

Hexed

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In a world where how magically educated you are is everything, nothing's better than graduating from Academy Hex. For two student teams, there's only one test left to achieve that. The problem is, that test is surviving in the human world!

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1 - Overslept

Chapter 1: Overslept

“Oi, lazy, you’re gonna be late.”

Darkon scowled in annoyance at the drawled comment. He pointedly ignored the speaker and shifted slightly in his hammock to get more comfortable, never opening his eyes.

“Oh well . . .” the same voice said. “I guess you really don’t want to graduate. That’s ok. I’m sure Ferran’s team will be happy to move into the corps. Have fun making weapons you never get to use from now on.”

That got Darkon’s attention. He jolted upright – and promptly lost his balance. His hammock dumped him on the hard wood floor and he groaned.

A cackle sounded above his head. He glared up at the source.

“Zip it, Pong,” he growled, pushing himself to his feet and rubbing his head where he could feel a goose egg growing.

Pong ignored him and continued his loud cackle, bouncing up and down in the air. Darkon swatted at the fairy but he easily dodged.

“I’m the least of your worries, Darkie,” Pong said, grinning evilly. “Just look at the time.”

Filled with dread, Darkon glanced up at the clock on his wall. He about died on the spot.

Pong held up a gloved hand, fingers spread wide. “You have to be in the White Hall in five minutes, think you can make it?”

Darkon snarled and jumped forward, missing Pong by a hair. Ignoring the fairy for a moment, he threw open his closet door and searched through the pile of clothes frantically. He finally found his black Team Leader robe and jerked it on. Then he darted to the other side of the room and threw open his window.

“Oi! You need shoes stupid!” Pong called.

“Don’t care,” Darkon said.

He leaned back into his small room and, before Pong could escape, grabbed the small fairy by the wings.

“OUCH!” Pong protested, swatting futilely at his master’s hand.

Darkon smirked. “Nice try.”

Pong harrumphed at him – not that it did any good. “It’s your fault you’re late. None of the other students need ten hours of sleep a – AH! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!”

Darkon had just taken a running start and leapt out the window.

“NEED I REMIND YOU IT’S TWENTY STORIES DOWN?!?” Pong shrieked, clutching his master’s hand so he wasn’t torn away by the wind.

Darkon ignored him and pulled a small, circular container out of his pocket. He held it between his pinkie and thumb and ripped the cover off with his teeth. Inside was a golden cream-like mixture. Pong saw it and his expression turned horrified.

“Oh no you don’t!” he shouted, now squirming to get away. “DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!”

Darkon dipped his pointer finger in the cream and in a flash had used it to draw two golden lines onto Pong’s vest, slanting up from his chest to the edges of his shoulders. With a smirk he added one final line, right down the middle of the two first lines.

Immediately, Pong was engulfed in a golden glow and Darkon released him. The fairy disappeared from his sight in a flash.

Unfortunately, with the distraction gone, Darkon found himself looking at the ground for the first time – and it was growing closer by the second. For a moment he wondered if he maybe should have taken the stairs after all.

Then a figure swooped underneath him and he smirked. Who needed stairs?

He wrapped his arms around the figure’s neck and held on tight. Powerful black wings beat on either side of him and suddenly he was moving forward instead of falling.

“Welcome back, Pong,” he said with a smug smile.

“Shut up,” the fairy snapped. “I should have just let you fall. Did you think to ask me if I wanted to grow fifty times my normal size?! I refuse to save you next time you jump out a window, idiot!”

“I’ll remember that,” Darkon replied.

Of course, he didn’t plan on jumping out any more windows . . . unless it was an emergency. He grinned.

“How long does the hex sign last?” Pong asked, flapping harder to get more altitude so they could clear the town rooftops.

“About seven minutes.”

“You are so lucky I’m here. I think you should forfeit your graduation anyway.”

“Not a chance, the team’s counting on me.”

“Then none of you are graduating anyway,” Pong mumbled.

Before Darkon could reply, Pong spilled air from his wings and headed into a dive towards the courtyard of the White Hall.

2 - Waiting

Chapter 2: Waiting

“Where’s that idiot you call a leader, Korinne?”

Korinne stiffened at Ferran’s voice. She kept her back to him and continued washing her hands under one of the faucets in the White Hall’s courtyard.

“Coming,” she said shortly.

Something darted towards her face and she jerked her head back, gasping in surprise. Ferran’s fairy, Cobalt, cocked his head sideways at her, so close his chest was almost touching her nose. His tongue lolled out of his mouth as he grinned lazily at her. She snarled at him and raised a hand to smack him, just barely catching herself in time.

“Too bad there’s that rule that if you injure an opposing team member on the White grounds you automatically forfeit,” Ferran said smoothly. “Well, too bad for you, since Cobalt counts as part of my team.”

She flicked her fingers at the fairy instead, sending water droplets flying in his direction. He rolled out of the way and she reached for a towel, drying her hands quickly and turning to leave the courtyard.

“Not so fast,” Ferran said, blocking her exit. He was a good head taller than her and it made her uncomfortable to have him staring down at her like that. “Tell me, do you really think Darkie’s gonna show?”

“Of course,” she answered tightly. “And I ask you to kindly refer to our team leader with the proper respect.”

Cobalt snickered, diving in to sit on Ferran’s shoulder. He folded his dark blue wings against his back.

“Love how formal ya’re, darlin’,” he said, grinning at her. “Bet’cha do Darkie proud.”

“She does us all proud,” said a new voice behind Ferran. “And you’re in her way.”

Ferran turned to raise an eyebrow at the newcomer. Korinne smiled in relief at him.

“Good to see you Hex,” she said.

He grinned and saluted her with two fingers. “You too, Kory.”

Cobalt darted up in Hex's face as he had to Korinne but Hex just blinked at him.

"Need something?" he asked politely.

Cobalt rolled sideways in the air, looking disappointed. Just as Hex and Korinne weren't allowed to touch him, he wasn't allowed to touch them either.

Ferran sighed dramatically. "Seeing as how it's two against one, I suppose I'd better withdraw."

"I thought you said Cobalt counted as a team member," Korinne muttered.

Ferran looked at her and said breezily. "Yes, well, very soon that will be "Corps Member" seeing as how you seem to be missing a team leader."

Cobalt snickered and returned to his perch on Ferran's shoulder. Korinne and Hex remained silent.

"At least you both have one more try after Darkie blows this one," he continued, smiling like this was fantastic news he was breaking. "Darkie on the other hand though . . . poor guy, after today he's gonna be back in his family's weapon shop. What a future."

"This coming from someone who's already failed his first graduation exam as well," Hex noted cheerfully.

Ferran's smile turned thin. "True, but of the two of us, I will be the one not pining for a redo of that first test."

He turned and ducked through the curtain that lead to the interior of the White Hall, leaving Hex and Korinne standing alone in the courtyard.

"How long do we have before the evaluation begins?" Korinne asked.

"Couple minutes," Hex replied. "That's why I came to get you."

Korinne sighed and looked toward the entrance to the courtyard, hoping to see a figure in a black robe appear any moment. "Do you think he will really make it?"

Hex slung an arm around her shoulders, steering her towards the entrance to the hall.

"Positive," he said.

"How are you so sure?" she asked, not wanting to doubt Darkon but unable to help it. "He does not exactly have a clean track record for tardiness."

"Because I – whoa hold on!" Hex said, interrupting himself and coming to a stop next to the trunk of one of the courtyard apple trees. He tilted his head back, staring up into the top branches. A grin lit his face a moment later. "HA! Apples are finally ripe!"

She sighed. "Hex, you know you can not reach them."

"Says who?" He pulled a small bottle out of his pocket and uncorked it. Dipping his little finger in the dark ink he let some of it drip back into the bottle and then drew a symbol on the bark of the tree.

Korinne stared at the symbol, wondering if Hex was crazy. "Hex . . . that is a tremor symbol. You will not get just one apple; you are going to get the whole tree!"

"Says who?" he asked again with a smile. He replaced the cork and slipped the bottle into his pocket, then turned his back on the trunk and faced her, holding an arm straight out with his palm upturned.

Before she could say anything else, the tree shook in her vision and she jumped back, arms over her head to protect herself from falling apples.

But there was only one, and it fell right into Hex's open palm. Korinne stared at him. He just grinned and took a bite out of the dark red fruit.

"Delicious," he said, smacking his lips.

She couldn't help but giggle.

"I always forget the level of control you have," she said, shaking her head with a smile.

"People don't call me Hex for nothing," he said, offering her a bite of his apple. She respectfully declined and followed him inside, not realizing that he never answered her earlier question about Darkon.

3 - Ready

Chapter 3: Ready

“It’s time, Sir,” said a voice from the door.

Carmos nodded at his servant. “Get the teams assembled – leaders at the front.”

“Um . . . Sir” the servant said hesitantly.

Carmos nodded for him to continue.

He cleared his throat and finished somewhat sheepishly, “Team Leader One isn’t here, Sir.”

“Darkon Andros” Carmos murmured. He fingered one of the files laid out on the table before him. Darkon did not have a good record for timeliness. “Well, I won’t be ready for another few minutes. He and his team will only be disqualified if I don’t see him when I greet the students.”

The servant smiled and bowed respectfully before exiting the room.

Carmos looked down at the file his hand rested on. The inside cover had Darkon’s name written on it in brush calligraphy – the penmanship an untidy scrawl that showed frustration and awkwardness in the writer. Carmos smiled; he believed the writer had been a seven-year old boy, new to the academy and insistent that he write his own name in the “professional” script instead of the simple print the other students used.

With a sigh, Carmos closed the file of academic and physical progress. This was Darkon’s last opportunity to graduate – students were only allowed the chance twice – and Carmos hoped that being a team leader this time around might prove the difference the teen needed to succeed. It would be a shame to lose a student with that much promise.

In fact, now that he thought about it, it was going to be a shame this year no matter which team won. Darkon’s and Ferran’s teams both consisted of some of the finest students he’d ever taught. It was unfortunate that they were all in the same level.

He gathered up all the student files into a straight pile and pulled open one of the drawers in his desk. The inside was packed with containers and bottles of various sizes – none bigger than three inches. He selected one and twisted off the cap. He dipped a calligraphy brush into the clear ink and painted three symbols down the front of the first folder on the stack. The ink disappeared immediately and the area around the folders shimmered. Carmos nodded, satisfied with his work. It was a complex hex he used to ensure no one else had access to confidential records.

After replacing the ink and brush in his drawer he crossed the room and picked up a small chest. Tucking it under his arm, he strode out of the room to the hall where his students were waiting.

Pong was a great diver and they shot towards the ground like an arrow. However, Darkon wasn't sure this was a good thing as the wind grabbed at him, trying to tear him off the fairy's back.

"Move your arms in more," Pong grunted, "you're trapping the top of my wings!"

Darkon sheepishly complied, allowing Pong to extend his wings again. He did it too quickly though. They lurched as he caught air and the fairy wind-milled his arms, caught by surprise.

Unfortunately, Darkon had loosened his grip when Pong had stopped the dive and now the sudden movement dislodged his arms. With a startled cry he fell backwards through the air.

Pong twisted, turning to come after him, but before he could do anything Darkon hit the top branches of a tree. Small branches scratched his bare legs and snapped under his weight. Leaves confused his vision and he reached out blindly, trying to grab something to stop his fall. Then one of the sturdy branches slammed into his upper back, across his shoulder blades. He gasped in pain.

"Darkon!" he heard Pong shout.

Darkon managed to catch a branch and look down at the ground. He couldn't tell how far down it was. He dropped to one more branch and then allowed himself to fall the rest of the way. He landed smoothly and dropped to his hands and knees so his ankles wouldn't take too much weight. His shoulders and back ached fiercely and he grimaced.

"Oi! You okay?!" Pong demanded, landing next to him. His figure flickered slightly, indicating the hex was wearing off.

"Peachy," Darkon grunted, feeling his back where he had been hit. Nothing permanent. That was good.

He jumped to his feet and raced towards the curtain leading from the courtyard to the inner hall.

"WHAT THE HECK?!"

"Come on Pong!"

He darted into the hall, stumbling a few times due to the bandages he wore in place of socks slipping on the smooth tile. Perhaps shoes would have been a good idea after all. But it was too late for that now.

The teams were gathered at the front of the room and Master Carmos was just entering. Darkon cursed his luck. He put on a final burst of speed anyway and jerked to a stop next to Ferran. The second team leader snickered at him, no doubt positive that he would be disqualified. Darkon crossed his fingers inside the long sleeves of his robe, hoping Carmos was in a forgiving mood.

The Academy Master came to a stop before them and smiled.

“Good to see you on time for once, Darkon,” Carmos said. “Although I must say, you’re a mess.”

Darkon grinned in relief and straightened his robe.

Ferran’s jaw dropped visibly. “But Master Carmos, he was late!”

Carmos raised an eyebrow.

“Was he?” he said. “When I looked around he was standing right here where he should be.”

Ferran floundered for something to say while Darkon’s grin turned smug.

“Although . . .” Carmos said thoughtfully, looking around. “There does seem to be a member of your team missing.”

Darkon turned to look at his team in surprise. Korinne was standing just behind him, on her right stood Hex, and on her left was Jair – the only person who looked like he knew what was going on. Darkon raised an eyebrow at him and Jair silently pointed at his shoulder.

“Oh, are you all looking for me?” a once-again-normal-sized Pong asked suddenly, popping up from underneath the neck of Darkon’s robe.

Darkon had to force himself not to yelp, but he couldn’t help jumping. “When did you get there?!”

“You’re so unobservant!” Pong chuckled, hopping off his shoulder so he was hovering in the air. He faced Carmos and bowed respectfully. “Pong: Team One Member One ready for assignment, Master.”

Carmos smiled at him and turned to face Ferran. “Is Team Two Member One present?”

As Ferran nodded, Pong leaned in next to Darkon’s ear and quickly hissed. “I was making sure you didn’t get injured from that impact earlier, idiot!”

Darkon smiled at his concern but didn’t reply as another fairy flew forward and bowed to Master Carmos.

“Cobalt: Team Two Member One ready for assignment, Master,” the fairy said.

Darkon studied him interestedly. Fairies always stayed very close to their masters so this was only the second time he had seen Cobalt up close.

The fairy was dressed entirely in blue and Darkon smiled at the play on his name. Even if he served Ferran at least he had a sense of humor. He had his wild blonde hair tied back loosely with a cord and there was a bored look in his dark eyes. His shirt looked as if it had once been long-sleeved but had been hacked off at his shoulders. Loose pants hung half-way down his calves and he was barefooted like Pong.

Cobalt must have felt his gaze because he turned to meet his eyes. Darkon waited for him to say something but he didn't.

Carmos broke the silence instead by saying, "Okay, remaining team members, count off if you're ready."

"Hex: Team One Member Two ready for assignment, Master," Hex said, starting it off.

"Laster: Team Two Member Two ready for assignment, Master."

"Jair: Team One Member Three ready for assignment, Master."

"Alos: Team Two Member Three ready for assignment, Master."

"Korinne: Team One Member Four ready for assignment, Master."

"Shina: Team Two Member Four ready for assignment, Master."

Carmos nodded. "Team Leaders, your teams are ready for assignment. What is your say?"

"Darkon Andros: Team Leader One, as my team is ready for assignment, so am I," Darkon said immediately.

"Ferran Conner: Team Leader Two, as my team is ready for assignment, so am I," Ferran said.

Carmos smiled. "Teams, your assignment is number five: The Human World."

4 - Start

Chapter 4: Start

Ferran stared at Carmos in shock. He was vaguely aware of his rival Darkon doing the same.

The Human World was known as the hardest graduation test that could be assigned to the senior class. It was the most restricting of the five possibilities.

“The old bat wants ta’ make this hard,” Cobalt hissed in his ear. The fairy was once again resting on his shoulder. His feathered wings tickled Ferran’s neck as he flared them angrily. “E’s trying ta’ make sure ya’ don’t graduate.”

Ferran stayed silent – Carmos would have heard him if he responded. But he couldn’t help feeling Cobalt was right. The Human World hadn’t been assigned to anyone in years. Why now?

Darkon recovered before Ferran did – much to Ferran’s hatred – and cleared his throat.

“What are the requirements for this assignment, Master?”

Carmos nodded approvingly at the Team One leader, causing Ferran to curl his lip as his anger flared even more.

“The first requirement,” Carmos said, pulling out the box he’d had tucked under his arm until now and opening it, “is that you must turn over all your solutions to me now.”

Ferran’s eyes widened in horror. Without his solutions, he would be totally unable to perform hexes – that was the whole point of Academy Hex! If they were unable to use what they’d learned in the assignment, how would they prove who was worthy to graduate?!

Ferran wasn’t the only one hesitating; both teams were nailed in place. Everyone would feel defenseless without the creams, inks, and various other solutions used to write hexes.

“Now,” Carmos repeated firmly. “Or no one will be graduating this year.”

Still, Ferran hesitated. He couldn’t help it.

Amazingly, it was the goof from Darkon’s team who shared a name with what he was giving up that made the first move. Hex stepped around his team leader and smiled at Carmos. He untied a pouch from his thigh and one more from his belt and emptied the various containers of solutions he had in them into the box. Then he pulled a few more containers from his pockets and dropped them in. Last of all, he

laid his field set of brushes into the chest and stepped back, bowing to the Academy Master.

“Well done,” Carmos said warmly. He gave a hard look to the rest of the students. “The rest of you had better follow his example.”

Ferran growled deep in his throat, he was being measured up to Darkon once again. Just because it was a different face and name didn’t make any difference – the guy was still on his rival’s team.

Ferran was the next to step up. He made sure his expression was blank as he dumped all of his solutions into the chest with Hex’s. His field brush set was last as well and as soon as he bowed and stepped back, he felt naked. This is why The Human World is the worst assignment, he thought.

Carmos nodded to him but didn’t say anything. One by one, the other students dumped their solutions into the chest, none of them happy about it. Hex had been the only one to smile, for unknown reasons.

Laster was the last to follow through on the requirement. He sullenly dropped his brushes and solutions into the box and bowed stiffly, slipping back into his place in line. If Carmos noticed his unhappiness he didn’t mention it.

“As we’ve been gathered here, servants have been collecting your home solutions as well,” Carmos said, closing the chest and locking it. “The only things you are allowed to take to the human world are your clothes.” He chuckled. “And be prepared to change wardrobes when you get there anyway – humans have very odd clothing styles and you may not fit in if you don’t change yours. Of course, that is your choice.”

Sure it’s our choice, Ferran thought sarcastically. Nothing is ever left up to us anymore – everything is forced.

“Now,” Carmos said, his expression turning serious, “on to the topic of your main assignment. You must live in the human world for one month, exactly as a human your age would do. That includes a human school, human social groups, human activities et cetera. But, you must never reveal who you truly are or what you can do. At the end of the month, the team that has “fit in” best you could say, will be the one to graduate.”

Ferran was certain he was dreaming. There was no way this could be the real graduation ceremony! Last year had been nothing like this. He had been assigned number three: Dawn’s Country. The test had consisted of a week spent in Dawn’s Country – a place on the other side of the planet that had blistering heat and savage animals. It was a place where “kill or be killed” was definitely the fitting description. And that test was two levels below The Human World.

“M’ I the only one who smells a rat ‘ere?” Cobalt whispered suspiciously.

Ferran shook his head ever so slightly. He didn’t know if it was a rat, but he was certain something was not right. He shot a look sideways at Darkon. His rival’s forehead was creased in a frown and Ferran could tell he was thinking the same thing.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to be done about it. Once assigned, the test had to be completed or

both teams automatically failed. That was something Ferran couldn't risk.

After letting the students stand in silence for a full minute or more, Carmos looked around at each of them in turn. Ferran met his gaze without blinking, trying to see what the Academy Master was planning. But his violet eyes revealed nothing.

"Well then teams, what say you?"

Ferran turned to look at his team, locking eyes with each of them to see how they felt. Laster's brown eyes were fiery as he nodded his consent. Alos nodded along with his twin. Shina looked at Ferran for a long moment before dipping her head. Ferran smiled tightly.

"Ya' know I'm with ya' Chap," Cobalt said, rising to his feet so Ferran could see him in his peripheral vision. He used the fond nickname he'd given Ferran after their first meeting. "No old bat's gonna get the better of us this time!"

Ferran hoped Carmos hadn't heard that last comment, yet some small part of him would be glad if he had. Cobalt was right; there was no way Ferran wasn't earning his place as an initiate this year. No way was he returning to a farming town where magic was nonexistent.

"Team Two accepts the assignment," he said firmly, his voice echoing in the White Hall.

Carmos nodded at him and looked to Darkon. Darkon turned from his team to face the master once more.

"Team One also accepts the assignment," he said.

"Excellent," Carmos said. "The first member of each team knows where the Human Rune is, pack up and head out. I will see you in a month. Luck to all."

With that he turned and left the hall, all but two of his servants following him.

Ferran turned to exit and was surprised to come face to face with Darkon. The other team leader had his hand outstretched and was wearing the ghost of a smile.

"I know we have our differences, Ferran," he said quietly. "But I hope you know I still wish you luck."

Ferran stared at his hand for a moment and then looked up at him coolly, hatred burning in the pit of his stomach.

"Only failures need luck," he said, pushing past his year-mate. Darkon didn't say anything else and his team parted the way so Ferran could get through. Ferran's team followed him silently.

They walked to the exit of the courtyard, then Ferran paused.

"Pack and meet at my quarters," he said. "The sooner we leave the better."

“Yes sir,” Laster said.

He didn't have to look to know Shina and Alos were nodding. He turned to leave them and then paused.

“Oh, and Shina, don't take forever and don't try to fit your entire room into your bag. I'm not waiting for you.”

With that he began walking again, ignoring the furious statements she was muttering to his back.

The test had finally started.

5 - Departure

Chapter 5: Departure

“Insufferable rat, low-life, miserable uppity mongrel . . .”

Darkon rolled his eyes as Pong continued his rant about Ferran. “Will you just pack already? You don’t have a lot but I’m sure Korinne doesn’t want to make you a whole new wardrobe when we get there just because you were too busy complaining to be ready in time.”

Pong flipped a loop in midair so he could meet Darkon’s eyes.

“Honestly, Dark, I don’t know how you put up with the guy – he’s a downright jerk!” Pong said, frowning.

“He wasn’t always,” Darkon murmured, stuffing the few shirts he owned into his bag. He usually wore wrapped bandages instead of a shirt (like he did instead of socks) because it was easier to move that way in training, but he didn’t know if it was accepted among humans – even in his own world it wasn’t common.

Pong’s frown grew more pronounced. “That’s right; you guys are year-mates aren’t you? Have you known him since you entered the Academy?”

His master nodded. Year-mates was the term used for Academy students that were the same age. You went through all of training together until graduation (from age five to fifteen), then, if you failed, you had one year to prepare and try again with the class under you. Ferran, Darkon, and Jair were all year-mates. When they had failed the assignment the year before, they had all been on the same team. Ferran had been leader.

“Well, if he wasn’t always a lower-than-dirt, wanna-be, disrespectful, failure at life—”

“Pong,” Darkon said warningly.

“I was gonna stop there. Yeesh. Anyway, if he wasn’t always like that, what changed? Did he get smacked in the head on your test or something?”

Darkon sighed heavily; he didn’t like revisiting the past. He thought it was better left alone. So he said simply, “Something like that.”

“Did you do the smacking?”

Darkon growled and turned to glare at him. “Will you pack already?! You can pester me in the human world just as easily as you can here.”

Pong held his hands up in surrender. “Yeesh, can’t a guy ask a few questions?”

Before Darkon could swat at him he darted up to the ceiling and disappeared into the cubby hole where he kept his things – but not before he stuck his tongue out at his master of course.

Darkon dropped to the floor in his meditation pose, rubbing his temples fiercely. Pong had been with him for a year now – once you were appointed team leader you were given a fairy – and sometimes Darkon found the pipsqueak more trying on his nerves than any grueling training exercise Carmos could think up.

“Uh-oh,” Hex’s voice said suddenly, causing Darkon to look up, “what’s going on?”

“How long have you been there?” Darkon asked irritably.

Hex slapped a hand to his heart dramatically. “Such a cold tone for your most loyal and caring friend! I was only worried about you, oh sharp one!”

Darkon rolled his eyes. “Where are Jair and Korinne?”

“Coming,” his team member answered, dropping his pack by the door, “you know how girls are, they have to take forever.”

Darkon raised an eyebrow. “And . . . what about Jair?”

“Well he’s practically a girl,” Hex said, grinning evilly. “He just needs to fill out a little– AHH!”

He was interrupted by Darkon throwing a shoe at him. He ducked just in time and the sandal hit the doorframe with a loud smack before falling to the floor.

“Respect your elders, twerp,” Darkon said coolly.

“Elder my butt,” Hex grumbled, snatching Darkon’s sandal and chucking it back at him. “You and Jair need your heads deflated – you’re only a year older than the rest of us.”

Darkon was ready for the return throw and he caught it easily.

“Me?” He faked a horrified look, pulling Hex’s trick from earlier. “Me, have a big head? You wound me, my friend!”

Hex rolled his eyes and knelt next to his pack, digging around for a moment. When he found what he was looking for, he tossed something to Darkon.

The team leader caught it in surprise. “An apple? I thought you didn’t like heights.”

Hex shuddered. “I didn’t climb. Amazingly enough, when I was walking back here I noticed a certain apple tree in the courtyard had been rather vandalized. Broken branches, disturbed leaves, and quite a few apples littering the ground that I seem to remember hanging on limbs earlier today.”

He bit into an apple of his own as Darkon blushed in embarrassment.

“Care to tell me why you showed up to the briefing with leaves stuck in your hair and scratches all over, almighty elder?”

Trust Hex to figure something like that out, Darkon thought. Everyone else probably just dismissed it as “had to run through a few things to avoid being late”.

“I did have a sort of . . . run in with the apple tree,” Darkon muttered, biting into his apple.

Hex snorted. “Judging by your startled reaction to Pong popping up when you usually aren’t caught off guard at all, I’d say you had a sort of “fly in” with the tree. I must admit, I admire your creativity at using the enlarging hex we learned in our last lesson.”

At a loss for something to say, Darkon took another bite of his apple. How did Hex always seem to know these things?

“Speaking of which, where is Pong?” he asked, looking around. “The pipsqueak is usually helping you torment me.”

“I’m being forced to pack against my will!” came a shouted reply from the cubby.

Hex had to slap a hand over his mouth to keep his food in as he laughed. Darkon chuckled at the rage in Pong’s voice as well. The fairy was anything but organized – packing was absolute torture for him.

“Careful, you may choke,” someone said from the hallway, sounding amused.

Hex stepped out of the way so Korinne could enter the room, Jair right behind her. Darkon smiled at the new arrivals.

Hex swallowed audibly and grinned at Korinne. “Now now, Kory, that’s not nice. You just want me to choke to death because then you won’t have to owe me any more.”

“Owe?” Darkon raised an eyebrow questioningly.

Hex nodded. “I saved her from the terrible wrath of Ferran earlier.”

Korinne rolled her eyes, brushing the statement off, but Darkon frowned. He’d had a sneaking suspicion for some time that his rival was trying to trap each member of his team alone and intimidate them. Darkon wasn’t worried about Jair or himself because Ferran knew better than to try it on them – but he worried about Korinne and Hex.

“Ferran cornered you?”

She looked uncomfortable. "I had been doing some form exercises before arriving so I was washing the solution off my hands when he entered the courtyard. I did not mean to be alone."

"No, it's nothing you did wrong," Darkon assured her. His voice turned quiet as he continued, "It's just that Ferran never used to play dirty. When he was my team leader he never tried to get the other team members alone – he always faced the team as a whole."

Jair nodded slightly, looking down. Darkon knew that Ferran's change bothered the other boy as much as it did him.

"Well, he's a cheater now," Hex said. His lips parted into a feral smile. "Which is just one of the many reasons why we're going to kick his butt!"

Korinne giggled and held out a hand, two fingers spread wide. Hex copied the action in a heartbeat.

"Who's the best team at Academy Hex?" he demanded loudly.

Darkon rolled his eyes. "Must you repeat this silly thing every time you think about graduation?"

Hex's face fell into a sad puppy-dog look. "Darkon . . . who's the best team at Academy Hex?"

Darkon sighed as dramatically as he could, slowly raising a hand with two splayed fingers. Secretly though, he enjoyed the team spirit Hex showed every time he did his little "ritual".

"Team two," he said slowly.

"YES!" Hex clapped his hands once and then pointed at Darkon with both pointer fingers, arms extended all the way. "And who's the best team leader at Academy Hex?"

"Darkon Andros!" Korinne said, enthusiastic as always.

Darkon felt himself blush a little and he looked down, supposedly straightening the bandages wrapped around his chest.

"YES AGAIN!" Hex spun around and pointed at the cubby near the ceiling. "Who's the best fairy a team leader's ever had?"

Darkon groaned. "Please don't! His head doesn't need to be inflated any more!"

It was too late though, Pong had been listening and the fairy darted out of his cubby, beaming cockily. He flipped a summersault in the air and shouted, "Pong vi Capella!"

Hex stopped short, looking confused. "Wait, Pong who what?"

Darkon snorted in amusement as Pong's expression deflated slightly.

"It's his "full name" as far as fairies can have one," Darkon explained. "The "vi" means that he serves someone and the "Capella" is which fairy province he came from."

"Oh, right!" Hex said, grinning once more. "Awesome name, Pong!"

Pong beamed again and Darkon shook his head. It looked like Hex was determined to make Pong pompous no matter what.

Hmm . . . on the other hand, "Pompous Pong" had a kind of ring to it. He stored away the nickname for future use.

"Soooooooooooo," Hex continued, spinning back to face everyone. This time he was the one wearing the cocky grin. "Who's the best hexer this Academy's ever seen?!"

"Wait, le' me think about this one, the name's hard to remember," Darkon teased.

Hex cuffed him on the head lightly, his attempt at looking cross failing miserably.

Korinne smiled mischievously. "Darkon, I believe it starts with an "S"."

Hex paused, utterly bewildered. "No it doesn't."

But Darkon had caught on to what she was saying.

"You're right," he said slowly, "something like "Sven" . . . or "Seven" . . . or maybe . . . "Steven"?"

Hex had been paling ever since he said "Sven" and he was now whiter than a ghost in the Nightlands. "Come on guys, no fair."

Korinne nodded firmly. "I think that's it. Steven. Yes, that must be it. Steven Chaffer!"

Darkon laughed and slid to his feet, slinging an arm around Hex's shoulders. "Stop cringing every time you hear the name Steven, we're just saying the truth."

Hex shuddered again at the use of his real name. Then he leaned close to Darkon and whispered in his ear, "I can't help it – I'm allergic to that name!"

Darkon laughed and punched him in the arm playfully. "Whatever you say. The best hexer this Academy's ever seen is my best friend Hex!"

Hex's ears turned flaming red and he tugged at his headband a little, looking down.

"Carmos's underwear, now you're just embarrassing me," he muttered.

Darkon laughed again, this time with Korinne. Pong howled above them, no doubt logging away the "Carmos's underwear" oath for later use. Hex and Jair grinned.

Hex picked back up again after a minute, "Also! Who's the most academically advanced student that can kick anyone's butt in hand to hand combat?"

"Korinne Gina!" Darkon and Pong said in unison. Pong dived down to sit on Darkon's head.

Korinne blushed proudly.

"Aaaaaand, who's the silent giant who can make Ferran Conner rethink everything he thought he knew with just a word or two?!"

Jair ducked his head as they all said, "Jair Derom!"

No one cared that he had identified Team Member Three after Team Member Four.

"So which team's going to graduate and go on to show everyone just what's possible?!" Hex crowed.

Wearing happy grins, they all threw their hands in the air (even Jair), two fingers raised, and shouted, "TEAM TWO!"

"Come on," Pong said, leaping into the air, packed back held in his hands, "let's get to that rune!"

They all grabbed their bags as well and were out the door in seconds.