



# Seign SEXEN SPELLBLADES

Bokuto Uno

ILLUSTRATION BY
Ruria Miyuki



# Copyright

## Reign of the Seven Spellblades, Vol. 12

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# Contents

Cover

<u>Insert</u>

Title Page

Copyright

**Prologue** 

**Chapter 1: The Visitor** 

**Chapter 2: Obsession** 

Chapter 3: Mayhem

**Chapter 4: The Evil Tree** 

**Afterword** 

Yen Newsletter

# Characters

#### Fourth-Years



The story's protagonist. Jack-of-all-trades, master of none. Swore revenge on the seven instructors who killed his mother.

Oliver Horn



nation belonging to the Union. Has a soft spot for the civil rights of

<u>, Katie Aalto</u>





A studious boy born to nonmagicals. Capable of switching between male and female bodies.

50

Tullio Rossi

A lone wolf who taught himself the sword by ignoring the fundamentals Determined to beat Oliver



Has served Stacy since they were kids and is dedicated to her. Half human, half werewolf.

Fay Willock



A samurai girl from Azia. Believes that Oliver is her destined sword partner.

Nanao Hibiya

A boy from a family of magical farmers. Honest and friendly. Has a knack for magical flora.



Eldest daughter of the prolific McFarlane family A master of the pen and sword, she looks out for her friends

Michela McFarlane

Michela's paternal half sister. Stubborn and headstrong, she has a competitive streak where Chela is concerned.

Stacy Cornwallis



Heir to the Albright clan, known for its prolific warrior mages. His bulky frame radiates confidence and pride.

Joseph Albright

#### Fourth-Years



Cast a spell on Katie during their welcome parade. Has poor people skills and a sharp tongue that gets her in trouble.

Annie Mackley



A proud youth from a prestigious family. Recognizes Oliver's and Nanao's talents and considers them worthy rivals.

Richard Andrews



A pure Koutz practitioner. Served by the Barthé twins, she excels in team play.

Ursule Valois



His every move is oddly showy, like a stage performer. Bedazzles with a blend of magic and deceit.

Rosé Mistral

#### Third-Years



Oliver's closest vassal. Adores him and aids his revenge as a covert operative.

Teresa Carste



Leoncio's younger sister. Arrogant yet open-minded; delights in spotting and cultivating talent. A fan of Oliver's since the combat league.

Felicia Echevalria



Teresa's friend. Shy but strong of heart, she greatly values her friendships. Has carried a torch for Guy since her arrival at Kimberly.

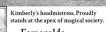
Rita Appleton

#### Seventh-Years



Student council president known and feared as the Toxic Gasser. Wears women's clothes as the whim strikes him.

#### Instructors



Esmeralda

Magical engineering instructor. Prone to outrageous lessons designed to maim Enrico Forghieri

Astronomy instructor. Driven to protect the world from tir incursi

**Demitrio Aristides** 

- Frances Gilchrist **~** Dustin Hedges

**~** Vanessa Aldiss

- Darius Grenville DECEASED



Tim Linton





A new instructor at Kimberly and a famed mage. Like Pete, they're a reversi.

Rod Farquois

Chela's father and the man who sent Nanao to Kimberly.

Theodore McFarlane

A sword arts practitioner renowned as the Blade Master. Friends and rivals with Darius since their student days.

<u>Luther Garland</u>

Prologue

001

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

# **Prologue**

After their chaotic visit to the McFarlane estate, the Sword Roses made a brief stop at Pete's old home, and their long journey began winding down. Then the eight members of their group made one last stop at the house where Guy was born.

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"Cliff, don't hog that!"

"Why not? It's first come, first served!"

"We've got company, jerk!"
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"Yeah, yeah, mind your manners, kids. The food ain't going anywhere!"

Guy's pile of siblings made for a boisterous dinner table, but his mother's voice carried over the hubbub. Levitating frying pans ferried one dish after another from the kitchen, dumping their contents on serving platters, only barely mindful of keeping the dishes from mixing. Left untouched, the mountains of food would soon add up, but the appetites of hungry mage children were more than a match for this pace. The mere sight of the spread could make a person feel sated, and Pete seemed mildly overwhelmed.

"...This is exactly what I thought your home would be like, Guy," he said.

"Spare me. If they bug you, feel free to send 'em packing."

"...Heh-heh..."

"Pass the vinegar!"

"What's that for, Chela?"

"This is so unlike what I'm used to. The McFarlanes are not known for lively family dinners."

She dug into the simple home cooking, clearly tickled pink. Oliver shot her a

quick glance; Chela's mother had certainly kept them all busy, but they'd met none of her other relatives. Nor had she ever mentioned them much—other than Stacy, who was clearly an exception. Being heir apparent to a family of considerable repute had left her uniquely isolated. Oliver sensed that, but didn't yet dare pry further.

"Good, ain't it? Typical farm food, but made from the finest stuff. All these veggies come from the fields outside!" said Mrs. Greenwood.

"...Mm, more where that came from."

Guy's father was a man of few words—a marked contrast from Guy's chatterbox mother—but he stood beside her, prepping ingredients so quickly his arm was invisible from the elbow down.

Guy leaned back in his chair, raising an eyebrow at them. "You could be a bit friendlier, Dad! I brought my friends home, here!"

"...Mm, fair. Should I get my guitar?"

"Absolutely not! You suck at it! Why do you always gotta play for people?!"

Guy shook his head and leaned back across the table.

Nanao had been packing food away as fast as any of the children, but then she felt a tug on her sleeve. She froze, fork still in hand, and glanced down to find a boy looking at her—he was maybe four or five years old.

"Mm? Can I help you?" she asked.

"Teach me spells!" the boy demanded.

Guy spun his chair that way. "You ain't ready, Colin! You ain't even got your first wand yet!"

"But I wanna go to Kimberly now!"

"Absolutely not!" their mother said, scooping up her small son. "One boy at that dangerous place is more than enough. If you really want to go, you'll need to grow up—and then fight me for a whole month straight. Just like your brother did."

Across the table from Nanao, Katie made a strange noise.

"...Guy, your parents tried to stop you from going to Kimberly, too?" she asked.

"Mm? Yeah, I guess. Lost count of how many times we got to grappling."

"Why wouldn't we?! We want him taking over the farm, not going to a place like that."

"Like I said, I'm into ancient and extinct species. Kimberly's got 'em both! Rare seeds, fossilized ones—only place that lets students get their hands on that stuff."

"Hmph. If it gets to be too much for you, just say the word. We've got the transfer forms filled out."

"Yeah, that ain't happening...although if I hadn't made friends, it might have."

The latter half of Guy's response came out as a low mutter.

Guy's mother sighed and glanced over at the Kimberly students' faces. "Stubborn as the both of us. He's all yours, Oliver. Seems like even our hardheaded boy actually listens to you."

"Does he?"

"His letters make that clear enough. We know how close you all are—and how much he respects you."

"Mom!" Guy wailed, half rising out of his chair.

Chela beamed at him.

"A bit late for that, Guy," Pete said. "Everyone knows how much you love Oliver."

"Coming from you, Pete?"

"I love him, too!" Nanao cried, not to be outdone. She had her hand raised.

"And one look at you proves it," Guy's mother said, chuckling. "You're as warm as a meal pulled fresh out of the oven. Do you *need* separate rooms?"

"They don't."

"Teresaaaa! You didn't even hesitate!" Katie wailed, giving the girl at the end

of the table an envious look.

Watching from on high—his head nearly in the rafters—Marco suppressed a smile.

**CHAPTER 1** 

The Visitor

007

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

#### **CHAPTER 1**

# **The Visitor**

The new year began, and the Sword Roses officially joined the upper forms. With the freshmen orientation complete, all students gathered in the hall once again—and the headmistress's glare raked the faces of all those present.

"Listen well. With the new year, there are changes to our faculty lineup."

Sparing them the preamble, she got right to the point. This assembly was not mandatory, but their time was nonetheless valuable—no one wanted to draw things out. In any other year, such announcements would merely have been posted on the bulletin boards, but the school had good reason for doing things differently this time. This was a dramatic shake-up and required explanation from the headmistress herself.

"Our biology instructor, Vanessa Aldiss, and expert on curses, Baldia Muwezicamili, are on loan to the Gnostic Hunters. And since our astronomy instructor, Demitrio Aristides, is currently still unaccounted for, we're bringing in three provisional instructors from outside the school."

A stir ran through the crowd. The students had heard rumors there'd be a shift in staff, but the names of those who would be leaving had remained unconfirmed—and this was the first official acknowledgement of Demitrio's disappearance. Coupling these announcements with the phrase "Gnostic Hunters" had given everyone a clear idea of just what had caused this shake-up.

"Remember—this is temporary, not permanent. That said, let me introduce our new faculty members. Step forward!"

Three figures strode out from the wings. An oddly nervous-looking middle-aged man, a dark-skinned woman who stood bolt upright, and a dazzling beauty whose gender could not be determined at a glance. This last one was decked out in the finest of robes, and immediately drew every eye in the room. All instinctively sensed that this was *more* than mere good looks.

"Ha...ha-ha...hello, students," the first man said, raising a hand and listlessly introducing himself. "Marcel Oger. I'll be your new magical biology instructor. I am a Kimberly graduate, so I guess that makes me one of you? Vanessa tormented me thoroughly while I was here, so rest assured, I am not nearly as frightening."

Compared to Vanessa, he certainly seemed like a pushover—but no Kimberly instructor could be judged by first impressions. Having committed his face and name to memory, the students turned their gazes to the woman next to him.

"Zelma Warburg, curses. Mm, you *are* Kimberly students—I like the looks in your eyes. Like Marcel, I'm a graduate; but I'm far stricter than Muwezicamili. Brace yourselves."

She flashed a grin. Her clothes, voice, and expression were all designed to attract people—a signal she and Baldia were opposites within their field.

Now that her name and face were known, all attention shifted to the final individual. Yet, this androgynous mage made no effort to speak. When eyes started shifting back to the headmistress, she was forced to call the newcomer out.

"...What are you doing? Introduce yourself, Farquois."

"Oh, apologies. I imagined you would do that for me."

The new instructor made a show of surprise, and several students gasped aloud. This mage dared to tease the headmistress in public? An act of valor that had previously been demonstrated by Theodore alone—and he got away with it thanks to their years of friendship.

But that was hardly the only reason the students were rattled. The name the headmistress had said was even more shocking. Oliver could feel Pete leaning eagerly forward, more excited than anyone else.



"...Farquois?!"

"Pete, stay put," Oliver urged.

The mage in question spoke again, their voice gently tickling the ears of every student present.

"Rod Farquois. I'll be teaching astronomy. Perhaps I should introduce myself as the third great sage instead? I haven't taught anyone for a hundred and twenty years, and I'm rather excited. I've been dragged in to replace the Ignorant Philosopher. Consider yourselves blessed."

Farquois chuckled at their own joke. This clarified all confusion about their gender; no wonder nobody could tell. This mage was neither man nor woman, but a reversi—capable of switching between either body at will. Just like Pete Reston.

"Unlike the other two arrivals, I never went to Kimberly. Nor do I have any intention of conforming to this institute's style. I will promise you this: I will approach every student with the utmost love, and guide each and every one of you to the pinnacle of your craft. I say that again—every student, without exception."

A confident proclamation. Spoken with such natural poise it did not sound the least bit exaggerated. Here was a mage capable of backing up their grandiose words. Everyone knew that instinctively, and those who had prior knowledge of the "great sage" already had evidence to support the claim.

Despite the attention on them, Farquois said nothing else. The headmistress turned her gaze back to the crowd.

"You will be learning under the guidance of these instructors until we have hired permanent replacements. That will be all. Dismissed!"

Minds still racing from the news, the students filed out. Ted Williams—the alchemy instructor—had been standing to the side of the stage, his eyes locked on Farquois's profile. Catching his stare, the reversi turned to him with a smile.

"...No need to glare, my boy. I promise I will not interfere with your curriculum. I have stirred more than enough pots for a lifetime."

Farquois moved closer as they spoke. It took Ted every last nerve not to back away. He knew exactly why: He was hearing the unconscious warning bell that rang when one was faced with a mage far superior to oneself.

"Unless you have business with me, perchance? Do you seek my teachings?"

Farquois spread their arms invitingly, and Ted felt a wave of dizziness. His arms and feet went numb, and the impulse to nod without any further thought rose up within. But before that impulse drowned his consciousness, a smaller man stepped out in front of him.

"That's enough, great sage. He's a serious man—thinks too much, and it makes him rather tense. Don't mistake it for hostility," said Dustin Hedges, the broomriding instructor.

The fact that Dustin had not been swayed like Ted proved he had what it took to stand against the sage: an aplomb far beyond what his diminutive frame would have suggested.

"How long has it been, broomfare hero?" Farquois said, smiling. "I believe we last met on the front, but you look none the worse for wear. I heard you've been in the dumps since your pupil set that record."

"Wish I could have stayed there, but circumstances forced me out."

"Aha! You've recovered your mettle, then. Are the two on your back a testament to that?"

Farquois glanced pointedly over Dustin's shoulders. Two long shafts which differed from the customary athame and white wand were visible there, diagonally crossed over his back. One was his broom, and the other was a long athame in its scabbard—colloquially referred to as a balmung. Broomback warfare—broomfare—was Dustin's trade, and these items were part of his full ensemble as well as a sign that the situation at Kimberly required him to be in a state of constant readiness. This was an indication of the spirit in which he had joined Ted's alliance.

Even other Kimberly instructors would have thought twice before picking a fight with Dustin in this state; Farquois was no exception. The great sage raised both hands, backing off.

"Now, now, no need to get your hackles up. I was merely testing the waters; let's all get along. We teach at the same school, after all."

They winked at Ted, then spun around and walked away. The teachers who had been watching began filing out in turn. Only then did Ted exhale. Dustin moved over to him, resting a hand on his heaving shoulders.

"You okay there, Ted?"

".....Hard to say," Ted admitted. "That's quite a charm they used. Nearly sucked me in."

The alchemy instructor was keenly aware he was the weakest of the Kimberly faculty, yet his ability to resist charms was far greater than the average mage's. Despite that, he'd been nigh helpless before the great sage's magnetism. And naturally, Farquois had hardly been serious—like the mage themself had suggested, they had merely been teasing him.

Dustin, too, was acutely aware of the threat this posed. He glared at the door the sage had exited through, looking grim.

"We got *one* the headmistress didn't pick, and they sent a doozy. Bite your tongue, Ted. I'm no augur, but I can say one thing for sure: This is gonna be one wild year."

Back in the school building, Pete was still muttering away, giddy from the unexpected encounter.

"This is actually happening! The Rod Farquois, here at Kimberly!"

"I get why you're excited, but try to settle down, Pete," Oliver said, hands on his friend's shoulders. He glanced at Chela. "What's your take on this?"

"It wasn't the headmistress's call. On that, I'm certain. A clear miscasting for a substitute. She mentioned the Gnostic Hunters, so the sage is likely someone they wedged in, following some unknown agenda of theirs."

"So Farquois is here to dig up dirt on Kimberly?"

"Their beauty was most unnatural. More like fey glamor than human beauty...," Nanao muttered.

While the rest of Oliver's friends reacted rationally, Pete's state suggested he was under the influence of a minor charm. A mage he'd long admired through their written works alone was suddenly here in the flesh—that burst of joy was exactly the sort of opening that allowed charms to take hold. Yet, once someone was even partially under the influence of a charm, it was difficult to make them realize it. Choosing his words carefully, Oliver rubbed his friend's shoulders.

"Listen, Pete. This is a mage from outside Kimberly. Our instructors so far have been terrifying, but curtailed by rules they couldn't break. The sage, though—I suspect those same rules may not apply to them."

Oliver was urging the utmost caution, but Pete's passion proved unstoppable. He brushed Oliver's hands off, annoyed.

"Then I've just gotta watch myself. When'd you all get so pessimistic? Even if Kimberly and the Gnostic Hunters are squabbling about something, that won't affect us directly."

"Oh, but it could. This is Rod Farquois. You know better than anyone, Pete—a solid ninety percent of reversi are taken in by that clan. Which could mean you."

Oliver wasn't getting through, so he pushed harder. But that just made Pete scowl even more, and he lashed out for reasons which went beyond the new instructor's charm.

"Sounds good to me. A connection with the great sage? That's an opportunity."

"Pete!" Chela yelped, unable to bear it.

What Pete had said wasn't entirely wrong, but he was clearly not getting just what a threat a mage like Rod Farquois posed. No matter how careful one might be, lengthy exposure to anyone with a charm that powerful would warp a person's will. Chela and Oliver believed this was why that clan had been able to bring so many reversi into their fold. Any contact with Farquois was a risk.

But before anyone could urge further caution, Pete turned his back on the group.

"I'll do things my way. We're fourth-years now. I'm sick and tired of your

overprotective bullshit."

He left those words ringing in their years; everyone knew *this* was the source of his frustration. The set of his shoulders made it clear it would be no use chasing after him now—doing so would only make him dig his heels in further. All they could do was watch him go.

That same evening, in a hidden workshop on the labyrinth's first layer, Oliver was acting as his comrades' lord, overseeing their first meeting of the year.

"You're all aware things have taken a nasty turn," said Gwyn, who was once again presiding over the gathering.

He and Shannon had graduated and been hired by Kimberly to help with curses. They were no longer students, but their role here had not changed. They would overlook nothing that might prove an obstacle to Oliver's purpose, and they needed to respond swiftly if such threats arose. But because of that, they were left at a loss.

"Vanessa and Baldia being sent away—well, we expected as much. But nobody expected the great sage rolling in to replace Demitrio. Who brought them in? Is the Gnostic HQ gearing up to take on the headmistress?"

"Unclear. Almost certainly one of the Five Rods, but Farquois isn't the type to act on anyone's orders. They're infamous for ignoring calls for Gnostic reservists unless the situation is exceptionally dire. We must assume they have a purpose of their own here."

"Tomes in the library? A faculty member's research? Or..."

Oliver's comrades searched for something of appropriate value, but then one girl's hand shot up.

"One obvious target—there's an unaffiliated reversi in the fourth year."

Everyone nodded. Oliver was hardly the only one who'd noticed that possibility.

"Pete Reston," Gwyn said. "That name is the first on all our minds. The Farquois clan actively encourages reversi to join their numbers, and everyone knows only reversi can inherit the Rod Farquois name."

"So they're here to get their paws on him before anyone else can stake a claim? I see the logic behind that, but would they come teach at Kimberly for that alone? Ain't no reason for the sage themself to do the job."

The speaker crooked his head, and Oliver agreed with that take entirely. This was far too much time and effort to devote to Pete Reston alone. Assuming that goal was achieved, they couldn't then step down so easily from their post. Doing so would be both a betrayal and an insult to the institute of Kimberly itself.

That was not a debt that could be repaid at the best of times, and in the current climate, it would make a lifelong enemy of the headmistress herself. Even the great sage could not possibly want that—which was why their presence here befuddled everyone.

"Either way, those are the motives we can suggest at the moment," Gwyn went on. "If this was done behind the headmistress's back, all the more reason to be wary of them. And they're every bit a match for the class of mage that Kimberly employs, which makes them a huge headache for us."

"So we just gotta wait and see? At this rate, we can't go picking a next target. All we can do is make sure we don't slip up and get ourselves caught."

"Yes...but there's no need to keep tabs on Pete Reston. Fortunately, our lord is already close to him."

All eyes turned to Oliver. He knew full well that his comrades had the right idea, so he nodded gravely.

"No telling how many will fall under the sage's charm," Gwyn said. "You watch yourself, Noll. As much as you watch your friend."

"...I will, Brother."

Oliver closed his eyes. He had always taken every precaution. That was his duty as their lord—and it was necessary for the safety of his irreplaceable friends.

When reflecting on the fight with Demitrio Aristides, Oliver was acutely aware of one thing: Regardless of the final outcome, they had *lost* that battle.

They had only managed to pull off the upset because of his late friend, Yuri Leik, a splinter of their target's soul. Oliver had sown the seeds for that—but arguably, so had Demitrio himself. The process had been far too unorthodox to be chalked up to "good fortune." Given that the oversight in their strategies had proved to be their fatal error, one could convincingly argue that their actual plans could never have led to victory.

And in light of that, the remaining four targets would hardly be *easier* than Demitrio. Oliver believed the attempt would lead only to defeat. They could not count on Yuri twice. Given the discrepancy in power between them and their targets, what awaited was merely the inevitable.

In this predicament, the great sage's arrival made Oliver's head spin. A new threat? A windfall they could turn to their advantage? No matter what move Oliver made, he would first have to see what this new arrival wanted. Classes had only just begun, and they provided him with his first chance to take the measure of the reversi.

"Well, now. How shall we begin?"

All students' eyes were on the podium where Demitrio had once held sway. Farquois was one size smaller than that philosopher. Everyone was curious to see how the great sage would teach, and it seemed the mage themself had yet to decide. Pete was sitting two rows ahead of Oliver, who kept one eye on his friend—careful to behave like any other student would while observing the sage carefully.

"Sorry, it's been a while since I last taught. Completely forgot how I used to behave. I think today we'll chat a bit, let me pick your brains. The sooner I put names to faces, the better."

Their tone was friendly, and students who'd been braced for anything were left flat-footed. Demitrio had been driven by duty—this approach was downright indifferent by comparison. As that impression settled in, Farquois crossed their arms.

"Still, old Aristides... I don't know who took him down, but consider me impressed. We never got along, though I respected his talents as a mage. And that's not something I say often. I can count on one hand the number of mages

### I respect."

They doffed their hat to their predecessor in the most arrogant manner possible, and several students bucked at their attitude, but chose to sheathe their mental daggers for now. Many had admired Demitrio's earnest character and his accomplishments; his tenure at Kimberly hadn't been so long for nothing. Oliver thought it wise to soothe their hackles before they were fully raised, but what Farquois said next was far more concerning.

"I'm aware of this institute's reputation," the sage remarked, leaning back against the podium. "Casting spells, swinging blades—both an accepted part of campus life. It's worse in the labyrinth below, but even in classes, limbs routinely go flying. You have my sympathies. From the bottom of my heart, I pity anyone forced to learn in a place like this."

Oliver's eyes nearly popped out of his head. Rather than soothing anyone, the sage had chosen to *bait* them. Arrogance and irrationality were typical among Kimberly instructors, but those qualities were earned after they'd proved themselves to the students. Demonstrating nothing, but sneering down their nose at everyone—that earned Farquois more than a few scowls.

"Richard Andrews," one boy said, raising his hand and briefly introducing himself. "If you don't mind me asking, do you take issue with Kimberly's approach?"

No minced words here—that was the question on everyone's mind. Oliver sent him a silent thank-you. He wanted to avoid saying anything himself, lest he suggest he was *probing*. But Richard could take the measure of Farquois undaunted, and Farquois glanced his way, still leaning on the podium.

"Take issue? Why, yes. If I were in charge, things would be quite different. At the least, you would be far safer. And without in any way diminishing the quality of your educations."

Everyone gulped. This went beyond criticism of Kimberly traditions into a direct criticism of the headmistress. Absolutely not something an outside substitute should be doing on the first day of class. Would their head remain on their shoulders the following day? All began to doubt that point, but Farquois shrugged it off.

"I've heard some of you campaigned for improvements. The student body president who graduated last year? Heh-heh...perhaps this is the ideal timing for my arrival. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Andrews?"

"...No comment."

Keeping his response minimal, Andrews let his gaze drop. Oliver took this interaction to mean the sage was even more fearless than he'd imagined, but that made it even less clear why they were here at all.

They can't actually be here to pick a fight with Kimberly from the inside, right? Did three losses drive the Gnostic headquarters to an act of foolish desperation?

"I suspect we're overcomplicating things. Let's clear the air with some light exercise! **Deformatio!**"

At the great sage's spell, the desks and chairs began to move, and were absorbed into the floor as the students leaped to their feet. Even the wall behind them retracted, removing the division between the adjacent classroom. This was a standard feature of Kimberly classrooms, and no one was surprised.

Until Farquois strode into the center of the space they'd created, spreading their arms.

"Let's play tag. I'll give appropriate credit to anyone who can catch me. In return...if I touch your forehead, identify yourself. That won't eliminate you or anything—it's just a way for me to learn your names."

"Huh...?"

"...What?"

"Should we allow spells or not? I won't use any, so I'm not picky...but perhaps you'd best avoid friendly fire."

Farquois was winding them up, but disguising it as concern. The students were now nakedly hostile to them. One such girl raised a hand—Jasmine Ames, one of the best blades in her year, her eyes hidden by her long bangs.

"...If you'll excuse me, Instructor. All here are Kimberly fourth-years. It would be one thing if we were outside, where there is room to run, but do you think you can outmaneuver us in this limited space without spells?" "Of course. Who do you think I am? I'm the great sage."

Farquois shrugged. And that was all Ames needed to hear.

"Very well. You heard the instructor, ladies and gentlemen. We have been disparaged."

That word hit hard—and every eye in the room bored into Farquois.

"That's the spirit," they said, spreading both arms. "Come at me!"

They clapped their hands, and all students sprang into motion. Farquois retreated with their back to the wall, then walked up the face of it. The students had expected as much, and those at the head of the pack employed the same technique.

"Ah, you've all mastered Wall Walking like it's nothing," Farquois murmured, sounding genuinely impressed. "How very Kimberly. Your acquisition of combat fundamentals is well ahead of the crowd."

In the lead, Rossi lunged at Farquois after a triple feint. His fingers reached for the sage's chest, but caught only air—and he received a light tap on his brow.

"...Tch...!"

"That was some Koutz footwork, yes? I can tell you were self-taught once, but you've polished it well. Tighten your balance on your turns, and it'll get even sharper. Your name?"

"Tullio Rossi! And I am not done with you just yet!"

One hand on his brow, Rossi had already shifted directions, giving chase. Farquois retreated farther up the wall, to the top of it, and then the great sage's feet carried them right onto the ceiling, such that they were dangling upside down. The students swore. This was far more difficult than walking on a wall, but they were forced to follow. While Ames and Rossi kept Farquois busy, Mistral used spatial magic to generate projections, all of which closed in on the sage's back—but then Farquois's finger pushed him backward.

"...Ack...!"

"You're good with illusions? If you can do this with spatial magic alone, the spell version must be outstanding. You'll have to demonstrate some time. Your

name?"

"Dammit! Rosé Mistral."

Unable to maintain Wall Walk further, Mistral fell from the ceiling. Without waiting for him to land, three new students used Ghost Ground in tandem, targeting Farquois. The sage's robe spun in response, and a foot swept across the ceiling at their heels—two students fell away, and a finger struck the third's brow.

"....!"

"Good teamwork. But those two can't quite keep up with your moves. Are you soft on your friends? Always a temptation. Your name?"

"...Jasmine Ames, loath as I am to admit it."

Reluctantly, she canceled her Wall Walk, falling away—and landing catlike on the floor below. Having seen that through, Farquois's gaze swept the ceiling around them.

Naturally, not everyone was approaching in small groups. While the early birds had kept the sage busy, the others had formed ranks. The bulk of the students were now in formation around their target.

"You have me surrounded! Yes, the right choice."

""Get 'em!""

Andrews and Albright gave the order as one, and dozens of students shot forward from every angle. They all thought they'd won; no matter how inhuman Farquois's movements were, there was nowhere to go. They even had a group on the floor below, in case the sage canceled their Wall Walk.

But Farquois did not even attempt to dodge—they merely tapped the ceiling with their heel.

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The students' soles collectively detached, and everyone around Farquois was put in free fall. Oliver had been watching from a distance, near the walls, and narrowed his eyes, analyzing this.

They took advantage of our unpolished technique. Poured mana into the ceiling around them, disrupting the elements, and making it hard for students to maintain the Wall Walk. Naturally, Farquois themself was unaffected. They were simply that much better at standing on the ceiling.

"Feel free to climb back up! I'm magnanimous. I'd never dream of saying you only get one shot at me."

Farquois smiled gently down at the stunned crowd below. By now, everyone knew they'd be chasing Farquois's shadow for the rest of class.

That notion proved well-founded, and time passed accordingly.

"...Hmm. Hmm? Hmm, hmm, hmm."

On the ceiling above, the great sage nodded to themself. Far fewer students were still mobile than when the game of tag had begun. Moving around on the walls took a lot out of them, and the majority had surpassed their limits, and were on the floor, out of breath. But there were exceptions—and Farquois turned toward them.

"Seven of you are still able to Wall Walk. More than I expected! When it comes to physical movements alone, you are clearly the best your year offers."

Arms folded, they offered praise, eyeing each face in turn.

"By this point I know who each of you must be. Nanao Hibiya, Chela McFarlane, Joseph Albright, and Ursule Valois, yes?" they said, pointing at the students they named. "Mr. Andrews and Ms. Ames gave me their names, so that much is obvious. Mr. Rossi—well done. Had you not lost your temper, I'm well aware you'd be here, too, don't worry."

Rossi was splayed flat across the floor overhead, but not forgotten. Oliver knew why—the others had played the long game and taken breaks appropriately, but Rossi had been all out from the get-go.

Having named six students, at last the sage turned to Oliver.

"And you, Mr. Horn. You're a very careful boy. You didn't let me touch you once. Something tells me it was your call that Ms. Hibiya and Ms. McFarlane weren't particularly aggressive."

*"…"* 

Oliver offered only silence in return. Not once since the game had begun had he offered instructions in any form the eye could see. He'd done his best to avoid anything that would allow the sage to analyze *him*. But it seemed like he might as well have done things in plain sight.

"You really don't want me touching you, hmm? No need for such caution. I am not your enemy—rather, I am your greatest ally. I hope you all realize that soon."

Farquois's lips curled, and they began walking across the ceiling. Everyone braced themselves; the game of tag was still afoot, and Farquois was still their target. That had allowed Oliver to keep his distance and observe. But if those roles were reversed...

The sound of a bell broke the mounting tension. Class was over, and Farquois's mysterious magnetism dissipated.

"Still, that's all we have time for. No credits given, but never fear—I know all your names and faces now. You are what all envy: pupils to the great sage."

With a dazzling smile, Farquois dropped to the floor below and headed for the door. The few remaining students finally relaxed.

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"...I am chagrined..."
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"Jaz!"

"Stay with us!"

Ames had no strength with which to make a landing, and her companions were forced to catch her.

"..."

"Augh, Mistral!"

"The stress killed him!"

Mistral was flat on his face, nigh unconscious, and his friends hastened to help him up.

One eye on them, Farquois grinned—and their path took them past Pete, who

was sitting exhausted with Katie and Guy.

"...Ah-"

*u\_\_\_\_\_"* 

Pete's eyes tracked the sage, but they moved right on by, not even sparing him a glance. The door slid closed, and Pete clenched his fists.

"One 'ell of a monster," Rossi said, recovering enough to right himself. "Movements too polished! Even our faculty 'ave few at that level. I would imagine just Garland and Theodore, eh?"

"Yeah...and they only touched us when countering."

"Had we pursued them more aggressively, none of us would still be standing. Deplorable."

Andrews and Albright were clearly on the same page.

Ursule Valois swept past them. She was a pure Koutz practitioner and had gone toe-to-toe with Oliver's team in the combat league the previous year.

"Postmortems? On your own time, please. I have better things to do."

"Ah, Lady Ursule—!"

"Wait for us...!"

Her two exhausted retainers scrambled to follow her out. The rest of the crowd began to follow their lead.

Pete was still standing very still, and Oliver moved to his side.

"Pete—"

"Don't fuss. I'm not chasing after them."

Pete brushed off his hand and left the room. Oliver grimaced, before being joined by Chela and Nanao.

"...Farquois has yet to show any clear interest in Pete. Not that we can relax yet."

"A fox in the flesh. It felt as if I was attempting to catch running water."

The girls gave their impressions of Farquois, and Oliver nodded.

"Agreed on both counts. Yet, they are here to teach at Kimberly, so this should be no surprise. I'm more interested in what they *said*. To call out this school's philosophy in so many words..."

His eyes narrowed. Even taking into consideration the great sage's reputation and their backing of the Gnostic Hunters, such behavior was a clear risk to life and limb.

"I cannot read them," Chela added. "Did they mean that? And if they did, to what extent?"

**CHAPTER 2** 

Obsession

## **CHAPTER 2**

## **Obsession**

One morning, Guy was shaken from his slumber.

"Guy—hey, wake up. Guy!" The voice was drawn out, but urgent.

Rubbing his eyes, Guy looked up to find his roommate, Yonatan Jelinek, acting rather upset. They'd lived together for three years now, since day one. They'd built a cordial relationship—not as close as the Sword Roses, but the pair got along fine.

"...Mm? Is it that time?"

"Not really. Just, like, your plant? It's weird."

Yonatan pointed at the window. Guy had a number of plants in pots growing there, but one was set well away from the others, surrounded by an elaborate magic diagram. The trunk was dark blue, the branches winding and wriggly—and the bloodred fruit dangling from the end of one branch made this all much more ominous than any standard plant.

"...It's bearing fruit already? That was fast."

"So we're good? It's not gonna, like, reach out for us?"

"...As long as you don't try anything funny, it'll be fine. I'm the one feeding it blood."

Guy heaved himself out of bed and grabbed his athame from the table. He nicked the tip of his finger and held it over the pot. Blood dripped into the pot and was swallowed by the soil, then ripples ran up the creepy plant like it was celebrating.

Guy snorted. This might have been scary to look at, but he was an old hand with dangerous magiflora, and it posed little threat. He was more bothered by how he'd come to possess this particular specimen in the first place—it was all

thanks to an encounter from the year before he would not soon forget.

A number of successes in cultivating endangered species had spread the word among Guy Greenwood's year of his talent for magical botany. But not many students were aware of his *second*-best subject.

"Are your hearts quite ready?" a raspy voice inquired. "You'll all be taking one step closer to becoming curse wranglers."

The curse instructor, Baldia Muwezicamili. Her classes ordinarily took place indoors, but today they were gathered in an outdoor training space. Those used to Kimberly classes could guess why—and the row of animals lined up behind Baldia proved their theory.

"Classes thus far have focused on how to handle curses. What curse energy is, and how it is transmitted. But that much is simply standard-issue mage curriculum. You know that, yes?" she asked. "What separates a curse wrangler from other mages is quite simple: Can they turn the curse energy inside themselves into power? Thus far, when cursed, you've only considered how to free yourself from it. From this point on, we shall do the opposite. We'll be looking at how to befriend it!"

With that, Baldia waved a wand. The beasts all filed into the practice space, with one stopping before each student.

Guy took a good look at the magical beast in front of him. It was something like a goat, but its breathing was ragged, its eyes cloudy and bloodshot, its milk-white pelt stained by a sinister moiré. At a glance, you could tell it was infected with a curse.

"I'm sure you can tell—Vana provided these drowsy goats, and they're quite cursed. Each of you is going to slaughter one, and receive the curse energy from that. For now, if you can pacify that energy within you, you pass. Individual aptitude varies wildly, early on. I'll give an easy extra assignment to those who handle it well."

The specifics of their task made Guy's friends frown.

"...Glad Katie chose not to attend."

"Yes, she could never have managed this."

"I am hardly eager, either. I must convince myself 'tis for my betterment."

Oliver, Chela, and Nanao were disturbed, but able to function. They knew that working with curses required a considerable degree of self-control. That was true even for Guy, who had a knack for this. All eyes drifted to the last of their number; Pete looked rather pale, aware this was not his strong suit.

"Everyone ready?" Baldia asked. "It's fine if you make them suffer, but that will make it harder to control the curse energy. For today, I recommend making it quick. Oh, don't worry; I'll take all the curse energy from you at the end. Okay? You may begin."

Guy was already moving even as she gave the sign. He drew his white wand and aimed it right at the drowsy goat's head. He'd done this sort of thing back home and knew just what spell to picture.

## "...Impediendum!"

He put solid force behind it. The spell hit the goat's skull, and the animal toppled over dead. His spell had paralyzed the brain itself, providing a painless demise.

Baldia grinned at him. "You're so nice! Is that how your family does it?"

"I was taught how not long after I got my wand." Guy sighed. "My folks are big on causing no suffering for the lives you take."

His friends nodded, and handled their goats in the same way. As Guy watched them, something hazy began to ooze out of the corpse at his feet.

"...Here goes..."

Steeling himself, he awaited the curse energy. A beat later, he felt the uncanny pain of it flowing into him and did his best not to reject it. He quickly finished up as his friends began tackling their own challenges, each focused on getting the energy under control.

"...Urgh...!"

Pete's knees buckled, the curse too much for him. Guy quickly stepped over, gripping his friend's shoulders firmly.

"Relax, Pete. Don't try and do anything to it. Just keep your mind intact and

focus on feeling it."

"...Ah, ahh..."

Through the hands on Pete's shoulders, he felt Pete's temperature stabilize. The boy was taking Guy's advice and facing the curse energy within him. The other three got theirs under control as well, looking relieved.

Feeling much the same way, Guy turned to Baldia.

"Mind if I keep the corpse, Instructor? I'd feel better if I could dress and eat it. Nanao, you in? You'd rather eat your kills, right?"

"That I would!" she cried, throwing a hand up.

Guy grinned and looked back at Baldia. "See? Oh, and about that extra assignment..."

"...Heh-heh, but of course."

Baldia readily gave permission, neither rebuking nor scoffing at her students' peculiarities—just watching it all with adoration.

"How are you faring, Guy?"

After class, Guy had split off from the others, carrying the drowsy goat corpses down the hall alone. These words hit his back as the crowd thinned around him. Hardly one to mistake that raspy voice, he turned, aware that it was his curse instructor addressing him.

"Well enough. What's up, Instructor Baldia? I'm not about to slack off in your class, I promise."

"Eh-heh-heh, I know that! You're a remarkable talent. Have been since day one!"

His carefree attitude made her chuckle. That baby face peeking out of her sinister frame—Guy was getting used to it. Once upon a time, if she'd gotten this close to him, the residual curse energy would have made him puke. Now he merely had to brace himself, and he could hold out long enough for some chitchat.

"There are many types of wranglers, but generous, patient types are generally

suited for this line of work. Those same qualities give you the capacity to put up with the curses you take in."

"That's nice to hear, but...flattery will get you nowhere."

"A breezy retort like that is reward enough! So few people manage to talk to me like that."

She sounded forlorn, and Guy was at a loss for how to respond. Realizing as much, she pressed on.

"Much as I'd love to stop and talk to you all day, dear, I don't want to be a bother. Let me get to the point. Things are changing. It's unclear if I'll be at Kimberly next year."

"...Oh yeah?"

"Can't say more, so don't ask. Just be aware there's a chance I'll be away for a year. And if that happens—while I'm gone, Instructor David will make you his!"

Her lips twisted with envy, then curled into a grin.

"So I'm doling out a little favoritism ahead of time. Your hand, if you would?"

Gulping, Guy did as he was told. A white hand extended from that black robe, and pinched fingers dropped something tiny into his palm. Guy frowned at it; those hard botanical fibers were unmistakable.

"...A seed...?"

"I want to show you the real thrill of curses, so I'm loaning you a tiny fraction of my own. Heh-heh...I put it in a plant, so that you might handle it more easily."

"And what do I do with it?"

"Cultivate it in soil mixed with your blood. It should bear fruit in a month; harvest that, and keep it in your pocket. I suspect it'll serve you well in a pinch."

When Guy said nothing, Baldia began pacing around him.

"You're looking for a shortcut to strength, aren't you? Curses can do that more than magiflora ever will. After all, this is a field only ever meant to do harm."

"...But I ain't planning on—"

"I know! It's not what you want. Once you've been cursed, it'll affect how you deal with people and plants. But you can work around that once you get better at it. And you haven't yet experienced the *power* you gain in return for all those inconveniences. I think it won't hurt to make up your mind once you've had a taste."

Guy could feel his resistance to the idea fading with each word she said. Kimberly faculty were prone to get right to the point, but Baldia never hesitated to lay a foundation first. She'd spent years plying him just for this one opportunity at recruitment.

"Why not give it a shot? Your little circle doesn't have any curse wranglers. If you learn the craft, it'll help all of you. Let you be there to take the curse if someone you care about is afflicted."

"..."

"Heh-heh. Don't worry, it's just a loaner. I'll scoop it right back up when I return to Kimberly, and even if something happens to me, it's mild enough that other teachers can manage it. There's no way you'll end up permanently cursed. I do hope you'll trust me that much."

She batted her eyelashes at him, and he was forced to concede the point. From the very first class, he'd maintained the same stance: He wasn't about to take a dim view of her based on her field of expertise alone. This was fundamental to Guy's gregarious personality.

When he slipped the seed into his pocket, Baldia grinned.

"You've accepted! Then that's all I have to say. Except...you're rather pentup."

"...? Meaning?"

"That phrase has only one meaning. Still...simple abstinence wouldn't get you this bad. You've got someone you're physically close to, but who you can't touch?"

Baldia tapped her chin with one finger, cocking her head to one side. Guy was

baffled, but a few seconds later he worked out the implication, and turned red. Baldia seemed to find that adorable.

"Such a shame! If you were a full-fledged wrangler, I could help you out. Few things feel better than sharing curses while you copulate. Like you're in a pit of mud, dissolving into it together."

"...Too much information! Leave me out of this conversation."

"Eh-heh-heh. You'll be an upperclassman soon enough, and I'll be treating you accordingly. Still, let me be clear—I don't do this for just anyone."

Baldia took a big step closer. Guy stiffened up, and she sniffed him.

"You always smell like sunshine. I *love* that. I imagine quite a few people here do. I envy the one you let in."

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Guy had no response to that.

On some level, he'd been self-aware. Each new year only added to the darkness at Kimberly, and his disposition made him stand out. It was the same reason that Katie came to Guy for comfort, and Oliver let himself relax in Guy's company.

"But if you sink into this same darkness, I could love you even more. Remember that, Guy."

With that last comment, Baldia spun around. Guy watched her tiny frame scuttle off down the hall. As befit someone in her field, that final remark was itself a curse.

"...Goddamn. I know how dangerous she is, but I can't bring myself to hate her."

Guy scratched his head, remembering how lonely she'd looked. Yonatan had been peering over his shoulder, but now he lay back down in bed.

"Lot on your mind, Guy? You have got to find a way to vent."

"I ain't pent-up!"

"Don't get mad at me. I'm still sleepy—wake me on your way out."

With that, Yonatan pulled the covers over his head. As the room fell silent, Guy turned his eyes back to the plant, which writhed with the curse it harbored, and sighed.

Morning classes were over, and the Sword Roses were kicking back in the Forum. To Guy, this was a reminder they were fourth-years now. The Fellowship was full of fresh-faced new kids and boisterous underclassmen, while the upper forms' dining hall was far more subdued. It was no less bloodthirsty, though; all occupants here had long since perfected that "ready to draw wands at any time" stance.

"Guy, take a look at this!"

Guy had been working his way through a galette when someone flung their arms around him from behind. Katie had maintained her cheery disposition into the upper forms, but her growing chest was definitely getting harder to ignore, and Guy squirmed a bit. Oblivious to this, she placed an open book before him.

"...Mmkay, what am I looking at?" he asked.

"Here—this claim's way different from the last book. Sounds like the concentration of magic particles isn't the sole deciding factor for branching evolutions. I've got a hunch that—"

"What's going on?"

Another friend had arrived late, and their eyes met. Katie hastily peeled herself off Guy.

"Ack, Oliver! N-n-nothing! Just got caught up in this book!"

"Yeah? I thought I could help."

"I'm good! Want to think on this myself."

Katie pivoted as best as she could and scrambled off. She no longer hesitated to cuddle with Guy, but when Oliver was around, shame still got the better of her. Feeling rather relieved, Guy snorted—and Oliver shot him a worried look.

"...Guy? You aren't looking so hot."

"Man, I'm fine, okay? I'm rock-solid, you know that."

Unable to withstand that look, Guy scrambled to his feet and quickly left the Forum, well aware he was off his game that day. The plant bearing fruit had dug up memories of Baldia, and his mind had been scattered all morning long, distracting him enough that he couldn't even maintain his cool around his friends.

Best to put his mind on other things. To that end, he hit up the library, but as he reached for a book, his hand overlapped with another's. Surprised, he turned to find Rita Appleton standing there. She was a year below him.

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"...Ah..."
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"...Yo, Rita. Here to read?"

"Y-yes. Magical botany class has us analyzing a species from the second layer."

"Ah. Don't let me stop ya."

He let her have the book and headed for a different shelf.

Rita hesitated, then called after him. "Er, um...!"

"Mm?"

"C-could you join me? I actually have several questions...!"

"? Uh, sure. That works; I needed a change of pace."

Guy nodded readily, turning back to her. Rita's cheeks were slightly flushed, but her smile was genuine.

If she had questions, it was best they go somewhere suitable for chatting. With that in mind, they hauled related readings to the nearest lounge, settled down there, and began discussing Rita's assignment. Guy had been through the same thing himself a year before, so the answers came readily, and he'd cleared up her concerns inside twenty minutes. Rita looked relieved.

"Thank you. I have a far better understanding now," she said.

"Cool." Guy nodded. "Easy to forget after a while at Kimberly, but there's nowhere else quite like the labyrinth. Same plants don't grow that way on the surface. That's something we've always gotta take into account in our papers."

A trap he'd fallen into himself. Rita glanced at his profile and smiled.

"...I'm glad you're doing okay. Maybe I was imagining it, but you looked awfully worn-out earlier."

"If even you've noticed, then it's definitely catching up with me."

"...If there's something on your mind, I'm happy to listen."

Rita balled her hands up on her knees, leaning in.

"It ain't that bad," Guy insisted, eyes on the rafters. "Just thinking on what's best for my buds. How's your group doing? Dean and Teresa still going at it?"

"W-we're doing just fine. Sounds like Teresa really enjoyed that trip. She told me all about your house."

"Ha-ha, good to know," Guy said, brightening up. "Tell her she's welcome over anytime."

Sensing a hidden pain beneath that cheeriness, Rita pursed her lips. She always paid him a lot of attention and had a good idea of just what was undermining his usual disposition.

"...This is about Ms. Aalto...right? She's been occupying your mind..."

"...Well, no use arguing the point. She's the biggest risk we've got."

Guy nodded, figuring he wasn't wriggling out of that one. But that didn't mean he was inclined to grumble about it to a junior. When he said nothing else, Rita felt her frustrations swirling.

Why wouldn't he talk to her? Was she not worth trusting? She wouldn't tell a soul. She'd always looked up to him, and hated how little she could do to help.

She couldn't exactly admit that. She swallowed the words, but something else spilled out. Feelings she'd kept bottled up right alongside her crush on him.

"...She's ...she's so...underhanded."

"Huh?"

"...Everyone knows she's got a thing for Mr. Horn. Yet, she's all over you. Like she's using you as an outlet because she knows she can't have him."

The dark fury in her voice made Guy's eyes widen. Rita caught herself and put a hand to her lips. Realizing just what she'd said, she turned pale.

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"S-sorry, I didn't..."

"Uh, Rita..."

".....! I—I gotta go."
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Rita bolted out of her chair and fled the room, leaving Guy staring after her.

"...What is going on today?"

"You're a heartbreaker, Guy."

A familiar voice. Guy flinched and spun around to find a short-statured boy behind him, with a hefty tome under one arm.

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"...Pete..."
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"Don't give me that. You are where you are. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop."

Letting that stand as his excuse, Pete glanced around, and several curious gazes were swiftly withdrawn. Rita had been too emotional to put up a soundproof barrier, and everyone had heard how their interaction had played out. Guy clutched his forehead, and Pete stepped in close.

"Look," he told Guy, "I've been keeping an eye on you myself. You're giving Katie a bit too much. Even if it's what you want."

"Oh, come on...I can't exactly turn her away. Not in her condition."

"No. I wouldn't want you doing that. You're the only one in any shape to deal with her—I couldn't do the same if I tried."

Pete was quite firm on this. He then caught Guy's eye.

"But it's gotta go both ways, Guy. You've gotta want her. Why aren't you making the moves? You're not her dad."

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"...No...I just don't see her like—"
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"Then who else is there? You gonna go with Ms. Appleton instead? Seems like she'd be up for it."

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"Hey!"
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Dropping Rita's name here definitely got under Guy's skin, and he grabbed Pete's shoulder roughly. Pete didn't budge. With unclouded eyes, he looked right up at Guy, his tone harsh.

"...Katie's going to you for comfort. But who's comforting you, Guy?"

Pete had spelled out an issue Guy had no response to. Guy's grip loosened, and Pete shook him off, straightening his robes.

"Katie's your best bet," Pete said with a sigh. "Keeps it in the group. That's all I'm trying to say. If I'm being totally honest, I don't want you getting that close to anyone else, even Ms. Appleton. That would probably rattle Katie even more. It'd be one thing if you were the kinda guy who could hook up with someone on the sly, but..."

"...Perish the thought."

Guy threw up his hands and sank back into his chair.

"Sorry." Pete flashed a smile. "Don't let it eat you up. I'm not trying to torment you here!"

He stepped closer.

"Tell you what—if you don't have it in you to go to Katie..." He cupped Guy's cheek and whispered in the bewildered boy's ear. "I could take care of you. Keeps it in our circle, so that works for me."

"Huh?"

This invitation made Guy stiffen up. Pete backed off before Guy could recover.

"Lemme know if you're interested. I'll need time to get myself ready. Can't have you just jumping me out of the blue!"

Guy's protests went unheard; Pete was already out the door. He'd dropped a whole new mess on a brain that was already overheated. Guy was left scratching his head with both hands.

Meanwhile, in the student council room, the Watch members were meeting,

their leader and lineup having been renewed.

"That everyone? Let's do this thing."

At the head of the table was a small-statured seventh-year, Tim Linton, who had overcome the odds to succeed Godfrey as student body president. Kimberly had never had strict uniform standards, so his frilly girl's outfit was now becoming a recognizable trademark. If anything seemed off here, it was less the boy's wardrobe than the boy himself being quite unused to command.

"Before anything else, I have a question," said a sixth-year to Tim's right. "Does anyone have the first clue what's going on at Kimberly? Any big-picture views, however hazy?"

This was Percival Whalley, aide to the new president. He'd been the opposition candidate in the election itself, but Tim had gone, "That dude's useful," and in a strange twist of fate, he'd wound up joining the new council. It was not hard to imagine how conflicted he'd been about the invite, but he'd accepted on the spot.

"No one, right? I thought not," said a seventh-year girl, her face planted on the table across from Tim. She sighed. "I'm certainly clueless. I thought I had a good read on who'd come, but the great sage blew my mind. I've got enough on my plate with all these debts."

Vera Miligan needed no introduction. She'd aided the Watch since Godfrey's reign and had been a key figure in the election; her spot here had been guaranteed. And that had been a major reason why Whalley had also been made an aide.

"How do we control her?"

"I ain't up to it."

"Fuck it—let's just get some hardheaded nag and let them deal with her."

That was the gist of how things had gone, and Whalley himself had agreed to the position on the condition that they never let Miligan control any finances.

"Before we let our imaginations run wild, let's review the facts," said a fourthyear—Richard Andrews, now the secretary. He began writing in the air with his wand. "Instructors Darius, Enrico, and Demitrio—three disappearances in as many years. Instructors Vanessa and Baldia sent away—three new teachers brought in to replace them, including the great sage Rod Farquois."

With one eye on the future, the Watch had seen the need to bring in a capable fourth-year, and had spoken to a number of combat league stars, but ultimately only one had agreed to join them. Officially he'd backed the opposition, so, as with Whalley, Tim's council was taking a flexible approach to appointments.

"Counting Instructor Ted, that's four new hires," Richard told the group. "He and two of the new ones all have long-standing ties to Kimberly; they're no surprise. The great sage alone sticks out like a sore thumb. For obvious reasons."

"There's a few students we'd have liked to have joined us to discuss these concerns—but I'm guessing that didn't work out, Mr. Andrews," said Whalley.

Richard shook his head. "I spoke to both Ms. McFarlane and Mr. Albright, but they refused for the same reason. They've heard nothing from home, and even if they had, they could not share."

"To be expected," Miligan said, pursing her lips. "Ms. McFarlane just got slugged by Instructor Theodore during the league, and Mr. Albright's father is the current head of the Five Rods. Neither scion can afford to share what they know—and likely weren't given the information in the first place."

"Fine." Tim folded his arms. "What we don't know, we dunno. Understanding that much is good enough. What we gotta do is clear as a bell. Prevent pointless student deaths, plain and simple."

"But to do that effectively, I'd like a firm grasp on the situation," Whalley growled. "Still, I agree that speculating on speculation is futile. We'll just have to base our approach on the limited information available."

"Then if we have a consensus, let us move ahead with these labyrinth entrance restrictions. These are less a difference of opinion than a simple emergency measure. Nobody wants to leave the underclassmen exposed in this political environment. If we don't act, the school itself may well do so."

"I won't argue with the gist of what you're saying, but we should expect opposition from the students themselves," Whalley said. "A complete ban is hardly reasonable—even requiring an upper forms monitor would meet fierce resistance. I'd recommend requiring that they move in numbers, and issuing labyrinth entrance passes based on individual skill. Naturally, that would extend to the layer they're permitted to access."

He scribbled down these concrete terms in the air, and Richard pondered them, chin in hand.

"Given the escalating difficulty of rescuing anyone stranded deeper in, that's a good place to draw the line. But Kimberly students instinctively seek to exploit rules like these. We're going to need solid checkpoints at each labyrinth entrance, and between layers. Watching the campus paintings and mirrors is one thing, but do we have the capacity to permanently staff anything within the labyrinth itself?"

"I considered it, but it's not *that* out of the question," Miligan offered. "Regardless, we don't exactly need checkpoints on the fourth layer or below, do we? No use worrying about anyone willing to go that deep. If we're just staffing the entrances to the second and third layers, it's not too different from the patrols we already do. And the restrictions on entering will simplify the rest of what we have to do."

A rather positive take given her relationship to Whalley—it could have been interpreted as self-control. Sadly, it could equally have been mistaken for indifference. Whalley had clearly given up on distinguishing between them.

"If we only consider student safety, that's likely the case. But what if we're also attempting to look into the current situation? There's a lot we could stand to learn by knowing just which students are delving deep."

"Are students suspects now, Percival?" Tim said, looking him right in the eye and intentionally using his first name.

This sudden intensity caught Whalley off guard, but he didn't let it show. "We shouldn't rule out the possibility. Even if we doubt they're the primary culprit in the teacher slayings, I think it's more than likely that there are accomplices among the student body."

"Fair enough," Miligan said, resting her other cheek on the table. "But Mr. Whalley—our lovely president is speaking of whether we should allow our suspicions to *show*."

That earned her a grunt from Whalley, and Tim nodded, snorting.

"...The whole school's buzzing about infighting among the faculty. Ain't smart to go planting seeds that'll make the students suspect each other."

"...Convincing," said Whalley. "But that concern is no reason to abandon efforts to discover the truth. Doing so would leave us on the ropes just as the mood here grows far more desperate than it ever was in your predecessor's day."

"Right with you there. And steps'll be taken, just not with us in the lead."

With that, Tim took an envelope out of his pocket and laid it on the table. All eyes converged on the sender's name.

"...A letter from Instructor Ted?" Whalley asked.

"A request to cooperate with campus safety," Tim explained. "When a teacher asks that of us, we gotta go along with it."

He waved his wand, opening the envelope, then opened the letter in midair.

"He's got Instructor Hedges and that librarian, Liikanen, in the mix. Not one word about this being run past the headmistress, so feel free to speculate on the implications of that, but they're all on the trustworthy end of this school's faculty."

"...Interesting. So we're playing along?"

"It's gonna be *teachers* digging into stuff. We're just reluctantly following their lead. Which means...we're required to share a little information."

Tim grinned, and everyone caught his drift. He had no intention of playing defense; he was fully prepared to use the teachers' actions to their benefit.

No one argued that point. This was how a Kimberly student *ought* to be. Taking everyone's silence as agreement, Miligan at last righted herself.

"Then we have a plan," she announced. "Gentlemen—let the new Watch

begin."

The next morning found Oliver and Pete headed into school, things still tense between them.

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"...."
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Neither was saying much. Neither was particularly chatty at the best of times, but a silence this sullen had not happened since their first few weeks here. The fact that they weren't actually fighting made it worse. Oliver would have loved to urge more caution vis-à-vis Farquois, but was painfully aware nothing he said would make a difference.

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"...Gotta check on something, so this is me. See you in the dorm tonight." 
"Y-yeah."
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Just as they were about to part without another word, Pete tossed something back Oliver's way.

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"Take this with you," he said. "You're slacking. I'd have made it way smaller."
".....!"
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Oliver stared grimly down at his palm. He'd slipped this tiny golem into Pete's robes in their dorm room and had set it to return if it detected anything amiss—but that did him no good now that Pete had discovered it. Pete himself showed no signs of anger; he just stalked away.

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"...Get a grip," Oliver muttered, forcing himself to take a deep breath.
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A cheery voice broke through Oliver's frustration and startled him. He swung around to find a familiar cross-dressing youth glaring up at him.

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"...President Linton?" he asked.
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Tim grabbed his hand, pulled him into a nearby classroom, and rattled off a spell to close the doors. Then he prowled the room, checking every nook and cranny, only pausing when he was satisfied.

<sup>&</sup>quot;There you are!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Doors, good. Crowds, nada. Siddown," Tim demanded.

"? O-okay..."

Not sure what this meant, Oliver took a seat. Tim came over to him, and without pausing for a second, laid his head down on Oliver's lap, stretching his legs out along the bench like it was a makeshift bed. Oliver gaped down at him, and Tim let the strength drain from his body, exhaling.

"...Whew, I tell ya, it ain't easy balancing 'cute' with 'gravitas.' Keeping the reins on Miligan and Whalley's bad enough, and now I got teachers in the mix? I gotta steer this ship through these rough seas? Puh-leeze."

At last, this spew of grumbling clued Oliver in. Wincing a bit, he played the part of a human pillow and gave Tim a gentle smile.

"...Hang in there," Oliver said. "I know you've got what it takes."

"Oh, like you ain't involved! You know how much easier this would be if you'd joined up? At least Andrews stepped in. He's a'ight."

"Again, I apologize. I was relieved when Richard agreed to join. I guarantee he's a man of character," Oliver offered, half-sorry, half-trusting.

Tim closed his eyes and snorted. "No gripes there. Nobody's slacking off; it's my job to keep the kooks in line. Still, that leaves the question—who's gonna comfort me?"

Tim's voice shook slightly, and he rolled over, throwing his arms around Oliver's waist and nuzzling his belly. Far more intimate than Oliver had anticipated, but considering how stressful succeeding Godfrey must've been, he could sympathize. Mindful of his senior's burdens, he gently stroked Tim's blond hair.



"...What do you think Godfrey's up to now...?" Tim asked.

"I'm sure he's fine. Ms. Ingwe's with him, right?"

"She is, just... I keep wondering if they're all over him. I miss him so much! I miss his face, his voice—his hands on my head."

Everything he couldn't say in front of other people came spilling out. Oliver realized everyone Tim had been able to open up to had graduated—and this role had now fallen to Oliver himself. He considered that an honor. Makeshift though the role might have been, their time together during the elections and in the Kingdom of the Dead had earned him that trust.

"...Don't worry," said Tim. "I'll keep you all safe. I ain't budging on that!"

"...I know you will. From the bottom of my heart."

And so Oliver spoke *his* mind. Tim peeled his face off Oliver's belly, lying back again and studying his expression.

"...I don't like it."

"Mm?"

"Your gloomy mug. Not good enough for you? I'm, like, cuteness manifest, and you can't just be happy to cuddle?"

Oliver's hand went to his face, probing his own expression. He didn't think he looked distraught, but Tim had seen through it. Part of Oliver was glad for that, while part of him was disappointed in his own vulnerability.

"I can guess what's on your mind," Tim added. "It's about Reston, right?"

"...Yeah," Oliver admitted. No use hiding things here. "He's very interested in contact with Instructor Farquois, and I'm far less sure about it."

Tim reached up and clamped his hands around Oliver's face. "You're finally sharing! Why didn't you come to me? That's what the Watch is for!"

"...Oh..."

"Pfft. Listen, we'll keep an eye on him. At least, we can provide eyes around campus that'll cover for when you ain't around. Unless you'd prefer I hurl poison directly at that Farquois fucker?"

Strong words, and an unwavering gaze. A kindness that echoed through Oliver, but which also elicited *guilt*. Oliver's own hidden actions had played a major role in destabilizing Kimberly, and it pained him to pretend he was merely an innocent student.

Still, that was not something he could ever share. Tim couldn't see the roots of the conflict—only the gloom that lingered on Oliver's face. That made Tim want to help all the more.

"Still can't get a smile outta you... Goddamn, you are a handful."

"Hmm?"

Frustrated, Tim put his hands around Oliver's neck, pulling Oliver's head down and himself up. Oliver felt lips upon his cheek. The pliant warmth stunned him—and Tim soon pulled away, hopping off Oliver's lap and standing before him.

"L-let me be very clear! I ain't cheating! It's just, uh, charity! I'm taking pity on a hopelessly dour junior! Showing mercy!"

Blushing furiously, pointing wildly, Tim soon tore himself free of Oliver's wideeyed gaze.

With his back turned, Tim muttered, "I'll be back soon enough. You'd better get that mug of yours a li'l less moody."

"...Right..."

Oliver managed a stiff nod. Tim unsealed the doors and sailed on out—and for a long time, Oliver just stared after him.

If Farquois was on the Watch's radar, that effectively meant they were being monitored everywhere on campus. Not just by council members, but by any students who were cooperating with the council. It would not be easy for the sage to avoid all those gazes up here.

"...Hmm..."

Conscious of that attention, Farquois folded their arms, pondering the matter as they strode down the corridor. Too relaxed to be called guarded, they wore a much subtler expression, like they had something stuck in their teeth. It was hard to tell if there was even an expression to discern.

"...Mm, something's nagging at me," Farquois muttered.

Several students in the area tensed—everyone the Watch had asked to keep an eye on Farquois. Not one let it show on their faces, but the great sage saw through it anyway; they flashed a half smile.

"Oh, no, not you. You're all free to play at following me around as much as you like. Though I'd much prefer you just come to talk to me!"

Ignoring the ripples this caused, Farquois spun around. Their eyes on the bend a good twenty yards off, the great sage drew their white wand, pointing it in that direction.

"Someone else bothering is me—and I think you're standing there?"

"...!"

The moment the great sage focused on her, the covert operative lurking around the corner—Teresa Carste—gulped. She'd been monitoring the sage for reasons quite unlike the Watch's, and had not expected them to spot her. Very few people had ever pulled that off at this distance, and they were all exceptions who were on Garland's level.

She had to make a snap decision. If they'd detected her while she was standing still, then if she tried to move now—she'd be outed entirely. Yet, if she remained still, they might well approach her location—leading to the same outcome. A mere twenty yards lay between them. It was unclear if she could shake the sage off at this range while moving at her top speed, but despite the risk, it might well be her only option.

Teresa was about to take those odds when a small orange *thing* wafted past her.

Farquois spotted it before Teresa could respond. A vaguely humanoid shape floating in the air, looking their way. The great sage's eyes widened.

"...Ah, might that be...?"

"Something wrong, Instructor Farquois?"

A big man rounded the same bend: Cyrus Rivermoore, now hired as part of Kimberly's extended faculty but still dressing like an evil priest. Farquois looked delighted.

"Mr. Rivermoore! I thought something odd was following me, but it was your astra? That explains it."

"Sorry. It's still very young—not quite trained."

"Sorryyyyyy!"

Ufa, the world's one and only astral life, was shifting shapes in the air between them, spinning.

"Always a fascinating sight," Farquois said, stroking their chin. "You're an interesting fellow yourself—fancy a longer chat sometime?"

"Certainly. An invitation from the great sage is an honor."

Rivermoore bowed respectfully. Farquois smiled and spun around, slipping through the frozen crowd. When they were out of sight, Rivermoore muttered to the shadows behind him.

"...Thank Ufa for that one, tiny meat."

"...I'm not meat, I'm Teresa. I didn't ask, and I'm not that tiny."

A narrow escape. Teresa let herself relax, just barely managing to talk trash in return. Having Rivermoore spot her was hardly ideal, but he already knew of her covert skills. And this was a thousand times better than having Farquois directly perceive her. On campus, in public—the great sage could not have taken drastic measures, but even in light of that, this moment could have gone very poorly for her.

"Teresa! Plaaay! Plaaaaay!"

Oblivious to Teresa's state of mind, Ufa was wrapping itself around her arm. For once, she could not work up the energy to shake it off and just watched it innocently cajole her.

"Not sure what you were trying," Rivermoore warned, "but you'd best keep your distance. You're no match for them."

*"…"* 

Teresa could hardly argue that point, much to her chagrin. Leaving her there,

Rivermoore took a few steps in the other direction while calling over his shoulder, "And you'd better hurry."

"Mm?"

"Curse class is next, right? Don't be late for any class I'm helping with."

"Doooon't! Doooon't!" Ufa parroted.

Ufa was hurrying her along, reminding Teresa that she was a student and that the man before her was one of her instructors. She hesitated, but after what had happened, she could hardly ignore them. Scowling, she moved to follow Rivermoore.

With three new teachers, the students could not devote all their attention to Farquois alone. Marcel Oger was filling in for Vanessa in magical biology, and was the recipient of some especially desperate looks. At Kimberly, Vanessa was equated with the word *tyrant*—the urge to take the measure of her successor was less curiosity and more survival instinct.

"Ha, ha-ha...that's how to handle a hibernating amber insect. Y-you all have good instincts! The less I have to teach, the better. Ha-ha..."

The result: Their stress proved unnecessary. His distinctively low-key energy kept the class moving smoothly, and things came to an end with no limbs sent flying and no classmate's organs on display. Everyone looked rather nonplussed. Marcel smiled feebly as they filed out of the outdoor practice space.

Katie herself seemed rather puzzled. "I was wondering what he'd be like..."

"He is far more reasonable than Instructor Vanessa. So far, at least."

Chela spoke for everyone, but magical biology class had long been a battleground for Katie, and she was not yet ready to relax. She took a step toward the instructor, away from her friends, and then turned back to them.

"I'm gonna go chat a bit. Go on ahead... Guy, you okay there?"

"...Yeah," Guy said, raising a hand. That did nothing to convince the group; he still looked pretty downcast. Granted, if he wasn't sharing what was on his mind, he must want to be left alone for the time being.

That bothered Katie, but she chose to tackle the teacher first.

Watching her go, Chela said, "You are *not* okay, Guy. You look almost as gloomy as Instructor Marcel."

"... Hate to admit it, but...it's all catching up to me."

"I won't pry, but if it's too much, then the sooner you come to us, the better."

With that, she moved on, catching up to Pete, who'd gone ahead. She gave Pete a searching look.

"I take it this is your fault, Pete?" she asked.

"You've got keen eyes."

"I'm sure you had your reasons. What did you say?"

"Nudged him to make a move on Katie. Can't stand to see him in this state."

Pete shrugged it off, but Chela's frown deepened. Sensing the unspoken reproach, Pete shot her a glare.

"Don't try and stop me. We agreed we'd both make our moves this year."

"...That we did, but if you go too far, I will say something."

"Go right ahead. I don't have time to toe the line."

With that, he turned his eyes to the fore.

"I'm not visiting the base tonight. That should tell you everything."

"——!"

It did. Chela knew her friend was about to take a big step toward their mutual goal.

For Oliver's efforts, he could not monitor every inch of campus. He did his best to broaden that range, but there was little payoff—all the day earned him was fatigue.

After dinner, he left the building, walking with Nanao toward the dorms, in the light of the setting sun. They'd considered heading to the base, but Pete had said he wasn't going, so Oliver had chosen to go to the dorms instead. He did not want to leave Pete to his own devices right now. He knew this was hardly rational thinking, but it felt as if one false move would mean he'd lose his friend forever.

Nanao was well aware of this concern. Matching his pace, she spoke, hoping to share even a little of his burden.

"...You were downcast the whole day long, Oliver."

"...I'm not trying to worry anyone. Just...there's a lot on my mind."

"I am aware. Pete's affairs concern us all. I have kept my eyes peeled and am fully prepared to put him in a headlock if I spot a rash act forthcoming. Katie, Guy, and Chela are likely poised to do the same."

"Yeah, you're right. This isn't something I need to handle alone. But Guy's got issues of his own right now— Ah, damn, I'm going in circles again. Here you are, trying to help, and I'm a mess."

He gritted his teeth, kicking himself mentally. Nanao reached out despite herself, pulling him close.

"...Nanao."

"...Knowing your pain, I am loath to part as such."

She rested her head on his shoulder. Accepting her embrace, Oliver dithered for a moment, then drew her into the trees that lined the path. He put his hands to her cheeks and gave her a lengthy kiss. Regretting the concern he'd caused, yet glad to receive it, and acting upon the love it engendered.

"...Let me off with that for now," she told him. "We shall spend tomorrow in the base, so let us talk further then."

"...I'll hold you to that."

Lingering disquiet left her lips pursed, but Nanao returned the kiss. His approach may have been clumsy, but she understood his intent, much to Oliver's relief. He gave her one last hug, and they reluctantly parted, each heading to their own dorm.

Through the door, up the stairs, outside the door to his room. Oliver took a deep breath, then turned the knob.

"...I'm back, Pete. Are you still—?"

But the sight he beheld made the words die on his lips.

The pale glow of crystal lamps lit Pete's upper body, clad only in a bra. The roommate he saw every day—in a garment he had never worn before. A *skirt*.

"...What? Close the door," Pete barked.

".....R-right."

Snapping out of it, but not at all hiding how rattled he was, Oliver shut the door behind him. Before he was able to pull his brain free of the confusion, Pete pulled on a blouse, checked the fit of it in the mirror, and turned back to face Oliver.

"You came at the right time. I was hoping to get your opinion. What do you make of this?"

"...Well, um...I think it looks...good...?"

"How can you tell with your eyes averted? Look at me."

Oliver's gaze swam. He couldn't look directly at his roommate. Pete reached out and cupped Oliver's face, forcing the point. Now he *had* to look. A modest outfit, yet one that had clearly been chosen carefully.

"I thought...you were reluctant to wear girl's clothes."

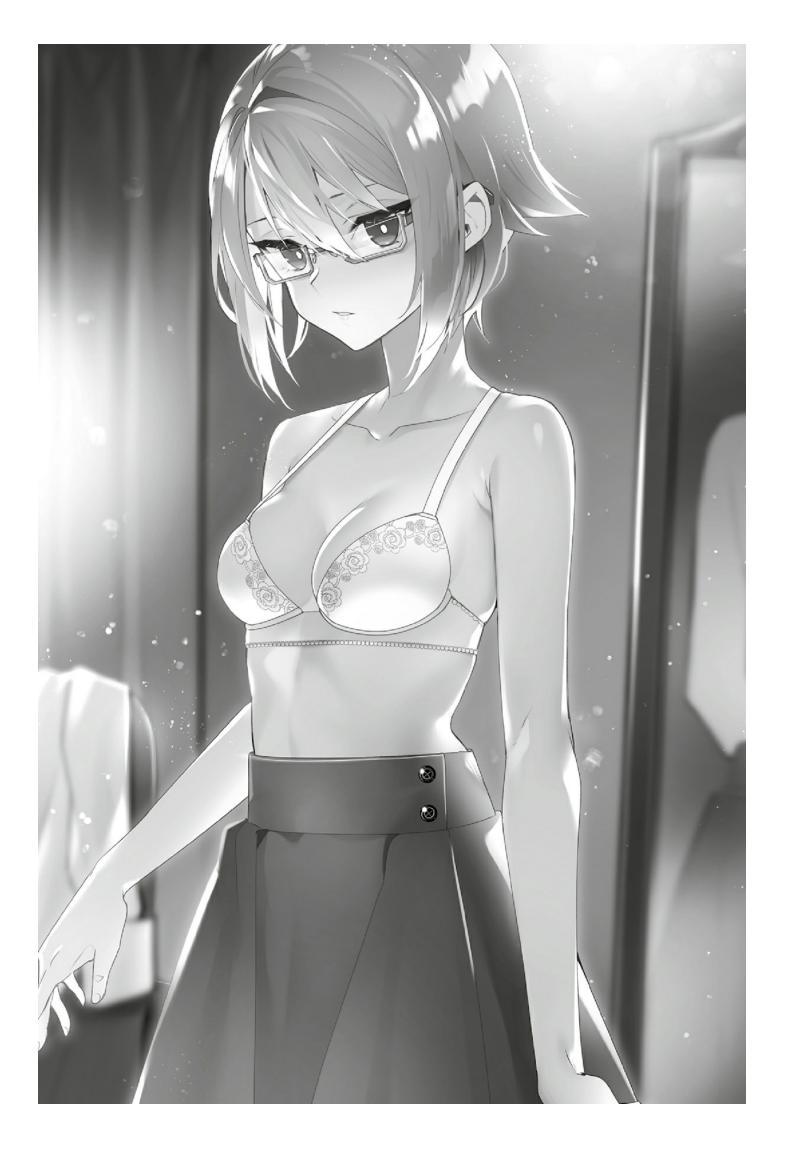
"To a degree, but the reluctance was never all that strong. I mostly didn't want to be Katie's dress-up doll." Pete put a hand on his hip with an elegant smile. "Well? I may not be as gaudy as President Linton, but you actually prefer the subdued look. I've noticed you offer more praise for the neat and tidy than the formal or the casual."

"...I'm not denying that, but..."

"This is my best shot at hitting that sweet spot. And you catch my drift, right? I'm wearing this for you."

That took Oliver's breath away. He *had* noticed. What Pete had on was all too specific to Oliver's tastes. A feat that would have been impossible unless every detail had been considered twice over. Pete must have spent ages analyzing

Oliver's preferences, considered any number of combinations to reach his goal, and arrived at this ensemble after a great deal of trial and error.



That was why Oliver couldn't bring himself to look at Pete. If he did, he'd be forced to grasp his friend's *full* intent.

Oliver froze, saying nothing—which was what Pete wanted.

Pete took a step closer. "You've got to see it to appraise it. Look close. Come on."

"....!"

"Why so reluctant? Go on, touch me anywhere. Like with the healing you always do."

Allowing himself a bit of snark, Pete took Oliver's hand and pulled it to his chest. Oliver's shoulders quivered. Pete was very much in his female body, and Oliver was acutely conscious of the swell of the breast beneath his palm—along with the heart racing beneath it.

"Oliver, I haven't told you this...but I'm planning on making some big changes this year."

"...Like what...?"

"I'm gonna be more like a *mage*. I've got the knowledge and strength to fend for myself, and I've adapted to this reversi thing. No more reason for me to keep my head down."

He slid his hand up Oliver's side, gently caressing him. Oliver's response to this stimulation sent a burst of ecstasy through Pete's mind, but did not dull his thoughts. He still needed those. This was a *negotiation*.

"And I'm a fourth-year now," Pete went on. "From ordinary blood, the first mage of my name—and soon enough, I'll have to consider propagating that line. Do I marry into an existing family, or start my own clan? Either way, if I'm inexperienced...I'll struggle."

Oliver's body shook; he sensed the heart of the matter approaching. Pete closed the gap between their faces, and he smiled sweetly, inches from his friend's eyes and nose.

"\_\_\_\_!"

"I'm not asking for your seed. I'm asking you to help me practice. Oliver, we've been together for three years. We know each other. If I have to pick someone, I'd rather it be you."

He'd made his request. And then, Oliver's mind pulled forth a memory.

Guy's home had been the grand finale of their return voyage, but they'd stopped at Pete's birthplace on the way. A decent-size property on the edge of a midsize town, one glance made it clear this belonged to a wealthy ordinary.

Pete knocked, then flung the door open.

"It's me, Dad. Been a while."

The interior was spotless but dimly lit, with only a few pairs of shoes waiting at the side of the broad entrance. Few signs of life compared to the scale of the building itself. They waited...and in time, the owner appeared.

"...Oh. You really did bring friends."

A man in his prime, in a well-tailored suit, was descending the stairs. Slightly slimmer than average, and his facial features bore little resemblance to his son's; only the prickly set to his eyes suggested any relation. When he reached the entrance, his gaze shifted to the friends behind Pete, and he made a florid bow.

"Howard Reston. For you to join my son on his visit here is a tremendous honor. Would that I could offer you an appropriate reception—but I am neither royalty nor nobility, merely an ordinary man. No matter how strenuous my efforts, I could not possibly hope to entertain mages in the manner to which you are accustomed. On that point, I must offer my humblest apologies."

Courteous, but very distant. Pete's friends exchanged glances. Mindful of who they were visiting, they'd left Marco at the inn, and Teresa had chosen to keep him company. Since they'd written ahead and received acknowledgment, these arrangements could hardly be considered rude. With that in mind, Oliver spoke.

"Oliver Horn, Kimberly fourth-year. We're visiting to learn where our close friend was born and raised. We require no excessive hospitality. We'd prefer to put aside divisions between ordinaries and mages, and have you treat us as your son's friends."

"My, my. I find your generosity most touching."

Howard's voice betrayed no added warmth, and Oliver repressed a sigh. He'd been attempting to lighten the mood, but had clearly made no progress. Perhaps he was simply the wrong person for the role. With that same thought, Katie made an attempt.

"Er, um! We brought gifts! These are very popular in Lantshire. Give them a try; they're really neat! With some tea—"

"I couldn't possibly. Your kind offer is most appreciated, but please, share them among yourselves. I fear a gift that extravagant would be lost upon the ordinary palate of a man like me."

Howard cut her off, leaving Katie hanging, the parcel in her hands. By her side, Guy furrowed his brow. Oliver felt the same way, but kept it from showing.

Oliver had couched it as respect for mages, but refusing to accept a visitor's gift was inarguably rude. As was forcing them to stand at the door without having invited them in. They were forced to admit this was not nerves nor indifference, but an active rejection of those standing before him.

That was the end of their friendly overtures. Before anyone could make further attempts, Pete stepped forward, fuming.

"Quite the welcome. Can't believe you've got that many empty platitudes in you."

"Wait, Pete-"

"Sorry, Oliver, but I'm done. I can't stand another second of this."

Pete was quite clear on that. Understanding where he was coming from, Oliver said nothing more. They'd received different receptions at Katie's and Chela's homes, but had been welcome at each. They knew Pete had enjoyed his time at both. But here, at his own home, his father would not even let them in the door. To him, that must have been an unpardonable insult.

"Just say it. The son you despise became what you hate most and brought more of his kind back with him. You must be livid. You want to send us packing, but you wouldn't dare to take that tone with mages. So you're hoping we'll get fed up and go. Am I right?"

Pete wasn't holding back, and for the first time, Howard's face betrayed several emotions: irritation, bitterness, and loathing.

"Is that your goal?" Howard snarled. "To embarrass me in front of your friends?"

"Sorry, but I don't have the time for that. I'm here to sever our connection. I will not grace this doorstep again. Per the rules of the magical world, I'll be keeping the name alone, but the Reston clan of mages will be unrelated to your family. I wanted to make that point clear."

His writ of severance was fueled by fury, years of pent-up feelings spilling out.

Howard sighed dramatically. "Years away, and that's all you have to say to me. I never expected anything, but clearly Kimberly does not teach *manners*." He narrowed his eyes. "Sever whatever connections you please. I never wanted a son like you, reduced to some foul creature who doesn't even know if it is a man or a woman."

"Wha—?" Katie gasped.

"Yo, take that back!" Guy spat.

This was an insult far beyond what Pete's friends could bear. Katie gaped, and Guy was ready to take a swing at him. Pete weakly raised a hand, waving them down, his hollow laughter echoing.

"This body unnerves you? It would. That's the sort of man you are. You cannot abide anything with even the slightest hint of magic. Even if it is your own son."

His voice shook as he assessed his father's character. Howard's face contorted, that hostile look replaced with blind rage.

"Very true. You should never have been born! If I'd known you'd be a mage, I'd never have allowed it!"

A total rejection of Pete's very existence. The last shred of tolerance vanished from Chela's eyes. Katie, Guy, and Nanao each took a step forward, as if to seal Howard's lips. Even Oliver forgot to hold his friends back. But all that was swept

away.

"It's not like I wanted Mom to die!"

Every ounce of air in Pete's lungs forced out that cry. Large tears spilled from his eyes, and he clenched his fists till the knuckles turned white. He was shaking with emotions he could no longer control.

That stopped his friends. The sight of this forcibly diverted their emotions. This was no time for anger. Would silencing this ordinary man make Pete happy? Would throwing down with him solve anything? Would violence heal their friend's wounded heart?

It would not. In that case, they merely needed to take him away. Remove their beloved friend from anything that hurt him.

A glance for consensus, and then they acted as one.

"Come, Oliver," said Chela. "Clearly, we do not belong here."

"Indeed!"

Chela pulled Pete under her wing and turned him around. Nanao strode beside them like a knight on guard duty. Katie and Guy ran ahead and kicked the door out of their way. Oliver took up the rear, following his friends.

He glanced back. "We'll be going, Howard. Apologies for the confusion—it seems we were at the wrong house."

Speaking for them all, he left the space behind that door dripping with sarcasm. No response was forthcoming—the man was not even looking their way. The former father of a friend had never once truly faced them.

They went straight back to the inn where Marco and Teresa were waiting, packed up their things, checked out, and headed for the nearest port on the loop waterway. Their tickets were for a later departure, but no one argued against switching their reservation to an earlier one. None of them wanted to keep Pete here a second longer.

"...I've settled down. Sorry for dragging you all along for that," said Pete.

He was on Chela's lap, with her arms around him—and his voice sounded a bit raspy. Like on the trip here, they had the whole ship reserved, and had been

taking turns holding Pete tight. Teresa figured it would be hard for him to vent with her around, so she had taken Marco for a walk on deck.

Their cabin was now a makeshift hideout, and seeing Pete in Chela's embrace made Oliver very glad they'd instituted a free-hug rule. No one here would have hesitated to comfort a friend.

"None of us mind, Pete," Chela said, cupping his cheeks. "You warned us in advance this would hardly be fun. We tagged along well aware of that."

She was a prolific hugger at the best of times, but today Oliver felt like every gesture she made carried a maternal warmth. Perhaps she was consciously evoking that, feeling as if that was what Pete needed most after that harrowing visit home.

"...I appreciate it, but you don't have to hold back. Please, tell me how you really feel. I want to know. It'll help me move on."

The others exchanged glances. They hadn't expected Pete to say that and had intended to keep their thoughts to themselves, but could hardly deny the request. Guy took a deep breath, going first. It was very like him to be deliberately insensitive when needed.

"...Right. Damn, what an asshole. Even if there's bad blood between you, there's a line you plain shouldn't cross. Especially with your own kid! Harassing you about something you were born with..."

This set Katie off, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I know! Does he not know what fathers are?! That was totally unacceptable! He doesn't see Pete—our friend—for years, and all he can do is hurl vile insults? If he'd been a mage, I would've given him a good slap!"

Nanao pulled her close, rubbing her back. Katie was always the most empathetic of the group, and they'd known it would hit her hard. Nanao made sure to ease her sadness.

"...You have a kind soul, Katie. You are furious enough for the both of us."

"...Wahhhhhh!"

This proved to be the last straw, and Katie buried her face in Nanao's chest.

Still rubbing her back, Nanao added, "...A very sad sort of man. The doors of his heart are shut so tight he no longer knows how to open them."

Nanao had felt anger, too—but not just that.

"I'm aware," said Pete. "And he lacks a baseline understanding of the whole reversi thing." He nodded, sniffing. "I gave him a brief rundown in my letter, and if he'd asked the town mage, he could easily have figured out the rest. But I knew he wouldn't bother. He keeps his distance from anything remotely uncanny, anything he can't understand. That's how he's lived his whole life."

Oliver considered this description of his friend's father. It felt accurate, but hardly complete. A failure to comprehend reversi alone could not explain such harsh rejection. Choosing his words with an eye on Pete's state of mind, he voiced that question.

"...Ordinaries who hate all things magic are not exactly unusual. Typical mage attitudes actively encourage such backlash. But—your father seems to coming from a different place. I sensed a much deeper hatred for our kind behind his actions."

Even that brief interaction had made that clear. Eyes closed, Pete nodded again.

"I'm to blame for that. We yelled about it there—my mother died giving birth to me. I'm told she was never particularly robust..."

A sad story, and all eyes were downcast. Chela's grip on him tightened. The tragedy he spoke of implied more than the literal meaning of the words—bearing a baby with a magic factor took a huge toll on any ordinary woman. Studies showed a clear discrepancy between mage and ordinary babies, and giving birth was hardly easy at the best of times. It wasn't at all unusual for the process to weaken ordinary mothers to their deaths. This was a tragedy often unavoidable even with a mage present for the birth—and like in Pete's case, it was all too common for the newborn mage alone to survive.

"If I'd lacked the aptitude, perhaps my mother would have lived. In his mind, I killed her. Ha-ha, worst of all, I can't say he's wrong."

<sup>&</sup>quot;But he is."

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"Totally wrong."
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"Completely."

Nanao, Guy, and Katie all spoke as one, and their encouragement got a smile from Pete.

"That's nice, but...he hated magic to begin with, and it's a fact that her death made him double down on it. I can't remember him ever picking me up. I was raised by a nurse he hired. She wasn't a bad person or anything, but..."

As his mind drifted back, the emotion drained from his voice.

"The clearest memory I've got, I was out for a walk with my dad. The neighbors all knew I was born with the aptitude. When they saw me, they'd act jealous, flatter me—the worst of them even took a knee. And the look on his face...anger, grief, loathing, all plastered over with the thinnest of smiles. Like it was all he could do not to strangle them on the spot. Every time I s-saw that, I \_\_"

"Enough. That's enough, Pete."

His memories were a curse, and he was acting like it was his duty to relay them. All his friends made to stop him, but Chela got there first, hugging him like she was trying to pull him back from the brink. Her grip was almost painful now, and that love pulled him out, reminded him where he was, and provoked a sigh of relief. He was no longer a part of *that*.

"Sorry—no use digging up the past. I'll be okay. I feel better now. I've severed all connections to that house."

He reached up, brushing Chela's cheek gratefully. Then he slowly rose from her lap, standing on his own two feet again. He rolled his shoulders, as if setting down a burden, then turned to his friends. The tear tracks still visible on his cheeks, he mustered all the cheer he could: a most fragile smile.

"I've got no home to return to. I'll have to make my own. Won't that be nice?" he said. "I mean, I can *choose*. For the first time, I get to be with who I want."

Oliver knew all that. He knew Pete's desires had always lain there.

"...Please...think this through, Pete."

Oliver's voice shook pleadingly; he was unable to do anything else. No matter how hard he thought, he could find no arguments that would convince his friend.

Because Pete wasn't wrong. What he desired was such a small thing. A loving family, nothing more. A warmth so many people were granted at birth, without ever needing to wish for it. Oliver had lost his, but it had once been there. But not for Pete. He was making up for that deprivation—and how could that be a bad thing? Who in the world could blame him for this yearning?

"I have thought this through," Pete insisted. "I could stand here counting your eyelashes, and my feelings still wouldn't change. I promise I'm not forcing you. If you're dead set against it, just refuse."

Oliver felt like each word Pete spoke was building a wall, one without a crack or a gap to be found in it. There was already no escaping, but Pete was not yet done shoring it up.

"But if you do refuse, I'll have to go to someone else. That won't be hard. Plenty of students are interested in reversi blood. I can pick one at random, invite them to bed, and make love to whichever of them proves most compatible."

Oliver was screaming on the inside. He could not let that happen. That was how *mages* lived. Like with Ophelia Salvadori, that was a life that whittled away your humanity.

Maintaining multiple partners at once was not the problem in and of itself. Oliver's own mother had done that. What Oliver objected to was reducing oneself to a means to an end, including the value of reversi blood. Pete absolutely did not want the life he'd outlined. He was merely offering it as a practical solution. One that would force him to adapt his own nature to that practicality. Unaware of what the consequences might be, he would warp his true self irreversibly.

Augh, what a nightmare. That would be just like—like—

"What do you say, Oliver? Will you accept me, or abandon me? It's a simple

choice. Nothing difficult about it."

True. This had never been a choice at all. Just a nasty dead end.

He didn't have it in him to reject Pete. The boy was too important.

But neither was Oliver capable of fully being there for Pete. Oliver's life did not have enough time left in it.

"Don't give me that look," said Pete. "I know this is hard for you. I'm not trying to steal you from Nanao. You can keep treasuring her the way you have been, and just come back to me at night. That's hardly an unusual practice here at Kimberly."

No. Don't. Bringing her name into it just makes my head spin that much more.

We haven't even gotten there yet. I was trapped before that point.

You don't get it, Pete. In a few short years, the boy you've chosen to be your family will no longer be alive.

My end is not far off. The repeated soul merges have left me with far too little time.

I cannot be with you for long. No matter how much you or I may want that.

"I'll count down from ten. If you refuse, push me away. If you don't, I'll take it as consent. Ready? Ten...nine..."

The countdown began. Even as his emotions churned, a part of Oliver was far away, listening in. This had no meaning. There was no choice, so granting him more time was simply delaying the fall of the guillotine's blade.

"...six...five...four..."

Oliver's mind spun with empty thoughts.

Did I choose the wrong way to relate to you? Should I not have let us get this close? Should we not have let each other care? Should I have kept you at arm's length, just one of many school peers?

I could never. If I went back in time, I couldn't even try. After all, Pete—that first day we met, when the anxiety of stepping into this world must have been at its peak...

...you stood by my side and joined the fray.

"...three...two...one.....zero."

The guillotine fell. Pete stepped closer. Unable to move a finger, Oliver found his lips stolen.

He couldn't even feel it. There was merely heat. His skin *knew* just how great the emotions behind that kiss were, how powerful the love that lay within his friend was. Oliver had no right to respond. No hope lay here—only immeasurable despair.

They were beyond thought now. Time no longer passed. Oliver didn't even attempt to breathe.

"...Gah...!"

Time resumed for Pete first. His vision strobing white, he pulled his lips away, drawing ragged breaths and clutching Oliver's shoulders. It was just as well that he'd reached his limit first, or Oliver would have passed out and crumpled to the floor.

"...Ha, ha-ha... My legs are failing me."

Pete's knees knocked together, a surge of joy and guilt swirling within him. If he'd been in his male body, he was certain that kiss alone would have brought him to ejaculation. For the rest of his life, he might never match this pitch of excitement again—a pointed reminder of just how desperately he'd craved this. He had no regrets. If he ever needed to make amends to Nanao, he would gladly cut his belly open, but for now...

"You remember, Oliver? When I was captured by Ophelia, drowning in that bottomless swamp until you came and grabbed my hand?"

".....How could I forget?"

Oliver's voice was hoarse. There were tears on his cheeks, and Pete reached up to touch them. The warm drops ran down Pete's wrist and arm, dampening his elbow.

"I feel the same way. In that cold mud, it was your face I thought of. I wanted nothing more than to see you again—and then there you were. Before I knew

it, you'd found me, and I was in your arms. Like fairy-tale magic."

An emotional admission. Too concentrated to be called gratitude, too far gone to be chalked up as mere affection. But Oliver got it. It flowed into him like molten steel, and made its point known. In which case—fine. This might have been an awful thing to do as a person, but that was how mages lived.

"...What do you want me to do to you? I'll do anything you ask. Anything...," Pete said, sliding his fingers into Oliver's shirt, eager to devote himself to bringing this boy pleasure while knowing full well that was a curse.

But it was also love. This might not bring happiness, but he at least wanted to give Oliver ecstasy. Perhaps that would be a balm for the wound Pete had caused.

Pete waited, but got no answer. Oliver's hand moved, although only to brush the hair from Pete's brow. Tender, yet forlorn—and it filled the void in Pete's soul.

"If you won't speak, then I'll do what I want," Pete said. "We've shared a room for three whole years now. I can't wait a moment longer."

With that, he shifted their embrace, moving that beloved heat to the bed. They'd lain together so many times as Oliver offered Pete healing, but tonight, their bodies would entwine for altogether different purposes.

**CHAPTER 3** 

Mayhem

## **CHAPTER 3**

## **Mayhem**

Just how good are you?

There were several metrics for evaluating this, but in the upper forms, soloing a labyrinth trail run was considered the simplest. Knowing what scores the upper echelon held provided a firm point of comparison. Repeat the run, take the average, and you'd have a good measurement.

"...Hahh...hahh...!"

So Guy was running up a branch of the irminsul, headed for the top. The labyrinth's second layer had been his primary training field under the Survivor's tutelage, so Guy actually knew more about it than Oliver or Nanao. He had no concerns about making it to the top and back down, but if time was a factor, everything changed. Especially if his standard was the best students in his year.

"Tonitrus! Outta my way! I'm in a bad mood!"

Magical beasts heard him coming and tried to make trouble, but Guy didn't stop, alternating spells and shouts to fend them off. They weren't out to fight losing battles, either, so if he struck first, he could often avoid a fight at all. This was a key technique for shaving seconds off your time.

As he pressed on, the branch underfoot grew sharply steeper. Less a slope than a sheer cliff, but he didn't have time for bouldering. Ignoring his exhaustion, he manipulated mana, trying to slow his heartbeat even as he Wall Walked up the vertical path. At last, his feet reached the peak, and he collapsed to the ground.

"Hahh, hahh...! Damn, how do they do it? And the round trip! They don't even get outta breath!"

Grumbling, he took out his pocket watch and checked his time. Three minutes and twenty seconds behind Oliver's—Guy's personal metric. And he had to take

a break here, while Oliver would head right back down without a second's pause. Guy's round-trip time would be even slower. With that point driven home, Guy let out an exasperated sigh.

"...Can't catch him this way... You nailed that fact, Instructor Baldia."

His fingers felt the cursed fruit in his pocket. He knew she was right—he was too far behind his friends, and desperate for a way to close that gap. If curses could help make that happen, then the idea was certainly tempting.

But his reluctance to take that step was still winning out. The transition from ordinary mage to curse wrangler was just that big a deal. What would he sacrifice for those gains? It was hard for him to accurately estimate that, which was why he couldn't make this choice lightly.

As his thoughts spun in circles, his pulse returned to normal, and he sat up. The urgent fretting wasn't going away, but he'd managed to drive it out of his mind for now. At the very least, the extra noise caused by contact with Katie had faded away. Glad his mind was built simply, Guy got to his feet—and only then did he realize he wasn't alone. A girl from his year was sitting on a bump on the irminsul some distance away.

"Mm? What, already occupied? You hurt?" Guy asked her.

"...Mind your own business. I've healed it. Just slipped up a bit and wore myself out, so I'm taking a rest to recover."

Her voice was curt. Guy glanced once at his watch before trying again.

"Yeah, but if you don't head back now, you ain't making second period. You're running solo, then? You in any shape for it?"

*""* 

The girl said nothing, and Guy was forced to shrug. It was a Kimberly pastime to make a labyrinth run and still make it to class punctually, but those plans went awry occassionally, and making up the difference was far tougher on your own. He'd tripped himself up often enough, and so he gave her a wave.

"C'mon. I still got mana left. This oughtta work out if we team up."

"...What do you want?"

The girl glared at him, and he sighed, shaking his head.

"Nothing! Why's everyone here gotta make it about that? Nothing wrong with helping each other out! I mess up down here plenty. Next time, you might be bailing me out."

*"…"* 

"If you insist, then just buy me something at the store. That sound like a deal, Mackley?"

He punctuated that offer with her name. She dithered a second longer, but eventually stood up, looking very reluctant.

Annie Mackley was on the small side, with upturned eyes. She was the girl who'd cast the spell that had put Katie in trouble on their first day at Kimberly, and she'd done little to improve that impression since.

"There you go," Guy said, looking her over. "Why're you running solo? Don't you have friends?"

"I'm not with them anymore. Not like we were ever that close."

"Huh. If you say so. I've been with the same group since my first year, so..."

"Yes, you're the weird one. You're so chummy it's downright creepy. I sometimes wonder if you all sleep in the same bed at night."

They'd just teamed up, and she was already making snide remarks. Her personality made Guy wince, but he put his mind on the path to the base.

"Glad you ain't changed. Try to keep up."

"Ohhh? Getting in that league main round certainly went to *your* head. Confidence like that will get you shot in the back."

Trading barbs, they started down the slope—but halfway down the cliff, Guy stopped in his tracks. He'd spotted some demon apes fighting on the next branch over.



"KIIIIIII!"

"GIIIIII—!"

Fights between beasts of the same type were hardly uncommon, but this seemed a bit too violent for that. With a screech, one ape jumped at another, biting its face off. While still tearing its enemy's cheek flesh off, it tried to go for the ear as well. This wasn't exactly a territorial dispute; it was a fight to the death. You didn't see fights this nasty even in mating season.

*"*...?"

"Why'd you stop?" Mackley asked Guy.

She frowned at him, and he perked up his ears. This place was always teeming with sounds of life, but now he could hear sounds of conflict in all directions. His senses, honed by the Survivor's training, were sounding a warning. Something wasn't right.

"...Careful, Mackley. Shit's about to hit the fan."

Meanwhile, morning arrived at the male dorm—and Oliver woke from a deep slumber.

"...Unh..."

He had little feeling in his hands, but he pushed the bed with them anyway, sitting up. He wasn't sick or anything—just too many lingering sensations were weighing him down. Tears welled up in his eyes. His mind wasn't moving yet, and he couldn't tell if he was actively sad or just regretting everything.

"You're up, Oliver? How do you feel?"

The voice came from right next to him. He jumped, and turned to find Pete on a chair, smiling, already in uniform. Memories came flooding back, clear images in Oliver's mind: his roommate, in girl's clothes, and the relentless exchange they'd had. But mostly everything they'd done after that.

"...Ngh..."

"Feel like shit? I know. Have some tea. Not that tea's gonna help you reset."

Pete held out a cup; he must have brewed a pot. Oliver took the teacup on

reflex and realized Pete was back in boy's clothes. In the same uniform he always wore, ready to head off to class like any other day. A clear statement that he had no plans to let anyone know what had happened last night. Pete himself had already worked though things.

"Take the morning off," Pete said. "I'll give 'em some excuse."

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"...No, I—"
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"Trust me."

Oliver had started to move forward, but Pete reached out, nudging him back. When Oliver looked confused, Pete leaned in and whispered in his ear.

"Can't let you go with that look on your face. No matter what I say, you'd give it away."

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".....!"
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Oliver quivered and hung his head. He couldn't see his own expression. This seemed to make Pete grow all the fonder, and he brushed Oliver's cheek.

"Try not to take it that hard. It makes me want to go another round. Even after all we did last night!"

This made Oliver flinch again. Pete kissed him gently on the forehead, then got up.

"Don't leave till you're sure you can act normal around Nanao. See you later, Oliver."

With that, he slipped out of the room. Unable to even watch him go, Oliver fell back into bed, making not a sound.

It took him over an hour to calm the turmoil in his heart, and achieve baseline equilibrium. By the time he got himself dressed and left the dorm, it was past nine, which left Oliver unsure what to do with himself. He was just barely capable of acting like his usual self, but still unprepared to face his friends. He even considered asking his cohort, Theo, to double for him, but obviously that was not something he should resort to for something so personal.

He'd have to take it one step at a time. Before seeing those closest to him, he should make contact with those less dear, and ease himself into things. With

that thought, he took the long way around, searching the passing crowds for someone he knew, but wouldn't call a friend. He was disgusted at himself for even having such a standard.

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"...?"
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Before long, he spotted two students near the edge of the garden. Fourth-years, one male, one female, clearly distressed. They'd forgotten to put up a sound dampening spell, and Oliver could make out their words just by focusing on them.

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"Found her?"

"No! I've been all over the campus."

"Argh, she's gotta be below!" the girl wailed, grinding her teeth.

Sensing trouble, Oliver stepped closer.

"...Something going on?" he asked.

"Er—"

"——! Mr. Horn...!"
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His proximity made them both brace themselves. He put up his hands, signaling that he had come in peace, keeping his tone as pleasant as he could manage.

"No need for alarm. The combat league was ages ago, and we're no longer in opposition. Am I right, Mr. Barthé? Ms. Barthé?"

He hoped using their names would help lower their defenses. They'd been on Team Valois last year, and they'd crossed wands in the combat league finals. Lélia Barthé wore her uniform to spec and seemed rather uptight; her brother Gui Barthé gave a comparatively relaxed impression. Both served under Ursule Valois, but without her around, it was easier to tell that they were related.

Based on what he'd overheard, Oliver asked, "Ms. Valois is unaccounted for? How serious is this? How long since she was last seen?"

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"...Why do you want to know?"
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"It'll help with evaluating the situation and tell me if I need to assist with a

search. If someone with her skills is lost, then that tells us the threat she faced is significant. You'll need more hands."

They weren't lowering those hackles yet, so he spelled out the logic. He knew he was mostly looking for a way to get his mind off things, but he *did* intend to help. The steadiness of his gaze must have proved convincing; Lélia lowered her guard before her brother did.

"We appreciate the offer," she said, sighing. "But objectively speaking, we're not at that point yet. It's been less than six hours."

"Six...so she was gone when you woke up? In that case, why are you so upset? Is it that unusual for her to go off alone...?"

Oliver looked puzzled, and Lélia shook her head.

"The opposite. She's ditching us all the time, and *that's* what's got us flustered. She never did this before—she *always* took us when she entered the labyrinth, and never went off alone without telling us. These days, though..."

Her face crumpled, and her gaze dropped to the ground. Gui stepped up, glaring at Oliver.

"This is *your* fault, Horn. Ever since you trounced us, Lady Ursule's been acting \_\_"

"Don't, Gui," Lélia snapped. "You'll only bring her more shame."

Oliver held his tongue, seeing no advantage in discussing any grudge they might bear. Given how his team had rattled Valois in the match, it would be hard not to drag that around. He picked his next words carefully, mindful of that history.

"Our match was what it was. But that doesn't mean I absolve myself of consequences. From what you've said, this requires no immediate action—it's more a situation to keep an eye on in the future. This is merely a suggestion: If I see Ms. Valois running solo, I can send word to you. I'll let my friends know to do the same. Naturally, she need know nothing of this arrangement."

The siblings glanced at each other, conflicted, but weighing his idea. This confirmed his speculation. Given Valois's character, he had not imagined she

had many friends—clearly, these two lacked peers they could easily turn to. They were isolated enough that they could not immediately refuse his offer.

It took them a long time to answer, but eventually Lélia nodded.

"...I owe you one. Just to be clear, this debt belongs to me alone. No one else."

Oliver conceded that point. He had no intention of calling in any debts here, and was frankly grateful they'd spent this time with him. Not that he could admit to that.

Once he'd arranged a means of contact, he left the Barthés and headed to the Fellowship. They'd hung out here a lot until the year before, but visiting the dining hall as a fourth-year carried a different weight. Conscious of the attention that it would earn him, he moved through the room—and those who knew him soon responded.

"Ah! Dean, look!"

"Stopping by, Mr. Horn?"

Two juniors sharing a table waved at him. Third-years he'd spent quite a bit of time with—Dean Travers and Peter Cornish. Oliver headed their way, waving back.

"Felt like checking in. How've you been doing, Mr. Travers? Polishing your moves?"

"Yeah, I think they're coming along nicely! And come on, call me Dean already! I already consider you a mentor."

"Oh, then call me Peter! I know you already have a Pete, and that makes it confusing..."

They were both so eager he couldn't help but smile. Talking to the Barthés had helped ease him into things, and their eager cheer was helping, too. Internally grateful, Oliver nodded and took a seat.

"Okay, Dean, Peter. I'm glad you're both in good spirits. The others aren't around? Teresa's one thing, but I guess in my mind, Ms. Appleton's always with you."

"Oh, Rita's..." Peter hesitated, and Dean took over.

"We're not sure why, but she's been in the dumps since yesterday. She's off in the flower beds, digging away. That's where she goes to sort herself out."

Rita Appleton, depressed? That wasn't something Oliver took lightly. He was aware of her feelings for Guy, who was struggling with a lot himself. He felt that it had to be related, but it wasn't something to dig into with neither of them present. Making a mental note of it, Oliver focused on the boys he was with.

"Ah. Just the impression I'm getting, Dean, but you seem like you're forcing things—something bugging you?"

"...Huh? I-I'm hunky-dory! Not a care in the world!"

Dean denied it vehemently, but Oliver could tell the protest was hollow. It stood to reason the boy would have his own problems, and this overlapping with Rita and Guy's issues made him wonder. Perhaps he should get a clearer picture of these relationships—but before Oliver could pry, Dean hastily changed the subject.

"T-Teresa's wandering off, like always. She'll probably show up when she gets hungr—"

As he spoke, there was a thud behind them. Oliver turned to look and found a blond girl gaping at him, flanked by her flunkies. There was a hefty tome on the floor at her feet; she must have dropped it, causing that sound. She made no attempt to pick it up, keeping her red eyes locked on Oliver.

*"*\_\_\_\_\_\_

"What's the matter, Lady Felicia?!"

"Come back to us!"

The man and woman with her scooped up the book, calling to her. At last, she emerged from her reverie, and took a very deep breath.

"...No matter. I allowed myself to be caught unprepared! A throb below my belly."

Smiling, the girl approached. Oliver had certainly seen her before. Like Teresa's team, hers had made it to the main round of the combat league, and

the girl herself remained one of the more remarkable third-years. Dignity and presence far beyond that of the lower forms—she had a lot in common with her recently graduated older brother, Leoncio Echevalria.

"You're..."

"Why, hello, Mr. Horn. I am Felicia Echevalria. I had plans to pay you a visit in the near future, but for *you* to come to *me*? Heh-heh, I almost succumbed to a mild climax."

"Uh, he's here to see us. What do you even want?"

"Stand down, Travers. Rest assured, I shall cherish you before long."

She brushed Dean off and turned back to Oliver, gracefully folding her arms.

"I witnessed your performance in the combat league. It was not bad! Not at all! Even now, reflecting on it brings a smile to my lips. I regret that I could not go against you myself."

"O-oh...uh, it's an honor...?"

"It is the utmost honor. Thus, I have prepared a gift for you. Palms up!"

Felicia snapped her fingers. One of her attendants swiftly removed a box from the bag on their shoulder, placed it on their hands, and offered it up to Oliver. The other attendant drew their wand and opened the lid with a spell, revealing the contents.

Inside was a collar. High-quality leather, studded with metal.

*"...*? .....????"

"What say you? I picked the materials and designed it myself. I do hope you like it!"

Felicia's cheeks were lightly flushed. Looking for all the world like a girl giving the boy she loved a gift for the first time, with a trace of age-appropriate nerves. In isolation, it would have been downright adorable, but the gift in question entirely ruined the effect. Oliver found himself rubbing his eyes, doubting their accuracy—the girl's behavior and the gift were a total mismatch.

"...P-pardon me, Ms. Felicia. Perhaps I am misreading the size of this. Is it...a

bracelet?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Even your jests cut deep! Rest assured, once you don it, it will fit perfectly. I took careful observations of your neck. On my honor as an Echevalria, it is made to your measurements."

His one faint hope was pulverized by her explanation. He was forced to acknowledge a fatal difference in tastes, and glanced at his juniors for help.

"...Sorry, Dean, Peter, I'm a bit confused. What's...going on? How do I respond?"

"She's always like this."

"Just tell her to shove it."

"No, but...it's intended as a favor? I can't just..."

Oliver's eyes darted between her face and the collar—and then a hand shot in from the side, seizing the source of his consternation. He flinched and turned to see that his covert operative had materialized. Her eyes were locked onto the collar in question.

*"…"* 

"T-Teresa."

Before Oliver could unfreeze, she took a tight grip on the collar with both hands, applying force far beyond what those spindly arms looked capable of. The leather strap was enchanted, and must have been quite durable, but it creaked as she pulled on it—and then it *tore*. Oliver let out a squeak. A deathly silence fell across the Fellowship.

Metal studs clattered on the floor. The pieces of the collar were flung aside. Teresa proceeded to grind her foot on them, then pulled out her athame and pointed it at Felicia.

"A challenge, Vixen. Let's take this outside."

"Ha! What nerves this malnourished guard dog has!"

Felicia's smile was downright vicious, and a stir ran through the crowd. Oliver was forced to concede there was no way this matter would end without

bloodshed.

"...Why'd you give him the time of day?" Gui muttered, in the gloomy forests of the labyrinth's second layer.

Walking ahead of him, his sister stopped dead in her tracks, then swung around. The Barthés had plunged straight down after leaving Oliver.

"What's that supposed to mean, Gui?"

"You know what I mean. Why would you share our problems with Horn? I said some shit myself, so I know I'm one to talk, but we should have just brushed him off."

He was clearly disgruntled, but Lélia just sighed.

"If we were capable of helping Lady Ursule, yes. But look at us. You know as well as I do we're a mess."

"That's no reason to get help from *him*! Lady Ursule has it in for Horn—and it's his fault we're like this."

But Lélia just shook off these arguments.

"That's not remotely true, Little Brother. The cause was always with us. Horn and Hibiya merely dragged it into the light. In that match, they peered deep inside Lady Ursule."

"…"

"Deeper than either of us could ever manage. We've got to admit and accept that fact. We have never been her attendants. We were merely puppets. What other word is there? We obeyed her every word, never once getting anywhere near her heart."

"...! That's what Lady Ursule wanted! We knew from the start we were nothing but her familiars!"

"You know better! You know that was never what she really needed!"

Lélia's voice suddenly rose to a shriek. The tears in her eyes robbed Gui of further protests. Instead, he pulled her close. Ordinarily, she was the rigid one, chastising her brother's impulses—but when emotions were laid bare, their

roles reversed.

Feeling the heat of her quivering body against him, Gui said, "Settle down, Sister. What else can we do? Take after Cornwallis's or Ames's servants? Could we ever be like them?"

"...Imitation will get us nowhere. But we do need to rethink our relationship with our mistress. At the very least, those you named have not failed as spectacularly as we have."

She sniffed, her face buried in his chest. Her words were a tough pill to swallow. At a loss, Gui turned his eyes to the canopy above.

"Maybe you've got a point. But I'm clueless. I don't even know what a good servant is. How's it different from being a useful tool? We've never even considered ourselves human, so how're we gonna fill that role?"

Even voicing these doubts made his voice tremble. Stepping outside the boundaries of being "puppets" was tantamount to wandering in the wilderness without so much as a single signpost. They had no idea where to go, or what to do, but they felt in their souls they could not afford to stand still. Perhaps their mistress was the same, Gui thought. Perhaps it was not just the two of them who were abandoned in the wilds; Ursule, too, was adrift without a goal.

Lélia flinched and peeled herself away from him. Gui, too, was on high alert before her eyes had even started scanning their surroundings. Unearthly sounds in all directions, and infinite hostility pricking their very skin.

"Brace yourself, Gui. Something's gone very wrong."

They put their backs together, athames raised—and magical beasts swarmed out of the underbrush around.

Given the lead-in, Oliver was the obvious choice to ref the duel. He was hardly going to leave Teresa alone when she was this furious, and they were well past the point where he could talk down either of them. For lack of options, they moved to a corner of the garden, which was soon filled with uninvited

<sup>&</sup>quot;...Sister."

onlookers. That was inevitable. Both duelists had made it to the main round of the combat league—and the impetus for this match could well be seen as salacious.

"How the starving cur howls. Unable to bear the thought of your owner collared by another?"

Arms elegantly crossed, Felicia was still winding her opponent up. Meanwhile, Teresa had her eyes on the ground, muttering to herself.

"...First her front teeth...then her nails...then her fingers..."

"Hoh, beyond speech, are we? Amusing. Rather novel having such fury directed at me."

"A foe like this is beneath you!" cried one student.

"Allow us to take your place!" yelled another.

Felicia's flunkies attempted to advance, but she grabbed each by the earlobe, twisting them.

""Aughhhhhh!""

"Stand down, you fools. Do you not see I am *enjoying* this?" Felicia hissed. "Say the word, Mr. Horn. Fear not—I shall not kill her. Though I imagine she'll make no such promise."

Her stance radiated confidence.

Oliver's brow furrowed. Dean and Peter whispered in his ears.

"It'll be fine."

"We'll jump in and stop them both if we have to."

"...Thanks, but...I've got that covered."

Oliver gave them an appreciative nod, but was unsure who would be stopping who. He could not get a read on the outcome of this duel.

Felicia Echevalria almost never deigned to fight, but what little she'd demonstrated in the recordings of the combat league proved she was far above the standard for her year. Teresa's odds would have improved considerably in a ruleless match—one allowing sneak attacks from the shadows—but this format

stifled her strengths every bit as much as the duel she'd fought with Dean had.

Still, Teresa had two extra years of training. She was far more accustomed to fighting in public than she had been back then. Whichever way these scales tipped, Oliver had to be ready for it. Possibly, he'd have to cast a paralysis spell on them both.

"Wands up."

Steeling himself, he raised a hand. Each grew all the more intense. Feeling like he was unleashing wild beasts from their cages, Oliver opened his mouth—and there was a roar from the school building.

"Hmm?"

Felicia and Teresa both turned toward the sound. Oliver's attention had already moved that way as well. Given what was at stake, this duel could not be called off, but the priority here was clear as day.

"Not today, ladies. That doesn't sound good."

"President!"

A Watch member burst into the meeting room, and Tim froze, a sandwich in his mouth.

"...Seriously? Couldn't wait one more minute?" he spat.

The contents of the report soon had him swearing and shoving his untouched lunch back in his basket. One of his favorites—roasted ham on a toasted baguette. It was a meal he would not be eating today.

"Underclassmen on campus, return to your dorms! There's a major disruption in the labyrinth!"

"C'mon, move! There's trouble on the second layer! The building may not be safe!"

Ted and Dustin's voices carried, urging the students to act. Those who'd run from such problems were a minority at Kimberly, so their actions went a long way toward selling the gravity of the situation. The faculty did not act without

meaning.

Hearing them shout, a man approached, and they turned to meet him. It was the taciturn magiflora instructor, David Holzwirt.

"... This evacuation order came from you?"

"Yes, Instructor Holzwirt. Ordinarily, we'd leave it to the student council, but with Kimberly like this, we thought it best to act. The headmistress has not approved. Are you against it?"

"Not at the moment. But do you intend to address the situation itself?"

"No. As per convention, we'll let the students handle it, and provide support as the council requests it."

"Then, fine. I'll be in my gardens. Say the word if you're shorthanded."

With that brief confirmation, he stalked off down the hall. Ted and Dustin looked equally relieved. They had expected some friction with the other staff.

"...A more favorable reaction than I'd imagined. Thank goodness; he'd be nasty if he turned on us."

"Yes, so let's take him at his word, and go to him if the need arises."

Ted chalked David up as a latent supporter. Fortunately, at this juncture, no faculty seemed inclined to take issue with their decision. All knew this was no time to be leaving campus safety in student hands, and Ted had figured a little overreach would pass without comment. Naturally, if he'd misjudged that line, his head would literally go flying.

"What a violent school! These things happen every year?"

"...Instructor Farquois."

The great sage had appeared without a sound. Ted's eyes narrowed.

This mage could be a major thorn in their side. The alliance was making a cautious choice to go beyond what Kimberly ordinarily did, but Rod Farquois had no respect for that tradition to begin with. Given their brash and ballsy persona, there was no telling what the great sage would do when no one was looking. Ted and Dustin might have to step in and intervene.

"I gather you're accustomed to having students tackle these things, but am I not allowed to act? I'd rather minimize casualties among my beloved students."

"Best to stay out of it. Kimberly works on its own rules. And I'm sure you know even the great sage cannot easily break them."

Ted was careful with his words but was quite clear on this point. He'd upped his resistance after their previous encounter and would no longer be at the mercy of their charm. Farquois shrugged, smiling—like a parent dealing with a stubborn child.

With younger students urged to leave, older students stepped in to handle things. The Sword Roses were among those ordered to gather in the Forum.

"Oliver!" Chela called.

"Sorry I'm late. What's going on? Are we all accounted for?"

He ran over, and all turned to face him. That alone told him something was wrong. Nanao and Katie were present, as was Pete—but the tallest of their number was not.

"Guy! Guy's not here! I saw him this morning; he said he was going for a walk. Usually he'd tell me if he was in the labyrinth, but..."

The hint of panic in Katie's voice drove his hunch home. Balling up his fists to still the turmoil within, Oliver focused on taking things in stride. He couldn't show up last and then lose his shit.

"...Okay. Then let's bear in mind Guy might be mixed up in this, and assess. Anything else? Anyone else we know who's unaccounted for?"

"Not at the moment. Most peers we're involved with are assembled here. One could call that a bright side..."

Chela had clearly already run down the list. Oliver scanned the crowd—and picked out a number of familiar faces. Rossi and Andrews caught his gaze, so he raised a hand to them, then moved to the next phase.

"Right... How about our juniors? I just met Teresa, Dean, and Peter, so they're

"Why omit my name, Mr. Horn?" a refined voice inquired.

Oliver turned to find Felicia Echevalria and her attendants smiling at him. Like she'd followed him from the aborted duel. A tiny shadow slipped in front of him, its athame aimed at Felicia. Clearly, Teresa Carste was still on guard.

"Keep your distance, Vixen! Do you wish to lose your head?"

"Teresa—and Ms. Felicia?! Wait, why are either of you here?" Oliver asked. "Lowerclassmen were told to evac—"

"They're exceptions—like you were last year."

Recognizing Vera Miligan's voice, he turned to find their old frenemy approaching. She was with her councilmate, Percival Whalley. Oliver spotted Tim a ways off, busy discussing things with a different group.

"Ms. Miligan, Mr. Whalley... So these two third-years are mobilized to address this situation?" said Oliver.

"Appropriate for anyone who made it to the main round of the combat league," Whalley replied. "We want them to get more experience, and having someone to look out for will force you fourth-years to stay focused. An arrangement with one eye on the future, not just the matter at hand."

In other words, this wasn't *just* Teresa and Felicia. Several other familiar faces were running into the Forum.

"Sorry—had to go grab Rita."

"Sounds like a mess. What can we do?"

"...Augh..."

Dean and Peter, whom Oliver had just split up with, had brought along Rita Appleton, who looked very uncomfortable. Whalley turned their way.

"Mr. Cornish was not in the league, but given his rapport with Team Carste, we've granted permission. And...I've had some contact with him before. I promise he'll be useful."

"Thanks a lot, Whalley!" Peter said, pleased to know the basis for his inclusion.

Whalley acknowledged this with a wave.

Aha, Oliver thought. He'd known this kid was not easily ruffled, but clearly he'd put that gumption to good use, laying the groundwork for this. Since he hadn't been in the league, he'd had to earn his position here—and the fact that he'd managed to earn Whalley's approval was genuinely impressive. Whalley was not an easily persuaded man; Peter must have really stuck to his guns.

Rita had been hiding behind Dean, but now she emerged, having noticed a key absence.

Eyes darting around the room, she asked, "Er, um, is Mr. Greenwood here...? I don't see him anywhere..."

"...I'm afraid we have bad news, Ms. Appleton. Guy's unaccounted for. Odds are high he's caught up in the labyrinth incident," Oliver told her.

The blood drained from Rita's face, and Dean put his hands on her shoulders, looking grim. Oliver glanced at Teresa, and she darted over to join them. Mildly surprised that concern for her friend had taken priority over her enmity toward Felicia, Oliver soon turned his attention toward the final stage of his assessment.

"...What's the scale here? Have the limits on labyrinth entry helped minimize the number of victims?"

"In the lower forms, we currently have three third-years and six second-years unaccounted for. Fortunately, all first-years have been located. Numbers that indicate our policy has been effective. With the upper forms, we're still trying to verify things. We assume Guy is hardly the only one caught up in it—"

As Miligan gave them the rundown, they heard footsteps and glanced toward the entrance. A fourth-year girl came running into the Forum, late to the assembly.

"...What's going on? What is this?" asked a distinctive voice—Ursule Valois, looking rather bewildered.

The sight of her face put a new concern in Oliver's mind, and he quickly

scanned the crowd again and came up empty. The duo he'd spoken to just that morning—and forgotten about in all the commotion—was nowhere to be seen.

"Ms. Valois, where are your attendants?" Oliver asked.

"...? H-how should I know? I was in the labyrinth solo! I only just got back."

"...! Anyone seen the Barthés? Anytime this morning!" Oliver turned to the crowd at large.

People exchanged glances, but no one said a word. His fears confirmed, Oliver turned back to Valois.

"I guess I was the last to see them. Bad news, Ms. Valois. They were searching for you. If you're here, you likely missed each other as they descended into the labyrinth."

"...Huh...?"

"Still not up to speed? Listen close. All magical beasts on the second floor have gone berserk. And the Barthé siblings may be trapped down there!"

That was the shortest explanation he could muster—and it finally sank in. Valois's expression grew visibly strained. He debated whether to give her time to process, but another student was already approaching.

"Pardon me, Mr. Horn. I feel a need to step in, here."

"Ms. Ames—"

Jasmine Ames had crossed wands with him in the combat league. Like Valois, she was always accompanied by her attendants—and they were standing close behind. A claim Valois could not make.

"Can you predict your attendants' actions, Ms. Valois?" Ames inquired, employing her default courteous tone. "If they were looking for you, that alone could help us narrow the search area. Anything you can tell us about where they might have gone could make all the difference."

An appropriate condition, mindful of the recipient's circumstances. Had Ames not asked this, Oliver would have. But their hopes proved to be in vain; Valois merely looked shifty, as if she had no answer for them.

"...I— I don't know? I was just wandering around the top three layers willy-nilly. And lately? I've barely even spoken to them."

Ames's demeanor changed dramatically. Alarmed, Oliver made to speak—but before he could, an open palm shot in, catching Valois on the cheek.

Valois went flying, spinning through the air—and she failed to stick the landing, instead ending up on her backside. Her Koutz training had allowed her to absorb the strike instinctively, but her state of mind left her in no shape to follow through. She simply gaped up at the newest arrival, baffled. It was Stacy Cornwallis, hand still raised from the hard slap, positively shaking with fury from head to toe.

"...You make me sick!" she snarled. "They're your attendants!"

"Calm down, Stace!"

Her attendant, Fay Willock, was soon rubbing her shoulders. No one else dared breathe a word. This mistress and servant trusted each other completely, and all could see why Valois's attitude had rubbed Stacy the wrong way.

Ames clearly felt much the same way and nodded approvingly. She turned back to Valois, giving her an icy stare.

"Ms. Cornwallis beat me to the punch. Not to kick you while you're down, but I thought better of you, Ms. Valois. I looked forward to cutting you down someday, but clearly you are not even worth *that*."

"I have infinite pity for the Barthés, forced to serve under a mistress like you. We will save them—you are free to disgrace yourself however you please."

"Oh, snap."

"You tell her, Jaz!"

Having dropped that ultimatum, Ames spun on her heel and stalked away, her attendants following on tenterhooks. Valois was too stunned to stand up, but yet another student approached her. Nanao took a knee, putting her at eye level and forcing Valois to look into her clear gaze.

"Harsh words, Lady Valois. Have they brought you to your senses?"

"Nanao—!"

Oliver gasped, watching closely. Nothing he said could help Valois now, so he pinned his hopes on his friend. In this moment, only Nanao Hibiya could get through.

Her hands reached out, taking a firm grip of Valois's shoulders. Locked in on those hollow eyes, calling out to what lay deep within.

"On your feet. What is lost will not return. But they are *not* lost. You have not yet let them slip through your fingers!"

Valois quivered. Oliver could tell those words had broken through. Emotions welled up within her shaken heart, twisting her countenance, then spilling free.

"...I'll look for them! Of course I will!"

"Consider me relieved."

Nanao flashed a grin and pulled Valois to her feet. Then she turned.

"Oliver, a proposal. May we add Lady Valois to our ranks?"

That caught him off guard...and Valois herself seemed equally taken aback. He looked from one to the other, assessing Nanao's intent.

"...You mean that, Nanao? Guy's life may depend on it."

"I would hardly joke about such matters. If we are carrying on the league teams, then ours is missing Yuri. Who better to fill that vacancy?"

That was the last angle he'd expected her to take, but it forced him to think. They were searching the whole second layer with limited numbers, and given the threat at hand, moving in teams of three was purely practical. The friend they'd once teamed up with was gone, and someone had to take his place. In terms of pure ability, Valois was arguably ideal.

"...What do you say, Ms. Valois?" Oliver asked, focusing on the remaining concern. Namely, Valois's own views of this arrangement. Did she have any intention of cooperating with them? His eyes bored into her, and she shifted uncomfortably, at a loss.

".....I— I never said... I don't..."

"Just nod. No one else would team up with you now."

The words were like a slap to the face, and Valois swung around, shocked. Stacy had her back turned, arms folded. She had fired that last volley over her shoulder.

"With Greenwood gone, Team Aalto is shaken up as well," Stacy added. "Chela, you go with them. Don't worry about us—we'll find a straggler to work with."

"Hoo boy," Fay muttered. "Mr. Leik's instincts would have been invaluable here. I'm missing him right about now."

They wandered off, looking for a third member. Oliver watched them go; he had to admit, Stacy's views were on the money. Few people would be willing to work with Valois in her condition, which could leave a valuable fighter to her own devices. They were the sole team with an opening for her—one possible purely because of the size of Nanao's heart.

"...Fine! Not like I have a choice." Valois scowled, clearly well aware of this.

That was enough for Oliver to allow her a modicum of trust. Her attendants were among the targets of their search, so she had the motivation and retained enough sense to put practical measures above her emotions. Given their past, he was hardly free of reluctance, but that had no bearing here.

"I can't help but worry, but if Nanao wants to play it this way, it's best to leave her to it."

"Hmph, I sure wouldn't bother."

Katie and Pete were clearly askance, but not about to argue a settled point. Chela nodded and moved to join them. Oliver shot all three a grateful look. With Guy absent, that lineup would keep them safe—and give him peace of mind.

He and Nanao exchanged a nod and refocused on Valois. Valois hesitated a moment, then returned the nod, if somewhat stiffly. They were on the same page.

"You dipshits done now? Then buckle up," said Tim. "We're still confirming the particulars, but we do know it's a curse wrangler consumed by the spell."

All eyes turned to the student body president. This was the first intel they'd been given on the enemy at hand.

"Everyone knows the scene—the bustling forest. Even as we speak, a widespread corruption's spreading. Make sure each team's got at least one mage who can handle curses. Otherwise, you won't even be able to get close."

The teams exchanged glances, and Tim offered further warnings.

"I'll also mention the basic precautions to take when dealing with a curse gone wild. We all know these things spread through relationships. Most basic of those is physical—meaning anyone you're taking to bed. If you've done it before or do it on occasion, appropriate countermeasures'll do the trick, but if you're getting it on all the time, you're in trouble—and gender ain't a factor. Rule of thumb is anything more than every other day within the last month."

Tim wasn't mincing words. A buzz ran through the crowd, and Chela slipped in beside Nanao.

"...Will you two be okay?" Chela whispered.

"We will. Would that I could say otherwise."

Nanao pursed her lips. Oliver cringed at that exchange, but if he dwelled on it at all, he'd succumb to thoughts of Pete from last night. He forced himself to remain professionally distanced.

He and Nanao were hardly sleeping together *that* often, so they didn't need to be cautious. Pete had been a single encounter the night before and wouldn't yet be a factor. Besides, now he wasn't even on the same team as Oliver. Oliver and his friends weren't concerned about rapid curse transmission—they needed to focus solely on the curse wrangler behind this. Heading to the scene would mean facing that person.

"...Who's good with curses—?" Tim started to ask.

"We can all take basic precautions. Chela and Oliver are decent at handling them, but Guy is by far the best at it," Pete said. This was Oliver's own assessment as well. Guy's grades in curse class had always been top of their year. And that fact informed their assessment of his current predicament.

"Not exactly the worst-case scenario," said Oliver. "It might even work in our favor. If Guy's in the labyrinth, putting up a fight..."

## "Tonitrus!"

## "Progressio!"

Spells echoed through the forest as angry beasts closed in. A bolt felled one, and toolplant vines snared another—it howled. Handling each in turn, Guy and Mackley raced across the transformed second layer.

"Don't finish 'em! They're dank with curse energy!" he shouted.

"I know! But what even is this?!"

All this casting was wearing Mackley out. Guy was leading the way, doing his best to keep a level head.

"Stay loose, Mackley. Panic will only blind you."

He was marshaling his own views. Mayhem like this was unthinkable on any ordinary day, but he was starting to see patterns in it. Not wanting to rush to a conclusion, he began breaking it down.

"We got magifauna going berserk over quite a large area. More than one species, carnivores and herbivores alike—but some variation on how crazy they get. Carnivores are definitely way worse. That means the root cause here must have taken over the food chain and spread that way. Work our way back up that, and we get—"

Guy broke off, pointing his athame at the ground. Spatial magic made a chunk of soil shoot up into his mouth. He soon spat it out, but Mackley clearly thought this was deeply gross.

"...Urgh."

"The dirt—I thought so. Plants growing in cursed soil, herbivores that ate those, then the predators that dined on them. Curse energy gets more concentrated as it moves up the food chain. But what's the trigger? This ain't

happening unless you transmit a lot, and real quick."

Muttering to himself, he scanned the terrain around. He spotted a little spring, and scooped up a mouthful with a spell, tasting it. He'd expected the same results as with the dirt—but sensed nothing amiss in the water. He spit it out anyway, looking baffled.

"...? Weird. Only so many ways you can corrupt this large an area."

"Is this any time for speculation? Focus on escaping this!"

"I'm investigating so we can. We gotta avoid the beasts, so we can't head toward the exit; anywhere we run, if we get surrounded, we're sunk. Or do you wanna gamble on a broom ride? If you can fly like Nanao, that might work."

Guy jerked a thumb at the air above. Mackley looked up and pursed her lips. The skies were every bit as bad as the surface. Bird wyverns were hardly the only flying creatures here; all manner of species had gone berserk and were wheeling around, attacking each other with abandon. Attempting a flight through that would be suicidal.

If there was no escaping the danger zone, then they'd have to find a place to lie low. Guy had been searching for an appropriate location, but then they heard burst spells going off not far away. Mackley's head went up, too. That was hardly a noise the beasts would make.

"Someone's fighting," said Guy. "And they're in trouble."

He shot off toward the sound. Mackley looked at him like he was crazy.

"I thought we were lying low?!"

"If we let them die, it'll feel real bad. Just stay put if you're too chicken!"

"...! I'm coming! I'll be damned if I have to owe you anything more..."

She grumbled but gave chase. Speeding up, Guy privately thought she was far more amenable than he'd expected.

"You still with me, Gui?"

"! Yeah...! Shit, I really blew it."

Ahead of Guy and Mackley, the Barthé siblings were doing their level best.

But the tides had turned against them. Primarily because Gui had used a doublecant against the first wave of beasts and soaked up the curse energy from everything he'd killed. Curses were not his specialty, and he'd been unable to resist. That, in turn, left him too weakened to run.

"...Sis, worse come to worst, run while they're eating me. Ain't no point in us both dying."

"I will deck you, dipshit! If you got breath for nonsense, cast!"

Lélia cast a spell at an incoming beast herself, snarling at her brother, who she had over her shoulder. Gui was well aware the suggestion meant nothing; if their positions were reversed, he'd never have left her. But they could not hold out like this much longer. He was searching for any other outcome—but their field of view was cut off by a surprise smoke screen.

*""*...?!""

"Over here! Quick!"

A whisper on a mana frequency. Turning toward it, they peered through the smoke and saw Guy and Mackley in the brush, beckoning them. The Barthés hustled toward them. Somehow, the siblings made it to cover while the smoke kept the beasts at bay, dove into the trench dug there, and faced two students in much the same predicament.

"...You're...," said Mackley.

"If it isn't the Barthés!" Guy cried. "Not like you folks to screw up this bad."

Guy raised an eyebrow at them, but the Barthés were far more shocked.

Guy was decked out in environmental camouflage, as instructed by Kevin Walker himself, and looked like a crazy forest freak. Were it not for the face peering at them through the densely packed leaves, they might not have identified him as human at all. He'd suggested Mackley do the same, and she'd adamantly refused—and arguably, that was the reaction most mages would have had.

"Clypeus." Closing up the entrance to the trench, Guy broke things down. "Oh, your brother got himself cursed. I'm guessing you used a doublecant on

first contact? Don't blame you. The second layer ain't usually a hotbed for curses."

When he'd finished, no outside light got in, but there were phosphorescent fruits on the toolplants, so visibility wasn't half bad. The roots woven around them were plenty sturdy; Lélia thought it was impressive work for the time he must have had. She doubted any other Kimberly student could use toolplants this well.

"...Sad, but true. Greenwood, can you break the curse?" she asked, laying Gui on her knees.

With a barrier complete, the camouflage was no longer necessary; Guy removed it via a spell, a dubious look on his face.

"Wish I could, but it's a tall order right now. Quickest approach to the energy is to move it, but I'm sorely lacking in decent surrogates. Spreading it among us, I could do, but—"

"I'm not about to host or share!" Mackley said, jumping in. "The former's no different from now, and the second could wipe us all out."

Guy was forced to nod. She was right on the money.

"What Mackley said. I'll add, we ain't exactly safe *here*. No wyrms, but the second layer's got its share of diggers. The barrier oughtta hold them for now, at least."

"...Could we go deeper? Same way you dug this?" Lélia asked.

"Like I just mentioned, sitting quiet ain't too bad, but if we start tunneling, the digger beasts will swarm us. If we gotta fight while we dig, I'd rather duke it out on the surface."

Dismissing the idea, he lowered his rucksack and took out a canteen and some provisions. They had a brief respite from peril here, so it was best to eat and drink while they could; that was one of the Survivor's ironclad rules. Obeying that to the letter, Guy tore a pound cake in four, and held out the pieces of it.

"So for now, we hunker down. Hold out long enough, rescue'll come. Fill

yourself up and be patient."

"...Argh..."

"...I can't eat right now."

"Choke it down, then. I ain't kidding—it could mean the difference between life and death."

Guy clearly meant that, so Mackley reluctantly started eating. Lélia was helping her brother eat his share, first. It was far better than he'd expected, and momentarily made him forget how much pain he was in.

"...That's very good," Gui said, managing a faint smile.

"You got great taste, Barthé." Guy grinned. "Greenwood grub gives ya flavor and nutrition."

He leaned back against a trunk, keeping his tone reassuringly level.

"Best to relax. You know they'll be coming for us. I can promise that—on the Sword Roses' name."

Answering their friend's faith, the others were advancing into the chaos of the second layer. Team Horn slipped through one of multiple entrances, and quickly hid themselves in the brush, sending scout golems out to survey.

"Anything, Oliver?" Nanao asked.

"...It's a mess. Beasts rampaging over all corners of the layer. Not many corruptions can spread this far..."

The horrors his golems picked up made his brow furrow. The bustling forest had its dangers, but was always teeming with life—it was never this bloodthirsty. Now it was but a crucible of violence. Where beasts had once killed so that they might feed, now they killed for no reason at all.

Unable to put this devastation into words, he chose to focus on scouting instead. Dodging the flying beasts took a lot of concentration, but he was getting results. He'd found a number of parties with lines drawn up, fending off the beasts. He deployed a golem wheeling in the air above each.

"...Several groups of students with barriers up, standing their ground. All

mixed upper and lower forms, not likely to buckle quick. They must have grouped up quickly after the disaster began."

"And Guy?"

"...No sign of him. Or the Barthés. They could be lurking somewhere hard to find... I suppose I shouldn't assume those two are together. Any chance they'd split up?"

Oliver was trying to consider every possibility.

"...Lélia...," Valois ventured, her voice subdued.

"?"

"...looks like the calm one...but she's rather emotional. Gui often has to settle her down."

Realizing she was attempting to describe their characters, Oliver and Nanao listened intently. Any scrap of information would help. They knew all about Guy, but had not spent enough time with the Barthés to make accurate guesses.

"...If they were looking for me? Lélia would be a *mess*. I don't think...he'd, like, leave her alone like that. So I imagine they're together."

With that, Valois clammed up. Oliver smiled.

He'd barely spoken to either of her attendants outside the combat league match, but this brief portrait alone told him a lot. At the very least, it seemed safe to assume they hadn't split up. It would be easier to find their hiding spot if they were together, and it would also improve their odds of survival.

"Good to know," said Oliver. "Would've been nice for Stacy and Ms. Ames to hear that."

"Indeed! You do know your attendants well." Nanao grinned at Valois.

Meanwhile, Valois just bit her lip, turning away. She was being less prickly than they'd expected, and Oliver was increasingly convinced this team up had been a good idea. Nanao had trusted Valois for reasons he had not perceived, and that faith had resonated with Valois herself. Perhaps this was a connection Nanao had carved her way to during their match.

"If Guy or the Barthés are hiding, then they're waiting for rescue. Beasts would converge on a rescue orb, so that's a last resort," said Oliver. "They might try some other means of conveying their location. If my golems can catch that, great—"

But a shock to his head made him break off. A bird wyvern had crushed one of his scout golems, and the corresponding view cut out. The recoil left him a bit dizzy, and he reported the loss.

"...! Lost one. Gonna be hard to keep them flying in this. Bet Pete's doing a better job..."

"Then we shall let him handle it," said Nanao. "We need merely cover the ground we see."

She meant they had enough of a grasp on things to commence their rescue operation. Oliver considered that and nodded. They hadn't found who they were searching for, but there was no use overcomplicating things. The fewer students stranded here, the more people could focus on the search.

"...Right. Based on what I've scouted, let's start with who's in the most danger. Those we rescue might know things, and our friends will use a rescue orb if things get hairy. Does that work for you, Ms. Valois?"

He turned to her, and she merely nodded. Perhaps she thought it was the right call; perhaps she merely didn't think she was in any position to argue. Oliver would have liked to ease these tensions further, but that was not something he could rush. With their plan in mind, he rose to his feet.

"The beasts are cursed. I'm sure everyone knows this, but do not finish them off. Be careful how you use any spells that could be lethal."

"Acknowledged. This is hardly the time for unfettered swings."

"Yeah, we've gotta pull our punches. If you fight like you usually do, we'll be surrounded in no time. Let's coordinate with the other teams, and make sure we maintain a line of retreat."

With that, all left the brush at a run. Beasts that spotted them radiated curse-laden hostility—and Oliver was the first to fire a spell back at the incoming threat.

# "Prohibere! Impediendum!"

## "Tonitrus!"

At much the same time, teams assigned to other entrances moved out. Team Aalto—with Chela subbing for Guy—was but one of these, maintaining an escape route while suppressing incoming beasts. Creatures of all shapes and sizes bore down, blinded by fury. Seeing them so far removed from their usual natures left Katie biting her lip.

"This is so horrible!" she moaned. "Even the sweet ones are caught up in this curse!"

"Agreed, but we've no time to pity them! Pete, how are you faring?"

Matching Katie's casting, Chela called to the rock behind them. Pete was sitting cross-legged in a defensive encampment, eyes barely open.

"Quite well. Transmitting my findings to the other teams."

Pete's mind was processing the visual data from well over twenty scout golems at once. This took considerable focus—something that sent a chill down Chela's spine. Neither she nor Oliver were capable of matching this feat.

"...How many are you up to?" she asked Pete.

"...Not as impressive as it looks. They're running on auto, freeing up my resources, and second-layer beasts aren't that good at flying. If you take the time, you can build a golem that can handle them."

Pete's tone was matter-of-fact, but Chela was fully cognizant of how difficult that really was. He must have been incredibly particular about how the golems were made, from their construction to the design of the mana circuit that controlled their movements, trimming all excess while maintaining a delicate balance between weight, size, and mobility—and now he was hot-swapping between auto and remote modes while simultaneously processing the observations they made. This was a feat far beyond the capabilities of the average fourth-year—and the fact that he was still improving was downright terrifying.

"...But I can only handle this number for...maybe twenty minutes. Beyond

that, I'll need to rest, or my attention will fray. Let me focus on scouting till I hit that limit."

"Right!"

"Absolutely."

With a hard time limit, Chela and Katie focused on the task at hand. Ideally, they'd complete all search and rescue tasks within those twenty minutes. Until then, they'd thin the numbers of berserker beasts, coordinating with other teams to reach stranded students. No hesitation on that front.

"Where are you, Guy?" Pete muttered. "Don't make this hard for me."

Pete added one more golem, further diminishing his capacity. His nose began to bleed, but he just wiped it with his sleeve. No matter. If it meant saving one of the Sword Roses, who cared how many brain cells he lost?

The changes wrought by their arrival were not entirely lost on those in Guy's trench. He'd slipped a rodent familiar to the surface, and it was scanning the area from the top of a tall tree, its vision projected into Guy's mind—and it had spotted a golem buzzing around between the flying beasts above.

"...Well? Any chance of a rescue?" Mackley asked, careful not to disturb his concentration.

Guy could only fold his arms, groaning. He was nowhere near as good at controlling familiars as Oliver, much less Pete. If he tried to send anything flying, it would be eaten immediately. Mackley and Lélia had already tried, with that exact result. That was why they'd resorted to the land-based critter Guy had on hand. The tree had afforded it a degree of elevation, but it could hardly see as far as a flying familiar.

"...I'm certainly seeing signs. The way those golems are darting about could well be Pete. So I'd say there's definitely *someone* at the second layer's entrance. If we throw up a rescue orb, they'll absolutely spot it—but it'll draw in all the beasts around, so...still a last resort."

"I've still got more familiars!" Lélia offered.

"Yeah...most'll get eaten on the way, but if we send enough, something'll get

through. Okay, everyone get your—"

Guy was about to act on that idea, but then he broke off. He wasn't having second thoughts; he'd felt an unnatural tremor underfoot.

"... Wait, why is the ground shaking?"

Even as he spoke, it got worse. The entire trench was rocking. Dirt fell from overhead, and worse—the ground beneath them collapsed. Darkness yawned and pulled all four into the depths.

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"Augh—?!"

"Hold on to me, Gui!"

"Wh-what now?!"

"Don't ask me! Crap— Impetus!"
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Helplessly dragged along with the falling dirt, Guy yanked a rescue orb from his pocket, and sent it upward on a wind spell. It broke through the soil to the surface and ruptured in the air, generating a pillar of light.

The search parties spotted that light immediately. Oliver's team had just scattered the beasts and sent a stranded group toward the rear. The orange light was not that far from them.

"A rescue orb! That's Guy's color—!"

"On it!" Nanao shot forward, Oliver and Valois on her heels.

But their feet were soon stalled by the rippling ground. The tremors weren't dying down—they were getting stronger still.

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"Hrm-?!"
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"Back off, Nanao!" Oliver cried, anticipating a major disturbance.

Nanao's instincts had suggested the same, and she was already reversing course. A moment later, a massive section of earth sank before their very eyes. When the dust had settled, they beheld a chasm so vast they could not see the bottom. Their advance was completely blocked.

"A sinkhole...?!" said Oliver. "But the second layer doesn't have—"

"To the air!" Nanao cried, leaping aboard her broom.

Oliver and Valois were soon on her tail. The sky was full of violent beasts, and they were forced to brave those flocks. Nanao slashed at the incoming bird wyverns, and Oliver and Valois fired spells at anything joining the creatures. With the immediate interference cleared, they reached the light's location.

"Where are you, Guy? If you can hear us, speak! Guy!"

Oliver was straining his vocal cords, calling his friend's name—but he heard no response.

They fled the beasts to the ground below. The collapse had left a conical pit behind, but the flowing soil had already sealed the hole and buried anything.

Oliver's shoulders quivered. This was not a good sign.

"... No sign of him," he said. "Did he get caught up in the sinkhole?"

"Oliver! Over there!"

Nanao spotted something gleaming, and darted toward it. When she fished it out of the dirt and held it up, Valois turned pale. Oliver could guess why. It was a silver brooch depicting flowers; the Barthé girl had been wearing that this morning.

"...That's...Lélia's," Valois managed—and then she lost her cool completely.

She aimed her athame at the ground, levitating all the soil, her face crumpling like she was on the verge of tears. It was painful to watch.

"Where...where are you...?"

".....! Deep breaths, Ms. Valois! If they aren't surfacing themselves, they must be very deep. Digging blindly will not get us there."

As Oliver talked her down, Nanao came up behind her, putting an arm around her shoulders. Oliver raised his own blade, sending mana frequencies and sonar pulses below. This was effective to some extent, but if their targets were beyond the depth he could reach, they had no options left.

Nanao clearly knew he'd get nowhere. Warding off the flying beasts with her katana in one hand, she rubbed Valois's back with the other, calming her down.

Nanao kept her eyes on their surroundings.

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"Oliver..."
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"...We misread the scale of things. This is no longer the second layer we know —this is uncharted territory!"

He abandoned his fruitless sonar probe, clenching his fists. They'd been one step away, so close to grabbing their friends' hands, only to lose them to the gloom below.

As confusion reigned above, in the pitch-black depths below, Guy fell through darkness, casting repeated deceleration spells. After a minute-long descent, he felt something solid against his back.

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".....Hah, hah... Guhhh!"
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"...Owwww..."

He'd taken one breath before something landed on his stomach. He recognized the voice behind that groan and sighed.

"Glad you're alive, but if you ain't hurt, get off me, Mackley."

"...I was planning on it!"

Mackley scrambled off him, sitting up.

Pricking up his ears, Guy called out, "You with us, Barthés? Gimme a holler if you can hear me!"

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"...Over here..."
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"...Ugh..."
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Both voices sounded feeble, but were close by. Guy was relieved to hear that. Things had gone from bad to worse, but at least they'd managed to stick together on the fall.

"...What's going on?" Lélia asked Guy. "That felt like a very long way. Did we fall through the bottom of the layer?"

"Don't ask me. I ain't sensing danger close at hand, so I'm gonna strike a light."

Guy still had his athame in hand, and he struck a light at the tip. This lifted the veil of darkness on their surroundings and made them all gasp. The ceiling was so high they could not make it out; even the narrowest walls were a solid thirty feet apart, and the distance before and behind so great the light could not penetrate it. The four of them were inside an unknown cavern.

"\_\_\_\_!"

"...What the hell...?"

Lélia and Mackley sounded equally stunned. Guy scrambled up and moved straight to the nearest wall, inspecting its rocky surface.

"...So we ain't through to the third layer. Looks like an ordinary cave."

That was all his initial analysis got him, so he reported as much. He ran his fingers along the wall; he could see and feel a distinctive pattern carved there.

"Bark marks on the walls. Ever heard of a lava tree mold? That's the hollow that's left behind when a tree gets caught up in a volcanic eruption...but no clue why there'd be one under the second layer. Some connection to the irminsul?"

Muttering away, he took stock of the situation.

"...I'd rather find a way out," Mackley said, dusting herself off. "Any way to fly back up the way we came?"

"Doubtful," Guy snapped. "Don't feel air flowing, and it's hard to believe that collapse wouldn't seal off the exit. Flying blind right now would just drain mana."

He'd considered this himself the moment he'd realized he still had his broom. The reason he'd given was a valid one, but also—if this was a place you could fly in and out of, rescue would have come to them. Clearly, this was not the case. They had to assume they'd need to find a new way out. Once he'd reached that conclusion, he planted his butt on the ground.

"Sit, Mackley. Let's regroup. We don't think this through, we really won't survive it."

With a major shift having impacted the second layer, the Watch ordered a temporary withdrawal. All teams assigned to the survivor search retreated to the school building. They were ordered to rest and recover until a new directive came down. The Watch members were gathered in the council headquarters, discussing just that.

"Lemme break down what we do know. Pitfalls all over the layer, leading to the discovery of an unknown cave system below. Totally unrelated to the existing third layer. Don't know much about the interior other than it's big and gnarled."

Tim Linton sounded pretty grim, and those around listened in silence. Kimberly's older students were used to mayhem, but this was far worse than they'd expected.

"Student casualties. From fourth year, we're missing Guy Greenwood, Annie Mackley, Gui Barthé, and Lélia Barthé. Their rescue orb was sighted, and we found the remains of their hiding spot. We gotta assume they were caught up in the collapse and yanked into the new cavern. Gotta rethink our rescue op from scratch—just how shitty are things? Given how unorthodox this is, we're gonna hit up the faculty, but don't except anything new on that front."

"So we missed four," Whalley said, going back to those names. "I suppose we should be glad we rescued the others in time. In hindsight, one could argue we implemented the restrictions on labyrinth access just in time. If there'd been underclassmen dragged below, they'd have little chance of survival."

"Can't really say fourth-years are exactly safe," Miligan cut in. "I'd rather not be flung into unknown territory, personally. Especially if this disruption came at the hands of a mage."

"Bingo." Tim nodded. "The state of the layer and student reports confirm it—we're now certain a sixth-year named Dino Lombardi has been consumed by the spell. He started acting...off toward the end of last year, so we had him on our watch list."

That name deepened their frowns. They all knew who they had to find and fight, but that wasn't nearly enough intel to stand against a skilled sixth-year on their turf. Sensing that the others felt that way, Tim turned his eyes to the corner where a man was sitting in silence.

"Would love to get this rescue op back underway, but to even start planning

that, we need a proper understanding of the situation. There's no time to spare, so spill your damn guts—I mean, please, share what information you can, Mr. Rivermoore."

Tim rephrased with a nod toward manners, and all eyes turned to Cyrus Rivermoore.

"I'm sure you've all guessed as much," Rivermoore began, "but when I dug up that behemoth skull, I did a substantial survey of the space beneath the irminsul. The roots spread far wider and deeper than you'd ever imagine from above. If this curse has corrupted the entire layer, that's why."

"That much, we figured," Miligan said. "But no one had 'mystery cave' on their bingo card. Any clue what that's about, Mr. Rivermoore?"

"I do," Rivermoore said. "The tree that now lives is the *second* irminsul. Has anyone heard that hypothesis before?"

Everyone frowned. The irminsul was a tree, so naturally it had to have sprung from *something*. No one said this aloud because they could tell he was implying more than that.

Whalley's breadth of knowledge was the most extensive of any of the students here; sifting through his memories, he ventured, "I'm aware of Albschuch's paper on the subject. She wrote that before this tree grew, there was another in the same location—where lived the behemoth that served as the bed for our irminsul. She had a basis for this, and findings to back it, but did not arrive at any concrete conclusions."

"Not surprising," Rivermoore replied. "Given elf magic compatibility with the irminsul, that research came at Kimberly's behest; it wasn't something Khiirgi herself was ever particularly interested in. I imagine she did the bare minimum and then abandoned it. Which also means it's no surprise someone else chose to dig deeper."

With that, Rivermoore shifted his eyes to the projection crystal on the table. Catching his drift, Miligan waved her wand, activating it and displaying the images recorded by their scout golems. Rivermoore soon urged her to pause and enlarge. Miligan did so, displaying a detailed view of the cave walls, including their shape and texture. Everyone spotted biological patterns which

were not found in ordinary caves.

"You see those bark marks and knots on the walls? This is a lava tree mold," Rivermoore explained. "The old irminsul was caught in an eruption, leaving its remains behind in the form of these caves. Solid evidence that Khiirgi's hypothesis was right."

"Riiiight! Riiiight!" Ufa echoed, wound around his neck. A sight that eased the tension a smidge.

"So let me get this straight," Miligan said, rubbing her chin. "We have the original irminsul. A behemoth took up residence within. The pyroclastic flow arrived, completely submerging the tree and likely killing the behemoth as well. The new irminsul sprouted from that behemoth's corpse, and grew to its current size over an incredible span of time. Right?"

These caves were connected to the very origins of the second layer. Imagining these ancient events, Whalley looked puzzled.

"Not to ask a basic question, but...shouldn't their positions be reversed? The behemoth would have nested in the roots of the original irminsul—or at least, below the treetop. It seems reasonable to assume we'd find these lava tree molds above the skull itself."

"A behemoth would not be instantly killed by mere lava. We can assume it struggled mightily before its demise, which explains why I found the head first. That struggle also protected the second tree's seed, which was likely already within the behemoth's body."

This was clearly Rivermoore's interpretation, but Whalley was nodding along.

"There's no volcano on the second layer," Miligan grumbled. "But I suppose if —like Instructor Demitrio's meditation field—that entire stretch of land was brought into the labyrinth from somewhere else after those events, that's not a contradiction. It boggles the mind—but back to the issue at hand. At the very least, that explains where these caves come from; the question is how we deal with this mess."

She prodded them to think. Andrews hesitated a moment, then raised his hand.

"...If these stem from the irminsul's ancestor, that does give us an idea of their layout. However many branches there may be, they'll lead back to the trunk. I suspect that will prove critical to rescuing the students. And since Mr. Greenwood is an accomplished magical botanist—"

"They'll likely reach the same conclusion," said Miligan. "I like the way you think, Mr. Andrews. Only problem is, that's where our consumed mage is hiding out. The entirety of this new space is effectively his territory. Does that remind you of anyone?"

Miligan flashed a grin. Naturally, this was directed at Rivermoore, who'd turned an entire abandoned zone into his personal kingdom and given them all quite a headache. However, Rivermoore dismissed her snark with a snort.

"Lombardi's likely connected to the current irminsul by a workshop that was transferred to the lava tree mold. You could say he's turned the entire tree into a giant familiar, but controlling anything of that size takes a lot of work, and specific conditions. Given how swiftly the changes to the second layer occurred, we can assume our target is not that deep down. If you make a thorough search of the area right below the tree, you'll find him soon enough. That's the extent of the advice I can offer in my position."

Some very concrete advice—and with that, Rivermoore closed his eyes. Clearly, this was where he drew the line.

"Fair enough," Miligan said, smiling. "You are faculty now. Still, between the state of Kimberly and the unknown territory, this is a highly irregular situation. I think we have solid grounds to request exceptional handling from the instructors—but what do you have to say about that? Last year, you were a senior we could rely on—a man who never once ignored a mage's morality. Give us your thoughts, Cyrus Rivermoore."

That sarcasm could have curdled milk, and it did earn her a frown. The Snake-Eyed Witch's implication was clear. The astra Ufa, the fruit of Rivermoore's research—the people here had played no small part in its creation. In other words, he *owed* them. Tim Linton sat right there; Oliver Horn's friend was among the missing. This should not be forgotten.

And in light of that, Miligan urged Rivermoore to take just one more step—a

pushy request, but one he acquiesced to, albeit with the loudest click of his tongue he had ever mustered.

"How that forked tongue of yours writhes, snake. I will take action to the extent that I am allowed. But do not expect help from the faculty. We each look after our own—no matter the occasion, that is the iron rule of Kimberly."

With that, he rose to his feet, and he and Ufa left the council chambers. The door slammed behind him, and Miligan shot the others an amused look.

"He's already acting like a teacher. For all the warnings he gave, it sounds like he'll be up to *something*."

"Given how Instructor Ted's group is moving, he may have some wriggle room. But they won't do anything decisive. We got a candidate for the final visitor?"

Lining up their cards, Tim pushed the conversation forward.

"That's a tricky one," Miligan replied, closing her eyes. "Mr. Lombardi trained directly under Instructor Baldia, and is considered first or second place among the curse wranglers in his year. Naturally, there are several wranglers volunteering to help. But not one of them is an obvious fit, honestly."

"So we lack a suitable candidate. One of those times when Godfrey would have gone in himself," Whalley muttered.

Everyone in the room froze. Dropping that name meant winding Tim up, or at least pouring fuel on the fire. Since becoming student body president, Tim had been doing the job—objectively speaking. Yet, at the same time, he knew better than anyone else that what he could do was no match for what Purgatory had achieved. And Whalley's remark gouged that wound.

The silence was oppressive. Whalley had his eyes locked on Tim, not wavering an inch, and Tim met that gaze. Eventually, Tim sighed.

"If he was still in charge and told me to do it, then I would. But I can't be as cavalier with my life as I used to be."

A bit of a self-dig. Tim *had* changed considerably. His position, his attitude— he was no longer the reckless Toxic Gasser working for the man he loved,

unconcerned about his own survival. He'd had no compunctions about throwing his life away for Godfrey, nor had he ever imagined he'd survive to his seventh year.

But here he was, still alive. And he'd taken over presidency from Godfrey, had kids like Oliver looking up to him, and was leading a new council of his own fellows. He had things to protect. There was no going back to his days as part of the rank and file, and he could not afford to kill himself in a vain attempt to imitate Purgatory's feats. He could protect nothing that way. The trust Godfrey and Lesedi had placed in him, and his feelings for the late Carlos and Ophelia... plus their original motivation—the desire to make this school a little better than it used to be.

That all fell upon him, and he could not take it lightly. Thus, Whalley's dig had not hurt at all. Certain of that, Whalley slowly smiled and let the moment pass.

"Glad to hear it," he said. "And you have my apology."

"I ain't mad. Damn, you're even uptight when you test people."

Tim rolled his eyes, and the others let themselves relax. They got why Whalley would want to take the measure of their leader's state of mind, but that had been nerve-racking. Tim clapped his hands, drawing their attention back to the matter at hand.

"Just gonna have to put a bunch of wranglers on the team going after Lombardi himself. The question is: How do the rest of our people search for the remaining fourth-years? This ain't like Ophelia; they ain't been kidnapped. Odds are high they're nowhere near Lombardi himself."

"But they're in completely uncharted territory," Miligan said. "If we can't predict how the missing will behave, the odds of locating them will plummet. Considering motivation and ability, we're gonna need the Sword Roses to play a key role in this."

"Throwing them into the thick of things, again?" Tim scowled. "Damn, and I just swore I'd keep 'em safe..."

"? You seem perturbed. Something happen between you?"

"None of your beeswax." Tim waved her off. "Go on, let Horn's group know.

Before they decide they ain't waiting!"

But the more he tried to avoid having this be personal, the more a certain boy's smile got lodged in Tim's head.

Meanwhile, the students the Watch had placed on standby were gathered in the Forum. Eating and resting, prepping to resume the search. The Sword Roses were waiting quietly. With Guy still in the labyrinth somewhere, Katie was looking a bit uneasy, but Chela and Oliver were keeping her calm, preventing her from running off ahead of them. And this concern was not limited to their group.

"You must eat, Lady Valois."

Valois was sitting sullenly at a table some distance off, and Nanao had taken a seat next to her. They'd been *so close* to rescuing her attendants, and she was visibly more upset than before. The plate of food in front of her had gone cold without a bite taken, so Nanao offered her a sandwich from her own plate.

"In times of strife, food and sleep may seem a secondary concern, but that is precisely why they are of value."

*"…"* 

Lacking the energy to refuse, Valois sluggishly took the sandwich. She chewed like it had turned to sand in her mouth, watching as Nanao resumed her own meal.

"...Aren't you, like...scared?" she asked.

"I know how resilient Guy can be. If your retainers are with him, then they are assuredly safe as well."

She said this with no hesitation—a fact that ate at Valois. Trust based on understanding. Something Valois could not have even if she desired it—not after years of dismissing her attendants as mere familiars.

"...I don't know anything... Not about Gui...or Lélia..."

"You described their characters."

"No...that much is simply their quirks as tools. I don't know anything *real*. Nothing about them as *people*."

The words just came tumbling out. She was past trying to put on a brave face. Already disgraced, she could not make things any worse.

"...I didn't want to know. Knowing would mean...I couldn't use them anymore. I'd be scared of losing something that mattered...again."

"Was that successful?" Nanao inquired.

Valois's words died on her lips. She hung her head. "... I hate you so much."

"My apologies. That was rather mean."

Nanao smiled as she spoke, then turned her chair to face Valois, looking right in her eyes.

"Listen, Lady Valois. We have fought before, so I can speak with conviction. You are strong. Not just the cut of your blade. The emotions you carry within you are far more powerful than most of us possess. People of that nature cannot live without someone to hold on to."

*"…"* 

"Do not fear loss. You have the power to protect. I know not what it is you lost before, but you are far stronger now than you were then. That alone you know as well as I."

Her words echoed through Valois, and she could not help but listen. Meanwhile, the Sword Roses were watching them talk, stifling their nerves.

"...She's really going for it," Oliver marveled.

"Are you sure you shouldn't join them?" Katie asked.

"Yeah—I'd just make things worse," he said, shaking his head. "This is a task only Nanao can handle."

He lacked the delicacy to pry open the lid Valois had placed on her heart. Thus, he'd entrusted the task to Nanao. It fell to her to keep Valois going, to lead her eyes to the path ahead. Only then could Valois truly begin.

Two figures entered the Forum and stole the Sword Roses' gazes. Miligan and Whalley, the president's aides. Their presence here meant the council had reached a decision, and the words they spoke did not betray those

expectations.

"Thank you for waiting," said Miligan.

"We have a plan," Whalley told the group. "It's time we resumed this search."

Everyone had been waiting for this, and rose to their feet. Pleased to see them all ready and willing, Miligan smiled—and began the briefing.

**CHAPTER 4** 

The Evil Tree

119

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

### **CHAPTER 4**

## **The Evil Tree**

After an hour on standby at the landing site, Guy's group decided there was little chance of rescue here, and they gingerly began to explore the cavern. The marks on the walls told them which way the dead tree had grown, and they'd chosen to follow this "branch" back to the source.

"...This is wild. How old was this tree? If a single branch is this big, it must have been even more massive than the one we got now."

Guy was still making observations on the go, clearly impressed.

"Could you try *not* enjoying this?" Mackley scowled. "You're as bad as Aalto in biology class."

"Huh? Please—this is just basic academic curiosity."

"You're not convincing anyone. Normal people don't get *curious* when their lives are in danger! But I get it—that's what mages do. Suit yourself! I'll be over here, imagining how bad it'll be when you get consumed by the spell."

"You are made of spite! It's been three years. Sand off them rough edges."

Guy sighed, but turning to glower at her made him realize the Barthés were falling behind. He looked back. Lélia was carrying her brother, and was very out of breath.

"Time for a break?" Guy suggested. "Put him down a bit, Ms. Barthé. No use running ourselves into the ground."

"...Just call me Lélia. Sorry...I need that rest."

"Why are you tired already?" Mackley demanded. "Even with him on your back, we haven't walked—"

Puzzled, Mackley approached them, but then she stopped midsentence. Lélia was laying her brother down—and there was a black mist in the air around her,

too. Much like the curse affecting Gui.

"...What the...?" Mackley gaped. "Why are you infected?! Did you take some from him?"

"...No." Lélia shook her head. "I tried to process it, but...this is the upshot. Worse than I thought."

Guy crossed his arms, looking the siblings over, and one potential cause crossed his mind. He hesitated a second, then spoke up.

"Uh...yeah, best distance yourself a little, Lélia. Mackley, you're both girls—look after her a bit. Treat the symptoms if you can. I'll handle her brother."

He hoisted Gui up and moved him a ways off. Leaning the boy against the cave wall, he knelt down. Gui's breathing was shallow, his eyes half-lidded.

"You still with us, Barthé? Mind if call you Gui? I hate to put it like this, but you feeling any better after transferring some of it to her?"

"...Yeah. Sorry...we're slowing you two down."

Gui managed to answer, eyes on the ground. Then he drew his white wand, putting a sound dampener up between them and the girls.

"Greenwood...you know why, right?"

"...Uh, why what?"

"Spare me. Why my curse energy shifted to her."

Guy's eyes swam. His honesty was working against him here; he wasn't great at playing dumb.

"You're siblings!" he said. "You're closer than any strangers would be. And, uh...I'm guessing Valois's mind control is a factor? That shit seemed pretty brute-force."

He tried to chalk it up to other things, and Gui mustered a half smile, appreciative of his consideration.

"All those things aren't helping, no. But they're all manageable concerns. Lady Ursule wouldn't leave us that exposed to curses. Only reason Lélia got corrupted this easy—"

Gui cut himself off, covering his eyes with one hand and leaning his head all the way back.

Guy tried to stop him from saying anything else, but to no avail. Gui was hell-bent on making this admission.

"Lately," he said, "we've been at it every night."

Guy was silent for several seconds, scratching his head, and finally spun around, taking a seat next to Gui. He had Gui drop his dampener spell and cast one himself, not wanting Gui to expend his remaining resources.

"I take it you're looking to talk. Fine—I'm listening."

"Thanks...," Gui whispered.

Leaning back against the wall, Guy chose his next words carefully.

"I ain't an expert...but I hear it happens often enough in old houses. For all kinds of reasons...like keeping the bloodline pure, or..."

"Yeah...but that's not what's going on with us. We're twins. Been together since the womb, already lots in common. And after our birth, they raised us to lean into that stuff. Our psychic overlap was a prerequisite for serving as her attendants. Basically..."

Gui began explaining their origins. It was hardly uncommon for mages to tweak a certain degree of their functions. But it was unusual to link two minds like this. For the simple reason that it undermined their individuality—essential to any mage.

"The two of us are one, which sounds great. We don't need words to be on the same page. We can coordinate in fights. But there is a downside: We can't be separated. If there's distance between us, we go nuts—quite literally. It's like we're missing half of our selves; we start getting scared, our mana circulation goes awry, then our bodies fall apart. The longer we're apart, the worse it gets."

"...Sounds rough. We've got gendered dorms! How's that work?"

"...A night apart isn't an issue. We can see each other at school, and we've gotten adjusted so we can handle up to a week apart. But that's assuming Lady Ursule is managing us. With her distancing herself from us, it rattled us both,

like we were limbs cut off from the brain. It sucks, but we don't know what to do with ourselves. We know she's avoiding us, we know it's stupid, but we *have* to go looking for her."

Gui's tone grew increasingly bitter, and Guy figured it was best to let him vent. He offered no words of comfort or encouragement, for none of that would help when it came to a story like this one.

"To keep our minds intact, we had to stick to each other like glue twenty-four seven. The last few months, we've barely been back to the dorms beyond quick errands. Sleeping in our labyrinth base, going straight from there to class, still clinging to each other for any comfort we could get. And one thing led to another. No love involved. Just masturbating with each other's bodies because only that could stave off our oncoming breakdown."

Gui's voice grew hoarse, like he was coughing up blood. He had his head buried in his knees. From his profile alone, Guy could tell he was utterly exhausted—and that made their predicament clear. They'd already been at the end of their rope, even before this curse had hit them.

"...Honestly, we're doomed. This bought us some time, but if our mistress keeps avoiding us, it's only gonna get worse. But if Lady Ursule no longer needs our services, then there's no reason for us to exist at all."

"..."

That made Guy's brow furrow. Oblivious to that response, Gui's tone grew increasingly desperate.

"...Maybe we'd be better off if you left us here. If things get tough, do so. We won't blame you for it."

Guy could take no more. He raised his fist high and bopped the other boy on the head.

"...Ow...!"

"Are you stupid? You think I'm gonna abandon you after hearing all this? Fuck, I'm so pissed off right now! I wanna punch the wall or something!"

He dropped the dampener, jumped to his feet, and let out a roar. Mackley

and Lélia jumped and turned toward him, and he swung angrily around to face them.

"Break's over! The curse energy's split between you two. You can both walk now, right? No use waiting for rescue in a branch like this—we gotta reach the trunk. If they realize this is a lava tree mold, they'll start the search there."

Gui was still gaping at him, so Guy lent him a shoulder.

Mackley sighed. "We'll be lucky to make it with these two slowing us down. But I'm not objecting! I wouldn't stand much chance of getting back alive on my own, and it's not like you'd even considering ditching them."

"You're damn right, Mackley. They're friends now."

"Shut up, you exhausting man. Grab my shoulder, Lélia. We gotta move."

Watching her get Lélia up, Guy grinned. Together, they moved on down the cave, but it didn't take long for the terrain to change. The hard rock underfoot gave way to something soft. Bats flew past above.

"...The ground...," Gui muttered.

"Yeah, there's soil coating the rock now. That's glow moss on the ceiling, same as on the third stratum. And we're starting to see the critters that live down here. The biota down here ain't as old as the caves themselves. Someone's gotta be maintaining it—maybe the same person that messed up the layer—"

Guy broke off his analysis, stopping in his tracks. Mackley pulled up alongside him, squinting at the path ahead.

"Take them and go back down, Mackley. This ain't good," he growled.

An instant later, cursed beasts shot toward them out of the dark.

"....!"

"...Antlerods," Guy muttered, watching close. "The one in back's a doozy—gotta be one of the lords that staked out turf atop the irminsul. Guess it got dragged down here, too, and it just had to bring backup."

The glow moss provided enough light to make out the creatures without an

illumination spell. Five oversized magideer, each with at least one massive antler. These were among the tougher foes the second layer offered; those antlers allowed the magideer to each control a single type of elemental. This was a lot like the spells mages cast—hence the "rod" in the species name. As they aged, they grew extra antlers, which allowed them to control multiple elements. The boss Guy had pointed out had *three*.

The herd stopped some distance off. Guy's eyes narrowed. These creatures weren't attacking on sight like the corrupted beasts above. But that didn't mean the antlerods weren't hostile; they were merely gauging the threat before they attacked. Four mages who were not fully grown, including two who were injured—Guy was sure they could *tell*.

"They've adapted to the curse," he spat. "If they're still in control, that's worse—can't bait 'em into fighting each other."

"...Is there a plan here?" Mackley asked. "You know it's functionally just the two of us. Carrying them, we can't even run."

"Oh, you ain't even got the half of it. Unless one of us stands guard over the Barthés, they'll get hit first. Keep backing off, Mackley. Get some barriers up around them, and don't move."

Guy dropped his rucksack, foisted Gui off on Mackley, and stepped forward. Mackley gaped at him.

"Wha—? You're going alone? Talk about overconfident! Charging in full frontal with no prep? None of the schemes you used in the combat league?"

"Not like I wanna do this! C'mon, back off!" Guy yelled, raising his athame.

That made the antlerods bristle.

# "Progressio!"

Guy moved first, scattering seeds in front of him. His spell made them grow rapidly, erecting a barrier, and the antlerods all made to leap over it. A snap decision that proved how many fights this herd had been through—but the moment he'd seen the boss, Guy had expected that.

Three magideer leaped forward, and tentacle-like tendrils shot up from the half-formed barricade, grabbing at them. A faux barrier trap employing toolplants Guy had personally altered. The rapid-growth vines held them for only a few seconds, but they lost their balance in the air and had to right themselves, giving Guy more than enough time to follow up. And their bodies prevented the two in the back from leaping in to help.

## "Fortis Flamma!"

That was when he slammed home a doublecant. He'd had this plan in mind from the start, and moved through the steps smoothly, staggering the antlerods with this spell just as they freed themselves from the vines. He *thought* he'd taken out the three in the lead. Right before him, one had turned sideways to deal with the vines—and the boss's horns pierced its flank.

### "V00000!"

One of its antlers was already generating a powerful freeze, even as it exited the deer's flesh. This canceled out Guy's flames and gave the antlerods on either side of it time to free themselves and spread out. The boss tossed the dying magideer aside, and Guy shuddered. Killing one had prevented the loss of all three, and the speed and mercilessness of that decision was terrifying. This antlerod had *earned* its mastery of that irminsul turf.

"...Not gonna make this easy, huh?" said Guy.

### "V00000!"

A howl of rage—and the herd recovered, moving to surround their prey. He'd been growing more barriers around him the moment he knew his surprise attack had failed, but they weren't going to last long.

"Dammit," Guy muttered. "Did you see this coming, Instructor Baldia...?"

Remembering what the curse instructor had told him, he couldn't help but grumble. Still—even if she had called it, he had no right to blame her. She hadn't forced his hand; she'd merely given him options. Even now, he could choose not to take that path and die a horrible death.

The rest was his own concern. What choice to make for which gain. What to sacrifice for what he could protect in turn. He had to decide—no one else in the

world could make up his mind for him.

"...I knew it. I can't be the only one keeping my nose clean."

A look of resignation. No need to fret under pressure—he'd reached his answer a long time ago.

He could not die here. There were too many things he'd left undone, too many things he wanted to preserve.

For a fleeting moment, he wondered how they'd take his loss.

They'd grieve for him. Not just that—they'd lose another pillar. One less reason to hesitate before striding toward the spell that would consume them. And that he could not abide. He had to be their anchor. Had to stand behind them, on this side of the line they could not cross, pulling them back until the bitter end.

And so he made his choice. To maintain that role, he had to take a step into his own darkness—his own spell. As vile a contradiction as that was.

"Sorry, Katie... I won't be hugging you for a while."

An apology crossed his lips, and his hand plunged into his robe, fingers clutching the gnarled, swollen red fruit hidden there. Baldia Muwezicamili had given him a seed. He'd grown it with his own blood. And that plant had borne this fruit.

It passed his lips. His teeth sank into it. His throat swallowed once.

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"Ngh-!"
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Searing heat burst within his body, followed by a chill that rippled through him from head to toe. A black veil converged from his peripherals, coating all he saw. He knew he could never tear it away again. This was how he saw the world, now and forever. His body and soul now *knew* just what it meant to take a curse within himself.

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"...Wha-?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;...Greenwood..."

<sup>&</sup>quot;...You son of a...!"

The three mages behind him looked on in horror. Even the antlerods surrounding him were unnerved, and faltered in their steps. These reactions spoke volumes about his condition—but Guy put that thought out of his mind. It was not worth considering. It did not matter how horrifying he might look. He knew what he had to do: get home alive. Back to his friends, having removed all obstacles in his way.

His mind and the curse energy converged. As host, he provided direction in broad strokes, letting that which he'd taken in do as it pleased within the range of what he permitted. He did not try to apply logic—he'd known from the start that could not be done. This was fundamentally different from taming a familiar. There was no point in training or arguing here. He could do only one thing—hang on to the rudder and try to steer.

The curse energy delighted in its new host. It spoke to him like a new friend, whose path was bound to its own. Guy could only nod—knowing full well it was already a part of him.

A nightmarish power coursed through him. He felt sickeningly strong, and his lips curled. For the first time in his life, he wore the smile of a *mage*.

"...Ha-ha... Yeah, I really took to it. You said I had a knack for this, and you weren't lying."

Guy Greenwood, curse wrangler. If his default state was like that of the sun, then this dark turn was an eclipse. The curse behind it was borrowed, but the *talent* had not been grafted on. Rooted in the same soil, here bloomed a new breed of his magecraft.

"...Now we're even. Come at me, deer."

""""VOOOOO!""""

Unleashing their elementals, the antlerods leaped at him. The nature of this threat had transformed, and they could sense this curse was far stronger than they were. Fire, lightning, and cold bore down on him—each of these spells alone could have meant Guy's end. He did not balk, merely casting a spell at the seeds by his feet.



### "Progressio!"

Cursed trees shot upward diagonally, and he bounded off them, leaping over the cold air and landing right by a foe's head. The antlerod dodged his slash, backing off, but the slash left Guy's athame pointed to the side; he aimed a spell that way, at a seed he'd sown before his landing. The toolplant grew, winding upward at horrifying speed and puncturing the magideer's hide, invading the flesh beyond. The magideer roared in pain and fear, but the cursed tree grew mercilessly, turning its flesh into a seedbed.

"...What in the ...?"

"That's...not how he fought before..."

The Barthés could not believe their eyes. Mackley finished creating her barriers and stood up, glowering at the fight before them.

"Yeah, the magiflora he uses aren't inherently offensive. Fighting with them, they're normally barriers, traps—things that give *him* time to attack. But not anymore."

She knew exactly where the difference lay, and that left her disinclined to rejoice now the tables had turned. She was all too aware of what it meant.

"Curses have no purpose other than causing harm. Everything wranglers do is intended to make something suffer. This has changed the very color of his magic. A mage who grew things with love—reduced to one who curses, corrupts, and kills."

Mackley was not mincing words, and the sheer weight of her pronouncement left Lélia and Gui speechless. All they could do was watch as Guy fought on, with the curse he'd taken in.

# "Impetus! Impetus!"

Cursed whirlwinds raged. Wide-ranging, but less powerful in return. The antlerods took that as a chance to fight back, charging their elementals and braving the winds. But as they stepped in, cursed trees captured two sets of forelegs, locking them down. Guy's earlier spell had already set them to grow on a delay.

## "Progressio!"

Two deer were immobilized, and Guy's next spell passed through the obstruction at their feet. The last exchange had taught the antlerods this was an attack. One of them lunged forward, intercepting the spell bodily before it hit the ground. A growth spell alone was hardly fatal, so this wasn't the wrong call—its mistake lay elsewhere.

"...VOO?!" the antlerod screamed, feeling an unnatural writhing accompanied by pain.

Countless cursed roots slithered like snakes beneath the beast's hide from toolplant seeds that had been swept there by the earlier wind spell. The wind itself had been no threat, but it had planted seeds on anything it touched. Guy had laid a trap, counting on his enemies' ability to adapt and to block his growth spells.

Watching the roots drive the antlerod mad, he muttered, "Ha-ha, damn. They ain't even parasitic toolplants—I'm just planting and growing 'em, and they do this."

Guy turned his attention to the two remaining magideer. His seeds were on them both—one of these was smart enough to realize that, and it backed off, afraid.

With the creatures' numbers reduced, Mackley saw her chance to join in, and she made her move. While the antlerods focused on Guy, she hit the minion with a lightning bolt, downing it and leaving Guy to face the boss alone.

"Curses are so *simple*. Way easier than growing things, far less complicated," said Guy, "and altogether unproductive."

Muttering his impressions, he fixed his darkened eyes upon his foe. He'd flipped the script when it came to their strength and numbers, but still the boss did not hesitate. It set its elementals to maximum output, and flames raced across the ground toward Guy. Letting those hit him head-on would mean defeat, and if he dodged to either side, the magideer could turn the flames in pursuit.

# "Fortis Progressio!"

Guy chose neither option. Instead, he maximized his output and directed it at all the seeds he'd sown in the vicinity. All the cursed trees grew as one, forming a line of spears aimed at the boss. The flames incinerated those at the fore, but did not extend to those which came from the sides. Its flanks punctured repeatedly, the boss's speed diminished. More trees caught up, shackling it, binding it, and dragging it to a halt right before Guy's eyes.

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"V000000-!"
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"It's time you rest. I'll take the curse. Sorry you got mixed up in our mess."

He aimed his athame, canceling out the last burst of flames, then stepped in and plunged the blade into the antlerod's brain. Too trussed up by branches to even collapse, the boss perished—and the curse energy stored within came gushing into Guy himself. And yet, this did not hit him nearly as hard as when he'd first allowed it in.

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".....All done. Anyone hurt?"

"N-no..."
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"...You have our thanks, Greenwood..."

Behind him, the Barthés sounded grim. He looked back, checking on them and Mackley, then went around to the downed foes to finish them off. These were the creatures tormented by his cursed trees but unable to die, along with the beast Mackley had knocked out with her lightning spell. Guy delivered a quick slash to each of their throats to put them out of their misery, stockpiling that much more curse energy within himself.

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"...That's all of them. Now, then ... "
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Guy turned back to his waiting companions, who looked rather nervous. Mackley had sat both Barthés down to avoid wearing them out any further, but now Guy grabbed the siblings by their heads.

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"Wha—?"
"Urk—?!"
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Each groaned, feeling something flowing out of them. Mackley gulped. A few minutes later, Guy let them go. He shook himself a bit, taking stock, then

blinked several times.

"So I can take it. I figured. A real eye-opener, on many levels."

The Barthés just gaped up at him. All the curse energy in them was gone, and their bodies felt unbelievably light. This made Mackley's scowl deepen.

Certainly, a curse wrangler could easily move that energy around. But that alone could not begin to explain what she'd just seen.

Guy himself was well aware of that, and had a hunch as to the cause, but left it unsaid. It had no direct bearing on their escape attempt, and if he was wrong —well, so be it. Unfounded speculation would only unnerve his companions.

"I've taken on the curse energy. You might have some side effects, but you oughtta be a solid eighty percent better. Let's move on."

With that, he turned and led the way. The Barthés scrambled to their feet, and Mackley followed them. She soon sped up, drawing level with Guy, and giving him some side-eye.

"...You gonna leave it like that?" she spat.

"What are you asking?"

"...Fine. Act like you don't know. None of my business."

With that, she angrily kicked the ground. Guy moved on down the darkened tunnel, saying not a word.

With the briefing complete, the Watch gave orders to resume the search.

The students in the Forum sprang into action. Three main roles—a group led by fourth-years headed into the lava tree mold's trunk in search of survivors; a group of older students heading for Lombardi's workshop in the upper areas of that formation, intent on serving as a Final Visitor for the mage consumed by the spell; and finally, a group remaining on the second-layer surface, securing an escape route. The Sword Roses were naturally headed to the trunk—they split into teams, each assigned to one of the three main fissures on the surface.

"We're quite far down! How are you faring with mapping, Pete?" Chela asked.

"...Steady progress. The Watch called it—it's vast, but not that complicated a

structure."

Team Aalto was heading down into the caverns. Other teams assigned to this fissure had split off at earlier branches to cover more ground; now it was just the three of them.

Oliver's team was at a different fissure entirely, so they would likely not see each other until they reached the trunk. Hoping to get there faster, Pete was once again dispatching as many golems as he could while he ran alongside his companions. The number of golems wasn't as high as he'd managed sitting down, but it was more than enough to scout the terrain and spot enemies. And one of the golems linked to his mind had just spotted their first obstacle.

"...Beast pack ahead," Pete warned. "Fell from the layer above, standard curse energy levels. Two big, eight midsize."

"Intercepting!" Katie cried, sending in her familiars.

The terrain and curses meant her oversized familiars, Marco and Lyla, weren't in tow; Katie had gone with several small manavians that had paralytic talons. They flew ahead, slashing at the beasts—exclusively hit-and-run tactics. The manavians scratched their enemies as they flew past, then swooped in again, doling out poison and diminishing the threat before Katie's group made contact. The curse's influence meant the beasts ignored this minor damage, which made the tactic that much more effective.

"...All midsize beasts are down. The big ones are slowed. At this speed, we'll be on them in twenty," said Pete.

"I'll take one," Chela offered. "Katie, you handle the other."

"Got it!"

As her manavians flew back, Katie and Chela drew their athames. Pete's estimate was accurate—seconds later, two beasts staggered toward them, and the girls cast a spell as one.

### ""Tonitrus!""

A bolt to each head, and both beasts fell unconscious. Partially paralyzed, confused, and caught utterly off guard, the enemy could offer no resistance.

Katie had her birds scratch them a few more times just in case. With that much poison in them, they'd be immobilized for a full day, and there was no risk of them attacking from behind.

"...First scout golem hit the trunk. That hollow is terrifyingly large; once I get the full scale of it, I'll share that map with the other teams."

Pete was leaving all the combat to his companions, focused only on his scouts; both girls nodded in reply. The three of them wanted nothing more than to get their arms around their lost friend as soon as they could manage.

### "Tonitrus!"

## "Impediendum!"

Their spells toppled beast after beast. Team Horn had delved into the lava tree mold from a different fissure, and were racing down the branch, headed for the trunk as well. They were making short work of their enemies, but of the three, Nanao alone looked somewhat out of her element.

"Hrm. I'm not accustomed to paralysis spells. I'd much prefer simply slashing away instead."

"Hang in there," Oliver told her. "Dealing with the curse energy from an accidental kill would be a headache; I'll make up for the reduction in damage."

# "Frigus! Tonitrus! Prohibere!"

Even as Oliver cautioned his team, Valois was casting away. Each spell was precisely targeted and effective, with the output appropriately diminished to avoid causing a fatal wound. This polished off the last of the pack. Impressed, Oliver rephrased his earlier statement.

"Ms. Valois and I will make up for it. I still have concerns, but she's performing a lot better than anticipated. Not just her Koutz moves—she has a real knack for choosing the right spell for the occasion."

"I am aware. We saw as much in our duel."

"And that's why you put your faith in her?" Oliver smiled. "You have me beat on that front."

They went around their fallen foes, ensuring they would not get up again—

and a familiar golem shot in from ahead. It paused above them, prompting contact. Oliver tapped his athame to it, retrieving the intel directly to his consciousness. A 3D map of the lava tree mold filled his mind's eye.

"Pete's sent a partial map. Wow, he's already got the trunk done and a route to it. That'll speed us up."

"Excellent," said Nanao. "Pete's recent progress is downright astounding. He's so much more reliable than a mere year ago."

"...Agreed, but still concerning. Mages are most unstable in a period of explosive growth. Let us hope he does not get drunk on his newfound power."

Even as he voiced his doubts, Oliver couldn't stop himself from remembering the events of the night before. Perhaps these concerns had come too late, and his friend was already in too deep.

Oliver quickly shook off those fears. This was not the time to dwell on them. Guy was waiting for their rescue.

"...No time for distractions. First, we save our friends. I know Guy won't abandon anyone with him. We do have hope, Ms. Valois."

"Spare me the speeches, would you? And hurry!"

With the beasts out of commission, Valois was already moving ahead. Sensing her urgent need to locate her attendants, Oliver and Nanao soon matched her pace.

Meanwhile, as the front lines heated up, the surface of the second layer was eerily silent.

"...Why'd it get so quiet?"

"I know we're making progress on beast suppression, but..."

Whalley and Miligan were whispering atop a plateau near the fissures. They were here to take command, ready for any eventuality. Behind them stood their president, Tim Linton.

"...That ain't the half of it," he said, crouching down and pinching the soil. "The curse energy levels are draining from the soil. He's stopped *spewing* the stuff." "He's switching to handling our assault, then?" Whalley suggested.

"That'd be one thing. But it could be far worse," Tim replied, glowering up at the irminsul and that cursed aura around it. "Given what Rivermoore said, Lombardi's right under that thing. Controlling the curse energy from the top of the lava tree mold. If he's knocked that off, then he might have gone *down*. Into the lower portions of the cave."

"Hmm...fleeing our attack?"

"Once consumed, mages don't get *scared*. If he's on the move anyway, there's a reason for it. Something below that appeals to a mind no longer thinking straight..."

The more Tim talked, the worse the feeling in his gut became. Right now, it was just one possibility—and he hoped he was wrong. But being in charge meant preparing for the worst. Straightening his thoughts out, he barked an order.

"Warn the front lines, have 'em locate Lombardi ASAP. Urge the teachers to be on the lookout in case the worst happens. I hope I'm wrong, but if I ain't... even fourth-years'll be in trouble."

While Tim was dealing with that, a group of third-year exceptions were standing nearby. Team Carste, with Peter in tow. They were glued to the edge of one fissure, eliminating all beasts that approached.

"...Less to do than I thought," Dean muttered. "Oh well."

"Nobody knows what's going on inside," Peter said. "It's a shame, but it's a fair assignment."

"I could have gone with them," Teresa intoned.

"Don't glare at me, Teresa," Dean scoffed. "You heard Mr. Horn—you ain't no different from us."

But it wasn't like he enjoyed standing around like this. Magical beasts had only come at them early on—with fourth-year teams moving around to suppress the hordes, they'd soon been left with nothing to do.

Dean turned to the fourth member of their party. Rita Appleton had been

staring fixedly at the fissure this whole time, saying not a word. Well aware of why, he tried talking to her.

"Buck up, Rita. I mean, I know how you feel. It sucks getting left behind. But Mr. Horn himself is leading the rescue. No need to worry—"

As he spoke, she swung around to face him. He flinched, and Rita took a step closer, her eyes boring into his.

"You know how I feel? Do you? Really?"

"Y-yeah?"

Dean nodded, bowled over. He wasn't just running his mouth off—he was genuinely sympathetic. He looked up to Katie the way Rita did with Guy; they had that in common. Katie's recent tendency to plaster herself up against Guy in public had been bugging him, too, and he could tell Rita had even stronger feelings on the matter. Based on all that, he was pretty sure he had a solid idea what she was going through.

"Then let me ask a favor," said Rita. "I'm about to do something—wait a while before you tell anyone."

With that, she swung back to the fissure, eyes gleaming. That was all Dean needed to guess what she had in mind. He leaned in, spooked.

"You mean that? No, wait—think, Rita. On your own, you'll just be the next to get stranded. You *know* this!"

"I do. But...I can't just stand here. I can't stop myself."

Hand shaking, Rita clutched her own shoulder. Unable to think of anything to say that would get through to her, Dean clammed up.

Teresa had been watching from the side, and quietly stepped in.

"Rita, you're beside yourself."

"...Teresa..."

"What exactly do you want to do? You've got to tell us that first. Hide nothing, put it all out there."

Teresa was looking her right in the eye, and Rita had to peer within herself for

answers.

Beside herself. Yes, that was the right phrase. She cared about Greenwood and was worried about him, but the uncontrollable anger she felt toward Aalto was every bit as strong.

As these powerful emotions churned inside her, Rita let out a silent howl.

Why did you let him be alone? His feelings for you were eating at him! Why weren't you there when he needed you? If you'd been there, this might never have happened. The man who smells like sunshine might never have been exposed to this unnecessary danger.

Could she have been there instead? With him day and night, thinking only of him, supporting his troubled heart? Frustrating as it was, she just wasn't that close to him.

But you are. And I've envied that to no end, cursed that truth. So— So why weren't you there?!

Her mounting thoughts took form. Affection, admiration, envy, and anger—all distilled into a crystal: Rita's unadorned *need*.

"I want to get to Mr. Greenwood before she does!" she cried.

The words came directly from the throbbing in her heart. Tears welled up in her eyes, her lashes trembling. Taking all that in, Teresa thought, *Oh, I know that feeling all too well*.

Rita was acting just like Teresa had when she'd been convinced Nanao Hibiya's actions had hurt her lord, and the rage had taken control, sending her out to seek retribution. Logically, she had known that was the wrong choice. Regardless of the outcome, her actions would only sadden him. But there was no way she could've stopped herself. If she'd tried, if she'd tamped down those emotions, she would have killed something vital inside herself.

The same went for Rita. She had to dive in; it was unavoidable. Even if she could do nothing once there, even if she regretted acting, even if she died without getting there—at least she would spare her heart.

In which case, nothing in the world, no magic words could ever stop her.

"...Very well. I understand."

With that acknowledgment, Teresa moved. She was no longer standing in front of Rita, but beside her, with the fissure behind them. Standing with her friend at the brink of a precipice—to Peter and Dean's surprise.

"Teresa—"

"You mean..."

A weighty silence. Rita seemed every bit as shocked as the boys, but Teresa made her feelings known.

"I'm going with Rita. It's obviously stupid, but I personally don't want to stop her. What say you? Want to rat us out to the upperclassmen? Fight us here to prevent us from going?"

She tapped the hilt of her athame, clearly ready to carry out that threat. Her expression remained as neutral as ever, but her eyes were lit with genuine passion.

Dean eventually let out a sigh. Resigned, he shrugged. "Do you even have to ask? Damn, of course I'm coming. If you're hell-bent on it, just say so."

"Okay, then I'll find the right timing," Peter said, immediately scanning their surroundings.

For once, Teresa actually *looked* surprised. Part of her had anticipated Dean's response; they'd known each other more than two years, and she had a level of unconscious trust with him. But Peter's response had come out of left field.

"...You're coming, Peter? You'll die if you get separated."

"Yikes, don't rub it in. But it's not a choice. Live or die, I'm doing that with Dean."

Peter flashed a dazzling smile. Teresa reconsidered her own question and decided it had been a foolish one. This boy, too, had principles he would not allow to bend.

"...Forget I said that. And sorry, Peter."

"Wow, Teresa actually apologized! Oh, wait, now's good. No one's looking our

way."

Seizing the moment, he urged them to act. Things were moving too fast, and Rita had blown her chance to thank anyone, but she wiped her tears and turned to the fissure below. Drawing her blade, she peered into the depths...and spoke to the friends joining her on this reckless endeavor.

"I'll go in first. Don't get too far behind. I promise I'll keep you safe."

"I'll be keeping you safe. Ain't no one dying today," Dean assured her.

"Says the one most likely to kick the bucket."

"Teresa, you and I are dueling once we get back. No rest beforehand!"

"Ah-ha-ha! Then I'll be the ref," Peter offered.

Their banter gave Rita courage. And that was the last push she needed. Her feet left the ground, and her friends followed her on the plunge into the darkness.

Felicia Echevalria had observed this entire exchange from behind a nearby tree.

"...Hmm."

"Ignoring orders! Acting on their own authority! Objectionable!"

"What should we do, Lady Felicia?"

Her attendants were fuming, but she just crossed her arms, considering the matter. Then a smile flickered across her lips.

"Could be a lark. Let's spectate!" she said.

"Ignoring orders! Acting on our own authority! Acceptable!"

"I'll lead the way!"

Both attendants immediately reversed their stances, and Felicia flung herself into the fissure after them.

Not long after all third-years had vanished from their posts, Team Bowles swung by, none the wiser.

"Wait." Bowles frowned. "Where'd everyone go ...?"

After that big battle, Guy's group had encountered no major obstacles, and were making steady progress. The Barthés had recovered enough to move on their own, so their pace picked up, all of them eager to reach their destination.

"...Ah..."

"...Are we here?"

At the end of a long upward slope, the view opened up. Several branches converged here, at a massive cylindrical expanse. The walls of the chamber were lined with trees, like spiral staircases connecting the branches up and down, splitting along the way to form bridges. The natural glow moss was enhanced by massive crystal lamps placed here and there to gently illuminate the entire chamber. Momentarily forgetting their predicament, they paused to soak in the view. Kimberly fourth-years were no stranger to the wonders of the labyrinth, but all the same, this took their breath away—it was just that unreal.

"...We're at the trunk. Maybe we hustled too hard. Looks like we got here first."

Pulling himself together, Guy was scanning the area. His academic curiosity was back in spades, but even he knew this wasn't the time for fieldwork. Given how exposed they'd be, it was risky just stepping into the trunk. After a brief discussion, they decided to set up a barrier by the branch exit and lie low. Once they'd finished that work, he finally lowered his rucksack.

"Now we just gotta hold our breath and wait for rescue. Let's eat some—"

But as he opened his provisions, he winced. The pound cake he'd worked so hard on had rotted. Clearly, this was not a problem of sanitation—rather, the curse energy he'd accepted had taken its toll on the food he carried.

He hastily took stock of his other possessions. There was a magic circle inscribed on his canteen, so he still had drinking water—only the food was ruined. But they had nothing else to fill their bellies with. Setting the rotting provisions on the ground beside him, Guy had to shrug.

"...Whoops. Nothing edible left. Guess I gotta take countermeasures when I'm this cursed."

"Classic new wrangler blunder," Mackley said. "Eat this."

She handed over her own emergency provisions, to his surprise. It took him a few seconds to recover and take it from her.

"...Uh. thanks."

"Whatever. Better eat fast. Same thing might happen if you sit there holding it."

"Good point. Down the hatch!"

Guy bit into the food...and got a loud *thunk* for his trouble. The food was quite hard. More of a biscuit than a bread or cake. He upped the force and gnawed away at it, then swallowed, curious.

He tilted his head. "... Mackley, you make this yourself?"

"I wasn't asking for reviews. It's nutritious."

"...It sure is filling, at least. You sure you don't want any baking lessons?"

"If you say another word, I'll punch you so hard you'll puke it back up."

Guy looked deeply saddened, and Mackley waved a fist at him. Watching from a distance, Gui started to wheeze.

"...Ha-ha..."

"? What, Gui?" Lélia asked.

"...Just seems nice, you know? They way they bicker. It's like...how humans interact. We've never been able to do that with Lady Ursule."

His eyes were on their past, and Lélia shifted uncomfortably.

"...We're servants," she said. "We're not her friends. We acted according to our station."

"I know that. But, like...I'd like more give-and-take. Not just obeying the orders she gives us. If we were more puppets than attendants, then I think that's what we were lacking."

The words were tumbling out of his mouth unbidden, and Lélia reached out, clutching his sleeve.

"...Don't leave me behind, Brother. If you do that...I'll have to cry."

"Sorry, Sister. I won't leave you. Not now, or ever. I belong at your side."

She was shivering, and he pulled her close, hugging her tight. One eye on that, Guy choked down the last of Mackley's provisions.

"Gotta do something for him," he muttered.

"Please. Like you're in any state to meddle. Do you even have a plan for when we're out of here? That curse ain't going anywhere."

"Yeah...well, I'm gonna be inconvenienced for a while, that's for sure. I imagine the faculty will be able to do something for me. Hope Instructor Baldia comes back soon...I kinda miss her."

"Holy crap, you're in *deep*. I can see Instructor David looking crestfallen already, the poor man."

"...I'm that messed up, huh? That curse family tree thing is pretty scary. It messes with your emotions, and if you don't watch yourself, you'll wind up totally dependent—"

Guy broke out of his reverie as he felt himself wrapped in an unnatural chill, a weight settling upon his skin. The others all felt it, too, and turned pale.

"Is that—?"

"Don't speak, Mackley. Use your eyes alone. Above us."

Sliding away along the wall, Guy looked up at the source descending from the trunk above. A mage, carried on countless cursed branches like tentacles from on high, himself merged with the tips of some. Sickly leaves had grown wild across his head where his hair should have been.

"Don't try to hide," he said, his eyes rolling toward their location. "You can't escape me here."

All four students shivered. Realizing they were already in this mage's clutches, Guy took a breath, then voluntarily stepped out of their barriers toward the trunk hollow. Mackley and the Barthés followed, looking tense.

"Can't just ride it out, huh? Hey there. We've never talked before, but I'm seen you in the halls on campus."

"I know you well, Mr. Greenwood. In only a few years, you've achieved astonishing things in magical botany, and I keep tabs on all students who earn Instructor Baldia's interest. Still...I see. You're this year's favorite."

The man chuckled. Seeing their eyes on him, he put his left hand to his chest, making it formal.

"As a friendly overture, allow me to introduce myself. Kimberly Magic Academy sixth-year, Dino Lombardi. I've specialized in researching curses transmitted through plants. One of many lowly wranglers struggling under the tutelage of the great and piteous cradle of maelstroms, Master Muwezicamili. Some rude individual has dubbed me the Evil Tree."

"Appreciate the gesture. Guy Greenwood, fourth-year. Sounds like you know I'm majoring in magical botany. I'm just a farmer's son, got no highfalutin name to give."

"Yet, you've finally taken a step into the curse wrangler's domain. Heh-heh...I feel a connection. This deep in, I'm sure you do as well. We are brothers in curses. I'm delighted to meet you, Little Brother."

Guy's companions turned to him, shocked, but he didn't even blink. His gut had told him they were kin, and face-to-face, it would have been harder *not* to have noticed. The curses each of them bore had been handed down from the same mother.

"...Thought so," said Guy. "Yeah, when I let it inside me, I had a hunch. The beasts I felled, the curse I took from the siblings behind me—it was *far* too easy for me to get that curse under control. If the origin's the same, that'd explain it. Not like I'm some sort of once-in-a-lifetime talent!"



"Ha-ha-ha, how modest you are. Once-in-a-lifetime, perhaps not—but your talent for harboring curses is more than exceptional. Otherwise, you'd hardly take *this* on without ill effects. Even I spent days rolling around in agony, yet you've only just accepted it, yes? Your knack for this may be superior to my own."

"I'll take the compliment! But I'd rather discuss this somewhere more relaxing. We kinda fell down here by accident and don't know how to get out. Mind showing us the way back to campus?"

This took a lot of nerve, but Guy made a point of asking anyway. Lombardi looked amused and pointed upward.

"If you climb to the top of the trunk and pick an appropriate branch, you'll emerge within the irminsul. Brooms will get you there faster. I'm afraid there are no signs, so you may get lost."

"Yeah? Huge help! Afraid we gotta get going now. Hit me up on campus, and I'll thank you then."

With that, Guy tried to break off their talk, but Lombardi shook his head.

"I'm afraid I must request a payment now. Processing curses through the irminsul is more difficult than I'd anticipated. You can control the same curse, so I'd like to ask for your assistance. Surely you won't mind, no? You'll be taking part in a feat of this measure. A privilege for any curse wrangler."

With that, he held out his hand.

"A feat, is it?" Guy said, frowning. He scratched his head. "Okay, tell me more —what is it you're trying to do?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm processing curse energy using the irminsul as a host. I'm sure you're aware that some plants—especially very old ones—are able to harbor and cleanse curse energy. I'm applying that principle to seal away the curse and break it. Via a means far more efficient than the standard process."

"Aha. Then you've failed," Guy declared.

The air around them froze. Mackley winced.

"I know all about plants and curses, yeah," Guy continued. "Read more papers

on the subject than I got fingers on both hands—your own paper included. And the upshot of it was plants ain't designed for long-term storage. For the simple reason that the plant serving as host is *changed* by the curse within. It'll only hold and break the curse at first—as that function declines, it'll start spraying the curse energy everywhere. That principle holds true for every species out there."

He was laying out solid grounds for his conclusion, completely undaunted. He was well aware that buttering this mage up would not buy them time. Better to get to the heart of the matter. He was counting on Lombardi's pride as a researcher; the mage would not dismiss these words out of hand.

"I'll acknowledge your techniques are something else. Normally, moving curse energy from animals to plants via the food chain takes a ton of time. Biologically, they're too disparate—hard to create a direct channel between them. Enough that there's an old mage saying, 'No man loathes a tree.' Pass it through a wrangler, and you can reduce that time, but that'd hardly be enough given the scale the irminsul requires," Guy explained. "But you solved that problem by embedding carnivorous parasite plants within the irminsul. You flipped the food chain on its head by feeding animals to the tree and creating a channel for the energy. Real impressive. You've pioneered a whole new possibility for this field—I know that much is true."

Digging up memories of the man's papers, he offered unvarnished praise, not mere flattery. He wasn't here to disparage Lombardi's efforts—what this situation required was simply an accurate, logical read. And since the mage was still listening, Guy felt confident that this approach was getting him somewhere, so he voiced the rest of his thoughts.

"But even with that, turning the irminsul into a curse receptacle ain't gonna work. Maintaining it ain't just 'difficult.' You're long past having any kinda control. The fact that we fell down here proves it... I'm guessing the irminsul roots play a major role in supporting the ground on the second layer, and your approach literally uprooted that. The effects are way beyond roots swollen with curse energy writhing through the ground—the curses seeping out of them corrupted the entire second-layer ecosystem. It's a brutal sight. Can't call that anything but failure."

Guy had based this conclusion on the very sights he'd witnessed. Had the scale of things been reduced, perhaps a partial success would have been possible, but that likely hadn't been enough for Lombardi. He'd been striving to achieve a fundamental technical revolution within his field, something that would flip the way everyone thought about curse energy. And his attempt had fallen short. The means he'd employed had been unable to accomplish his goals. That fact alone could not be denied.

Lombardi clenched his fists. Guy knew how he must feel. A rejection of a lifetime's worth of research would not just go in one ear and out the other. Aware it was meaningless, Lombardi could not stop himself from arguing.

"...I'll admit I've made some errors in control. But that's just the expected instability on start-up. If I can stabilize the flow of curse energy within the irminsul, it should clear up! It's not enough...not nearly enough! Easing off here would be a grievous error," said Lombardi. "I have to push it harder! This is merely an obstacle caused by adding haphazard curses at the start; what I need to do is align the curses employed! I'm sure that will bring the cycle within safe margins! I just want your help to accomplish that—why can you not see how simple this is?!"

Lombardi's voice shook; he was almost sobbing.

Guy quietly shook his head. "You're just going around in circles. The results you want ain't worth the risk involved, and the logic behind it's a total mess. But you can't tell, right? And we all know why. *That's* what being consumed by the spell means."

He spoke with pity—and that last line made Lombardi clutch his head.

"...I've been consumed... No, no, I'm still sane! My thoughts are not frayed... I'd never...let myself be... I'm not..."

His expression hollow, he was muttering to himself, no longer looking at them. Realizing the time for conversation had passed, Guy called over his shoulder. "You'd better go. He's only fixated on me. I bet you could slip past him now. I'm not joking—that might be your last chance to get out alive."

His tone was grim, and his companions knew he meant every word of it. The Barthés exchanged glances and grinned.

"And leave you here alone? I'm afraid we're not that shameless."

"Don't wanna run this debt up any higher. Besides, it'd be a waste—you taking on that curse got us back in this, so let us throw down."

Lélia and Gui both drew their athames. Then they glanced at Mackley, who crossed her arms, snorting.

"...I'm fine with being the sole survivor."

"Big talk from someone who's not budging, Mackley," said Lélia.

"We've got your number now," added Gui. "Your own nature works against you at every turn."

The twins chuckled, and Mackley's brow twitched.

"You are *all* so aggravating! Fine, I can't live with it. Not letting this debt balloon any further, and not letting you die here so I can never pay it off. And if I can't live with it"—her voice rose to a roar, and she drew her athame—"then I don't have a fucking choice."

"You folks are being real dumb. But that's the kinda dumb I love."

Guy let that serve as his thanks. He ran his eyes around the trunk's interior, noting the small creatures and golems flitting around in the air. Then he raised his athame.

"I'm seeing scouts around. Rescue's definitely inbound. I'll take on the curse energy. If you soak up any, fork it over to me. In return, fight like our lives depend on it."

"Ha! Who do you think you're talking to, Greenwood?"

"You may have carried us this far, so perhaps you've forgotten. Think back to the combat league. Curses are one thing, but if it's spells or blades, we're pretty damn good."

The Barthés sounded equally confident. Lombardi's bloodshot eyes settled on them.

Mackley braced herself and yelled, "We'll have time to talk on campus or in hell. Here he comes!"

Team Carste had managed to enter the lava tree mold undetected. A while down the passage, they encountered a group of berserk beasts, and were now desperately fleeing their pursuit.

"...Hahh, hahh...!"

"Eeaughhh!"

"Hide yourselves!" Rita yelled, as they reached a fork in the road. She cast a smoke screen to the rear.

Catching her drift, her three companions threw themselves into a hollow and held their breath. Teresa's spell created several splinters, which made a show of running off down the side passage. The beasts took the bait and ran off, away from where the four of them planned to go.

Listening to them scurrying off through the smoke, Dean breathed a sigh of relief.

"...We're in the clear, somehow."

"Urgh, it's so dark! So scary!" Peter moaned. "Oh, incidentally, this is the eighth fork from the entrance, down a bit to the right, then up a bit to the left. I've got the map our seniors made in my head, so we won't get lost."

"Very helpful, Peter," Teresa said. "But make up your mind if you're scared or not."

She seemed entirely baffled by her friend's condition—then something tiny flitted by overhead. Watching it sail off toward the depths, Dean frowned.

"The beasts are horrifying, but we don't want our elders catching up with us, right? Whose golem just flew past?"

"Probably Pete's. He can put a ridiculous number out there at once," said Peter. "Hope I can manage even half of that someday. I've gotta pick his brain on that soon."

"You sure don't let *any* social shit spook you, huh? What's the word, Rita? We going straight on to the trunk?"

"...As long as we don't run into any older teams. I imagine it'll depend on who catches us, but the last thing I want is to get sent packing halfway down."

Everyone nodded at this directive. They emerged from their hiding space, and resumed their run down the cavern depths. For a while, they were unimpeded—but after several further branches, they reached another pack. All four drew their athames, facing down the snarling beasts.

"...More of 'em," said Dean.

"Quite a lot. Do we fight, or flee? Augh, this is terrifying!" Peter whimpered.

"...If we try and slip past, we might bring more beasts to the front lines," said Rita. "We'll be enough of a burden on them as it is; can't let that happen. Nor can we turn back."

"So no other option, then," Dean surmised. "I'm fine with that. It's just much harder if we can't kill 'em."

He steeled himself and stepped to the fore. Teresa was right by his side. Rita waved Peter to the back, taking command and weighing their prowess. Six midsize enemies, all cursed. Not impossible odds, but throttling their spells to avoid getting cursed from a kill was tough. To keep her friends safe, she might have to resort to the trick she'd hidden.

## "Magnus Tonitrus."

Her grim train of thought was silenced by a blinding flash of light. A massive electric bolt from behind them swallowed all six beasts, knocking out the pack with a single spell. They jumped and spun around—and saw a golden-haired girl behind them, athame in hand.

"Oh, we caught up already? Why are you dawdling here? I thought you were headed for the trunk."

"Hmph, the vixen...," Teresa muttered.

"Ms. Felicia...?" said Rita.

As they stared, Felicia's attendants managed to catch up, and Dean voiced the first question that popped into his head.

"So, uh...we could ask you the same thing. Why'd you come? What happened to securing the retreat?"

"I abandoned that duty. There are teachers lurking about, and our positions

were established enough that my presence would make little difference. A whimsical spectating jaunt—line up!"

She abruptly turned to her attendants, who stiffened. Her eyes raked them both.

"You forced my hand," she told them. "Excuses?"

"None!"

"Accepting all punishments!"

They closed their eyes, waiting. Felicia nodded and raised both hands. She pressed the tip of her middle finger against the ball of her thumb, charging it—and then a powerful forehead flick struck both brows as one.

""Owwww!""

"That shall suffice. Perhaps I ran a mite too quickly for you."

Their punishment complete, she turned her back on her groaning attendants and began walking. Stunned, Team Carste watched her go.

She gave them a puzzled frown. "What, are you not coming? Suit yourselves. I appreciate that stepping on ground I have previously tread upon is a tall order."

Rita blinked at the offer, but Dean spoke first.

"Never once thought that! But if we can team up, let's. Teresa, no fighting now. You don't mind the extra hands, do you, Rita?"

"N-no...they're definitely welcome." Rita nodded, still a bit taken aback.

Teresa could hardly object here. Felicia's attendants recovered, and the two parties converged. Their unexpected new companions were as encouraging as they were baffling.

Rita gave her classmate a searching look. "...Do you mind if I ask you something, Ms. Felicia? I've been wondering."

"I'll allow it. Ask away."

"...Why do you leave all the work to your attendants?"

"Because working is not my job."

That concept rattled Rita's very notion of the world. Before she could recover, she asked the boy beside her, "Dean, am I appalled? Or impressed?"

"Put it out your mind. The least meaningful question this world has to offer."

Rita figured Dean had a point, so she took that advice to heart.

"...Keep moving while I talk. I have good news and bad news," Pete growled, as they ran on down the cave.

Sensing this would be critical, Katie and Chela perked up their ears.

"First, I found Guy," Pete began. "We called it—he's in the trunk with the Barthés and Mackley. No one's sustained any real injuries yet."

"...!"

"Guy...! Oh, thank goodness...!"

They looked relieved...but Pete's next words wiped that from their faces.

"Now for the bad news. Mr. Lombardi has been consumed by the spell, and he's right there with them—and they just started fighting. The battle's going too hard for my golems to get close. And...there's something off about Guy. The way he's fighting is totally different. To my eyes, it looks like he's taken on a powerful curse."

The girls gasped and glanced at each other. They knew the situation was dire, but had no clue what to make of the rest of it. If the curse had weakened him, that'd be one thing. But how would it change the way he fought? Curses weren't something you could turn to your advantage overnight. Had Guy been hauling some kind of secret weapon around without their knowledge?

"Oh, and one more thing," Pete added. "The third-year teams are in the cave. Both Team Carste and Team Echevalria. No upperclassmen anywhere near them. I'm guessing they went rogue."

Pete made a face, watching them through one of his golems. Neither he nor Katie nor Chela were inclined to ignore this. Both teams were skilled enough to make exceptions for them, but that didn't mean they could be left on their own in *here*.

Sharing Katie and Chela's sentiments, Pete said, "I'm on it. Team Andrews is

closest. Given all that's going on, we can't escort them back up. Okay, stop there! All seven of you!"

He suddenly raised his voice, making the girls jump. But they soon realized what was happening—he was calling to the third-years through his scout golem. They'd had no idea he'd added such a function.

"Er, Pete?!" cried Peter.

"You're kidding! Those talk?!" Dean yelped.

"You've really done it this time, but I'll save the lecture for later. First, what's your goal?"

Through his golem, Pete saw them pull up short. One girl stepped forward to answer. Rita Appleton; he'd had a hunch it would be her.

"We're going after Mr. Greenwood. Personal reasons on my part," she said.

That was enough to tell Pete this was neither thoughtless nor an act of desperation. Most things he could say here would go in one ear and out the other. In which case, he turned to the other team.

"And you, Team Echevalria?"

"Pure curiosity. It was so dull upstairs," Felicia Echevalria replied.

Not a trace of guilt, and Pete rolled his eyes. Yelling at her would be just as useless as scolding Rita, if for very different reasons.

"Fine, got it. Turn left at the next branch. Join up with Team Andrews there."

"...Are they taking us back up?" Rita asked. "If so—"

"Shush. At this depth, there's no time for it. No matter who says what, you're in the search now. You'll get your wish—we're taking you to Guy. Ride Andrews's coattails like your lives depend on it. That's all from me. Questions?"

Pete was wasting no words here. Rita, who had expected a tongue-lashing, was caught flat-footed. Teresa had to elbow her in the ribs before she managed a nod.

"N-no questions. Um, thanks, Mr. Reston."

"Don't thank me. Ignoring orders in this mess will cost you. Be ready for it."

With that threat, he cut off the comms. Katie and Chela had only heard one side of this exchange, so Pete relayed the rest to them on the go. Chela could imagine how Rita felt.

"...Can't hardly blame her," Chela said, sighing. "Given what we've done..."

"Don't get soft," Pete snapped. "How we feel and how we ought to mentor them is different. I'll be giving them a piece of my mind later."

Then he glanced at their third member, who was clearly struggling with this.

"Don't fall behind, Katie. Do you want them getting there first?"

"\_\_\_\_!"

Katie pursed her lips and sped up. She wasn't about to let that happen; she'd been more reliant on Guy than anyone, and her feelings for him were therefore that much stronger.

"Tonitrus!"

"Flamma!"

"Flamma!"

Spells echoed across the great cavern. Four of them against one consumed sixth-year—they threw out everything they had, the battle's pitch only intensifying.

## "Progressio!"

Cursed roots reached out to attack, but Guy's spell turned them aside. Magiflora powered by a curse from the same mother made it easy for him to interfere. For that reason, they were fighting defensively.

"Ha-ha, I see. Very good," said Lombardi, much calmer now. "You've got a firm grasp on the basics of curse energy. Instead of trying to force your orders on it, you're broadly accepting it, then providing minimal direction. Like handling an injured horse gone buck wild."

He clearly had a high opinion of Guy's curse-wrangling skills. Lombardi was dangling from a number of massive cursed roots belonging to the irminsul above the cavern's ceiling. Cursed flowers Guy had planted on a platform near

him fired a volley of seeds. All the footholds in the trunk were made from magiflora, and it was a cinch for Guy to parasite his own plants on them. His adaptability impressed Lombardi once again.

"The way you use magiflora is a lot like how I do. I feel so close to you! As if you really are my brother."

"Enough jokes. Progressio!"

Even as he spoke, Guy was deflecting incoming cursed roots. Lombardi seemed to find his resistance delightful.

"It wasn't meant to be a joke. It's so very rare to meet a like-minded mage, let alone one so similar to myself. How can I not feel close to you? Especially since we attend the same school!" Lombardi roared. "...But that also means I can *tell*: You cannot defeat me."

With that pronouncement, the roots split. Thinner, tauter, their speed increased by leaps and bounds. Some acting as jagged pikes, others as heavy whips—all after their prey. Guy's athame was too slow to stop them all; one whip cracked hard against his side, and the blow sent him flying across the cavern's expanse.

# "...Ngh! Impetus!"

He snapped out a wind spell, barely managing to direct himself into a roll across a platform a level below. He'd avoided a nasty fall, but the blow to his stomach had left him unable to stand. Seeing him in trouble, the others leaped in.

"Greenwood!"

"We've gotta cover him! Mackley!"

"Argh, do I have to do everything?!"

The Barthés moved to occupy their enemy. Mackley dropped down a level, running over to Guy. This interruption just seemed to irritate Lombardi.

"Get out of my way," he spat. "I'm having a conversation with my brother!"

"Hey, don't be like that. We wanna chat, too!"

"Seriously, the nepotism is uncalled for!"

Taunting him, the siblings each took a side, casting spells from opposite angles. One handled the incoming roots, the other focused on attacking their wrangler, and they switched roles as the need arose. They were coordinating far too well. Lombardi's frown deepened.

"You're sickeningly in sync," he muttered, fending off their attacks. "I can tell you're siblings...but this goes far beyond 'we always fight together.'"

He soon reached a conclusion.

"Oh, I see! Your minds are connected. They made these adjustments while you were quite young—possibly before you were born! That is so horrible... Still..."

## "**Flamma!** ——?!"

Gui had just cast a spell when a black vine shot up from beneath his feet, binding him. A seed embedded in a fragment of root that had been sliced away earlier in the fight. Gui quickly tried to cut his way free, but a new root shot in from above, preventing that.

"Hang in there, Gui!"

Seeing her brother in trouble, Lélia dashed around the rim of the platform. Lombardi chose not to stop her, instead urging his roots to snare them both once they were together. Coordinated attacks from both sides had been vexing him; if his prey were fixed in place, they posed no threat.

"...You can't hide it from me. There's a key component missing from your style. You're meant to have someone else here with you! A pity. In this state, you're no match for any Kimberly sixth-year."

In mere seconds, the cursed roots overwhelmed their spell resistance, trussing them up and nailing them to the wall—but then a burst of flames shot in from below, incinerating the roots around them.

"...Let 'em go. You want my companions, you gotta go through me."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Gah...!"

"...Oh...?"

Lombardi had not expected Guy to get back up this fast. Mackley worked with him to make the older student back off while Guy ran to the Barthés. The pair had managed to extract themselves from the remaining roots. Guy clapped his hands to their shoulders, absorbing the curse energy this attack had planted in them.

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"Hah...! Hah...hah...!"
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"...Look at you...," said Mackley.

Guy was looking rather pale and breathing heavily. Mackley scowled. This was his third absorption in this fight alone, and the toll of the curse was only mounting. Lombardi seemed to agree.

"You can't keep doing this, Mr. Greenwood. You've only just become a wrangler; taking on too much energy would be folly. At this rate, you'll lose control and be consumed yourself before you ever manage to stop *me*."

"...This is nothing. I roll with the punches and just keep going!"

Guy flashed Lombardi a grin and readied his athame again. The Barthés and Mackley lined up with him, still prepared to fight.

"I'll admit your tenacity is a virtue." Lombardi sighed, seeing them undaunted. "But I'm disinclined to prolong your suffering."

With that quiet promise, roots broke through the wall behind them. These had burrowed down through the walls from high above. Guy's group jumped and turned to deal with them...but that left their backs open to Lombardi.

"Let's end things here. Tonitrus."

A bolt of mercy came bearing down on them. Burning the roots away was the most they could do—none of them could handle this assault on top of that. Guy swore under his breath—and *someone else* landed behind them, spinning in the air to adjust the bolt's flow.

"Huh?"

Barely free of the roots, Guy turned around to see a girl standing before him, her back to them. Mackley looked every bit as shocked, but the Barthés were

on the verge of tears.

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"...Oh..."
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"...Lady...Ursule...?"
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Their mistress had arrived. Badly out of breath from a headlong run, she'd used a Koutz Flow Cut that had easily deflected the bolt and the curse it bore. Ursule Valois stood before the consumed sixth-year, shoulders shaking with emotions immeasurable.

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"...No more..."
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A whisper escaped her lips. Everything that had driven her to race to her attendants' sides. Emotions she'd been afraid to harbor, afraid to even acknowledge—and for the first time, she voiced her desire.

"I've lost too much already! Don't you dare take anything more!"

A howl from her soul shook the entire chamber. And that made the Barthés' tears flow. Not because she'd come to rescue them, but because this sight proved beyond all doubt that she *needed* them.

"Your words have been heard, Lady Valois."

Another voice—recognizing it instantly, Guy felt himself relax. He turned to smile up at the speaker.

"You finally joined us? Took you long enough."

"My deepest apologies, Guy," said Nanao.

"Yeah, looks like we made you stress it."

Oliver was right there with her, bearing the scars from the beasts they'd fought their way through, cheeks still flushed from the exertion. Valois had ignored those foes and lunged on ahead, seizing the opportunity borne from Oliver and Nanao's teamwork—but they'd *allowed* that. They'd placed their faith in her, certain she could handle it. She'd unconsciously given them a foundation for that belief along the way.



Moments later, further footsteps echoed across the trunk. A row of people Guy knew well emerged from a different branch.

"Looks like we're here in time."

"Guy! You're safe now; we're all here!"

"Still in one piece. We'll ask about the curse later; for now, this is good enough."

Chela, Katie, and Pete, all looking relieved. With six fresh faces against him, Lombardi narrowed his eyes.

"...And you are...?"

"Oliver Horn, fourth-year. There's a lot going on here, so we'll skip the intros and get to the point. You're finished, Mr. Lombardi. You've got nowhere else to go."

Even as his words echoed, more fourth-years emerged from other branches. Nearly all the search and rescue teams in the lava tree mold had arrived.

Lombardi smiled at the countless piercing stares. "Well, well. The more the merrier!"

"Upperclassmen will be here soon," Oliver announced. "Your descent into the trunk threw a wrench in things, but the outcome will not change. It is not too late—stop corrupting the irminsul and the second layer, and surrender. Or else we will be forced to take you down."

Oliver thrust the tip of his athame toward Lombardi for emphasis. One last warning. They had him outnumbered—and even a skilled sixth-year would have seen that, if they were thinking straight. But that did not apply to one consumed by the spell. Lombardi turned his eyes back to Oliver, looking genuinely baffled.

"I hear your demands, but they defy my comprehension. How exactly am I finished? Your gathering here works in my favor. I merely need to snare you in my curse, turn you into pawns, and then I'll have the army I need. This is my workshop. The arrival of a few upperclassmen will hardly—"

"That's where you're wrong, Mr. Lombardi. This is no longer your turf."

Oliver knew that getting through to this mage was futile, but he made an attempt regardless.

Lombardi's gaze snapped to the ceiling above as he sensed *something* he could not ignore.

Meanwhile, on the second layer—or just below it, near the roots of the irminsul, the source of the curse contamination.

### "...Impetus-"

In a hollow gouged out of the tree's heart, alchemy instructor Ted Williams was chanting away, sweat pouring down his brow. Next to him, a massive syringe had been injected into the floor, with a thick pipe connected to the other end of it that wormed its way out of the chamber. Turquoise fluid flowed through this pipe into the great tree, the spread of it enhanced by Ted's spells. He'd done the same thing at two previous locations, and now at this third instance, he completed the job, and lowered his wand.

"...Whew. Managed it somehow."

"Well done, Teddy."

"Looks like it went off without a hitch."

Isko, the librarian, and Dustin, the broomriding instructor, offered praise; Ted turned back to them with a smile.

"Yes, the three injections have solidified the irminsul. I'm an alchemist, so I haven't worked with curses; all I've done is dose the living tree. Given the sheer size of it, it took quite a lot of potions. Thank goodness Instructor David lent me his stock—and your assistance made all the difference, Instructor Zelma."

Zelma Warburg was on the far side of the chamber, hands on the floor. Very focused on removing the curse energy from the tree, she didn't even open her eyes.

"No problem," she said. "It's my job to clean up any mess Baldia's apprentices cause. Still, it's a *lot* of energy. Not saying I can't handle it, but I'm not taking it all on at once."

Zelma frowned, but Ted nodded, having assumed as much.

"If we get it down to what the irminsul itself can contain, that's a rock-solid start. The potion's starting to reach the roots, so the layer's terrain won't be disrupted any further. It'll take a while to restore things, but we can tackle that task once this situation is resolved. Still, this is all the faculty can do here. We'll just have to wait until the students tackling the search return. I'm sure you agree, don't you, Mr. Rivermoore?"

Ted turned again, checking in with the man watching from the far corner.

Rivermoore gave a somber nod. "Astonishing work, Mr. Williams. I appreciate the swift response."

"Appreciaaaate! Appreciaaaate!"

Around his neck, Ufa let out a joyous cry, and Ted couldn't repress a smile.

"There is one other thing that concerns me," Rivermoore said, eyes downcast. "Where did the great sage go?"

*"*\_\_\_\_\_*"* 

Lombardi glared at the ceiling for a long, grim moment. Certain the man had grasped the reality of the situation, Oliver spoke again.

"You can tell, right? Instructor Ted has already petrified a solid eighty percent of the irminsul. Kimberly faculty may not lift a finger for a few missing students, but major damage to Kimberly property—like the labyrinth itself—is not something they can overlook. Simply put, you've gone too far. Arguably, having accomplished all this on your own is downright astonishing."

A spoonful of praise atop his scorn. None of this seemed to reach Lombardi's ears; his face contorted in fury, and he ground his teeth.

"...The faculty are against me? Why? Why do you interfere? It makes no sense! You should be on my side! How long do you intend to make her carry all those curses?! You force so much of the world's liabilities onto one wrangler—how can you live with yourselves?! Not even batting an eye, you dare to go on breathing?!"

Bottled-up emotions frothed over. It was no longer even clear who he was yelling at. Yet, it made Oliver feel oddly sympathetic. He bit his lip. He could tell

this man had once worked with purpose. A desperate desire had driven him toward his spell until it had consumed him.

"I can't abide it! I can't afford to waste a second! Not as long as her face haunts the backs of my eyelids!" Lombardi roared.

Emotion too strong for his body burst forth as magic. Cursed roots rocketed down from the rafters, increasing in number, filling the air above the fourth-years. All too predictable.

Oliver's eyes narrowed. So far, Lombardi had been controlling the irminsul's roots. Ted's work had solidified those near the surface, but that effect hadn't reached the roots as deep as this lava tree mold. Thus, Lombardi was taking everything still under his control, applying all the power he had—and fighting back. Well past considering the odds of this succeeding, well past any other thoughts, he strove only to complete the endeavor he'd begun. That was how those consumed by the spell always thought.

This man was cursed by his heart's desire, and though she felt pity, Nanao kept her blade drawn. She asked only one thing: that the comrade beside her let loose the dogs of war.

"Oliver," she urged. "It is time."

"So it is," he said. "Very well, Mr. Lombardi. It seems you will not stop. In that case, we will take you on. Until the older students arrive, you face us fourth-years!"

That sounded the bells of battle; all students sprang into action. As they tried to land the first hit, a voice rang out from a branch above.

"The first strike is ours," said Stacy. "My way of making up for slapping her."

"I'll run a distraction—stay behind me, Odets," Fay ordered.

"Heh-heh, don't be foolish, guard dog. My very presence assures a swift resolution, a thousand spells slammed home at maximum chant speed and optimal trajectory!"

Team Cornwallis was running down the walls, with Stacy and Fay joined by a fellow fourth-year girl, Evelyn Odets. This shocked Oliver; Odets was great at

snap casting and chaining her spells, but generally far too particular about the craft to team up with anyone. They'd pulled a tricky customer, but before Oliver could worry about it, another team leaped in from the far side.

"I rescind my earlier insult, Ms. Valois. But pray, do not mistreat your attendants again."

"Ah-ha-ha, Jaz is blushing!"

"She's so cute when she's embarrassed!"

Cheery voices rang out—Jasmine Ames, with her attendants in tow. Like Stacy, she'd heaped scorn upon Valois, and the fact that Valois had arrived here before her clearly mattered. Valois herself was preoccupied with healing the Barthés, and barely spared her a glance.

As the other students flung themselves into the fray for reasons of their own, Guy moved up beside Oliver, laughing to himself.

"...What a sight for sore eyes," he said. "Like a combat league reunion."

"You absorbed a curse, Guy?" Oliver asked. His friend's entire vibe was different.

Clearly uncomfortable with the look on Oliver's face, Guy scratched his head. "Yeah, a hand-me-down from Instructor Baldia. Seems like it's a match for our enemy here. Can't tell myself, but do I look that different? Don't worry—it ain't that bad."

"...It clearly is, you idiot," snapped Katie.

Team Aalto had caught up with them.

Guy's attempt to shrug off his new look earned him a teary-eyed stare from Katie. He almost reached for her, but yanked his hand back just in time. A harsh reminder that such a privilege was now denied to him. The pain of it showed on his face.

"Aw, fuck," Guy grumbled. "The cost sure hurts. Can't even rub her head."

He'd known this would happen the moment he'd chosen to swallow the curse—and he reminded himself of that now. Then he tore himself away from Katie's gaze so hard he almost snapped his neck, refocusing instead on Lombardi.

"I'd love to be done here, but there's work to do. This ain't a connection I expected; mind leaving the last blow to me?"

"Guy, you can't mean—"

"Absolutely not! You'll be—"

His friends all knew exactly what the consequences of that would be. Guy nodded, acknowledging it.

"I know. All that curse energy'll hit me. But that's true no matter who does the job. If we're all afraid to finish things, this fight'll just drag on—and that ain't good for anybody. No telling how many of us'll die before the upperclassmen get here."

Oliver reluctantly conceded that point.

Guy was right. They had the advantage of numbers, but battles against those consumed by the spell never followed those rules. His advantage might have been curtailed, but they were still in Lombardi's workshop—it stood to reason the mage would have several more tricks up his sleeve. Worst-case scenario, he might be prepared to collapse this entire chamber. And in that case, buying time for the older students to arrive was itself an untenable risk.

"...Let me do this," Guy insisted. "This is a curse from the same mother. It falls to me to take on my brother's burden."

That was not just determination—there was a hint of affection. And the look on his face pushed Oliver to accept. If it really had been impossible, his friend would never have suggested it. This was a proposal from a curse wrangler who knew he had the capacity required.

And the boy himself wanted to be Lombardi's Final Visitor. They'd looked each other in the eye, exchanged more than a few words, and crossed wands. And Guy knew that role belonged to him. This could not be dismissed. No mage could ever take that lightly. Thus, they would simply have to help with the aftermath.

"...Fine," Oliver said. "Taking on his curse energy doesn't mean you'll be absorbing what's in the irminsul. If you're brothers in curses, that'll help you control it. A temporary receptacle until more advanced wranglers arrive—"

"W-wait!" Katie cried. "What if he can't? What if it's too much for him?"

"That's why we're here. You know what that means, Katie?" Oliver asked, his look forcing her to be on the same page.

Katie gulped, then nodded. Nanao, Chela, and Pete were swift to join her. All minds were as one. This would not fall to Guy alone. If needed, each of them would take their share.

Consensus achieved, Guy stepped forward. This was where Nanao, Oliver, and Chela always stood—but for once, he could be with them, with pride. And that fact brought a surge of delight.

"...Fantastic. I can finally fight alongside you guys."

The fourth-years plunged into the fray, employing every technique they had acquired. A dazzling display—and the third-year teams, arriving at last, were watching in awe from the exit to one branch.

"Yikes, this place is nuts," Peter said under his breath.

"...Damn, this is how the best fourth-years fight?" Dean managed.

The ferocity of the encounter left Rita speechless. Keenly aware he didn't belong here, Peter was muttering away, while Dean could hardly tear his eyes off a fight markedly more advanced than anything he was remotely capable of. For once, Teresa was disinclined to mock them for it. She had to keep her covert skills hidden, which left her with no option but to stand there twiddling her thumbs—much like the three of them. Team Andrews had brought them here, and was very firm that they must remain on standby. If they chose to ignore that order, they had only themselves to blame for their deaths.

"...There's no place for us here, Rita," said Teresa. "I'm afraid—"

"Heh-heh-heh, exquisite!"

But another voice cut in. The group turned to look, and found Felicia watching the fight, flanked by her attendants, lounging on a chair made from toolplants—one so elaborate it even had armrests. Rita rubbed her eyes; even Dean, by far the most experienced with Felicia's foibles, had to gape. All of them were being

forced to spectate, but clearly Felicia was far more amenable to being in that position.

"...Why in the hell would you make your own chair?" Dean asked.

"Why would I not? I've got the best seat in the house! Nothing I'd rather do than enjoy the show. Ah, I can hardly bear it. No matter where I look, the talent here is gasp-inducing. My nether regions will not stop tingling. How I wish I could collar every one of these fourth-years!"

Felicia raised both hands, miming that very action. Teresa's group could picture it, but couldn't comprehend it.

Rita soon tore her gaze away, focusing on the battle once more. She'd confirmed Guy's safety the moment they'd arrived, and was very conscious of his presence on the front lines.

"...Honestly, I don't think we'll be called on to act here," she said. "But that doesn't mean we can afford to relax. I'm sure nobody here thinks they've got this fight in the bag."

"Ha-ha, this terrain is just my style, no?"

"You prefer this to flat surfaces? You've got one foot in the circus."

### "Fortis Impetus!"

Team Andrews darted out across the uneven footing. One cursed root after another stretched down from above, but they cut through them with spells or blades, occasionally even using them as makeshift footholds. Andrews and Albright had always been good at adapting to terrain, but light footwork was Rossi's bread and butter, and he took to it like a fish to water. Well over twenty cursed roots were pursuing him alone.

"Wrong! Wrong! They're all wrong! Ha-ha, gotcha good!"

"You're loving this, Mistral."

"Been so long since his splinters fooled anyone—'course, it's 'cause of the sheer numbers here."

Mistral's fighting style employed duplicates of himself to confuse his foes. He was in his element against an opponent who had far fewer eyes than the roots

he had in play. Each successful deception meant fewer attacks the rest had to handle; the better bait he managed to be, the more the other fourth-years could go on the offensive.

"Severed one large branch. Thomas, make sure you hit."

"Yes, yes, sorry I suck. This is so frustrating! Can't I just aim for him?"

"If you want the curse to kill you, go ahead. We'll leave your body here."

Team Liebert was taking advantage of their ranged skills, spell-sniping the roots at their base. Meanwhile, Jürgen Liebert was using his classic golem arts to firm up the footholds on the walls. These increased in number each time they moved to a new sniping point, and the other teams were making good use of them. Unable to aim at Lombardi himself, both Camilla and Thomas had their hands tied—but even so, they had the skills to make a difference with supporting fire alone. Camilla had cast several long-range paralysis and hardening spells at Lombardi and confirmed that these were rendered ineffective by his link to the irminsul.

#### "Gladio Ferrum!"

One eye on her classmates' feats, Nanao was unleashing iai spells, cleaving swatches of roots. No matter how many cursed roots she severed, the energy never transferred to her; the restrictions she'd faced on the road here were no longer in effect. The sheer quantity of roots her spells severed was far above anyone else in her year. The direct upshot: No roots made it past her position to the territory under her.

#### "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

Their resistance was far beyond his wildest expectations. Lombardi might have been losing his capacity for thought, but he *sensed* it, and began flailing wildly with all the curse energy he could muster. Roots began growing not just from the ceiling, but from the walls all around the trunk's chamber—and that told Oliver their moment had arrived. After a burst of power like this, there was always a lull. What better timing to finish things?

"...Been waiting for this. Nanao, Valois!"

"On it!"

"I don't take orders from you!"

Team Horn took to their brooms, zooming upward. Spiraling through the incoming roots, higher, higher, and higher still. The density of attacks was far beyond what one could dodge with broom skills alone; where that proved insufficient, the other teams kept them covered.

"Flamma!"

"Flamma!"

"Flamma!"

Lélia, Gui, and Mackley cast from their respective locations. Other students matched their chants, incinerating any roots that tried to knock Team Horn out of the air. That powerful backup let them soar—all the way to where Lombardi stood, surrounded by his own roots.

"Gladio!"

"Flamma!"

"Flamma!"

Nanao's spell sliced deep into the roots directly over Lombardi's head, and Oliver and Valois sent flames billowing in after it, incinerating still more roots. Lombardi lost the bulk of what kept him afloat, and he was left dangling in midair. Camilla and Thomas did not let that go unnoticed—their spells severed the remaining roots, putting him in free fall. Spells from two other locations hit him as he plummeted: Chela's hardening spell, and Katie's levitation.

"He's stiff!" Chela yelled.

"Go, Guy!" Katie hollered.

They had him immobilized in the air—for a scant few seconds. But that was all Guy needed. He'd been on standby for just this moment, and skidded down a root no longer under Lombardi's control.

"Ah—"

Letting go of the root, Guy flung himself out into the air. Both hands on the hilt of his athame, he landed directly on top of Lombardi's floating, root-

encrusted body. Their gazes met. Guy saw a future in Lombardi's eyes that might well have been his. He sensed he'd learned a lot from the man in this brief time. And so— "Good-bye, Brother."

—he did not hesitate to drive that blade into Lombardi's heart. His first time killing a man—and with that sensation, memories not his own poured into Guy's mind.

"You're absolutely sure?"

Her back was turned toward him, her frame too small and too frail to be allowed to move forward in time.

"I know I invited *you* to join the world of curses, but do think long and hard. You have quite a talent for magical botany, too. If you follow that path instead, you may well achieve big things. Perhaps even join the ranks of history's greatest mages," she said. "Becoming a curse wrangler means discarding most such opportunities. Turning your back on the light that would have shone upon your life, descending instead into the depths of the cold, dark earth. If you fully understand that fact, do you still want to be a wrangler?"

He wanted to nod right away, but held himself in check, forcing himself to mull the question over. He could see Instructor David urging him to reconsider. This choice betrayed his debt to that man. A mentor who'd seen great promise in him, had taught him so much—and now he aimed to take those teachings and run.

Yet, still he felt no doubts. His mind already made up, he said the words—and her back quivered. Like a child crying in the dark.

".....Okay," she said. "Mm...I hear you. Sorry I had to test you like that. You've been saying the same thing for a while now. So strange, isn't it? I pull so hard while you're wavering, but when the time arrives, I get cold feet."

Mocking herself, she turned around. There was a smile on her sickly, pale face. A trace less strength to it than usual.

"But we've had quite enough of that. True to my word, you're my apprentice now. Don't celebrate. You've been charmed by the most corrupt witch alive—that makes you the second saddest child around."

She turned her back on him again, unable to maintain the smile any longer. The rest of her speech reached him from over her shoulder. He'd known her long enough to know that she always got like this when she spoke outside her professional capacity.

"So please—when you die, curse my name. Hate me for it, despise me—seethe with contempt. You have more right to those emotions than anyone else," she told him. ".....No matter what, do not *feel* for me—"

There the memory ended. Guy accepted it. All that Lombardi loved, all that had driven his life.

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"...Instructor...Baldia... Your burden—"
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His last words were a rasp. Guy's blade withdrew, the spell ran its course—and Lombardi's body began to fall. Nursing a lingering sadness, Guy sank into the depths of the hollow with his brother-in-curses.

#### """Elletardus!!!"""

And the living and the dead went their separate ways. His friends' spells slowed his fall, letting Lombardi's corpse alone plummet into the abyss below. Guy spared it one final glance, and then another spell hit him from the side, landing him on one of the platforms Liebert had made.

His friends flocked to his side. Lying immobile on his back, eyes on the rafters, Guy yelled, "Stay back! It's starting!"

And with that warning, the first deluge flowed in. Too intense to be registered as either heat or cold, the impact of it ejected all the air from his lungs. His vision strobed, he forgot to inhale; the thing raging within robbed him of everything but agony.

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"...Aughh...! Gakkk...gck..."
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The Sword Roses landed on the platform with him and ran toward their writhing friend. The changes wrought by all that curse energy were not contained within Guy—they were spilling over, a raging tempest around him. It

<sup>&</sup>quot;Guy—!" Nanao shouted.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Guy, listen to my voice!" Oliver urged. "Don't lose yourself!"

was obvious at a glance this was beyond his capacity to control. They'd planned for this, and Oliver took a step forward.

"...He's at his limit! I'll go first, you follow—"

But before he could finish, someone darted past him.

Katie.

Before anyone else could act, the moment they'd broached the topic, she'd made up her mind to go first. Oliver followed close behind.

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"Katie...!"

"We'd best join them!"

"Agreed!"

"Don't die, Guy!"
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Nanao, Chela, and Pete had been further out, but were closing quickly in. Katie reached the center of the storm, a few steps away from Guy. Seeing his face contorted in pain, she could think of nothing else. Desperate to share that suffering— "Huh?"

But someone else landed in front of her. A girl far taller than Katie, but clad in a third-year's uniform. Barely bothering with a deceleration spell, she broke both legs in several places—and didn't even care.

She was already acting. Bending over before Katie's very eyes, leaning over Guy's tormented frame and pressing her lips to his. Sharing the curse with a kiss. The simplest, most powerful way to move curse energy, even for non-wranglers.

Katie froze—but time kept moving. The girl took on as much energy as she could handle, then pulled her lips away, smiling.

"I hope...that helped," she said.

".....Rita.....?" Guy murmured, unable to tell if he was dreaming the face in front of him.

There were tears in Rita's eyes. The warmth filling her heart outweighed her suffering.

"Good...I'm glad I came. I got...to be first...this time..."

She muttered this blearily and gave him another kiss. Only then did Katie recover—now was not the time to linger. The excess curse energy within Guy was far more than a single third-year could hope to take on.

"G-give me room, Rita! You've had enough! It'll—"

### "Ducere!"

Katie had grabbed Rita's shoulder, and Oliver's spell yanked the third-year away, giving her no chance of arguing. A forcible measure taken out of the conviction that she would not budge of her own accord. Rita was merely half-conscious and did not fight him. Oliver caught her, and Katie tore her eyes away, leaning over Guy.

"...Sorry...! Here I go, Guy!"

And she managed a kiss. Enduring the agony of the curse energy flowing in through her lips—in the corner of her mind, she wondered whose lips she was tasting. Her mind was reviewing the sight she'd seen a moment ago despite herself, but she shook it off, focusing on the task at hand. Her limit came up fast, but she did not stop. She would have taken it all if she could, and if not—at the very least, she adamantly refused to break off faster than her junior had.



"Move away, Katie! Ducere!"

Oliver was forced to drag his friend away once he sensed she was in the same condition as Rita now was. Chela ran over next, examining Guy while forcing herself to remain levelheaded. Curse energy could have lingering aftereffects; it wasn't simply a matter of taking turns withdrawing it. It was vital that they acted according to his capacity.

"...Well?!" said Oliver.

"...Not yet!" Chela replied. "He's recovered somewhat, but not yet stable. I'd better—"

"No, let me! You handle the rest."

"Nay, I shall take a turn!" Nanao cut in.

"Since we'll need to carry people," Pete said, "I'd better—"

"Augh, quit your squawking!"

A roar cut through their squabble, and they spun around in surprise. They'd each been trying to minimize the risks to each other—but been interrupted by the last person any of them had seen coming. Annie Mackley, the same girl who'd cast that spell on Katie during the welcome parade that had first brought the Sword Roses together.

"...I owe him. A lot. You get how that eats at you?"

Mackley's face contorted; she clearly wasn't processing her own feelings well. Nobody knew what she meant—none of them had been privy to the time she'd spent with Guy. Or how her unyielding nature meant she refused to bend on what mattered most.

Before they could work anything out, Mackley pushed past them to Guy's side. She pounced on him like a carnivore.

"Mackley...?" he whispered, his eyes barely focusing.

"...I'm clearing my tab. If there's change...then be grateful till you die!"

With that threat, she pressed her lips firmly against his.

The Sword Roses stared, stunned. Few things in their time here had been

harder to comprehend. Mackley made a conscious effort to ignore their stares, focusing on absorbing the curse energy. Unlike Rita and Katie, she carefully, accurately judged her own capacity, and broke off there.

"...Hahh, hah... Hell yeah... How...ya like that...?!"

Mackley wiped her mouth with her sleeve so hard it almost chafed, and that was the last thing she managed before toppling over backward.

Oliver tore his eyes from her, looking back at Guy.

"Guy, how's it going?" he called. "Got it under control?"

"...Yeah, it's settling down. Just...can someone tell me what the hell is going on?"

Guy was blinking furiously, utterly lost. His friends took that as proof he'd stabilized, and they breathed a sigh of relief. Then they moved on to easing the pain of those who'd taken on the excess energy. By now, other students were joining them, helping with the treatment. Rita's friends caught up with her, while Rossi knelt down beside Mackley, smirking.

"You 'ave changed my mind, Ms. Mackley. That was a fine kiss!"

"...Drop dead, asshole..."

She could barely move, but looked ready to kill him anyway. Albright laughed out loud, and even Andrews had to hide his smile.

Perhaps that moment had done more to change her reputation than anything else.

With the main peril gone, the fourth-years began to relax. Now they needed merely wait for the older students to arrive, and they could return to campus. Everyone assumed that was how things would go.

But then a tremor hit, forcibly shaking off that notion.

"...Wait...what's the noise?" Albright growled, his athame back in hand.

A moment later, dark, filthy water began pouring from the rafters. Hauling the wounded away from this deluge, Oliver and Chela were the first to realize the implications. "...Subterranean water! And it's laced with curse energy!" Oliver shouted.

"Everyone, get to high ground! Do not let this touch you!" Chela ordered.

All students in earshot sprang into action. The majority hopped on their brooms, flying upward and helping those carrying the wounded as they bounded from platform to platform. Oliver's team had Guy and Katie on their backs, and once they'd gained some ground on the foul waters filling the depths, they paused to assess.

"Mr. Lombardi had this stored beneath the irminsul? I *thought* it was odd the second layer's water was unaffected—he'd kept it all pooled here?" Oliver wondered aloud.

"...This is bad news. The water's swiftly filling this chamber. If we try and flee the way we came, it'll come after us," said Pete. "We might get the older students caught in this and find ourselves trapped..."

"We should be fine so long as the water level doesn't get *too* high," said Chela. "But if it does..."

These were dire predictions, and everyone present looked concerned. Ordinary water would have hardly been a threat; a mage could survive being submerged. But this curse energy changed everything. Water was the source of all life—once corrupted, mere contact would infect a person; submerge oneself for any length of time without proper measures taken, and you'd soon be in critical condition.

They could use spells to dig themselves a shelter, but they had no real way of escaping that with this tainted water all around them; they'd be stuck waiting ages for a rescue. That thought made Oliver turn to Guy and Katie. He bit back a wave of panic. With multiple students already laden with curse energy, they could not afford a wait of indeterminate length.

"Hmm? I say, is this a predicament?"

A languid voice punctured Oliver's thoughts. He and his friends jumped, and when they turned, they found the new Kimberly instructor, the great sage Rod Farquois.

"Where'd you come from—?"

"Why, I just came down the halls in the usual fashion. How awful! Sending students to a place this rife with danger? I would never dream of it," they said, examining their surroundings.

As everyone gaped, the great sage drew their white wand, taking action.

"Let's go one step at a time. First, those afflicted with curse energy—come here."

They called out to Guy and Katie—neither was capable of moving, nor did the sage expect it. Farquois spoke to what lay within them. A cursed black mist lifted out of the pair's bodies, flowing through the air and into Farquois.

"...Ah...?"

"I feel...much better..."

Recovering at once, Guy and Katie sat up, blinking. Farquois looked at Guy, faintly surprised.

"Oh, I can't take yours on! It likes you so much it refused to join me. Hmm... well, you'd best look after it, then. I'm only slightly vexed."

The sage huffed, then spun around, hopping onto a broom. Moving freely around the cave, they repeated this treatment for the other teams carrying wounded students. Rita and Mackley were both shocked by their sudden recovery, but soon boarded brooms of their own.

"Next, that," the sage said, turning their attention to the waters, which had already filled a third of the chamber. "So many ways I could handle it, but let's make this simple. Inflarebulla!"

This spell generated a bubble around Farquois, who plunged straight into the tainted waters below. Everyone watched, wordless—and not long after, the surface began to swirl, and the water level dropped.

"What...is the instructor doing?" Guy asked.

"I think...they've altered the terrain," Oliver ventured. "Creating a larger reservoir below this chamber. All the water's draining into it..."

It sounded absurd, but Oliver could think of no other explanation. Chela nodded, shuddering.

"...Such power," she marveled. "They must be strengthening the sides to avoid collapse as well—a construction project that would normally take several magic builders weeks to complete. And they're improvising it while submerged in cursed water."

Oliver could only nod.

On top of that, it wasn't like the curse energy they'd taken from the wounded had disappeared. It had simply been transferred to a new receptacle: Farquois. In other words, the great sage should have been suffering from the same curse; however, they showed no ill effects because their capacity was simply *that vast*. All this curse energy had consumed three others before Guy could handle it—and that was a small enough quantity for Farquois to simply ignore.

The great sage was operating on a different scale, a pointed reminder that they were every bit as powerful as the other Kimberly faculty. Oliver might have buried Darius, Enrico, and Demitrio—but even he could not begin to plumb the sage's depths. He very much hoped the sage would not become his enemy, although he knew how faint a hope that was.

The construction complete, Farquois resurfaced.

"Okay, that should do it," they said. "Don't worry about the upperclassmen! If they aren't getting washed down here, they've played their cards right."

All eyes focused on the body in Farquois's arms—Lombardi, the very boy that had just been slain. His body had been cut free of the cursed roots.

"You poor thing." Farquois smiled gently down at him. "You, too, must have been so alone."

They hugged the body's head to their chest. Everyone watching gulped. Much like Farquois's actions in class, this was unthinkable at Kimberly. Yet, at the same time, Oliver had to admit—it was not wrong. And that brought an ominous thought to mind: Were they the mad ones, driven around the bend by this hellscape? Was this teacher the lone sane person here?

"Did anyone else die? Very good. I'm sure it was quite touch and go!"

Farquois exclaimed. "Now then, let's head back. Don't worry about the trip up to the surface! The great sage is with you, and there is no safer place in the world."

Farquois directed a bright smile at the students. No one could find a reason to refuse the offer—and that was why it scared them.

From the bottom of his heart, Oliver shared that sentiment.

END

### **Afterword**

Hello, this is Bokuto Uno. The hubbub of the fourth year begins in earnest.

Rod Farquois, the great sage, an outside mage dispatched by the Gnostic Hunters. As bold as they are brazen, their actions ripple through the halls of Kimberly, now three instructors fewer. At times, they outright refute the institute's philosophies. And what lies beneath that behavior? Given the sage's nature, answers will be hard to come by.

Meanwhile, changes brew within the Sword Roses. Pete and Guy each make major decisions that Oliver's and Katie's hearts bear the brunt of. Their juniors will not stand by in silence—no matter where you look, you find burning desires. In light of that: How will they build their bonds? A question that will torment them all.

One peak has passed, but do not dream of resting easy. Life in the Kimberly upper forms is challenging in more ways than one.

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## **Table of Contents**

- 1. Cover
- 2. Insert
- 3. <u>Title Page</u>
- 4. Copyright
- 5. <u>Prologue</u>
- 6. Chapter 1: The Visitor
- 7. Chapter 2: Obsession
- 8. Chapter 3: Mayhem
- 9. Chapter 4: The Evil Tree
- 10. Afterword
- 11. Yen Newsletter