

### Deliberately

Mage crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the doorway. “Cery. Come on...” she pleaded, practically bouncing with impatience.

Cery very deliberately finished her sentence, put her finger on the text to mark her place, and looked up at Mage from her spot sprawled across the bed. Then, just as deliberately, she blinked, once, twice, radiating an utter lack of comprehension. She almost wished she wore spectacles, so that she could deliberately push them half a centimeter up her nose for emphasis. “Mage. It’s a dance. Party. Thing. Whatever.” She waved her hand inarticulately. “What am I going to do at a party?”

Mage laughed. The late afternoon sunshine lit up her smile. “Dance? Socialize? Flirt with a boy? Get out of that book and into the real world.”

Cery sighed and rolled her eyes. She lifted her finger from the page and went back to reading. Only, she couldn’t. She was far too aware of Mage still there, in her doorway, watching

her, waiting for her to break. She felt a nervous sort of flutter in her chest. Could she... Did she dare to... No. Definitely not.

She scoured her mind for another excuse. “Mage, please. I am dead tired. They had me practicing telekinesis all morning. And I *hate* moving things with my mind. Like, why can’t I just walk across the room and do it myself? Isn’t that what *feet* and *hands* are for? I have better things to use my magic on...” She realized she was rambling. Why did she keep *saying* things when it was obvious no one cared?

Mage didn’t seem to mind, though. “And what better way to rid yourself of the stresses of a modern education... than to relax and enjoy a good party?”

“Ha ha,” Cery said flatly. She stared at the page, not seeing a word. Her heart began to pound at the mountain of possibilities she feared she might have to climb. She never had been good at saying no...

The drumming of her heartbeat couldn’t quite drown out the sound of Mage’s footsteps as she crossed the room, or the sound of the springs creaking as Mage sat beside her on the bed. Close. Almost too close – closer than Cery would have allowed under ordinary circumstances.

The mere thought of hundreds of students so close together, their sweat and warmth brushing against her skin, of casual, accidental contact, of an atmosphere so dense with heightened emotion and exuberant magical energy that everyone’s life force blurred together and flowed through hers...

She wanted to drown herself in hot water and scrub her skin off.

She gave up pretending to read and craned her neck to look up at the girl next to her. That was a mistake. Mage was too close, her big brown eyes open too wide, her face too earnest, her lips formed into a perfect pout.

Cery closed her eyes and rolled onto her back. “Nope. Nope nope nope you are not going to get me like that.”

“Cery.” Something in her voice made Cery look. Mage was wearing a stern frown. “You know I love a good book as much as anyone. But come *on*, I know you want to get out sometimes. I know you want to know what that “real world” out there is like – you know the one they write bad teen novels about? The ones where people talk to each other about boring things and nobody knows a word in a dead language and kids get drunk and fall all over each other and share sloppy kisses in the nearest dark corner?”

“Wow. You make that sound *so* appealing.”

“Yeah. But you know you want to.”

Cery felt the fluttering again. That desperate sense of reckless abandon rising up in her chest, that terrifying feeling of free fall that showed up whenever she thought she might make an impulsive decision or interact with actual *people*, that desperation that made her want to curl up and hide under the covers forever and yet, all at once, go sing off key and dance like an idiot...

“They spent all morning telling you what to do with your magic, with your *life*, trying to force you to learn self-control... but now you have the opportunity to defy them. You can lose control, and you can take back your life...”

“Mage. We’re not starting a revolution here...”

Mage laughed. “Whatever. It was worth a shot. I guess I’ll have to go back to: Please? Pretty please with a cherry on top?”

Cery felt herself balanced precariously on the tipping point of a decision – safe, but lonely, or...? She hesitated, an answer on the tip of her tongue, but she wasn’t sure which one.

She was still completely baffled that someone like Mage Wexler actually wanted to be friends with her. She'd arrived at the beginning of the school year and promptly locked herself away from the enthusiastic hordes of returning students. That first week, she'd hardly left her room. But after six days of hiding, she'd finally put up a chalkboard on her door, with "Ceridwen" written across the top in meticulous cursive.

The next evening, after an overwhelming day of classes, she'd arrived to find the simple message: "Hi!" with a great big smiley face. She was standing there staring at it in confusion – what was the proper etiquette for smiley faces left on your chalkboard? – when Mage came around the corner.

"Hi. You're Cery, right – can I call you Cery?" she said, smiling that absolutely contagious smile that never changed. Mother had always insisted on Ceridwen...

Now, once again, a smile was spreading across Mage's face. She knew she'd won. She always did, in the end. Cery groaned and pulled the pillow over her face, drowning out the world in a sea of soft greet fabric. "Fine! Fine, fine, fine, I will go to the stupid dance."

Mage laughed, giddy with her success, and fell over onto the bed, next to Cery. "Why milady," she said, in the poshest of tones, "I would be ever so pleased to be your escort."

Cery hit her with the pillow.

This should be interesting.

She was regretting it already. The fluttering monster in her chest, content with having utterly ruined her life, had slunk back into its slumber. Now all she could feel was her heart pounding and the warm presence of another body, far too close to hers.

"So... what do I wear?" Cery asked.

“Hmm... wear something pretty,” Mage said. “You might catch someone’s eye... I heard Roger Flannigan has a crush on you.”

Cery rolled her eyes, but she could feel the heat radiating from her cheeks as her face flushed. Mage didn’t know... “Flannigan?” Cery said, busying herself with shuffling through the hangers. “Please. I can do better than that...”

In the end, Mage had to pick out an appropriate outfit – that green dress that Cery never wore. It had been her mother’s, once. She’d pull it out from the depths of her closet, every once in a while, to admire the soft sheen of the fabric or trace her fingers over the floral embroidery on the bodice, but it was always too short, or too fancy, so she’d pull on a pair of blue jeans and a sweater and pretend she didn’t care about being pretty. Mage had to help her with the zipper, and the ornamental lacing on the back, and Cery shuddered every time the girl’s fingers accidentally brushed her skin.

She smoothed the fabric over her thighs again, as if that one millimeter of added length could make her stop feeling vulnerable and exposed. Her hands shook as she fumbled with the laces of her boots. But there was no more putting it off. Dress, shoes, hair arranged into slightly less of a brown curly mess...

Mage stood back and examined her – Mage, who had a closet full of purple dresses that should have clashed with her red hair, but didn’t. Mage, who knew exactly how to dress for any social occasion. Mage, who didn’t even have to try, but always looked... breathtaking. That was the word. Cery looked away and fiddled with the too short hem again.

She locked the door behind her, the mechanism designed to respond to a simple command and the residues of her magical signature. Her hand lingered on the doorknob. Maybe there was something she was forgetting, some reason to explain the sense of foreboding hanging

over her head. A catastrophically unfinished piece of homework? A family emergency? A... medical condition?

“Off we go, then,” Mage said cheerfully, and Cery followed her down the hall.

Before she really knew what was happening, Cery was standing at the edge of the clearing, lit by lanterns suspended from the trees. Before her was a mass of bodies – too many, too crowded, all blurring together. Too much energy in too confined a space – ridiculous as that seemed, out here in the open air.

The student body had long ago decided that the castle, built back during Scott’s Invasion, had far too oppressive an atmosphere for social events. Either way you read the history books, too many innocent people had died here. Nowadays it was a school for those “extraordinarily gifted” – a cheap euphemism for “too powerful for their own damn good”. But even so, too many *students* had died within those walls, unable to control their power, or holding on to it too long, hoarding it away, until they burned up into nothing.

Cery shuddered just thinking about it. She wasn’t sure which would be worse, standing in a hall steeped in the magic of generations of ghosts... or standing here, now, where the magic was *alive* and overflowing and she was expected to be a part of it.

“This was a bad idea,” she told Mage, looking at the crowd of unfamiliar faces. It was suddenly far too hard to breathe. “I’m just going to go now. I’m sure you can find someone... to keep you company...”

“Oh come on. Don’t chicken out on me now,” Mage said. She grabbed Cery’s hand, and pulled her into the crowd.

The music was loud, reverberating through her ribcage, clashing with her heartbeat, almost drowning out the chorus of frantic thoughts running through her head. *Don't freak out it's okay what are you doing breathe don't freak out they're just people just keep breathing it's okay...*

When they'd pushed their way far enough, Mage spun around, her red hair twirling around her, and grabbed Cery's other hand. She began to bounce up and down to the music, pulling on Cery's hands. Her hair bounced around her, her limbs moved in wild, uncoordinated motions, but she had that beaming Mage Wexler smile on her face. Her dark brown eyes shone in the lamplight.

Cery's breath caught in her throat. The fluttering had started up again. She felt the magic washing over her, wave after wave crashing over her head, as if she were a pebble on the beach and it was slowly wearing her away... and suppressed the urge to panic.

*Okay, she thought. Don't be a disappointment. You can totally do this "dancing" thing. Ceridwen, for once in your life be a good friend...*

And she began to bounce.

And it was awkward as hell.

But the music kept playing, and Mage kept smiling, and no one gave her a second glance. And if this weird bouncing thing was all it took, maybe she could do this. Mage gave her a look, and she let out an awkward little laugh and tried to smile, and not trip over her feet.

Then the music changed. And so did the dancing. And her feet felt heavy and her heart dropped out of her chest and her head started spinning again. "So... what do I do?"

Mage never stopped smiling. "Here, I'll teach you."

The following moments were among the most uncoordinated in the fourteen years of Cery's life, but between trying to remember what to do with her feet and remember to actually do it in time to the beat thudding through her chest, she almost forgot to worry about what she might look like or how sweaty her palms were or how terribly aware she was of Mage's hands touching her skin.

And then she forgot entirely, in a dizzying sequence of movements and spins and the rising tempo of the music and the crescendo of joyful exuberance. It was like coming up for air after drowning, and the tides of foreign energy no longer overwhelmed her. The feeling of reckless abandon had clawed its way out of her heart again, and her feet were light and so was her heart, and so in the middle of another spin, when she found herself unexpectedly tucked in Mage's arms...

She turned another fraction of a radian, leaned forward the last few centimeters, and gently pressed their lips together.

The moments melted away. She was sure that the music kept playing, and the people kept dancing and her heart kept beating, but she wasn't sure that any of it mattered. She could feel Mage's lips interlocked with hers, warm and sweet and unbelievably soft. She could smell the black currant scent of her hair and feel the warmth of her skin impossibly close...

She pulled away, and the moment shattered, and all the pieces came raining down. *Ceridwen what did you do?* Her heart began to pound, her head began to spin, her knees felt ready to buckle.

Mage's face was stunned and expressionless and close enough for Cery to count the freckles. She focused on that, even though she knew she wouldn't be able to keep track, just so she wouldn't have to notice that beautiful smile had disappeared.

Mage took a breath. Her face creased with confusion, and Cery lost track of the freckles again. “Cery... I’m not sure...”

She could feel herself preparing to turn and run. She couldn’t hear this. Not right now. She knew what was coming, but she couldn’t stand here and listen as Mage said those words. She forced a smile on her face, took Mage by the hand, and twirled her around into an elaborate, dramatic dip, just as the music swelled.

Mage burst out laughing. It was a couple minutes before she could properly control the giggles, and Cery couldn’t help but smile at every resurgence. The song ended, fading slowly into nothingness, and Cery excused herself to retreat to the punch bowl. Every person who brushed against her as she pushed through the crowd sent a swarm of invisible insects scurrying across her skin.

She reached the edge of the crowd. Finally, she could breathe again, in shallow, gasping breaths. The night air cooled the sweat on her skin. There was a yard of empty space – *personal* space – in every direction.

She eyed the bright orange punch warily, wondering if it had been spiked. That was what happened in all the terrible books, after all. On the other hand, what did it matter? Might as well. She ladled herself a glass and downed it. The cloying sweetness stuck to the back of her throat long after she’d swallowed.

“You okay?”

She jumped. Cal Dresdner, from her Old World Literature class, was regarding her curiously from several feet away. He was also in her Intro to Alchemy class. He was around a lot, she realized.

She stared into her cup, where a fraction of an orange slice remained stuck to the bottom. “I just kissed Mage Wexler,” she admitted. She wasn’t sure why. Could she later claim to have been drunk? Was there even any alcohol in this punch?

She snuck a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. He looked her over, head to toe, directly enough to have made her uncomfortable, if it hadn’t been for the rest of the evening.

“Good for you,” he said finally. “I wouldn’t have had the guts.”

Cery gave him a humorless laugh, and downed another glass of punch. It still tasted awful, but it was probably clean. How much of her precious life force would it take to turn the water into whiskey? And could she do it without poisoning herself?

“When was the last time you... y’know, *did* anything?” Cal asked.

“Magic? I...” When *was* the last time? Had it really been in classes that morning? “I’m not sure.” She pressed the back of her hand against her forehead. A fever would be the first sign. Her face did feel hot, but she wasn’t sure if that meant anything.

“Use it or lose it,” he said, twirling his finger around his temple. His tone said he was joking, but his face told her he most certainly wasn’t.

Cery stared into her cup. She hated putting herself in this situation. She *hated* it. Magic for magic’s sake, magic just because if you didn’t it would slowly kill you. She wanted to go home and hide under the covers until her face stopped feeling flushed and her hands stopped shaking and everyone forgot that some idiot had kissed her best friend at the spring dance.

“Hey,” Cal said, gently interrupting her train of thought. “Do you want to go—”

“Don’t say dance.”

He laughed. “Do you want to go sneak into the library? I can show you how to pick the locks before they change them again.”

Cery smiled, just a little bit. “I like libraries...” *Wow. How articulate.* She didn’t know the proper etiquette for this situation, either. If a boy invites you to break into a school building at night, are you allowed to say yes? Does it matter if he’s probably doing it out of pity? And is there an exception if that building is full of very old books?

“You don’t get an offer like this every day.” Cal offered her his hand.

Cery cast a last look at Mage, who was frowning as she slow danced with a boy, the crushing weight of rejection settling on her shoulders. Mage hadn’t said anything, of course. Yet. But she would, tomorrow, or Monday, and then... There would be the awkwardness, and the excuses, and Mage would finally see reason and stop bothering with stupid, *stupid* Ceridwen Smith.

And Cery would probably need a new friend. So as long as Cal was offering... She forced a smile on her face, and walked with Cal through the trees towards the darkened library. This time, she kept her hands to herself.

Cery had hardly slept all night. She was sitting on her bed the next morning reading a book Cal had recommended – which she’d gotten up at the break of dawn and obtained from the library *legally*, no matter what he’d said – when Mage showed up in her doorway again.

“Hey,” Cery said, raising her eyes from the book just long enough to be polite. She stared at the stark black text without comprehending a word.

“Hey, Cery.” Mage fidgeted for a moment. “Listen, about... last night...”

She waited for Cery to say something. Cery didn’t have anything to say. She could feel the humiliation rising up already. There was a lump in her throat. Her face felt hot, her eyes started stinging. She blinked slowly, deliberately, and kept her eyes fixed on the text.

“I’m just not sure...” Mage started again, but fell silent. Cery found herself just a little bit pleased that Mage couldn’t seem to finish a sentence. But she kept trying, and that had to mean something, didn’t it? “I mean, I didn’t think... And I don’t know if I... I just...”

Cery started to smile in spite of herself. She raised her eyes from the book and met Mage’s gaze.

Mage let out the breath she’d been holding, all in a rush, and smiled back. “... do you mind if I read with you?”

“Sure.”

Mage crossed the room and sat against the wall at the foot of Cery’s bed. She opened her book, and fell completely into the text. One moment, she was there, and the next she was miles away, immersed in a thousand year old drama from the Old World.

Their feet were touching.

For a second, Cery didn’t dare move, didn’t dare breathe. But she made herself take a very deliberate breath, and, just as deliberately, relax her muscles and go back to her book. Maybe, just like this, slowly, deliberately, she could get used to another person’s skin touching her own.

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