

## Chapter 1

Grief and guilt go hand in hand—difficult to separate—and even harder to let go.

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With a flick of my wrist, I shaved another strip of wood, whittling away the layers. I placed the half-finished knight next to its twin with a sigh. The chess piece looked like Bandit. Even with my hands occupied, I couldn't shake the past.

Erik, a Warden of the Council, had abandoned us to face the Red Witch alone so he could stuff his pockets with the gnome's treasure. That battle had pushed me to my limits and left me too weak to save Bandit, my friend and fellow apprentice.

No one believed me, but I knew the truth.

*It's Erik's fault Bandit's dead, and if it takes the rest of my life, I'll make sure he pays for it.*

The door flew open. "Noah, get your gear."

I stumbled to my feet, blinking at the man who stood in the doorway, his eyes hidden behind mirrored aviator glasses.

Ranger folded his arms and then stepped forward until his face was inches from mine. "We're heading into the wilds. Pack for an extended trip."

I backed away from his hot breath, catching my bare foot against the chair. My coffee splashed onto my T-shirt, and I swiped a hand across my patchy stubble. My sweatpants hung low on my hips, and I tugged at them, surprised by their looseness.

Ranger scanned the room, taking in the dirty dishes and clothes scattered about, and growled his disapproval. I traced my finger through the wood shavings on the table, wondering when the fairies had last bothered to clean.

With a firm hand to the back of my head, not hard, but enough to catch my attention, he said, “Snap out of it. You have fifteen minutes to shower and pack.”

Too drained to protest, I stretched and yawned.

Ranger wrinkled his nose. “Merlin’s Beard! Every creature in the Otherlands can smell you.” He turned on his heel. “I need fresh air.” And with that, the Captain of the Wardens stormed out.

The hot shower burned away the cobwebs in my mind. Clean and dressed, I gathered my gear, realizing how far I’d let myself go.

*Mischief* fluttered his pages, his smiling face and bushy eyebrows emerging from the leather cover. “Hey, Laddie, don’t forget me,” he said in his Scottish brogue.

The enchanted journal had once belonged to Ezra, a famous wizard and my many-times-great-grandfather. I wrapped *Mischief* in a soft cloth and stowed him in my pack.

When I heard the horses, I shrugged into my duster, took one last look at the messy cottage, and trudged outside.

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Ranger and Mrs. S waited beside the Fell Ponies, Orion and Altair, their white coats shimmering with enchantment in the morning sun. Mrs. S’s violet eyes, once warm with encouragement, now held a mix of disappointment and dwindling patience. I couldn’t blame her.

“Probationary Apprentice Wizard of Castle Dragon. You’re hereby assigned to Warden Ranger Rodrigues.” She handed me Orion’s reins.

I almost rolled my eyes, but checked myself. *You’re already on thin ice—don’t push it.* I avoided Ranger’s ever-present reflective sunglasses.

Orion whinnied. I greeted him with an enthusiastic neck scratch before leaning in to give him a hug. As I ran my hands down his flank, a calming rush of magic swept over me.

Altair nickered, his wild mane cascading beyond his eyes. I stroked his soft jaw.

“A disturbance in Newton Territory. You’re to go with Ranger,” Mrs. S said.

“But why? He doesn’t need any help.”

Mrs. S’s cloak billowed in the calm morning air. “It’s time you earned your keep.” Lines deepened around her mouth. “Castle Dragon is not a flophouse for vagabond wizards.”

At her chastisement, my gaze dropped, and I busied myself tightening the laces on my boots.

Ranger barked out my name, sitting astride Altair.

I dragged myself into Orion’s saddle and gave him a reassuring pat. His comforting presence brought a ghost of a smile to my lips.

*Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad. It’s been a while since I spent time with the ponies.*

Mrs. S waved a farewell. “Godspeed.”

Ranger made a clucking sound, and Altair leaped skyward.

Orion didn’t wait for my command, and with a jolt, he unfolded his wings and took to the skies.

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We circled Castle Dragon and glided over the old oak that marked Bandit's headstone. His final moments flashed through my mind. I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting to stem the swell of emotion as my fingers tightened around the reins until my knuckles turned white.

*Focus on the now.*

I repeated the chant, opening my mind to accept Orion's soothing, positive energy.

Mrs. S's counsel echoed. *Grief clouds the past, making us depressed, while uncertainty shrouds the future, breeding anxiety. To move forward, we must stay centered in the present.*

Her words sank in as I patted Orion's neck, his soft coat warm beneath my hand. The tension in my shoulders eased as we moved deeper into the Otherlands, flying over rolling green hills and trees beginning to shed their leaves.

The lush landscape gave way to rugged terrain with dry, golden grass and jagged rocks. Below us, a winding gravel road snaked alongside a braided river, its turquoise waters shimmering like gems. I found myself captivated by the breathtaking scenery.

Smoke shattered my brief sense of wonder. Thin wisps of gray spiraled from a dozen fires burning the sparse dry grass.