

Cover Illustration by Holly Finlay | Character Illustrations by Vibeell

A romantic illustration set against a starry, pink-to-purple gradient background. A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a white toga-like garment, is seen from the back, looking up at a woman. The woman, with long dark hair and blue eyes, is wearing a black bikini and is leaning over him, her head resting on his shoulder. Her long hair flows down the center of the image. The overall mood is intimate and celestial.

Masters

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Story Premise



When college sophomore Kaleigh Pele becomes Professor Mark Lewis's student assistant, she finds a brilliant man obsessed with order and control. Working alongside him is just the sort of positive boost she needs, and everything is going exactly as planned.

Until she meets Declan Masters.

Declan seems to know more about Kaleigh than she does herself. Considering Mark's reaction to seeing Declan, there's something they're not telling her. Add in dreams that feel more like memories and an uncontrollable pull towards Declan? There's a tug of something forgotten.

Beneath her everyday life, there's a storm brewing—and it promises *Destruction*.

Historic Background Information

The world of Masters is set on Earth but with an alternate creation story. There are beings called Masters, which are the gods in this universe. No one knows for sure who came first, Creation or Destruction. There was a blinding light, and they both opened their eyes to find each other. The Master of Creation is responsible for bringing everything into existence, starting with the stars, planets, moons, and sun. He created everything except for the First Four—Creation (Declan), Destruction (Kaleigh), Order (Mark), and Chaos (Brooks).

These four Masters just *were*. Once they arrived on Earth, the Master of Order appeared, his job to keep order between Creation and Destruction. In the beginning, Creation made all of the plants and trees. Then, with a single curious touch, Destruction killed a tree. Creation brought it back, and then Order realized that the tree seemed to look *healthier* after shedding its leaves because of Destruction's influence. So, he used Creation and Destruction to create a cycle throughout nature that would become the seasons (as we know them). That was the moment that he named Creation and Destruction, and they called him Order. He became responsible for naming everything from then on.

Shortly after, Chaos showed up in the same manner that Order had. Then Declan created humans. He was in awe of their simple innocence, and they worshipped him. They followed him around everywhere he went and made sacrifices in his honor. The only problem was that Kaleigh hated sharing him with them, and the humans feared her. On many occasions, they saw what she was capable of, and they didn't trust her. Soon they decided that she had their dear Creator under a spell and that they needed to free him.

With Mark's help, Declan had the human's minds wiped of the First Four, and from that day on, they kept their distance. He then began creating the *made* Masters. While they weren't nearly as powerful as the Four were, they had all their other capabilities. He created them two by two, ensuring that each had an equal and opposite to maintain balance. He understood the importance, seeing his equal in Kaleigh, and Mark's equal in Brooks.

Main Character

Meet Kaleigh!

A.K.A. the **Master of Destruction**—Perpetually tanned skin, unruly brown hair, and bright blue eyes—She's the Destruction side of a centuries-old Creation and Destruction cycle. Since the beginning of time, there's been an irresistible pull between her and Declan. An all-consuming love that burns until it destroys them... again and again. After all, as her namesake suggests, her specialty is Destruction.

Only this time, she's made an unexpected move—A deal with Mark, the Master of Order, to break the cycle. Losing control is what she knows best, but can she learn how to control Destruction? She has to get her memories back first.

BEFORE her schedule becomes complicated and filled with the struggle of controlling primordial powers of Destruction...

A sophomore at the University of Alandria, she works as Professor Mark Lewis's student aid and lives with her best friend, Lauren. As a girl with no family, no memories before the age of ten, and someone who grew up in foster homes, she never allows anything to distract her from her goal to finally take charge of her life. Her favorite place to be is under the stars. They ground her and give her a sense of who she is that nothing else ever has.

Spearheading a student outreach program, under the guidance of Professor Lewis, Kaleigh meets Declan Masters. Declan seems to know more about her than she knows about herself, and she can't deny the magnetic pull she feels whenever she's around him.

She's a bit relieved by the instant connection with Declan, if she's honest with herself, because a relationship with him would be much more appropriate than one with Mark... all things considered. Sometimes she gets the feeling she's known him for so much longer, though—both of them.

When Declan brings back her memories, *the one thing she asked him not to do*, she gives him what he's craved. He wanted the Master of Destruction back. Well, she's back. And the thing she's out to destroy this time just might be his heart—and her own in the process.

She wanted her memories to come back to her naturally and on their own time. She wanted to train under Mark and learn control and order to manage her Destruction and keep Declan safe. Now her only choice is the Amulet of Containment—the *lost* Amulet of Containment. It looks like they'll be traveling to the place where all lost things go.

To visit the Keepers, deep within the Twisted Woods.





Supporting Characters

Meet Declan!

A.K.A. the **Master of Creation**—Olive skin, dark black hair, and jade green eyes—He's the Creation side of a centuries-old Creation and Destruction cycle. It's unclear who came first, Creation or Destruction, but the Master of Creation fell so madly in love with Destruction the moment he saw her that he crafted the planets and stars for her.

IN THE BEGINNING... he was called Eden.

Her Eden. And in the beginning, he created life. Plants, oceans, mountains, streams, birds, and animals. Other Masters, one for anything he could think of, with an equal and opposite counterpart to ensure balance remained.

Then humans. Simple and beautiful in their innocence. Some worshiped him. Brought offerings to him and sought him out, just to catch his eye.

Oh, but they feared Kaleigh. There's danger in fear. So, with the help of his best friend and right-hand man, Mark, the Master of Order, he had their memories wiped and decided that they would keep their existence a secret from the mortals from then on.

Hand in hand, he and Kaleigh shaped the world together. Entire civilizations were built and destroyed at the hands of two. There were technically four of them. The First Four, they were called. They were the *natural* Masters. The ones that simply *were*. Creation, Destruction, Order, and Chaos.

Truth be told, the four of them wouldn't even be a unit if it weren't for Declan and Kaleigh. Creation and Order trust each other fully as do Destruction and Chaos.

The same can't be said for any other pairing. Unfortunately, Brooks follows Kaleigh around everywhere, and Declan has always been hesitant to seek a fight with the hotheaded thrill seeker.

Loyal to a fault, Mark is the guy that Declan has always been able to count on.

Until now...

What's a guy to do when his best friend makes a deal with the love of his life to keep them apart?

What he does best, of course. Make her fall in love with him again, even if it breaks all of her rules.

Supporting Characters

Meet Mark!

A.K.A. the Master of Order—Dark blond curls, athletic build, and steely grey eyes—He's the third of the First Four. Since the beginning of time, there's been something between Creation and Destruction. And since the beginning of time, Order has been around to clean up the mess of it.

It's no secret that he's never been Kaleigh's biggest fan. She's irresponsible, selfish, and thinks the world revolves around her. Unfortunately, she's partly right, since the stars were literally hung in the sky for her.

As Declan's best friend and right-hand man, Mark has never been able to convince him to end this *destined for failure* 'project' with Destruction. Not for lack of trying.

His job is to use the powers of Creation and Destruction to keep Order in the universe. Yet he has no control over the two individuals. For centuries, he's had to sit by and watch as *she*'s destroyed them, over and over again, while Declan takes it with a smile on his face. Mark's never been able to stop it.



Until now... They usually rise from the ashes, pick up where they left off, start the cycle over. It looks like Destruction has finally come to her senses. Maybe she has *some* redeeming qualities, after all.

The plan is to erase her memories, allow her to experience life as a human, watch her from afar, keep Declan away, and when the time is right, come back into her life as a mentor, and slowly trigger her memories to return. Then the real training begins--control and Order—what he knows best.

Buying and setting up the college was easy, as was getting becoming Dr. Mark Lewis. Obtaining letters of recommendation from board members that he appointed explicitly for this reason? No issue at all. Becoming department head was such a simple task he almost missed cleaning up after Kaleigh and Brooks. *Almost*. Watching over her as she lived life as a human was entertaining. He wasn't sure how she managed to look so strong while being unable to access any of her powers. He had someone to watch her fulltime in case they resurfaced, of course.

When she finally arrives on campus, he's one of her first classes, and she signs up for work-study the first week. Will this ever feel like work? He puts in his first request for an aid and receives a stack of eager applicants. He keeps the papers over the weekend to make it seem like he spent adequate time deliberating.

Whenever he's near her in class or during office hours, he can feel her power buzzing, almost like it's beneath his own hands. And the way her eyes light up when he speaks with her... He's not sure what about her humanity is so off-putting. Regardless, everything's going just as planned, and he won't fail. The power to change things is finally within his grasp.

There's just one problem.

He never planned on *losing* control.



Supporting Characters

Meet Brooks!

A.K.A. the **Master of Chaos**—Light brown skin, faded pompadour, with blue eyes—He’s the last, but certainly not least, of the First Four. It is said that Order showed up to balance out Creation and Destruction. Well, Chaos showed up the moment of their first kiss. A romance for the ages, with the opportunity to fall in love again and again... because there could never truly be a happy ending. Pure Chaos.

Then the humans were created. Wars. Betrayals. If he didn’t know any better, he would think that Declan had made the humans just for him. Alas, the Creator is far too insufferable for that. Unfortunately, Kaleigh doesn’t see it, though. She does, however, grow bored.

And that’s when they really have fun wreaking havoc. This is their closely held secret because the only person worse than Creation is *Order*. And the Master of Order would definitely disapprove. Some Masters can use their powers together, which strengthens one or both of their abilities. And the combination of Destruction and Chaos... Annihilation.

When Kaleigh made her deal with Order, Brooks had no idea that it included him as well. She figured the best way to break the cycle would be to start both her and Brooks over. Without memories and their powers. Once Kaleigh’s memories were triggered, then his would be close behind, and they would both learn to truly wield their powers—rather than their powers wielding them.

When Brooks Carter joins Kaleigh’s outreach group, they become fast friends. Almost like they’ve known each other their entire lives. He feels something for her but can see that something might be going on with this Masters guy (total jerk btw).

And once that total jerk Masters breaks the rules and triggers Kaleigh’s memories and powers? No one knows what to expect from the newly awaked forces of Destruction and Chaos. The problem is, if their memories had time to come back naturally, they might have remembered Annihilation.

The worst thing about rediscovering the powers of Chaos, training to master Control, and monitoring discourse worldwide? Watching your best friend fall in love with the guy you’ve both always hated.

And realizing that he’s not really that bad.

And the best thing?

War.

Supporting Characters

Lauren Moore (human)- Lauren is Kaleigh's outspoken best friend and roommate. She has short, bright red hair and pale skin. She's always interested in what's going on in her besties life and schedules any chance to spend time with her. They eat a lot of takeout and spend almost as much time at Jose's (the campus coffee spot) as they do in their dorm. Where Kaleigh is dedicated and always working, Lauren is right the opposite. She's obsessed with making the most of her time and fills every moment with something to do. She makes near-perfect grades with the bare minimum of studying, and she never cheats. This has always been something that she is good at. She is not a Master. She has a strong recall, and she does listen very well while in class. She hates multitasking and will avoid it at all costs, preferring instead to give all of her attention to whatever task she is doing at the moment.

Jerid Taylor (Master)- Jerid is the Master of Prophesy. He can usually be found hanging out with Declan and Rose (Master of Memory). The three of them have become close since Mark has been busy working with Kaleigh on their plan. This group was not formed by coincidence, however. What would the Master of Creation need from the Masters of Prophecy and Memory? Considering his girlfriend has no memory of their past lives... Anyway, Jerid has a carefree attitude. He has shaggy blond hair and brown eyes and never worries about what tomorrow may bring because, well, he already knows. He likes to keep it simple and only check into the future on occasion. Or when his power activates on its own to let him know of something big that will happen. He's not all-seeing—meaning he can't see the future of strangers he's never met. He would need to either come into contact with the person, an item of theirs, or in a strange chaos theory (butterfly effect), come into contact with someone that is about to set off a chain of events that will affect said stranger.

Rosalina 'Rose' Gonzalez (Master)- Rose is the Master of Memory. She is almost always found with either Jerid or Declan or both. Once they bring Kaleigh into their little circle of friends, with clear intentions of bringing her memories back at Declan's request, she also begins hanging out with Kaleigh more. Rose has shiny black hair and brown eyes, and she's a shopaholic through-and-through. She never tires of buying new things. She doesn't even have to be shopping for herself. She finds joy in shopping of any kind. She speaks fluent English and Spanish and will switch between the two without thought. Masters can usually speak a multitude of languages, but these two are Rose's languages of choice. When she meets someone new, she is a fast judge in character, and once she has decided if she likes them or not, there's seldom any changing her mind. Call her stubborn, but maybe it has to do with her perfect memory. As in, she can recall anything that has ever happened in the history of ever even if it didn't happen to her, and even if she wasn't around or didn't witness it. The one shortcoming of this power is that if she has no ties to the memory, she has to come into contact with something that does. To access Kaleigh's memories, she would need Kaleigh. To recall an event that happened with an ancient civilization—she would need a relic from that civilization.

Caleb Brewer (Master)- There's not much to say about the Master of Deception. He's a liar, he lies, and he does it well. Even if you think he's not lying to you—he is. He's devastatingly handsome. His appearance changes based on your preferences. That's the Deception working. Kaleigh and Lauren went to high school with Caleb, and Kaleigh had the misfortune, and terrible judgment, of dating him. It was never part of the deal for him to be part of her plan with Mark. Leave it to Mark to throw in Deception to keep an eye on her. While it was never explicitly stated, Caleb had always assumed that it was part of Mark's plan for him to get close to Kaleigh. It was time for someone to bring her down a notch. Dating her had been fun. The Master of Destruction was a wild card as a human teen without powers. He almost liked her. Lucky for him, that best friend of hers didn't have any powers because she beat the crap out of him with just her fists after he broke Kaleigh's heart. His abilities have saved him from many things. Unfortunately, they can't save him from a punch already thrown or a mind that's already made up.

Supporting Characters

Seth (Master)- While most Masters have adopted last names over the years to maintain a semblance of normalcy and blend in, Seth doesn't keep with the trends. He moves at his own pace and does things his way. He goes about life as naturally as possible. His hair is always unkempt, his eyes green under a glassy haze, and his skin sun kissed. He wears whatever he finds, leaves things wherever he likes, arrives whenever it suits him, and randomly signs up for classes. As Declan's roommate, this is something they don't see eye to eye about. Luckily, Declan is hardly ever at home, and honestly, neither of them have ever been prone to aggression. Seth is a drifter and is only at the college now because of the current phase he's found himself in. He's decided that he wants to see how many classes he can take *without* getting a degree. He doesn't believe in exclusive relationships, which works out perfectly well for him and the people he spends time with. People are naturally drawn to him and find great inspiration in his company. More than a few undergrad students have created some of their best work in his presence only to end up a one-hit-wonder. He often has to break things off when they become obsessed. He's the Master of Muse.

The Maiden- A stunning woman under five-foot-tall, with violet eyes, and near floor-length black hair kept in elaborate braids, the Maiden is neither a Master nor a human. She is a gifted individual who can create whatever it is that a person needs the most. You can only ever seek the Maiden once. She lives in a tower that is on the outskirts of time itself. The Keepers have an odd relationship with the Maiden but have never called on her for a favor until Verloor travels with Kaleigh and Declan to see her. When you go to seek a favor from the Maiden, you knock once on the door for each person with you to inform her of how many guests to expect. She immediately has the thing that you need, but she will spend time talking to you first. You will not know what it is you need, nor will you even know how to use it. You might not even need it as soon as you think you will (this is very important to the plot).

“The Keepers”—Neither Masters nor humans

Verloor- The unstable side of the duo. He regularly traverses the Collection, which has caused a fracture in his mind. He exhibits signs of multiple mental disorders. Seeing so much of the timeline is not healthy nor safe, and the only reason he can sustain it is that as a Keeper, it is his job to manage the distant part of the Collection. Another aspect of his Keeper duties is to ensure certain... events come to be. He alternates between speaking in riddles and speaking naturally. He has jet black hair but the same stunning grey eyes as his brother. The Keepers are twins and balance each other fully. He flirts with Kaleigh constantly, which irritates Declan as much, if not more than the riddles. Verloor loves to play mind games. The fact that his flirtation makes Declan mad and Kaleigh uncomfortable is the driving force behind why he does it. He's incredibly interested in her power. It calls to him, possibly like a siren song. He's smarter than that, so he knows to stay away. That doesn't mean he can't have some fun, though. Especially if having fun means snubbing the Master of Creation in the process. Mind games, remember? Verloor has powers, and they are many, but it is unknown what exactly they are. He refers to everything in the Collection as his “Lost Things.”

Gevind- The stable, collected side of the duo. Gevind speaks very formally, but he also speaks in riddles from time to time. Because of his nature, there is very little difference between him and his brother. When around them, however, it is easy to tell them apart. Gevind is formal, often drinks tea, and has stunning grey hair and eyes. He primarily manages what comes and goes in the Collection. He stays in their Cabin and greets the very seldom visitor that comes upon them seeking for something they have lost. When making deals with *travelers*, the Keepers often speak in unison. It is unnerving but a sign that the agreement is almost complete. Gevind also has powers, and they are also unknown. He refers to everything in the Collection as his “Found Things.”

Locations

The University of Alandria

Located in Asheville, North Carolina. Around half of the story takes place on campus of the university. The university and surrounding area are based heavily on Biltmore House. When Kaleigh made the deal with Mark and began life as a (seemingly) powerless human, the Master of Order got started on their plan. He purchased the historical building and founded a university on the grounds. He hand-picked shareholders in the University while also earning a doctorate. By the time Kaleigh joins the University of Alandria, Mark Lewis is a department head and heavily respected individual within the college.



The campus building is a castle structure. There are dormitories on campus as well as staff and student housing for those who choose to live on campus. Kaleigh shares a dorm room with her best friend, Lauren. Brooks also lives in the same dorm building but does not share his dorm room. Mark owns a house on campus that also serves as his secondary office. Declan shares a rented home with a roommate, the Master of Muse.

The Twisted Woods

Woods where every tree is twisted and gnarled. Within the Twisted Woods lives the Keepers, individuals tasked with managing “the Collection.” Anything that is ever lost can be found within the Collection. For Kaleigh, the lost thing she seeks is the Amulet of Containment. Both the Woods and the Collection exist outside of time and pretty much on a different dimension. The entrance to the Woods is found at Null Island. A place marked only by a weather buoy, Station 13010-Soul. Null Island isn’t supposed to be real—neither is dimensional travel.



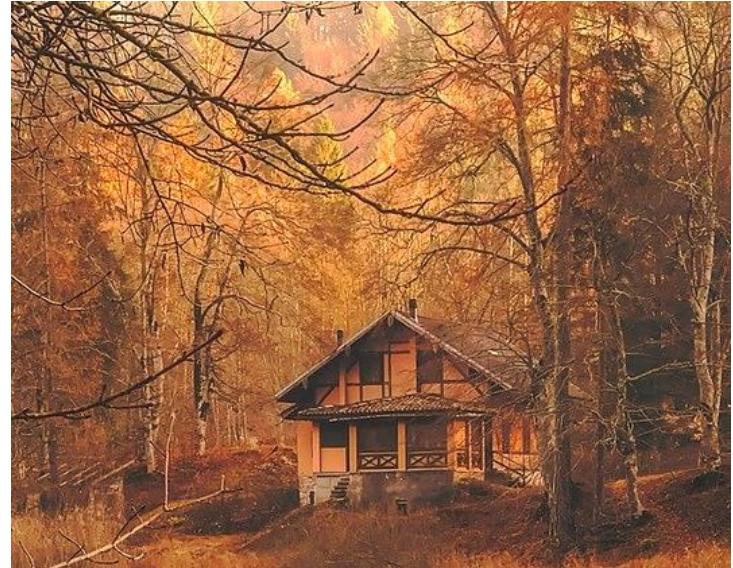
The Twisted Woods have been mentioned few times throughout history, and not much is known. The only thing that each story has in common is the vast irregularities that each story contains. While there are a dozen or so known maps of the Woods, no two maps are the same. It’s almost as if the Woods change with each new visitor. In Declan and Kaleigh’s case, one side of the Woods is lush and full of life (while branches are still twisted and gnarled), and the other side is dead, mossy, and appears as if a tornado might have passed through.

Locations

The Keepers Cabin & The Collection

Just the tip of the Collection's iceberg, a hoarder's fortress—carefully organized but impossibly cluttered. Some of the world's most valuable objects live here. Lost. Forgotten. As if valueless. Only, they now have the best looking after them. Anyone seeking a lost item would need help from the Keepers and would do so at their Cabin.

The best way to describe the Collection is as its own realm. Verloor can traverse the Collection freely. It exists outside of time. When in the Collection, one could go to moments of the past and retrieve a lost item in that way. But this method is left solely up to the degression of the Keepers. This is often the last resort option and should never be chosen if another path can be taken.



The Maiden's Tower

Much like Rapunzel in her tower, the Maiden is forever confined to her own on the outskirts of time itself. She rarely gets visitors and always sees them coming. The Maiden is one of three unique individuals, including the two Keepers, that are neither human nor Master. The original crafter of the Amulet of Containment, she's a magical being with the ability to make a person whatever it is they need most. This can only be done once, and it might not be what you expect. Most importantly, you might not need it immediately. The natural choice would be to revisit her. Only she cannot make another Amulet. Also, Declan paid for the last Amulet by freeing her from her Tower. With the help of the Keepers, they might visit be able to her in the past.

Jose's Coffee Shop

Kaleigh and Lauren spend most of their time at this popular campus coffee shop. Rain, snow, shine, finals, or break, Jose's is always packed full of students. A full menu of coffees, teas, smoothies, ice creams (seasonal), pastries, sandwiches, and soups are available anytime, day or night. Jose's is open 24 hours to cater to the college student schedule. Mismatched tables, chairs, couches, and high booths are crammed into every available space of the shop. Owner and head barista Jose Riverez is a proud supporter of the University of Alandria and her students. Whenever musical talent takes to the stage, you can be sure the performers are Alandria students or alumni. All art on display or for sale in the shop are Alandria made works of art. Kaleigh 'meets' Declan for the 'first time' here.



Additional World Information

Masters do not have to say any words, cast any spells, or perform any rituals. They just *do* their power, and it happens. All Masters were created knowing how to use their abilities. Certain Masters can combine their power to create more effective outcomes (such as Chaos and Destruction for Annihilation). This has also been done when Order used Creation's and Destruction's powers to create a cycle throughout nature that would become the seasons.

Everyone in Masters are either human or a Master (or in the case of the Maiden and the two Keepers—*Others*). Masters are basically gods, and there are Masters for everything—from Creation to Destruction, Order to Chaos, Prophecy to Memory, Truth to Deception—they live like ordinary people. Masters speak all known languages, as well as some of their own.

Masters are in perfect health as long as they are not compromised in some way. Pretty much the only way to hurt a Master is through the use of another Master's powers. There are currently no healers or Master of Healing. The best person to seek would be the Master of Order. Come to him with a problem that he feels is beneath him, however, and he may very well make the situation worse.

Masters are immortal. The only Masters to ever have experienced something like death are Creation and Destruction. Since the beginning, they have been unable to resist each other and have been inseparable ever since. The problem is that their powers make a volatile combination. A cycle of Creation and Destruction where they are burned up within Kaleigh's forces of Destruction and then rise from the ashes, much like a phoenix, and slowly regain their powers.

The power of the First Four—Creation, Destruction, Order, Chaos—far exceeds any other Master. Their powers are infinite and never need to recharge. The only exception is when Destruction and Chaos are newly awakened to their abilities and use their combined power of Annihilation. This, the large gap in power, has been a topic of discourse amongst some of the *made* Masters for a while. They feel like Declan had the ability to gift them with more but chose not to in order to maintain control over them. Possibly at the recommendation of his right-hand man, Mark.

Story Synopsis

When college sophomore Kaleigh Pele becomes Professor Mark Lewis's student assistant, she finds a brilliant man obsessed with order and control. Working alongside him is just the sort of positive boost she needs, and everything is going as planned. Until she meets Declan Masters. Rain falling from a clear sky. Lightning and thunder when they kiss. Strange things happen when she is around Declan, which intrigues her more.

When her memories return, she remembers why she started all of this. And the rules Declan selfishly broke to get her back. Declan is the Master of Creation and she, the Master of Destruction, is tired of their cycle of Destruction. She made a plan with Mark—the Master of Order—to keep her away from Declan and train her to control her power. Now, as her control grows stronger, so does her Destruction itself.

An accidental encounter with Brooks, the Master of Chaos, sets Kaleigh and Declan on a mission to find the Amulet of Containment. They journey through the Twisted Woods, home to the Keepers, into the Collection, a realm where the most powerful of lost things reside, and pay a visit to the Maiden, a woman with the ability to create whatever it is that you most need.

Once reunited, the four test the Amulet, only to find it useless. At a loss for what's next, Brooks informs them of a new development. The *made* Masters fear Mark's control over Destruction. A revolution is starting and war is coming.

Story Excerpt

[*Kaleigh and Declan have traversed the Twisted Woods and arrived at the Keepers Cabin. Things haven't gone well so far between Declan and the Keepers and Kaleigh's asked him to wait outside while she negotiates a price for their help in locating the Amulet of Containment.*]

Gevind held the door open as Kaleigh walked back inside the Keepers Cabin. Looking around, she discovered that the room they were in was different than the one she had just left. This room was completely spotless and orderly. The type of place that someone would greet guests.

Gevind motioned for her to take a seat on a very stylish sectional. She sat down and turned back to question the change in environment. He handed her a coffee, seemingly pulled out of nowhere. She accepted the warm drink and watched Gevind sit down in a small accent chair that she could have sworn was not there before.

“Do you understand how time works here?” he asked her.

“Umm, *does* it work here?”

“Of course. That’s a silly question for time works everywhere and nowhere all at once.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to that, so she simply nodded her head.

“So, I would assume that you do not?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m assuming you do not know how time works here?”

She shook her head. “I don’t.”

“Well, the simplest way to put this is probably also the most complicated. Time is happening all at once here. So, when we need something, if it ever will come to us or ever has come to us, the moment we need it,” he snapped his fingers, “it’s here.”

“Okay. So, kind of like a room of requirements?”

“Not at all.” He smiled a brilliant smile that suggested she was spot on, only his words said right the opposite.

“Okay.”

“Convince me,” a voice said from behind her.

She was proud of herself when she did not startle at the surprise.

Verloor walked around and took his place on the sectional, facing her. “So, not only blind then?” he asked.

“I am not blind, nor am I deaf. What is your preference?”

He raised an eyebrow at her, a hint of a smile touching his lips. "My preference?" "How would you prefer to be convinced, Verloor? Do keep up." She sipped her coffee, noting that not only was it the absolute perfect temperature, but it was also the best coffee she had ever had. The last time she had drunk this particular brew, she and Declan had been in France.

This time, Verloor let out a rumbling laugh that did surprise her. She looked to find him leaning forward, examining her.

"What is it that you are offering?" Verloor asked.

"I'm not exactly sure what I can offer you that you don't already have." She gestured vaguely around the Cabin. "So, name your price."

"And if I want something, less conventional?" his voice turned silky.

She met his gaze. "Then I suppose we will require another sort of room." She took another sip of her coffee and glanced at Gevind. He looked leagues more interested now.

"As tempting as your offer is," Gevind started, looking her over. "I must ask for something that you *can* give me."

"Oh? And what is that?"

"Don't you mean, what isn't that?" Gevind interrupted.

"What isn't that?" she corrected herself.

"You, my dear, you," Gevind tisked.

"I am not something that I can give you?"

Both Keepers shook their heads.

"I'm a little irritated and offended by that statement," she said, crossing her arms.

"Why do you allow something irrelevant to affect your wellbeing?" Gevind asked.

Her forehead creased. She wasn't sure if this was normal every day Keepers talk, or they were playing games with her. She sipped her coffee and looked around the room.

"So, what is it that you do want?" she asked.

"That you *can* give me," Verloor reminded her.

She nodded. Verloor worked his mouth as if contemplating the cost of his help. She looked at Gevind. He had his chin propped in his hand and was watching her expectantly.

"You need my power?" she asked, more of a statement than a question.

"We do," the Keepers said in unison.

She sat straight in her seat. “What for?”

“That is not part of the agreement,” Gevind said. He held a hand up to keep her from interrupting. “We require the use of your power, for a future event yet to happen. We will require your full cooperation in this matter, and there will be zero way for you to decline when the time comes for you to complete your half of the deal.”

She looked from one Keeper to the next, unsure of how to respond. What power did these two possess that they thought they could control the will of one of the First Four? Even more than that, they thought they would be able to hold her will. No one knew for sure which came first, Creation or Destruction. Hell, she was there, and she didn’t even know for sure. The thing was, though, that she and Declan were, without a doubt, two of the most powerful creatures alive. What deal could bind her will in this way?

“What payment will you require from Declan?”

“Just that he plays his part and stay out of the way,” Verloor answered.

“During our journey?” she asked.

“For eternity.”

She blinked. “You’re asking me for one single use of my power in a future event without giving me any details as to what I will be doing and what the event is?”

“Correct,” both Keepers answered.

“And you want Declan to *play his part and stay out of the way* for the rest of eternity?”

“Correct,” both Keepers answered.

“Do you understand how drastic of a price this is?”

“I do not,” Gevind said. He brought a teacup to his lips and loudly slurped his drink. The teacup had not previously existed.

“Is it not within your power to create Destruction?” Verloor asked.

“Yes, but—”

“Is it not within Declan’s power to simply continue with his life the same way he would normally?” Verloor asked.

“Yes.” She ground her teeth together. “So, you will not ask him to do anything?”

“Not at all,” both Keepers answered.

“And you will not ask him to *not* do something?”

“Not at all,” both Keepers answered.

“It doesn’t really seem like you are getting anything from him at all.” She threw her hands in the air in exasperation. She noticed that the coffee cup she was holding just a moment before had disappeared. She sighed.

“Seems like we have a deal!” Verloor said, clapping his hands. “I do love paperwork.”

“You hate paperwork, brother,” Gevind corrected.

“That is correct, but I do so love to avoid the paperwork.” He winked at Kaleigh and disappeared.

“You should go find him. He will be losing his patience soon,” Gevind said. He took a long drink of his tea, then smiled.

“Verloor?”

“No, my dear. Your other half,” Gevind smiled a wicked smile at this, and Kaleigh tossed the coffee mug, now back in her hand, straight at his head.

The mug never connected, of course. But it was satisfying nonetheless to throw it at him. He never flinched. She stomped her way out of the cabin to bring Declan back inside.

Stepping outside, she found that he was not at all where she had left him. She looked around, scanning her environment, and didn’t spot him. She walked around to the back of the house and found the stream that ran through the Twisted Woods. It was a beautiful sight--the stream so perfectly placed in the Keepers’ backyard. She walked over and bent down to take a drink from the water.

“We provided you nourishment inside so that you would not be tempted by something so simple,” Verloor said, suddenly beside her.

She let the water fall from her hands. “What would it have done to me?”

“Well, let’s just say that you would have become quite permanently a part of our little family. Let’s find your boyfriend.”

Kaleigh shuddered at his words. Did that mean that all who drank of the stream were forever lost in the Twisted Woods? Or did they find themselves belonging to the Keepers? They began walking into the Woods, looking for Declan. Verloor didn’t seem to be looking, though. He seemed to know precisely where Declan was. “He’s not my boyfriend, you know.”

“Yes, I know what you two are.” Verloor didn’t elaborate further.

“Not anymore,” Kaleigh said.

“I know all about your new pet, my dear. Never assume that I depend on out of date information. I know exactly what the two of you are. I know what you have been. I know what you will be.”

She positioned herself in front of him and stopped. “And what is that?”

“That, sweet Kaleigh, is not something that you have anything to bargain for.”

End of Excerpt

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