

Door Number Four

Bokerah Brumley

Chapter One

“All doors lead to purpose.” — Colonel Mzuzi Blackfox, C.C.C., retired

Testing Day

Recruit Center, A.F.C.C.

It was testing day at Academy of Future Creature Caretakers.

Fourteen-year-old Rase Flannigan closed the front door behind him and started down the walk. His mother beamed at him from the window. He didn't have to turn around to appreciate the busting warmth of it.

He wasn't looking forward to disappointing her.

He'd heard all the rumors. Students said the testing rooms contained engineered scenarios in artificial worlds.

Rase didn't know what to believe. He sighed. Not that it mattered. The corridor of doors stood between each cadet and an invitation to the C.C.C.

Real or not, he suspected he'd get the bad news tomorrow: he'd flunked out of the program. He knew it right down to the magic in his bone marrow, but his footsteps still ate away the distance between his parents' home and the school.

Overhead, mint green sky shimmered with a Weather Keeper's magic, and a handful of spots developed. A moment later, the specks grew to fluffy pink clouds. The apprentice was getting better.

At the corner, his best friend, Agon, waved. The impending exam had Rase's stomach in knots, and he didn't want to talk about Amelia, Agon's latest artist crush. Instead of stopping, Rase waved back, and then snapped his fingers and a single flame danced over his fingertips. He kept it alive for five blocks before it winked out. At least he was getting better at holding his spells.

A handful of other recruits collected in front of the Academy, milling about, visiting before sessions began. Most of them were reluctant to go inside, but Rase was early. He wanted to get a little more study time in before nine bells rang.

If Rase failed his final, he wouldn't be invited to join the Creature Caretakers Corps. Only one in four recruits made it into the C.C.C. Agon had a backup plan. Rase didn't. He had never wanted to be anything other than a creature caretaker. He wanted to hear about an animal in need and rescue it. From the time he was small, the dream of joining the C.C.C. had filled him up. Helping defenseless creatures made him happy in a way nothing else had.

When Rase reached for the door, an exposed bulb above the entrance flashed red, and a warning buzzer blared at him. An eyeball, as big as his skull and hanging from a vine, dipped down between the foliage of the leafy casing and gave him a once-over. Behind him, snickers rolled through the crowd of students. A cranky voice commanded, *Announce yourself, Recruit*. The words were projected in Rase's mind.

Rase grimaced and dropped his hand. Distracted by worry, he'd forgotten to project. *Rookie mistake*. The psychic guard plant didn't recognize anyone by sight. The building was covered in it for just that reason. Shapeshifters could look like anyone. Glamours could overcome visuals, too. The security guard had been grown from an off-world cutting and

recognized brainwaves and patterns. Since the C.C.C. had started using him, they'd had no cross-realm infiltrations. At least that's what Rase had overheard in the corridors.

Rase thought of the sentient herbage structure. He projected an image of himself and his identity. *Rase Flannigan. Third year recruit.* He thought the words one at a time. *Rhymes with shenanigan,* he added.

Ah, Rase. The crimson light turned a happy yellow. *Good luck on your test today.* The monocular withdrew, tilting and bouncing cheerfully. At least the architecture was in a decent mood that morning. It could be a mercurial plant when rules weren't observed. The entrance hissed as the precautionary sealing spell disengaged and the glass slid out of the way.

"Thanks," Rase muttered. He marched inside with his chin up and shoulders back. Maybe pretend confidence would conjure the faith in himself that he lacked. He moved into the fifteen-story open-air atrium. The Academy classrooms took up the lower two floors, administration took up one level above that, and no cadet was allowed above the third floor. The Creature Caretaker Corps took up the remaining twelve floors.

He took a right at the next corridor and slipped into Professor Blackfox's lecture hall. The dark-haired man stood at the chalkboard, writing his *Ten Commandments of Testing*, his back to the rows of student desks. Professor Blackfox had retired from the C.C.C. with honors, and he'd been teaching at the Academy ever since.

"Mr. Flannigan," he said without turning, his voice still deep and strong.

"Professor." Rase took a seat in the middle of the second row.

"Nervous about your exam?" The chalk scratched against the blackboard.

1) Thou shalt not cheat.

"Something like that." Rase grimaced. It was exactly like that.

Professor Blackfox didn't stop writing. "You could apply for a fourth year."

2) *Thou shalt not waste time.*

Rase didn't answer. He didn't deserve to be there. His parents had already sacrificed enough for him. When he exhibited signs of creature talent, they packed up and moved into the capital so he could attend the Academy. He hadn't been smart enough to earn any scholarships, but that hadn't stopped them. If their son wanted to join the C.C.C., then he would. For them, it was that simple.

Yet if Rase wasn't smart enough to make it through the Academy then *that* would have to be his answer. Maybe he could get someone else to deliver the news when he failed. Rase sighed. He didn't deserve his parents. They'd sacrificed jobs they loved so he could chase a dream.

Professor Blackfox stopped writing. "I can recommend you for a fourth year, but I don't think you'll need it, Mr. Flannigan." Then Blackfox smiled.

Rase jumped as though he'd been slapped. *Who is this and what has he done with the professor?* The man waited for a response. Rase plastered a grin on his face. "Thanks."

"In the world of animal rescue, remember that *no* attempt is far worse than attempting, risking, and getting it wrong." Blackfox held Rase's gaze a moment longer, then tuned back to his task, the chalk squeaking louder than before. Over his shoulder, he said, "In the C.C.C., each door leads to a new test, a new opportunity to show your skills. Use each one as though a world depends on it."

3) *Thou shalt do that which ye know.*

Rase scanned the classroom. Professor Blackfox had encouraged him and nobody was there to witness it. The man hadn't looked happy in three years.

Rase smoothed his hand over his face. He couldn't decide if the morale boost made his nervousness worse or not. When Professor Blackfox finished writing, he dusted off his hands and strolled to his office adjacent to the classroom.

Rase tugged his leather-bound textbook from his backpack, but only stared at the pages. He knew most of the spells, and he wasn't about to learn the remainder of them while he was brain-bound with worry about passing the test. There wasn't anything else he could learn in the little bit of time he had left. Instead, he planned how he would tell his parents he'd failed them.

Ten minutes into his melancholy, the next student arrived. Jess, a candidate for valedictorian, waved at Rase and took a seat in the front row. She twisted her brown hair into a long strand, piled it on top of her head, and shoved a pencil through it. She turned around. "Are you ready for the big day?"

Rase shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not." Mostly not, but he didn't want to admit it.

"I hope I get a mammal," she said.

"A good door can make all the difference." Rase dropped the tome back in his bag. No use pretending to study. The portal—the mission—could make all the difference in the world, and that fact had his stomach in knots. Rase had particular ability with reptiles and birds. Jess favored mammals. More students wandered in, and Jess straightened in her seat.

Professor Blackfox entered from the opposite side of the room. "Five minutes, students," he barked and ducked back out.

Two minutes before nine bells, a collection of disheveled students shuffled in—Jess called them the "crammers." They pulled all-nighters, cramming for their magic exams, trying to remember spells and skills and talents on half-a-minute of sleep. Though about half of them managed to keep a passing grade, most of them were students that had been enrolled by hopeful

parents. The group took their seats, yawning and wiping sleep from bleary eyes. They'd probably been up all night preparing for the test.

At precisely nine bells, Professor crossed to his dais and began roll call, moving quickly through the thirty-some-odd students in alphabetical order. Once completed, he placed his hands on either side of the lectern.

Rase leaned forward. He knew so little about the testing process. *Doors*. That's all he knew. Doors were the physical representation of the portals that led to each and every mission for the C.C.C.

"Remember the *Ten Commandments of Testing*."

Rase glanced at the words on the board. He didn't have to read them. In varying order, they appeared every day. All the students should have known them by heart, and he did.

"Students," Professor Blackfox went on, "this is the last time I will see your morning faces. It's been a memorable three years. Some of you have impressed me," he glanced at Jess, "and others have continued to show up." His gaze swept across the cramming crowd. He lifted the lectern top and retrieved a stack of cream-colored envelopes. "Your tests have been randomly preassigned by Dean Romero."

He stepped down off of the podium and to the right, carrying the testing assignments. He raised his free hand toward a blank wall and muttered to himself. Without preamble, the wood paneling dissolved to show a thick, red square with what looked like a steering wheel from a sailing ship in the middle.

Academy Testing had been inscribed vertically across the surface.

Everyone gasped, Rase included. They'd never seen Professor Blackfox use magic, and none of them had any idea that the testing corridor had been there the whole time. Professor

Blackfox ignored their surprise and turned the large handle, spinning it around until mechanisms whirred and clicked. He tapped a circle in the middle of the locking wheel, and the door popped open to reveal an anteroom that resembled a black cube with a predominately white corridor out the other side and beyond.

Professor Blackfox marched into the space. He did an about-face and waved toward the exit. “This is your testing corridor. Please line up in alphabetical order—that would be the order of roll call—and make your way here.” He pointed to the pale marble floor and a dark line appeared. He clasped his hands behind his back. “Despite what you may have heard, everything that happens today is as real as working for the C.C.C. Animals may die by your inaction.”

Rase swallowed as the warning took hold. That wasn’t the rumor they had all heard. It changed everything. If an animal disappeared from a planetary ecosystem, the maturation trajectory of a whole world could be irrevocably damaged.

Rase caught Jess’s eye. She bit her bottom lip and then looked away.

Hushed, the students followed the instruction in orderly fashion, more in awe of their teacher than they had been in three years. It was against the rules for cadets to use magic outside of the designated areas inside the Academy, and they’d never seen Professor Blackfox use it before.

“First student, please approach,” Professor Blackfox called. Jess had taken her place a few spots ahead of Rase, but she wasn’t first.

Rachel Anderson had that honor. She chewed on her fingernails as she joined Professor Blackfox. He waved his hand, and a dark wall descended from the ceiling and settled between the waiting students and the anteroom. The screen effectively kept the proceedings inside private.

A few minutes later, the wall dissolved. Rachel had moved into the corridor beyond the anteroom, and Professor Blackfox bellowed, "Next!" The next student made his way forward.

Rase shifted from side to side. He considered biting his own nails, but the habit drove his mother crazy. With each step forward, his knees got shakier and shakier. Then it was his turn.

"Next!"

He darted into the room and almost lost his balance on the slick floor. Professor Blackfox waved his hand and the privacy screen lowered. The students outside disappeared. Rase glanced around. The air was different, sounds beyond the cube were muffled, a world unto itself.

Professor Blackfox took an envelope from the stack. "Mr. Flannigan, you have been assigned door number four." He passed the paper to Rase. "Remember that the magic restrictions have been lifted. Remember your training, Mr. Flannigan." He leaned forward. "And everything that happens in that room came from an animal distress call. It's as real as anything that the officers of the C.C.C. encounter in actual missions. "

Rase stared at the spell-sealed paper rectangle. "Do you know what scenario is behind my door?"

"It's luck of the draw." Professor Blackfox raised an eyebrow.

"Life or death decisions?" He didn't need another reason to stress about the test, but there it was.

Professor Blackfox leaned away. "As previously defined, your actions irrevocably impact the universe inside that door." He crossed his arms. "Mr. Flannigan, would you like to decline testing or shall I go on?"

"Please continue." Rase swallowed. The rumors had been wrong. He lifted his gaze and nodded. The paper weighted his hand, a metric ton of responsibility.

Professor Blackfox pointed at the space ahead of them. “When the privacy spell lifts, travel down the corridor. The exits are arranged in sequential order. You will have a few minutes to read your instructions and then you must open your door. Do not dally. The portal will disappear when you close the door behind you. At that moment, your timer will begin. The gateway will reappear when you complete your task or your time runs out. Whichever comes first.” Professor Blackfox extended his hand and Rase took it, pumping it up and down. “Good luck, Rase. It has been an honor serving as your professor.”

The wall behind him disappeared and revealed the monochromatic testing corridor. Doors lined the length of the hall. Each scarlet door was the same as the next, each one an equal distance from the ones before and after. There must have been hundreds of them. A different number sparkled over each one. Door zero was to his left, door one to his right.

Rase licked his lips. His future was only a few steps down the hall.