

CAS

TER

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ONE

I take the coins and am compelled to remind my buyer how things can still go wrong. I thought I was over botching my last mind wipe, but apparently not.

“Like I said before, there are no guarantees,” I say. The corners of the square coins dig into my hand as I riffle through them, counting the number of marks. Removing time from someone’s memory is burning down a single tree in a thick forest—sometimes there’s smoke damage to other trees nearby. “Mind wipes are tricky.”

The last time, I didn’t just wipe out a weekend as requested, but the whole week. Rudy pointed out it had more to do with the nature of the spell than my control. Mostly I believe him, if only because Rudy’s not one for trying to make me feel better.

Coral nods. Her name’s not really Coral—I never want to know their actual names—but it’s what I call her on account of the lipstick she wore on our first meeting, the same shade she’s wearing now. “Still, I’m just asking for one specific day to be gone,” she says, nervously twirling the ends of her brown hair. “But if you can’t do it . . .”

Annoyance flickers across her face even as her eyes stay hopeful.

The conflict comes as no surprise. It’s how most of those with leftover magic feel about casters of full magic, unable to decide if they loathe us or envy us. If they need us or hate us. We’re dangerous, forever having to hide who we are. Only one thing is certain—they can’t do what we can. Full magic.

“Any other caster of full magic will tell you the same,” I say. “No guarantees. And if they say otherwise, they’re lying.” I slide her a cool look, hoping nothing on my face gives away that another caster might be more confident with their magic. How they might’ve done more than the few mind wipes I have. How I’m actually doing this because I still need to be better.

I hold out my hand, offering back the marks. “But be my guest, if you’d like to spend the time searching for someone else.”

She flushes. The network of rumored full magic casters in Lotusland is thin—holes and dead ends—and it took her months to find me, a caster willing to cast for marks. And needing marks the way I do, I let myself be found.

Still uncertain, Coral picks at her nail. She’s careful to work around the material painted onto the tip. It’s a trend, embedding bits of spell starters right onto your nails so you only have to curl your fingers into your palm to cast magic. The downside is that a lot of starters need to be replenished, so you’re always repainting. Like most casters of any magic, I just use a basic starter bag. Blending in is good.

I do my best to hide how nervous I am as doubt continues to cloud her expression. She takes in my age—I’m sixteen, not exactly a responsible adult—my worn clothing that says I might just be trying to hustle her, and then my casting arm. Like there are signs in the limb and its palm that would give away my true control over magic.

I hope she can’t tell I’m still working on perfecting that control, the consequences of which could mean disaster for me or the fragile ecosystem around us.

Finally Coral waves her hand, exasperated. “I’ve paid, so whatever—let’s just get on with it. I have a meeting in a few minutes and need to get back to my office.” She touches one of her starter-embedded nails to her palm and her hair smooths itself back, though we are indoors and there is no wind. It’s leftover magic, weak enough to exact no cost on its caster.

I shove the marks into the pocket of my jeans and glance around the washroom.

We agreed to meet here secretly, this room of silver-papered walls and warm mahogany doors and ceramic-framed mirrors. We’re in one of the dozens of high-rise office buildings that make up the Tower Sector of the city, and for a second my skin goes clammy.

It was not even a year ago that Shire fell from one of these buildings—maybe it was even *this* building, I don’t know. It was a job gone beyond wrong—her casting full magic.

The memory of our last time speaking, the raised voices. The disagreement. I would mind wipe myself of that argument, if I wasn’t too scared of losing more of Shire. She died too young, and I don’t have memories to spare.

Coral clears her throat. “What’s the worst that can happen again?”

I check the washroom stalls once more, though they’re just as empty as they’ve been since I got here. “We’ve already covered that.”

“Humor me. This isn’t an easy decision.”

“Fine,” I say.

“I lose a lot more time than a day, right?”

“Possibly.”

“It doesn’t work at all?”

“Maybe.”

She swallows, curls in her pinky, and hastily casts another leftover spell. The shoulders of her suit jacket neaten themselves. “I forget everything.”

“Highly unlikely.” Even I couldn’t do that, especially not by accident. A caster would have to have zero control over their full magic for that to happen. Brand-new to their power, caught completely unaware. I think back to the day I found out I wasn’t a typical caster of leftover magic, and repress a shudder.

I step into one of the stalls and she follows me. I lock the door and then lean back against it, hoping it all goes well. I’m not worried about someone interfering. Casting full magic hurts. There’s always a price to pay, sometimes forever, so I’d prefer to be out of sight for this.

Leftover magic requires a starter, just like the ones embedded in Coral’s nails. And it’s cast by placing the starter in the palm of the casting arm.

But for *full* magic, we cast with a spell star, tracing the shape in the palm. The rule is that the more points to a star, the more magic is pulled from the earth. It’s why casting real magic is illegal now. The pain that follows is a limitation, too—draw a star with too many points and you could be dead before the spell’s even run out.

A mind wipe the way Coral wants it is a seven-pointed star. That’s the amount of magic I’m going to need.

I *could* chance six points—I’m only wiping one day. But six usually means a nosebleed for me, and it’d be awkward to move across

a crowded lunchtime lobby while bleeding from my face. Seven will give me a bad headache that I usually like to sleep off when I can. Except it's the middle of the day and my parents already think I'll be out until late, working at a job that has nothing to do with casting full magic. A job I don't actually have.

Which is why I keep a jar of healing meds in my starter bag. They're not a surefire fix, and they won't work on a bloody nose, but they should help with a casting migraine. I mean to head to Rudy's from here anyway—if I'm really still hurting, there's no better place to be than his apothecary.

If he were here, he'd remind me to be careful. To not draw any extra attention to myself. To never forget that secrecy is imperative when casting is illegal.

Shire would tell me the same. She'd remind me of Scouts and their department within the police dedicated to hunting us down. Some of those Scouts are casters just like me. But full magic never guarantees loyalty, and they've turned because of pay, or because they worry about the earth caving in while they still stand on it, or simply because they believe it's the right thing to do.

But Shire is dead. She faced the pain of casting too much magic and died.

I push back harder against the stall door, needing it to keep feeling steady. I pull out a green leaf from the starter bag I wear slung over my shoulder.

"Last chance," I say to Coral.

She's sitting on the closed lid of the toilet. Her eyes are huge. There's fear in them now, crowding out need and envy and hate. The look in them says despite her being here, it's right that my kind

of magic is now banished, that casters like me no longer have a place in this world.

She exhales. "I'm in."

"Then play out the day in your head for me to find." I draw a seven-pointed star on my palm with my finger, lay down the leaf in the center, and cast.