

Chapter 1: The Beginner's Mistake

"You've got to be kidding me," Cecily Mawkins huffed, hunching over to catch her breath. Her legs burned from her frenzied run across the plaza. She stared down at the half-open grate at her feet and nudged it with her heel, wincing as a putrid odor reached her nose. She couldn't believe she'd trained eight years for *this*.

Sighing, she kicked the grate open and slid into the hole. For a few terrifying seconds, her feet floated in open air, and then her toes caught the first rung of a ladder. Releasing her breath, she leaned backwards, pulled the grate closed, and began her descent, all the while trying not to lose her breakfast.

Eight years. It had been eight years since she'd shaken hands with a member of the witch's council and accepted the biggest secret of her life. At ten, she'd been a little too young to understand the exact repercussions of her decision, but she'd at least understood that she would lead a different life than her elementary peers: one of adventure, glory, and eventual stardom. Since then, she'd crossed oceans, scaled mountains, and defeated her fair share of monsters, all in the name of the amulet she would wield at the end of her training.

And now here she was, her amulet looped around her neck, slogging through the sewers of Summer Peak University in the heart of sweltering Arizona. She jumped off the ladder and cursed her luck as her landing sent a spray of grey-brown muck into her face. Her ten-year-old self would have scoffed at this. Had she known that her shining destiny was to trail a giant slug through university sewers, would she have still stood before that councilor and accepted the mundane bronze badge that would help her hone her abilities? Would she have thought it worth her time?

The poor man's amulet, her mentors had called the badge, a twinge of sympathy in their faces as their hands reached for their own amulets: their swords, pendants, seeming keepsakes. Once a witch graduated from the badge and gained a true amulet, they learned real power. Maybe that's why she was here. Maybe the mentors sent all of their graduating trainees on the grossest missions, to keep them grounded and in line. She could never be sure. It wasn't a mentor's job to tell a trainee anything much, apart from where to buy books and how to perform spells. And sometimes they didn't even do that.

She sighed. At least it wasn't her job to clean the place. She felt a sudden surge of sympathy for the poor worker who would have to spend the night following her footsteps with a mop and sponge, wondering how some idiotic college kid had managed to fall through the grate this time.

The tunnel suddenly shook with a great rumbling, sending Cecily stumbling into the wall. She recoiled, her face contorting in disgust. Her shirt was as good as ruined now. Did workers even come through here? Maybe the place hadn't been cleaned since she'd been ordained as a witch. Maybe it had never been cleaned at all. If she'd known that this was how she was going to be spending her morning, she would have worn her Summer Peak T-shirt. That would have given her an excuse not to wear it to Freshmen Welcome.

She hated being a student. She was leagues smarter than any of the people enrolled in the school. True, she was not the best at math, or English, or chemical engineering, but she wouldn't be needing any of that. Her amulet promised a different, better life. As a witch, her job was to protect people from unseen magical dangers, to keep them in their naive little

bubbles. She doubted any of the Arizona buggers on the surface could do that on their own, no matter how great they were at differential calculus.

Her attention snapped back as the slug's groaning grew louder, sending another tremor through the sewer floor. Cecily bent down and murmured a quick steadying spell under her breath. A plume of green smoke—the color of her magic—spewed from her mouth and over her feet. The pendant at her neck warmed as she stood and resumed her trudging, quickening her pace as much as she could. She had a bowl of dark chocolate mints and an aloe vera drink waiting for her in her room. Once she'd cleaned up, she could enjoy them in peace.

She turned the corner and sprang into the middle of the corridor, expecting to face the slug from a safe, manageable distance. Instead, she nearly tripped over a boy half her size who had been running in the opposite direction. In her hurry to stop, she wheeled into the sewer wall, her elbows tracking foot-long trenches through the filth. She let out a shrill string of curses that quickly petered into silence as she looked down and found the boy whacking her shirt like a punching bag.

"What?" she asked, barely able to keep the irritability out of her voice. Not only had she just ruined a perfectly good shirt, but now her arm felt as if it'd been rolled in putrid popsicle juice. The boy's grubby fists only made things worse.

"Slug!" he exclaimed helpfully, waving frantic hands in the direction he'd come, completely oblivious to Cecily's discontent. "Run!"

His face looked as if it had been rolled out of donut dough, pudgy and plump with a babylike roundness. With his giant black cloak and tiny corduroy pants, he looked like he'd dressed up as a bat for Halloween. He couldn't have been older than seven.

The oddness of the child's age, given that they were standing underneath a college campus where the youngest student was over sixteen, faded from Cecily's mind as she watched him. The way he danced from foot to foot, his tiny face puffed red with adrenaline, flooded her with memories of her younger brother's antics. Recklessness and adventure ran in the family. Her heart softening, she held out a grime-coated hand to the boy.

They didn't exactly flee quickly. The boy's stubbier, shorter legs kept his sprint at a slow trudge next to Cecily's long, purposeful stride. For a moment, she couldn't help but feel as if the two of them, slogging along at a pathetic, muddy pace, were the sewer's real slugs.

"How far back is it?" Cecily demanded as the boy tugged her into a tunnel that branched off of the main path. Her irritation had reached new heights. She didn't like that they were running *away* from the slug. Her mission was meant to be quick and simple! Now, she had to deal with the possibility of collateral damage.

The boy whipped his head over his shoulder, looked back at her with wide eyes, and then barreled ahead, his tiny legs churning through the sewer filth. Cecily huffed under her breath and followed.

They continued in silence until a new rumble passed through the sewers. This time Cecily could feel the vibration in her chest like the boom of a deep bass. Her ribcage constricted around the pressure, nearly cutting off her air.

Gasping, she came to a quick conclusion. Having the boy around wouldn't do. She couldn't complete her mission with a vulnerable civilian in tow. She needed to get him to safety before she could do anything else. Ignoring the thrumming in her chest, she doubled her pace.

She only stopped when she realized that the boy's small hand was no longer tucked in hers. She turned and caught sight of him over her shoulder, slumped in the muck, his shaggy hair obscuring his face like matted seaweed. She sighed and walked back to him, beckoning him with her fingers.

"Come on," she said quietly. "That slug's not going to go away just because you're tired. We need to get you aboveground so I can deal with it. Okay?"

She waited for a reaction, but the boy didn't move. His shoulders trembled, the pallor of his skin faded to a pasty white. When he looked up at her, his moonlike eyes caught her off-guard.

She shuddered. In that moment he looked a little too much like her brother, who was still living with her mother in California, oblivious to the fact that she was versed in magic. Granted, David was a lot older now, but the resemblance still stood.

The fear in the boy's tiny face was what broke her. She sighed and knelt in the muck, placing her hands on his shoulders. She locked eyes with him.

"You're going to be fine," she promised.

"How do you know?" the boy demanded, craning his neck to look over her shoulder. "It's coming."

As if on cue, the sewer rumbled again. Through the stink of rot and feces, Cecily noticed an earthy reek. If there was any time for a plan, it was now.

She turned back to the boy.

"I'm going to defeat that thing," she declared quietly. "But I need you to help me."

The boy's eyes brightened. A hint of the adventurousness she had seen in him before bubbled up again.

"Help you?" he repeated. Cecily nodded and squeezed his wrists. She then pointed his hands down the tunnel, back in the direction they'd come.

"When I say the word, you run, alright? Right past that slug. It won't notice you at all, as long as you run. Okay? Can you do that for me?"

"But I'll be...it'll be right next to me," the boy stammered. "It'll eat me!"

"It won't," Cecily insisted.

"It might! You told me to run toward it! Are you...are you going to make it eat me?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but felt her words die in her throat as a lumbering shape emerged at the end of the tunnel. It looked far worse than it had when she'd cornered it by the physical sciences building. The sewers must have taken their toll. The flaps along its sides were now coated in excrement and a long trail of scarlet saliva dribbled out of its star-shaped mouth. Scratches ran along its back and over the bumpy white of its underbelly, staining its sticky skin a mottled red-brown color.

The creature didn't have eyes, but Cecily imagined that if it had, it would have been glaring at her. She quelled the instinctual rise of fear in her gut. This slug was only a hassle. She'd faced monsters far worse, after all. It was the boy she was worried about.

"Remember what I said?" she asked him, though she kept her eyes on the creature.

"Yes," the boy said stubbornly. "Get eaten by the monster."

"I told you, it won't eat you!"

"It might! You're not the boss of it!"

"I'm the boss of me," Cecily insisted. "And trust me, I can defeat that thing."

"Trust you? Why?"

The question should have alerted her. Unfortunately, her attention remained on the slug. She didn't think; she just answered.

"Well, I trust you. Isn't that enough?"

The boy said nothing. She glanced back at him and stared until he gave her a short, stiff nod. She then brought her fists together and rolled her shoulders back.

"Alright, Cecily," she said to herself. "You got this."

She then strode towards the slug, which was slowly oozing its way towards her like a giant piece of overcooked jello. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure that she was adequately shielding the boy, Cecily murmured an amplification spell and shouted.

"Hey! Over here!"

Pulling her amulet over her head, she muttered a flight spell and launched herself at the creature. Halfway into her ascent her grip tightened on her pendant, drawing it into her favorite white staff. Landing on the slug's back and doing her best to ignore the sick squish of her shoes sinking into a two-inch layer of excrement, she drove the staff into the creature's flesh and twisted it.

The creature howled and thrashed wildly. It would have sent Cecily careening into the wall had she not whispered another steadying spell and clung onto her staff for dear life. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a dark blur kicking up a spray of black filth and smiled. The kid was doing as he'd been told.

She turned back to the creature beneath her feet.

"Time to say goodbye," she murmured.

She whispered another quick flight spell and spiraled into the air. Inches from the top of the sewer tunnel, she changed course and dove back towards her staff. The weight of her body buried it deep in the creature's flesh. She waited expectantly for the slug to burst into green powder as all of her defeated monsters did, but this one defied her. Her staff continued to sink into its skin as if into quicksand. Her fingers were no match. Before she knew it, her staff had slipped through her hands and into the creature's flesh.

Stunned, she stared at it as if witnessing a bizarre vision. For a few short moments it floated there, spinning slowly in the sea of red-tinted jelly. Then, suddenly, the slug folded in on itself, neatly collapsing into a small, round object that clattered to the floor. Cecily and her staff quickly followed. She landed on her back in the muck, some of it splashing into her hair and eyes. Her staff skittered out of sight.

After she had wiped the mud and excrement from her eyes, she looked up to find the boy she'd saved looking down at her. His grin immediately put her on guard. Something was wrong.

"What did you...?" she mumbled, her head still reeling from her fall. Her eyes then zeroed in on what was in the boy's hand: her staff. Her jaw dropped as he tossed it from hand to hand. It spun and then shrunk into her amulet, which he dangled before her like a cat toy. She watched in utter bemusement as it swung before her eyes.

"Gotcha," the boy said, his tone far too cheerful for the occasion. Cecily's blood ran cold. Who was this kid? What had she done? Then, of course, she realized.

She'd made the worst beginner's mistake.

"I trusted you," she murmured in horror. "You can't..."

She reached for the staff, some part of her naively certain it would still answer to her, but the boy danced out of her reach. He waved her weapon.

“What can’t I do?” he asked with a laugh. “You’ve given me your trust. Too bad. You’re a good witch. Or at least, you were.”

He let out another peel of laughter that chilled Cecily to the bone. The childishness of his words, the words sealing her fate, only added to her humiliation.

How could this be happening to her? She’d done everything right! Saving people, saving *children*, that was her job!

“Now, I really should be going.”

“Where?” Cecily demanded, feeling sick. “Who *are* you?”

“You told me to run, remember? I’m only keeping my promise.”

He grinned. Then, just like that, he was gone. After a moment of furious silence, Cecily realized that she’d never even gotten his name.