



Bokuto Uno

ILLUSTRATION BY
Ruria Miyuki

Reign
of the **SEVEN**
SPELLBLADES
Side of Fire



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"—?! Don't,
Al! Get out
of here!
I'll figure
something
out—"

"Keep your
filthy snout
off my friend,
monster."

"Flamma!"

Carlos Whitrow

Alvin Godfrey



Ophelia Salvadori

Lesedi Ingwe

Tim Linton

"Our goal today is to scout potential workshop locations. We need a base to operate from."



"Gino Beltrami.
Like you, a
second-year.
Please call me
Barman."

"I saw you earlier.
What did you do
to her?"

Gino Beltrami



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Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Bokuto Uno

The background of the book cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. It depicts a scene of destruction, with debris and rubble scattered across the ground. In the foreground, a large, ornate, dark-colored object, possibly a sword hilt or a piece of armor, is visible. The overall tone is somber and dramatic, with a focus on the aftermath of battle.

Reign of the SEVEN SPELLBLADES

Side of Fire

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Ruria Miyuki


New York

Copyright

Reign of the Seven Spellblades: Side of Fire Bokuto Uno

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

Cover art by Ruria Miyuki

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Characters

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Alvin Godfrey

Eventual student body president,
but a nobody at our story's start.



Lesedi Ingwe

A girl with eyes like daggers.
Has her roots in another
continent, which gives her a
unique kick-based fighting style.



Carlos Whitrow

An androgynous youth with a
beautiful voice. The first friend
Godfrey makes at Kimberly.



Ophelia Salvadori

Carlos's childhood friend. Born
with a Perfume that bewitches
the opposite sex and brings
her anguish.



Tim Linton

A boy who radiates hostility.
Uses poisons with no antidotes
to terrorize those around him.



Side of Fire



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

Oliver Horn



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

Nanao Hibiya

A girl from Farnland, a nation belonging to the Union. Has a soft spot for the civil rights of demi-humans.



Katie Aalto

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



Guy Greenwood



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

Pete Reston



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

Michela McFarlane

Instructors



Kimberly's headmistress. Proudly stands at the apex of magical society.

Esmeralda



Magical biology instructor. Feared by her students for her wild personality.

Vanessa Aldiss



Magical engineering instructor. Prone to outrageous lessons designed to maim students.

Enrico Forghieri



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

Theodore McFarlane



Spellology instructor. The ultimate witch, she's been alive for more than one thousand years.

Frances Gilchrist



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

Luther Garland



Alchemy instructor and a master of sword arts. Arrogant and haughty, but does have a caring side to him.

Darius Grenville

—Demitrio Aristides

—Dustin Hedges

On average, 20 percent do not make it to graduation. The reasons why vary: Death, madness, and disappearance are only the tip of the iceberg.

Kimberly Magic Academy—a name given to hell on Earth.

“Fortis Impetus!”

Powerful winds, born from a wand, converged into a spear that shot toward their foe. The wand was held by a third-year student, one Michela McFarlane, her deep mana pool allowing this double incantation. A spell strong enough to bore a hole through rock, yet the wall of water before them stifled the momentum. It dissipated.

“...Not even a doublecant worked?!”

“*Gladio!*”

A water tentacle shot out to strike back, severed by a spell from another third-year—Nanao Hibiya. The severed portion lost shape, becoming mere water once more, but they were in a swamp; there was plenty of water for the creature to convert into new tentacles.

“Hrm,” Nanao grumbled. “Slicing these accomplishes naught. A perplexing beast.”

The boy beside her—Oliver Horn—nodded. The massive shifting wall of water was but a cloak, controlled with elementals; squint hard enough, and beneath that rippling surface one might glimpse the kernel. A streamlined body covered in slick scales, broad limbs evolved into fins, the sharp teeth of a carnivore lining the maw atop that slender neck. Distinctive even among waterwyrms. He knew the creature’s name.

“A mizuchi. A divine beast familiar found in Azian rivers. I’d heard there was one dormant on the third layer, but...”

As he spoke, Oliver’s gaze rose to the top of the watery armor. A male student, buried to the waist, laughing maniacally.

“Hee! Hee-hee! Kya-hee-hee-hee-hee! Excellent! Far better than anticipated! Run wild! Demonstrate the power of the river divinities! I shall make you lord of the third layer once more!”

Drunk on power, his own mind on the verge of assimilation.

Oliver frowned. "...He believes he's tamed it, but it's taking control. He's on the verge of being consumed by the spell."

"Such conceit, Mr. Seitz," Michela said, stepping up beside Oliver, athame in hand. "You should have known this was beyond a third-year's reach."

Three younger students stood behind them, under their protection—but determined to pitch in. They'd all suffered injuries in the fight, but they were disinclined to care. A friend of theirs had been swallowed up in the mizuchi's waters.

"...Dean..."

"...We'll get you out...!"

"Deep breaths!" Guy Greenwood said. A tall third-year, he waved his juniors down. "This is a real nasty customer. Rush in, and you'll get yourselves killed. That includes you, Teresa."

He'd spotted Teresa Carste, a second-year, about to make a solo play.

The waters of the marsh lapping at his ankles, Pete Reston—a smaller third-year—narrowed his eyes.

"...These ripples..."

"Look out! The visible shapes are not the only threat! Assume all water here is a part of it!"

This warning came from Katie Aalto, a third-year well-versed in magical biology. In response, everyone channeled a portion of their magic into walking on water—just as the mizuchi turned its reservoir into a thirty-foot-tall wave bearing down on them. No time to dodge. All third-years formed ranks before their juniors, wands raised—

"Impetus!"

A gale flew over their heads, slamming into the water. Before the wave could hit, the wind blew it back, then slammed hard against the mizuchi's water armor. The unexpected spell made everyone swing around—and they found a man standing behind them, athame raised.

“Once more, I find you fighting monsters. You make a real habit of it.”

“President Godfrey...!”

A strong gaze beneath upturned brows. The upperclassman they trusted most. He soon stepped between them and the mizuchi, staring it down and speaking over sturdy shoulders.

“Mr. Seitz is well on his way to being consumed by the spell. That much is obvious, but since when is a creature like this on the third layer?”

“He seems to have awakened a dormant mizuchi!” Oliver said. “There’d been several sightings...”

“A mizuchi...? Ah, the mate to the corpse Rivermoore employs. I see Mr. Travers trapped within—how’s he faring?”

“He should still be okay!” Katie cried. “Prey with mana reserves aren’t immediately eaten; mizuchi keep them alive inside the water, like sucking on a hard candy. They stand to gain more from that in the long run.”

Caught up to speed, Godfrey nodded. A captured junior was a pickle, but he was unlikely to be used as a hostage. Mizuchi were animals; such notions were beyond them. Erich Seitz was likely too far gone to think of it himself.

“Got it,” Godfrey said. His mind made up, he barked an order. “Extract your friend.”

They, too, were Kimberly students. He need not offer detailed plans. Godfrey’s role here was clear—keep this creature busy until the young mages’ efforts paid off.

“The die is cast,” Godfrey declared. “They’ll be forced to deal with *me*.”

He took a big step forward. The mizuchi tracked his movements, clearly aware he was the greatest threat. It tried to take him out quickly; part of its water wall formed a projectile, which it fired at top speed.

“Hah!”

That aim was true, but Godfrey kicked it with a force greater than the launch, sending the water orb back along the same trajectory. It smashed against the mizuchi’s armor. Not a remotely practical approach, and it left Pete gasping.

“H-he kicked the water?!”

“An application of Lake Walking! The strength of his legs is beyond compare!”

“Ducere!”

The man's next spell hit the water armor and forcibly peeled a chunk of it away. The rest of them knew just why he was going for chip damage over anything more powerful.

"The president's weakening the armor! Now's our chance to free Dean!"

The third-years spread out around the mizuchi, all wands aimed at the same thing—the boy trapped within.

""""""Supernatet!""""""

Their spells melded, flying toward the boy. The mizuchi's interference weakened the power, but their combined might applied levitation in the same direction. And that force pulled the boy upward, out of the water's depths.

“He’s hit the surface!”

“Now, Nanao!”

“Gladio!”

Nanao's severing spell cut through the water, and the portion holding their junior was freed from the mizuchi's control. He fell away—and Guy caught him. The boy's friends raced over.

“Dean!”

“Hang in there, Dean!”

"Shoulder him and skedaddle! Teresa, back 'em up!" Guy cried.

“Will do.”

Dean's friends hoisted him up and ran off, Teresa guarding their retreat. Certain they were out of harm's way, Godfrey grinned and glanced up at Seitz.

"No more distractions. Let's see who's better, Mr. Seitz."

“Hee-ha-ha-ha! Such airs, Purgatory!”

The challenge grabbed Seitz's attention, and the mizuchi drew in all water

from the vicinity. Its armor swelled to several times its original size. All too aware of how powerful this next attack would be, the third-years moved to back Godfrey's play—but he stood his ground, athame at the ready.

“Calidi Ignis!”

A torrent that could gouge through steel—and he fired a spell right into it. The crimson flames slammed into the water, explosively vaporizing it. The Sword Roses leaped back out of harm's way, while Godfrey poured yet more mana into his wand.

“Rahhhhhhhhh!”

The balance shifted, his flames pushing the water back. Plumes of steam rose up, a sight so patently absurd his juniors forgot to think. The crimson pierced the water armor and reached the root of the torrent, vaporizing the mizuchi too fast for it to even burn. The remaining water burst, splattering to the ground—and Seitz fell into Godfrey's arms.

“All done, gentlemen. Case closed.”

He said this as if it was nothing. His juniors lowered their wands, jaws hanging open.

Within the hellscape of Kimberly stood a man known as Purgatory.

Alvin Godfrey, student body president. Armed with extraordinary magic output and an unflinching heart, he drew like-minded students together and formed the Campus Watch, the mages in their ranks doing battle with all they deemed unfair. The witches and warlocks who lined these halls feared him. Even those following their spells toward realms outside the domain of humankind could hardly dismiss him.

Was he always like that? No, not at all.

Once—he, too, was just a student. Scorned for lack of talent, frustrated by what he could not do, buffeted by the horrors of the darkness all around. His suffering was beyond that of any average student. But even before he found his strength, he stood tall, attempting to protect those around him.

The Watch Headquarters contains accounts of those times. Anyone who

wishes to can peruse them.

It is not clear who first gave these records their name, but all Watch members call them:

The Purgatory Files.



Prologue

007

Side of Fire

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Prologue

It was like being trapped in a vault. That impression renewed each time the boy set foot within.

A basement room down a long flight of stairs. The air was less still than it was oppressive; the walls, floor, and ceiling bore the scars of intensive training done here over the years. Each time the boy faced his father's stony visage, the stress wrung him out.

"...Hah..."

Alvin Godfrey, age fifteen. Taller than average, with upturned brows and eyes that gleamed with a light that suggested he was equally forthright and honest to a fault. No trace of the gravity or intensity so commonly found in mages—even the natural muscles of his build were those of a simple country boy.

"Flamma!"

He chanted a spell, and flames leaped from his wand. The power was unstable, roiling left and right, shrinking and swelling.

"...Ngh...!"

The more he struggled to get it under control, the more blood drained from his face. Judgment had already been passed. No different from any other attempt—and his father let out a sigh.

"...Enough. Stop that, Alvin."

A cold voice, dismissing his son's efforts. Out of breath, the boy lowered his wand, facing his father's disappointment.

"I knew you were defective, but to reach age fifteen with no improvement..."

"...I apologize, Father."

The boy's voice betrayed his shame. The father took a step toward him,

slapping his cheek without pity.

“...!”

“Do not apologize lightly. You know full well we’re past the stage where that has any meaning. No matter your failings, you will have to attend a school *somewhere* next year. But at this rate, I cannot imagine you passing any exams.”

With that lament, he turned away, delivering a few more words over his shoulder.

“You’ve drawn up a list of every school in the Union, yes?”

“...I have.”

“Then test at them all, as long as the dates do not overlap. Schools of repute will likely send you packing, but perhaps you’ll get lucky. It is only a small saving grace, but at least you’re not a complete fool. Perhaps you can get enough points on the written exam to slide in somewhere.”

The final hope to which they clung. Only one answer available to him—standing at attention, Godfrey nodded.

“Understood. I’ll get right to it.”

“I hope for good news. Do not make me sigh again.”

The boy bowed to his father and left the room. He stole one last glance at the man’s face but found no expression at all. His father was no longer even registering disappointment.

Not far from the manor where he lived were plain wooden homes between fields of grain. A town built for those without magic—ordinaries.

The population was decent for a place this remote, but the network of waterways that modern shipping revolved around did not yet reach it; the Godfreys were constantly nagging the magic authorities to rectify that. Unfortunately, these efforts had not paid off. Their clan was just over three hundred years old—hardly new, but not quite established. They simply lacked the political clout of the true dynasties.

Godfrey himself was quite fond of the town as it was. The waterways might

not reach it, but the river flowed clean, and the trout and carp caught from it were a favorite meal. He often joined the local fishermen on their boats and occasionally caught a glimpse of river fairies swimming in the clear water below. Development would one day put an end to these things; a real shame, he thought.

“Oh, Al!”

“You’re dressed for travel? Where you going?”

Local children spotted Godfrey at the carpet stop in town, baggage on his back, and came running up to him. Smiling at his younger friends, he nodded as cheerily as he could muster.

“I’m off on a tour of magic school exams. Got a lot to take, so it’ll be a while. Won’t get back till next month.”

“Whoa, that’s forever!”

“Come back early! We need more people for kickball!”

“You’re so big; you make a great keeper, Al!”

“Will you bring us presents?!”

A chorus of gripes and pleas. He shook his head at them, and an older woman in an apron came running.

“I’m not too late! Al, are you leaving soon?”

“Ma’am?”

“I brought your lunch! The pie in the big bundle won’t keep, so start with that. Did you pack spare clothes? Don’t fall off the carpet, now! And always double-check the destination when you’re transferring!”

She voiced far more concern than his actual parents had. Rather embarrassed by that, he put his hands up, stopping her.

“Thank you. But I’ll be fine. I planned the travel route myself, including strategies for problems I might face along the way. The exams themselves are far more worrying.”

“Well, good. I do worry! You’re a good boy, but you’ve never really seemed

like a mage.”

That hit a sore spot and left Godfrey at a loss for words.

The truth was, most mages didn’t take carpets around. They could just use their own brooms. He did have one with him—but it was for emergencies, in case carpets weren’t an option. He’d fallen off and hurt himself too many times; his father forbade him riding it any real distance.

Nothing he said now would change her impression of him, so he turned her attention toward the future.

“If I attend magic school, I’m sure I’ll change. Expect great things!” he said. “Oh, sorry. It’s that time. Gonna claim a spot on the carpet.”

He saw the carpet coming in for a landing, took the lunch from her, and headed over. He got a few looks for taking a carpet with a broom on his back, but he paid that no attention. As he settled in with his belongings, the woman and the children watched over him.

“I’m off,” he said. “Wish me luck!”

Not long after, the departure time arrived. Godfrey waved as the carpet lifted off. The children waved back, and the carpet soon disappeared across the horizon. The woman’s worried frown never once relaxed.

He reached his first destination after an eight-hour flight. It should have been six hours, but flying carpets were magical creatures—their flight speed varied widely according to their condition. This carpet was getting on in years, and there had been several instances when it started losing altitude, forcing the passengers to pat it encouragingly.

“A mite past our scheduled arrival time, but here we are at Galatea! Thank you for riding; please disembark so we can rest the carpet.”



Unsteadily, Godfrey stepped onto solid ground. The feel of it came as a relief, but his back was as bent as any old-timer's.

"Two hours is a 'mite'...? Argh, this thing's murder on my back."

For the first time, he felt like he knew why his father was so desperate to get the waterway to their home. But as the pain in his back faded, he looked around—and forgot all other concerns. The bustle of the magicity was a far cry from the rustic village he knew.

The sky was covered in a latticed dome, with paths of light in the air, brooms and carpets carrying people and things here and there. There were structures dangling from the dome like cocoons, shops for those who could fly to them. The ground-level streets were rather raucous, with stands along both sides calling out to the passing crowds. For a hick like him, it felt like a festival—but this was not Godfrey's first visit, and he knew it was always like this.

"Hello again, Galatea. I think I was...eight when Mother took me here?"

He took a deep breath, refocusing.

The city life was certainly thrilling, but he was here on business. Not to see the sights, but to face a challenge that could determine the course of his very life.

"What a place to start my exam pilgrimage. It's great that I can knock this one and Featherston out together, but..."

He glanced up at the sky once more. Glowing letters hovered in midair, pointing to the exam site for Kimberly Magic Academy.

He'd reserved a room at an inn, and that night helped him recover. He rose ready and motivated. Once dressed, he spoke briefly with the proprietor and stepped outside, clapping his cheeks for pep.

"...Okay, I'm ready. Onward!"

"Heeeeeelp!"

Before he could even take a step, there was a scream from behind. He spun around and saw an older woman collapsed on the side of the road. Unable to leave her be, he ran over.

“...What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been robbed! Oh, you’re a mage? Hurry! After him!”

She pointed, and he saw a man running off with a purse under his arm. Realizing what this meant, Godfrey frowned.

“Of all the days... Stop, thief!”

He was already in pursuit. The man had some distance on him, but however inexperienced Godfrey may have been, he was a mage. And one who’d spent quite a lot of time running around in the dirt with the local children. No ordinary thief could outpace him. As the crowds around gawked, he swiftly closed the gap.

“Gah...!”

“Don’t fight me! I’m not trying to hurt you!” Godfrey urged the thief.

He’d pinned the thief down from behind and recovered the purse. Much as he’d have liked to incapacitate the man with a spell, he wasn’t capable of anything that required such finesse. Instead, he just grappled with the man, asked the crowd to take care of the rest, and turned back to the victim, handing her the purse.

“Oh, thank you, thank you! May I ask your na—?”

“Sorry, madam!”

He bobbed his head and turned to run off.

He could not afford to be late. This had taken him away from his destination, but he still had time—

“Help! Somebody, help!”

And again, a cry caught his ear. Godfrey screeched to a halt and peered down a narrow alley.

“...What is it this time?!”

“Ah! Someone stopped! Oh, you’re a mage? Fancy that—so am I!”

Godfrey was greeted with a smile. A slim youth with androgynous features and a distinctive voice—and a wand in their hand, which proved they were a

mage. They were on one knee beside a prone woman, the sight of whom made Godfrey gulp. She was white as a sheet, breathing heavily—and the bulge in her belly made it clear why.

“I saw her topple over!” the youth told Godfrey. “I think she’s ready to pop. We have to get to the hospital, but she’s in no state to move.”

“...Do you know how to use anesthetic spells?”

“Of course. And I know where the hospital is.”

“Then I’ll carry her. You follow along, easing her pain. Sorry, but we’ll have to make this quick. I’m short on time!”

Once the spell was cast, he hefted her up and ran off, following the youth’s directions. They stuck close behind. After a moment, they asked, “Wait, are you a Kimberly applicant?”

“Got it in one. It’s a big day, but somehow I keep stumbling across trouble. I’m not exactly built to be an augur, but perhaps I should have applied myself a bit harder.”

“Heh-heh. Well, at least you’re not alone. I’m here for the same thing.”

“Wha—? You are?! Do *you* really have time for this?!”

“Gosh, pot calling the kettle black! Perhaps you have a point, but I’d rather not abandon her. Even if I passed my exam, I’d feel bad.”

Screams interrupted their discussion:

“Augh!”

“Wargs escaped the transport cart!”

A cart of wargs had toppled over, and dozens of the beasts had escaped. The fleeing crowds had them very agitated. Godfrey’s lips twitched.

“...A third calamity. This is beyond bad luck into *am I cursed?* territory.”

“I have to agree. But we can’t exactly take the long way around—she’s at her limit.”

The youth was closely watching the pregnant woman’s condition. Godfrey could tell her breathing was growing shallow—and that made his mind up. He

had to make a beeline.

“Fine, I’m going through. Keep her safe.”

“...Huh?! Wait—I can’t look after you as well!”

“I’m tough as all get-out. One of my few strengths. I can soak a few bites!”

With that, he plunged into the fray. The wargs targeted him at once. Jaws clamped on to his undefended legs. Feeling those teeth sink into his flesh, Godfrey pressed on, dragging the warg along with him.

“Bite me all you like! I’ll just make you sick!”

“Tonitrus! You’re a wild man...!”

The youth stayed close on his heels, prying the wargs off with lightning and frightening away the next wave. They were unable to stop them all, and a few more bit Godfrey, but he raced right through the scene of the accident. Once the pair escaped the wargs, the hospital was right before them. Dripping blood in his wake, Godfrey burst through the doors and called to the shocked receptionist—an ordinary.

“Pregnant woman! Emergency delivery! Take her, please.”

“G-got it! Um, your name is—?”

“No time for that! The rest is yours!”

He laid the woman down on a bench. He saw her eyes blearily on him and bent down momentarily, cupping her hand in his.

“Sorry I can’t stay. Have a safe delivery.”

With that, he turned and dashed off. The youth caught up to him, breathing heavily.

“Wait! You’re going in that state?”

“Afraid I’m no healer! And there’s no time to avail myself of the hospital here!”

Before he could run off, the youth grabbed his wrist. He turned back to find them bent over, their wand aimed at his wounds—their spell closing them up.

“Well, I *can* heal. Afraid this does nothing for your clothes, though.”

“...Thanks, but...aren’t we rivals?”

“I’m the one who dragged you into this mess. Don’t worry; I know I can pass.”

They flashed a dazzling smile. Godfrey smiled back, grateful for the help.

Ultimately, the pair did manage to reach the exam site on time—by the skin of their teeth. The monitors looked aghast at Godfrey’s torn clothes, but since he himself was fine, they said nothing. He and the youth split up, found their seats, and began tackling the test sheets.

Spellology, magical history, alchemy. True to the school’s reputation, quite difficult, but lots of essay questions seeking to grasp how the applicants thought. Those late nights studying paid off. Godfrey’s pen moved swiftly and surely, and he completed the test sheet with five minutes to spare.

“That’ll be all. Put your pens down,” the monitor called—and with a spell, they collected all the test sheets, provoking screams from those trying to write one last word.

Godfrey looked relieved. He’d done his part here, at least.

“Practicals are next. They include a simple interview with faculty members, so do not be rude.”

Obedying instructions, the applicants split into groups, moving down the hall. Another group went in ahead of his, and Godfrey put his hands on his chest, taking deep breaths. This was going to be his make-or-break moment, his greatest fear.

“Next group, head in.”

The monitor held the door open for them. Five other examinees entered with Godfrey. Crystals for each were placed on a long table at the center of the room, and two instructors sat behind desks at the back. One was a pleasant-looking man in a white cape, while the other was a dignified old woman in a dark robe. The man flashed a smile at them.

“Welcome. My name is Luther Garland, and I’ll be evaluating your practical exams. With me is Instructor Frances Gilchrist. Line up here.”

These names made every applicant gulp, Godfrey included. Their reputations preceded them. One so proficient in sword arts they called him the Blade Master; the other a supreme witch, alive for more than a thousand years. Both were heroes of the Gnostic fronts, and employing them proved the power of Kimberly as an institute.

“No need to stress it. We’re not asking anything difficult here. We’re simply measuring your fundamentals. Trying too hard may work against you.”

Clearly trying to help them feel at ease. Godfrey had known this in advance, but it proved no comfort. Simply measuring his fundamentals? That meant anyone who did not meet that standard would fail, without any recourse.

“Let’s begin with the stability of your output. Place your wand on a crystal and pour mana into it. As strong as you can, while maintaining the flow for a full minute.”

""""""Yes, sir!""""""

All examinees stepped up to the crystals and began. Godfrey aimed his own wand and started infusing his crystal with mana.

“ ”

The crystal soon lit up. The more mana applied, the brighter they got; the steadier the flow, the more consistent that light was. There was some variation in the brightness, but the other examinees were all solidly consistent. Godfrey's alone was blinking furiously, never stabilizing.

“Hmm...?”

“ ”
...

That drew the instructors' attention. The longer it went on, the worse Godfrey's complexion became. It was hard to imagine that he was merely applying mana to a crystal. He wore a desperate scowl, his whole body shaking like he was attempting to seal away some mighty force.

“Okay, enough,” Garland demanded. “Mr. Godfrey, you’re rather pale. Are you unwell?”

“...No...I’m...perfectly healthy,” Godfrey gasped, his breath ragged.

All applicants lowered their wands. The others were giving him dubious looks, but he was past noticing.

“Right,” Garland said, watching him closely. “We could let you take the rest of the exam later, if you like?”

“I appreciate the concern...but I’m good to go.”

More time would not improve his performance. All too aware of this, Godfrey chose to power through.

“Very well.” Garland nodded. “Next task—we’re measuring your individual elements. Beginning with fire—”

Thirty minutes later, Godfrey still stood—but exhaustion piled on exhaustion, and he looked ready to collapse.

“...Hah...hah...hah...!”

Sweat dripping from nearly every pore, he was unable to catch his breath. The other students were past worrying about him; they looked downright unnerved.

After a pause, Garland announced, “That’s all we have. Results will be sent to your homes, so you may leave. Thanks for coming.”

With that last formality, the examinees filed out. Godfrey staggered after them, forgetting to close the door. Garland waved his wand at it, and once it closed, he glanced at his colleague.

“...What did you make of him, Instructor Gilchrist?”

“Appalling beyond words. It’s been years since an examinee infuriated me so.”

Her brow had not betrayed a hint of this during the exam or now. Garland looked sympathetic.

“I felt much the same. We’re in agreement, then?”

“You hardly need to ask. Handle him accordingly.”

Their opinions required no debate. Garland nodded once and ushered in the next batch of applicants.

This was but the first trial of many. Godfrey repeated much the same

performance at every other exam site.

“B-boy, are you quite all right? You look half dead!”

“Cease this farce at once. This is a serious exam!”

“Oof... Mr. Godfrey, enough. You may leave. You’re distracting the other applicants.”

Strictly speaking, it was *not* the same. Only Kimberly had allowed him to complete the practicals; at every other school, the administrator sent him packing halfway through.

Some were concerned, some annoyed, some incensed, but Godfrey was nothing if not persistent and did his level best at every site.

“Last one... Can’t say I didn’t see it coming.”

His eighteenth exam had taken him all the way to Daitsch. As he left the venue, he stood in the street outside, sighing dramatically.

There were other magic schools in the Union...but many exam dates overlapped. He’d taken as many as he physically could. His pilgrimage had ended without a single success—and left him dragging his heels back to the carpet stop.

“What do I tell my father? What happens if none of them take me? Do we work connections and find some village mage who’ll accept me as a student?”

Godfrey folded his arms, considering those questions. He’d heard of a few cases like his. There *were* schools that allowed in even poor performers, but his father had refused to consider that notion. They were beneath the minimum level the Godfreys’ reputation demanded. Three hundred years was hardly long by mage dynasty standards, which made them even more conscious of anything that could encourage contempt.

“But I can’t just...*not* be a mage. He would never allow a total failure... Though I’d happily live out my life working a field if I had to.”

Muttering to himself, he settled in at the edge of the carpet. The fatigue of his long journey catching up to him, he fell asleep as soon as the carpet wafted off across the sunset sky.

At the end of the carpet ride, he boarded a ship that took the waterways across the border. More boats and carpets awaited him—a journey far more grueling than his initial ride to Galatea. At last, he reached his home.

“I’m back, Father. All I can say is—”

He had nothing to be proud of. He came in the door despondent, but found his father’s eyes gleaming.

“Well done, Alvin!”

“Huh?”

Godfrey froze, unsure what this meant. His father was being positively effusive.

“For the first time, you’ve impressed me! I thought going for numbers stood a small chance of success, but I never imagined it would be *here*! How’d you pull it off? Did the stress of it allow you to pull off a miracle? Why did you never manage it before?!”

His father was slapping his shoulders, but Godfrey just looked perplexed. He’d rarely seen the man in this good a mood, and he had no clue what brought this on. He was afraid there’d been some terrible misunderstanding—and was already worried about how his father would take the bad news.

“I don’t care how you did it. Either way, this spring you’re a Kimberly student. Rejoice, Alvin! You’ve finally got a shot at contributing to our family name.”

Finally, the dots connected. There was a letter in his father’s hand, and he saw the official acceptance at the top of it. The first school he’d tested for and the first to send results—and thus, his father’s joy. Blissfully ignorant of how his son had actually performed.

Before Godfrey could recover, his father grew grim, looking him in the eye.

“But do not forget this—you are attending with the Godfrey name on your shoulders. You’ll be no match for the older students, but do not disgrace yourself before your peers. Apply yourself like your life depends on it, grasping anything you can. Not that Kimberly is a school you can survive, otherwise.”

The boy had yet to catch up with the facts, and already his father was making

harsher demands. All ideas he'd entertained on the carpet home went down the drain.

"If you cannot manage that, there is no need for you to return here alive. An inept son is one who never existed in the first place. I shall forget your name and face."

The father's fingers tightened on his son's shoulder. The look in the man's eyes was that of a parent clinging to their last hope. And that made it all too clear to the boy—it didn't *matter* if there were other paths in life. This man could not abide any further disappointments from his own flesh and blood.

"Let me be very clear, Alvin. You will become a proper mage at Kimberly. If you do not, then make sure you die there."

Every escape route crumbled beneath the weight of these words. All Godfrey could do was nod. This settled things—with no other choice, his path took him straight to the sorcerer's hell.

Godfrey retained few memories of the frenzied prep before admission. He knew his parents had tried to cram every bit of knowledge and technique into him that they could, but this time flew past without ever feeling real to him. The things that most stuck with him: the tears of the local children when he went to say good-bye and the worried look on the kind lady's face.

And then he found himself in that hellscape. Two mountains east of Galatea, at the end of the Flower Road—the institute of learning at the pinnacle of the world's sorcery. A towering building with walls all around it, as ominous as it was ostentatious. A spire rising skyward like an upheld sword. He'd heard it looked more like a fortress than a school—but that was not the impression Godfrey received. This was a bottomless abyss. He and every other student passing through those gates were tumbling in.

"Let me first ask—why are you here?"

The hall where the orientation was held. At the podium, a witch's voice, like a dagger. Jade eyes raking the crowd of fresh faces. A long dress that went from blue to black like plunging into the ocean's depths. Two athames crossed behind her hips. Alarmingly beautiful, but that beauty as extreme as the harshest winters at the edges of the world. It felt like her very presence lowered the temperature in the room and left the first-years shivering.

"Will you use your time here to make friends and become a better mage? Are you here to earn the cred 'Kimberly graduate' provides, fueling your future pursuit of sorcery?" she asked. "I hope that it is neither. Those notions are so dismally cavalier."

Nailing this point home without mercy, the witch slammed her hand on the lectern.

"*This* is where you earn results! If you cannot succeed at Kimberly, do not dare dream of a life beyond these walls!" she bellowed. "This is the optimal environment. The outside world is filled with compromises, but here there is very little that will block your research. There is no shortage of pioneering predecessors or competition to encourage your own advances. Learn, search, and succeed. If you perish along the way, so be it. This administration has always accounted for that possibility."

Everyone entering Kimberly knew this much in advance. Death, madness, disappearance—no matter the outcome, 20 percent of those here would be consumed by the spell. But this moment served as a harsh reminder: This was no exaggeration, but a fact, a future that awaited them all. They knew this to be true—each gesture this witch made told them so. Told them she would loathe that statistic's decline far more than she ever would its increase.

"Your life and death are in your own hands. That is the first motto I can provide. And know this, too. Accomplishing nothing, achieving nothing, merely surviving seven years here, in this school—there is no greater shame imaginable."

There was a weighty silence as all carved the laws of this hellscape into their minds.

"I'll leave you with that," she said, scanning the rows of faces. "If there are no questions, we will proceed to the banquet."

She waved a wand, and the hall began rearranging itself like the pieces of a puzzle. Chunks of floor became chairs, scooping up students; tables thrust out from the walls; and a dazzling buffet of piping hot food appeared from thin air.

"Whoa...!"

"Huh...?!"

The ceiling parted, and older students descended on brooms, filling the first-years' glasses with grape juice from on high. The scene turned to one of merriment, melting the hearts frozen by the witch's speech.

"Hmm."

As this change took place, Godfrey sat in a corner, arms folded, lost in thought.

"Isn't the headmistress terrifying? Hard to believe she only just assumed the position."

A friendly voice in his ear. Godfrey looked up and found a slim first-year with an engaging smile. The androgynous voice and face jogged his memory—he'd met this youth before, on the exam day. They'd helped him get that pregnant

lady to the hospital.

“You’re... So you passed, too?”

“I did! A pleasure to meet you again. We didn’t even get a chance to trade names, did we? Time we fixed that. I’m Carlos Whitrow. Not a fan of parties? You’re clearly not having fun.”

“...That’s not why. I’m Alvin Godfrey. I’m glad you came over to me, Mr. Whitrow—or...is it Ms.?”

“Just call me Carlos. I am *technically* male, but that’s neither here nor there. How about I call you Al?”

Carlos settled down on a chair next to him. Godfrey turned to face them.

“That’s fine, Carlos. It’s not that I hate parties—I just don’t know why I’m here. Honestly, my practicals were a disaster. I have no clue why they accepted me.”

“You don’t say? Well, you’re here now, so consider that a blessing. There’s plenty of time to make up for your shortcomings.”

Carlos was putting a positive spin on things. A gesture of kindness that helped Godfrey relax.

“True enough. Okay, let’s look forward to that.”

Realizing how hungry he was, he tackled the buffet, piling food onto his plate. He and Carlos sat together, eating—until his gaze was drawn to a group at a table nearby.

“Quite a crowd. Someone famous?”

“Oh, that would be Mr. Echevalria’s entourage. They’re a big-name family, and everyone wants to make an impression on their scion. People here care a lot about their futures.”

“Huh... You’re not going to join them? I could go with you.”



“Mm, that’s not quite my scene. I’ll introduce myself sooner or later, but not today. As if joining the herd would accomplish much.”

Carlos shrugged, then looked around and rose to their feet.

“I spy a few wallflowers. Shall we, Al?”

“...I see you’re a busybody.”

“And yet, you’re joining me. We’re birds of a feather!”

Godfrey couldn’t argue there. He stood up. He still had no clue what this place had in store for him, but at the very least, he’d met the right person.

After orientation, they were led to the dorms—and fortunately, Godfrey and Carlos turned out to be roommates. Allegedly, the school revised the room assignments after observing interactions at the banquet—a fact that made Godfrey grateful to Kimberly for the first time.

The next morning, he set foot in the school building and found it even larger than he’d imagined, yet somehow stiflingly claustrophobic. The marble floors were so cold that touching them made him shiver. Elaborate wall reliefs spoke to just how thick those walls were—and attempting to read the magical data encoded into them made him dizzy at the sheer volume. The very layout of the corridors was far from the orderly approach standard architecture employed; first-years unaccustomed to it frequently found themselves not only lost but also punch-drunk on the sheer complexity.

Older students gave them smiles in passing, as if to say *You don’t know the half of it*. Clearly mindful of their own early experiences.

The first-years picked their way to the classroom, but the room itself was no real departure from those of other schools. Students sitting at desks fanned out around a lectern, everyone waiting anxiously and expectantly for the lecture to begin. At last, the door opened. In came the witch from the exam site—an elderly lady, back straight as a rod.

“I am Frances Gilchrist, spellology instructor,” she began. “It galls me to teach anyone with those metal things hanging on their hips, but what I teach is exactly as it has always been. What is magic, what are spells, and how should a

mage handle each? You shall all emerge with a firm understanding of the true nature of these things.”

Few mages alive had lived as long as her, and even Godfrey knew full well the value of her direct tutelage. But the doubts in his mind overcame that impulse. His entrance exams had been catastrophic, and the witch before him likely knew why they had not worked against him.

Still, he did not plan to start with a personal question on day one. With his innate dedication, he listened to Gilchrist’s overview of the subject. The nature of spellcraft, a diatribe against the need for athames, the overall progression of their lessons. When she finished this speech, she moved to the next phase.

“That’s enough for the preamble. For the rest of this class, we’ll be focusing on stable output for the respective elements. Let me remind you—this is the most fundamental of fundamentals, and this is the one and only time we will ever deal with it in this class. Once you learn the approach, you are expected to practice it on your own time. Each class, we will learn something *new*. Those who fail to make it theirs will fall further and further behind.”

Her words were like a clap on their backs. Each student faced the crystal before them. Godfrey took a deep breath and raised his white wand.

“.....Okay.”

“Al, are you all right? You’re shaking like a leaf.”

Carlos was already concerned. Godfrey tried to shake off his fears. He opened his mouth to cast—

“Stop. Lower your hands, Mr. Godfrey.”

A voice from the lectern. He looked up, surprised.

“You are not yet ready for that,” the witch intoned. “Move to the next room, catch your breath, close your eyes, and focus on observing your internal mana circulation. As you do, slowly chant spells.”

He hadn’t even done anything, and already he was being assigned remedial work.

When he failed to move, she added, “Don’t worry about shifting elements—

stick to fire. I'll be the judge of your improvement and when you can return here. Any arguments?"

Her gaze shot through him. Godfrey clammed up and hung his head, fingers clenching around his wand. He was but a student and could not argue this.

"...No, ma'am..."

"Then get a move on. Remember, time you waste comes back to haunt you."

Godfrey glumly left the room. The other students whispered behind his back.

"...Sent out on his first day?"

"Legit? He didn't even do shit yet!"

"How'd he mess up already?"

"Apparently he did!"

"How'd he pass the exam, then?"

"I know, right? I mean, this is Kimberly!"

Carlos heard all that scorn. Unable to bear it, they raised their hand.

"Instructor, when I finish my task, may I join him?"

"Suit yourself. But do not offer advice. That's an order."

Carlos made quick work of their own assignment and slipped into the next room. They found Godfrey looking white as a sheet, struggling mightily, so out of breath his incantations were full of false starts. It was obvious his condition was only deteriorating.

"Aha," Carlos said, folding their arms. "Not every day you find a mage *that* awkward."

"Disappointed?" Godfrey asked with a sad smile, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Carlos shrugged, shaking their head. "I've never felt that way about a friend, and I have no intention of doing so. But if I may express an opinion—it's a mystery. I simply don't know how you got like this. I'm not being mean; it's just a question of the process."

“My father said the same thing. Although he *was* being mean.”

Godfrey chuckled. Carlos came over and patted his shoulders.

“Don’t beat yourself up, Al. It’s the first day! Panic won’t help. Trust our instructor and examine your own circulation. If she told you to focus on that, it’s likely the source of your issues.”

“Yeah, I know. Just...I’ve never been good at looking inside. ‘Feel the mana flowing through you’—but I never once have. Can you?”

“More or less, yes. I’m afraid I can say no more. She told me not to offer advice. Besides, everyone senses it differently. Ignoring that and having you copy what I do could make things worse.”

Carlos gave him a rueful smile, but Godfrey just nodded, raising his wand.

“Then this is my task to overcome. No time to whine; gotta give it all I got. You can go on back, Carlos.”

“Thanks, but I’m gonna watch awhile. Don’t worry; I finished my end already.”

“...Sorry.”

“For what? Stick to gratitude, here.”

Carlos did not let him apologize. Godfrey flashed them a smile and chanted an incantation.

In a school for mages, there were few classes that did not employ spells. Thus, Godfrey’s difficulties didn’t end with spellology.

“Darius Grenville, in charge of alchemy. Let me give the overview.”

The man at the lectern was still in his prime and spoke with arrogance. Overbearing in a very different way from Gilchrist’s dignity, he was certainly making his students stiffen up.

“If you, in your ignorance and incompetence, set yourselves on fire or take out your own eyes, I shall not even notice. I will care only when and if it interferes with class progress. I shall offer corrections to failure once and only once. Fail twice, and I shall eject you from the room on the spot. Do not forget that.”

With that bracing warning, Darius locked his eyes onto one face.

“You, however, are the exception, Mr. Godfrey.”

“...Meaning?” Godfrey frowned.

Darius pointed at the door.

“Get out, right now. There is not a single device in this room I am willing to let you handle in your condition. I’ll prepare notes on what we cover, so at least attempt to shore up your knowledge with them. When I deem you ready to join the class, I’ll let you know.”

A buzz ran through the room. The class had barely started, and once again Godfrey had been kicked out. He found this hard to accept. Well aware of all the eyes on him, he balled his hands into fists, attempting an argument.

“...I haven’t even touched my wand—”

“And letting you would be a waste of time. As is this exchange. Have you not already disappointed me enough?” Darius said, his tone utterly dismissive.

Carlos tried to get a word in, but Godfrey waved them off. He stood up and left the room without another word. Once the doors had closed behind him, Darius resumed class as if nothing had happened.

“Good. Let’s begin. Light your cauldrons. Your first brew will be—”

Likewise, Godfrey spent the first few days at Kimberly unable to participate in the bulk of his classes.

“...Rahhh!”

He put that frustration into a swing of his athame. The class was in rows, practicing their forms.

“It’s eating you up...,” Carlos said. “Not that I blame you. Most classes won’t even let you hold a wand!”

“Sword arts is the one exception. At least they work me hard enough to drive all other thoughts out of my mind.”

Even as he spoke, he was diligently repeating the motion.

Modern mages knew the advantages of a short blade at ranges too close to

chant a spell; thus, they carried a white wand for pure casting and an athame—a metal blade designed to channel magic—for fighting. Sword arts was the collective term for all close-quarters techniques, and a mage's skill with them was valued not just at Kimberly, but throughout the magical world.

At this point, the man who'd ordered these drills approached. Tall and making that white cape work for him—Luther Garland, the other instructor from the exam site.

"I can see the frustration in your swing. Struggling, Mr. Godfrey?"

"Instructor Garland... I hate to admit it, but yes." Godfrey stopped swinging and turned to face the man. "If I may ask—you were there for my practicals. What are your thoughts on how I came to be admitted here at all?"

"You're wondering if there was some mistake? There was not. I personally pushed for your admission, and I'll add that Instructor Gilchrist was your fiercest advocate. She was adamant we could not allow you to attend any other school."

That revelation came as quite a shock. He found it hard to connect to the witch who'd sent him out of the room on day one. As he struggled to reconcile the two, Garland looked him in the eye.

"Her teaching methods are strict. But there is always a reason for them. That's all I can share at this stage. I'm afraid that may prove small comfort."

"...No, it *is* encouraging."

Godfrey managed a nod—and a furious roar went up behind Garland. The sword arts master turned to see two students, blades locked, nigh grappling.

"Ah...that's gonna be a fight in a minute. Can't let it be," said Garland. "Hang in there, Mr. Godfrey. You may be in for a difficult time, but remember this—we're expecting great things in your future."

With that, Garland walked away. Chewing on those words—like a single drop of rain in a desert—Godfrey resumed his drills.

When classes ended for the day, Godfrey and Carlos had dinner in the hall meant for the lower forms, commonly known as the Fellowship. While frictions

among students were a routine part of life at Kimberly, there was an unwritten rule that mealtimes served as a buffer—and it was rare for anyone to outwardly sling blades or spells around. This was the one place outside their dorm rooms where anyone could relax.

“Mm, that’s good! This herring is grilled to perfection,” Carlos said, savoring their fish.

Godfrey nodded. “The quality of the food is one of the few things at Kimberly I thoroughly approve of. And you can have as much as you want, which I really need. I’ve always had a bottomless pit for a stomach no matter how active I am.”

True to his word, he was clearing one heaping plate after another. But as he ate, passing students were smirking and lobbing jeers over his shoulder.

“Yo, glutton!”

“Wasting more food? Show some respect!”

They were so blatant, his brow creased. Getting sent to another room in most classes had definitely earned him a reputation in his year—for the worse. Kimberly valued freedom and success, so anyone obviously inferior was a prime target for contempt.

But Carlos was never one to let a friend get treated that way. They put their fork down and glared at the speakers.

“He’s not taking it off *your* plates, is he? Let the man eat in peace.”

“Sure, sure.”

“Help yourself!”

The students shrugged and moved on. Carlos turned back to their friend, smiling warmly.

“Don’t pay them any attention, Al. You heard Instructor Garland. The school has great hopes for you. You’ve got his seal of approval, so feel free to eat with gusto.”

“I plan to. If they won’t let me touch my wand, the least they can do is let me pig out.”

Godfrey's fork hand sped up. Not exactly the effect Carlos had been hoping for, but they poured him a new cup of tea, lest he choke on his dinner.

"There you are, Mr. Godfrey. Other room."

Eight days since the start of term, and this was how Gilchrist greeted him. For the first time, he stayed put.

"What is it? You have your instructions."

"But not a reason for them."

Behind him, he heard Carlos gulp. Not about to let the witch's formidability discourage him, Godfrey voiced his burning question.

"I've heard you advocated for my admission. I assume your goal was not to make me the laughingstock of the school. Yet, you offer no guidance, merely banish me to another room. Is there truly a merit to this approach? Can I get a convincing reason for it?"

He was glaring right at her—and she held his gaze for a moment.

"...It took you five whole classes," Gilchrist said with a sigh. She stepped closer to her student, not breaking eye contact. "Let me make one thing clear, Mr. Godfrey. Do you believe this is a school where you will be taught the right answer?"

"...?"

Godfrey was unsure what she meant by this. His head spun.

"There are baby birds who cannot break their own shells," the witch added. "At hatcheries, these are largely left alone—there's a superstition that if human hands assist them, they will never grow up strong. But in actual fact, many of those chicks *could* thrive. Helping them hatch is simply not cost-effective; inability to break their shells does not correlate to defects in the chicks themselves." Then she said, "But let me remind you of this—this is Kimberly, and you are a mage."

Godfrey stopped breathing. Before his very eyes, Gilchrist issued a decree.

"We've allowed you to enter our halls with your shell still on. I'm the one who tapped that shell and took stock of the chick within. But if you are disinclined to

break that shell yourself, I have no intention of peeling it for you.”

“——!”

This hit him like a bolt of lightning. Yet, she was still not done.

“Let me answer my own question. We do not dole out answers—you find them yourselves. Wherever you fledglings are headed, the faculty here will merely provide *hints*. In light of that, your achievements are your own. And I’ll add—that attitude is the bare minimum expected of a mage. You first thought that doing what I said would get you somewhere, but then you rid yourself of that notion and stood up to me. That alone, I respect. Nonetheless, proceed to the next room. Use your own head and figure out what it is you must accomplish there.”

“...”

Without another word, Godfrey turned on his heel and left the room. The elderly witch allowed herself a sigh, then returned to the lectern.

“Such a handful... Textbooks, please. It’s high time we got underway.”

“That was way past strict. How’re you holding up, Al? Things getting you down?”

Carlos caught up with him after class, but Godfrey shook them off with a smile.

“No—that helped. She said what I needed to hear. Deep down, I’d convinced myself I had to do what my instructors said. I’ve been doing just that since my father started showing me the ropes.”

He’d done some self-reflection. That didn’t mean he’d worked through everything, but at the very least, he’d reached one conclusion.

“But one of those instructors told me to knock that off. Which means there’s no good reason for me to keep doing the same thing. I’m gonna start trying new things. Not just an attitude adjustment—I’m going to change up the very way I live.”

“You take things to heart and think them through. I do like that about you.”

Carlos smiled. Godfrey nodded emphatically, and at a fork in the hall, he

turned the other way.

“Alchemy’s up next, but I’m skipping. It’d be a waste of time to show myself, only to be ejected from the room. See you at sword arts, Carlos.”

“Point taken. I’ll be there, Al.”

They waved each other off. To Carlos’s eyes, Godfrey looked more motivated than ever.

Two classes later, it was time for sword arts. Today, Godfrey’s issues were not the source of strife.

Two first-years ordered to spar had their blades aimed at each other. The dark-skinned girl advanced, swinging—but the boy she faced backed off, using chantless spatial magic to generate electric shocks that struck her cheeks.

“...Heh-heh...”

“...”

Yet, he offered no follow-up. He clearly had no intention of engaging her properly; he was just causing her pain without any meaning to it. By the third repetition, she’d figured out his goal.

“...Gah—”

And in the blink of an eye, her roundhouse kick struck his thigh. The impact knocked him off his feet and racked him with pain. As the initial wave subsided, he worked out what had happened and began cursing at her.

“B-bitch! What the hell? Kicks are against the rules!”

“Are they? Sorry. I must’ve missed that.”

The dark-skinned girl was unfazed. The furious boy turned to Garland, but he merely offered lip service.

“...Ms. Ingwe, I won’t forbid you from using your family’s techniques, but this class is focused on the fundamentals. I’d appreciate you bearing that in mind.”

“Pardon the slip. I got distracted by the buzzing of a fly.”

Without a trace of guilt, she gave her opponent a scathing look. A quiet power that made the boy run off, teary-eyed.

Watching this all play out from the sidelines, Godfrey murmured, "...Let's go with her."

"Mm? Al?" Carlos blinked at him, but Godfrey was already moving.

He went straight up to the girl and stood before her.

"Ms. Ingwe, can we talk?"

"...What about?"

"My name is Alvin Godfrey. I'm interested in your techniques. Can I ask you to teach me?"

He got right to the point. It was his first time speaking to her, but he'd certainly known who she was. Lesedi Ingwe—her hawklike eyes and taut muscles drew the eye, but she was a lone wolf, associating with no one. And that dark skin meant her heritage came from another continent.

"What kind of a fool shares their cards that easy? Why even ask? You know full well this stuff is unorthodox."

"I'm done caring about proprieties. To me, your approach seems entirely pragmatic."

"...Hmph. I'll give you that, but you've got no eye for character. You saw that fight—that's who I am."

She jerked a thumb at the boy she'd kicked. Godfrey nodded.



“That’s why I picked you.”

“Mm?”

“He was nagging you with his spatial magic, yes? You got annoyed and kicked him for it. Clearly, he was in the wrong. Had he taken the fight seriously, you’d have stuck to the fundamentals.”

Godfrey was simply stating his observations. But this earned him a flicker of a smile.

“...Okay, consider me intrigued.”

He had her attention now. Lesedi turned to face him, athame in hand.

“I never intended to hide what I do. If you want to see my techniques, I’ll show ’em to you. But I won’t be walking you through it. Best I can do is kick you over—feel free to steal what you can.”

“All right. Exactly what I wanted.”

Grinning, Godfrey raised his own blade. He carefully watched for her first move, but an instant later, the sole of her shoe was in his face.

He certainly got the kicking he’d wanted. Carlos had to help him to a common room. The girl had kicked him so much he was unrecognizable.

“So many bruises! Are you sure we don’t need a doctor?”

“...No time to waste on healing. What use is there in caring what I look like? They’ll laugh at me no matter how clear my complexion is.”

Speaking through swollen lips, he leaned back in his seat. Carlos shook their head and aimed their wand at the bruises.

“...Hng...”

“They’re bothering *me*, so I’m attending to them. I rather like this forthright visage.”

Unable to turn down a friend’s generosity, Godfrey sat still and let them work.

“Al,” Carlos said. “They might be laughing now, but that won’t last long.”

“...Let’s hope not. Do you see a break in these clouds?”

“Just a hunch, I’m afraid. But since the moment we first met, I’ve found it hard to believe you’re *just* all thumbs.”

They finished healing and put their wand away. The expression on Godfrey’s face was dauntless once more, and Carlos looked pleased.

“You should never dismiss a mage’s hunches,” they said. “You’re going to surprise everyone. In the way they least expect. I can’t wait to find out how.”

“...Well, if *you* say so, I’ll take you at your word.”

“Do that. You won’t regret it!”

Carlos put a hand on their hip, smirking. Godfrey couldn’t help but smile back. His friend’s words proved a greater balm than any healing spell.

Once he stopped waiting for the teachers to help, Godfrey gradually began to turn his thoughts inward. First, he accepted the fact that he couldn’t do what everyone else could; then he stopped trying to force himself into the molds of those who could. He was now trying everything he could think of to find a mold that was right for him.

This involved a lot of trial and error, but not without thought.

He *did* have mana. There were multiple methods for measuring the mana within, but at rest, his was no worse than that of other mages his age. His issues arose when attempting to *do* anything with that mana—which focused his search for a solution.

Was he having trouble visualizing it? It was hardly unusual for mages to struggle with consistency when their mental images were half-baked. But generally speaking, unstable or not, it did take shape; in his case, the results were always far inferior to what he had in mind. This was the nut he couldn’t crack. The spell’s effects did not measure up to the mana he poured in—the energy equation didn’t balance.

Godfrey pondered this for a while. Where was the lost mana going?

No one else was siphoning it away. This was all happening inside his own body. If anyone was doing this, it was Godfrey—and if he could not perceive it, it must have been an unconscious action.

So he changed the question: *Where* was he putting that mana?

A few mornings later, Godfrey encountered a strange sight at the entrance to the school building.

“Coming through! Get in my way, and I’ll step on your ass!”

Vanessa Aldiss, the magical biology instructor, was leading a massive beast past the crowd of students. The chain in her hand linked to the collar of a massive boar—a phaea. She hooked it up to a mooring post awfully near the front door, then glared at the students nearby.

“For the fourth-year class. Gonna leave it parked here, but don’t bug it. It can blow you all to hell and back! If that’s what you want, knock yourselves out.”

With that, she stalked off into the building, white coat streaming in her wake. The beast left behind was over twenty feet tall, and the students gave it a wide berth, Godfrey and Carlos among them.

“She brought another big one...,” Carlos noted. “Glad that’s not for our class.”

“Putting first-years up against that would just be feeding it,” said Godfrey. “And the scary thing about Kimberly—we can’t say that won’t happen.”

Busy talking, both failed to notice a student behind them, drawing his wand with a malicious grin.

“...Extruditor.”

A spell, cast quietly. Carlos’s ears caught it, and their eyes went wide.

“Al, look out!”

“Hng?!”

Two hands shoved Godfrey aside. The spell aimed at him hit Carlos instead—and sent them flying forward.

“Carlos!”

“...Ngh...!”

Carlos rolled across the ground, hitting their back hard. When they looked up, they found an enraged phaea right in front of them. The student who’d cast the spell blanched.

“Sh-shit! That kid’s so light, they got sent packing...”

“Someone, help!”

“How?! *You* do something!”

The first-years were just pushing the problem on one another, no one taking a step forward. Meanwhile, the beast was inching toward Carlos, the fangs in its lower jaw gleaming.

“...Oh dear. I promise I won’t taste good...”

Carlos smiled, trying to show they weren’t hostile. This was lost on the phaea. Vanessa had controlled it with force—it had an agenda against humankind. Sensing the violent intent, Carlos drew their blade, hand shaking.

“...You’re not inclined to listen, then...?”

The moment they stood up, it would attack. Instead, they fended it off with their athame, but that meant they couldn’t scramble away. At best, they were buying time for a teacher to get there, but that seemed unlikely.

Then a boy stepped between them and the beast. Naturally, it was Godfrey.

“——?! Don’t, Al! Get out of here! I’ll figure something out—”

“Not happening!” Godfrey snapped. He raised his athame, glaring down the growling beast. “Keep your filthy snout off my friend, monster.”

As he spoke, he told himself this: *The situation is simple. Your friend’s in trouble. The threat to their life stands before you. No chance of a retreat or help from elsewhere; no option but to fight back. To make that happen, you need a spell.*

Is that not enough? What reason is there to hesitate? None.

Send it all forward. Logic, instinct, conscious or unconscious—right here, right now, obey my will!

“Flamma!”

“I appreciate your reasoning, but is it not a bit harsh?”

Elsewhere in the building, Garland was facing a witch far older than him. The meaning of his words was not lost on her.

“...Mr. Godfrey, you mean?”

“Yes. He’s working hard, and it’s a shame to see that not pay off. It hurts to look at.”

There was no use hiding how he felt. But Gilchrist never even looked at him.

“He’s been like this awhile,” she said. “The whole time he was learning at home, before he ever came here.”

“...I imagine, yes. His teacher blew it and compounded that over the years.”

“Likely a mistake at the very outset. The output of his first spell was unexpectedly powerful—and the mage teaching him assumed he lacked control. So they taught him to stifle it. Unaware that was the worst thing they could do.”

With her analysis clear, the witch turned to face Garland.

“You noticed yourself. That boy’s potential output is by far the greatest in his school year. It will only grow stronger—few on campus will be able to match him at all. And yet the bulk of that prodigious talent is being *wasted* on trying to restrain his own magic. How would any spell begin to function? The vast energy an incantation moves is being forced right back into him in equal measure. What emerges from his wand is merely the overflow from that titanic struggle.”

Garland nodded in agreement. He’d spotted the potential lurking beneath that problem at the exam site. That was why he’d pushed for the boy’s enrollment with Gilchrist. But he took issue with her approach to the solution.

“I could coax him through it,” she admitted. “That would resolve the immediate issue. It would be every bit as effective as you’re hoping. However—would that *truly* be his salvation?”

“...From all these years of strife?”

“Precisely. All this time with no success, being treated with contempt, being looked down upon, choking down his own frustrations. The bulk of his life has been like that. If my advice resolved the issue, that would be *my* doing, not *his*. Perhaps he’d be delighted! Perhaps he’d *feel* saved. But would that really mean anything?”

This rang true, and Garland dropped his protest.

“All that time, wasted on a futile pursuit. All that labor. Enough to make anyone clasp a hand to their eyes. He must reclaim that on his own. Know that he has saved himself, carved open his own path forward. Only then will he truly be—”

Before she could finish, a boom drowned her out. Garland flew out of the classroom and found the students in the hall abuzz.

“Wh-what was that noise?”

“An explosion? Where?”

Gilchrist snorted. She’d felt the mana wave on her skin and knew the cause.

“...He finally broke his shell. Such a slow learner.”

In an instant, a wave of heat turned the area around the school entrance ash gray.

“...Al...”

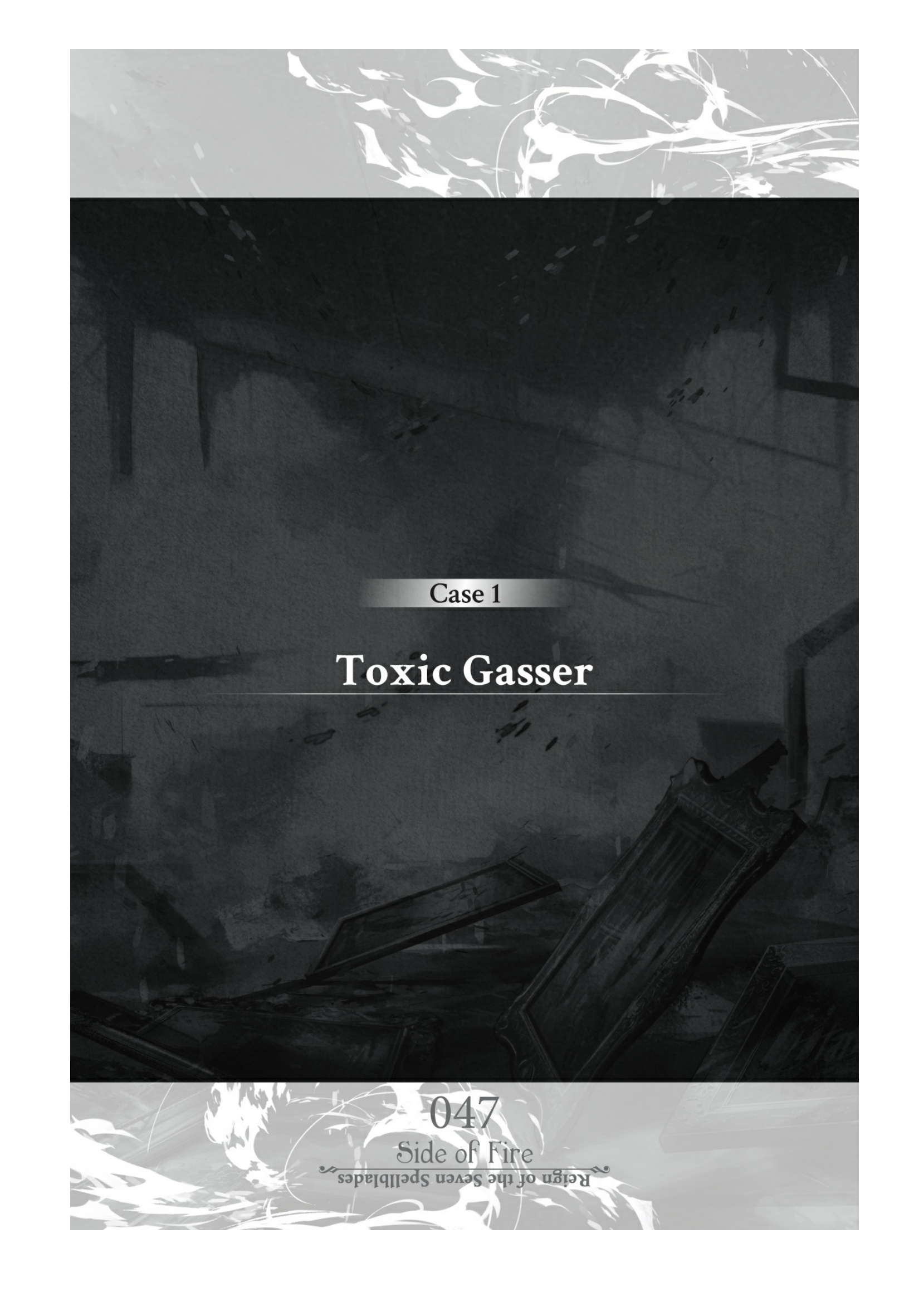
The bewildered students could only gape. Carlos’s jaw hung open. Their friend had protected them with a fire spell—and the flames it made had reduced the beast to a heap of cinders.

“...I guess I worked it out,” Godfrey muttered, not turning around.

The flames had been far out of his control and charred his arm to the elbow, but the look on his face suggested it all made sense now. The years of hardship and suffering were behind him; he’d made that power his own.

Godfrey chewed on this outcome for a few seconds, then turned to Carlos, athame still clutched in his burned hand. He flashed a smile.

“Worth trusting your friends, Carlos. You sure called this one.”



Case 1

Toxic Gasser

047

Side of Fire

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Case 1

Toxic Gasser

Mage endeavors always went hand in hand with death. Their learning institutes offered added facilities but did not alter that fundamental nature. Kimberly was arguably one such institute.

As a result, morals that held sway in the outside world had no place here. The effects of the civil rights movement were certainly felt, but the way the students here lived had not changed significantly since the school's founding. Namely, they followed their own spells, no matter what suffering that caused—to them or to those around. If they chose to fight, they fought. If they chose to steal, they stole. If they chose to kill, they killed. That core stance meant that all students here were forced to be *combatants*.

And thus, the only reason there were rules against duels in the school building was because they interfered with other students learning. If they chose a location where that concern did not apply, things had to get awfully noisy before the faculty would bother caring. The Kimberly campus was vast and dark. There was no shortage of suitable venues.

“Impetus!”

“Tonitrus!”

Once again, two wands were crossed in an out-of-the-way corridor. A furious exchange of spells from range; in time, one went down, and their athame rolled across the floor.

“Gah...”

The loser was left in a heap, groaning. The girl he'd been fighting approached with a twisted grin.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's all you got? You just ran your mouth off with nothing to back it?”

“Hurck...!”

Still riding a high, the girl kicked him hard in the stomach, eliciting a throttled grunt. Not a savage act she allowed herself due to lack of prying eyes—there were definitely students glancing sidelong at them in passing, albeit from a safe distance.

“Uh-oh, the loser’s getting beat.”

“Someone, stop her. He’s puking blood.”

“Let him. If they wanted to be stopped, they’d have arranged for a ref.”

One and all agreed it served him right. No one moved to intervene. Most duels had a ref to keep things from getting out of hand; if the combatants skipped that step, they had only themselves to blame. No mercy for the loser. In that sea of indifference, the girl raised her foot again, clearly not done tormenting her opponent.

“Enough!”

A cry against the tide of public opinion. The girl swung around, surprised, and found two stern-looking second-years. Alvin Godfrey—distinctive upturned brows, eyes that never wavered. Carlos Whitrow—slim, with an androgynous air. The girl appeared baffled by their sudden intrusion.

“Hah? What’s your problem? Stay out of my business,” she spat.

“You’ve already won. Duels are one thing, beatings another. This is just abuse.”

“He’s the one who started shit! Getting his ass beat after is just what he gets for insulting a mage! My family’s rep was on the line.”

“I appreciate the motivation. You’ve repaid the insult and proven your skill to those around you. Now is the time to demonstrate mercy. That is how strong fighters from houses of repute behave.”

Godfrey’s appeal followed mage logic. His attitude made it clear that if she would not listen, he stood ready to take her on. The girl studied his face for a moment, then sighed and lowered her blade.

“...Fine. I could handle a second duel, but I’m not in the mood to fight *you*.

Whatever! I'm bored now. Do what you like with him."

She turned on her heel and stalked away. When she was out of sight, Godfrey and Carlos ran to the boy.

"Are you still with us? I'd love to heal you myself, but I'm afraid I can't tell if there's internal injuries," said Carlos. "All I can do is provide anesthetics; we'll carry you to the infirmary."

"...Urk... Ah..."

The boy was in too much pain to answer. Godfrey had seen sights like this far too many times, and they always left him grinding his teeth.

Afterward, they took the boy to the school infirmary, where he did turn out to have some mildly ruptured organs—injuries that would prove fatal to an ordinary but weren't even taken seriously at Kimberly.

"...It's too much," Godfrey muttered from his chair in a lounge.

Carlos's silence showed they entirely agreed.

"I was warned before my arrival, but living here is far beyond—far *beneath* my expectations. It's rare to go a day without encountering a violent act. Will we reach the end of classes without blood drawn? Carlos, place your bet."

"I'm hardly going to wager on something *that* unsavory. But my healing skills have improved by leaps and bounds in a single year. I get firsthand experience each and every day."

Carlos sighed, eyes on their wand. The two of them had spent a year together, never far from the scent of blood.

"We've stuck our noses in everywhere, but I'm at my limit!" Godfrey slammed his fist on the table. "I can't leave it like this! Enough stopgap solutions. We've got to act to change things!"

He settled back, eyes on his friend.

"I *do* have an idea," he said. "Interested?"

"You know it. This will be lovely, I'm sure."

Carlos propped up their chin in their hands with an encouraging smile.

Godfrey laid out his idea.

“I want to form a neighborhood watch. Not just the two of us, but one roping in all like-minded students,” he began. “We’ll be maintaining order and banding together to deal with outside threats. Gradually expanding our turf until it covers the entire campus. The specifics are still hazy, but if we can attract decent numbers, it should help discourage the worst impulses.”

Godfrey was dead serious about this. Carlos folded their arms, considering the proposition.

“It’s certainly bold. I’m sure you’re aware it will be met with fierce opposition. It’s a direct challenge to the Kimberly spirit. Less a watch, more a resistance movement.”

“...Can’t disagree. I considered joining the student council and working to change things from within, but they’re too divorced from my ideals. Wouldn’t even let me join—and even if they did, I don’t see them listening. Best I start my own movement.”

“The only option, yes. They’re hardly going to pay us much attention while we’re small; that would be counting the scales on a wyvern before it’s slain. Best we focus on how to attract an initial membership. It’s not much of a watch with only two people in it.”

Carlos was narrowing the scope to their immediate concern, having counted themselves among the membership already, which earned them a grateful grin from Godfrey. *Without a friend like Carlos, Godfrey thought, I’d never have dared embark on this venture.*

“I’ve got a few leads, so I might as well talk to anyone and everyone. Is there anyone you think is promising? Including the new crop of first-years.”

“...Hmm...” Carlos had to think about that. Eventually, they said, “I do know one, but I suspect she’ll need a bit more time.”

Godfrey nodded, taking them at their word. He wasn’t one to argue with a friend’s judgment call.

“Then I’ll leave her to you. For now, I’m focusing on my own leads. Got my eye on one person in particular.”

With that, he stood up. Carlos had a hunch who he meant—and followed him out.

“A neighborhood watch? In your dreams.”

In a classroom where multiple auto-drums kept the rhythm, a female student skipped around to the beat. Lesedi Ingwe, a second-year student—and Godfrey’s first candidate for watch membership. Observing her lethally aggressive dance, he folded his arms, shot down already.

“Not even worth considering? Mind elaborating on your reasoning?”

“Do I have to? Even a child would understand. No one’ll care as long as the risks far outweigh the return. You want to use this watch to impose order on campus, but the status quo is so far gone you’ll be but a drop in the bucket. What can two second-years do against any real threat? And one more member won’t change that equation.”

Lesedi never once broke step. Her hands on the floor, upside down, legs windmilling. It was hard to take their eyes off her. She wasn’t dancing to the beat for the art of it—this was how martial artists from her continent trained. Godfrey knew little about the practice, but he could tell she was sharpening her fangs.

“I’m well aware. That’s why I want to start with the best. We can announce ourselves and take action after that... Assuming our membership will be our year and below, our starting lineup must know how to handle themselves. That’s why we came to you first, Lesedi.”

He wasn’t about to hide his reasoning, either. She flipped out of her handstand and broke off her training, breathing hard. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand and turned to face Godfrey.

“Not interested. You want to make this dream feel real, prove you can get results. You’re talking about numbers—and I get that. But that ain’t enough. You need something that resonates. Show you’re not all talk, but can bring about real change—that your actions will bring tangible benefits. *Convince* me. Even if the math don’t add up, mages *love* to follow their guts, logic be damned.”

Lesedi pointed right at his chest.

“You need to prove *you’re* a draw. You’re no longer a laughingstock, but now you’re just an overpowered oaf. Fix yourself, then try me. When you’ve got something to show for it, I’ll at least hear you out.”

With that, she grabbed her towel and left the room. Godfrey watched her go.

“...Lost that one,” Carlos said with a rueful grin. “Certainly some harsh truths.”

“I’d call it a fair warning. Not a single thing she said was out of line. I’ve gotta prove I’m a draw—that’s a hurdle anyone trying to lead has to overcome.”

And it forced him to reconsider. He turned to Carlos.

“Before we talk about how this watch will work, I need a win of my own. Bluntly speaking, I need a reputation. And ideally, I need to earn that in a way Kimberly students don’t. Show who I am, what kind of group I’d lead, and why people should flock to it.”

“A dry run, then,” Carlos said, nodding. “Take a problem the watch would solve, and fix it all on your own. These little scuffles we’ve tackled aren’t nothing, but ideally you’ll want a big bang. Kimberly students do rather love the dramatic.”

“That’s the long and short of it. We’ve got an approach in mind—now we’ve gotta go looking for trouble. We’ll pick something major that we think I can handle, and take our shot. Put on a show—and do it with integrity.”

“Problems on campus? They’re a bushel a belc.”

“Stick your nose in, and you’ll get burned. What can *you* do?”

“You’re gonna tackle an upperclassman on their turf in the labyrinth? Enjoy dying.”

Godfrey and Carlos were chasing their new goal but were met with a frosty reception. No one placed any stock in their ability to get things done, and they showed no interest in the watch he envisioned. More than anything, asking for help solving your problems was simply not what Kimberly students did.

“...No place for outsiders in anything involving family dealings. The labyrinth is a petri dish for trouble, but diving in to fix things is still a tall order for us.”

Godfrey had his arms folded, pondering this. The enchanted labyrinth was synonymous with Kimberly's name; the school building a lid on the sprawling dungeon beneath it. Down there, away from the eyes of the faculty—that was where the bulk of students did their work, and they'd have to tackle those issues in due time. But between the multitude of magifauna and the high odds of encounters with formidable older students, they could not even handle things on the upper layers.

"What we're looking for is in short supply," Carlos noted. "There are plenty of minor issues, but chasing those is like taking care of our chores. We'd be better off sticking to our previous approach and stepping in when duels go too far. We don't want people thinking we're the odd-jobs squad."

Carlos sighed. Godfrey, too, was acutely aware that their standings and skills did not let them tackle many issues. Sticking their heads in where they didn't belong would only lead to premature destruction.

But there *were* problems they could handle. Carefully plucking one of these from the pile their questioning had uncovered, Carlos said, "Although this *did* catch my interest. One of the new first-years is causing untold problems. Not just a lone wolf, but extremely aggressive—arguments tend to swiftly lead to lives on the line."

"Yeah, I heard. New students often want to prove themselves, so I assumed he was one of those..."

"Perhaps time *would* resolve it, but they say he's turning magical poisons into mist and spraying them everywhere. Lots of collateral damage, and the whole first-year contingent is on edge. If the neighborhood watch wants peace on campus, isn't this exactly the sort of problem we should handle?"

Godfrey mulled that over. Then he nodded.

"No one asked us to step in, but that does sound like a case for us. If the cause is a first-year, we won't be outclassed, but it's a big enough issue the whole year is aware of it. Can't expect it to resonate much with the older students—but better than doing nothing."

Godfrey made up his mind, sights set on his target.

“Swift decisions are one of your virtues.” Carlos smiled. “No time like the present. Let’s check in on the boy himself.”

They dashed off down the hall. The watch’s first endeavor: rehabilitating a problem child.

It happened to be lunchtime, so they soon found their target in the Fellowship. He was a small-statured first-year occupying a large corner table all by himself. Perhaps the other students were simply afraid to approach, but the way he was eating a roast chicken bare-handed was downright insolent. He punctuated each bite with hostile glares at his surroundings, which certainly sold the reputation they’d heard.

“...That him? I see. Everyone’s keeping a wide berth,” Godfrey noted.

“Quite a feat for a first-year at Kimberly. Looks like a tough nut to crack. Should I go first? I’m an old hand at taming prickly children,” said Carlos.

A kind offer, but Godfrey turned it down.

“No, this one should be me. No tricks, just the direct approach. We’ll want to be all about candor and sincerity.”

“The two words furthest from Kimberly. Then I’ll keep watch from here. Call me if you’re struggling.”

Godfrey nodded and stepped toward their target.

He’d never been much of a talker. All he could do was hear the boy out and then state his own goal in plain Yelglish.

“...Hate to interrupt your meal, but can you spare a minute?”

The moment he spoke, the boy’s glare stabbed through him. Seen up close, he wasn’t quite what Godfrey expected. Small body, thin limbs, glittering gold hair cut just above the shoulders, even features with a touch of childish innocence remaining—that alone would make anyone deem him an adorable boy. But as he turned, his hand slipped into the pocket of his robe, and the gleam in his eyes radiated abject hostility.

“...The fuck are you?”

“Alvin Godfrey, second-year. I’d like a word.”

He met the boy's gaze, not flinching from it. The boy started to his feet.

"...Looking for trouble? Let's step outside."

"No need to be hasty. I'm not here to fight. Just trying to open a line of communication. Won't hold you longer than the meal takes."

Talking the boy down, he took a seat. The boy frowned, but settled back into his chair.

"Communication, eh? The fuck we got to talk about? I ain't got shit to say to you."

"I won't dictate the subject. If you've got frustrations or gripes to get off your chest, I'll listen. That's what I'm here for."

"Ha, you're a weird one."

He snorted, but there was no rejection in his tone. Godfrey took that as permission.

"Glad you'll allow it. I haven't lunched yet, so I'll eat here."

He reached for the big plate, grabbed a charbroiled drumstick, and took a big bite.

The boy scowled. "You're just eating off that plate? Ain't you heard a word I just said?"

"? I'm not a picky eater. And the roast chicken here's great."



Godfrey was talking with his mouth full. The boy went quiet, and Godfrey reduced three pieces of chicken to bones far faster than this boy was doing. Then he reached for the salad, not bothering to plate it, just plowing through the contents like a horse. By this point, the boy was actively appalled.

“You got one hell of an appetite. Did you skip breakfast?”

“Nope, I’m always like this. Only just learned why—I’ve got a way bigger mana pool than most. Till we figured that out, people just called me the bottomless stomach or a dumpster. Since I’m free of that concern, food tastes all the better. Don’t worry; I won’t eat your share.”

He was already done with the salad and dragging a meat pie across the table. For a little while, the boy watched him eat, like a child observing a predator at the zoo.

“So, thoughts?” Godfrey asked when his stomach felt human again. “Like I said, any complaints?”

“Complaints?” the boy snapped, coming back to his senses. “Sure, I got some. Nothing but. This place is a dump, a heap of shit they done stewed. Diluted a bit compared to where I came from, but the essence ain’t changed.”

Already some reveals. Godfrey picked through those words for a moment.

“Not taking to Kimberly, then? I can sympathize. I’m largely of the same opinion.”

“Don’t butter me up. You ain’t different. You think I’m a target for your spells or a ball you can kick around. That much is obvious.”

“Is it?” Godfrey said, looking him right in the eye. Not even blinking—staring the boy down.

The boy must have read something in that look, because he muttered, “... Okay, you ain’t here to fight.”

For the first time, the tension left his shoulders. He’d had one hand in his pocket this whole time, but he withdrew that, saying, “Tim Linton. I get you ain’t hostile. So I’ll let you hear my name.”

“Appreciate the understanding, Mr. Linton. And I get that your attitude is your

way of taking stock of people. You're not throwing down with just anyone, are you?"

"...They start shit with me, and I'll throw down, one second flat. But I ain't exactly running a sale on beatdowns. I don't do shit if they just leave me alone. But do they ever?" Tim spat, eyes darting around the room.

This was a huge discrepancy from what Godfrey had heard prior to meeting him. The rumors had suggested he was the aggressor, but it seemed the boy believed he was merely defending himself.

And Godfrey could tell the boy did not welcome this state of affairs. He wasn't just acting that way for Godfrey's benefit—no reason to put on a show for a no-name second-year, and if he'd been a deft performer, he'd have avoided making waves in the first place.

He'd likely had a rough time on the way to this current mess. In light of that, Godfrey resumed his questioning.

"So it's not like you're unable to weather an insult. Sorry if I'm reading this wrong, but you don't seem interested in defending your family's honor."

"The Linton family? Ha, who gives a warg's ass? If they collapsed tonight, I'd drink to it. This place is a cesspool, but at least it's got edible food. Didn't get that back where I'm from."

Tim threw the last bite of sausage into his mouth, chewed, swallowed, and got up.

"Meal's over. Like you said, we're done communicating."

"Okay. Thank you, Mr. Linton. I'm glad we spoke."

Godfrey shot him a smile, and Tim pursed his lips.

"...You're coming back, huh? I ain't gonna stop you, but don't expect me to talk next time. If I ain't in the mood, I'll stonewall you."

"Fair enough. But I *will* keep coming."

He was firm on that point. Tim Linton snorted, turned on his heel, and stalked out of the Fellowship.

A moment later, Carlos sat down next to Godfrey.

“Nice work, Al. I had concerns, but you did pretty well. First impressions?”

“Not bad. He’s got his head screwed on far more than we thought. He’s bucking against the Kimberly scene—a fundamentally different stance from those who thrive on the violence here. In that sense, he oughtta fit in with us.”

His honest opinion and a happy accident. He’d expected to be rehabilitating a problem child, but inside, he’d sensed one of his own.

Still, that was no reason to be optimistic. There was still a gulf between them, and Godfrey accounted for that in his next move.

“Gonna take time for him to open up. He let a few things slip, and I think he gets I don’t mean him harm, but he’s still very guarded. Perhaps he’s simply never encountered anyone he could trust. Even that brief exchange made it clear he grew up in a very bad place.”

“Oh...like so many mages. My girl’s in the same state.” Carlos sighed, then shook off that concern, giving their friend a pleasant smile. “But it sounds like you’re the man for the job. Candor and sincerity, was it?”

“Precisely. I’ll keep running at him till it gets through.”

Carlos chuckled. A year had been long enough for them to know—when their friend made a promise, it came true.

Naturally, Carlos wasn’t about to let their earnest friend do all the work.

The evening after their first contact with Tim, Carlos split up with Godfrey after dinner, searching the halls for a girl they knew. Eventually, Carlos found her in a garden full of fountains.

“There you are, Lia. How’s this place treating you?”

The girl they’d been searching for was a first-year, sitting alone on a bench. She glared at him.

Pale, unblemished skin, purplish hair, amethyst eyes glittering at the center of her fragile, delicate features. Her uniform was worn to specification—to a degree past proper and into downright fastidious. Clear signs of concerted effort on her part to show as little skin as possible. Yet, in sharp contrast to that

intent, the air about her was inarguably *enticing*—even without the Perfume her body naturally produced, one that captivated the minds of the opposite sex indiscriminately.

Her name was Ophelia Salvadori. The features of her bloodline were well-known across the magical world—one *could* say she was the heiress to a storied dynasty.

“...It’s fine,” she said crossly. “No one’s tried anything funny. You don’t have to keep checking up on me.”

Ophelia’s gaze snapped to Carlos.

“What are you up to?” she asked. “I heard you and some oaf are running around breaking up fights.”

“Heh-heh, that we are. At first, I was just worried and stuck around to cover for him, but...he’s a very active soul. Before I knew it, it’s like we were lifelong partners. I’m sure you’ve heard the stories—you can’t tell me you aren’t curious.”

“The stories I’ve heard make him sound like a nitwit. This is hardly the place to defend the weak. I don’t see the point.”

She wasn’t mincing words, and Carlos found this hard to argue.

“Fair enough... If the stories aren’t convincing, why not meet him yourself? I imagine you’ll soon discover what manner of man he is.”

Ophelia snorted at this suggestion. But she also thought: *If I’m loath to face anyone from my own year, what harm can it do to goggle at a fantastical creature?*

Tim had expected Godfrey to visit again, but he soon discovered he’d underestimated the man.

“Sunning in the gardens? It’s a lovely day for it!”

With that, Godfrey settled down on the bench next to him. Tim had been reading a magazine, and he sighed dramatically.

A lovely day? It could be the worst weather in a decade, and this man would just concoct some other excuse.

Every other day. For a month now, Godfrey had maintained that pace like clockwork, regularly dropping in on him. Depending on his mood, Tim would play along or point-blank ignore him, and he'd learned the man would be satisfied with a few minutes of small talk, which gradually lowered Tim's guard.

"Even if that is true, I doubt you make a habit of it yourself. Shit, I should never have humored you. Now it's an open invitation."

"Don't be like that! I don't mind the occasional stroll here, and you can't tell me you have any real objections to our conversations."

As he smoothed the boy's feathers, Godfrey glanced around and spotted something unexpected among the neatly trimmed branches. A dome-shaped nest, from which emerged the tiny face of a magical creature—a pot weasel. This species planted their own seeds, shaping trees to meet their needs.

"Oh, a pot weasel. At this range, they usually hiss or flee... Have you been feeding it?"

"I just tossed a few scraps its way. Don't make eye contact. You'll spook it."

"Ah, my bad. You like animals?"

"Hell no. But cute shit? Kinda makes your troubles seem far away."

Tim meant this as an off-the-cuff remark, but Godfrey took it as a rare glimpse of his tastes. Nodding to himself, he turned his eyes to the magazine open on the boy's lap.

"What had you so absorbed?" he asked. "Mind if I peek at the cover? Oh, I've seen this on the stands. It's a big-name fashion magazine, right?"

"Sure. I usually just flip through, but this time they had a feature on Madam Pasquier's designs. Even have breakdowns on pieces created specifically for contests. This really does it for me—but I guess you wouldn't understand."

Tim shrugged, stopping himself there.

"I may not be a fashionista," Godfrey said, looking unusually annoyed, "but that doesn't mean I don't have eyes. I mean...this would look great on you."

He pointed at the page. An eye-catching dress that used hoops to give the skirts volume. Covered in lace and frills, it was worn by a petite girl who was

smiling with a parasol in hand.

“This shit’s for little girls!” Tim gaped. “That’s what you think of me?!”

“Mm? I don’t know that gender matters. I just thought you’ve got the looks to pull it off.”

“——!”

That caught Tim entirely by surprise and made him gasp. Objectively speaking, he was certainly good-looking—but given his usual behavior, no one had offered compliments to his face. This was possibly the first time that had *ever* happened. It was the last thing he’d expected, and he drew a total blank on how to respond.

There was a lengthy silence, and Tim started feeling like he needed to change the subject. Irritated at how implacable Godfrey’s profile was, Tim snapped the magazine closed.

“...Time you fess up. Which fight put you onto me? You want me to behave, yeah?”

“That’s a part of it, sure. But no one put me up to this in particular. My purpose is more self-serving than that—to be blunt, I want credit for reforming a problem child.”

“What for? That ain’t gonna do you a lick of good *here*.”

“I’m not so sure. Sometimes people’s needs don’t show on the surface. I think that’s doubly true in a place like Kimberly.”

Not catching his drift, Tim scowled. Godfrey looked him in the eye and spoke his mind.

“Talking to the students who got caught up in your fights, I can tell your magical poisons are far better than any normal first-year’s. They’re extremely powerful and take Herculean effort to detoxify. Yet...you’re making them airborne and scattering them willy-nilly.”

“Ha. And you want me to stop?”

“Not exactly. I’m more interested in you,” said Godfrey. “How are *you* unaffected? The way they describe your fights, you’re inhaling plenty of your

own poisons. Which makes me curious.”

He seemed to mean this, and Tim turned his gaze to the cup beside him on the bench. He took a vial from his pouch, added a single drop to the liquid already in the cup, drank half of it himself, then offered the remainder to Godfrey.

“...Give it a try. If you don’t mind sharing.”

“Hmm.”

“Scared? You should be. No rational man would drink this. Go ahead. Toss it out.”

Tim’s smile looked rather forced. He started to put the cup down, but Godfrey snagged it first.

“No, I think I will.”

“Huh?”

Before Tim’s jaw even dropped, Godfrey chugged the rest of the concoction. It was the last thing Tim had expected, and he froze completely. A few seconds of silence—then the cup slipped from Godfrey’s fingers, rolling across the stones at their feet.

“...Gah...!”

“...You actually fucking drank it?! How are you that dumb?!”

Godfrey was doubled over, clutching his chest. Tim stared down at him, stunned. He’d meant this as a warning, expecting the man to back off—but he’d just knocked it right on back.

“I think you know now,” Tim said, all warmth draining from his voice. “But yeah, that was poison. Toxic enough that a single drop can mess up even a mage. But it don’t work on me. I could take five times that dose and be hunky-dory. I’ve got *resistances*. Been dosed so often I *had* to build them up.”

This was the answer he’d been looking for, but Godfrey was past offering a response to it. It was all he could do to withstand the scorching pain in his belly.

“That ain’t a fatal dose,” Tim said, his voice awfully flat. “But it *will* make you

suffer. For hours till they manage to cure you.”

With that, he got up and walked away, leaving Godfrey there.

This wasn't what Tim had planned on, but it suited him just fine. It just moved his plans forward. Those with hostility, he paid back in kind. Those without, he simply pushed away. Didn't matter which Godfrey was—this ended things.

“Learned your lesson? Don't come see me again. If you do, then act like the others and try to shut me down. I'll show you what I can really do.”

Godfrey tried to call out after him, but his body couldn't take any more. He toppled over. Tim was conscious of a pang in his own heart. He swore under his breath, refusing to let himself turn back.

A moment later, as Godfrey passed out, a girl emerged from the shadows.

“...”

Ophelia Salvadori. Carlos had talked her into taking a peek—and what she'd witnessed defied her understanding.

She stood over Godfrey, sounding as confused as she was appalled.

“What am I supposed to make of *this*? He just voluntarily poisoned himself...”

Ophelia had witnessed the entire spectacle and could not be less sympathetic. He had to have known the cup was poisoned—drinking that was simply self-destructive. If someone threw themselves into a tornado and wound up blown away, what else was that but *stupid*?

“...Argh, honestly...”

She considered turning on her heel and leaving him there, but a tug of obligation stayed her feet.

“...Carlos is fond of him. They'd grumble if I did nothing.”

She sighed and drew her wand, sliding her other hand into her pocket. If standard medicine helped, good. If not, she'd just have to drag him to the infirmary.

When Godfrey's eyes opened, he found his friend smiling at him.

“_____”

“You’re up? That took ages,” Carlos said gently.

Godfrey sat up in bed, glancing around. It was their dorm room.

“...Huh...?”

“I carried you back myself. A kind soul provided an antidote, so by the time I got there, you’d stabilized. Be grateful to whomever it was.”

But after Carlos caught him up to speed, their smile faded.

“I can guess what happened: He slipped you some poison, right?” they asked.

“...Not quite. I...drank it intentionally.” Best to make that clear. When Carlos looked aghast, Godfrey added, “I asked how he can withstand his own poisons. By way of explanation, he drank half the cup, then offered me the rest. He didn’t force my hand—I could’ve easily refused it. This is all on me.”

“Rather rash, I have to admit.”

Defending the other party to the bitter end. Carlos shook their head and moved to the table, filling a cup from the teapot.

“I’ll only say this once: This is a good place to throw in the towel. You survived this time, but will that luck hold out? I know he’s not a bad kid deep down, but that doesn’t guarantee your safety. That is the nature of a mage.”

A gentle suggestion. And Godfrey appreciated it.

“Thanks, Carlos,” he said, eyes downcast. “You’ve always got my back.”

“You just noticed? I’ve been right here since before we took our exams.”

Carlos smiled, offering the teacup. Godfrey took it and felt the strong brew jolting his mind back into gear.

“But in this case, you need not worry,” he said. “I’m now completely certain he’ll be a good friend.”

His confidence came through loud and clear. Carlos shrugged as if they’d seen it coming.

“Once your mind’s made up, you’re steadfast. Fine, I’ll trust you on this one. What else are partners for?”

“I may need your help again. But...it will pay off.”

His mind made up, Godfrey tilted the cup, downing the rest in one go.

Evening, two days later. Tim was in the hall after his last class. His eyes were constantly searching the area, checking for any signs of Godfrey.

“...I finally drove him off? About time.”

There was a sigh in his voice. He was relieved the man had given up. Hostility, he met in kind. But the opposite? Tim really didn’t know how to handle that. This was not a skill he’d acquired growing up.

These thoughts in mind, he moved down the hall—and then stopped in his tracks.

“Oh, I can feel *that*... Nice to get a bit of legit hate after all this confusing shit.”

He could feel their gazes boring into his neck. Tim spun around.

“Come on out, chuckleheads. You’re after me, right?”

Five students appeared from the classrooms on either side of the hall. All first-years—and he recognized their faces. Each of them had wound up inhaling his poisons in previous scuffles.

“...We’re done letting you roam free in our class.”

“Take a knee and beg for mercy, Toxic Gasser. Or we’ll show you the true meaning of hell.”

Their athames came out, and Tim sneered, drawing his own. His free hand reached for the pouch at his hip.

“I’ve already seen what you got,” he said. “Or are you here to sample my new product?”

He baited them to start the fight. Their ultimatum rejected, they chanted a spell.

“““““Tonitrus!”””””

“Flamma!”

Five bolts shot at Tim, but he did nothing to stop them. From over his

shoulder, an inferno blocked the bolts, clashing in the air before him.

“...Huh?”

Tim reeled, eyes wide. A man’s wand extended over his shoulder.

“Well, isn’t this nasty? No ref, and five on one?”

Alvin Godfrey. His sudden arrival made the attackers step back.

“A second-year...”

“What was that fire?!”

“Hold your nerves! He burned his own arm,” one hissed.

The first-year was right—Godfrey still didn’t have fine control over his own spells, and the flames burned his arm and the sleeve of his shirt. This alone was a serious injury, but he kept his eyes on the attackers, showing no pain. The girl leading the group took a step forward.

“We picked our location. This doesn’t involve you—stay out of it.”

“Yeah! This is a first-year problem!”

“I’m sure you’ve heard the stories—you know what this asshole’s done!”

Once the others chimed in, Godfrey nodded at the accusations.

“I gather this rift runs deep. But I’m also getting to know this boy, and I don’t think the blame for this current friction lies entirely on Mr. Linton’s shoulders.”

He voiced his trust—and Tim’s face was a sight.

Is this guy brain-dead?! Did he already forget what I did to him?!

“Still, that doesn’t mean I’m ignoring the harm he brought you. What do you say we repair elsewhere and talk things over? With me moderating? Mr. Linton’s not actually *trying* to start fights. And I’d like to find a peaceful solution.”

“If you think there’s the slightest chance of that, you’re not worth talking to,” the leader spat.

After her stance was made clear, Godfrey mulled things over, then nodded.

“...Very well,” he said. “But we disperse for now. I have no intention of

fighting you, but I have zero issues kicking up a fuss until a teacher shows up. And I'm sure you don't want that."

"...You stick your head in other people's problems and then snitch?"

"Have you no concept of pride?"

"I abandoned that my first year," Godfrey replied, just grinning at the students' insults. "If you're curious, we could find out what happens. See just how sad it looks when a second-year begs for help when cornered by a pack of first-years."

The leader studied him for a moment, then put her blade away.

"...We're done here," she told her lackeys.

"Huh?"

"You mean that?"

"We'll be back. For now, we'll let him off with a warning."

She turned and stalked off down the hall, her pack on her heels. Her mind was on that clash of spells.

We all cast at full strength. Even if I account for the extra year, his output is downright abnormal.

"Best we don't fuck around and find out how strong he really is."

Her instincts rang a warning bell, and she beat a retreat. Godfrey watched until they'd rounded the corner, and then he lowered his wand, relieved.

"...Managed to send them packing. Glad their leader has a head on her shoulders."

"Hey!" Tim grabbed his collar, face contorted in fury.

Godfrey didn't bat an eye. "What's wrong, Mr. Linton? That's an intimidating gesture."

"I didn't ask for your help!"

He put his gripe into words—and Godfrey just grinned.

"I didn't *help*. I merely admonished everyone. If I hadn't stepped in, you'd

have given as good as you got, possibly wiped the floor with them. That'd be five more students in the infirmary. Six, if you needed help. That's an outcome I can support."

"That's any given day at Kimberly! What'll stopping it once do?"

"I think there's meaning in dealing with individual incidents, not the total sum. A different perspective, perhaps."

"Even if those pissant successes ruin your rep? You ain't gonna tell me you forgot how I dosed your ass."

"When did that happen? I seem to recall *choosing* to drink."

Godfrey looked genuinely confused. Tim let go of his collar, feeling dizzy. He staggered backward to the wall.

"...Ah, shit, I can't. I'm done."

Frustrated and lost, he glared at Godfrey.

"Lay it out there! What'll taming me do for you? You said you wanted the cred for getting a problem child in line, but what the hell're you gonna do with that? Running around like a dipshit helping people, as if you can change this cesspool?!"

"I'd like to make it a little nicer."

Godfrey didn't even hesitate. Tim froze completely, so Godfrey put his hand to his chin, elaborating.

"A bit lacking in specifics? The original idea was to form a neighborhood watch. A group meant to bring order to the halls and the labyrinth, handle the dangers therein. I'm looking for like-minded students. The reason I'm attempting to reform you is because I need to prove my leadership skills. Also..."

He gave his junior a long, hard look.

"...I'd like *you* to join us. You didn't take to Kimberly; you've spoken against the way things are here and taken action to contest it. Deep down, you think the way I do. I'd like your help changing this place. That's all I've got going on inside."

“Ch-change? This dump?!”

Several seconds of stunned silence, and when Tim recovered, he broke eye contact.

“Y-you gotta be kidding! That shit ain’t possible. No first-or second-year—”

“Oh, it’s possible. A few years from now, we’ll be in the upper forms. Time enough to increase our numbers, build a proper structure, and start having real influence. We take it one step at a time. It’s no fantasy. It might be a long road, but it’s no pipe dream.”

“That just proves you’ve got a screw loose! A cesspool will always be a cesspool! Sweeping it out ain’t gonna do squat! Places like this *don’t change!*”

The words he spat spoke to a deep-seated hopelessness. But Godfrey solemnly shook his head.

“Giving up on changing an unwanted environment means you’ve surrendered. And I’m not about to do that. I’d rather go down fighting than resign myself to misery. And I believe you feel the same way.”

Those eyes bored right through him. Tim couldn’t stand it. He spun on his heel and stalked off down the hall.

“...Nobody asked you to believe!”

“Tim!”

“Don’t follow me! I *will* gas your ass!”

One last threat, and he ran off. Godfrey stood right where he was, watching the boy’s back until he was out of sight.

“...Dammit, dammit! What’s his problem?! Poison oughtta be more discouraging! Instead he’s blabbing all kinds of bullshit...”

Tim was past caring where he was headed. Swearing under his breath over and over, his irritation was going nowhere. But the more he swore Godfrey was a fool, the more it proved he couldn’t *quite* dismiss him. A thought smoldered inside him.

“...Change? Change this place...? Can he? Can anyone? Is that even worth

hoping for?”

The very idea had never occurred to Tim, so he hadn't thought to ask if it was possible. He'd spent his entire life at the mercy of his surroundings. Enduring suffering and cruelty, unconsciously abandoning everything but the need to survive. The speed at which he resorted to violence was a side effect of that—yet even the struggle to stay alive had begun to eat at him.

Godfrey's approach upended that very premise. It was a bolt from the blue.

“...Then...can things change? Back then...could I have...?”

“What? Eat up, Tim. Don't leave a bite behind.”

“That's a poisonous bug's role. You killed him. You survived.”

A dark memory. Cold sweat beaded all over his body; he shook his head, driving it out.

“...No. No...that wasn't so easily done,” he muttered, his feet stopping.

At a loss, he turned his eyes to the ceiling.

“...What should I do? Brothers and Sisters...what say you?”

Evening. Six days since Godfrey last met Tim. Godfrey and Carlos were roaming the halls, looking for the boy they could not find.

“Well? Any luck?” Carlos asked.

“Nope, no sign of him. He's shown up in classes...so he must be avoiding me.”

They were trading updates in the hall. Godfrey crossed his arms, scowling.

“I thought it was time and told him everything...but perhaps it was too soon. Dammit, I never think hard enough.”

“...I'm less convinced. The fact that he's avoiding you proves just how deeply your words resonated with him. People don't avoid what they can ignore.”

Carlos offered another perspective, and Godfrey nodded.

“Let's hope,” he said, turning around. “But that just proves he needs us there. I'll make another round. If you find anything, send a familiar.”

“You know I will. Be careful, Al.”

With those words at his back, Godfrey was already running off. He had a nasty feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Meanwhile, the boy he sought was wandering unsteadily around the outskirts of the campus.

“...Can’t choke it down... Sheesh... Is this even dinner? Or is it animal feed?”

His face was a fright. Hanging from his arm was a basket of food he’d loaded up at the Fellowship. He always brought extra to feed the pot weasel, but he wasn’t up to eating anything...so it was all for the beast. Since his last talk with Godfrey, his mind had been going in circles, and he couldn’t muster an appetite.

He was headed for the pot weasel’s nest. But as he approached, he sensed something amiss—no signs of life.

“...? Yo, why ain’t you popping your head out? You usually spot me from here... Come out, or I’ll take it back— Oh.”

His voice died away. Several upperclassmen were there, but Tim never even noticed them. He only had eyes for the tortured remains of the animal on the ground at their feet.

“Mm? Hey, first-year. Mind cleaning this mess up?”

“It was like this when we got here. So gross and disgusting.”

“Dunno who did it, but if you’re gonna take out your issues on an animal, clean that shit up.”

They radiated contempt, and that at least told Tim they hadn’t done the deed. No Kimberly student would bother lying about something as trivial as animal torture. It would never even occur to them that they needed to feel bad about it.

However, he’d rather they *had* done it.

That would have given him a target. He could have unleashed his rage on them and ended things there.

“ ... ”

Tim knelt without a word and scooped up the five abandoned bodies. The

parents had been raising young; this was all three of their offspring. Oblivious to the blood on his uniform, he cradled them close and walked past the older kids.

“...What the...?”

“How dare you ignore us!”

“Was he feeling sick? Dude looked white as a sheet.”

Still holding the remains of the pot weasels, Tim walked the length of the building—and the skies opened up. Cold rain pelted down on their tiny bodies, but Tim was past caring.

“...Ha-ha...”

A hollow laugh. Thinking of the creatures that had provided some fleeting solace in this hellscape. Uselessly clutching them now that they’d been brutally trampled.

“...Why am I taking this so hard? I knew all along. That’s what this place is.”

And this was the natural outcome. Painting over all other emotions with a coat of self-derision, Tim let his laugh ring high.

“...Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...! That’s right—I knew it! Nothing changes! No matter where I am, everything stays the same...!”

Tears ran down his cheeks, mingling with the rain. After a long, long time, his laughter died away. A whisper fell from his lips, as if begging forgiveness.

“There you have it. Brothers, Sisters...haven’t I done enough?”

Approximately ten minutes later, still soaking wet from the rain, Tim staggered into the bustle of the lower forms’ dining hall—the Fellowship.

“Whoa, the Toxic Gasser’s here.”

“Make room, make room! Too risky to sit near him!”

Students who spotted him made a show of changing seats. But Tim never even noticed. He reached the center of the Fellowship and came to a standstill.

“...? What’s up with him? Why ain’t he moving?”

“Maybe he’s looking for someone. Does anyone actually talk to him, though?”

They were still offering scorn—when Tim tossed his pouch in the air.

“Fragor.”

A burst spell followed, pulverizing the pouch. All the magic potions he kept inside detonated, spreading a multicolored mist across the room.

“Huh?”

“...Uh?”

“No, wait...!”

Before they could recover, those touched by the mist went down, foaming at the mouth. A sight that made blood drain from everyone’s faces.

“H-he’s—”

“—gassing us all!”

Terror lent wings to their feet. As the panic spread, Tim pulled more vials from his pockets, tossing them wildly in all directions.

“Fragor... Fragor... Fragor.”

No emotion in his voice. The toxic mist rapidly filled the entire room.

“...Fragor... Fragor... Fragor, Fragor, Fragor...”

Once he ran out of poisons, he began casting willy-nilly, turning his athame every which way. No point taking aim. His rancor was directed at the school itself, at the very world around him.

“Let me make this clear. Only *one* of you will survive in this urn.”

The speaker was a wizened old man. He was in a windowless room, surrounded by frightened children—ingredients—taken from his extended family. Young Tim was among them. Aleister Linton was once a great alchemist, but his sanity had been on the decline, and these sacrifices were a part of his final rite.

“Craft your poisons. Brew them so that you will survive them but anyone else will not,” he intoned. “You will be paired at random; each pair will drink each other’s concoction. The survivor will eat the flesh of the deceased, inheriting their resistances. We shall repeat this until only one of you remains. That

survivor will be my masterpiece—resistant to anything and everything.”

As the children grasped what fate had in store for them, their faces fell. There was only madness here.

“You are but poisonous bugs, surviving on the flesh of your brothers and sisters. If you understand me, abandon your humanity and set about your brews. Emotions will do nothing but dull your venom’s bite.”

Tim kept casting, tears streaming from his eyes, screaming at the past lurking at the bottom of that urn. If it was possible to change things, he’d needed that knowledge *there*.

“Kuh!”

In lieu of his next incantation, he found blood on his breath. His knees buckled under him.

“...Ha-ha... There’s my limit...,” he whispered.

The athame fell from his numbed fingers.

The resistances acquired in that vile survival game were not without limits. Even Tim could not last long in the thick of a fog made from his own toxins.

He didn’t care. He’d brewed these poisons himself and knew he couldn’t survive them—nor did he want to. He’d done that far too many times already.

“...So be it. Do your worst!” he spat. “...Brothers, Sisters—did this help at all...?”

Speaking to the children he’d ingested, he let himself fall to the floor. Past moving so much as a finger. Hoping his heart would stop soon. No longer capable of bearing a life devoid of light.

“...I should never have been born. Not into a world like this...”

One student’s rampage had plunged the Fellowship into chaos. Godfrey came rushing in a beat too late.

“Al!”

“What happened, Carlos?!”

His friend had arrived ahead of him. Keeping a wide berth of the toxins, Carlos

filled him in.

“He gassed the room. All his poisons, right in the center of the Fellowship. I’m pretty sure he’s still in there. He was still casting spells not long ago...”

Carlos peered into the fog. Godfrey looked grim.

“...Carlos, call my name. Repeatedly.”

“Al?! You don’t— You’re going in there?!”

“I am. Otherwise, he’ll die.”

Godfrey took a step toward the fog, but Carlos grabbed his wrist, hard.

“...I’m not letting you. Even for you, this is suicide. There’s no way you’ll come back alive.”

“I’ll go straight to him, pick him up, and come right back out. If I minimize the breaths I take, I should last that long.”

“Based on *what*?! Conjecture? Delusional levels of optimism?! Don’t be rash! Do you want me to stand here and watch my friend die?!”

Carlos never raised their voice like this. Godfrey saw tears forming in his friend’s eyes, and he hung his head, balling his hands into fists.

“You’re absolutely right, Carlos. So...I’m sorry.”

With that, he shook off their hand and shoved them back. Carlos stared wide-eyed, and Godfrey plunged into the toxic gas.

“I’m going anyway.”

“Al—!”

Meanwhile, in the heart of that fog, Tim was in agony.

“...*Koff, koff...*! Shit, these resistances are screwing me over... Won’t let me... die easy...”

Face contorted in pain, he swore under his breath. He longed for death, but his body was fighting like hell to keep him alive. Prolonging his suffering. Like a curse upon him.

Perhaps it would be faster to grab his blade and run it through his chest. As he

entertained the notion, he heard footsteps coming closer.

“...Uhhh...?”

Baffled, he tried to focus his eyes. And saw a large male form looming out of the mist.

“There you are! On my shoulders, Tim.”

“...Huh...?”

Before the boy could process that, Godfrey picked him up. Tim’s first thought—the poison was making him see things. But the skin contact let him feel the man’s warmth, and that proved this was real. A chill ran down his spine.

“...What...are you doing...? Where...do you think you are?”

“Don’t talk; you’ll inhale more gas.”

With that, Godfrey started walking. Something bumped his leg, blocking his progress.

“...Hmm...? A table?”

He adjusted his course, moving again—and soon bumped into another table. This made his condition all too clear.

“...Dammit... You can’t even see?!” Tim’s face contorted. “J-just leave me here! Drop me and go! Before you—”

“Not happening,” Godfrey growled.

Tim slapped the man’s back—ineffectually, as the poison left him weak.

“Stop, stop...! You’re gonna die! In your condition—*koff*—you won’t last a minute! Even if we start detoxing you now, I dunno if we can s-save you! You know that yourself!”

“Maybe I do,” Godfrey said with a nod.

He was well aware of how stupid this was.

A solid 90 percent of his vision was shot to hell. His balance was way off, and it was hard to walk at all. The pain of his curdling skin was not as fatal as the nausea and wooziness—if he let himself relax for an instant, he’d black out. He

knew better than anyone that he was tumbling toward certain death.

His father would let out a howl of anguish. Here Godfrey was, attending a school far more prestigious than he deserved—and he'd chosen to waste that. Godfrey felt a pang of guilt. But he'd long since come to terms with the fact that he would never be the kind of mage that man wanted him to be.

“...Still—”

Still, Father. Your fool of a son knows this to be true. No human was ever meant to be anyone but themselves.

Deny my nature, hammer home the lamentations of my heart, pound out the cracks that causes, force a shape upon those remains—is that the spell you desire for me? As a father, as a mage, is that the future you ask of your son?

In that case, I cannot live up to it. I do not want to. I do not want anyone to end up like that.

I am here to become myself. And I will not betray that goal.

“—this is what I *want* to do.”

The smile on his face was positively radiant. The strength in his voice, the force residing in his soul—both echoed through the frozen valves of Tim's heart. A ray of light, piercing through the clouds of misery and despair. Not once in his life had he beheld a light like this, a warm, crimson glow like a fire burning in a hearth.

“Al! Over here, Al! Can you hear me? This way!”

Godfrey's bleary mind latched on to his friend's voice. His ears functioning just enough to track it. How grateful he was for it—as long as Carlos called his name, he knew where to go, no matter how many tables he bumped into.

With Tim on his back, he forged onward. In the right direction. To where his friend awaited.

“...At last...”

“Al...!”

Carlos let out a silent shriek at the sight of them. With no resistances, Godfrey

was in even worse condition than Tim. Wherever his skin wasn't covered with his uniform, it was melted clean off—he looked far worse than your average cadaver. Yet, he did not collapse, staying upright long enough to lower Tim to the floor.

“...Are you...still awake, Tim?” Godfrey asked, kneeling down.

Unable to find words, Tim answered with a look alone.

“...Ah... Good.”

That reassurance allowed him to let go of consciousness. Godfrey toppled over. Carlos moved to treat him, but someone else stepped in. Carlos looked up and found a first-year girl beside them.

“Lia?”

“...What's wrong with him?” Ophelia whispered.

Her eyes on the prone man. Less appalled at his foolish act than pitying a freak.

“...He's almost dead. First he drinks poison himself; now he plunges into a fog of it. Has he been pulling stunts like this since he enrolled?”

Carlos just nodded, which spoke more than any words. Emotions that she could not control rose inside Ophelia, and her voice grew ragged.

“...That's insane. He's not right in the head. What is the point of this, Carlos? What is worth this kind of pain...?!”

Her question was nearly a shriek. Carlos had grabbed some water from a table nearby and was rinsing the poison off Godfrey's skin.

“He'd do the same for you,” they murmured. “That's just who he is.”

“...!”

Ophelia found herself at a loss for words.

Panic still held sway in the hall around them, but the school physician came running, her roar echoing over the hubbub.

“Blimey, what a turnup! Whose work is this? There'll be hell to pay for dragging me out of my office, or my name's not Gisela Zonneveld! My cure will

make you wish you'd died! You'd best scream your heads off and hope that lightens my mood! Form a tormented choir, or there'll be no end to your suffering!"

The physician hauled the victims off like so much lumber, and the situation was resolved as quickly as it had begun. The bulk of the students had fled the gas cloud on their own; the crop who had gone down at the start had been swiftly evacuated by second-and third-year students accustomed to these calamities. Godfrey was an exception, having plunged into the most toxic sector of his own volition; his injuries were far more substantial than anyone else's.

Three days passed with the whole school abuzz over the incident and its fallout.

"I apologize. I mean that—I genuinely regret this."

In the infirmary, Godfrey was sitting in bed, his head bowed low. Conscious again but not fully healed, his body still bandaged like a mummy. One sight of Carlos's sullen face had convinced him the time for rest was done.

Despite Godfrey's apologies, Carlos refused to make eye contact.

"...I'm not convinced," they said. "When have you *ever* listened to a word I say?"

"That's not true. I value all the advice you give. I swear! Your words are always in my best interest. I would never dream of dismissing them."

"The facts suggest otherwise."

"And I apologize for that. But I just—I just *had* to save him. I couldn't let him die there, all alone. My feet moved of their own accord. No matter how foolish an act that was."

He could not deny those feelings. Carlos's eyes swam with tears.

"...I know full well that's who you are. I imagine I know that better than anyone else here."

"..."

"But...I need you to understand how *I* feel. How it broke my heart to see you plunge into that toxic fog. Imagine the look on my face if you hadn't returned,

and I'd been left behind. Please."

This plea made Godfrey close his eyes, his head still down. Taking this as a sign their words were sinking in, Carlos wiped their tears and mustered a smile.

"Enough sermonizing! I *am* glad you came back alive. You can see again, and it sounds like there's no other long-term effects. Be grateful Dr. Zonneveld knows her stuff."

"...I *am* grateful. Just... I'd rather not recall the healing process. To say the least, that was torture she merely called healing."

Godfrey shivered at the memory. Yanking his mind away from it, he found himself wondering about the boy he'd saved.

"...So how's Tim doing? There was no sign of him when I woke up."

"Knock, knock!"

A student burst into the infirmary. Godfrey and Carlos both looked up in shock and saw a frill-covered figure advancing directly toward them. A small-statured, adorable girl with a beaming smile.

"Sup, Godfrey, Whitrow! How's it going? Any blood in the phlegm or urine? With the volume you inhaled, no telling what'll go wrong. Spot anything amiss, and just say the word! I can't make antidotes myself, but I'll write it all down and let the doctor know! And if you need anyone to wipe you downstairs, I am here! Ask me for anything!"

The furious volley of words left them both blinking.

"W-wait. Hold on a second," Godfrey said, hands up. "Wh-who are you? I appreciate the visit, of course, but I've got no memory of ever meeting you."

"Huh? What're you on about? It's me."

The girl pointed at herself. The slight whiff of hostility beneath that light makeup finally clued both second-years in. This was a *boy* they knew.

".....You're *Tim*?!"

"Yep, yep! Who else would it be? Oh, right, the outfit tricking you?"

Godfrey and Carlos nodded, and Tim did a twirl, letting his skirts flare out.

“You know how I love cute things! If I made myself cute, I figured I’d be unstoppable! Since I was coming to see you, I went the extra mile—does this not do it for you? Would you rather I go for a formal look? Lay those thoughts on me! I’m up for anything that’ll make me cuter.”

Tim’s passion was a bit much for Godfrey. Carlos actually recovered first, nodding.

“...So you do drag? That certainly caught us off guard, but it’s hardly unusual in mage circles. And you *are* adorable! You’ve got a good eye.”

“Thanks a million! I shoulda known any friend of Godfrey’s would have impeccable taste!”

Tim held up a hand, and Carlos gamely gave him a high five. By this time, Godfrey had caught up, remembering the fashion magazine and his off-the-cuff remark. The outfit Tim had on bore a distinct resemblance to the one Godfrey had pointed to.

After this initial burst of enthusiasm, Tim’s shoulders drooped, and he shot Godfrey a somber look.

“So, uh. A bit late, but thanks a lot for what you did. I put you through the wringer, and I’m glad you pulled me out.”

He spoke his feelings in plain Yelglish. Godfrey had been prepared for the exact opposite; he looked taken aback. Tim did his best to explain.

“Honestly, I went there ready to die. But once I didn’t—I dunno, that impulse just up and vanished. I know I came in bouncing off the walls, but I’m just feeling super-duper good right now. I dunno how to put it—like the long dark night finally ended.”


That metaphor described the change within. Tim stared Godfrey right in the eye.

“You saved my life, Godfrey. So you get to decide what I do with it. I’ll follow your lead into any mire. I do that, and I know I’ll die with a smile.”

Godfrey gulped, and Tim put a hand to his chest, beaming. Then he turned bright red.

“So, uh...mind if I join that neighborhood watch thing?”

He looked up through his lashes. Godfrey and Carlos exchanged glances and grinned.



Case 2

The Lady

087

Side of Fire

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Case 2

The Lady

Kimberly largely let most student issues pass without comment, but there *were* limits. Tim's actions very much crossed that line.

Thus, Godfrey took him to the headmistress's office, prepared for the worst. He began with his version of what went down in the Fellowship.

"And there you have it. Mr. Linton's actions were certainly grave, but fortunately there were no fatalities, and he's made it clear he's turned a new leaf. Additionally, given the circumstances of his upbringing, I feel there's more we could have done as his elders. I believe it would be a mistake to process this incident solely as a failure on his part."

As Godfrey made his case, Tim sat bolt upright next to him. He'd avoided drag today, demonstrating his sincerity with the regulation uniform, worn to spec.

Across an imposing work desk, the high witch of Kimberly—Esmeralda—rose to her feet.

"...Hmm."

She approached the students, showing no signs of violence, yet this proximity alone was enough to leave both boys sweating profusely. They knew perfectly well that if she was so inclined, their lives would be but candles in the wind.

"Let me first dismiss one concern," the headmistress began. "Linton tossing poison around is itself a trifle. No different from the scraps that happen in the labyrinth on a daily basis. The lack of deaths is because the older students have learned from those same incidents and acted quickly. One of those lives is to your credit, Godfrey."

A mix of praise and cynicism. Esmeralda stopped right next to Tim.

"What I cannot overlook is the sole fact that this incident took place in the Fellowship. However minor or trivial an incident there, it counts as an attack on

Kimberly itself. We are generous with our students, but I have no generosity for my enemies. Is that clear, Linton?”

“...!”

This was tantamount to a death sentence, and Tim could no longer breathe. Unable to watch, Godfrey rose to argue.

“He is not your enemy. He joined me here today to demonstrate that fact. This was a mistake, not a mutiny.”

“It is not you who will decide that. Nor, may I add, is it *me*. We must consider the opinions of all students aware of the incident and how it will be viewed by those outside the campus walls. My duties here are not so light I can keep a dog that has already bitten my hand.”

With that, she turned, moving back to her desk. The pressure lessened slightly, and Godfrey tried to put his next argument together.

“Gladio.”

A spell—and Tim’s body dropped. Both he and Godfrey jumped and looked down. The legs of Tim’s chair had been cut nigh horizontally, making them shorter. Tim’s legs were still in front of the chair even though the slice had come from behind him.

“...!”

Shuddering, Godfrey snapped his gaze back to her. The headmistress stood before the desk, athame in hand. When had she drawn that? Neither boy had seen it happen.

“Give me your opinion, Godfrey. I am considering the penalty. My first thought is to reduce him to ashes and scatter them on the Flower Road, but like you say, that might just be a *tad* harsh for a first-year student. If you have an appropriate alternative, offer it now.”

She kept her back to them as she offered this ultimatum. Godfrey swallowed hard. And then he voiced the proposition he’d come in with.

“Even if this incident had led to fatalities, reverse engineering the spread of the poison suggests it would have been a maximum of thirty victims, give or

take. That's assuming not a single person in a set vicinity around him managed to flee."

"An appropriate calculation. What of it?"

"Let's double that number. Starting today, he will *save* sixty students. Tim Linton will shoulder that responsibility as a Kimberly student. A boy who once bit your hand will now act to protect your resources. Is there any better way of demonstrating the dignity of your office?"

A bold proposal, and it got her to turn around and glare at him. An icy stare that had broken many a will before. Yet, this second-year boy met it head-on, not even flinching. Esmeralda's eyes narrowed.

"You hold my gaze while spouting nonsense. I would not call that promising, Godfrey."

"I spoke no nonsense. This is what we will do."

"...Specifically?"

"We intend to reduce the deaths on campus and in the labyrinth. Whatever the actual figures are, we have an official average from the annual estimate, which should make increases or decreases trackable. Over the next three years, I promise a thirty percent reduction."

The headmistress's silence urged him to continue, so he did.

"The advantage is clear. Kimberly may be all about freedom and success, but the current state of affairs lacks order. Students who are still growing perish all too easily in accidents, or they injure themselves in ways that delay the progress of their research. Neither situation is desirable from your perspective. Naturally, we will endeavor to carry this out in a way that does not interfere with the students' self-governance or creativity. We have no intention of turning mages into puppets."

"Can you do this? You, a boy with no backing?"

Before querying the worth of the idea, she questioned its practicality. Godfrey had expected just that and did not hesitate.

"I'll run for student body president in my fourth year. And by that time, I'll

have the support to win.”

Tim looked at him, eyes wide.

The headmistress gave this some thought.

“...Very well. I’ll accept your terms for Tim Linton’s penalty. Have him gather manuscript testimonies from sixty mages he’s saved. Reward for success will be granted when Linton advances to his fourth year. No allowances made if the number falls short.”

“Thank you!” Godfrey’s voice leaped, and he grabbed Tim’s hand, pulling him out of the headmistress’s office.

In the silence after they left, a voice echoed from above.

“You’ve let them write a blank check. Are you that fond of him, Emmy?”

A dapper man in a dark-brown suit stood on the ceiling—the adjunct instructor, Theodore McFarlane. Not even glancing at him, the headmistress sat down at her desk, waving her wand so that several documents floated in the air before her.

“Letting them go will serve to cleanse this place. Like he implied, as powerful cliques form among the students, the campus does tend to stagnate. I was just considering giving the pot a good stir, though I hadn’t expected a second-year to propose it.”

“Aha. Dismantling the cliques and balancing the powers seems like a job the faculty could easily handle, though.”

“That robs it of all meaning. Student problems solved by student hands. No matter the age, Kimberly students require that foundational strength. That is the way of things.”

As she spoke, she used manuscript to sign the documents around her.

“You certainly place great expectations on his shoulders,” Theodore said, arching a brow. “Your gamble may not pay off, but I’ll keep an eye on things myself. Mettle like his is rare; a shame to see it nipped in the bud.”

“Suit yourself. He made his pitch here in the hopes of gaining that support. I would not place my hopes on any old fool. He is, at least, a resolute one.”

The interview had been enough to convince her of that. And Theodore entirely agreed.

“...Hahhh, hahhh...!”

“...Whew...”

Escaping the interview, Godfrey and Tim fled for the nearest lounge. There, the stress caught up with them, and they tumbled into the nearest chairs. Carlos came over with tea.

“You’re safe now, boys. What a relief to see you both alive and well. I was about to go kick the door down!”

Their relief was palpable; Carlos had spent the entire meeting hovering right outside the office. Pouring each a cup, they inquired as to the outcome.

“I assume this means you earned a respite. She accepted your terms?”

“...Yeah. Sixty students saved in three years. That is Tim’s official penalty. I also pitched her on my plans. I won’t count on her backing my play, but at the very least, she’s unlikely to interfere.”

“Still can’t believe you dared to go for two birds with one stone right under her nose. That aside, getting tacit approval of our actions is key. No matter what the other students say, we can argue with aplomb.”

Godfrey nodded. Wetting his whistle with the tea, Tim let out a long breath, then managed to speak at last.

“So who do we kill—? I mean, where do we start? I ain’t never tried to *help* anyone before, so...I’m drawing a blank here.”

“Don’t worry. We’ve got plans. But first, we need comrades. Tim puts us at three, but I’d like at least two more...”

“You’ve gone and stuck your hands in the shit again, huh?”

A new voice cut in. All three jumped and turned—to find a dark-skinned girl standing there. Lesedi Ingwe, the girl who’d taught Godfrey how to kick.

“See for yourself, Lesedi. We’ve just now gained ourselves a new member. Progress!”

Godfrey shot her a peerless grin, and she burst into laughter.

“...Heh-heh. You nearly got yourself killed, and you don’t regret a thing! You’re hard-core.”

“...Huh? Who does this bitch—?” Tim was gearing up for a fight, but Lesedi waved him down.

“The whole school’s talking about your stunt in the Fellowship. Do you know what they’re saying about you?”

“My mind was on other things. Care to fill me in?”

“The dumbest man alive risked his neck to save a mad dog. That’s the gist of it anyway. Some think it’s funny; others are openly contemptuous—but the one thing they all got in common? Their eyes are *all* on you. Even the upper forms are talking, people who throw down on a daily basis.”

This incident had made ripples far beyond Godfrey’s understanding. With her point made clear, Lesedi crossed her arms, looking grim.

“It got under my skin, too. I’d have preferred to put you outta sight, outta mind, but your dumb asses are making too much noise. If you’re gonna be a constant distraction anyway, I might as well pull up a chair in the box seats.”

She flashed a grin. Godfrey nodded, rose to his feet, and held out a hand.

“Welcome to the watch, Lesedi.”

“Huh? She’s joining? The hell?!”

“We actually asked her first, Tim,” said Carlos. “So glad you came around, Sedi. I cannot possibly keep these two in line on my own. I’m desperate for your help.”

Carlos was already pouring an extra cup for her. Lesedi accepted it, snorting.

“I ain’t here to act all chummy. But you can count on me in a scrap. I was looking for a good excuse to start kicking a few asses. If I tag along with you, I’ll get no shortage of that action, right?”

Godfrey winced but nodded. He glanced around at the group.

“That makes four of us. A good start, but a bit heavy on the front line. I’d like

someone good at healing and support, if only to ease the burden on Carlos. Any ideas...?”

“On it already. Leave this to me,” Carlos declared. All eyes turned to them. “I’ve been waiting for the right moment, and I think this is it. It *might* take me a bit of time to persuade her, but I promise, she’s got a heart of gold. Once she joins, we’ll have five—and be ready to go.”

“I’m not about to doubt your recommendation. When can we meet her, Carlos?”

No hesitation on Godfrey’s part—their fifth member was locked in before anyone even said a word to her.

Recruitment took two months, but eventually Godfrey’s enthusiasm wore her down.

“...Um, so...I’m Ophelia Salvadori. I’ve spoken to you all in the Fellowship, but...it’s nice to be here.”

They’d gathered in an empty classroom, and Ophelia made an anxious introduction.

“About time,” Lesedi said, flashing a grin and crossing her arms. “The constant crotch pain finally bore fruit! How you feeling about that, Godfrey?”

“...Moved beyond words...!”

Godfrey wiped his tears with a sleeve. Ophelia was born generating Perfume that stimulated the opposite sex. Recruiting her had required he find a way to fight that—and he’d chosen to cast a pain spell on his crotch each time he found himself aroused. He’d earned those tears.

Ophelia was clearly pretty nervous, but Tim made a beeline for her.

“Don’t you stand next to him, greenhorn! That spot belongs to *me*.”

“...What’s your problem?”

“I’m Tim Linton. Don’t say you ain’t heard of me! Everyone knows I’m Godfrey’s right hand. Don’t go acting like healing magic makes you all that. Right now, you barely qualify as his little toe!”



Tim was making this a competition, and Ophelia didn't know what to make of that—but Carlos just shrugged.

"I foresee issues with teamwork...but those'll iron out as we spend time together. I know you're all good children at heart."

"That they are. Don't let him get to you, Ophelia. Tim may have a foul mouth, but his heart's as pure as the driven snow. If you're in danger, he'll be there to save you. And before that happens, I'm sure we'll be in your debt more times than you can possibly imagine."

Godfrey was more than sure of that. He drew his athame.

"We are the Kimberly neighborhood watch. As of this moment, we're on duty. All members, blades forward!"

""""Acutus!""""

At their leader's call, all drew their athames and cast a sharpening spell, giving their blades an edge. That done, Godfrey turned his eyes toward the giant painting on the wall.

"Wait for us, warlocks of the depths! We'll be straightening you out soon!"

With that proclamation, he plunged into the painting. Into the hotbed of every problem in this hellscape—the massive labyrinth residing beneath the Kimberly campus.

Naturally, this was a trial by fire.

"Godfrey? Oh, I know you! The school's dumbest man! You ran into a poison cloud to save some kid and nearly died for it. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! / nearly died laughing!"

The labyrinth's first layer: the quiet, wandering path. A maze of shifting corridors and chambers large and small, it was packed with hidden rooms used as private workshops outside the school's purview. Naturally, far more problems sprouted here than up above.

The watch's first encounter: a pair of students, one male, one female. Informed of the watch's purpose, the girl busted a gut laughing, slapping her knee, clearly aware of their reputation. The watch was unsure how to take this,

and the girl stroked her chin, inspecting them.

“So you pack of clowns are tackling the labyrinth, hmm? Biff, wham, pow! I can dig it! Nothing like rushing in over your heads. Way better than cowering up on campus like the smart kids.”

She spoke enthusiastically but also drew her athame. This was such a natural gesture, they caught it a beat too late and hastily braced for combat. Clearly, in her mind, that was just an extension of their friendly chat.

“In which case, why don’t we throw down?!” she said, delighted. “You got a healer? You do? Cool, cool. Then I can fuck your faces up! But do make sure the hits don’t land on point, or the impact’ll make your brains pop.”

A few minutes of combat made it clear victory was not possible—and they ran for it, carrying the wounded. This alone had nearly ended Godfrey’s party.

“...Who the hell is that freak?!” Lesedi rasped, nursing a broken left arm.

“...Bloody Karlie. Fisticuffs champion of the third-years. We certainly landed a doozy our first time out...,” Carlos said. They’d heard enough stories to identify the girl.

Godfrey had a black eye and was carrying Tim on his shoulders.

“Tim’s not waking up. Didn’t even get a chance to use his poisons...”

“Godfrey and I hit her from both sides, and she batted us off, laughing the whole time! Sure as hell proved I ain’t ready.”

Lesedi kicked the wall. Only she and Godfrey had directly engaged Karlie—and were even more acutely aware of how futile that effort had been. Proof of just how horrific their seniors were and how powerless they’d be against them.

Conscious of how rattled they were, Ophelia finished healing the scrape on her side.

“Her companion was a curse wrangler,” she said, her voice calm. “We’re lucky he didn’t join the fray. My healing won’t help with a curse.”

“...True. And that suggests she was just toying with us,” Lesedi spat.

Godfrey straightened up, putting his head back in the game. “Exactly what we

expected, then. If we don't get folks like that in line, there'll never be order in the labyrinth. We may not be strong enough yet, but as we improve—!"

"You again?" a low voice growled.

They were all instantly in combat mode, glaring toward the speaker.

A male student emerged from the darkness of the corridor, dressed like a heretical priest. Godfrey and Carlos gulped. They'd crossed wands with this threat several times since their first year.

"...Rivermoore..."

"Looks like you've already suffered one defeat today. Hmm? Got some unusual meat with you, I see."

His eyes turned to Ophelia, narrowing. His grin widening, Cyrus Rivermoore drew his athame.

"I'm curious—I'll give her an appraisal. Congreganta."

"——! Everyone, on guard!"

At the warlock's spell, countless bones swirled through the air, swiftly constructing a bony beast. Godfrey handed Tim over to Carlos and drew his own athame.

"Flamma!"

Flames filled the corridor. Rivermoore shielded himself with his bones and snorted at his foe's smoking arm.

"Still lighting up your own arm? You never learn."

"Can't burn bones without the flesh. It's perfect for you."

Ignoring the pain, Godfrey went for a second spell. Lesedi matched him, sliding under the beast to kick the warlock himself. Rivermoore bent backward to dodge it, chuckling.

"The teamwork's starting to come together. Ingwe, you're joining this pack of fools?"

"Don't speak. I'm in a bad mood—I might just kick too hard!"

She spun into a heel kick that connected. He'd put his arm up to block it, and there was an audible snap as the bone gave way.

"Down an arm? Hmph."

The moment his arm stopped moving, Rivermoore cut it off at the elbow. Lesedi maintained her combo, but her foe grabbed her by the nape of her neck and squeezed.

"Kah...!"

"That was careless. I'm a necromancer. Easier to control a *dead* arm."

Lesedi was forced to back off, and Godfrey took her place. As he closed in before a spell could be cast, their cross guards locked.

"You oughtta value life more! Yours and others!" he spat at Rivermoore.

"Is that anything to say to a mage? And by engaging me at all, those words come right back at you."

The bone beast came at Godfrey from the side, but a wind-borne mist melted the lifeless bones away. Sensing mortal peril, Godfrey leaped back, eyes focusing on the boy on Carlos's back.

"...Watch your mouth, chucklehead..."

Tim was awake and grabbing another vial. Rivermoore snorted.

"The Toxic Gasser awakens? A little risky for my tastes—time I left."

His next spell made a smoke cloud, covering his retreat. As the sound of his footsteps died away, Godfrey looked relieved.

"...He's gone. Guh...!"

"Godfrey!"

The pain of his burned arm kicked in, and Ophelia looked horrified, moving in to heal him. But he only allowed her the minimum pain reduction before turning to face his comrades.

"Hard to fight again after Bloody Karlie. We just got started, but it's time we left. For today, we'll have to call this frustration our sole gain."

The others were forced to agree. They were in no shape to handle anyone else. All moved to get out of dodge.

“Oh, found ’em! I thought someone was down here.”

“——?!”

Yet another voice. They spun around, fearing the worst—but the short guy behind them had his hands up, not looking for a fight.

“At ease. I come in peace. You’re hurt? I’ll escort you to a safe place. Can’t really heal up properly *here*.”

“...And who might you be?” Godfrey asked, not ready to trust him.

The man flashed a smile, his oversized backpack rocking.

“Kevin Walker. Just your run-of-the-mill labyrinth enthusiast! But I will say this—I’m on *your* side.”

Kevin Walker, a fourth-year. Leader of the Labyrinth Gourmet Club. The watch certainly knew of his reputation and that he was always ready to look after his juniors.

Godfrey considered the offer and chose to accept it. Whatever his true intentions, right now they knew far too few upperclassmen. He believed making this man’s acquaintance would benefit them in the future.

“...Ha-ha, a neighborhood watch? That’s a tough cookie to crumble! Especially with only first-and second-years.”

He led them to a little room on the first layer. There, he set up a basic barrier and made a campfire. While Godfrey’s companions tended to their wounds, Godfrey filled the older man in on their purpose and earned himself a thoughtful scowl.

“If I’m being honest, you’re better off not trying. At your level, you’re not even ready to tackle the average scrap on this layer. That last guy was probably a second-year. You’re struggling with your own here. Anyone older will mop the floor with you.”

“...We’re painfully aware. But we can’t afford to stop. Our deal with the headmistress requires this penitence—and it’s a goal I’m not willing to back

away from.”

Godfrey heeded the warning and made his position clear. Walker considered this.

“I figured as much the moment I laid eyes on you. In which case, I’ll have to do something... But what? If I’m gonna get you to the level you need quick...”

Walker looked at each face in turn, thinking.

“You mean you’ll train us?” Godfrey asked, eyes widening. “Hands-on?”

“? Well, yeah. Can’t exactly let you get yourselves killed. And I love the labyrinth! Much better if no one winds up dying down here. I want everyone to enjoy their explorations! So if you can help cut down on the fighting, I’m all for that.”

Simple, off-the-cuff goodwill. Godfrey had to fight off the emotions swelling up. He rubbed his eyes.

“Uh—why are we crying? I touch a nerve?”

“...No... Just... It’s so unlike this place. The first trace of any warmth I’ve felt from any older student.”

“...You’ve had it rough, huh? I ain’t seen it, but I can imagine. You’ve also busted your butts—and that effort’s gonna seem like nothing compared to what you’re *gonna* do.”

With that, Walker faced the whole group.

“In my mind, older students oughtta have their juniors’ backs. I’ve got my own club to run, and it ain’t in my character to do what you do, so I can’t join the watch itself. But I *can* help. At least until you can survive this place yourselves.”

He grabbed the skewers from the fire and passed them around—charred flesh of some unidentified creature. Godfrey grimaced.

“With that settled,” Walker added, “you can’t do squat on an empty stomach! You into camp food? These are army hoppers from the second layer. Not too gamy, relatively noob-friendly. They’re fully cooked, so chow down!”

“...Th-thanks...”

“Yeah...”

Unable to refuse, they all accepted. His friends’ eyes on him, Godfrey took the first bite. Bitter, pungent, but also quite rich—very fitting for the labyrinth.

Once they’d eaten, they moved to an open area, where Walker began taking stock of their fighting skills. At his request, they showed off how they moved and cast. Once he had a grasp of it, he offered his evaluation.

“Mm-hmm. I see. Words didn’t tell me much, but you folks aren’t weak! You can move, you have the nerves, and most of you have a good gimmick going on. Use that last card right, and it can really hurt a stronger foe.”

They were relieved he saw some promise—except his next words hit right at their failings.

“But you’ve got lots to work on. Godfrey, your mana output is bonkers, but you can’t control it for shit. Never seen someone burn their own arm off. Have you always been like that?”

“No...I only learned to cast at all last year. Before that, chanting just made me sick.”

“Good lord. But it sounds like you’re on your way to fixing things, so fine. Just—if you’re operating on the assumption that each blast hurts you, you’re not geared for any lengthy spell exchanges. I’m guessing you can go maaaybe three shots.”

“...Yes,” Godfrey admitted. “If we don’t stop to heal. After that, I can’t even hold a wand.”

Walker thought for a second, then pulled a bottle from his backpack.

“What’s this?” Godfrey asked.

“Volfrog mucus. Resists fire and heat. I always coat myself in it before tackling hot environments. Try casting with it on.”

At Walker’s urging, Godfrey lathered the creamy contents onto his arm and chanted a spell. He didn’t quite believe it—but indeed, fire leaped from his wand, and yet his arm did not burn.

“...!”

“Kept you from burning, but the mucus turned white and cloudy. At the rate it’s degrading, it only buys you two more shots.”

“That’s a lot. Turning three shots into five can make a huge difference.”

“Yeah. But be warned—it’s useless for other elements. I take it all your spells are coming out the same way? This might help in the immediate, but you still gotta work on your control, and fast. I’m not the one to help you there, so I’ll find someone who is.”

He was even finding other mentors. Godfrey flashed an appreciative grin. Walker turned from him to Lesedi.

“Lesedi, you’re a rock-solid fighter they can rely on. I think you’re on the right track, but there’s one new thing I’d recommend.”

“Sir, yes, sir! What would that be?”

She’d snapped to attention, which made Walker laugh.

“Nothing *that* major. Just...whatever you do, bear in mind how that’ll get your *team* to victory. In other words, how you can help set things up so Godfrey’s spells hit home. I’m sure you’re aware his firepower is your clincher. If his aim is true, most upperclassmen can’t cancel that out easily. And you’ll wanna take advantage of that.”

“So don’t try to showboat. Just do what’s right for the team?”

“Not wrong, but a bit off the mark. Showboating is totally fine. I just want you to remember your teammates’ strengths and find paths that’ll lead you all to victory. Not figuring out how to kick a foe down yourself, but how to knock them off-balance so that Godfrey’s spells can finish them, for instance. That sort of thing will broaden your options.”

“...! Understood, sir!” She saluted.

“Linton,” Walker said, turning to Tim. “As far as clinchers go, you’re a strong match for Godfrey—but I think your main goal now is getting better at fighting without gassing your own side. Until you learn that, don’t worry much about hitting hard. Don’t even *try* to get lethal! That’s not a warning; that’s an order.”

“...Riiight...”

Tim pursed his lips, clearly disgruntled.

“I’m not saying spreading mist is all bad,” Walker added, wincing. “But there’s a time and place. First thing that comes to mind is buying time to cover a retreat. Alternatively—getting the drop on a foe and taking ’em out before the fight. In each case, there’s distance between your party and the enemy. Reduce the risk to your own side while taking advantage of the poisons’ strength. And one other suggestion—”

Walker raised his wand and chanted a spell. Several winged insects flew out of his backpack, circling him.

“—familiar-like familiars like these may help. Inject fluid in their bellies, and they can carry that, letting you deploy your toxins from a distance. Bugs aren’t the most flexible familiars, but that means they’ve got simple thought processes and don’t make unexpected movements—good for newbies. Unlike animals, they’re unlikely to fear their targets. Bluntly speaking, they’re your own little attack squad.”

He took some familiar eggs from his backpack. Tim hesitated.

Remembering how he’d fed the pot weasel, Godfrey chimed in.

“...Tim, if it’s too soon, there’s other approaches.”

“Nah, I use bugs in my brews all the time. Ain’t good to be picky.”

With that, he took the eggs, staring down at them.

“When the time comes, I’ll give my life just like you do. Can we call that a deal?”

A low hiss—and it alarmed both Godfrey and Walker, but they chose not to poke it now. Leaving Tim be for a moment, Walker turned to Carlos.

“Carlos, I don’t have much advice for you. You know the strengths and characters of your frontline fighters, and you’re backing them up well. You’re great at arcing your shots and switching elements, which helps a lot. Like Lesedi, I want you to keep an eye out for how to control the flow of combat and get Godfrey a chance to end things. I bet you prove adept at creating those

openings.”

"I'll certainly try. Leave them to me, Walker."

Carlos looked pleased to be on the right track. Walker nodded and turned to the last member of the party.

“And finally, Ophelia. I had you pegged as the healer, but you’re a solid fighter, too. Your output is second only to Godfrey’s. You seem a bit reluctant to engage, but I think you’re good to find more moments to attack yourself. Also...”

Walker broke off, giving her a piercing look.

“...I get the feeling you’re still hiding your true strength. Pure hunch on my part. Could be imagining it...”

“...!”

Ophelia looked tense, and Carlos stepped in front of her.

“Lia’s a gentle soul. We’ll work on her aggression, but let’s leave it at that.”

“Fair. All right, I’m done. Didn’t mean to make it weird. Sorry, Ophelia.”

“...Okay...”

She awkwardly shifted away, and Walker clapped his hands.

“Then let’s try a fight with that advice in mind. Make your goal to land a hit on me. If you manage that, you won’t lose to many in the lower forms, and upperclassmen’ll have to think twice. I’d call that the bare minimum you need to hit to operate down here. Ready?”

""""""Yes!""""""

The watch sprang into action. With all Walker had done for them, they had to make it count.

From that point on, they made frequent trips to the labyrinth, and Kevin Walker continued to oversee their training. His teachings focused more on survival than victory and extended beyond mere combat to understanding the terrain and how it changed, locating safe points to evacuate to, and learning how to hunt and cook edible creatures. His stated goal was “the confidence to

get back alive if you were tossed in here without a wand.” None of them doubted *he* could pull that off.

“Now, now, don’t hold back, Godfrey. If you don’t beat them quick, they’ll eat you.”

That call made Godfrey refocus. They were on a branch of the irminsul, a towering tree in the second layer. Several magical beasts were closing in. Walker quickly raised his blade.

“Those are oilmunks. Dry ‘em out, let ‘em sit for three days, and they become...an acquired taste. The oil in their humps is top quality, so try to beat them without harming that.”

Godfrey’s spell scorched the incoming creatures. He’d rather have advice on fighting than cooking. But from his perch above, Walker was simply smiling away, offering nothing else. That left Godfrey to follow his own instincts as the number of foes only increased.

“Here come some jumping scorpions. They don’t require any tricks—best to just deep-fry them! I swear, the crunch of their exoskeletons is addictive.”

Manabugs swarmed up the underside of the branch, surrounding Godfrey. He wasn’t handling them fast enough—and bird wyverns were gathering overhead, leaving him cornered.

“Oh dear. Looks like you’re gonna be their dinner! That begs the question—what recipe would bring out the true flavor of a Godfrey?”

“Hah!”

Godfrey’s eyes opened, and he sat up in bed—in his dorm room. Carlos was already up, their nose in a book.

“Morning, Al,” they said, eyes wide. “Quite a rough awakening. Bad dreams?”

“...I was just on the irminsul. Astounding how Walker manages to train us even in our sleep.”

He wiped the sweat from his brow. Carlos put the book down and began boiling water.

“We still have time, so make yourself presentable. Five sugars?”

“Yeah, I need that *extra* sweet,” Godfrey said with a nod.

Something in the room caught his eye.

“Uh, Carlos...”

“Mm-hmm?”

“Not to be alarmist, but...is that painting getting upset?”

Both examined the magic art hung on the wall. Like Godfrey said, the girl depicted in it was moving frantically back and forth within the frame.

“Yes, I’ve certainly seen her move before, but never in such a tizzy,” Carlos observed. “Wonder what’s bothering her.”

“Hard to tell what would upset a painting. The way the light falls on her, maybe? Doesn’t like the frame? Or are there bugs nibbling on the canvas?”

Godfrey moved closer, cocking his head.

“Not worth considering,” Carlos said, shrugging. “You know magic paintings love to pull tricks, Al. She might just be trying to confuse you. You’ve seen kids on campus sobbing next to the painting that steals textbooks.”

“...I have. Point taken.”

Nodding, Godfrey turned away. He took a seat, sipping the tea Carlos handed him. The whole time the girl in the painting appeared to be pleading with him.

“Okay, this is bugging me. I know I should ignore her, but...it’s not just her body language. She’s looking right at me!”

“True.” Carlos frowned. “We could drape a cloth over it. I hate to, but it’s hard to relax when she’s like this.”

Godfrey looked back at the painting, considering that idea.

“Hanging a sheet over her sounds worse. Let’s just do *this*.”

He took the painting off the wall and dramatically slid it under his bed. Out of sight, out of mind.

“Sorry,” he said, sighing. “I’ll hang it up again once she’s calmed down.”

“You might just be pissing her off,” Carlos noted. “Oh, it’s that time. Let’s

head out, Al.”

They left their room. Once they reached the school building, neither of them remembered the painting at all.

Their first period that day was sword arts. With Walker’s guidance, Godfrey’s performance here was changing rapidly.

“Huff! Huff! Huff! Hahhh!”

“Ah—whoa! Whoa! Augh!”

His opponent wasn’t up to the speed of his flurry and wound up bent over backward, a blade at his throat. The match settled, Godfrey stepped away.

“Thank you. Next!”

He was already moving on to his next partner. Garland was standing with Lesedi, watching, one hand on his hip.

“I can’t say he’s a skilled swordsman, but his physical strength makes up for his unrefined technique.”

“Yeah, he’s getting the hang of using his mana to supplement his motions. He’s still an overpowered oaf, but it’s not just spells now. Fun to watch, right?”

She implied Godfrey was starting to get a handle on his own strengths. Garland nodded, clearly of two minds about that.

“It’s my job to help refine his rougher moves...but from the looks of things, you’ve found a mentor elsewhere. I know why you need a quick path to strength, so I’ll hold my tongue for now.”

“Appreciated, Master. But...I could use your coaching, myself. I want a better handle on how Lanoff works.”

“So that you can *fight* Lanoff? How resolute!”

With the wind in their sails, Godfrey started making moves—and getting noticed.

At lunch that day, Ophelia was walking down the hall with a basket of food in her arms. As always, attracting looks from those around her.

“Uh-oh, clouds of it again.”

“Does she even try to contain it? How desperate can one girl be?”

“Distractingly sexy. Gotta chug a resistance potion...”

They made sure she could hear them. Made a show of drinking potions in front of her. She stifled her emotions, searching for a place less populated.

They’d found her old lunch spot, so these days she was using a terrace on the third floor. She settled down on a bench, relieved, and had just opened the basket when a cheery voice called her name.

“Hey, Ophelia! I’ve been looking for you. You eating here today?”

“Ah...G-Godfrey.”

Flustered, she slid to the side, making room for him. He sat down and took out his own lunch.

“Let me know when you find a new spot. Carlos not with you?”

“...They tried to follow, but I told them not to. They’re not my guardian, you know.”

“True, true. Independence is a fine thing. But don’t try to drive me off now—I went all out in sword arts class. If I don’t get something in my stomach here, I’ll never make it back to the Fellowship.”

A very Godfrey excuse. Ophelia giggled. Godfrey swallowed his first pie in nearly a single bite, glancing around.

“There are downsides to having our gathering spots always in flux. I’d like a base to operate from. That might not be an option up above, but we should figure something out in the labyrinth soonish. I’ve got no clue what makes a good location—do you?”

“Um...for a communal workshop? I think I can at least find a place that meets our minimum requirements. But the hard part of workshops comes once you secure a location. If we’re intent on making a new one, we first have to establish a zone exempt from the labyrinth’s terrain shifts.”

She’d stopped eating to think. Godfrey watched her for a moment, then took out his pocket watch and stood up.

“Whoops, look at the time. Wish I could chat longer, but I’ve gotta get to class. I’ll walk you to yours, Ophelia.”

“Oh, no...I’m fine on my own.”

“Please, we’re headed the same way. I insist you join me. It’s a great excuse to scope out how the winds are blowing for the first-years.”

Their meal done, they left the bench. In the halls, the pair drew many a look—but the vibe was noticeably different from when Ophelia was on her own.

“...Weird, an oaf and a succubus walking side by side.”

“From the Toxic Gasser to her? Dude loves the freaks.”

“...Does sound kinda fun, though.”

“Huh? What part of it?”

“Don’t tell me stupidity is contagious!”

There was a range of reactions. And Ophelia couldn’t quite suppress a smile.

“...Heh-heh...”

“? What’s up, Ophelia? Something scratching your funny bone?” Godfrey asked.

“...Yes, this whole time.”

They reached her classroom. Before Ophelia stepped in, Godfrey poked his head in the door.

“...Hmm, don’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

With that, he turned to go. Despite herself, Ophelia reached out for him.

“...Ah—”

“Later, Ophelia. Keep up the good work.”

He tossed an odd parting phrase over his shoulder. Wondering what it meant, Ophelia entered the room, and all eyes instantly turned to her.

“Oh, the lady arrives.”

“Okay, okay, clear a seat for her. Give her space.”

They made a show of clearing out. She was used to that treatment and didn't bat an eye—but today, things went differently. In her corner of the classroom, someone was lounging back in his seat, scowling at anyone who approached.

“Huh? What’re you staring at me for?”

Tim Linton, in drag. Baffled, Ophelia sat down a few seats away, but Tim quickly moved next to her.

“...Um?”

“Forgot my textbook. Lemme share yours,” he said, not even looking at her.

Perplexed, she looked at his bag. “You forgot...? Then what’s in that overstuffed bag?”

“Poison vials. Was trying a whole range of new concoctions. No room left for books!”

“If you intentionally don’t bring it, that doesn’t count as forgetting. Why are you even in class?”

“Don’t gimme that shit. I’m putting up with your whole fragrance thing, ain’t I?”

Tim pinched his nose, and Ophelia felt her brow twitch.

“...Fine, you can look at my book. If you join me outside after.”

“Oh? We throwing down? I’m in! You gunning to be his new right arm?”

“Nothing that uncouth. Just some simple training. Though I might be a bit harsh on you.”

Neither saw a reason not to. So after class, they did just that.

That evening, Godfrey, Carlos, and Lesedi had secured a table in the Fellowship. They were joined by Ophelia and Tim, each sporting identical bruises on their faces.

“Gosh, it’s so nice to see you two getting along.”

““How?!””

Ophelia’s and Tim’s objections overlapped. Godfrey nodded.

“You’re past the point of minding your manners. Tim, make sure you thank Ophelia. She loaned you her textbook, right?”

At this prompt, Tim’s eyes snapped to Ophelia. She was a bit taller than him, and he leaned in close.

“.....Thaaaaaanks.”

“You’re welcome. A curious way to express your gratitude—were you incorporating the squeal of a pig?”

“Ah, Lia’s found her sea legs,” Carlos purred, wincing a bit.

Once everyone was seated, Godfrey declared, “Our goal today is not just our usual patrol—we also want to scout potential workshop locations. We need a base to operate from. Thoughts?”

“Not gonna object, but why not just ask Walker?”

“That would be faster, but I don’t want to be reliant on him forever. Making experience our own requires a degree of trial and error. And...”

With that he paused, turning his smile at each in turn.

“...even if the result is a bit hinky, hideouts are something you want to make yourselves. You get me?”

Godfrey clearly expected an enthusiastic response, but instead Carlos, Lesedi, and Ophelia just looked at one another.

“...I don’t get it, Al.”

“Same.”

“I’m lost...”

Godfrey hung his head, and Tim slipped closer to him.

“Don’t let ’em bring you down! I get the appeal entirely!”

“...Thank you, Tim,” Godfrey managed.

Carlos couldn’t help but smile. “Still, I see why we *should* do it ourselves. Far be it from me to argue. I’ll come with you, Al.”

Lesedi and Ophelia nodded. Godfrey recovered and began to discuss specifics.

After dinner, they dove into the labyrinth, moving carefully—per Walker’s advice—as they searched for a potential workshop location. This proved more difficult than anticipated.

“...Mm, I thought we’d find a *candidate* easily enough, but clearly, I underestimated the challenges,” Godfrey mused.

“Sorry...it’s not just what the workshop itself needs,” Ophelia told him. “We also have to consider access to the school building. There are sites that are lacking one or two of our needs, but if we have to meet all of them...”

A three-hour search had proved fruitless. Ophelia had volunteered to examine the sites, so she was feeling pretty despondent.

“You’re rejecting these sites for our own good,” Godfrey said, smiling. “Thank you, Ophelia. I’m glad you’ve joined the watch.”

Those words struck home, and the mixture of joy and embarrassment meant she couldn’t even look at him. Tim was dancing in place behind her.

“Gahhh...! Enemies! Where are the enemies?! Give me work and Godfrey’s smile! A head pat for a job well done!”

“We’re not here to *start* things, Tim,” Carlos said, soothing the boy. “We will need you in time, so settle down.”

Meanwhile, Ophelia was examining the terrain before them.

“This is close, but positionally, it’ll have too much influence from the terrain shifts. We could make it work with major construction, using classical golem techniques... No, that’s just not practical.”

She muttered for another minute, then shook her head, and the group left to find another site.

“My, my, another shopper?”

Startled, all turned, hands grabbing hilts. The speaker found five blades pointed at her and put her hands up.

“Let’s not be hasty! As you can see, I’m running solo. And I’m a helpless little first-year. I’m not about to take on all five of you, am I?”

She pointed to her red tie. This girl had long front bangs that hid one of her eyes. Certain she was alone, Lesedi put her blade away.

“That much is true, at least,” she said. “So why speak to us at all? You know there’s little to be gained by making enemies here.”

“I made my call *because* I know your faces. With the infamous Godfrey here, I figured you wouldn’t attack on sight. After all, you’re the oddballs so odd that you go around *helping* people at Kimberly.”

She wasn’t mincing words, and Godfrey’s frown deepened.

“So that’s my current rep? I’m not pleased by the emphasis on *odd*, but I suppose I should be glad people at least know me.

“To make it formal—Alvin Godfrey, second-year. You are?”

Giving his name prompted her to return the favor. She bowed theatrically.

“Vera Miligan. I’m nobody yet, but I should say I back the civil rights movement and deplore the current treatment of demi-humans. Which I hope will help us get along.”

Her candor was enough to make Carlos lower their blade.

“Making that claim *here* is certainly bold. I’m Carlos Whitrow, and this is Lesedi Ingwe. I imagine our first-years need no introduction.”

“I appreciate the courtesy! I’m willing to bet that everyone in our year is all too aware of those two. They may not know me, but I hope this encounter changes that.”

Miligan held out a hand. Friendly, yet hard to trust. Ophelia and Tim warily shook her hand, and Miligan looked around the group once more.

“I feel this is not a lineup where playing cards close to my chest will help, so allow me to get to the point. Are you looking for a site to build a workshop?”

“Mm, is it that obvious?”

“If you stop here and call it ‘close,’ then yes. I reached much the same conclusion myself the other day. I swung back to make one last check and saw you here—I knew right away.”

Lesedi’s eyes narrowed. That made both their stances clear.



“So you’re also searching for a site, and you want to discuss something relevant?”

“Precisely. Let me clarify one point—I’ve already found solid candidates. Three of them, in fact. I’d love to break ground now, but on my own, that would be quite a challenge. There’s some significant work involved. I need more hands—and without someone to watch your back, work here is hardly efficient.”

Miligan put a hand to her hip, sighing. Then she beamed at them.

“So my proposition—of the three candidates, I’ll cede the best one to you. We’ll make it a shared workshop, and you’ll allow me to use it as a base of operations myself. Naturally, I’ll help with the work. This location doesn’t require *major* construction, but it’s still quite a long way to completion.”

An unexpected offer. They exchanged glances, considering it carefully.

“...We’re certainly interested,” Godfrey said. “But we do have questions.”

“Ask away!”

“First—this deal means we’re all in the same workshop. We’ll know what the other is working on. What we make of that is one thing, but are you sure you don’t mind?”

“I don’t, no. Sharing is actually preferable. Even if I did manage to complete construction, I’m not at all certain I could maintain it on my own. I doubt there are many upperclassmen who’d bother stealing a workshop from a junior, but I could absolutely see myself targeted by students in my year or the one above. Should that happen, I’d rather have it defended.”

She rattled off her reasoning, and it all seemed to add up. Lesedi was starting to get on board.

“Also, right now, I’m not doing any research worth hiding. Mostly just going for quantity of dissections, which means I need a place where I can store the samples. That does mean I’ll need you to guarantee me that space within this shared workshop—I will have to insist on that.”

Now Miligan was actively pressing her luck, and when she saw them still considering this, she added one more thing.

“Meanwhile, consider your side. I hate to speculate out of turn, but you’re less in need of a research location than you are a base of operations, yes? In which case, you don’t have to worry about what I see. I believe this proposition will be mutually beneficial.”

But that also made Lesedi wary. “...You’re on the money. I suppose we’ve made no secret about our intentions.”

“Wait, stop piling on,” Ophelia said. “We’d be sharing a base—what matters most is whether we can trust you. How can you guarantee that?”

“That, I’m afraid, I have no way of proving offhand. We’ll have to hope our future interactions earn that. But in matters of trust, I’m the one shouldering the bulk of the risk. It is five against one. If you turn on me, I won’t last long.”

That was a disadvantage. Ophelia clammed up. She would’ve liked to say something clever to maintain an advantage, but she had spent her life avoiding company, and Miligan had an edge when it came to a battle of wits.

With both sides out of new cards to put down, Godfrey spoke again.

“We understand your suggestion. If I may make a counteroffer...”

“If you want me to join your watch, I’m afraid that’s a no-go, Godfrey. I sympathize with your cause and would love to help, but I’m focused on improving myself right now. I simply don’t have the time to run around helping others.”

Shot down already, Godfrey winced—and Miligan smiled.

“That said, when I’m free, I wouldn’t mind offering assistance. At the very least, I can help spread positive impressions of your actions. We’d be sharing a workshop—I could be considered an ancillary member, perhaps. Would that be enough?”

“More than enough,” Godfrey said, accepting her concession. “We’ll take this offer. We’ll discuss the particulars on the way to your location.”

“Are you sure?” Ophelia asked, clearly still suspicious.

“Her pitch is clear and consistent, and it benefits us both,” Godfrey replied. “I’m not sure what more she could do to earn our trust right now. And I like her

spirit—spying the opportunity and stepping up to negotiate are qualities we can use, even in an ancillary member.”

Miligan clearly agreed with this appraisal.

“Kind words indeed! That settles things. Follow me—and do promise you won’t zap me once we get there, yes?”

With that, she turned on her heel and walked away. Godfrey patted Ophelia on the back.

“Come on, Ophelia. It’ll be fine—this works for us.”

“...I hope so. But this girl seems like bad news.”

She was clearly not convinced—and in time, she’d learn her instincts were right.

Once they had a location, things moved smoothly. The labyrinth’s terrain shifted all the time, so it was not too difficult for a mage to create a workshop here. And Miligan had blueprints ready, so the construction phase lasted only a week.

“...Okay, it’s done! Feast your eyes!” Godfrey cried, standing in the main chamber.

Crystal lamps illuminated the space. It had an alchemy area with sinks, and a break area with a table and enough chairs for all. The large open area was meant for spell and sword practice. Three doors led out, one to a bathroom, two to smaller rooms—one of which was Miligan’s sample storehouse.

Godfrey looked quite pleased.

“Amateur construction, so there’s some rough edges, but not bad work at all. Heh-heh-heh... Now we can rest and resupply without heading up to campus. So much more we can get done!”

“A dream come true, Al?” Carlos smiled. “I’ll admit, I’m tickled pink myself. Now I can provide hot meals for our busy bees!”

Inspecting the ventilation, Tim nodded. “Got the extra airflow I wanted. All good. Wasn’t sure about leaving all the design to you, but you sure delivered on the blueprint.”

“My, my, high praise indeed!” Miligan chirped. “Ophelia, what do you say? My goal was to make this kiln accessible to everyone.”

“...I hate to admit it, but I can’t find anything to nitpick. Beyond the excessive size of your morgue, that is.”

“Please, call it sample containment. That was my condition going in, and it was never up for debate. I did my best to balance functionality and comfort in the space built for the rest of you. Let’s shake on that, shall we?”

Meanwhile, Carlos was placing glasses on the table, filling them with juice.

“Come, let us celebrate! I brought white grape juice just for the occasion.”

“How thoughtful, Carlos,” said Godfrey. “To the completion of our first workshop—a toast!”

Everyone raised their glasses. Five regular members, one ancillary—all with a base to call their own.

Kevin Walker’s instruction and their new base—these two factors put wind in their sails, and the neighborhood watch began getting things done.

Naturally, they weren’t crazy enough to poke their noses into *every* conflict between students. Miligan, who was now calling herself the brains of their operation, had suggested they start by passing out free magic tools. All-purpose antidotes, smoke orbs, rescue orbs—tools that would help them get out of a jam—given out like candy. Naturally, they explained the purpose of the watch as they did so. This wasn’t exactly cheap, but they earned the needed funds gathering materials with Walker on the second layer, the bustling forest. This was good training and good income, and each excursion made them that much better at handling the labyrinth.

With Tim in the watch’s ranks, many students were disinclined to trust ingestible potions. But Godfrey’s own reputation was rapidly spreading and largely canceled this out; most students looked perplexed but accepted the other types of tools readily enough. This steadily made the watch recognizable even down here—Kimberly students knew how to spy an advantage, and students in the lower forms were soon making use of the watch. If they could mitigate the risks of exploration by simply acting friendly with the watch, why

not do so?

It was hard work, but Godfrey's group could feel it paying off. Wondering what their next step should be, Godfrey wandered the halls of the school building—and made himself the subject of discussion.

"Oh, the idiot's here."

"Making a name for himself."

"Got a base in the labyrinth now."

"Nobody's hammered him down yet?"

"I bet they're getting ready to."

Opinions varied wildly, but Godfrey was only interested in the future—until a student blocked his way.

"...Ah..."

"Speak of the devil."

Not wanting to get caught up in the cross fire, the surrounding students made themselves scarce. Godfrey stopped, eyes on the breathtakingly beautiful blond boy before him. He was flanked by a boy and a girl, both second-years—and judging by the pointy ears, the girl was an elf.

"...Yes, seen up close, your face *does* resemble the king of the apes."

"And you would be—?"

Before Godfrey could finish, the boy spoke over him.

"No introductions are necessary, but I *do* like to mind my manners. Leoncio Echevalria. I shall not be requiring your name—apes have no concept of etiquette."

"Alvin Godfrey. As you can see, I'm fully human. The etiquette I learned at home may be inadequate, but I know better than to insult a stranger to their face."

This boy was clearly trying to get a rise out of Godfrey, so he responded with sarcasm. The elf started giggling.

“...Kah-heh-heh.....”

“Restraint, Khiirgi,” whispered the other flunky. He carried himself like a gentleman.

“Retorts come as easily to you as does breathing.” Leoncio snorted. “As they should. Entirely suiting a creature of your ilk.”

“What’s your business with me, Mr. Echevalria? You came with backup. I assume this is not a consultation.”

“I’m glad you understand. Let me be clear—you’re an eyesore.”

With that, he sighed dramatically.

“You got into Kimberly, yet you decide to *help* people? I looked the other way while you were merely roaming the halls on campus, but I cannot do the same within the labyrinth. Do you realize your tactless efforts are rubbing people the wrong way?”

“I’m just trying to help. Like you yourself said, if that rubs people the wrong way, that’s a clear indication they’re after the opposite.”

“He’s got you there!”

“Khiirgi!”

This time, the second boy chastised the elf in much stronger tones. Ignoring them, Leoncio frowned.

“Do you imagine this place operates on binary morality? That alone makes me wonder if you even are a mage. How can one truly pursue sorcery while trapped in the shallow ethics of the ordinaries? Your words are an insult to the institution of Kimberly itself.”

“I disagree. This school is all about freedom and results. Accordingly, I’m acting freely, striving for results along the path that takes me to. Pray tell, what is wrong with that?”

“The motto alone is not the only norm in play. There is a logic that mages, by their nature, ought to follow. This is not spelled out in so many words for the simple reason that it is not needed—until someone like you arrives.”



“So a bad habit grew into an unwritten rule. Perfect. That’s exactly what I want to change.”

The elf whistled and then gurgled—the boy had yanked hard on her collar, dragging her away. That left Godfrey and Leoncio glaring each other down.

“Before you stands an opportunity. A chance to become a leader under the auspices of the next student body president. That, of course, will depend on your future performance, but I will treat you fairly. And you are hardly the type to content yourself with the nectar your keeper provides.”

Godfrey gave this invitation due consideration and then smiled. “Ah, I see where you’re coming from. But I’m afraid I’ll have to pass.”

“...Meaning?”

“I intend to run for student body president myself. If I want to change this place, I’ll need status and power. I’m afraid that makes us rivals.”

This confident proclamation caught Leoncio flat-footed, and he rubbed his temples.

“...Never have I encountered stupidity so dizzying. Just to be sure—have you gone quite mad?”

“Look me in the eye and make your own call. Do I look crazy?”

Godfrey caught his gaze and held it. His eyes did not waver. Leoncio took full measure of that and then spun on his heel.

“Indeed you do,” he spat. “You’re as mad as they come.”

Down the hall, the other boy was chewing the elf out. He looked up as Leoncio approached, and the boy’s poker face told him exactly how well the offer had gone.

“Are we backing off? I’m assuming he said no.”

“A complete waste of time. There is no saving him. His skull was always empty.”

Leoncio sounded bitter. His gaze turned to the elf and her sinister smile.

“Snatch up the two first-years. Crush the rest before the day is out. That is

your penalty for speaking out of turn. I trust you can handle it, Khiirgi?"

"Haaa-ha, but of course! That punishment is but a reward. You are a talented keeper, Leo."

She gleefully nodded, licking her lips with relish, her eyes already on her prey.



Case 3

The Artist

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Side of Fire

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Case 3

The Artist

A gray space, location unknown, boundaries undefined. A young man stood before a white sheet of paper, pencil in hand, lost in thought.

“...Hmm...”

A sketch and a frown. A scribble and a shake of the head. Each attempt made his neck crook farther.

“...No...that’s not it...”

He tore the page from the sketchbook, ripped it up, and clutched his head.

“...The motif itself is solid...but it refuses to become a *theme*. What am I doing wrong? The colors? The perspective...?”

Muttering to himself, he waved a spellbrush. He began drawing again, but soon his hand paused.

“...Wait...when did I last eat? Or drink? ...No matter. I’m not hungry.”

The questions faded as soon as they arrived. His brush wandering before the paper, he muttered away.

“...What am I even *trying* to paint...?”

“Are you here, Carlos?!”

Godfrey burst into the lounge. Several students within jumped and turned, Carlos and Miligan among them.

“What’s wrong, Al? You look a fright.”

“Mr. Echevalria made contact,” Godfrey said, hustling over to their table. “Seems our activities got under his skin. He tried to recruit me, but that likely doubled as a final warning.”

Carlos looked grim. “And you turned him down?”

“Yeah, there was no room for compromise. That aside, I doubt he’s a man who’ll give us time to prepare. We’ll need to keep our guards up and assume he’ll come at us hard. Glad you’re here, Miligan—where are the others?”

Godfrey glanced around, not seeing anyone else.

“We split up after class,” Miligan said. “Not twenty minutes ago—normally, they’d still be on campus, but I’ve got a sinking feeling. They were arguing about who can handle the labyrinth better. They’re always competing, but today...”

“They may well have dived right in?”

Miligan nodded. Godfrey turned to go.

“Then they won’t be far from the workshop. I’m going on ahead. Carlos, you find Lesedi and catch up.”

“On it!”

Carlos was already moving.

“We might come up empty,” Godfrey said. “Miligan, can you check the halls?”

“I can. I’ll send a familiar if I find them in the next half hour—if that time passes, assume I didn’t and will be waiting where there are eyes on me.”

A wise decision. Godfrey broke into a run, mad at himself.

“Should I have avoided an answer and bought time? Both of you, stay safe!”

Meanwhile, Miligan had called it—Tim and Ophelia were bickering furiously in the labyrinth.

“Like I said, if you keep inching forward, you’ll never have enough time! Enemy detection? What a pain! Just pitch poison and silence ‘em all!”

“A spectacular solution! Tell me, does your satchel generate vials without end? If you toss them out willy-nilly, you’ll be empty when you really need them. And brewing those costs time and money! You’ve got to think ahead!”

They only stopped yelling when they were out of breath.

“Dammit,” Tim said, scratching his head. “Arguing ain’t getting us anywhere. I dunno what he sees in you. You’re all talk but don’t do shit, and frankly, I’m way cuter.”

“I do respect your unwarranted confidence. Friendly word of advice—‘cute’ doesn’t *just* mean your physical appearance. There are several other factors: the way you comport yourself, the way you speak, et cetera. You’re no match for me on any of those—including your face.”

“...Heh, say what you like. The choice will ultimately be Godfrey’s. I trust you ain’t forgot how he rubbed my back yesterday?”

“Because you gambled on a random new drink and got a coughing fit for your trouble! And if we’re counting—he rubbed my head.”

“Not the same! He’s just treating you like a child. Mine’s pure affection! What, you too dense to tell the difference?”

“That’s not a distinction; it’s a delusion. Why are you so convinced he’s in love with you, anyway? Did you inhale too much of your own poison and rot your brain? I’m starting to genuinely worry.”

Trading insults, they headed for their shared workshop. But on the way, Tim spun around.

“What, heading back?” said Ophelia. “Don’t run away—”

“I’m not,” he growled, suddenly tense.

His eyes locked on the darkness down the passage. Ophelia picked up on it, too.

“Brace yourself, Ophelia. This one’s dangerous.”

Their athames leaped to their hands. A sinister shadow appeared before them.

“...You shouldn’t fight, children. That’s what *naughty* kids do.”

A pale finger pierced the darkness. The uniform encasing her long limbs was as dark as her skin was pale. Long, pointy ears, but the face between them was covered in a hideous wooden mask. Tim and Ophelia gulped—this was exactly the sort of monster little children feared.

“I take it your parents weren’t big on bedtime stories, hm? Then I’ll tell you. When children fight all the time, the scary Alp comes to steal them away.”

The elf girl—Khiirgi Albschuch—took off the mask, revealing a twisted smile. They need not ask; her palpable evil proved they were already in a battle. Tim had a vial between his fingers, and he hurled it her way.

“Now!”

“Impetus!”

Ophelia’s spell chased it. The vial burst in the air, the contents vaporizing—and the wind spell carried the lethal cloud toward their foe.

“What a dangerous toy you have! Impetus.”

Khiirgi leisurely cast a spell, blowing the mist behind her. Assuming she’d fallen for it, Tim and Ophelia launched their next moves, their incantations overlapping.

““Flamma!””

Their flames ignited the gas around Khiirgi. It exploded. The elf and the passage were swallowed by the fire.

“A flammable toxin? Too close, too close.”

““?!””

Khiirgi was still standing there. Her control over the wind was so fine it even sent the explosion over her shoulders. There were a few singes on her uniform, but she was still grinning luridly.

“Starting with a two-phase move? You’re even naughtier than I thought.” Praising their work, she licked her lips. “Ideal. Well worth snatching you up.”

“——! Tonitrus!”

“Frigus!”

They cast again, backing away. Five winged-insect familiars flew out from Tim’s robes, launching themselves at the elf—but Khiirgi easily ducked under those and the spells.

“You can’t let me see you release them! They’re much too slow to prick anyone from the fore.”

As she got close, Tim and Ophelia aimed their wands behind her.

““Impetus!””

At their spell, the insect familiars behind Khiirgi detonated the liquid in their bellies. It vaporized—and the winds they’d made dragged it back toward her.

“Hng— Impetus!”

““Fragor!””

Sensing danger, Khiirgi used the force of her wind spell to dive forward, and Tim’s and Ophelia’s spells burst right where she’d been a moment before. The gas ignited, and flames billowed—Khiirgi side-eyed that, even as she landed on the ceiling, running across it with Wall Walk.

“...I see. If the poisons ignite, cleanup is easier.”

““Flamma!””

They sent flames at the enemy above. She couldn’t quite dodge one and had to aim her athame at it, laced with the opposing element so that the blade and her body were pushed aside. She spun through the air, landing on the floor again.

“Forcing me to use a Flow Cut?” she murmured, impressed. “You didn’t learn *that* in class. I see you found a good mentor in the upper forms.”

““Clypeus!””

They hit her again on her landing. Walls reared up on either side of her, limiting her movements. Ophelia spied a chance to end things.

“Now! Tonitrus!”

“Tenebris!”

Khiirgi pushed it back with the oppositional, and Ophelia had to dodge to the side. She frowned—she’d expected to lose the tug-of-war, but if Tim had managed to copy her cast, they’d have won.

“Tim? Why didn’t you—?”

“...Glk...”

She knew why the moment she looked. Tim was frozen to the spot, shaking—a scorpion familiar was stabbing his leg.

“That’s how you do it,” Khiirgi purred, explaining, “You never noticed! Slow movements can be a strength.”

Tim managed to shake off the paralytic, moving again.

“Oh, already? You have some alarming resistances. At your age! Poor thing.”

“...Ngh... Shut the fuck up!”

“Don’t, Tim! Match me—!”

But he was already out front, casting—and Khiirgi’s heel caught him in the solar plexus.

“...Gah...”

“Thought you were out of range? Awww. I was only moving at half my true speed.”

As he toppled, she landed a roundhouse kick. Tim’s head bounced off the floor, and he was out cold. With one down, the elf turned to Ophelia, and her eyes dropped to the vial that fell from Tim’s hand.

“I swear, play with toxins all the time, and you get very naughty. Don’t you agree?”

“...!”

Alone now, Ophelia kept her athame raised, and Khiirgi shrugged.

“Nice of you to keep trying, but I *do* recommend surrender. You’ve got no way of winning on your own—and you know that.”

Ophelia ignored that suggestion, focusing her mind inward.

“...Glad I planted one,” she muttered.

“Hrm?” Khiirgi frowned—and saw a gleam in Ophelia’s eye.

“You started this,” Ophelia said. “Don’t blame me if it kills you. Partus!”

A purple light shined over her lower belly. A mystic glow—from which emerged a hideous thing drenched in amniotic fluid.

“...Oh-ho...?!”

Like an ox, fifteen feet long, bony spurs on each flank like a chariot, and a

scorpion's tail attached to its backside. Matching no known magical beast, it earned an elven cackle.

“.....Haaa-ha! I remember now—Salvadori! You're descended from a succubus, yes? So you're using your womb as a cradle for chimera, then? My, my, the evils of your kind never cease to delight!”

Khiirgi threw herself into battle with the chimera, ecstatic. Ophelia got Tim on her back and ran off in the other direction.

“Hah, hah...! Tim, please! Wake up! If we can just reach the workshop—”

She was clutching to that hope, but a few minutes later, a gust of wind hit her face.

“...I saw this coming. Glad I came to observe.”

“...!”

Before her stood a second-year, well-bred, uniform altered so the coat resembled a vest. Ophelia set Tim down on the floor, athame at the ready, and the man shook his head.

“Relax and make yourself comfortable, lady. No need to worry about resisting—we're already done.”

That struck her as odd, and then Ophelia felt like she was floating in water, her vision blurred.

“Huh...?”

She put her hands to her head, staggering—sensation fading from her limbs.

“...Poison...? How...? When...?”

Searching for a cause, she looked herself over. Her eyes lit upon the back of her right hand—and several tiny objects pricking her skin.

“...Little needles...so small you can barely see them...”

“And you felt no pain,” the man said softly. “A principle I abide by.”

Ophelia gritted her teeth. Tim might withstand this much, but she lacked his resistance. She might not have drifted off yet, but she was struggling to focus—and in no shape to face a more powerful second-year.

But that was the task before her. Fighting her swimming head, she raised her athame.

“Still?” The man sighed. “Resignation would be far easier on you. You leave me with no choice.”

He raised his blade, too, stepping toward a girl who looked ready to crumple.

“Flamma!”

Crimson flames billowed between them. The man leaped back, eyes on another second-year emerging from a side passage.

“...You’ve arrived rather early, Mr. Godfrey.”

The man knew his name, and Godfrey stepped out in front of Ophelia, growling, “I saw you earlier. What did you do to her?”

“Gino Beltrami. Like you, a second-year. Please call me Barman.”

Gino offered an elegant bow. Godfrey remained grim.

“You refuse to answer, then. My friends are hurt—I’m ready when you are.”

“By all means. My door is long since open.”

Seeing Godfrey in no mood to talk, Gino lifted his blade.

“A light aperitif to begin? Let’s get a good buzz going. Impetus!”

“Flamma!”

Two spells at close range, and their blades tangled. Godfrey’s fires deflected upward, but Gino’s winds were visualized differently, surrounding his opponent—and those winds were *spiked*.

“Hahhh!”

With that cry, Godfrey used spatial magic, generating winds along the surface of his skin and pushing that air aside. At the same time, his blade shot toward Gino’s chest, impressing his opponent.

“Oh? Well spotted.”

“I saw the needles in Ophelia. I’m not blind.”

Walker’s training was paying off, and Godfrey had made the necessary

observations before the fight began.

“An unruly customer, vaulting over the bar. This area is for staff only.”

Gino’s tone stuck to professional reprimand. Between the fingers of his free hand, he held a glass orb taken from his pocket.

“Still, handling bad drunks is part of the job. I’ll have your second drink ready in a jiffy.”

“Hahhh!”

Before he completed his throw, Godfrey knocked it away with his foot. The orb smashed on the floor at a distance, and Gino sighed.

“Not a fan of that label? You know how to make a bartender cry.”

Godfrey moved to finish this before Gino could make another play—but found himself off-balance.

“...Hng...”

“We can’t leave you sober for long. To those who administer spirits, there is no greater shame.”

Gino made it clear this was a point of pride. Catching a hint of herbal liqueur in his nostrils, Godfrey held his breath.

“The stronger the spirits, the easier they ought to go down. Ideally, the customer will not even notice they’ve been imbibing. With me so far?”

Godfrey realized this odor was drifting from the guard on Gino’s athame. He snorted—the glass orb had been a decoy. The real trap lay on the blade itself.

“...A boozy blade, paired with Lanoff-style. The founder must be rolling in his grave.”

“This is my bar—only I need remain sober. The foundation of customer service.”

Gino had an alcoholic ampoule embedded in his athame. Godfrey hesitated—get in close, and he’d inhale more of those spirits. But back off to avoid that, and he’d be putting Tim and Ophelia in harm’s way. He soon had his answer, and he stepped in.

“Still, you approach? The more you move, the more inebriated you’ll get.”

Gino shook his head. Carefully monitoring the speed at which Godfrey’s movements were slowing, patiently waiting for his chance to fight back. That moment soon arrived.

“Not much longer... Time you headed home,” he whispered.

But as he did, Godfrey chanted:

“...Dolor.”

A pain spell, cast on himself, slamming against every inch of his skin and instantly sobering him. Gino had committed to a thrust meant to end things, but Godfrey leaped off the floor from his toes, aiming for his opponent’s side.

“——?!”

“Rahhhh!”

Gino got an arm in between, defending himself—there was a snap, and the bone broke. His body lifted into the air, flying toward the passage wall. He used Wall Walk to absorb the impact and dropped back to the floor, glaring at his dangling left arm.

“...A pain spell as a restorative? You *are* a nasty customer.”

“I value spells that don’t burn my arm. You’ll need a lot more booze to get me drunk, Barman!” Godfrey yelled, feeling alert again.

Mindful of the moves Lesedi taught Godfrey, Walker had suggested employing a midheight roundhouse kick as a counter. Get enough speed and force behind it, and it hit hard even as he deflected his opponent’s attack. Gino’s response had lowered the point of contact down near the knee, but with Godfrey’s superlative mana output, his kicks hit too hard for a little deflection to really matter.

As his injured foe considered his next move, Godfrey called, “I forgot to mention, but I’ve got backup coming. Think you can handle this on your own?”

This was no bluff—two friends had arrived, taking positions to defend the downed first-years. Carlos and Lesedi.

“...Perhaps I misjudged things,” Gino admitted. “But don’t be alarmed—I have help of my own.”

An elf appeared behind him, her entire body splattered in chimera blood.

“My, my, all our prey together! Gino, you tagged along?”

“I felt certain you’d let your enthusiasm get the best of you, at the cost of your mission. What exactly were you off playing with?”

“A chimera! Never fought the like before. Struggled a bit. Just finished it off and came running—and found you like this. So be it! This job’s a lot more fun than I expected.”

Snickering, Khiirgi raised her athame.

“Three on two, but you’re not backing off.” Lesedi scowled. “Arrogant much?”

“Careful, the girl’s an elf,” Carlos warned. “Khiirgi Albschuch. They say she was a drifter, pursued by her own village—and I think we can guess why.”

“The other’s a trickster,” Godfrey added. “An alchemist, but Tim’s polar opposite—doses you without you noticing. Look out for little needles on the wind and alcoholic vapors in his athame. One false move, and you’ll fall asleep mid-riposte.”

Staying close behind Khiirgi, Gino raised his blade.

“No time to heal my arm. Khiirgi, can you handle the front line?”

“Of course. I’ve got just the toolplant. One that’s never been brought out before I came along. Haaa-ha! Another reason why I can’t ever go home.”

Khiirgi cackled. Godfrey’s side wanted to take advantage of their numbers, but elven magic aptitude defied human standards, and they had no way of accurately gauging what she could do. Gino and Khiirgi were being just as cautious—neither of them quite had the measure of just how big a spell Godfrey could cast.

Tension mounted on both sides—until something unexpected rolled out of one passage.

“““——?!”””

““...?!””

A *wheel*. No bigger than that of a carriage, but on fire. At the center of it was a face, like a caricature—very unpleasant. It was rolling around on its own, laughing maniacally, doing slow circles around the five of them.

“...? What is that thing?”

“Not...any sort of magical beast. It feels *wrong*. Like it isn’t real...”

Carlos frowned. Godfrey glanced at their foes, who looked just as lost.

“...This isn’t yours, is it, Gino?” Khiirgi asked.

“Obviously not. My establishment would not allow anything this grotesque.”

Feeling a hot wind blowing from the depths of the corridor, Godfrey turned toward it.

“...More incoming,” he muttered.

A moment later, more grotesqueries emerged from the darkness. A humanoid form, body wasted away, belly hideously swollen, dragging themselves along the floor on unnaturally developed arms in lieu of their wasted legs. A massive hulk as big as any troll, wielding instruments of torture. And leading the way, more of those wheels.

All eyes went wide.

“Carlos! Grab Ophelia!” Godfrey yelled, making a snap decision to abandon this fight.

He grabbed Tim and started to run. Carlos—carrying Ophelia—and Lesedi were close behind.

Lesedi glanced again at the grotesqueries, grinding her teeth. “...What are those things? Is hell overflowing?!”

She spoke for everyone there. On the far side of the same corridor, Khiirgi and Gino had reached the same conclusion and were running themselves.

“No time for play! Let’s bail, Gino!”

“That does seem necessary... Fair enough. I’ll brief Leoncio.”

Without anyone to carry, they soon passed the watch and took a different fork in the passageway before vanishing from view. One fewer threat to worry about, but the watch's pursuit was gaining on them. The sinister wheels caught up first.

"Tch, can't outrun 'em! Burn the ones in front!"

"Right! Flamma!"

""Flamma!""

All three cast fire spells, enveloping the front of the pack of wheels. They squinted into the inferno, trying to gauge the effectiveness—and the wheels burned bright for a moment before crumbling. This outcome shocked Godfrey—these things seemed far more fragile than any of them had expected.

"Hmm?"

"What the...? That was easy."

"It's not over yet!" Godfrey roared.

From behind the burned-up wheels came a flock of birdmen with colorful feathers, all wielding man catchers.

""KEH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!""

They fanned out, attacking from three sides, aiming their man catchers at the mages' throats and ankles. The watch fought this off with their athames but could not break stride to focus on that. Defending themselves as best they could, they ran on, lest more creatures catch up.

"They're fast...! Careful! These things are strong!"

"What are they?! What manner of beast are these things?!" Lesedi wondered, even as she kicked another.

The same question nagged Godfrey. Humanoid, with wings—a garuda came to mind, but those didn't naturally occur in the labyrinth, and these foes didn't have that distinctive aura higher beasts radiated. It was more like something crafted after hearing descriptions of garuda secondhand. But in this moment, he had no means to verify that instinctive assessment.

Lesedi's kick crumpled one birdman's head. Fluid from that landed on Godfrey's arm and made him frown.

"Blood...? No, this isn't— It smells like...paint?"

He'd almost reached an important realization—when a friend's cry pulled him from his thoughts.

"Flamma! Get away from Lia, you—!"

A birdman was doggedly pursuing the girl on Carlos's back, trying to snatch her with its catchpole. Carlos was frantically waving their athame at it, staving it off. Godfrey tried to step in, but another birdman came at him from his blind side.

"...Ah—!"

"Carlos!"

Godfrey was unable to match the birdman on speed; the catchpole snagged Carlos's neck, pushing them back—while the birdman grabbed for Ophelia. Lesedi just barely kicked it away.

"They're trying to carry them off...?! Push them back, Godfrey! This won't end well!"

"I know! We need to force an opening!"

Conscious of the other creatures on their heels, Godfrey considered using a big blast to clear them out. But before he could, the wall behind him burst open from below, a massive shadow looming overhead.

"...What the...?"

Stunned, Godfrey stopped in his tracks. Before his very eyes stood a giant, clad in robes that resembled those of Chena's court officials. The face was so craggy it was gasp-inducing; the baton in its hand seemingly carved directly from a log—and it raked the humans with a gaze that seemed to pierce their hearts.

It evoked a feeling beyond fear and into something unreal—delaying Godfrey's spell a beat too long. The giant swung that baton, striking him and sending him flying sideways.

“Kahhh—!”

Godfrey slammed against the wall so hard it took his breath away. He’d managed to twist himself just enough to spare Tim that fate, but the boy’s body slid to the floor, and the birdmen swooped in, grabbing him and hauling him away. Godfrey was desperate to snatch him back, but his limbs were numb and unresponsive.

“...T-Tim...!”

“Lia—!”

At the same time, a new birdman snatched Ophelia off Carlos’s back. The two of them were tossed to more grotesqueries, who did an about-face and ran off, carrying Tim and Ophelia into the labyrinth’s depths. At last, Godfrey could feel his limbs again. He put a blast of fire in the giant’s face, pushing it back. While it was thrashing its baton at the flames, he and Carlos tried to turn back down the passage—but Lesedi grabbed them both.

“Pull out, boys!”

“?! W-wait, Lesedi! Tim and Ophelia!”

“Let go! Sedi, please...!”

But their cries went unheard. Lesedi dragged them both through the wall toppled by the giant’s entrance, attempting an escape through the passage beyond. When they tried again to shake her off and go back, her face twisted like a demon.

“You’d rather we *all* die?!” Lesedi roared. “Fuck that! Don’t make me snap any more teeth!”

The anguish in her tone at last got through to them. This situation was far beyond what they could handle. They had to leave the labyrinth as soon as possible and get word of this to the upperclassmen and faculty. That was their last resort.

It was another twenty minutes of running before they hit the exit painting and made it safely back to the school building.

“...Hah, hah...!”

“Hah...!”

All were badly out of breath. Carlos was openly weeping.

“...Lia...!”

“Stay focused! No time to rest! Gotta contact the faculty—”

Lesedi was already moving, but a moment later, grotesque wheels shot out of the painting behind them. All three panicked.

“They came *out* of the painting?! Why?!”

“Flamma!”

A fireball over their shoulders melted the wheels. They swung around to find some upperclassmen in the open classroom doors.

“...Second-years? Just fled the labyrinth? If you can move, evacuate to another room. The school building isn’t safe.”

“It isn’t? Hold on. What’s happening—?”

But even as Godfrey spoke, a birdman swooped out of the painting behind him. The upperclassmen swiftly dispatched it.

“See for yourself,” one barked, glaring at him. “Weird monsters are popping out of paintings all over the building. Even the instructors don’t yet know what’s going on. So move your asses! We’re not here to stand guard over you!”

That finally got Godfrey, Carlos, and Lesedi moving. In the hall, they could feel the confusion all around—and that proved the scale of this was far worse than they’d assumed.

“All students, your attention. Extermination of hostile presences on campus is complete, and all paintings serving as channels are sealed. The hostiles are believed to be paint sprites. The majority were painted in oil, so fire spells were especially effective. Should you encounter any, do not hesitate to burn them.”

The emergency broadcast came not two minutes after the three watch members escaped. Mouths formed on the walls of the school, and Garland’s calm tones spoke through them. Now that they were aware the faculty were on top of things, the students’ panic began to subside.

“We’re looking into the root cause, but we expect the paint sprites have come from the labyrinth’s depths, so it may be a while yet. Upperclassmen, remain in the building and cooperate with the investigation; underclassmen, return to your dorms and remain on standby until further notice. I repeat, underclassmen, return to your dorms and remain on standby until further notice.”

A clear order, and second-year students had to obey it. Worried about Tim and Ophelia, Godfrey, Carlos, and Lesedi returned to their dorms and sat limply in a corner of a common room, feeling helpless.

“...What’s going on...?” Godfrey said. The question of the hour.

Arms folded, Lesedi summed up what they knew. “If those monsters are paint sprites, that explains why they’re coming out of paintings all over the school. More than thirty students captured, the majority underclassmen.”

Those were the facts—the rest was her speculation.

“There were third-years among that number, so we’re lucky to have made it back ourselves. We could well have been among the missing.”

“...But...! Lia and Tim...!” Carlos’s voice was choked with tears.

Lesedi looked right at them. “Get a grip, Carlos. Magic gone wild in the halls and labyrinth. Casualties among the students. May not happen every day, but it does happen *regularly* here. You knew that before you enrolled.”

A harsh reminder of the realities at Kimberly. That got Godfrey’s mind working again.

“So...a student’s been consumed by the spell?”

Lesedi nodded. Consumed by the spell—an end that lay in wait in a mage’s future. The nature of it varied. Some went mad, some disappeared, some died, but what they all had in common was that their very being was warped by *something* magical—and irreversible. The further a mage delved into sorcery, the more likely it became—and thus, this end was considered the highest of honors.

“The natural assumption. I’m sure the faculty and upperclassmen are narrowing down the list of suspects. Even Kimberly can’t have many mages

capable of this, especially if the spell involves paintings.”

Lesedi was doing her best to keep it together, but her hands clenched tight.

“Either way, we’ve been stuffed into the dorms, awaiting further news. Dammit. It sucks to be *protected*.”

“...If we’d at least fled to our workshop...we could have searched from there...”

Carlos was still dwelling on regrets. No matter how much they wanted to help their friends, they were not allowed into the labyrinth. Godfrey put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, comforting them. At length, he rose to his feet.

“Lesedi, can you sit with Carlos awhile?”

“? Sure, but where are you going?”

“Gonna walk around the dorm. Gotta get my thoughts in order.”

Cooling his head, Godfrey paced the corridors. His ears were buffeted by sobs and wails.

“What now...? He didn’t come back...”

“Why...? He’s only a first-year...!”

“Dammit! They shouldn’t have been in the labyrinth yet...”

Their anguish brought Tim’s and Ophelia’s faces back to the front of Godfrey’s mind. Fear rose up, and he struggled to keep control.

“...Ngh... Stay calm... You’re the leader, remember? You can’t wallow.”

Chastising himself, he walked on. Ahead of him, he saw a group of upperclassmen carrying a frame wrapped in insulation paper. He moved aside to let them pass.

“...Oh,” he murmured. “They had paintings in the dorms, too. No paint sprites emerged here, but I guess they’re removing them just in case...”

Something nagged at the back of his mind, and he started chasing it.

“Wait... The paint sprites popped out of the paintings. The cause lies deep in the labyrinth...”

He drew a line between the facts and saw it leading to a conclusion.

“...Then where do the paintings they came from lead?”

With that, he turned on his heel and ran. Heedless of the looks this got him, he burst back into the common room.

“Carlos! Lesedi!”

They looked up, startled, and he ran over.

“...? What’s wrong, Al?”

“Come with me. To our room, now.”

Confused, both followed him. Meanwhile, someone else in the room watched them go, frowning. Khiirgi and Gino had only just informed him of their failure.

“...? What are they making a fuss about?”

Leoncio Echevalria rose to his feet and quietly followed.

“What’s this about? Talk, Godfrey,” Lesedi said on the way.

Ahead of the pack, Godfrey started to fill them in.

“Had an idea as I wandered the dorm. If the paint sprites are coming through paintings, then those paintings connect to their source. And the paintings aren’t just hung in the school—they’re in the dorms, too.”

“True, but the faculty know that. I saw a bunch of paintings getting hauled away. I doubt there’s any left.”

“Not if they’re hung up properly, no.”

Reaching the door to his room, Godfrey opened it, then stepped in. He went right to his bed and pulled a painting out from underneath. Carlos gasped, and Lesedi looked surprised.

“——! Yo, is that...?”

“The painting was kicking up a fuss and distracting us, so we took it off the wall temporarily. Actually...quite a while ago. I kind of forgot about it, so I’m not really sure how long ago.”

Trying to jog his memory, he looked down at the painting. The girl it depicted

saw him looking and ran over, nearly bursting out of the frame, waving both hands.

“...She’s still pretty frantic. Even more desperate now. I just took that as another one of the notorious magic painting’s pranks before, but after that paint sprite rampage, it sure reads different. Maybe she started moving...”

“...As a precursor to this incident. That your point, Al?” Carlos asked.

Godfrey flipped the painting around. “The artist signed it. Severo Escobar. I imagine he’s the one.”

He set the painting against the bed and glanced at his companions.

“Which brings us to the point. If this links to the same source as those paint sprites, then the channel may still be open. If Garland was right, that leads to the labyrinth’s depths. I’m heading in.”

Carlos gulped. Lesedi put a hand to her head, scowling.

“You’re a madman. This is wild speculation from the get-go, and you’ve spared no thought to the risk. It’s not even worth calling it a suicide run—you’re just throwing yourself right off the cliff.”

“I know. That’s why I’m going alone.”

“——!!”

Carlos looked downright distraught, and Lesedi fought off her own surge of emotion. She used her last threat of rationality to point out the flaw in this logic.

“Even *if* the paintings the monsters came through lead to the source, that doesn’t mean every painting in the school does! You don’t have to go—the faculty and upperclassmen will dive in and attempt a rescue. You realize you’re just gonna die for no reason, right?”

“The rules here say faculty will not intervene until eight days after the students are lost. Until then, we’re relying on older students alone. But I don’t trust Kimberly students as far as I can throw them, let alone to wait for them to act. If the need arises, their first priority won’t be student rescues—and there’s far too many reasons why that would happen.”

“...! No...that’s pessimistic. You know how many are lost: more than thirty! If that many younger students died en masse, even Kimberly would be rocked to its core. The faculty will rethink that eight-day rule!”

“Yeah, I’m certainly picturing the worst-case scenario. But you’re being *too* optimistic. Even if the faculty do move up the timetable, we don’t know by how much. And there’s no guarantee Tim and Ophelia will live that long. We know better. My top priority is rescuing our friends. And doing so as soon as possible. No one else on campus will follow that agenda—no one else will prioritize their survival at all.”

This left Lesedi without an argument. No matter how flawed the rest of his logic was, this one point she could not deny. Before she could find a way past this silence, Godfrey moved on.

“Once I’m inside, report this painting to the older students. I’ll insist I had it hidden, and you tried to stop me, but I jumped in anyway. Put it like that, and at worst, there’ll be just one extra body.”

There was a loud *crack*. Lesedi jumped—and found Carlos’s fist buried in Godfrey’s cheek.

“I told you before. Think about how it feels to be left behind.”

“...Yeah, I remember every word.”

Godfrey nodded, poker-faced. Carlos held his gaze.

“You claim you haven’t forgotten. You knew how mad this would make me—no, you were counting on it.”

Carlos took a step closer, clutching Godfrey’s shoulders. Their face twisted with conflicting emotions.

“...You really are...hopelessly dumb.”

Carlos rested their forehead on Godfrey’s chest for a moment—then looked up, eyes wet with tears and a smile on their face.

“...But I’m afraid this time I won’t let you go alone.”

“Carlos, I—”

“Hear me out first. Two reasons. The first is simple—Lia’s life matters far more than my own.”

Carlos let that hang a moment. The weight of that phrase was enough to discourage Lesedi from jumping in. She knew full well—right now, Carlos was speaking as a *mage*.

“That’s not me and Lia as people. That’s our houses. The Salvadoris and the Whitrows have a contract. I’m obligated to look after her until she completes her spell. I have no right to go on living if I let her die. These facts were set in stone before we even met. This promise means everything—you’re a mage, and you know why.”

Godfrey waffled for a long moment, then nodded quietly. He, too, grew up in a mage household and could not be dismissive of what that entailed.

“My second reason is equally simple. I, personally, want to keep Lia safe. The exact opposite of the first reason—this one is all me. I swore a vow of my own long ago—if I don’t act here, I will no longer be me. I have to go.”

Deep down, Godfrey had known his friend would say just this. When Godfrey remained silent, Carlos wiped their tears.

“I might add—I’m taking advantage of your own attempt. This increases the odds of Lia surviving this, so I don’t feel bad about it. I know I was *just* scolding you.”

“...”

“Naturally, I’d like to save Tim, too. But...let that be *your* motive. My priority is set in stone. It would feel wrong to list his rescue as a reason for my actions,” Carlos stated. “But that said, Al—let’s go save them both, together. I will stand with you and bet my life on this battle.”

A stalwart declaration, and Godfrey could answer only one way: with a nod.

Carlos turned to face Lesedi. “That settles it. There you have it, Sedi. Sorry we’re both fools.”

Carlos smiled, and Lesedi balled her hands into fists, hanging her head.

“...Why don’t you ask for my help? You’re both that shameless!”

“There’s no good reason for you to risk your life here. Without that reason, you can’t commit. And taking someone who isn’t committed to their death is just a tragedy. What would you even accomplish?”

Lesedi grabbed Carlos by the collar. Her arm went up, and her fist swung—stopping an inch from their nose.

“...Don’t use that voice to get yourself hit,” she croaked, as if there was blood in her throat.

Carlos put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her close.

“...You have a kind soul, Sedi. Far too kind. Consider this a last request from a terrible friend. I want you to live.”

A request from the heart. None of them dared to break the silence that followed—

“What *are* you doing?”

—but a new voice did. Their heads snapped up, and they found Leoncio standing in the doorway, scowling at them. His eyes lit on the painting by the bed and flared open.

“...Is that—? Wait, are you—?!”

“Shit... C’mon, Carlos!”

“Right!”

No more time to hesitate. Leoncio was advancing across the room, and Godfrey and Carlos ran from him toward the painting—


“Hmm?”

And only then did they spot the uncanny glow. Less than a moment later, the painting’s light grew stronger and swallowed all four of them whole.

“Wha—?”

“Gah?! ”

Bright light dazzled their eyes; when it faded, there was no one in the room. Just a single painting remained.



Case 4

Purgatory

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Side of Fire

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Case 4

Purgatory

“A long time ago, you magic paintings served a basic yet vital function.”

A man’s voice, speaking mellifluously. The girl on the canvas listened happily, even as his brush gave her shape.

“You preserved things. Who lived, what happened—the brushes of magic painters recorded all those things. Naturally, that meant realism was a core value, the ability to capture things just as the eye perceived them. The more precise the art was, the more detailed—the better. As an extension of that, mages came to believe that *movement* was better than the lack thereof. A still painting preserves but a single point in time, but if you can depict motion, then you’ve recorded a *line*. This idea is why you all became so full of life.”

The way he spoke of history was almost musical. She valued that more than the meaning, and so she urged him on. This made it harder for him to paint, but he just smiled.

“However—eventually, there came an invention that threatened that core purpose. Memorial crystals and projection crystals. These let mages capture and re-create scenes without the use of a brush. Mechanically exact, free of the perceptions and subjectivity the artist brought. Sadly, these were simply far better suited to the goal of *preservation*. No matter how much we honed our crafts, we could not match the accuracy of these crystal archives. Our passion and predilections actively interfered. Emotions only distort and embellish what was meant to be a record of fact.”

Speaking of this ancient crisis, he mixed a color with his brush. The girl’s half-formed body grew all the more alive; she relished the beautiful chestnut hair the man painted for her. Gently settling her down, the man continued on, like a lullaby.

“For that reason, the purpose of magic paintings was reexamined. For a long

time, artists struggled with it. Many concluded that their art was mere entertainment. Many patrons cut off all funding. Innumerable magic artists found themselves without a means to display their work. They *were* mages, so they did not exactly starve. But that was no salvation. We are not capable of merely *living*—thus, the artists sought new avenues to apply their skills.”

She thought this was very sad. What was wrong with just living? Life brought so many pleasures. Blue skies, pleasant breezes, the smell of soil—was that not all people needed to be happy?

“Several movements emerged from this process. The introspects and the prunists are both quite famous—the former attempt to depict the inner lives that crystals cannot capture, while the latter place emphasis on trimming away unnecessary frills and improving the view. Both approaches have their merits. Mental control is vital to the use of magic, and if that is visible, then reproduction becomes far easier. Crystal recordings contain far too much information for anyone to process, so a magic painting depicting only what is truly needed is more practical. Yet, both approaches struggled. The former’s attempt to objectively depict the subjective was inherently contradictory, and with the latter, the time required to prune down the data proved impractical. Ultimately, artists were left trapped in a futile struggle against the cold, clear precision crystals provided.”

She couldn’t even follow half the more granular details, but she nodded anyway. Led on by that, the man spoke of the artists’ resurgence.

“But we did not take defeat lying down. Our long, dark time led to two vital discoveries. Symbolization and abstraction. Take the concepts behind the introspects and prunists, boil them down, and crystallize them into technique. I could go on all day, but simply put, the former represents one thing with another, while the latter depicts the common characteristics shared by several things. Still doesn’t make sense? Ha-ha, I know. When I first heard of them, it made no sense at all. It’s far more complex and nuanced than the simplicity the crystals provide.”

The man shrugged. His expression made it clear he was not expecting her to grasp the concepts. Just the fact that there was always something left behind after people struggled and desperately reached for the new.

“By chance or otherwise, these two principles paired well. Combining them opened a new path for magic art to follow. That is the path I am on, and you a success born along my way.”

His brush stopped, and he looked at the subject he was painting. She quickly assumed a pose, attempting to demonstrate how good his work was.

“Post-realism. Some break that down and call it futurism. At risk of being misunderstood, I’ll tell you the simplest version: drawing that which does not yet exist. Perhaps that sounds prophetic, but that is not the intent. We are strictly accounting for the principles of our world and painting visions of the future that we know will *not* be a natural outgrowth of them. Simpletons dismiss this as mere fantasy, but the intent is the polar opposite. We are not playing around, depicting the unreal. On our page, we attempt to create that which should exist yet does not. And we believe this art will serve as a goalpost, allowing us to reach that point someday.”

He sounded so serious, she had to nod. She might not fully grasp the meaning or intent, but she knew how much it meant to him. That was all that ever mattered to her. If he made this his life’s work, then she would be there to encourage him. She was his creation, the motif he’d chosen—and that would never change.

“Unfortunately, this aspiration was confused with the Gnostics and their offers of superficial salvation. I could grumble for ages about that, so let’s not. Let the artists in their salons bellyache to their hearts’ content. Your paintings are the future we have not seen, so why waste my breath discussing a past I never wanted? Regroup and look forward—to the future I wish to depict.”

He was back on track, yet his smile wavered.

“I’m afraid that’s the thing I haven’t quite worked out yet. Don’t look disappointed! I do have leads. On my travels, I saw something that spooked me, and I gathered pieces in the same genre. I’ve painted your eyes, so you can see them yourself, yes? Over there.”

The man pointed across his studio at a wall crowded with paintings. She took one look—and flinched. Every one of them featured hideous monsters and people suffering. Even if she were to be polite, they were not in good taste. The

distinctive brushwork he used with her was nowhere to be found; both technically and artistically, these works were fundamentally different.

“Hellscape. A genre not found in traditional magic painting, these are all the work of ordinary artists. A form of religious art—and mages have no religion, so why would we paint such themes? Yet, for some reason, it stuck with me. I’m not sure why. What is it they offer?”

He looked puzzled. An idea struck her, so she asked, and he chuckled.

“Do I want to turn this world into hell? Ha-ha, that would make things easy, but I’m afraid it’s not that simple. My art is about the future—the whole point is to make the world a better place. Yet utopian paintings do nothing for me. They’re too fantastical. Or too far off to count as post-realism. The sheer chaos depicted is no worse than these hellscapes, mind.”

He put his brush down and took a seat on a chair, gazing at the hellscapes with a baffled frown. Then he turned back to her, speaking like a museum guide.

“My troubles aside, they’re fascinating! The ordinaries have invented so many types of hell. I can’t help but be impressed by the variety of torments awaiting those who fall. One expects them to be pierced with needles or basted in fires, but there are even roundabout punishments, like being forced to pile stones as the river sweeps you away. And that’s for children who die before their parents!”

That concept was beyond her. Why would anyone blame the dead child? He’d known she’d react that way, so he didn’t wait for her to ask.

“The blessings of magical culture are everywhere in the Union, but in Azia there are still many children who fail to grow up. Value your life so you may succeed us—if you take that as the moral, it makes a kind of sense. But interpretations aimed at those still living do nothing for me. It feels...impure, somehow? I mean, hell is supposed to be a place for the dead.”

He ran his fingers along the frame. These paintings gave him inspiration, but his thoughts differed from those of the foreign painters. She thought that was only natural. He was, after all, a mage.

“I believe that even the longest of punishments comes to an end, and beyond it there must be salvation. But what is salvation to a sinner? How can souls so corrupted be pardoned, purified? These thoughts are always on my mind when I gaze upon these paintings. Fretting, struggling, yet certain what I need to paint lies beyond...”

A glimpse of memories not his own—and Godfrey surfaced from them.

“—up! Please wake up! Open your eyes!”

A loud voice urging his awakening. Feeling them close, Godfrey stirred.

“——.....?”

“Ah, his eyelids moved! Don’t go back to sleep! It’s not the weekend! I don’t care how sleepy you are—you have to get up! This is no time for rest!”

That got his eyes open. He sat up, not recognizing the room. A girl in her early teens, wearing a simple dress, stood before him. That confused him.

“...Where am I? You’re...”

“Oh, good! You woke up! You’re *inside* me. See? Recognize this deft brushstroke? Far superior work to these run-of-the-mill paintings. Even a blind man can pick Severo Escobar’s work out of a lineup!”

The girl put her hand to her chest in a gesture of pride. Godfrey looked baffled, but the texture of her clothes and skin caught his eye. The moment he recognized both were painted, he realized she was a paint sprite, and he drew his athame. Seeing the flames at the tip, she hastily threw up her hands.

“Wait, wait! I don’t mean you any harm! Can’t you tell?!”

She waved both hands frantically. Confused, he frowned at her.

“...Yeah, you don’t seem hostile.”

“Then put that thing down, please! I’m an oil painting! I’m scared of fire! And if you light this place up, you’ll burn, too, okay? Make sure to tell the others when you wake them!”

She pointed, and Godfrey turned to find Carlos, Lesedi, and Leoncio on the ground. That finally called back memories from before he blacked out, and he

grasped what was going on.

“...So...we’re inside the painting? The one from our dorm room?”

“Exactly! The beautiful painting you shoved under your bed. I’ll spare you the lecture, but I was furious! I’ve never been treated like that since the moment I was painted!”

“Well...sorry about that. I’d better get the others up.”

“Go ahead. Please do, actually. Otherwise, we’ll never get anywhere.”

She urged him on, and Godfrey started shaking their shoulders, deeply unsure what was happening.

To no surprise, Lesedi clutched her head the moment she woke up.

“...And I’m in the painting? Please tell me I’m dreaming. Can I go back to bed?”

“Sorry,” he said, then suggested, “Let’s clear our heads and hear her out. She seems like she wants something from us.”

Lesedi eyed Leoncio, who they’d left unconscious.

“First, what about him? He’s an even more unwilling participant. Can’t predict what he’ll do when he wakes.”

“...Let’s at least take his wand. If we give it back once we’re out, we can try to avoid a fight here. He’ll hold it against me, though...”

They’d figured out the rest once he woke. Godfrey swiped the athame and the white wand, as Carlos advanced on the girl.

“First, let me ask—can you take us to where Lia is?”

“You mean to the children captured by the hellscape sprites? I can. But there’s something I want you to do there. Have a seat, and we’ll talk.”

She waved to some chairs. Still wary, they sat down. The girl took a seat on the opposite side of the round table in between them, resting her arms on it.

“You’re from the lower forms, right? I heard what you were saying before I pulled you in, but just to be sure—what do you think is going on here?”

“Speculation, but...an upperclassman skilled in magic painting was consumed by the spell deep in the labyrinth, and as a result, the paint sprites went wild. And you were likely drawn by the same hand,” Godfrey replied.

“Good, right on the money. Let’s proceed. I’ll tell you what you want to know most—the captured children are still safe. For the simple reason that he doesn’t mean them harm. The painting Severo’s working on requires mages as a component of the layout—that’s why they were captured. Corpses don’t benefit him, so he’s left them alive. As simple as that.”

The three friends hadn’t expected this, and they chewed it over.

“You sound sure of that,” Godfrey said. “I assume this isn’t conjecture. Given that you’re aware of what the paint sprites are doing...can you see them?”

“Of course. There’s a channel between all works by the same artist, and we all know what the others are up to. We can communicate as well—just not right now. They don’t want to see me. The hellscape sprites synched with Severo *after* he was consumed by the spell, while I’m valuing the way he thought before that happened. A small distinction, but a critical one.”

She sighed, and Godfrey rubbed his chin, considering this.

“We were hoping we could rescue our friends by traveling through your painting. It sounds like that *is* possible, and you’re willing to help.”

That worked in their favor. If he believed everything she said, it was almost ideal. But he was a Kimberly student and did not take that for granted.

“So let me ask,” he said, giving her a piercing look. “What is it you want? You pulled us in here for a reason, yes?”

The girl straightened, explaining herself.

“Help Severo finish his painting. That’s all I ask for.”

He raised a brow at this—and Lesedi furrowed hers.

“...You want us to help your creator complete his spell? Not save him?”

“I wish he could be saved, but he’s past that. This isn’t a question of your skills—I know it’s too late for him. Severo went too deep. He can’t come back. What matters now is what he accomplishes there.”

Her hands were on her lap, shaking, but her mind was made up. Godfrey went quiet, aware she was a paint sprite, but she seemed to be telling the truth. She looked human and meant what she said—that's what his instincts told him.

"Okay. But what can we do? I'm afraid I know little about art. I doubt I can do anything to help the creative process."

"Right—I'm not expecting any technical help from you. What matters is your value as a motif. I felt you had that, so I'd like him to meet you. If only that could have happened before he was consumed..."

She hung her head. Godfrey felt a pang of guilt—instead of being annoyed by the painting, he could have heard her out. Her head came up.

"Go find him. Talk to Severo," she said. "That's all I'm specifically asking you to do. Naturally, if you can save any of the captured children along the way, I'll help. The hellscape sprites grabbed all sorts, but Severo never had a use for them. That's why I'm sending him the motif he really needs."

She argued that this did not go against their goals, but Lesedi cut in.

"You're offering up Godfrey's life in exchange for the captured students. That's how I hear your proposal."

"...I only want to give Severo inspiration. But I can't promise it won't end poorly. He's been consumed by the spell. I no longer know what he's thinking. All I'm getting now is a terrible urgency."

The girl broke off, looking deeply remorseful—and that was the last piece Godfrey needed. He decided to trust her. If she meant to deceive them, why admit to any of that? It was certainly possible that was how she meant to trick them, but that level of suspicion was unproductive.

"Very well. I accept."

He made his intentions clear, and Lesedi let out an exasperated sigh.

"Have you lost your—? No, I already questioned your sanity."

"Sorry, Lesedi," Godfrey told her. "In any case, I have a request of my own. Can you send Lesedi and Mr. Echevalria—the boy asleep over there—back to the school building? This was a mission for me and Carlos only. They shouldn't

be here.”

“I would if I could, but it’s too late. Look.”

The girl pointed over their shoulders. Behind them was a frame—likely the enchanted one they’d come through. The real world should lay beyond it, but they saw nothing. It was sealed tight with insulation paper.

“After I pulled you in, a group of upperclassmen carried it back to the school building. I’m sealed away by Kimberly faculty. You’re not getting out of that from the inside. All I can do now is send you to the exit in the labyrinth.”

“So we have no choice? Then I’m going.” Lesedi huffed. No brave fronts of bravado—she was *in*.

Before getting dragged here, she’d had all sorts of reasons not to join their suicide mission, but with retreat not an option—none of those mattered. In which case, she was joining them. Protect her friends, defeat their foes, no other options, no use thinking about it. Ironically, this had saved her a ton of worry.

“Wait—he’s awake,” Carlos called.

Leoncio’s eyes snapped open, and he sat up, seemingly unbothered by his missing wands. He must have woken earlier and maintained the pretense of slumber while getting his wits about him.

“...I could use a briefing. What...is this?”

“Glad you could join us, Echevalria. Yourself included, we’re about to be sent to the labyrinth’s depths. That’s no coercion—it’s the only way out. Give him the rundown, Carlos.”

Carlos moved over to Leoncio, carefully explaining the facts. They were inside the painting, could not leave by the way they’d come in, and the only other exit led through the labyrinth’s depths. They added the painting girl’s request and the group’s goals, at which point Leoncio nodded.

“...Understood. I concede there’s no other choice.”

He wasted no time on questions, and that appeared to impress Lesedi.

“A speedy decision, Mr. Echevalria. I expected you to grumble.”

“I’d like to, but time spent on useless gripes is time wasted. Painting girl, where does this labyrinth exit lead?”

“Severo’s studio in the fourth layer, the Library of the Depths. I imagine you know you won’t be escaping on your own. That’s far deeper than anyone your age should go. When your purpose is met, gather in a reading space and wait for rescue. The paint sprites can’t get you there.”

“That’s what I had planned. Is there a short path to safety from this exit?”

“No, first you have to get out of the studio. However, countless paintings have blended together into a makeshift world. I wouldn’t recommend acting on your own, no matter how quickly you wish to escape. You’re only second-years—I imagine you’d die first.”

She wasn’t mincing words. Leoncio rubbed his temples, his eyes gleaming.

“In other words, if I wish to get back to campus alive, I must tag along on your suicide mission.”

“Beautifully put. I’m starting to like you, Echevalria.”

Lesedi clapped, but Leoncio ignored her spite entirely, holding his hand toward Godfrey.

“...Wands. This is no time for fighting.”

“Okay.”

Given the situation, he chose to trust the man—and gave back the stolen wand and blade. The moment Leoncio gripped them, his other hand formed a fist—and he swung.

“——!”

“Al!”

A *crack* against Godfrey’s face had him staggering sideways. A trail of blood ran down his cheek. Not backing off at all, he looked up again, and Leoncio snorted.

“A reprimand. That will not be the last of it—I owe you ten times that for getting me mixed up in this absurdity.”

With that, he spun on his heel, red eyes raking the exit frame in the distance.

“But not until we’re back on campus. Open the exit, painting girl.”

The girl rose to her feet, nodding. She had four cloth pouches in her hands.

“Before I go, take these. They’re important.”

“...What the...?”

“...Burnt coins?”

What they found in the pouches baffled them. Azian characters were carved on the coins, and all were discolored, as if they’d been exposed to high heat.

“It’s hell money,” the girl explained. “There’s a bunch of stuff in each—hell’s rules vary by painting, so you’ll need to be ready for them all. Consider them a form of talisman.”

All nodded and tucked the pouches into their pockets. The girl closed her eyes, concentrating. Figuring she was feeling out what lay outside the entrance, no one interrupted.

“Okay, go. I picked the safest place I could, but nowhere’s perfect. Hide as soon as you can.”

Godfrey drew his athame.

“You go first, Godfrey,” Leoncio said. “Perhaps that will improve my mood.”

“Always intended to. We brought you into this, so we’ll keep you safe. Stay behind us.”

With that, Godfrey dove through the frame, Carlos and Lesedi right behind. Leoncio was last to go, scowling furiously.

“Keep *me* safe?! Tch, what an aggravating man!”

Muttering to himself, he crossed the frame, leaving the girl behind.

“Please...,” she whispered, all alone.

“...Unh...”

Meanwhile, Gino’s anesthetic was wearing off, and Ophelia’s eyes opened.

“...My head feels like a rock. Carlos, make the tea extra strong—”

“Chew on this.”

She sat up, eyes bleary—and a hand from one side held out a cube made of compressed leaves. Ophelia frowned at that and turned—to find a boy in girl’s clothing.

“...Tim? Why are you—?”

“Just chew on it! It’ll wake you up.”

He shoved it at her, so Ophelia reluctantly bit into the leafy lump. The sheer bitterness was like a shot through the brain, banishing the last remnants of the drugs and clearing her mind.

“...Ngh...!”

“Hits like a brick, right? Now that you’re up, steel yourself and look around.”

One hand clapped to her lips, Ophelia did just that.

And the view made her forget about the foul flavor.

A massive vertical shaft surrounded by towering rock walls. Hollows carved into the side, with iron bars set in them; each packed with people dressed in burlap bags. Tim and Ophelia were in the bottommost cell.

The walls were covered in cells, like the world’s most tasteless show windows—and humanoid things with black wings patrolled the exterior, long torture implements in hand. “Things” because Ophelia could not ascertain their nature. They resembled harpies more than anything else, but where those demis had wings, these had arms. The wings were separate, sprouting from their backs. Their feet were hooved, like goats—to her knowledge, no such creatures existed. Yellowed, uneven teeth in mouths open to the gums—a design seemingly calculated to provoke fear in all who saw them.

“Wh-what...is this place...?”

“No clue. But we’re clearly in some sort of hell.”

Tim was taking this in stride. He’d certainly been surprised when he first woke up, but nothing more. He’d grown up with horrors.

“You remember going at it with that nasty-ass elf, right? I remember the

others coming to rescue us, then these things barging into the fight—and as they ran for it, we got captured. In no state to defend ourselves. That’s when I blacked out again. Woke up about an hour ago. Decided to let you sleep till that toxin wore off. I dunno how to detox.”

With her caught up to speed, Tim looked at the birdmen and their torture devices, grinning wickedly.

“...Can’t wait to find out what they got in store for us!”

Ophelia ran through the story, then gave Tim a look.

“...When exactly did you wake up, Tim?”

“Huh?”

“That elf knocked you out. What’s...the next thing you remember?”

She’d taken a step closer, looking so grim his eyes wandered. His gut told him why—he’d seen a strange familiar pop out of her belly. No ordinary summons worked like that—that was a beast *born* from a human body.

“...”

“...So you did see it,” she muttered, certain. Before Tim could say a word, she grabbed his shoulders tight. “Don’t tell him. Please.”

He’d never heard her beg like this. And he could see the tears pattering to the ground below. Tim mussed the back of his hair, then sighed and pushed her away.

“...All I remember is how you saved my ass. Nothing else matters! And I ain’t gonna waste my breath on what doesn’t. Trust me on that.”

He caught her eye on that vow, with a sincerity that made her blink and wipe her tears.

“...Thanks,” she managed.

For once, she was unobscured by her usual defenses—and Tim couldn’t help but smile.

“I swear...we’re in hell, and that’s your first concern? You’re as mad as I am. Think, girl! Right now, we ain’t even sure we’ll ever see him again.”

Tim steered her attention to the problem at hand, trying to plan.

“It’s not all bad news, though. As gnarly as they look, I ain’t getting any real hostility from them. And they didn’t actually hurt us any. Also—they ain’t that bright. The fact they left us our wands and gear proves it. Kind of a half-assed way to lock up a mage, right?”

“...What even are they? They look like magical beasts, but clearly aren’t. I assume they’re some sort of mock life-form woven with magic...”

“Wish I knew. They burned like crazy when Godfrey hit ’em with flames, and I saw one burst into liquid when Lesedi kicked it. Does that help?”

That extra intel jogged Ophelia’s memory. She stroked her chin.

“...Paint sprites, I think. Which means we’re likely inside a painting. That would explain why nothing feels real and why I’ve never heard of a place like this in the labyrinth.”

“Monsters made of paint, then? Not my field—would poison work on ’em?”

Tim stood up, taking another look at them—but this earned him a glare, so he swore and sat back down.

“They react to big movements. Doesn’t seem like they intend us harm now, but no telling how long that’ll last. Gotta make an escape plan.”

“Yes, I agree. Tim, turn around.”

“Huh?”

He crooked a brow at that, but turned his back to her. Ophelia pulled a small ampoule from her robe and slipped it between her legs.

“...!”

The magical beast’s components reached her womb and affixed themselves. Wiping her hand with a handkerchief, she turned back to Tim, explaining herself.

“...I implanted a chimera seed. I used the one I had prepped on the elf, so I can’t unleash another until I’ve grown one within me. That’ll take a full day, minimum—but the more powerful options we have, the better.”

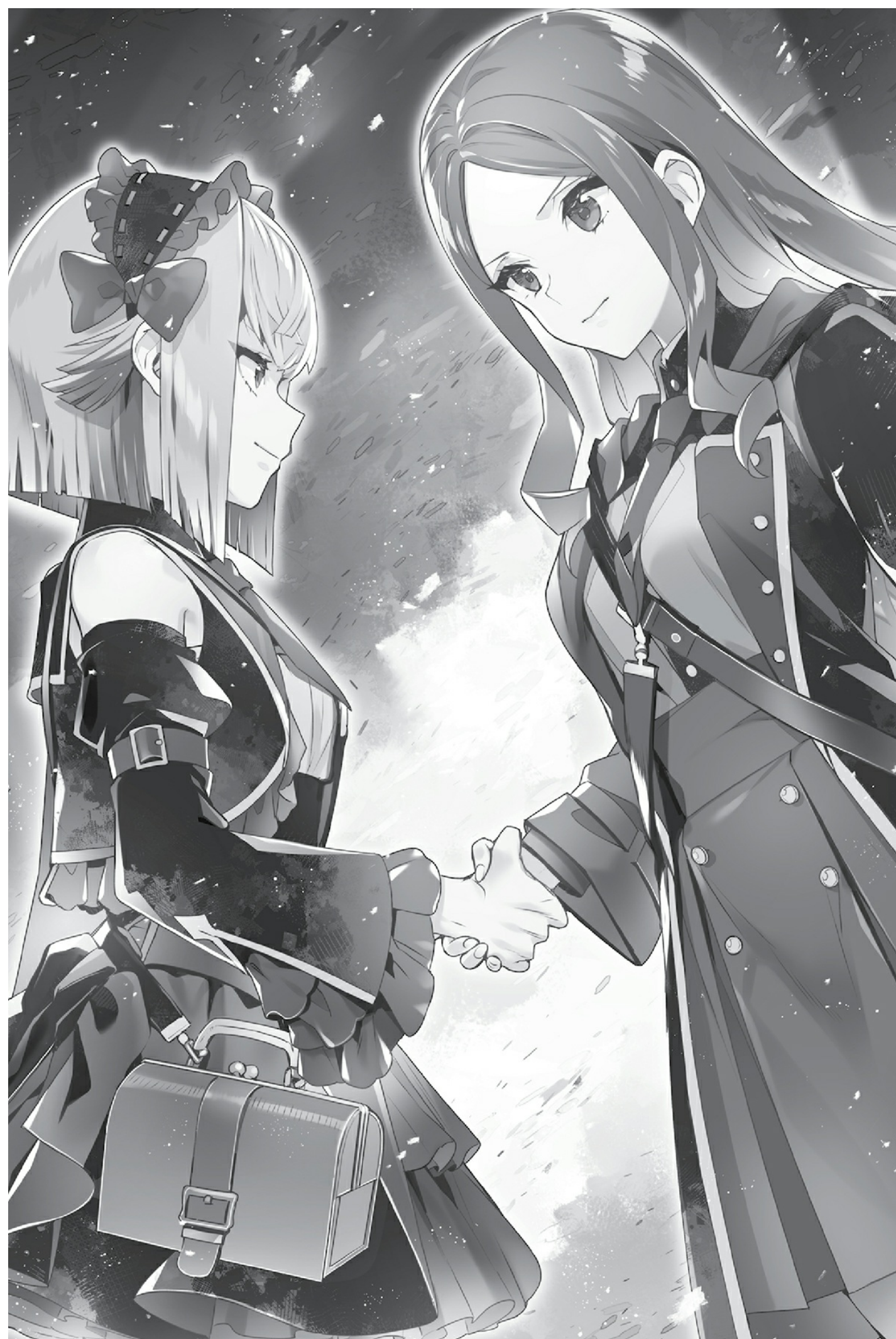
“...You sure you wanna share that?”

“You already saw one. No use hiding it. And I’m not about to die trying to hide what I can really do. Neither are you, right?”

She was being pragmatic, and Tim had to agree.

“...Yeah, Godfrey saved my life—I can’t let it end here. I’m calling a truce on our bickering. Let’s make sure we survive this, Ophelia.”

He held out a hand, and Ophelia readily shook it.



*

Last time, they'd been yanked in unawares, but this time they were ready for it. They passed through the frame fully conscious, emerging in the space beyond.

"...Wow."

Hand on his athame, Godfrey looked around. Beneath an ominous red sky lay a rust-colored wasteland, stretching as far as the eye could see. Arid land dotted with rocks and boulders—and between those, desiccated human corpses lying in heaps, surrounded by instruments of torture. A gust of wind carried the scent of iron to their nostrils.

"Certainly not the labyrinth. We're inside a painting," Carlos surmised.

"Can you hear me?" the girl's voice echoed in their heads. "Don't draw your athames. Stick to white wands. Godfrey can carry me, then stay stealthy and start searching."

Godfrey switched to his white wand, using a spell to affix the frame floating behind them to his back. They set out across the wasteland.

"You're our guide, then?" Godfrey asked. "Your voice can reach us here?"

"You've been in my painting, so the channel will remain open for a while. Otherwise, I'd never have sent second-years in here. But that won't guarantee your safety. I should warn you that fleeing back inside me is *not* an option, no matter how bad things get. There's lots of conditions when linking between paintings."

With that, she switched to explaining their surroundings.

"You're inside the *Eight Great Hells*. An Azian hellscape Severo painted for study. It's fairly treacherous, so proceed with caution. And absolutely do not draw your athame without my permission."

Godfrey and Carlos nodded, and something swooshed through the air behind them. They spun around—and found Lesedi's foot an inch from Leoncio's face.

"Let me make one thing very clear, Echevalria. Getting yanked into this against your will does earn you some sympathy, but we don't owe you *shit*."

“...Hmm?”

“The only reason our younger members got captured by paint sprites is because your minion left them in no state to fight. We could argue that your being here is your own fault. Know that hit you landed on Godfrey was entirely out of line.”

“Leave it, Lesedi. Getting through this is all that matters,” Godfrey said.

Her eyes never left the blond boy, but she lowered her foot.

Not batting an eye, Leoncio called out to the girl. “What manner of paint sprites await us? Patterns, viable elements?”

“Hard to say. Inside a painting, you’re at the mercy of the local rules. It’s an oil painting, but you can’t just burn them like you did outside. There are many types of guards, so you’re probably better off making observations before engaging.”

No simple solutions to anything. Her words made it clear they had a hard road ahead of them.

“Hmm,” Lesedi growled. “You make it sound like we’re trapped in a Grand Aria.”

“Exactly. Magic paintings at this level *are* Arias, limited to the space within the frame. That should tell you just how great Severo is.”

The girl sounded proud, but Godfrey just looked grim. A Grand Aria—often said to be a mage’s ultimate achievement, this was a rite that literally rewrote the world itself, creating a new world under the domain of laws the caster created. Conventional wisdom did not apply—and where they found themselves might not be *exactly* that, but it was close enough to make Godfrey concerned.

“If you encounter guards, better not to fight if possible. You’re in a remote region, so perhaps you could handle it—but as we near the center, they’ll get stronger and in greater numbers. You simply don’t have the strength to tackle their best.”

“Region? Azian hells have those?”

“They do. And there’s organized oversight on each. There are eight great hells, each of which has sixteen lesser hells around them. You’re in the realm of sword cuts, a smaller hell outside one of those eight—specifically, the reviving hell. This is where you go if you murdered someone with a bladed weapon.”

“The perfect hell for us and our athames, then. Where do we go next?”

“We’re less looking for a place and more trying to find the Jizo Bosatsu patrolling here and have him help you escape. If you stay put, he’ll come to you eventually, but the more lives are in an area, the more frequently he passes through.”

Following her instructions, they set off across the wasteland. She called it west, but in the painting, they had no way of knowing which way was which, and her word was all they had. That made it hard to feel comfortable.

“Urgh...!”

A giant with a club lurched out from behind a boulder. A subspecies of troll found in Azia, resembling an ogre—one of this hell’s guards. They froze on the spot—and it glanced once at them, then thumped off.

“...It let us go?”

“Yes, you aren’t actual residents here, and the low-level guards aren’t terribly motivated. They’re worked hard for low wages.”

“W-wages? Hell has payrolls?”

“Why do you think I gave you money? If a fight breaks out, that’s one thing, but best if you can pay them off.”

She talked like this was normal. Carlos patted the bag in their pocket through their robes, less certain.

“I’m glad there’s ways to avoid combat, but...it’s so prosaic...”

“Agreed, but the less fights the better,” said Godfrey, “Let’s move on.”

Eyes on their surroundings, they resumed their walk. Here and there, they saw prisoners shrieking as the guards slashed away at them. A brutal sight, but knowing it was a painting—there seemed no point caring. They turned their backs on the screams, pressing onward—until their path was blocked by a

forest with metal leaves.

“...And this would be?”

“The forest of swords. Every tree has blades growing on it. We can’t get to the reviving hell without passing through. Good luck!”

“That’s encouraging...,” Godfrey said, poking one of the leaves.

The edges were certainly sharp, but not so bad it instantly broke the skin. And their uniforms were designed to repel blades.

“...Not *that* sharp. I doubt they’d get through Kimberly robes. Just be careful they don’t hit your face.”

“I guess...” Lesedi nodded.

She swallowed, and they ventured into the forest of swords. They soon found that the hard branches prevented them from simply pushing aside the thicket patches like with ordinary shrubs.

“This sucks ass!” Lesedi swore, ducking under some blades. “Wish we could at least cut through them with our athame...”

“You can, but the guards will come flocking to you. Remember, this is where they keep murderers who killed with swords,” the girl advised.

“And burning our way through would take too much mana,” Godfrey added. “Just grin and bear it.”

As they persevered, Carlos felt a sharp pain on their calf.

“Ack...!”

“Carlos?!”

Sensing something amiss, Godfrey quickly scanned their surroundings. He soon found a small *thing*, a sharp blade in one hand, bounding around from branch to branch.

“A blade monkey! They come in packs of five or six! Look out!”

“Fight here? Without athames?” Leoncio frowned, raising his white wand.

A blade monkey shot down from above, and Lesedi’s heel hit home.

“Geh—!”

It was sent flying and wound up impaled on a branch blade. It thrashed for a moment and then perished. Lesedi’s kick had found a safe line through the blades around her—she lowered her leg, snorting.

“Moves are telegraphed. They’ve only faced unresisting sinners.”

More foes came dashing in through the trees to one side. Leoncio’s toe caught one’s legs, and it went tumbling into a blade, decapitating itself with its own momentum.

“Trip them up, and it’s that easy? Hmph, the second layer’s beasts are far more imposing.”

With the threat measured, they formed ranks, waiting for the next wave—and felt the hostiles retreating.

“Two down, and the rest flee?” Godfrey said. “That *is* unmotivated.”

“Hurry onward,” the girl advised. “They may not be too dangerous, but they might call other guards.”

They healed Carlos’s leg and pressed on through the forest of swords. They watched for further attacks, but none came—twenty minutes later, they reached the other side, and the view opened up once more.

“...We’re out? Now where are we?” Leoncio frowned.

Countless cauldrons, all over fires, in rows to the horizon. Large guards were stirring these pots—in which were countless boiling humans, their screams and cries echoing in all directions. As they gaped, the girl filled them in.

“We’ve reached the realm of cauldrons. Those who’ve killed and eaten animals are boiled in these iron pots. Unlike the realm of sword cuts, you can draw your athame without incurring immediate wrath, but there are a lot more guards here—be cautious.”

They began their journey across this fresh hell.

Eyes on the boiling sinners, Lesedi wondered, “Stiff punishment for eating meat. Is Azian culture that opposed to the idea?”

“It can be, but all punishments are rather extreme. The goal is to tell the living just how bad things will be if they do anything wrong. Since it’s fiction, they can go all out.”

“Like the money thing, this feels very down-to-earth. I suppose if humans dreamed it up, that’s how things work.”

“I’m less sure. Other depictions of hell are further removed. If you’re unlucky, you might get to see them.”

“Do you *really* know where you’re going...?” Lesedi growled, glaring at the picture.

Godfrey, in the lead, drew to a halt—before them lay an expanse of boiling water, covering half of all they could see.

“...That is a very large cauldron,” the girl explained. “More like a lake, really.”

After a moment of observation, Godfrey said, “Let’s go around. Less guards to the left.”

Eyes on the guards hurling sinners into the lake, using the smaller cauldrons as cover, they did their best to remain out of sight.

“...They make it look routine,” said Lesedi.

“Like they’re adding ingredients to a stew,” Godfrey added.

“The work is easier than in the realm of sword cuts, so their quotas are higher,” the girl told them. “Look. Up ahead, the poached sinners are being pulled out in sieves.”

“I’d rather not see *any* of this,” Carlos said. “The sooner we’re through, the better.”

This was the consensus, so they sped up...but a guard finished throwing his sinners in and spotted them. Godfrey saw him lumbering their way.

“...Hng. One’s after us.”

“Take out your hell money. Hold it lightly in your palm. Four of you, so eight coins will suffice.”

Godfrey did as the girl suggested, letting the guard see. The guard turned his

back, then held his hand out behind him. Catching the intent, Godfrey was about to pass the money over—when another guard came running in.

“——?!”

“Another one spotted you? Not good! They’ll come flocking in! You’ll never have enough funds.”

The two guards started arguing, and Godfrey’s group could hear more approaching. Godfrey made his choice.

“Run while they’re distracted!”

All four were soon at top speed. Guards who saw them fleeing began giving chase, but their bulky frames rendered them as sluggish as they looked. Just as Godfrey started to think they’d get away clean, the guards started tipping cauldrons their way.

“Tch!”

“Echevalria!”

“Ah, Al—?!”

Leoncio had been closest, and to avoid getting crushed under the cauldron, he leaped down to the boiling water’s surface, Godfrey hot on his heels. Shocked, Carlos and Lesedi peered over the edge—and found them both standing on the bubbling surface.

“...Unnecessary. Did you think I had not mastered Lake Walking?”

“Glad you have. I really struggled with it last year.”

Godfrey just looked glad that his fears were unfounded. The other two joined them on the boiling lake, leaving the guards gnashing their teeth on the bank.

“Didn’t think of walking on boiling water, but it might actually be safer,” Lesedi said.

“Let’s make a dash for the far shore!” Carlos urged.

Off they went, the waters rearing up and chasing them. The guards had giant oars to stir the pot and were using these to generate boiling waves. Godfrey drew his athame to handle this.

“Stop them, Carlos!”

“On it! Prohibere!”

A hardening spell hit the hot wave, and they ran off, following the girl’s instructions. At last, they reached the far side and were on dry land—and they kept on running, mindful of the guards in pursuit.

“We’re across!”

“Is that the right gate?!”

“Yes! Only one more lesser hell to cross, and you’re in the reviving hell! Use your spells to burst through the gate!”

“Got it. Godfrey! You save yours!”

The remaining three fired at the gate ahead and plunged into the darkness beyond. Another spell to close the gate behind them, and they found themselves in a realm devoid of light.

“...I can’t see at all. Painting girl, explain.”

“This is the realm of darkness. For those who kill sheep and turtles. It may make progress difficult, but do not generate light. Move quietly, keeping voices and footsteps to a minimum.”

Even in this darkness, she knew which way to go. They picked their way along, Godfrey wiping the sweat from his brow. At first, he assumed the heat was residual from the boiling lake, but clearly not.

“...It’s very hot. Yet, no fires...”

“Black flames. Fires made of darkness, tormenting the sinners here. Guards are slowly carrying them around, so keep clear of heat sources.”

Godfrey took this in stride. He’d figured there were enemies nearby when she cautioned against the light.

In time, Lesedi detected movement. “Multiple things moving around.”

“Clip imps. They cut the tendons of sinners’ legs so they can’t flee. They rely on their ears and noses, so if you’re quiet, they won’t attack—”

But sounds drowned the painting girl out. A rustling of footsteps right at

hand.

"More and more of them." Lesedi frowned. "Are we in trouble?"

“If we clump up, we can’t dodge properly. Let’s spread out a little,” Carlos suggested.

They began moving at an appropriate range—not far enough to lose track of one another—but every now and then, things flitted among them. Unnerving. They were being tracked by their footsteps and the sounds of their breathing.

“...!”

One false move, and they'd make contact—and be in combat. Hoping to avoid that, Godfrey focused on their presence—and then his toe hit something hard, sending it flying.

“——?!”

A blunder. Too focused on the enemies to register objects that weren't moving. That had likely been a rock—and the sound of it made their position far more obvious than their stifled steps.

“Shi—”

""""""GYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!""""""

Horrific shrieks echoed through the dark. Lesedi and Carlos strained their eyes.

“Godfrey?!”

"I've got the light!"

“No, don’t—!” Leoncio said—but there was already a light on Carlos’s athame.

The things in the dark came into view. Scrawny frames, scuttling on all fours, eyelids melted closed, yellowed teeth, sinners' blood dripping from hands holding bone scythes. On the verge of tackling Godfrey.

“Run!” Leoncio roared, and everyone shot forward.

They were past dousing the light and hiding once more—clip imps were closing in from all directions. More from ahead, and when they changed course

to avoid them, another pack arrived. Soon they had nowhere to run, enemies thronging all around.

“...We’re surrounded.”

“Painting girl, advice?”

“...Um...you might be doomed...”

Her voice shook, so Godfrey steeled his nerve. He’d have to fire a big spell and open a path. As he raised his athame to do that, Carlos put a hand on his shoulder.

“...Wait, Al.”

“Carlos?”

“I’d like to try something. Hold that spell.”

With that, they stepped forward. Before the thronging hell guardians, they placed a hand on their chest and took a deep breath—

“*La-la~* ♪”

—and began to sing. The clip imps flinched and stopped.

The last thing they’d expected.

“My word.”

“An enchanted voice? But why—?” Leoncio frowned.

But the view before them soon explained why. One imp after another dropped their weapons, enraptured by the sounds of Carlos’s song.

“...The guards stopped to listen?”

“...Oh,” the girl said. “The guards are starved for entertainment. They live in darkness and have never heard music before. And a voice this beautiful...”

Leoncio took that to the logical conclusion.

“They cannot fight *emotion*. The song alone is tantamount to a charm. A curious pawn you have.”

“They’re a friend, not a pawn,” Godfrey insisted. Then he asked, “Carlos, can you keep going?”

Carlos nodded, smiling as they sang. They took the lead, and the throng of clip imps parted, making way for them. Carlos strode down that aisle.

“Let’s follow. They seem disinclined to stop the concert.”

For the next half hour, the group walked on, escorted by Carlos’s song. At last, they passed through a gate and escaped the darkness.

“...We’re through...”

“...Whew.”

Finally, a moment to rest. Godfrey was soon concerned for his friend.

“How are you holding up, Carlos? That must take its toll.”

“I’m fine!” Carlos said, smiling. “They were a responsive audience, so I didn’t have to use that much power.”

Leoncio stepped closer, examining the band tattooed around their throat.

“So this works to seal your enchanted voice? Then you’re far from your limit.”

“But don’t count on it. It works better on some listeners than others, and if I sing at full strength, my body won’t hold out.”

Leoncio nodded and turned away. Before them stood an open expanse of red earth, stretching to the horizon.

“We’re in the reviving hell now. It’s only a matter of time before we encounter the Jizo Bosatsu on patrol. That said...”

The girl trailed off, and they knew why. Dotted across the plains were sinners with makeshift weapons, killing one another. Those who received fatal wounds fell temporarily, but they soon rose to their feet again—like the undead. Even with no foreknowledge, Godfrey could tell this endless fight had given the hell its name.

“...the question is whether you can live that long. The sinners here are consumed by enmity and are constantly trying to kill one another. Unlike the guards, they don’t take bribes.”

“So there’s no avoiding a fight. How long must we hold out?” Godfrey asked, drawing his athame.

The girl considered this. “An hour, at most. Once he arrives, I’ll do the talking; you focus on survival.”

“Makes it simple,” Lesedi said, cracking her neck.

Sinners had already spotted them, and they stepped forward to engage.

Tim and Ophelia had been biding their time in the cage. Certain the patrolling paint sprites were distracted, they exchanged glances.

“...Ready?”

“Yes. Let’s do this.”

They got to work. Spells cast to raise the ground, forming dummies. They covered these in their robes, leaving those in the cell—then cut the bars behind them with their athames, slipping out. They dove into the nearest passage leading into the rock face, escaping the paint sprites’ line of sight—and ran for it.

“...Good, we’re out!”

“That went well! My first time escaping prison...”

Ophelia grinned, riding a wave of excitement. But the paint sprites soon kicked up a fuss by their cage.

“They worked it out? Let’s hurry!”

They ran on, conscious of their pursuit—and soon found themselves before a gate blocking the passage. Both drew their blades.

““Patentibus!””

That spell should have opened the gate, but the door didn’t budge.

“I was afraid of that,” Tim spat. “Okay, busting through!”

“Acid, then a spell? Let’s hope our output’s strong enough!”

Tim grabbed a vial from his pouch, and his spell controlled the flow of the mist, coating a circular section of the door. As it started to dissolve, he and Ophelia cast another spell together.

““Impetus!””

With the door weakened, the blast of wind punched a hole in it.

“Yes!” Ophelia yelled.

“No time to celebrate! Dive in!”

They ducked down, taking turns diving through the hole they’d made, careful not to let the remnants of the potion touch them. They got to their feet outside and found themselves somewhere completely different—rolling hills in all directions. They resumed their flight, glancing back at the paint sprites peering through the hole.

“...They’re not following us. Looks like they can’t?”

“They draw the line at that, huh? Works for us, but I doubt we’re welcome here, either.”

Tim figured the world inside the paintings operated on rules of its own. He and Ophelia reached the top of the hill—and the view that provided made them gulp.

“...Oh my...”

An expanse bathed in pure-white light. Their instincts told them this was *not* merely the predominant color—but a space not yet painted, the future site of this painting’s centerpiece. An untouched canvas.

“...I can tell without prior knowledge. We’re approaching the heart of things.”

“Yeah. And whoever’s behind it.”

They had their hands clenched on their athames, certain there was no avoiding a fight.

The reviving hell was filled with bloodthirsty cadavers, and the mages’ battle raged on.

“...Hahhh, hahhh...!”

“How much longer, painting girl? It’s been at least forty minutes!” Leoncio roared, turning three incoming sinners to ash at once. Carlos’s enchanted voice was tempering the trio’s aggression.

“I can feel him getting closer!” the girl said, her voice tense. “Ten more

minutes...no, five! Hang on a little longer!”

With an end in sight, they summoned further reserves and fought on. Constantly moving to avoid being surrounded—but there were just so many sinners here, and at each new location, more charged their way. None especially powerful—but they came in such numbers, their mana could not keep up. Godfrey was not the only one forced to avoid spells and to endure.

“Hng?!”

Then a mounted knight came charging toward them, knocking sinners aside. Easily eight feet tall. In one hand, a polished halberd. Both rider and horse encased in burnished black armor. Clearly a class above the rest, and all eyes turned toward it.

“...Who’s that?”

“No! The overseer?!” the girl shrieked. “He’s the top guard in this hell! I thought we could avoid him if we stuck to the outskirts...!”

They threw their bags of hell money its way, but it paid that no attention, its horse’s hooves pounding onward. That surprised no one; they knew what this meant.

“No interest in bribes. A fight it is.”

“Careful! He’s a warrior, not a guard. Nothing like—!”

The knight attacked before the painting girl could even finish. A sweep of the halberd with the full speed of the horse behind it. Godfrey blocked with his athame, but was lifted off his feet and sent flying.

“...Ngh...!”

In the air, he was defenseless. Carlos was focused on their song and could not chant a spell to save him. Trying to help, Lesedi aimed her blade at the knight, and Leoncio matched her.

“Tonitrus!”

“Solis lux!”

Two spells of different elements struck the knight’s back—but it did not even

flinch. They barely managed to draw its gaze.

“Not even defending itself?” Leoncio spat. “How thick is that armor?”

With spells ineffective, Lesedi changed tactics, shifting her aim from the rider’s back to the horse’s legs. But then a crossbow bolt fired from the horse’s back—and she barely dodged, losing a layer of skin to the passing shaft. Far more powerful than any average bow and featuring a contrivance that meant the next shaft was already loaded.

“No openings! How are we supposed to fight this?!”

Even Lesedi couldn’t keep dodging that bow at close range. But from a safe distance, they had no way of putting it down, and with their attention focused on the knight, the wave of sinners would wear them down. Leoncio scowled. Even a few minutes in these conditions might prove too long.

“Keep Carlos safe,” Godfrey said, landing and righting himself. “I’ll handle *him*.”

He gave the knight a look of such ferocity, it wheeled around, raising the halberd again—and he met it not with a spell but with his athame.

“Rahhh!”

The knight swung the halberd, though, even more powerfully than before. The sight alone put fear in Lesedi’s eyes.

“...How can he match *that*?”

“Why won’t he cast?!” Leoncio roared.

“...One, he’s only got so many shots. Second—he’s defending us,” Lesedi explained.

Even Godfrey’s output wouldn’t down this knight in one blow. And if he attempted it, the knight would likely go for weaker foes first—and their enchanted singer was all too exposed.

But as long as he stuck to blades, that could be avoided. The fight thus far had made it clear the knight *preferred* that. As long as Godfrey did not cast, he showed no signs of reaching for the crossbow. Thus, Godfrey had chosen this tactic. Keeping the knight’s attention on himself kept the others out of harm’s

way.

“...You are determined to infuriate me at every turn,” Leoncio growled, loath to be under Godfrey’s protection.

Even as Leoncio watched, the knight cast the crossbow aside, gripping the halberd with both hands.

“He dropped the bow! Full strength!”

“That was all one-handed...?”

Godfrey grimaced. The knight leaped from the horse, the halberd descending from on high.

“...!”

Godfrey put his free hand on the back of his blade, blocking the halberd. The force was stupendous and caused his knees to buckle. But just as it seemed like his legs would fold under him, he used the full might of the added strength his mana circulation provided and pushed back.

“Rahhh!”

The tip of the halberd swam in Godfrey’s vision, the knight’s finishing blow defended against—and it went still. An absurd use of mana, it left Godfrey feeling distanced from his own body, yet he spied a *smile* beneath the knight’s helm.

“Hng...”

No longer mounted, the knight stood upon its own two legs. The girl sounded as impressed as she was appalled.

“You’re something else, Godfrey. He *likes* you!”

The knight struck a high stance—an invitation. As imposing as a warrior ought to be. Godfrey shot forward, responding in kind.

“WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

They fought face-to-face. A swift halberd strike, deflected; a step in close as the tip wavered—but the knight had anticipated that and swept its halberd

horizontally.

“...Gah...!”

The hilt—not the blade—caught Godfrey’s side. With the knight’s skill, it could do more than enough damage even without actually slicing. The impact stopped Godfrey in his tracks, and the next swing bore down upon him.

“Extruditor! Ducere!”

Leoncio’s spells shot in to prevent it. The first pushed the halberd aside, and the second peeled off a piece of the chest armor. Saved in the nick of time, Godfrey glanced once at the blond mage.

“Oaf of the highest order, why do you play at warriors’ games? What are you?!”

A roar of fury. And a pointed reminder.

“Right.” Godfrey winced. “I’m a *mage*.”

The knight had regrouped and was stepping in, swinging down. Godfrey stepped back to avoid that—and a spell crossed his tongue.

“Flamma!”

A focused bolt of fire struck the gap in the armor, burning the body within. As the knight staggered, light passed over their heads.

“He has arrived! Hear our plea, Jizo Bosatsu!” the girl cried. “I know you can tell—these children do not belong here!”

The moment her plea was accepted, light poured down from above, enveloping them.

“Mm—”

“Whoa—?! ”

The ground underfoot fell away—hell retreated. As the knight’s presence faded, Godfrey caught a last word flung after it.

A gray space, devoid of sound. The mages looked around, taking in where the Jizo Bosatsu had left them.

“...We got away...?” Lesedi asked.

“...Somehow,” the girl said, sounding relieved. “Well done, all of you. Honestly, when the overseer appeared, I thought it was all over.”

Remembering the knight’s last remark, Godfrey grimaced. “He said to come again once I die. Not sure how to respond to *that* invitation.”

“Tell him *hell no*. What other answer is there?” Lesedi spat.

Godfrey nodded and turned to Leoncio, offering his hand.

“Appreciate the assist, Mr. Echevalria. He’d have cut me down otherwise. My survival is your doing.”

“I merely called a fool a fool. Spare me the gratitude—it makes me want to kill you myself.”

Leoncio knocked Godfrey’s hand aside, then turned his back, addressing the painting girl.

“So where are we? Not outside the painting, I take it?”

“Afraid not. But we’re close to our destination.”

She urged them on, her voice grim. As she spoke, Godfrey looked around—and found a patch of white light in the gray.

“This painting is, as yet, untitled. You’re in an unfinished hellscape. Severo’s here with you—and the children you’re searching for.”

Tim and Ophelia had kept a low profile, moving onward—but before them lay a space teeming with paint sprites. Too big to dash across, too little cover to sneak by. This left them both with a difficult decision.

“...We’re screwed. Can’t go farther without being spotted.”

“Yes... I hate to, but let’s lie low awhile.”

They nodded and cast at the wall hiding them, slipping into a shelter meant for two. Inside, they closed the openings, leaving only peepholes.

Tim let out a sigh. “Might have been better off in the cage—let’s hope that’s not the case. If it turns out to be, let me say sorry here.”

“No need. Whatever the outcome, I have no intention of leaving my life in someone else’s hands. I’m sure Carlos is coming for me anyway. I’m just worried he and Godfrey are getting themselves in—”

She broke off mid-sentence. Something unnatural beyond the wall sent chills down both of their spines.

“Ngh—”

“...Don’t...breathe...!”

Making as little noise as they could, they peered through the peepholes. Someone was walking frantically back and forth outside—a slim young man with a spellbrush in one hand. His clothing spattered with paint, his gaunt cheeks and hollow eyes speaking to his torments.

“Dammit! I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know! How do I save you mages?! Nothing makes you change! Burning, stabbing, crushing—nothing cleanses the corruption in your souls!”

He was muttering, agitated—and the birdman sprites brought him an unconscious underclassman. One from a different batch than Tim and Ophelia.

“Mm?” The man frowned. “Why are you bringing me children? I’ve told you they’re no use as a motif!”

He sighed, disappointed, and the sprites flew off, leaving the student behind. The man waved his wand, making a chair behind him and then settling down on it.

“I need humans who have *sinned*. Fully grown mages—or they’re worthless to me. Though even if I had some, I would not know what to do with them.”

He clutched his head, muttering away.

“...If I am to draw hell, I must *witness* it. Must I copy Azian folklore? All I’ve done, and back to *that*? Augh. No, no, I can’t. I don’t want that again. Once nearly destroyed me. A second—”

He quivered, then his eyes snapped to the sleeping student. Slowly, he raised his hand.

“...But I have to paint...otherwise, it will be in vain...in which case...”

He rose from his chair, staggering forward. Just as he was about to touch the student...

“Don’t.”

A voice stopped him. The man jumped. And he found Tim Linton glaring at him.

“I’m outta my element, but I can tell,” Tim growled, looking the man in the eye. “This is your moment of no return. Remember what it is you *really* wanna achieve. It ain’t *that*.”

Ophelia caught up, standing next to him.

“...Tim...!”

“Sorry, Ophelia. But you know as well as I do—if we fail to stop him here, we’re all doomed.”

He spoke with confidence, and the man’s voice quivered.

“...Who are you? Why are you here...?” he asked, confused.

“Your paint sprites nabbed us. Do you realize you’ve been consumed by the spell?”

Tim put the plain truth out there, and the man gaped at him, then smiled weakly.

“...Ha-ha, don’t be silly... I’m just in my studio, painting away...”

“Then why’s he here? Why are we? Artists know the difference between their own paintings and outside elements, right? Open your eyes. Look around. Was this what your studio looked like?”

Tim waved at the unreal landscape. The man gazed at the space, stunned—and then realization sank in.

“Oh...I see. We’re *inside* a painting...”

Glad the man was following along, Tim turned up the pressure.

“Nice of you to join us. Let us out. You said you can’t use us, but you’ve captured us anyway. We mages don’t die easy, so we’re loath to accept a pointless death.”

He pinned his hopes on this, and the man's shoulders shook.

"...So it's true, Juanita..."

A name crossed his lips. With his eyes unfocused, he rambled on.

"They only bring children... All too young to face their sins. Is that a sign that I must sin myself...? Were you alone not sin enough? I cannot envision the hell I must paint—is that what you're telling me...?"

"...! Yo, come back to us!" Tim shouted.

"No use. He's too far gone," Ophelia replied.

"...Very well," the man said, his trembling dying away. "I'll try these three. Sorry I ever hesitated..."

He was still talking himself into it, murky eyes turning to the two juniors.

"Kimberly Magic Academy seventh-year Severo Escobar. Majoring in post-realism. I am, as I have ever been, a hopelessly untalented magic painter of hellscapes. That is the name of the demon who will slaughter you. Curse that name, children."

That was a declaration of war. Tim and Ophelia each took a step back, drawing their athames—and attacking first.

"Partus!"

A swiftly grown chimera leaped from Ophelia's belly. With a fearsome birthing cry, it attacked—and the man's eyes went wide.

"A chimera in your belly...? How awful. Your body is a punishment handed down at the moment of your birth..."

And while his eyes were locked on that, Tim closed in. A paint sprite threw itself in front of his spell, but Tim spat the magic potion he'd planted in his mouth. The toxic mist hit the man's eyes, blinding him.

"...You've taken my eyes," the man whispered. "A lethal poison. Yet, you had it in your mouth... How you must have suffered to obtain *that* resistance..."

Seizing this chance, Tim and Ophelia joined the chimera, attacking. But the man's brush moved too fast for the eye to see, drawing bars in the air that

blocked their progress.

“...Wonderful, children. Your lives were full of screams. A proper sacrificial motif...”

Before they could recover, his brush moved. A towering demon, a severed head aloft on white wings, a lizardman with a gleaming sword. What he drew in the area became the denizens of hell.

“As you are, wanting for nothing—become my sin.”

Tim and Ophelia fought back against these new opponents, but this man was *making* paint sprites. No matter how many they defeated, there were always more. Their efforts were fruitless—in no time, they were on the defensive, cornered.

“He’s got no eyes, but we can’t get through!”

“We’re inside his painting. Even blind, this is a part of him...!”

They cast spells, hoping for any way to turn this around. Well aware they had no shot at winning. That a desperate last stand was their only option.

Their resistance did not last even five minutes.

Three underclassmen in a heap before him. The man looked them over, muttering, “No, no...that’s not it...!”

His voice rose to a shriek. He pulled at his hair. Frustrated by the futility of his own actions.

“It’s not right, Juanita! There is no point in suffering! The Azian monks refuted that! Suffering is our constant state—how can that purify a soul?!”

His voice a rasp, like he was coughing up blood. An empty hollow in his eyes.

“I already knew. What I seek...is something I lost long ago. No end of searching will find that anywhere within me. That’s why I looked for motifs outside of art. But what I need is not mature mages, not sacrificial lambs...”



He folded to the ground. Seeking an answer he could not find.

“...We mages have no god to beg for mercy. In the bowels of hell...what name do we call?”

As if in answer, a chunk of wall drawn by his own brush blew inward.

“——?! ”

He swung around to face it and found a boy striding through the dust.

“...Is everyone at this school a giant pain in the ass?”

Three underclassmen were on the newcomer's heels—but the man's eyes were locked on the one in the lead. On those eyes, with a purpose far too strong.

“You want help, then? With something you can't handle on your own? Then say the word. Not to a nonexistent god, but to me—I'm right here.”

As the boy drew near, one of his companions ran over to Tim and Ophelia, standing before them.

“Call for me, and I will come. As long as I can hear your voice, as long as my limbs still move—that is the vow I swore.”

That was how he lived. Tim and Ophelia were gazing at his back, smiling through their injuries.

“You came...”

Godfrey nodded emphatically.

“Kept you waiting,” he said. His words doubled as an acknowledgment of the fight they'd endured. “We're here to take you two home.”

His voice echoed through the air around them. That alone changed the entire mood.

“Wh-who...are you...?” the artist stammered.

“The man you need, Severo.”

The painting lifted from Godfrey's back, the girl calling out from within. Severo's eyes went wide.

“Juanita?! Why are you here...? You shouldn’t be... I mean...you were with me, berating my every move...”

“That Juanita is your *sin*. I’m the one you painted and cut away from your heart—a portrait of me when I was *healthy*. When I was alive, you *had* to capture me. But you could not bear to have me smiling at you. The moment I was done, you gifted me to the dorms.”

She spoke with sorrow. Desperate to make up for lost time.

“The thing you’ve lost, the subject of your final masterpiece—it’s right here. Don’t look away. Face it. I know you can do it.”

“Unh...unh...unhhhhhh...!”

A ripple went through Severo. He raised his spellbrush—an instinctive defense.

Eyes on him, Godfrey asked the girl, “He seems past talking. May I?”

“Yes. No need to overthink this. Just show him who you are.”

“Solis lux!”

A light from the side, not waiting for their talk to end. Severo blocked with a barrier wall. Godfrey looked surprised, and Leoncio snorted.

“I care not about your circumstances. I’m here to kill my enemy—the rest of you suit yourselves.”

With that, he attacked, lunging in without fear. Lesedi watched his back, and Carlos stepped up next to her.

“Hang on a moment longer, Lia,” they said, glancing down. “This won’t take long.”

“He’s in the top year, but what of it? We’re here to do our thing.”

“I’ll keep addressing him as I fight. As many words as I can, for as long as I can. You keep me alive.”

Both nodded. Lesedi and Godfrey chased after Leoncio.

“Carlos, sing!” Godfrey called. “It should work on him!”

“Got it! I’ll sing till my lungs explode!”

Carlos put their fingers to their throat tattoo. It came away like a ribbon, and they started singing—the output of their enchanted voice far more powerful. Calling to the fading mind of a man consumed by the spell—and with the scene set, Godfrey roared.

“Come at me, painter of hell!”

His first spell mowed down the paint sprites in his way. The defensive film on his arm turned white, but there was no use conserving strength here. Godfrey threw himself at the seventh-year with the full force of his ideals.

“You wish to paint salvation! That’s why you chose hellscapes! Correct?”

“.....Yes! Yet, that salvation eludes me! Nothing I paint is sufficient to save a mage! No matter how I move my brush, I have seen every hell this world offers, and I know they are beyond salvation...!”

The answer he got was a desperate cry. But the fact that he responded at all—seemed like a path forward. Godfrey stayed focused on the fight, but lent his ears, chose his words, moving steadily closer to Severo’s heart.

“Our salvation? I’d argue you must save yourself first. How can you save anyone when you yourself have not been saved?”

“I do not want it—I no longer have the right!”

A vehement rejection—and Severo’s brush painted countless torture implements, which flew at his foes. Godfrey’s second spell burned these away, his tone unchanged.

“Then that is equally true for the mages you wish to save. Do you see the contradiction? Their salvation is *your* salvation—you cannot have one without the other. No success without sacrifice. That is how a *mage* thinks! No wonder you’re going in circles.”

He was pointing out the obvious flaws in Severo’s logic while demonstrating his understanding. Godfrey had faced many mages on campus, and many had shared the same distorted ideals—as the artist before him did.

“The salvation you seek lies outside that cycle! And I believe I know the

answer.”

“Then tell me! What manner of punishment is it?!”

He painted more sprites even as he asked; Lesedi’s kicks and Leoncio’s spells made short work of them, allowing Godfrey to remain close and try to get through.

“...I loathe this school. For many reasons—but chief among them? Nobody takes care of themselves. They all see themselves as further grist for the mill. And that only gets worse with each passing year, the more complete a mage they become.”

His speech tore the covers from his foe, yet equally revealed himself. Godfrey saw that as a fair exchange. Attempting to reach his opponent’s heart without baring his own would be the height of arrogance.

“We all die eventually—thus, as long as we go on living, we are bound to lose that which matters to us. This is true not just for mages, but for ordinaries, too. But how are humans meant to handle this loss?”

Severo had no answer to that, so he said nothing.

“We *grieve*,” Godfrey said, providing one. “We reflect on what we lost, on feelings that cannot be replaced—and we make that a part of ourselves. If that leaves a hollow that cannot be filled, then that is a reminder of what we once had. You cannot paint over it; you cannot turn your eyes away—you can only run your fingers along the frame.”

“What meaning does *that* have?!” Severo screamed.

Swords shot from the ground at his feet. Godfrey leaped away, his third spell melting them, and spoke again before his feet even touched the ground.

“It has no meaning, nor should it. That is inherent to the concept of the irreplaceable! It matters too much for anything else to take its place? Then that is the core of our humanity! And you know why? Because we are more than logs for the pyre! Our lives are not a means to someone else’s end!”

Godfrey’s speech rang out above the clamor of the battle.

“...I don’t get it! I don’t get it...!” Severo wailed, shaking his head. “Nothing

you say makes sense! Please use words I can understand...!”

“No, you already do! Deep down, this is what you crave! You simply have not accepted it. You once possessed a spark so vital it could not be replaced. Yet, you stubbornly avert your eyes from it. Because you were taught that a mage should not reflect on the lives cast aside, taught that all such sacrifices have *meaning*.”

Severo’s brush generated a blizzard, and Godfrey’s fourth spell pushed it back. The protective film was gone, and Godfrey’s arm was starting to burn. None of that pain showed on his face—his eyes locked only on the artist.

“I’ll say it again. Trace the hollow within. The place it used to be. It may not *mean* anything; it may be objectively of no consequence—by sorcerous standards, it may appear a laughable concern. But that was a spark you alone cannot deny.”

Draw her once a day. His mother’s orders, when he was very young.

At first, Severo was baffled by these instructions. A nonmagical girl, hired as a servant—how could that serve as a motif of any value? Would he not be better off spending that time acquiring other techniques?

But in time, he understood. She was not a servant, but a teaching material. A girl doomed to an untimely death three years hence—and he was to record her progression to that demise, burn her life and death into his eyes.

“You know what, Severo? I think mages are very sad creatures.”

Thus, Severo continued to draw her. As her cheeks grew gaunt, her skin dry. Where once she had bounded around merrily, now she could only lie in bed.

“To pursue your spells, you must trample on morality and ethics. Throw what really matters into the fires of your ambitions. There is nothing protecting your heart. It’s like you’re standing naked in a field, at the mercy of the elements.”

Severo remembered every emotion and idea the girl had expressed in her short life.

“That’s why we ordinaries make up gods. We imagine salvation from nothing, and it gives us comfort. I think you need something to serve that function.

Without it, you will lose sight of your own essence.”

There was a smile on the girl’s face. The kindness there alone unchanged from when she was healthy—a fact that struck him as cruel.

“Promise me you’ll paint that one day, Severo.”

“And so I painted,” Severo whispered, tears he’d long held back streaming down his face. “Painting after painting. I had to create great works, the likes of which no one had ever seen, art that could lead to the future of sorcery—nothing else made sense. If the art drawn in your blood does not hold value equal to you, that’s just unacceptable. If I fail, then what did you die for? How am I to reward your sacrifice?”

A plea, delivered through sobs. The girl’s painting had been hovering away from the front lines, but now it swooped down next to Godfrey.

“...Imagine,” she said, speaking words to the artist that she alone could offer. “Imagine that right here, right now—the world ends. Everything you mages built, the history dedicated to the pursuit of sorcery—all for naught.”

A harsh hypothetical. An awful future, in which no sacrifices were rewarded. But despite that fact, her voice did not waver.

“The time we spent together is still here. It does not have to *mean* anything. It’s still with us, Severo.”

In the frame, the girl had her hand on her chest. Severo dropped his spellbrush, clutching his head with both hands.

“...Unh—ah—aughhhhhh...!”

The painted world began to waver. As the artist’s mind shook, so did the order imposed upon this space. All that was left was to wait for its collapse, taking everything with it—and when the girl realized that, she barked an order.

“Burn it, Godfrey.”

“Burn what?”

“Everything. There’s too much clutter on this canvas.”

Godfrey doubted his ears, yet he realized that was the only path left to them.

The girl gave him one more push.

“Cleanse it. If all else is gone, his eyes will see what he is meant to paint.”

A simple plea for a blank canvas. Godfrey had to nod.

“Very well. If I can manage that before I burn myself up, that is.”

Godfrey raised his athame. He’d fired four spells already, and his arm was badly burnt—realizing what he meant to do, Lesedi looked aghast.

“No—you’re gonna doublecant? That’ll turn you to ash!”

“I’ll apply the convergence magic principle. Help me control it, Lesedi.”

She grimaced but moved up beside him. Placing her own wand alongside Godfrey’s, but warning, “It’s not my forte! Don’t blame me if we both burn up!”

“Then let me say sorry now—and thank you,” Godfrey told her with a smile.

That was the last push she needed, and her voice grew calm.

“Then let me make one minor request. Instead of Flamma, use Ignis.”

“Mm?”

“I feel that fits you better. Don’t ask why—it’s pure instinct.”

An abrupt proposal as he laid his life on the line. But that was what had brought them here. Words from a trusted comrade. Godfrey nodded readily.

“...Okay. Somehow, I think you’re right.”

He focused, took a deep breath—and chanted the spell.

“Enfoldo Ignis!”

A surge of mana raged within. Focusing it, controlling it, manifesting flames from his wand—Godfrey was entirely unable to handle it all, the overflowing fires began to burn his arm.

“...Gah...!”

“Focus! Don’t let your visual slip!” Lesedi urged.

He held on for dear life, but that was not enough. Now the flames were wrapping around *her* arm.

“...Shit... I can’t hold it...!”

“Back away, Lesedi!” Tim shouted. “There’s still time—”

“Shut up, moron! Want me to split your head before the fires consume us?!”

Lesedi had never scowled harder, pouring everything she had into controlling the spell. Godfrey felt sensation leaving his arm, knew death was approaching... and then he saw another wand join theirs.

“...Fools. Must you make me do everything?”

“——?!”

“Echevalria?!”

“I’ll hold your reins! Abandon your sloppy attempt at control, make like the overpowered oaf you are, and blast at full strength! That’s your one and only talent!”

With that insult, he joined the effort. The overflowing flames forced in the right direction, focusing—and with three mages pouring mana in, the power of the spell grew stronger still.

“You can say that again.”

Godfrey nodded and abandoned all restraint. The flames he issued enveloped the collapsing world.

“Ah—”

Severo floated in the midst of it, his mind bereft of destination.

“...It’s burning,” he whispered. “It’s all consumed by flames.”

Even as the words crossed his lips, he thought it odd. There had been fires in the eight great hells they’d crossed—all meant to torment the sinners there. But here, there was no such suffering. Bathed in these cleansing fires, his body consumed by them, Severo felt more at peace than ever before.

“...It doesn’t hurt...? Why...are these flames so—?”

“They’re consuming your *burden*.”



The painting girl hovered next to him. Flames already licking her frame. That old, familiar sight made Severo's face crumple.

"Juanita...I'm sorry. I never managed—"

"You don't have time for apologies. Take brush in hand."

She interrupted him, urging him to action. Suggesting he no longer had anything to fret about. What he'd been seeking was here before him.

"You can see it, right? This is what you wished to draw. A cradle of gentle flames, cleansing mages of their sins, calling forth the humanity that lies within," she told him. "No more tears. No more punishments. Your salvation has always lain *here*."

Only then did it fall into place. Hell was for those who'd sinned and died—not to punish the living. Suffering was not the answer—that went hand in hand with life as a mage. What they required was absolution for a soul stained with grief.

"...Purgatory. Oh yes...that's the word..."

That was a concept from ordinary religions. A place between heaven and hell, where souls were cleansed in fire for their own salvation. He'd known the word but had been unable to imagine it. He could envision flames as punishment but not as salvation.

Yet—now they lay before him. Gentle flames, wrapped around his wounded soul.

His brush leaped to his hand. Harbored with infinite passion. Grateful to all who had led him to this end, he gave it shape, shape that would remain.

"How...warm..."

It all went up in flames—and consequently, they were expelled from the finished painting.

"Hahhh...!"

Snapping out of it, Godfrey found himself standing, athame in hand. He'd used all his mana, and there were no flames left to offer. Looking around, he spied an unfamiliar room. Leoncio and Lesedi stood on either side, equally

stunned—and Carlos at a distance, looking around, Tim, Ophelia, and many other underclassmen at their feet.

“Where...are we...?”

“His studio. Thank you. Severo completed his work.”

Godfrey turned toward the fading voice. There, he saw the painting they’d emerged from—the last echoes of her voice came from within. Godfrey stepped closer, straining to hear them.

“All captured children...are now free. They’re all with you.”

“So it seems. Mr. Escobar?”

“Severo...has already merged with the painting. But don’t feel bad. He was...truly grateful.”

Her joy was genuine. Even as her voice grew faint, that last message came through.

“I’m melding with him. My last...request. Take this painting...up to the school.”

With that, he heard no more. After a long moment, he straightened up.

“...It’s over,” Carlos said. “The channel is broken.”

“So this is his masterpiece? Awfully cheery for a hellscape...,” Godfrey said, looking the painting over.

It showed people covered in orange flames, but their eyes were closed, their expressions peaceful. He was no art critic, but he sensed that this depicted salvation for all mages: the final answer one magic painter had arrived at.

Lesedi joined him for a while, but soon her mind turned back to reality.

“There’s no threat here. Let’s wake the others and head for the library. I’ve seen enough hells for one lifetime—don’t ever want to see another.”

Shaking her head, she put Tim on her shoulder. Godfrey heard him grumble—and then spotted Leoncio, standing across the room, his back to them.

“Echevalria? Your burns—”

“Stay away!”

A bark that stopped him in his tracks. A beat hung in the air.

“The injuries are not substantial,” Leoncio said, calmer. “Look after yourself.”

“...Okay, will do.”

Once back in school, their conflict would resume—so Godfrey was not about to insist. Carlos had started healing Ophelia, so he headed that way.

“What does this mean...?” Leoncio whispered, clenching his hands. “Why...am I crying?”

He could not comprehend his own emotions—and he glared balefully down at his own crotch. At his outsize member, pushing up the cloth at full salute.

“And why...are you *hard*...?”



Epilogue

205

Side of Fire

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Epilogue

Hauling the recovered underclassmen, they left the studio. By the time they reached the fourth layer's reading area, they found a rescue squad of upperclassmen waiting to escort them to safety. The students on campus above were shocked to see Godfrey carrying Severo's final work with him.

They gave their reports, and the next day, the school declared the situation resolved. The sealed paintings were restored to their original locations, and Kimberly was back to its usual level of constant violence.

Godfrey was standing alone before the painting when Tim yelled his name, throwing his arms around Godfrey from behind. The boy had recovered from his injuries quickly and earned himself a smile.

"All good, Tim? Those weren't mild injuries..."

"See for yourself! Never been better. The moment you arrived, my mind was fully healed! My body was just being a quitter, so I couldn't get up."

"I was scared you'd actually *try*." Carlos chuckled, catching up. "You ought to listen to your body sometimes, okay?"

Lesedi and Ophelia joined them. Godfrey turned to the neighborhood watch and made it formal.

"Lesedi, Carlos, Ophelia—I put you all through a lot this time. As the leader, I regret exposing my companions to harm."

"Godfrey..." Ophelia sighed.

"Remorse is useless," Lesedi scoffed. "You're gonna do this same thing umpteen times."

Godfrey winced. "Can't argue with that," he admitted. "Naturally, I'll try to learn from this and avoid risks...but I suspect Lesedi's right. As long as there are those in need of help, I'll go running after them. Just as Mr. Escobar's paintings

were his burden, this is my lot as a mage.”

He’d come to that realization a while ago. He glanced around at their faces.

“But I don’t intend to rope others into my mess. I’ll go the rest alone. As of today, the neighborhood watch—”

Before he could say another word, a fist hit his solar plexus. Lesedi hadn’t held back at all, and her punch left him gasping for air.

“...Guh...”

“A solid hit. Rejoice—that was good enough to make me forgive what you just said.”

With that, she fixed him with a glare. For once, no one admonished her. Ophelia stepped forward, speaking quietly.

“...The whole time we were in the painting, I never doubted. I knew you and Carlos would come to save us.”

“Ophelia...”

“Even consumed by the spell, Mr. Escobar was drawn to you—and I think I get why. Kimberly is a cold place. But that’s not true around you. Here...there is warmth.”

Ophelia took Godfrey’s hand in hers, staring right into his eyes. She’d felt something along these lines before, but now those feelings came into focus, and she wished to share them.

“...Let me stay by your side. I will not die easily. I will get stronger—”

“Ain’t nothing to worry about, Godfrey! Next time I’ll kill ’em all solo!”

Tim, never one to take a hint, started talking over her. One of Ophelia’s eyes twitched, and she spun around to face him.

“Tim, I was in the middle of something.”

“And there was no need to hold his hand while you did. Can’t put anything past you! Godfrey, give my tits a squeeze as a palate cleanser.”

“Fake tits made with a transformation spell?! Move aside! I’m not finished!”

The two first-years were now grappling, and Godfrey just blinked at them.

“...You’re sure?” he asked. “If you stick around—”

“Perhaps it’s a foolish choice,” Carlos said, smiling. “But I know this for sure—not one person here will regret it.”

That smile banished Godfrey’s last concern. Casting aside his pain, he looked proud, gazing upon his stalwart companions.

“Thank you... I’ll shoulder the burden of your lives once more.”

His eyes flicked down—and two older students came their way.

“Oh, it’s the band of fools! Breaking records again? Congrats!”

“I—I don’t think...that’s the best phrasing...”

A third-year girl, as dangerous as she was outwardly friendly, backed by a second-year male with the distinctly gloomy vibe of a curse wrangler. This duo had made a powerful impression, and the watch braced themselves.

“Bloody Karlie...!”

“What do you want?!”

“Ah, settle down. We ain’t here to fight. Just taking a gander at the old boy’s success. You the same, right?”

She fluttered her hand and slipped past them to the painting. She and the boy looked up at it awhile.

“Okay...I get it,” Karlie said. “That is something else.”

She looked up at the rafters, fingers dabbing at the corners of her eyes. The boy handed her a handkerchief, and she took it, blowing her nose.

“Really put a tingle back there. Damn, dude could paint...”

“I-I’m shocked. D-didn’t think you had a s-sensitive bone in you.”

“Robert, how dare you. You think I’m some sort of lout?” Karlie put his head in an iron claw.

Here, Lesedi voiced a question.

“I felt something from it myself, but what meaning does this have,

specifically? Something about the path of our sorcery...?”

“Girl, don’t ask me about philosophy shit. Post-realist art ain’t anything that concrete. All I know is, it moves something in the viewer—what that *means* is beyond me. Could be a few centuries before we work it out.”

Karlie flashed a grin, then pursed her lips, tearing her eyes away from the painting.

“...Ah, I can’t. If I stare at this any longer, I’ll dry out. Hate to run, but I gotta.” She swung around. “See ya later, Purgatory.”

She slapped Godfrey on the shoulder and headed for the door, the gloomy boy in tow.

“...Did you mean me?” Godfrey asked.

“Who else? That’s the painting’s title. You got Mr. Escobar to paint it, and you brought it back up here. Might as well call you the same thing. Not sure who first came up with it, but most of the upperclassmen are calling you that now.”

Karlie shrugged it off, yet Godfrey had no clue how to respond. She shot him an impish grin.

“Not many idiots serve as a Final Visitor in only their second year,” she said. “Makes people expect things. So this ain’t an encouragement so much as it is an order: Don’t die easy, kid.”

With that, she was off down the hall, leaving Godfrey clutching his head.

“What an epithet...”

“Agreed.” Lesedi grinned. “But it’s memorable. Nearly every student here’s seen this painting.”

Tearing their eyes off the painting, Carlos added, “This is just the beginning of your legend.”

A second prophecy. A few years in the future, they’d all look back—and know for a fact it had come true.

END

Afterword

Curtains rise on a time of fire. Hello, I am Bokuto Uno.

The history of Kimberly is a long one, and no matter where you look, turmoil lies. But the changes made just before Oliver Horn and Nanao Hibiya enrolled were significant; without them, they'd have led very different lives. Alvin Godfrey's arrival divided things into before and after.

Godfrey's neighborhood watch precedes the elected Campus Watch. A number of incidents spread their fame, yet they are still but a fragile group. As their allies grow, so will their enemies; and in time, they will tackle the maelstrom at the heart of Kimberly. Their trials are far greater than what you see in these pages. Their enemies far more imposing. They will face many an encounter—and a few departures.

Their adventure has only just begun. See you in the next purgatory.

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