

Deliberately

Mage crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the doorway. "Cery. Come oooon," she pleaded, bouncing a little with the impatience and excitement of it all.

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, equally deliberately, she blinked, once, twice. She almost wished she wore spectacles, so that she could deliberately push them half a centimeter up her nose. "Mage. It's a dance. Party. Thing. Whatever." She waved her hand inarticulately. "What am I going to do at a party?"

Mage laughed. "Dance. Socialize. Have some fun. Get out of that book and into the real world. Flirt with a boy."

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 room, 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. She scoured her mind for another excuse.

“Mage, please. Archery completely wore me out today. Turns out, redirecting my inner turmoil into wind currents? *So* not my thing.”

“And what better way to rid yourself of that inner turmoil 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 on the bed. "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." Cery certainly couldn't deny that. "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 of French 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 freefall 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 everyone could see her but no one cared...

"Mari will be there, and Cal, and you don't even have to dance. You can stand by the punch bowl and laugh at all us goofy-looking idiots all night if you want to."

Cery felt herself balanced precariously at the tipping point of a decision – safe, but lonely, or...? She hesitated. Maybe...

Mage could sense she was winning. She grinned. "Don't make me tickle you..."

Cery groaned and pulled the pillow over her face. "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.

Mage insisted on dressing her up. Cery did her best to resist, but her heart wasn't quite in it — it was too distracted pounding dreadfully at the most inopportune moments. Why, why, why had she agreed to this? What did she think she was doing? She wasn't... she couldn't...

Before she really knew what was happening, she 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. She knew she should recognize someone, she went to school with these people, but suddenly she could swear not a single face looked familiar.

She felt a little faint. It was suddenly far too hard to breath. This was a bad idea.

She took a deep breath.

It didn't help.

"This was a bad idea," she told Mage. "I'm just going to go now. I'm sure there's someone you know..." she gestured weakly to the swirling crowd.

"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 — almost too loud to hear herself think. Which was good, because it drowned out the chorus of *don't freak out don't freak out what are you doing breathe don't freak out* running on repeat through her mind.

Apparently satisfied with their location, 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 the biggest 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, and suppressed the urge to panic.

Okay, she thought. Don't be a disappointment. Be a good friend. You can totally do this "dancing" thing...

And she began to bounce.

And it was awkward as all 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.

And 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."

What followed were some of the most uncoordinated moments 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 music, 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 the dizzying sequence of movements and spins and the rising tempo of the music and crescendo of joyful exuberance. It was like coming up for air after drowning, and the tides of foreign energy splashing around her were no longer

overwhelming. 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 impossibly soft... She could smell the strawberry scent of her hair and feel the warmth of her skin impossibly close...

Then she pulled away, and the moment shattered, and all the pieces came raining down. Her heart began to pound, her head began to spin, her knees felt ready to buckle.

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

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 hear it.

She forced a smile on her face, took Mage by the hand, and twirled her around into an elaborate, dramatic dip. It was awfully uncoordinated and as out of sync with the music as it was possible to be.

Mage burst out laughing. It was few minutes before she could properly control her giggles. 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.

She eyed it 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 ladeled herself a glass and downed it. It tasted awful.

"You okay?"

She jumped. Cal was regarding her curiously from several feet away.

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 seemed impressed.

"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?

Cal looked her over, head to toe, directly enough to have made her uncomfortable, if it hadn't been for the rest of the evening. "Hey," he said. "Do you want to go—"

"Don't say dance."

Cal laughed, his blue eyes sparkling. "Do you want to go sneak into the library?"

"Yes *please*."

She cast a last look at Mage, who was frowning as she slow danced with a boy, and followed Cal towards the darkened library.

Cery didn't sleep all night. She was sitting on her bed reading when Mage showed up in her doorway the next morning.

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

"Hey, Cery." Mage stood in the doorway and 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 felt silent. Cery found herself just a little bit pleased to find that Mage couldn't seem to finish a sentence. "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 book. 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 French drama.

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, equally deliberately, relax her muscles and open up her book. Maybe, just like this, slowly, deliberately, she could get used to another person's skin touching her own.

So she went back to the book Cal had given her.

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