

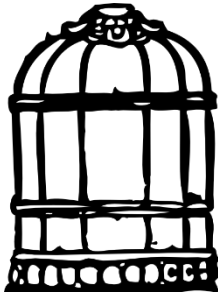
# UNCAGED



**Warning:** *The following excerpt is unedited. Typos and grammatical errors galore.*

**Double Warning:** *Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.*

**Triple Warning:** *Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!*



# CHAPTER ONE

## *The Boy in the Cage*

I was stressing over homework when one of my roommates burst into our dorm room.

“Oh my God, Taryn. You’ll never guess what?”

Glancing up from the book I had propped on my knees where I sat on my bed with my back pressed against the wall, I brushed long bangs from my eyes and took in Posey’s wide, bright eyes. She freaked out over everything, so I could only imagine what had her riled this time. It could be a broken fingernail or the apocalypse.

“They’re serving cherry cheesecake for dessert at supper again?”

That earned me a scowl. “No. This is big.”

Except she’d said that yesterday about the cheesecake.

“Oh. Sorry.” Honest mistake.

I went back to studying the figure in my textbook. There was just no way I’d ever be able to perform the potion it described. It was way too complicated for the likes of me. Anything to do with cooking or brewing seemed to fall short in my brain. My boyfriend Raff like to tease that I—

“Eschelon just called for—”

“Dude!” The already cracked door of our room banged the rest of the way open, smacking against the wall as it admitted yet another person into my room. Posey’s mammoth boyfriend,

Colfax, barged inside, skidding to a halt beside her. “Did you hear? Eschelon just asked Simon to meet him at the cage.”

“*What?*” I surged to my feet, my potions book flying off to who-knew-where. Now *this* was big news. “Who’s getting punished?”

“That’s the thing,” Posey shifted uneasily closer to Colfax as she gripped his arm. Shivering, she glanced up at her boyfriend before turning back to me. “I have no idea.”

“I don’t think anyone is,” Colfax added.

I shook my head. “That’s impossible. Of course someone has to be getting punished. Why else would Eschelon want the cage opened?”

Posey shrugged. “Beats me.”

Calling Simon, the only key master on campus, to the cage had meant only one thing in the past: someone was about to be punished. Severely.

In all the time I’d attended Drexel Academy, I’d only seen four students punished inside the cage. The first experience, watching a fifth year electrocuted until he’d passed out, had happened the first month I’d been enrolled. I’d only been nine at the time, but the memory had ingrained itself into my brain so deeply I could recall every detail as if it had happened five minutes ago. I swear, I still carried the scent of scorched flesh inside my nostrils.

One thing was certain after that; I knew I never, *ever* wanted to step out of line enough to deserve such reprimand.

But the thing was, we usually knew about a cage punishment days, sometimes weeks, in advance. This was frankly unprecedented.

Needing to see it for myself, I darted past Posey and Colfax, hurrying from the room. My best friend and her boyfriend scrambled after me.

As soon as we raced from Clairvoyance Hall, I saw the crowd gathering around the learning center off to our right, clamoring to get inside.

Blaine, my other roommate, had been carrying a laundry basket full of neatly folded clothes and detergent through the dimly-lit evening toward the front door of Clairvoyance. But the hullabaloo had caused her to pause in the middle of the sidewalk and crane her neck around to gawk.

“Watch out.” Colfax caught her shoulders and manually set her out his way so he could half-walk, half-gallop to the learning center ahead of us.

His maneuver caused Blaine to jump, almost upsetting her cleaned laundry. Only the ability of her unnaturally flexible arms stretching twice their length saved them from kissing the concrete. When she whirled around and saw me, she yanked a pair of earbuds free of her ears by their cords. “What’s going on?”

“Eschelon just called Simon to the cage.”

Gasping, Blaine dropped her basket in the middle of the sidewalk to cover her mouth with both hands. “What! Who’s getting punished?”

“We don’t know,” I called over my shoulder as Posey swept me toward the learning center, catching us up with Colfax.

Abandoning her laundry, Blaine raced after me. “Do you think it’s Darius? He was caught cheating on his stabilizing midterm yesterday.” She clutched my free hand tight and huddled as close to me as Posey was.

I suspected the only reason Darius had cheated was because Blaine had supplied him with all the answers.

“Please don’t tell me you still have a thing for that brainless muscle head,” Posey demanded, leaning past me to send Blaine an irritated scowl. “I mean, seriously, Blay. Wake up already. Darius is a total jerk knob who’s just using you to help him make a good grade.”

“He is not! You take that back.” She swiped past me, stretching her arm three times as long as it normally went to swat at Posey. But a ball a fire, roughly the size of a baseball, struck out from Colfax’s raised hand to intercept her, protecting his girlfriend.

“No touching my girl.”

“Enough!” I yelled above both of them, lifting my fingers and exerting my own supernatural power to flash up an invisible shield between Blaine and Colfax so no one could get slapped or burned. Blaine’s hand bounced unharmed off the force field, and Colfax’s flaming ball rebounded back to him, where he caught it into his palm like a baseball. A ribbon of smoke exited between his fingers as he extinguished the flame and sent me a scowl.

Rolling my eyes and simply amazed how easily a fight had broken out between us when there were much bigger concerns abreast, I sighed, exasperated. “You are such children.”

After sending Colfax a reprimanding glance, I turned to Blaine and added, “I doubt Darius is going to be electrocuted for such a minor infraction. Don’t freak, okay. I’m sure everything will be fine.”

The problem was, I wasn’t sure if things were fine at all. To me, it all just felt...off. A current of fear coated the air around us, thick and cloistering. But Blaine seemed to take comfort from my words. Sagging with relief, she squeezed my hand.

As we neared the main entrance of the learning center, Colfax disappeared inside, too impatient to stick with us. Once we elbowed our way through the bank of doors, we headed toward the cafeteria since the research room looked crammed full already and the hallway leading to the other rooms looked too congested to even try. It didn’t matter which arena we entered, anyway; the cage was a round, centralized cell in the middle of the facility. Bars for it could be seen in the corner of all four main chambers so the boy inside could watch us during class time, meals, training, and meditation.

He had a small apartment cordoned off inside the cage as well as a darkened recess no one could see into. I had to guess the mystery room was his lavatory since it couldn’t be a bedroom; a small cot had been bolted to the center of his cage for him to sleep on.

I had no idea how large his bathroom—or whatever it was in there—measured, but the boy spent a lot of his time in it, especially during classes. He didn't seem to like it when people stared at him. Not that I could blame him. If I'd lived in a cage located in the middle of the learning center at Drexel for more than ten years, I'd despise the staring too.

I spotted Raff as soon as we entered the cafeteria. He'd finagled his way to the front of the crowd and hovered a few feet behind the academy's head elder. Eschelon stood calmly facing the cage with his hands folded placidly behind his back. He gave no sign he even realized the entire student body had gathered around him as he waited.

Hoping my boyfriend knew what was happening, I moved toward Raff. Posey and Blaine tagged along with me. As soon as I reached him and touched his back, Raff glanced around with a scowl, only to smooth the expression into a grin when he saw it was me.

"Hey." He took my hand and pulled me up next to him, wedging me between him and his friend, Pender.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He shook his head, letting me know he was just as clueless as I was. When he opened his mouth to respond, someone at the entrance called, "Here he is! Simon's here."

We turned to focus on the lanky, pale-faced sixth-year who lurched hesitantly through the doorway only to jerk to a halt and gape wide-eyed at the crowd watching him. Simon was a red-headed fourteen-year-old with an overly large nose and bad acne. He was the type whose awkwardness would follow him way past adolescence and into adulthood.

Eschelon turned from the cage and called in an affable voice. "Ah. There you are, my boy." He unlaced his fingers from behind his back and waved the key master forward with two fingers. "Don't be shy. All is well."

Except nothing was ever “well” when the cage was opened. The boy inside had only been used for one purpose: to inflict terrible pain on misbehaving students.

Without pause, a path formed from Simon to Eschelon as students shifted to let the key master through. He staggered forward, tripping as he increased his pace and looking paler with each stumble.

My heart thumped hard inside my chest, echoing through my ears. I clamped my hand down on Raff’s to calm myself. I hated watching anyone getting hurt. But there was no way I could leave. I was just as curious as everyone else to know what was happening.

Focusing on Eschelon, I bit my lip, my apprehensions spiking through my bloodstream to the rhythm of my rapid heartbeat. The head elder seemed so calm—pleasant even—he didn’t act like a man about to punish some disobedient student, which should’ve pacified me. But his tranquil behavior only put me more on edge. Every fine hair on my body stood on edge, alert. Wary.

When a shaking Simon reached the cage, Eschelon patted him on the shoulder with a reassuring smile. “Thank you for coming so swiftly.”

Simon gave a forced, tremulous smile and nodded. Like me, he must’ve sensed something worse than a mere electrifying punishment was about to take place.

Still ignoring the rest of us, Eschelon rotated back toward the cage. “Oh, yes. And Darius?” he called gently. “Is Darius here? Please come forward, Darius.”

Behind me, Blaine whimpered. She gripped the tail of my shirt, so I reached back with my free hand to grasp her fingers soothingly.

“Shh.” I turned my head just enough to whisper into her hair. “Don’t worry. Eschelon said all was well.”

She nodded but buried her face into my shoulder as if she couldn’t bear to watch the jerk of her dreams get punished.

Darius appeared beside Simon, all color drained from his cheeks while a glaze of sweat covered his skin. Not even his bulging biceps could make him look intimidating and strong now, not with an expression of absolute terror cloaking him.

“Y-yes, sir?”

Without looking at him, Eschelon lifted his hand to halt Darius. “Thank you for coming,” he murmured. “Please remain close. I’ll require your assistance.”

Alarm bells gonged in my head. The use of Darius’s ability—strength—could mean...well, it must mean...the boy in the cage was to be punished.

But that made no sense. He didn’t have any freedoms to be able to do anything wrong.

The only rule us students had regarding the caged boy was to never talk to him. After watching him electrocute someone the first time, I had followed that edict without question. To my knowledge, no one else had ever attempted to speak to him either. We didn’t make fun of him, we didn’t smile at him, we rarely even looked toward his prison. We only referred to him—out of his earshot—whenever we talked of punishments.

Maybe someone had finally spoken to him.

Eschelon tapped on the rungs of the cage, making his golden rings clang against the metal bars. “Come,” he called, not as gently as he’d spoken to either Simon or Darius. The sharp command in his voice actually made me flinch.

My eyes burned as I stared hard into the cage at the dark corner where the caged boy must’ve been hiding. I’d rarely gotten a good view of him since he tended to stick to the shadow. The few times he’d been commanded to come into the light and use his ability to punish were about it. I usually made it a point to not even look at the cage otherwise.

I’d only made eye-contact with him once in my life, and it was a memory I wish I could forget.

Waiting for him to appear now, I shivered as my skin prickled with apprehension.



He emerged from the shadows slow and predatory, like a stalking lion circling its prey, his leery gaze set on Eschelon as if he'd rather rip out the head elder's jugular with his teeth than have a civil conversation with him. I had no idea what color his deep-set eyes were; I'd never been close enough to tell. But they looked dark, shaded under his brow as they were. Plus he tipped his head down just enough to mask them.

Maybe they were brown, matching his long hair that tumbled over his shoulders with a savage kind of grace. He looked as untamed as he probably was. Though he was as lanky and tall as Simon, there wasn't a gangly bone on the caged boy's body. The short sleeves of his black shirt exposed sleek skin covering whipcord lean muscles that rippled along his arms.

I had no idea how old he was, but he couldn't be much older than me. He'd been young the first time I'd seen him, and he'd grown as I had grown over the years. If he were a student, I would've guessed he was a ninth or tenth year, if not recently graduated.

"It seems your sentence has come to an end, and you've proven yourself worthy of freedom," Eschelon said, eliciting a gasp throughout the entire learning center; I could hear surprise from students in the research and training rooms as well.

Raff looked to me, his eyes clearly asking what had just happened. I shook my head, just as confused. Blaine lifted her face from my shoulder.

"Did he just say what I think he said?"

I couldn't speak. My tongue felt too thick for words.

Anxiety clogged my skin, making my entire body seize with unease. If the boy capable of producing electricity with his entire body and frying children to the point of rendering them unconscious with a single touch was about to go free, what did this mean to the rest of us?

Eschelon held up a hand to silence all the murmured protests. "However," he said, still speaking to the caged boy. "Before I let you free, you must swear your continued obedience to me."

Holding my breath as I waited for the boy's response, I gulped when he lifted his face just enough to scope out the people in the cafeteria, scanning all the students watching him. He kept looking as if he was searching for someone specific.

Until he found me.

Then his gaze stopped dead. Being locked in eye contact with him for a second time in my life was even more unnerving than the first when I'd been nine. My lungs reacted violently, slugging in a sharp breath that only got captured in my throat.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't move. I felt as caged as he was.

"I swear it," he murmured in a low voice that caused the muscles low in my stomach to clench. Without shifting his attention, he seemed to give his answer to me instead of Eschelon.

Blaine jerked away from me as if I was suddenly contaminated. But Posey, bless her, clamped down on my elbow in support, while Raff shifted protectively in front of me to break the caged boy's stare.

I blinked and turned to my best friend, my entire body chilled with fear and confusion. She looked about as scared and bewildered as I felt so I leaned against Raff's shoulder. He brought my quivering fingers to his mouth and kissed my knuckles. Relieved by his steady presence, I closed my eyes and blew out a long breath, soothed by his familiar scent.

Ten feet away, metal groaned and shifted as Simon went to work releasing each lock. A jolt passed through me. I risked a peek over Raff's shoulder to catch a look of almost-comical glee cross the key master's face while he passed his fingers over the next complicated bolt without touching it. When it glided open effortlessly, I darted a quick glance at the boy inside. I was relieved—and deep inside, strangely disappointed—to discover he'd shifted his focus from my direction to the cage's entrance that was being opened.

“Can Eschelon really do this?” Posey hissed in my ear. “It can’t be safe to let him go just like that. We’ve all seen what he can do.”

I shared a silent look with her and shrugged. Of course we’d seen what he could do. It was a requirement to watch every punishment at the cage...as a way to keep us in line. But Eschelon had said he was free to go, so what did I know?

Once Simon finished unbolting the last latch, Eschelon motioned Darius forward. “Roll the gate open please.”

I’d seen the muscle-necked Darius lift two cars at a time, one with each hand. He could uproot a tree without breaking a sweat. But at the head elder’s command, he hesitated. “Are...are you sure?”

Eschelon merely turned to look at him. He blinked once, and Darius’s face went beet red, full of embarrassment for questioning him.

Ducking his chin, the strength-holder mumbled, “Yes, sir.”

He dashed forward to slide open the cage’s gate as if nudging aside a feather pillow.

As soon as the two doors yawned apart, everyone in the cafeteria scuttled backward, Simon and Darius leading the charge. I bumped into the students who’d been standing behind me and Raff bumped into me. Within seconds, a path twice as wide as the one that had been made for Simon had been cleared all the way to the exit.

The boy in the cage took a cautious step forward then hesitated. He looked at the probing eyes, not even glancing my way this time, and a green current of pure electricity ignited around him. Like a bug zapper, it buzzed and crackled, circling him from head to toe. And then just as quickly as it appeared, it vanished.

The whole thing reminded me of some wild animal setting off his warning signal—a skunk lifting its tail, a porcupine perking up his needles, a rattlesnake shaking its rattle. He wanted us to stay away.

We respected his warning and gave him plenty of berth to emerge into his freedom. The only person who didn't cower was Eschelon.

"Come," the head elder said. "I'll show you to your dormitory."

"Oh, hell no," Posey whispered. "He's not staying in the *dorms* with us, is he?"

Apparently he was.

Raff stepped forward. "Sir?" He reached out as if to catch Eschelon's sleeve, but he respectfully dropped his hand before making contact.

Eschelon had turned toward the exit but paused to glance at Raff. He blinked, looking around him as if noticing the rest of the student body had been watching the show as well. Fluttering a hand at us in an unconcerned manner, he nodded. "Ah, yes. Everyone, Zekiel will be joining your ranks as a fellow student come tomorrow."

Zekiel?

The caged boy actually had a name?

Mine certainly wasn't the only mouth to flail open. But, seriously, he couldn't just go from acting as our punisher and a thing we weren't even supposed to address to becoming one of us, just like that. Could he?

I wasn't sure which shocked me more: his name or his new status.

"Oh, and a word of caution," Eschelon added, "Please avoid any physical contact with him as to prevent accidental electrocution. He's still working on his ability to control his gift. Thank you." A collective murmur of dread crossed the room, but Eschelon only smiled and shooed us away. "Carry on. I'm sure you all have tests early in the morning."

With his dismissal made, he strode from the cafeteria, the newly freed electrical boy following behind him.

I had no idea what any of this meant, but one thing was certain; my final year at Drexel Academy for the Supernaturally

Gifted had just gotten ten times more interesting...and  
frightening.