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Jupe pinched himself on the arm and grinned from the passenger seat of my Volkswagen. “Yep, I definitely feel different.”

I swiped my monthly pass through the card reader at the parking garage entrance down the street from my bar. It buzzed in acceptance, and the gate’s striped barrier arm rose. “Well, you sure do *look* it,” I agreed, stowing the pass in a pocket on the sun visor.

“Different how?” Jupe tugged at one of the long espresso curls jutting out around his face. Like other Earthbound demons, his head and shoulders were crowned by a swirling halo of hazy light. His was an alluring spring green that matched his unusually pale eyes and gave off a lightning-bug luminescence in the shadowed interior of my car.

“You look older . . . more sophisticated,” I teased.

“Really?”

I rolled my eyes and pulled through the raised gate into the dark garage. “No.”

He punched me in the arm.

“Dammit, that hurt,” I complained in the middle of a

laugh, rubbing my shoulder. “See if I ever give you anything again, you ungrateful punk.”

Jupe snickered as he stretched out long, wiry legs and examined the savings deposit receipt perched on his knee, thoughtfully tracing his finger along the indented ink. The deposit was for \$15,000, originally in the form of a check, made payable to me from Caliph Superior, the leader of my esoteric organization back in Florida. The money was payment for the black-market glass talon Jupe’s father, Lon, had bought to help me out a few weeks ago. My magical order was rolling in dough, so I didn’t feel guilty that they had offered to reimburse Lon. But when he refused their check, I couldn’t keep the money for myself, so the only logical solution was give it to his son . . . while Lon was away in Mexico on a three-day photo shoot. Sneaky? Sure. But if you’re going to lie to Lon, you have to do it while he’s away on business. Otherwise he’ll just sense it before you can make it out the door. Jupe taught me that trick. He should write a book, *How to Outsmart an Empath*. The boy has skills.

But who knew giving money to an underage kid would be so hard? Jupe and I spent almost an hour arguing with tellers inside my credit union: no, I did *not* want to put it in some giftable trust fund that Jupe couldn’t touch until he was twenty-one. He already had a fat college fund and enough bonds and CDs to start a third-world country.

Problem was, the credit union didn’t allow minors on a joint savings account without a parent or legal guardian co-signing, and I was neither. Girlfriend of the Boy’s Father didn’t qualify, apparently. The branch manager couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t wait until Lon was back in town to get his signature. I wasn’t about to tell the manager that Lon would refuse—which he would. After a blue-faced argument, the manager finally, inexplicably, gave in.

“By the way, I know you still don’t believe me,” Jupe said as he snooped inside the glove compartment, “but I really *did* do it. Me. I got the manager to make an exception and let us open the account.”

God, he really wasn’t going to give that a rest. I swatted his hand away from the glove compartment and steered the car down the ramp to the next parking level; the Metropark garage sticks the monthlies in the dregs on the bottom floor. “You’re a charmer, don’t get me wrong.” And he was. Witty, geek-smart, almost annoyingly outgoing, and well on his way to becoming drop-dead gorgeous. Just yesterday he bragged that he’d overheard some girl in his class referring to him as “totally hot.” Did I mention he was cocky?

“I’m serious, Cady. I concentrated with my mind and twisted his thoughts around. I think it’s my”—he leaned over the armrest and spoke in a lower voice, as if someone could hear us outside the car—“knack.”

Knack. Slang for a preternatural ability possessed by an Earthbound demon. Most Earthbounds have one, but many knacks fall short of spectacular. A little foresight here, a little nighttime vision there. A whole hell of a lot of psychokinetics, most of them no more than bland party entertainment, unable to lift anything heavier than a freaking spoon a couple inches off the table. Don’t get me wrong: the occasional impressive ability *does* exist. I’ve met Earthbounds who could pick a lock with a touch, and others who could curse your unborn child. Those weren’t exactly commonplace, though.

“You’re crazy,” I said, waiting for another car to back out. A large, sparkling jack-o’-lantern clung to the top of its antenna—less than two weeks to Halloween. “For starters, you’ve got a couple more years before your demonic ability will start expressing. And second, you’ll inherit it from your

mom or dad. It's genetic, you know—you don't just get a new ability out of thin air."

"I know all that," Jupe complained. "Who's the demon here, me or you?"

"You are. I'm mere human." Well, human magician with a few extra skills, but still human.

"Yeah, and I got the stupid 'knack' speech with the 'birds and the bees' from my dad when I was eight."

"Poor, poor Lon," I murmured. The car windows were fogging up; it was going to rain. I turned the defroster on and cranked up the compressor fan.

"All I'm saying is that I know about what's *supposed* to happen. But I'm telling you, Cady, I can make people do things. I can get inside their minds and change their thoughts."

"Pfft. I've never even heard of a knack like that." Well, Lon could influence thoughts when he was amped up into his transmuted demon state, but that's nothing Jupe knew about, or would ever know. Not from me, anyway. Besides, Lon's influence was temporary, and he had to be touching the person. Plus, it was more common for the inherited knack to be weaker than the parents', not stronger.

"I think my knack is like"—he paused, as if he knew what he was about to say was going to sound ridiculous, but he just couldn't stop himself—"a Jedi mind trick."

I snorted.

"I'm serious!"

"Dream on." I shot him a sidelong glance as he snuck a couple fingers just beneath the waistband of his jeans and scratched—vigorously, with a teeth-gritting, pained look on his face. That was the third time today I'd caught him scratching. "What the hell is wrong with you? You have ants in your pants?"

He scratched harder and groaned. "I've got an injury."

Dear God, have mercy. I held up my hand to stop him from saying more, waving away any mental images before they had a chance to pop into my head. "I don't *even* want to know."

Affronted, he made a face at me. "Not *there*. It's . . . nothing. Never mind."

No need to tell me twice. He could discuss it with the school nurse or his dad. Not my job description. I promptly changed the subject. "So, what was all that jibber-jabber earlier about you wanting an Eldorado?"

He'd talked the branch manager's ear off, telling him what he was going to do with the savings account. Jupe swore to the guy—who couldn't have a given a rat's ass—that he wouldn't touch his new money until he turned fifteen and could apply for a driver's learning permit, and buy a car. That's right: a year from now this ADHD mess of a boy would be plowing down the same roads I drove on. Heaven help us all.

"Umm, *Super Fly*, duh. The Cadillac Eldorado is only one of the greatest cars in movie history—the original pimp-mobile." He waggled his eyebrows. "Driven by Youngblood Priest, played by Ron motherfucking O'Neal."

I didn't even bother to curtail his obscenity-rich language anymore. Getting honey out of a hornet would be easier. When I was his age, my parents would've slapped me for talking like that. Then again, my parents turned out to be evil, power-hungry serial killers, so what did they know? I mean, these were the people accused of murdering the leaders of rival occult organizations when I was seventeen. They swore they were innocent, and because I believed them, they were able to persuade me to assume a fake identity, separate from them, and hide from the FBI for seven years. When they resurfaced

a couple of months ago, Lon tried to help me prove their innocence, but we discovered that they actually *had* murdered several people and were planning to kill one more: me. They'd conceived me during some crazy sex ritual that granted me the title of Moonchild and enhanced magical abilities that lay dormant inside me until I turned twenty-five—and they wanted to steal those abilities through ritual sacrifice. But I escaped and they were spirited away by a demon into the Æthyr, where, I hope, karma bit them both in the ass.

So, yeah, compared to them, Lon was parent of the year. That's why I just stuck to the Butler house rule: no swearing around strangers. Unless Jupe was making an ass of himself in public, he could knock himself out.

"Yuck," I complained. "Didn't Boss Hog drive an Eldorado in the *Dukes of Hazzard*?"

His wince told me that I was right.

"Anyway, I seriously doubt your dad's going to go for a pimpmobile."

He clicked the release on his seat belt several times. "Then how about a 1977 Firebird Trans-Am?"

The boy was obsessed. He knew the make and model of every car produced in the last fifty years—at least the ones featured in movies or on TV.

"Oh, *hell* no," I said. "Not a Trans-Am."

"That's the Bandit's car. What's wrong with that?"

I puffed my cheeks out and made a puking noise.

"Hey, you're talking about Burt—"

"Yes, I know. Burt motherfucking Reynolds. Put your seat belt on, Snowman—we've still got two more levels to go."

He refastened the buckle. "Holy shit! I've never been this far down underground. There'd better be an elevator. This looks like the kind of place where you get stabbed and left for dead."

Ugh. Tell me about it. Parking here was the worst part of owning my bar, but it was better than leaving my car on the street. I once had my window broken and my car stereo stolen while parked in front of the bar. At least the garage had cameras and a guard on-premises 24/7.

“If I had to choose, I guess I’d go for the Eldorado,” I said, trying to distract both of us from the sight of a homeless guy sleeping in a dark corner by one of the stairwells. “But I’m kinda doubting that fifteen thou is going to buy you one.”

“My dad knows a ton of car collectors. He’ll get me a deal.”

Mmm-hmm. Sure he would. We headed down the final ramp onto the monthlies’ level. I spotted a tight corner space, not too far from the elevator.

“We’re parking here?” Jupe asked, wiping away fog to peer out the window. “Gross.”

“Welcome to glamorous big-city life.”

“I bet the Snatcher would have a field day down in this dump.”

“Who?”

“The Sandpiper Park Snatcher,” he repeated, as if I were the dumbest person in the world. When I shook my head in confusion, he explained. “Some kid went missing in La Sirena a couple of days ago. Everyone at school says the Snatcher’s back.”

I grunted and warily glanced out the window. Leave it to me to get spooked by a teenager inside my own parking garage. “Look, you said you wanted to see my bar before it opens today.”

“I do, I do!” he confirmed, throwing off his seat belt.

“Then help me haul this shit out of the car and let’s get going before the rain starts.”

I popped the trunk as Jupe slammed his door shut and jogged around to meet me. The restaurant supply guy had screwed up our delivery yesterday, so that meant I had to take care of this weekend's garnish supplies by tracking down mondo sacks of lemons, limes, oranges, and pineapples. Jupe and I made a quick trip to the wholesaler's warehouse before the whole savings account fiasco earlier in the day. Along with the fruit, I let him pick out Halloween candy both for home and the bar, so we also had enough Tootsie Rolls, Pixy Stix, and severed gummy body parts to feed an army of demons.

While we unloaded the trunk, Jupe started in again about the Snatcher. In the oceanside Northern California town where he and Lon lived, this was apparently a local urban legend: a bogeyman whom no one had ever seen. When I pressed Jupe for details, all he could give me was a tangle of motley stories about young teenage Earthbounds who were picked off one by one at Halloween in the early '80s.

Great. That was the last thing I wanted to think about. Several weeks had passed since Jupe had been held hostage and his arm broken, but those memories continued to send a familiar pang of guilt through my gut. And from the worry shading his eyes right now, I guessed he wasn't all that keen on pondering the possibility of getting kidnapped again, either. Best not to talk about it.

"Smells like someone's been pissing all over the walls," Jupe complained, wrinkling his nose in disgust as we toted the bags of fruit and candy to the elevator.

"Someone probably has. Lots of someones." I glanced over my shoulder and scanned the dirty garage. The concrete floor shook with the dull boom of a car on the level above us driving over speed bumps. Otherwise it was quiet. Usually

was during the daytime on weekends. “Inhale through your mouth,” I suggested. “And stay sharp.”

He followed my instruction as I stopped in front of the elevator and used a knuckle to press the cracked plastic button to go up. I started to ask Jupe a question but was interrupted when something hit me in the shoulder, knocking me sideways. My cheek smacked into the concrete above the elevator button panel. Pain flared. A bag of limes fell out of my hand as Jupe yelled behind me.

“Against the wall! Move!” A man in a bright blue hoodie towered in front of us, his face shrouded in sharp slices of shadow under the dim garage lights. No halo, so he was human, not Earthbound. His blond hair was shaggily cropped. He carried a curved hunting knife in one hand and stood with his legs apart, bouncing on the toes of his tennis shoes, ready for a fight.

I dropped the other bag I was holding and backed into Jupe. The scrape on my cheek was on fire. My heart galloped frantically inside my chest.

“Money. Now!” the man shouted. As he did, his head shifted out of the shadows to reveal a mouthful of yellow, rotting teeth. Meth head, I assumed, pairing his dental issues with the twitchy way he moved. Not exactly a man in his prime, that’s for sure. On one hand, I might be able to take him down with a swift kick to his balls. Then again, I might get stuck with that dirty-ass knife.

“Credit cardth too,” the man added with a lisp, looking me over with nervous eyes. He turned the knife over in his hand and blinked rapidly. His erratic, drug-primed pulse was probably a few pumps away from causing his heart to explode. I wished I could will it along a little faster.

Jupe made a mewling noise behind me as his hands

gripped the back of my jacket. I thought of the magical seals on my inner forearm, white ink tattoos etched into my skin. I could charge one of them to make Jupe and me seem to disappear, then we could run to the car and escape. But most of the seals require blood or saliva to activate—both rich with Heka, the magical energy needed to power spells—and my jacket sleeves were stiff. The meth addict could easily shiv me in the gut while I fumbled to get to the seals.

What else? Not enough time to break out a hunk of red ochre chalk and scribble out a spell, and I couldn't very well knock the guy out with a sack of limes. There was my new ability, the so-called Moonchild power. The last time I'd used it, I'd given up my serial-killer parents to an ancient Æthyric demon in payment for their crimes. Not exactly something I wanted to dwell on . . . or remember at all, frankly. Regardless, the ability only worked on demons, and the man standing in front of us was human. So what the hell was I going to do?

"You got a wallet, boy?" the mugger asked.

"No way," Jupe whispered in my ear. "I'm not giving him my money."

"What did you say? You got money?" The man twisted his head around, scanning the garage as another car drove through the level above us.

I didn't answer. Like Jupe said, no way.

"I don't mind hurtin' either one of you," the man warned. "Eat or be eaten. A big, bad thtorm's a-comin'. Can't you feel it in the air?"

From the psychotic glint in his eyes, I didn't think he was talking about the afternoon rain forecast. Stupid bastard was out of his ever-loving mind. Dirty, diseased, high, and crazy.

A fluorescent light shone above the elevator. I was going to have to shock him. Why was my last resort always my only

option? Best not to kick a gift horse in the mouth, I supposed. Most mages would probably give their right arm to be able to kindle Heka like I could. My sensitivity threshold to electrical shock was pretty high. “Stay away,” I threatened, “or whatever god you pray to better help you, because I’m going to fry you to hell and back.”

“Say what?” He narrowed his eyes and visually searched me for a weapon.

I tapped into the electrical current. My skin tingled with the familiar flow of foreign energy as I spooled electricity into myself. No time to be gentle about it, so I pulled fast. Lights flickered. The descending elevator groaned in protest. Within a couple of seconds, my body hummed with enough charged Heka to shock the guy pretty badly. But I’d have to get close enough to touch him. The concrete floor was a poor conductor.

“Let go,” I growled through gritted teeth, trying to shake Jupe off. He was gripping my jacket like death and if he didn’t let go, I couldn’t do this. Without a caduceus staff to even out the release, it was going to hurt all of us when I let go of the kindled Heka.

The garage elevator dinged.

The mugger yelped and swiveled wildly, searching for the source of the sound.

The elevator doors parted.

“Police are coming! Run!” Jupe shouted near my ear. I jumped in surprise, nearly losing control of the Heka.

Spooked, the mugger cried out incoherently, turned on his heels, and fled from Jupe’s nonexistent police in the empty elevator car. We watched in disbelief as he raced his own heartbeat up the parking garage ramp toward the next level. As he barreled around the corner, a large blue minivan

sped down the ramp and slammed on squealing brakes when Methbrain ran out in front of it. The disconcerting thump of metal on flesh echoed through the garage. Then the man's body jerked and he crumpled on top of the minivan's hood.

Jupe gasped.

The doors to the elevator closed.

Unable to hold the Heka any longer, I shoved a shaking hand into my inner jacket pocket until my fingers wrapped around a pencil. I pushed Jupe away forcefully, then thrust the pencil into the concrete wall, releasing a substantial volt of charged Heka through the small graphite point. The wooden caduceus staves I normally used for magical work contained fat graphite cores that allow smooth releases of kindled energy. This puny pencil? Not so much. It immediately overloaded and shattered, wedging a yellow wooden splinter into my skin.

"Shit!" I stuck my injured finger in my mouth as a wave of post-magick nausea hit me and I swayed on my feet. The sound of car doors opening drew my attention to the minivan. Three people were running to help the meth head—but he popped up from the hood like an unkillable video game character, briefly shook himself, and tore off, further up the ramp and out of sight.

Jupe's eyes were two brilliant circles of leafy green surrounded by white moons. "You okay?" I asked, putting my hands all over him like an overanxious soccer mom. Panicked thoughts of his needing another cast ran through my head.

"Whoa . . ." He was just shaken, but otherwise fine. His eyes darted between me and the minivan. "We almost got mugged."

"Oh, God, Jupe. I'm so sorry." I wrapped my arms around him. A dark laugh vibrated his shoulders. I released him to study his face. He wasn't smiling.

“Do you believe me now?” he said. “I did that, Cady. Like I convinced the manager at the credit union.”

“Jupe—”

He shook his head, dismissing my lack of belief, then said firmly, “I just made that mugger believe the cops were coming.”

