

Control+ALT+Delete

Chapter One



A heavy mist still hugged the ground and shifted around the artificial tombstones and mausoleum staged in the side yard of the Stevens' home. Hours quickly passed since the last of the guests departed from the block-party style fundraising festival Colby and his club organized. Beyond the rows of houses and trees that obscured the view of Lake Shore Drive, the barely audible motors of few passing vehicles was the only noise breaking the stillness of the early morning darkness.

A strained squeak followed by a hushed click echoed around the yard. The noise was soon followed by a muffled padding in the grass. The mists began to swirl as the fur covered question mark cut through it, forcing the ground clinging fog to separate before folding back in its wake. Two glowing yellow eyes caught the moon's light as it floated down past its midpoint of travel across the star-filled sky.

The Russian blue cat leaped up to perch atop one to the tombstones and moaned deeply before releasing a single abrupt yowling call. He waited.

Minutes passed in silence, the only noise a slight buzz followed by a

muted pop as Fizzlewink transformed into his blue-skinned small statured self. He twirled his favored eyebrow in time with his eyes that darted around, scanning the darkness.

“I have wondered how long it would be until I heard from you,” a voice called as his shadowy outline stood out against the rising fog behind him.

Fizzlewink jumped at the sudden voice. He was surprised because he did not sense the man’s approach.

A chuckle escaped the man’s mouth. “You are slipping old friend.”

Gathering himself in a feeble attempt to compose his dignity, Fizzlewink shifted around but remained seated. “We have never been friends.”

“Regardless of our working relationship, you have failed to contact us as expected. Why now?”

“I have been rather occupied with the boy.”

The man was not convinced. “I can see that. He has progressed dangerously fast.”

Fizzlewink sat up defensively. “That is not my doing. He is more powerful than we calculated.”

“A turbulent child with a temper is dangerous with a weapon of magic. You will teach him to control his emotions or he will be dealt with by others.” The dark tone of the man’s voice left little to interpret.

“He will be controlled and malleable as promised.” Fizzlewink jumped down from his perch and started to walk away. His steps halted at the sound of the man clearing his throat. “Was there something more?”

“Are you certain you have the stomach for this Fizzlewink? You were quite vocal in your protests when the child was discovered.”

“There are other variables at play that we did not account for,” Fizzlewink protested. “There are Shizumu out of bounds and congregating everywhere in the area.” Fizzlewink heard no response from the man, which meant he already knew. “Then there is the arrival of the Dreggs.”

That got the man’s attention. Fizzlewink, though he couldn’t make out the features of the man from the way his shadow stiffened, could tell this was news to his late night visitor.

“When?”

“They were here last night,” Fizzlewink paused as he watch the man’s obscured head dart around, looking for signs of the beasts. “This was the third or fourth time they showed themselves to the boy.”

“The boy has been working with them?”

“Heavens no, but they are drawn to him like a moth to the flame for some reason. And lucky since there was a seeker here tonight and it wasn’t normal.”

The man said nothing for several moments. When he did speak, there was a tightening to his tone and a hastening in his words. “You have a job to do, that hasn’t changed. I will inform the others and they will deal with the Dreggs and discuss the seeker.”

Fizzlewink stood, blinking. “I will do as I agreed.”

“Then you are prepared to prove your worth?” the man asked.

Fizzlewink did not speak but nodded slowly.

“You will retrieve something for me. A small token to prove you will do as you are told.”

Fizzlewink noticed the man said ‘me’ and not us. He wasn’t sure what it meant but filed it away for later consideration.

“What would you ask of me beyond what part I have already conceded to play?” Fizzlewink attempted to conceal the worry, but his voice betrayed the sinking of his emotions.

“I have come to know that a certain object, a watch, has come into the boy’s possession. Something once belonging to that traitor Jarrod.” The man paused but only long enough to see the understanding in Fizzlewink’s eyes. “Good, I see you know what I’m referring to. You will go and fetch it for me. Now.”

Fizzlewink didn’t like being in this situation, but he had little recourse. “Wait here.”

He didn’t bother changing form as he sullenly walked around the back of the house, shoulders sagging and head down. As quietly as he exited earlier he doubled his efforts at silencing his actions this time. Fizzlewink entered the house and with slow, stealthy, deliberate steps, making his way through the first floor to the stairs. He paused only long enough to make certain he hadn’t disturbed the old witch sitting in the living room chair.

Nana sat with her head back and mouth wide open, taking in deep nasal breaths and exhaling with a vibrating rattle that would rival a buzzsaw.

Fizzlewink shook his head and proceeded to ascend the stairs, careful to avoid those that creaked. Once at the top of the first flight, he picked up his pace at the sound of a low howl outside. He took that to be a signal to hurry along.

The second door on the right, slightly ajar, was his destination. As he crept along and stayed in the shadow along the wall, Fizzlewink slinked into the room and scanned around for the watch. Colby had not been wearing it lately, but it wouldn’t be far from him.

As he suspected, Fizzlewink spied the watch on the nightstand beside a radio alarm clock. In a silent burst of movement, Fizzlewink shifted position to stand before the watch, hand poised to snatch it up, but he hesitated. Another howl in the yard raised the hairs on his neck.

With a wave of his hand and a mumbled word, Fizzlewink dashed off and exited the room, shoving his hand in his front pocket. In his haste, he failed to notice the door just before the stairs open and a robed figure step out into his escape route.

“What are you doing, lurking around at nearly three in the morning?” Aria asked while yawning and rubbing her eyes.

“Off to see a man about a mouse,” Fizzlewink said as he rushed past her and bound down the stairs.

“Don’t mess in my garden!” Aria hissed. “Why can’t he use a toilet like any normal person?”

Fizzlewink heard her but chose to ignore the comment. He had to get outside before his visitor made any more noise to draw attention.

Once outside, Fizzlewink found the man where he left him, only his hand escaped the shadow of the tree he stood beside.

“Excellent,” the man said as Fizzlewink slowly handed over the prize. “We’ve searched for this a very long time.”

“It’s just an old watch,” Fizzlewink said though he suspected differently. His eyes never left the timepiece as the man fondled and rotated it in his hand.

The man placed the watch in his pocket. “We’ll be in touch.” The man turned and disappeared into the darkness leaving Fizzlewink alone and glaring.

Once he felt it safe, Fizzlewink let out a long held breath and smiled.

He turned to head back to the house when he heard the muffled scream and sounds of struggle. He dashed below the closest bush as he transformed back into his cat façade.

The moments dragged on as he peered into the darkness and sniffed the air. There was no more noise, not even the buzz of cars on the drive nearby could be heard. Fizzlewink cautiously eased out from under the bushes when a rough hand took hold of the back of his neck and lifted him off the ground, dispelling his guise.

Feet dangling far from the ground, Fizzlewink felt the hot and foul breath of his assailant. The stench was unmistakable and only one thing could catch him by surprise when being right on top of him. He opened his eyes to stare directly into the cold, and depthless glare of the Dregg that Colby called Conrad.

“What have you done little man?” Conrad asked. He lifted his other hand to dangle the watch by its band as he held it between his fingers.

Before Fizzlewink could answer, steam began to rise from the place where Conrad held the watch. The face of the timepiece began to glow. As the intensity grew, both the Dregg and Shizumu tried to keep watching the item against the protest of their own eyes wanting nothing more than to retreat behind tightly closed lids.

In a flash, the watch was gone.

“That was unexpected,” was all Fizzlewink could think to say.

“I think it past time we took a more active interest,” Conrad said. “You will tell me what is happening.”

Fizzlewink wiggled to get free, but it was no use. His skin burned where the Dregg held him. “I will tell you nothing.”

The Dregg laughed, a deep and a low rumble. “You forget what the Dreggs were created to accomplish and what we can do. We shall see who has the cat’s tongue before we are satisfied.”

Conrad shoved Fizzlewink into a sack he pulled from his shoulder. Cinching it closed, he swung the sack around to his back then added a satisfied grin to his hard-featured face when he heard the grunt from inside the bag.

Colby woke suddenly and with a jerking start as he felt a pull on him. Not a physical pull, but one that reached into his being and yanked slight and quick as though plucking a stray hair. As his eyes opened, he thought he saw a flash or reflection, but couldn't find the source once his eyes adjusted to the light pouring in from the moon through the window.

He looked at the clock on his bedside table. Seeing it was not yet four in the morning, he grumbled but smiled slightly when he caught a glimpse of his father's watch next to the clock. The watch's crystal face reflected the blue-green light of the digital display of his alarm clock.

He fluffed his pillow and nestled back under the covers before closing his eyes and drifted back to sleep. He had a full few weeks at school ahead planning for Mexico and he needed his rest. Soon it would be Thanksgiving break which was the start of several holidays that ushered in winter, the last season before the upcoming spring trip.