

~~The darker-than-night bird wheeled over him, gliding as silently through the sky as an owl. He knew it! He knew that had been no crow . . . that was a raven, and undoubtedly one of Tomaz Crowfeather's!~~ It had been too quiet in the weeks since summer camp's abrupt ending. Far, far too quiet. He hadn't had a Tomb dream in all that time either. Something was up! But what?

He raised his hand, rather like a falconer, as he'd seen Tomaz do. The Native American had struck a far different figure than he did . . . a grown man, with a face lined by the sun, hair banded at the nape of his neck, always in comfortable blue jeans and vest and shirt, hammered silver disks and turquoise stone jewelry studding his waist, his wrists, his neck. But Jason stood there expectantly, anyway.

The raven circled above him. It dove at his hand, passing it, the wind from its wings slapping his open palm. Then, with a cry, the bird dropped something into the dewed grass and disappeared into the darkness.

He picked it out of a tangled spiderweb in the corner, strands holding it tightly for him, keeping the paper from being carried off by the faint night breeze. He tucked it into his pocket and hurried back into the house. His step on the stair caught Joanna's attention, and she called out from the TV room. "Jason?"

"Yes, Mom. I just took the trash out so I wouldn't forget it. I'm almost finished with my homework."

"Good!" Although he couldn't see her, he could hear the pleased smile in her voice.

Without further interruption, he hurried back to his attic bedroom, pulled the stair up and secured it. Then, and only then, did he take the paper out and flatten it to be readable.

Greetings, young Magicker, from Headmaster Gavan Rainwater and staff. Be diligent in your studies and beware the Curse of Arkady!

He knew it! There *was* danger lurking nearby. "What on Earth is the Curse of Arkady?"

"A thing to be feared and watched out for, it seems."

Jason whirled around in his chair. "Gavan!"

The headmaster of Camp Ravenwyng leaned against his porthole window, his unexpected presence filling the room. "You rang?"

"In my dream—"

Gavan frowned slightly. He straightened up, drawing his cape about him, and bringing his wolfhead cane up to look into the crystal held by the pewter creature's wide jaws. "You set off the alarm beacon through your dreams? That's power, Jason. Good and bad." He rubbed his palm over his cane as he communed with his crystal. "I think I'll have Tomaz visit you again, give you some more instruction on dreamwalking. Yours seem to be very potent, and yet you have to be able to read and control them."

"What more can he tell me?"

"I'm not sure." Gavan gave him a lopsided grin. "Tomaz is a man of infinite depths. His knowledge of other ways of magic is vast, and I'm still learning about it myself. But this I know." Gavan Rainwater stared into his face with eyes of crystal clear freshwater blue. "We can't afford to have you scared, Jason. A Gatekeeper has to be strong and curious, ready to explore, and wary enough to handle what he finds. I've a friend, Fizziwig, who will be training you for that, but in the meantime, we have to help you find a balance."

"I'm not scared."

Gavan reached out and put a hand on Jason's shoulder. "No?"

“Not that scared anyway.”

~~“Good. If you were that scared, you couldn’t think, and we need you to keep your wits about you.”~~

We are spread thin, Jason, watching over all of you, and there will be times when none of us can come to your aid, despite the alarm beacon.”

Jason tapped his note. “Then that’s why Tomaz sent this. A warning to keep us ready.”

“What is that?”

Jason passed it over. Gavan scanned it, and handed it back with a sigh. “He dares what he shouldn’t and in all of our names. The Council will be furious over this, but perhaps he’s right. We debated this and the Council voted not to frighten everyone unduly. Tomaz and I disagreed, but we were outvoted. Evidently, Tomaz took the warning upon himself.” Gavan rubbed his jaw. “If I can’t stop the Council from bickering, we’re not going to be able to face Brennard. You should all know there are risks out there now, of being found and attacked and not just by the Dark Hand.”

“So there is a curse.”

Gavan nodded slowly. “A curse that can be dark and deadly. Gather the others, and warn them if they haven’t been already, and learn to guard yourselves. Take care of each other, Jason.” He tapped the head of his cane, and his very body seemed to grow thin and disappear. His voice lingered after he’d vanished, saying, “Do all that is within your power to do!”

“I will!” pledged Jason, and the Magicker was gone. It was only then that Jason realized Gavan hadn’t told him what the Curse of Arkady was.

CURSES

“WHEN are we seven met again?” asked Bailey, her voice hollow and thready, pitched to send echoes through the air and raise the fine hairs at the back of everyone’s neck.

Trent wadded up a piece of paper and threw it at her. It bounced off her freckled nose and into the pocket of her shirt. “We’re in my backyard and we’re only here till my dad gets home!” he snorted unimpressed.

The pocket rippled and bumped and squeaked, and the paper wad was abruptly ejected, followed by the whiskered and curious face of the pocket’s occupant. Lacey let out an indignant chirp, cleaned her pack rat face with tiny paws, and dove back into Bailey’s pocket, leaving only her tufted tail hanging out. Grinning, Bailey tucked that back in, as well.

Sounded good, though!”

Ting smiled slightly as she smoothed a dark wing of hair from her oval face, her almond-shaped eyes lighting with a quiet humor. “You always sound good, Bailey. It’s the mind behind the words. . .” Her sentence trailed off. She folded her hands in her lap and bumped her shoulder against her friend’s as if to emphasize the tease.

“Yeah, yeah.” Rich and Stefan had been playing cards, as usual. Stefan gathered them into his big chunky hands as he turned his attention to the meeting. “I got football practice in thirty minutes. That had better be good.”

Getting them all together at one time was no small feat, and Jason could only thank a slow Saturday morning for the timing. He’d sent a summons by crystal, but it had taken days to get them together here. He fished out the raven-delivered paper. “Anyone besides me get this from Tomaz?”

Bailey’s hand shot up. Ting frowned, then shook her head. Rich grunted and both the redhead and his chunky pal nodded. Danno’s answer was to pull out a similar piece of paper from inside his jacket. Trent shook his head in the negative. “What’s up?”

“It’s a warning.”

“Trouble?” Trent’s eyes lit up. “And they’re worried we might get into it?”

“I think,” said Danno quietly, “we’ve got enough problems with the Dark Hand. Fair warning against anyone or anything else is good.” He wrapped his arms about his legs, darker Latino face in contrast to the cream color of his shirt.

“But no one’s been bothered, have they? School’s been going, days and weeks are passing. I think it’s all a bunch of hokey cooked up to keep us quiet.”

Stefan echoed Rich’s scoff. “Yeah. Like homework.”

“Homework is cooked up to help us learn,” remarked Ting. She stared at her slender hands in her lap.

Jason sat down on a big rock that occupied most of the corner of Trent’s small patch of yard. “I think,” he offered, “that we can expect the Dark Hand, just like the Magickers, to be recovering from the battle at Ravenwyng. First we defeated their spy Jonnard, and then the others. They’ve probably

been catching their breath, and now they're getting ready to strike again. I don't think they'll have wolfjackals to help them, but they could be anyone, anywhere, tracking us."

"Why no wolfjackals?"

Jason shrugged. "They need a lot of mana. My guess is they stay close to Havens and Gates. But members of the Hand are just like anyone."

Rich rolled his eyes. "Like they can find us. There's only how many million people in the country now?" Trent shot him a look. "You think they couldn't?"

"I think," Rich said, tilting his head in Trent's direction, "that we're small fish to them."

"Not so small," Bailey muttered. "Remember what Jon did to Henry Squibb!"

They all sat in silence for a moment thinking of round-faced, funny, and smart Henry who'd had his newly found Magicker powers destroyed by the traitor Jonnard. The discovery that Jon had been a thief, traitor, and destroyer had shocked them all. Ting let out a little sigh. "I see Henry sometimes," she said. "At our dentist. I can't tell if he remembers me or not."

The Magickers had ways of protecting their existence, and one of them had been used on Henry after the disastrous theft of his fledgling powers. It had sent him home in a baffled, cheerful, totally clueless state. Not that Henry had been all that different, but . . . well, he *had* been magickal. "You don't think he does?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

Trent said quietly, "I miss Henry."

"Me, too." Danno scratched his hand through thick, dark hair. "Think we'd get in trouble with . . . them . . . if we said hi or something?"

"I don't think we'd get in trouble, but would it be fair to Henry? Seems to me, he's better off not knowing what he lost. Ignorance is bliss and all that."

Bailey glanced at Trent. "I thought it was 'Ignorance is best,' " she said. Trent nudged her. "You would!" acknowledging that Bailey seemed to have a bottomless source for her slightly twisted sayings.

"I think," Jason said slowly, "that being a Magicker—past, present, or future—is too important to forget. I won't forget Henry, and I hope someday he'll have a chance to remember just who all of us are. Ting, if you do see him, tell him I'd like to talk to him sometime. Maybe over the computer, he'd like that." Jason rolled his paper into a scroll and popped it back into a vest pocket. "We're the only ones left from camp with crystals and our full memories of what happened." Silence fell over all of them as they remembered the dreadful storm of power called mana that brought wild Magick as well as torrential rain and thunder and lightning, nearly destroying Ravenwyng. Their summer of learning the mysteries of Magick had come to a sudden ending, but Ravenwyng had survived, with their help. Jason took a deep breath. "I called us all together to . . . well, to make sure everyone was all right, and to see if we could set up a ring, to keep tabs on each other, to help out."

"We've got the alarm beacons if something goes wrong," Danno said. He watched Jason's face. "The last thing they taught us."

"What if it's not enough?" Jason looked around at all of them sprawled on Trent's back lawn. He did not want to discuss his dreams and what Gavan had said, but the foreboding it had left him with was like a bad taste in his mouth that wouldn't go away.

"What did you have in mind? We can't meet like this all the time." Trent studied the crystal in his hand, saying nothing else, but Jason knew his inner thoughts. They'd used their crystals to see through, but that ability was new and rather untried with them, not to be misused or used often. They all needed far more training. Destinations could be rocky, even dangerous without it. The elders

Magickers were busy trying to ready a training program that would make up the gaps, but until then they had to be very careful what they did.

Trent, of all of them, was in the most jeopardy. Only Jason knew his secret. Trent had no power. Not even the elder Magickers had seen through the powerful screen of wit and knowledge he'd thrown about himself. His quick mind and deep wealth of reading knowledge had kept him from being discovered, and his love of magick made him eager to be a Magicker in any way he could.

"Most of us have access to computers. I was thinking, an e-mail ring. Just a daily check on how we all are, if we've seen anything odd or felt anything."

Stefan grunted. His thick, square face reflected the bear being he could abruptly shapeshift into. "I could do that," he said.

"Me, too." Bailey and Ting answered almost at once.

"That would work for me," Danno agreed. "Getting away to meet in person is a lot trickier. Especially since my dad's company may be transferring him overseas for at least a year, and if that happens, we're all going." Rich shrugged. "Whatever," he said, as if supremely bored.

"I think it'll work. Better than phoning and trying to explain the charges." Trent crossed his arms over his lean figure.

"E-mail," Bailey added, looking about at all of them, her golden-brown ponytail bouncing as she spoke. "It could be faked. I suggest a password. Just to identify it's really us."

"Finally something cool." Rich smiled slowly.

"How about Excalibur?" said Trent.

"How about freakazoid," countered Stefan. He clambered to his feet, shifting his weight back and forth restlessly. The backpack on his shoulder held his football gear, lumpy pads and helmet and all.

"How about something serious," said Jason. "Like what Tomaz warned us about, the curse. How about Arkady?"

Each of the seven thought about it briefly, then nodded in turn. "Done, then. Every day, when you can, send a note. We'll take down each other's addresses and we're finished."

Ting nibbled on one fingertip as she wrote out the e-mail lists for everyone, looking as if there were something she wanted to say.

"What is it, Ting?"

"Should we include Jennifer?"

Jason thought about the older girl, blonde and willowy, who had been Ting's and Bailey's cabinmate and counselor. "Well . . . I don't know . . ."

Ting fidgeted.

"What do you think?"

The pencil wobbled in Ting's hand. "I heard . . ." she said softly. "She's avoiding all of us. She has a boyfriend. She's different from last summer."

"A boyfriend? Oh, mannnnn." Trent frowned. He'd always had a kind of interest in Jennifer, Jason remembered. Not that he'd ever own up to it.

"Maybe it's best we don't, then. Till she makes up her mind and everything?"

"All right." Ting nodded, and her expression calmed as she returned to writing out copies of the lists.

It only took a few moments, and then Ting and Bailey had their crystals out. They focused and disappeared in a soft shimmer. Stefan fished his out with his great, clumsy paw of a hand, yet held the gem with a kind of tenderness as he looked into it. Rich followed him like a shadow at Stefan's heels. Danno winked at them, before focusing on his crystal and vanishing. Soon only Trent and Jason

remained. Trent slapped his hand against Jason's shoulder.

~~"There's another reason we can't meet like this too often, besides needing more practice. We could be leaving a trail the Dark Hand might pick up on."~~

Jason thought. "Not if we went into the Haven."

"You're the only one who's really been there, Jason. And I couldn't get there without you."

"It's something to think about, though. The Haven is out of time and place. It could be the perfect spot for us to go to if there's trouble. I need to look into it."

"Meanwhile, how about I find out, if I can, who this Arkady is and what this curse might be? I wonder why Tomaz or Gavan couldn't just tell us what the curse is."

Jason nodded in agreement. Books and knowledge were Trent's great asset. He knew all the myths and fables, and what he didn't know, he could track down almost immediately with his expertise on the Internet and libraries. "I think," he said slowly, "we need to know as soon as possible. A warning isn't enough. We need to know what to look out for."

"Something you didn't tell us?" It was a question Trent looked like he really didn't need answered.

"Like that line from Ray Bradbury," Jason said, quoting one of his favorite books. "'By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.'"

Trent grinned. "Actually, I think that started with Shakespeare, but I get your meaning. A warning forewarned is definitely forearmed in this case. I'll let you know whatever I find."

"And I," answered Jason, "hope you don't find anything, but we both know better!" He rubbed the back of his left hand, where the scar of the wolfjackal bite looked healed and yet still remained tender. It would never go away, that mark, and there were times when it was just as fresh and painful as newly made, despite all the months of healing. He thought of the night he'd gotten it, the very first night of summer camp, before he'd even been told he had been born with Magick in his blood. With a shudder, he recalled the snarling ambush of the beastly wolfjackal and the ripping of his skin as he fought it off. *You're mine!* the beast had snarled at him before slinking off into the darkness.

After a moment's hesitation, he added, "This is serious business, Trent."

"I know."

"You could be the easiest one for the Dark Hand to get to."

"Or the hardest. I can't leave a Magick trail, can I? Besides, we don't really know what Brennard is up to, if anything. Supposedly, both he and Gregory the Gray haven't been seen in a couple hundred years. His followers are pretty much on their own."

"That doesn't seem to have stopped them, and anyone who can make Gavan or Tomaz worried is gonna scare me." He thought. "I think they can move throughout our world pretty much at will. They're more organized than the others."

"It comes of *not* having a Council, I think."

That made Jason smile. "No long arguments about how to do things, right?"

"You've got the idea." Trent leaned against the back railing of the yard deck.

Jason hesitated for a long moment, but Trent seemed to be waiting for him to say something else, so he composed his words. "I still get dreams."

"Still? I thought those got pretty well squelched at camp."

"Maybe for everyone else, but not me." Jason rubbed his chin. "Why me?"

"Think you're the weak link in the chain?"

"I hope not. I don't want to, but—sometimes—I wonder."

Trent considered it, then shook his head vigorously. "Nah. It has to be more than that. If Brennard was looking for the weak ones, he'd have come after me. Or Henry. Or Rich, maybe. I think he

drawn by strong talent, and that means you, bud.”

~~Jason shifted uneasily. He did not think of himself as being any more gifted than any other Magicker. If anything, he'd been cursed. He rubbed his scarred hand again. The only way of knowing for sure if the wolfjackal had marked him as Brennard's own was a way he did not wish to try, and that was to let Brennard tell him face-to-face. "I don't want to meet either Brennard or Jonnard again."~~

“One thing you have to consider is that Tomaz sent the note. I'll do all the research and digging I can, but he's the one you ought to talk to. And, with those dreams, you can't wait to do it.”

“Think so?”

“I know so. Look. We're all hanging out here, and we're brand new. It's like driving in rush hour right after you get your learner's permit! You're crazy if you don't ask for help.”

“You're right.” Jason's head bobbed in reluctant agreement. “I'll get hold of him as soon as I can and let you know what happens. But you've gotta let me know if anything starts happening to you!”

“Look. I'm going to worry about you, and you're going to worry about me. That's what friends are for. I promise you,” and he marked his finger over his chest. “Anything weird and you'll hear about it.”

“Right back at you.” He cupped his crystal. “Time to bail, then.”

With a wave to Trent, he looked into his crystal, focused on a doorway back to his own place with total concentration, and then stepped through.

CHARMED, I'M SURE

“GOD help me if I ever agree to another Council meeting,” Gavan Rainwater muttered to himself, and rubbed his temple with the cool pewter wolfhead that adorned his cane. The massage failed to alleviate the dull, pounding throb of a headache as he tried to listen to the droning words of Macabiah Allenby, who was most strenuously protesting the warning Tomaz Crowfeather had sent to those new Magickers his Talents could find. At this table in the Ravenwyng meeting hall sat some of the most powerful Magickers alive—and there were few enough of those, unfortunately—and Gavan knew that they were not here because they were happy.

They should be happy. Because of the efforts of his staff, the camp had successfully been drawn beyond the borders of the Iron Gate, and now rested temporarily in a Haven, a pocket of magickal magic that put it outside of the time stream of the world. Gavan was now concentrating his efforts on anchoring Ravenwyng in the small dell dominated by the Iron Mountain Range. Anchoring it and warding it against ricocheting back into place. That was why he'd agreed to a Council meeting in the hope of securing the aid of a few more Magickers in getting those wards set. But he would not get more from the six who'd come in to join his own staff. Instead, he was facing an inquisition of his actions and plans.

Tomaz, on the other hand, seemed to be amused by Allenby. The Native American was leaning forward on the long conference table, his elbows firmly planted on the table's edge and his chin resting on the steeple of his fingers. The deeply weathered lines of his face curved in an otherwise neutral expression.

Allenby, as bald as an egg except for a white fringe of hair that ran around the circle of his head and then descended about the edges of his lower face in a wispy beard, sucked in an enormous breath and launched into what one could only hope was the summation of his speech. Gavan wove and locked his fingers together. They sounded like old women, all of them, old women gathered at the laundry vats, to argue and gossip and vent old spites. He'd come forward in time, most of them had, yet the six seemed mired in centuries long past. He sighed heavily. If anyone else at the table heard him, they made no sign, except that Tomaz looked at him briefly, with humor dancing in his dark eyes.

“And furthermore,” Allenby wheezed, “the usage of such familiars as Crowfeather's ravens ought to be deplored, if not totally banned, in the future. Movement of that sort might attract the Dark Hand's attention, and put us all in jeopardy!” He stopped suddenly, as if finally out of words or breath, or both.

Tomaz waited a long moment as if making sure Allenby had finished. The Council member sat back in his chair, took out a neatly folded handkerchief and mopped first his face, and then his bald head.

“Now then,” Tomaz said mildly. “The movement of natural creatures is far less likely to attract the attention of Brennard's people than any other method we could use. I also hope you don't suggest that we leave the children in the dark, uninformed. Yes, it might be said we failed in our attempt to educate so many in such a short time. We live and learn. They *lived and learned*. And a remarkable handf

stayed by our sides to combat the wild Magick of a mana storm and the attack of the Dark Har through it. I call that an amazingly successful failure.” Tomaz smiled, slowly, the expression dawning on his face like the sun coming up on a desert landscape.

“Here, here!” cried Eleanora softly. Lace framed her face and the dark ringlets of hair about although tiny dark circles of fatigue outlined her eyes. Her musician’s hands were folded gracefully upon the table.

Dr. Anita Patel, however, shook her head sadly. “We found too many. More than we can train or protect. When we disassembled the camp, we had to take their crystals and the memories of all but this handful. We had good intentions and not nearly enough resources to do what we wanted to. This a disservice. I, for one, am not in favor of moving forward on the Academy. Not yet. It is too soon.”

“What?” Her words brought Gavan leaping to his feet. “You can’t mean that! I’ll sit here all day and listen to bantering about quills versus ballpoint pens when writing out spells and incantations, but I will not argue about whether the Academy goes forward. It has to. There is no other way!”

“SILENCE!” roared Aunt Freyah, as she brought down her gavel sharply. “Points of order, ladies and gentlemen! You are all out of turn except for Master Crowfeather here!” Her dark eyes snapped and the soft halo of her silvery hair fairly shimmered in her anger. “Shall we keep to parliamentary rules of procedure?” Her voice rose with every word.

Wincing, Gavan seated himself. He folded his arms across his chest and hoped he did not look as if he were sulking.

That he did not succeed was obvious when Aunt Freyah rapped the table sharply again, shattering his thoughts.

“Ow!” He sank back and looked at her reproachfully.

She twirled the gavel in her veined hands. “And we will keep to our seats at all times! We are not heathens, nor is this a brawl.”

He looked at her. “It will be a brawl if it comes to a fight over the Academy, Auntie. There is not a Magicker alive who can stop me from opening its doors to take in our future and see that training done properly.” He rubbed his brow that now rang from her fervor to restore order as well as the headache he’d developed from Allenby’s speech-making.

“I don’t think that’s really the question at the moment, Gavan,” Eleanora said quietly. “We’ll have school open, but will there be any students who will be able to attend?”

“Preeeeecisely,” said Allenby.

She curved her lips into a smile. “Without warnings such as Tomaz sent out, there can’t be. Even with warnings, we have to face issues like Jonnard.” Her face paled at the mention of the traitor who had nearly sabotaged all their efforts.

Tomaz tapped his turquoise-and-silver watchband. “We have not been able to track him. He hasn’t gone back to his home, and traces there of him seem to have vanished.” He gave a rueful expression. “Computers are remarkably easy to hack, it appears.”

“He was trained for nearly a year before camp opened. Anita, you recruited him, didn’t you?” Softly accented words from Isabella Ruelle who sat quietly near the table’s end, her dark blonde hair pulled back from a face dominated by a hawklike nose, marring beauty into handsomeness. She wore a lace mantilla about her shoulders, her dress of deep maroon brocade both contemporary and stylish and yet speaking of her Spanish heritage. She was seldom seen outside of Europe since the awakening, and Gavan knew he ought to be pleased by her attendance.

He was not. Despite her soft voice, Isabella trained the Leucators, the inner force of the Magickers that bore a resemblance to the Inquisition, and Gavan was prepared to swear Isabella enjoyed it.

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