**HUNGRY MAGIC**

Magic lived in the quarantined zone, endemic in the twisted trunks of old trees, the cold wind that tore through gory leaves (still clinging to their bony branches, at least for now); it sunk deep in the mossy soil underfoot. Dara kept one hand tangled up in that magic, the other braced on the grip of his gun.

Dara had been out here over a dozen times—the first trip when he was just six, clinging to Lehrer’s shirt sleeve like that would be enough to keep him safe.

He never got any less wary. The virus lurked in the shadowy spaces between the roots, slithered up pine bark. Look away for a moment, and it would strike.

Lehrer walked a few paces ahead, the underbrush coiling back on itself every time he took a step—like it was afraid to come too close. Those same twigs snapped at Dara’s heels, poison ivy climbing up his ankles. Every time Dara flicked it away with static electricity it just came back a second later, singed but angry.

“Let’s try this with a handicap,” Lehrer said, glancing over his shoulder at Dara. “No fire, no electricity.”

Dara made a face at the back of Lehrer’s head once he looked away again. The best way to scare off magic-infested plant life was, of course, to burn it. But at least he could still use—

“No telekinesis, either,” Lehrer added.

Damn it.

“So what’s left, then?”

He could practically see the smile curving up Lehrer’s lips. “You’ll have to exercise a little creativity.”

‘Creativity’ could mean a lot of things where Lehrer was concerned. Dara frowned down at the forest floor, watching magic flicker like static over tangled vines and fallen rocks. One of those vines coiled closer—maybe cold? Dara could try to freeze them out—

He hesitated too long.

He sensed the surge of magic a split second before something rough and wooden tightened around his ankle and Dara was pulled off his feet. He hit the ground hard enough that for a second he saw constellations—Orion and Ursa Major sparkling like shattered glass behind his eyelids. When he finally managing to gasp in a proper breath, to look, it was already too late.

Magic swarmed over his legs and stomach, multicolored and lethal. A tree root was locked around his ankle, knotted wood contorting as its grip tightened—and Dara swore he felt his very bones creaking under the pressure, little bolts of pain darting up his shin.

“Finally,” Lehrer said.

Dara twisted his neck to get a look at him—Lehrer had pulled up his sleeve to examine his wristwatch, like he was impatient to get home in time for dinner.

*Cold. Try cold.*

Dara focused his mind, tried to focus on the water in that root—infiltrating the sap, little fluid molecules swimming in the bark. He imagined those molecules slowing their motions, becoming dull and sluggish, then *willed* it to be so.

Ice crystallized, vein-like, around the root. It flinched slightly, as if physically pained—Dara almost managed to jerk his leg out of grasp, but the tree just bore down harder a beat later. The ice snapped but didn’t break, not completely.

Cold wouldn’t work. Shit.

Lehrer watched from several feet away, quartz-pale eyes fixed on Dara with mild interest.

*Concentrate.*

The tree dragged him along the ground, Dara’s back scraping against sharp rocks and broken twigs—he felt his shirt tear, and really that irritated him more than all the rest—that shirt was *designer.*

He dug his heels into the dirt, dragged a massive rock up from under the earth to break ground like a kraken breaching the surface of the sea. But all that succeeded in doing was making the tree pull him up over the boulder, granite tearing into his already-tattered skin and ripping a sharp sound from Dara’s throat.

He lurched forward and grabbed at the root with both hands, giving up on ice and earth in favor of brute force. Superstrength. The wood cracked under his grip, bark contorting and peeling back in stripes as Dara’s short nails dug in. It was working, it was *working*—

Just not fast enough.

Dara’s back hit something hard—the trunk of a massive oak. And the trunk split open, gaping like a mouth with amber teeth. The root shoved him back, into the tree itself.

Dara knew the quarantined zone was full of strange phenomena and wild magic, but frankly he’d never imagined trees that *ate people*.

The trunk closed around him slowly, warm live wood shifting contentedly against Dara’s trapped limbs.

“Calix!” he shouted, but Lehrer was nothing but a sliver of a shadow visible past the shifting bark and leaves.

*Think, think*—

It was impossible to think clearly past the panic that condensed in Dara’s mind, a dark cloud of seething adrenaline. God, could trees like this actually *digest*? Would acid seep out from the wood grain and eat away at Dara’s flesh and sinew, transform him into a gooey pulp throbbing like a heart in the core of a carnivorous tree?

Thinking like that wasn’t productive, but Dara couldn’t stop himself. It was like the images were on a grotesque permanent reel in his head, painted in far brighter color than real life could ever muster.

Lehrer would save him. Lehrer would…he’d *do* something. Right?

Maybe not. Maybe that was why he brought Dara here, to the heart of the QZ, where losing him was only too easy. Even best case scenario—well, Lehrer said himself, *cause and effect*.

If Dara couldn’t save himself from magic, then he deserved to die from it.

No. Dara couldn’t rely on Lehrer. He had to save himself.

The trunk sealed itself shut, perfect and seamless, closing Dara in the dark.

In here the air was humid and tasted like sap and grave dirt. Dara scratched at the wood, leaning into his superstrength—but all that earned him was a low pulse that thrummed through the whole tree, and it crushed in against his ribs—his legs—his arms—trapping his hands flat-palmed against damp wood.

He couldn’t move. He could barely breathe. He’d die here, he’d rot like—

*There’s an idea.*

Dara couldn’t control bacteria and fungi, but he knew how they worked. They ate away at the cell wall of organic material, decomposing it. No reason Dara couldn’t do the same, if he was *smart* about it—

Dara shut his eyes. There was nothing to see in the heart of the tree but somehow it helped anyway. He thought about the cells that made up the wood, the sap. He imagined the walls of those cells popping like so many fluid blisters.

Wood groaned around him, the tree giving a great shudder that sent nausea pitching up Dara’s throat.

*Faster.*

He could smell it now, the slow rise of death and decay. The tree’s trunk was going soft against his hands and he pressed harder, a tight noise escaping past gritted teeth. The trunk convulsed around him, rippling like sickly pond water against his skin.

And then the tree burst like an overripe fruit, vomiting both Dara and necrotic tissue onto the ground. Dara was still on his hands and knees, choking and coughing up chunks of black wood, as the tree withered and died.

“Four minutes and thirty-two seconds,” Lehrer pronounced.

Dara looked up, still trembling from exertion. Lehrer stood a pace away, flicking a speck of rotten wood off his tailored sleeve.

Dara scrubbed at his face with the heel of one hand, but only succeeded in smearing the dirt around further.

“Thanks a lot for that,” he said, voice coming out raw and hoarse. “I could have died.”

“I had every confidence in you.”

“I couldn’t *breathe*.”

Lehrer waved one dismissive hand. “I would have let you out at the five minute mark. Get up and clean yourself off.”

Dara obeyed, his joints aching under the pressure of his own weight as he pushed to his feet. At least now the magic blanketing the forest floor evaded him, flinching away just as it had from Lehrer’s orbit. A twist of magic made quick work of the grime and mud, but even with his skin clean Dara still felt dirty. Like the decomposing tree had ground itself permanently into flesh.

Lehrer had already started off back toward the edge of the wood and their waiting car. Dara trailed several paces behind, Lehrer’s smaller and less powerful shadow.

It was only when they were back at the government complex, after Dara had showered and changed into fresh clothes, Lehrer pouring tea in the kitchen and passing Dara a cup of hot chamomile, that Dara realized that out there—even on the verge of death, with that tree closing in all around—he’d followed Lehrer’s rules. *No fire, no electricity, no telekinesis*.

He obeyed. And he would have kept obeying, even if it killed him.

Dara went to bed sick.