

CONJURING ZEPHYR

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CHAPTER 1

I first saw the uniforms while visiting Capital Art Museum on a school trip. *But are my cloth manipulation skills good enough to pass muster? I guess I will find out.* Straightening my spine, I marched toward the imposing Student Hall.

My boy-crazy best friend, Patti, coached me on how to walk like a man for weeks. Patti would know. All she does is watch men. She wasn't convinced I could get away with my scheme. She, like everyone else, was convinced there were fundamental differences between men and women that were easily spotted. That didn't stop her from helping me prepare for all foreseeable contingencies.

Student Hall loomed over me as I stepped into the lobby. Students rushed around getting ready for the semester to start.

A large display gave instructions to prepare for new student orientation. "Welcome New Students!" it proclaimed in big, bold letters. My first task was to determine what dorm room I was assigned. Following the arrows

to the left, I found a bored looking second-year checking a list and handing out dorm entry chips.

“Name?” he asked me, without looking up from the list.
My first test.

“Kie Stephenson,” I replied, lowering my voice slightly. His eyes flicked to my face, and I resisted the urge to squirm. I stilled my body and smoothed my expression, trying to seem unconcerned.

“Elemental Dorm, fourth floor, east block, room two.” He handed me a chip then waved me away, pointing at a stack of campus maps on the table beside him.

I snatched one and shoved my nose into it, using it as a shield. A quick peek showed me he was already helping another student. I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

Once I located my dorm on the map, I left Student Hall and noticed a slight boy with blond hair struggling with luggage.

“Do you need help?” I asked him.

He squeaked, clearly startled, and dropped the suitcase. Big blue eyes met mine as he stuttered. “I-I-if you...d-d-don’t mind.”

I smiled reassuringly. “I’m Kie,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Leif,” he said, shaking it. He exhaled in relief and returned my smile weakly.

“Where are you headed, Leif?”

“Elemental Dorm, first floor.”

“All right, I’m going to Elemental Dorm too. Let me help you,” I said, grabbing his dropped case.

“Thanks.” He looked tired.

After walking a short while, I asked, “Why didn’t you leave the case with the valet?”

Leif reddened and replied in a quiet voice, “My father was watching.” My confused expression must have forced him to continue, but he was clearly uncomfortable. “He doesn’t think I am strong enough to be an elemental, so he always makes me carry everything.”

Leif looked so dejected, I had to save him. “My parents don’t live in Capital. I made the journey with friends.”

“Oh?” he asked, brightening at the change of subject.

“I’m from the rim. It took me three days to get here by train.”

“I’ve never met someone from the rim before,” he said in awe.

Before he could ask any questions, there was a loud crash and someone shouted.

A dark-haired first-year hovered above Elemental Dorm, throwing whirlwinds at the source of the shouting. Another dark-haired first-year stood behind a rock wall, protecting himself from the wind.

“Stop it, Flynn,” the boy on the ground yelled. “I am not fixing that window.”

Flynn laughed and stuck out his tongue.

A flare of fire forced everyone’s attention to the dorm’s front door. “Enough,” the source of the flame, an annoyed fourth-year, ordered.

Flynn landed immediately, and the other dark-haired boy crumbled his wall.

“Reid, what happened?” The upperclassman demanded an explanation.

Upon closer inspection, the two boys causing the ruckus were clearly twins. Their faces were identical though their builds were a bit different. They were both the same tall height, but Reid was more muscular, probably because he was an earth user while Flynn was an air user.

Reid hesitated to answer the upperclassman, not wanting to get his brother in trouble.

“The craziest thing, Dorm Leader,” Flynn said, drawing the fourth-year’s attention to him. “It was a phoenix. I have never seen one so big,” he fabricated convincingly.

The Dorm Leader harrumphed and turned to Reid, who avoided eye contact and ducked his head. “Fix it,” he said and strode inside.

Flynn and Reid exhaled in sync then turned to each other. Flynn grinned, and Reid rolled his eyes then walked to the broken window. Flynn noticed Leif and me. He looked at our ties and yelled, “Hey, fellow newbies,” waving his arm in a wide arc as if we needed help seeing him.

Leif and I timidly waved back, unsure but not wanting to be unfriendly. Flynn closed the distance between us.

“Flynn Williams, here to make life more interesting. That’s my brother, Reid,” he said, grinning and jabbing his thumb over his shoulder. Reid nodded in our direction.

“I’m Kie, and this is Leif,” I replied.

Flynn’s gaze slid over me intently. As soon as I noticed, it was gone. *Paranoia will make you look more suspicious, Kai.* I straightened my spine.

“What floors?” Flynn asked.

“Fourth for me and first for Leif,” I replied.

“Air and earth, huh? Us too,” Flynn grinned. “But you already knew that. Leave that case for the staff, and I will show you around.” He motioned for me to follow and pointed Leif toward Reid.

“Thanks,” I responded.

As I took a step forward, Leif grabbed my elbow to stop me. I met his nervous eyes and was taken aback. *So much like Toby: fragile and looking to me for reassurance.* I squeezed his

hand and whispered, “Don’t worry. I’m sure Reid will take care of you. I will see you at dinner, okay?”

Reid reconstructed the broken glass, and I watched, impressed that his earth elemental skills were already so developed for a first year. When he had completed his task, he moved toward us. He nodded to Leif, “East block, right? Which room?” Reid’s distraction had Leif fumbling for his chip.

I headed into Elemental Dorm in search of Flynn, who had gone ahead, and entered a large common area. Couches, chairs, and tables were arranged arbitrarily around the room. On the far side, a staircase spiraled up and out of sight.

Flynn lounged on a couch, feet up, appearing relaxed. He peeked at me under gently-closed lids. With a flourish and a well-controlled wind, he was standing in front of me, smirking. *These twins are pretty advanced for first-years.*

“The stairs lead to the other three floors. Past them is the dining room. There are four blocks of dorm rooms on each floor, and each block houses eight students. The second floor has an open room for meetings or practice or whatever. The laundry room is on the third floor. What room are you in?”

“Room two.”

A mischievous grin, which I realized was his default expression, spread slowly across his face. “Let’s head up then, Roomie.”

He started up the spiral staircase, and I followed wondering what would result from this unexpected turn.

In the fourth-floor common area, we headed toward the east block. Through the block door was a hallway leading to a window. Four doors faced the hall. Immediately to the

right was a door with a large silver “1” on it. To the left was our door.

“Welcome home.” Flynn smiled, placing his chip next to a pad to the right of our door. The door lock clicked, and he pushed it ajar.

“After you.” He bowed slightly at the waist with his arm folded across his stomach.

Our room was simple but spacious. Straight ahead was a window. Along the left wall were two elevated beds, the kind with desks underneath. On the right, there stood two wardrobes on either side of a door.

“That is the bathroom we share with the guys in room four. You’re all right with sharing a bathroom with three men, right?”

Alarm shot through me. Before my brain could tell my mouth what to say, Flynn went on like he hadn’t said anything unusual. “Would you like the window bed or the one closest to the door? I prefer the window myself, but I’m willing to negotiate.”

“I am fine with the door side,” I mumbled.

“Great!” Flynn grinned and climbed his bed. Lying on his stomach, he closed his eyes. “The valets should deliver our luggage sometime during dinner.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked, feeling uninformed.

“I got here early to scope out the place,” he replied with a voice that said he was up to something.

I didn’t respond, but sat in my desk chair and began giving myself a mental pep talk. *You can do this, Kai. It seems difficult now, but you will manage. Your task is worthy. The rules are unreasonable. Oh man, this is too much. I will never pull it off. No, stop it! You are just as clever as any boy. Look at it this*

way: your lack of feminine curves will finally come in handy. Yes, it's possible. I know it. I just have to access the right information. Pumped up, I smiled.

That's when I realized Flynn was staring at me. He made no attempt to hide it. Finally, he asked, "Tell me why a girl, such as you, would come to an all-boys university?"

Before fear could get a grip, I started to laugh. I just couldn't help it. I was hysterical. Sides aching, I wiped tears from my eyes. "Did you just ask me, 'What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?'"

Flynn's serious expression flew from his face, and he hopped down from his bed. "I guess I did, but if you want pick-up lines, I can do better."

Seeing his grin sobered me. I buried my face in my hands. "Oh man! I am so screwed."

"I can do that too. I do appreciate a good scheme, though. Let me in on it, and I won't turn you in," he conspired in a whisper.

I sighed, both relieved and anxious. "First let me say, if you try anything while I am sleeping, you will be sorry you ever looked upon my face."

He grinned but held up his hands in surrender. "Mysterious...and noted."

"Okay," I began. "You know how magic surrounds us and pulling it from the atmosphere is how everyone utilizes it?"

He nodded at the common knowledge.

"Air, water, and earth elementals are trained to manipulate the elements around them to accomplish various ends. But fire elementals can create fire. I am convinced that other elementals could create their elements too, not just manipulate what is already present. I came here to figure out how to do it." I looked up nervously.

walked to the table where they waited with six empty seats.

Leif was practically bouncing in his seat when we arrived. “Kie! Guess what? Reid and I are roommates. He is so nice. He let me have the window bed.” He smiled so widely I thought his cheeks must hurt.

“That’s great, Leif. I am rooming with Flynn,” I said, sitting next to Leif.

Flynn sat beside Reid, who was on Leif’s other side. Reid nodded to his brother. They began some type of silent communication outsiders could never truly understand. It looked to me like Flynn was saying something was afoot. Reid asked a question. Then, Flynn’s eyes flicked to me. Reid’s steady gaze settled on me.

It wasn’t cold as I expected it would be. It was quiet and curious. *Well, I guess it was too much to think Flynn could keep my secret from his twin.*

Meanwhile, Leif was telling me all about the plants that grow in their dorm room. “There is ivy all along the walls and this flowerpot in the windowsill, and Reid said we could plant whatever we want. Did you get a flower box?”

“No, but we don’t practice the magic that makes plants grow,” I replied.

“That’s true,” Leif said, looking sad that we didn’t have flowerpots, too.

I shoveled down a few bites. Patti told me that while men can have nice table manners, they are not required the same way they are for women.

A loud clapping drew everyone’s attention to the window side of the room, and the talking quieted.

Dorm Leader stood, demanding attention. “Eat hearty,” he said. “Early tomorrow, we meet outside by the front door. Disciplined magic use requires a strong body and a

powerful will. Every student, including the scholar and military students, will be participating. We will walk from our front lawn to Training Field together. Your physical training begins then and will continue every morning until you graduate. Sleep well. See you at first light.”