

## CHAPTER TWO

*...in which we are introduced to Le O'Capri and hear another alarming news, while Luna and Astro go to meet a gremlin*

**M**y friends, I have the first assignment for you!"

As soon as Novus Wizword uttered the words, someone knocked on the door.

"Who else could that be?" the Headmaster exclaimed in a small voice. Then he turned to the door and added, louder this time, "Come in!"

The door opened immediately and Le O'Capri the leopard jumped into the room. Le bowed graciously and froze in his pose. O'Capri was from an ancient family of Italian knights (hence such an unusual name) and had the reputation of being the most courteous creature in the entire Academy.



"O'Capri, speak up, don't keep us in suspense. What news have you brought us?" Wizword inquired anxiously.

"Thank you, my lord," O'Capri said, still bowing. "My lord, the news is anything but good. I'd rather say it's alarming. A student of the Magic Speech house has disappeared a few hours ago. He is neither in his room, nor in the study nest. We have also checked neighboring branch-houses, but he isn't there either."

"Is it possible that he has violated the charter of the Academy and left the borders of the Magic Tree?" Novus asked.

"No, my lord. Our guards wouldn't fail to notice it. But no one saw him leaving."

"What if he is just hiding?" Luna asked shyly. "Maybe he was playing hide-and-seek and doesn't know that the game is over."

"Oh no, miss Luna. Let me note that nothing like that ever happens to children. Children always know when the game is over. If we were talking about an adult, I could presume he was able to go on playing alone. But children never do things like that. This is something else."

"Well, my friends, I have the second assignment for you," Novus told Luna and Astro.

"Oh, my! We have just become assistants of the Academy's Headmaster and we already have as many as two assignments!" Astro exclaimed excitedly.

"Yes! We are actual assistants to Novus Wizword! It's been my aspiration for four years!" Luna exclaimed in turn.

"Please note," Dorothea Nightwing said suddenly, "that you haven't been given any assignments yet."

"Fair enough, Dorothea!" Novus Wizword agreed. "I still haven't said anything about the first assignment. Apparently, I'm getting old and start forgetting things."

"You are seven hundred and eighty-five years old," the owl informed.

"Am I statistically old?" Novus asked.

"Hardly, considering average indicators," the owl responded at once. "Usually, dragons live about one thousand five hundred years. So, you are in your prime now."

Astro turned to Luna and whispered in her ear:

"What a nuisance this Dorothea Nightwing is."

Luna only nodded to show her complete acquiescence.

"Dorothea, you are a storehouse of useful knowledge," Novus concluded distractedly. "But what was I talking about..." He lost the train of thought again.

"You were about to announce their assignments," the owl noted, without responding to the Headmaster's praise.

"Oh, yes. The assignments. So, my friends, your first assignment is to lure the

gremlin into the guestroom, and the second is to find the lost student."

"Gremlin? Have you said 'gremlin', my lord? Or have I misheard you?" Le O'Capri inquired in bewilderment.

"Yes, a gremlin was seen on Academy's grounds," Dorothea explained instead of the Headmaster.

"How? Isn't it impossible?" Le O'Capri asked perplexedly.

"We were discussing it just before you came in," Wizword explained. "No one knows for sure yet."

"Then let me catch him and send him to prison, my lord. I think, we can't endanger this gentleman, Astro, and miss Luna. Entrust this matter to me—for I would risk my life for the Academy. I would fight like a lion."

"Like a leopard," Dorothea corrected.

"Yes, sure, that's what I meant," O'Capri seemed embarrassed.

"No, my friend," Wizword said, "you seem to know nothing about gremlins."

"Little, my lord. I know, however, that they are prohibited to enter the territory of the Academy. That's why I thought them to be large, threatening and very dangerous."

"No, not at all. Firstly, gremlins are no bigger than a child. Secondly, they are definitely not the most beautiful creatures, but believe me, trolls and space slimers from planet Nibiru are much uglier. Thirdly, gremlins are only dangerous because they are terribly ignorant, ill-mannered, and absolutely unable to conceive beauty. They are only interested in food, sleep, nose-picking, and other kinds of primitive entertainments. They break all machinery as they can't understand how it works. They are afraid of everything new. That's why gremlins can't be taught."

"The more so, my lord, let me catch and isolate this gremlin. He might be a bad influence on our students because of his behavior."

"You see, my friend, gremlins are quite skittish. One roar of yours is enough for a gremlin to hide so well that it would take us a few days to find him. Astro and Luna are a different story. Despite all their flaws, gremlins are quite playful. That's why we need the help of my young assistants. They can engage the gremlin in a game and lure him to the guestroom. There, we will detain him until we find out how he has wriggled his way into the Academy. And, most importantly—why."

"As you wish, my lord," O'Capri said and bowed.

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Half an hour later, Luna and Astro entered the Academy library. Rows of desks were immersed in twilight: looking for the last traces of the gremlin, the friends didn't notice that the sun went down. Large windows shed waning light on the reading room. The area with the book racks was completely dark. Shelves as tall as a three-story house were packed with ancient manuscripts, large volumes, and small matchbox-sized books. Darkness hid these treasures of knowledge, collected over centuries by generations of archivists and librarians from curious glances. While Luna and Astro were taking in the astonishing view of those "bookscrapers" disappearing in the darkness, something rustled in the hall. An ugly shadow slid across the wall. Luna and Astro exchanged glances. The hair on their tails stood in anticipation of danger. Soon something rustled again. Then the source of the sound appeared on one of the desks in the reading room. And it wasn't something, but someone! The dark abomination was holding a book in its hand, or maybe it was a paw. Luna and Astro shivered involuntarily and shuffled closer to each other. There was a real gremlin in front of them!

