

## Chapter 876

### What Will Get You to Gold Rank

On the podium of a Remore Academy lecture hall, Belinda pointed at the floating hologram of a partially complete ritual diagram.

“Unless you are lost or getting expelled at the end of the semester,” she said in a magically amplified voice, “you will all recognise this. The Hagstrom Cycle is one of the most common bases for bronze and silver-tier rituals. It is reliable, it is efficient, and — if enacted properly — will keep a ritual running for years given proper maintenance. Knowing the Hagstrom Cycle backwards and forwards is a fundamental skill for anyone serious about the study of magic, regardless of specialty.”

She made a casual gesture and the podium’s magic sent the image to hover by the wall behind her.

“I learned the Hagstrom Cycle when I was a street rat in a magical backwater learning from the scant few books I could steal. There is no excuse for all you little rich pricks.”

There was laughter through the lecture hall. Over the course of scholastic year, the students had become accustomed of the peculiarities of their professor. That was known to be part and parcel of studying at Remore Academy, famous for recruiting adventurers, especially those close to or just having reached gold-rank. It was a time when adventurers tended to slow down and pursue more contemplative approaches to advancement.

“I fully acknowledge,” Belinda continued, “the eminent usefulness and undeniable value of the Hagstrom Cycle. Can anyone explain, then, why I personally detest it?”

A sea of hands shot up. Belinda panned her eyes across the room and spotted a particular student not seated in his normal position with his friends. Even more unusual was the fact that his hand was one of those in the air.

“Young Master Burkis,” she said. “I am positively quivering with anticipation of the rare treat of hearing an answer from you.”

“Setting up the Hagstrom Cycle is an intricate process,” Burkis said. “It takes time, care and precision to implement, which isn’t easy when a furnace drake is spewing flames everywhere and the thing you’re hiding behind is on fire. It’s better to use something that you can establish quickly and has a more generous margin for error. It doesn’t matter that it only lasts twenty minutes if you only need it for five.”

“An exquisite answer, Master Burkis. Given that this is the introductory unit of Practical Use of Ritual Magic in the Field, one might even call it a perfect answer. One I would expect from someone who had spent years around an adventuring team with

multiple ritualists. Like my team, for example, that includes not only myself but the Archchancellor of the Magical Research Association. It is such a good answer that it warrants a trip to the biscuit table...”

Burkis was halfway out of his seat, eyeing the table off to the side of the podium stage. He froze as Belinda continued.

“...assuming you are, in fact, Mr Burkis. And not a shape-shifting dragon taking students’ lectures for them in return for payment.”

The whole room turned to look at Burkis in an excruciatingly long moment of still silence. He then turned into a mouse and scurried off between the seats.

“Attention here, please,” Belinda announced. The students stopped looking under their chairs for the fleeing rodent and looked back to the podium.

“Yes,” Belinda said. “The handful of you suddenly very worried have extremely good reason to be. Now, I’m all for cheating—”

A loud throat-clearing sound came from the back of the lecture hall.

“Oh, hello, Dean Remore. Anyway, as I was saying, if you’re going to cheat, you have to be aware of who you’re trying to cheat.”

“Professor Callahan...”

“We can chat when I’m done, Dean. Keep your pants on. What was I saying? Right, if you’re going to cheat, be aware of the consequences of getting caught. If you aren’t willing to accept those consequences, then I strongly advise against trying. And as cheating is an expulsion offence, trying it here is a very bad idea. Do you think the faculty of the Remore Academy have never dealt with this kind of issue before? This school is staffed by some of the most capable, experienced and cunning people in the world. If you had the ability to put one over on them, you would be teachers here and not students. And for those of you who listened to me say that and still think you can put one over them, you might as well pack your things today. That is not an attitude that will get you to graduation here, so you might as well save us the time and bother.”

The playful tone permeating the lecture hall was now a deathly stillness. Belinda sighed.

“I don’t think we’re likely to get much more productive work done today, and you now all have rumours to go spread. So, lecture over; off you go.”

Students started scrambling, avoiding Dean Remore as he made his way down to the podium. Belinda had sat down on the edge of the stage by the time he arrived.

“Good morning, Dean. Is it weird being Dean of the Ritual Magic School when your actual name is Dean? Dean Remore is your full name and your title. I’d have thought that, of all families, one that runs a school would know better.”

Dean sighed but otherwise ignored Belinda’s question.

“You know, Professor Callahan,” he said, “you are fitting in here all too well. I do wish Roland would recruit some vaguely sensible people for once.”

“I thought it was a good speech,” Belinda said. “Practical advice with a set-them-up-and-knock-them-down structure. By the time word spreads, which will take all of six minutes, everyone who has been employing this little shape-shifting ring to skip classes will be wondering what we know and how long we’ve known it.”

“Indeed. We have this issue once or twice a decade. There will be a slew of expulsions and contrite second chances. Each instance has its own quirks, though. This time it’s a member of the Geller family letting his familiar run amok. Not a minor member of the family, either.”

“Oh, I would advise just telling Humphrey. He’s so upright that he’ll do your work for you.”

“That’s not for me to decide. Thankfully. Something similar happened when I was a student here and they expelled a member of the royal family. A minor one, but still. I would not like to be the person dealing with that.”

“Is that a big deal?”

“It’s royal family of Estercost. One of the most prominent kingdoms in the world.”

“Was that a yes or a no?”

“You think royalty is some small matter?”

“You know a member of my team used to be the Storm Kingdom’s Hurricane Princess, right?”

“What?”

“Do you not know what my adventuring team is?”

“I wasn’t told. Wait, do you know Humphrey Geller because—”

“He’s my team leader, yes.”

“Oh. Oh dear. I really wish people would tell me these things.”

Belinda gave him a sympathetic smile.

“Would you like a biscuit before I pack them up? Maybe a pastry?”

“No th—”

His eyes fell on the table.

“Maybe just one.”

A few minutes later, Dean finished a biscuit the size of a teacup saucer.

“I am forced to concede that you handled the release of that information to the student body well,” he told Belinda. “There will be a staff meeting at the start of next week about next steps.”

The Dean left as Belinda was putting her baked goods into containers and then her storage space. She was around halfway done when she felt a slight breeze behind her and smiled.

“I have trouble understanding how this is what will get you to gold rank,” Sophie said.

“You and I both know that I’m the worst fit out of anyone in the team,” Belinda said as she turned to face her friend. “In my head, I’m still a thief, more than an adventurer. My power set reflects that. Deception, entrapment and thievery.”

She tapped her forehead.

“Up here, I know my skills and powers are useful to the team. That I am an adventurer. But there are still doubts I can’t shake. Insecurities about who I am and what I have to offer.”

She tapped over where her heart would have been.

“In here, it’s harder to convince myself that I’m an adventurer and not still a criminal.”

“You realise that you don’t have a brain or a heart anymore, right?”

“And you know metaphors exist, right?”

Sophie laughed.

“I shouldn’t try to outsmart you, should I?”

“No.”

Belinda turned to take in the lecture hall.

“This place,” she said. “This is where adventurers come from. If I can matter here...”

Sophie gathered her friend up in a hug.

“You are amazing,” Sophie told her. “Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

“Should I be jealous?” Estella’s voice came from the back of the hall.

“Are you kidding?” Belinda said, extricating herself from Sophie. “She’s got Captain Good Boy waiting for her at home. I can’t compete with that.”

Sophie gave her a teasing slap on the arm, then spotted a small figure moving along the side of the room. The mouse froze as Sophie pointed and Belinda turned to look. It turned into a trembling puppy with wide eyes staring at them. Sophie rolled her eyes.

“Okay, one,” Belinda said.

The puppy turned into a young man in the Remore Academy uniform. He looked like Humphrey when Belinda and Sophie first met him, but with silver eyes and hair. He snatched two biscuits from the table and made a break for the exit.

"Hey, I said one!" Belinda called after him.

"You shouldn't reward bad behaviour, Lindy," Sophie scolded.

"Making him behave is your job," Belinda said. "I'm the fun aunt."

"I'm not his mother, Lindy."

"Sure you're not. Speaking of which, have you told Hump you're leaving yet?"

Sophie steeled herself with a long slow breath.

"That's a no," Belinda said.

"I wanted to say goodbye to you, first. Once I tell him, I'm gone."

"Well, go do it," Belinda said, grabbing Sophie in another hug. "The sooner you go, the sooner you come back."

"No," Sophie said. "I'm not coming back until he comes to find me. Goodbye, Lindy."

They pulled the hug in tighter.

"Bye, Soph."

Sophie was suddenly gone, as if she'd teleported. Belinda went back to the table to finish packing things away.

"Get the job done?" she asked Estella, who'd been waiting by the table, eating a bun.

"Yeah. Whole thing was a grift, like I thought. Turns out it was his grandson. That was how they were going to get him to sign over the airships."

"His own grandson?"

"Yeah. Paid me a nice bonus to keep quiet, too. I love working for noble families. Lots of money and lots of secrets means lots of paydays for me."

"It sounds like you're buying lunch, then."

As they walked out of the lecture hall side by side, Estella slipped her fingers between Belinda's.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm fine, Stel."

"Are you, though? I know you and Sophie don't spend a lot of time apart."

"We've done it before."

"And she went and fell in love with the person least like you I've ever met."

Belinda gave her a sharp look.

"Oh, please," Estella said. "You think I don't see it? We've all carried a torch for someone who wasn't on our vibe, Lindy. I see that pain in you, and I see that it's old."

You've moved on, which can't have been easy. And I don't hate the idea of it just being you and me for a while."

Belinda squeezed her hand.

"I don't hate that either," she said.

"We can talk about it."

"You don't want to talk about that."

"No. But I think that maybe you need to. And maybe I need you to. She's always going to be around, Lindy, a few excursions like right now aside. Best get it out in the open, at least between you and me. Otherwise, it'll always be there."

Belinda sighed.

"This lunch is going to be a lot less fun than I hoped."