
Episode 4: Put to the Test

Adana Washington

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Will startled awake. It took him a moment to realize that he was in his room, that the shadowy figures lurking in the corners were remnants of whatever dream he had risen from. He was still in his uniform, now rumpled. His latest assignment, on the desk in front of him, remained unfinished. Outside, he could see the Arcavios night, a slash of darkness punctuated by the usual odd glows across the campus. There was no sign of Rowan. Her side of the room was still in the same state of disarray it had been in for weeks. He stood up, wincing at a crick in his neck, just as a shout came from the hallway.

“—outhern gate!”

“How many did she—?”

“Is everyone—”

In the crowd of students rushing past, Will spotted someone from the Prismari Mage Tower team—Arlo Wickel, the point guard who had impressed Quint with his earth magic.

“Hey! What’s going on?”

Wickel pointed down the hall. “Hey first-year! Follow the crowd—Dean Uvilda is waiting to take you to a designated shelter.”

“But what’s *happening*?”

“The Oriq are here,” he said curtly, before turning and running after the crowd of younger students. Will stood there for a moment, stunned, a sick feeling growing in his stomach. Professor Onyx had been right.

Outside, Will stumbled into a scene of utter chaos. The crowd, joined by more and more students flowing out of the dorms, had frozen by one end of the courtyard. On the other side, past their horrified, stunned expressions, Will could see an encroaching wall of dark shapes.

No—not shapes. Creatures.



Mage Hunters' Onslaught | Art by: Lie Setiawan

They skittered across the manicured lawn on narrow, pointed legs, insectile plating covering wine-purple flesh. Glowing violet spines ran along their backs and up to eyeless heads, featureless altogether save for a gaping, toothy maw. Terrible screeches rent the air.

They sounded hungry.

At first, Will only thought his knees were going weak—but the whole ground was shaking. He saw Wickel step out of the crowd, his entire body vibrating with energy, and thrust both hands into the loam beneath him. A semicircle of churning soil rippled out from where he stood, rising up into a wall of dense earth between the creatures and the students. He turned back to the wide-eyed first-years. “Run! I said *run* !”

Even as he hurried to comply, Will could see the first of the horrible creatures coming over the earthen wall, scaling it effortlessly. He needed to find his sister. Where was Rowan?

Across the campus of Strixhaven, Rowan howled and swung her sword. It bit into a joint between the creature’s armor plating, sending a gout of dark blood spurting across her uniform and down onto the overgrown garden surrounding the Witherbloom dormitories. Behind her, Plink was backing away from one of the things, squealing in fear; with a shouted incantation, Auvernine called thorny roots up from the soil to wrap around the creature’s legs and drag it down into the earth.

“They’re everywhere!” shouted Plink, almost stumbling over the creature’s buried form. “We’re surrounded! Abandon ship! Surrender!”

Rowan scanned the field that stretched before Witherbloom college. Her friend was right. The creatures were advancing in an eerily glowing wall of chitin, pushing the students back toward the dorms.

“If we just wait for the professors—” started Auvernine.

“No. If we just wait, we’re going to be overwhelmed. We have to get past them. We have to get out,” said Rowan.

“And go where?” asked Auvernine desperately.

Rowan glanced toward the Biblioplex, her thoughts turning to Will. If she knew her brother, that’s where he would be. “There,” she said, pointing to its vast silhouette in the night.

“Oh, *now* you want to study?” said Plink, stumbling toward her friends, nearly hysterical.

It wasn’t just Will that drew her there, though. It was in the center of the campus; if the deans and professors would choose anywhere to make a stand, it would be there—and her brother had never stopped going on about all the powerful spells tucked away in those dusty old tomes. *Let’s hope you’re right, Will.*

“Professor Onyx, watch out!”

Liliana spun around at her student’s shout just as an Oriq agent sent a hissing coil of energy at her. It was a vicious spell, something meant to suck the life from her—but she was quite experienced in magic such as this. She stopped the spell inches from her outstretched palm and regarded it coolly. Behind her, the crowd of students that had been in her lecture hall moments ago stared, agape and terrified. *He could have hit them*, she thought. *Well. Fair is fair.* With a gesture, Liliana sent it racing back toward the caster, twice as hungry as before. He tried to flinch away, but the ravenous magic devoured him before he had a chance to even scream.

Deans Kianne and Imbraham came to join her, jogging down the path that led to Quandrix College behind another wave of students. “Professor Onyx,” said Imbraham in that high, odd voice of his. “We are being pursued by a very curious foe. I suggest we regroup with the other faculty at—”

He was cut off by a scream; a student had fallen behind. “Go!” Imbraham barked. “I’ll watch over this group.”

They were off at once, Kianne and Liliana matching strides. Another scream followed; this time, they could see the student, collapsed on the ground and cowering as an insect-like monster loomed over him. “Mage hunters,” Kianne hissed under her breath. Liliana could see more of them boiling out from the shadows, their pointed legs clicking against the stone cobbles.

The creature reared back, the segments of its body glowing, and Kianne sent a geometric lance of force piercing through it. Liliana grabbed the terrified student and pushed him behind her. “Get out of here.”

Something else had caught her attention, though—amid the crawling darkness on all sides, there seemed to be a human figure, a man in a strange red uniform. At least she thought he was human at first glance; there was something wrong with his face, a sharpening and stretching to the cheekbones that reminded her of mandibles. He locked eyes with her, and with eerie coordination, all of the other mage hunters surged toward them.

“Who is that?” said Kianne.

“I don’t know,” Liliana said. “But it seems he’s controlling these creatures somehow.”

Dean Kianne’s face twisted in horror. “All of them? I’ve never seen magic like that before.”

“There’s always a spell,” muttered Liliana. She extended her hand and black threads of magic shot out from the tips of her fingers, but before they could make contact with him, one of the creatures threw itself in the way. The spell burrowed into its shell, making its chitin crack and crumble to dust.



Defend the Campus | Art by: Izzy

At her side, Dean Kianne lifted her hands, light shining around her. In seconds, a horde of angular, catlike fractals had assembled. The constructs leapt forward at her direction, colliding with the wave of approaching mage hunters. The man in the red coat faded back into the crowd of churning, spiny bodies, and Liliana was leaning forward to chase him when something stopped her.

All this mayhem. An attack all across the campus, with no apparent aim but destruction and chaos. Why?

Because, as Liliana realized with building dread, it wasn't an attack—it was a misdirection.

Will ran. He ran as fast as he could, trying not to think about the horrifying creature behind him and its many legs, or the burning in his lungs as he pushed himself harder, or the wet grass beneath his feet that would be so easy to slip on—

Wait. Without stopping, Will stuck his hand down toward the ground and applied a bit of focus. Behind him, the evening dew condensed into hard ice. He turned, looking over his shoulder just in time to see one of the monster's long legs skid off to the side, collapsing underneath it.

"Yes!" shouted Will, shortly before running into something spiky and huge.

He bounced off the second creature's shell as it whipped one claw at him, nicking his uniform but missing anything important. Falling to the ground, he rolled to one side as another claw buried itself in the earth where his head had been a moment before. Will stuck out his arms blindly, making contact with its armor-plated midsection, and drew the heat from it so fast a crack split through the middle of the shell. The creature fell back, screeching, but by then the other one had gotten up and was scuttling toward him.



Mage Hunter | Art by: Mathias Kollros

Suddenly, a roar filled the air, the sound rolling through the sky. More roars answered it until the ground trembled from the cacophony. The creature leapt away from Will and almost *galloped* on its many legs, moving fast—but not fast enough.

A column of fire shot down from the sky and swept over the ground. All around, Will could hear the shrieks of the invading creatures, could smell the carbon in the air as their shells scorched and popped and blackened. In a moment, they were nothing but ashes, scattered to the wind by the beating of giant wings.

Will threw his arms over his head, calling up sheets of ice around himself as another burst of flame ripped through the courtyard. It was barely enough to protect him from the scorching heat, but Will couldn't help the whoop of joy that burst out of him. The dragons had come.

Rowan turned at the sound of her name, letting her friends rush past her toward the main campus. There, with a sword of ice in his hand and a goofy-looking slash across the front of his uniform, was her brother. "Will!"

They ran toward each other and fell into a hug, squeezing each other tightly. When Rowan pulled back, she frowned at the makeshift weapon in his hand. "Where's your sword?"

"In our room," Will said between panting breaths. "I came as fast as I could."

"Look out!" someone shouted behind them. Rowan barely had time to register the Oriq agent stepping out from behind the hedge; as he stuck out his hand, thorns of lethal blood-red energy lancing toward them, she knocked Will to the ground.

There was a gurgling sound, then silence; it took Rowan a moment to realize she had closed her eyes. When she opened them, she saw the Oriq splayed across the ground. Nearby was the familiar stern presence of Professor Onyx, who whirled on them with those cold violet eyes. "You two. Why aren't you taking shelter?"

"We were attacked," they said—almost at the same time.

"At the Prismari dorms," said Will.

"And the Witherbloom ones," said Rowan. "They were surrounding us—almost like they were trying to keep us in one place."

"That's because they were," said Professor Onyx. "This is part of some distraction."

"Distracting us from what?" asked Will.

"I don't have the answer to that," she said. "Not yet. But I know one thing—the mage hunters aren't just herding in the students. They've formed a perimeter around the Biblioplex."

A *perimeter*. Rowan didn't like the sound of that. A living wall of spines, of those glowing purple feelers, of snapping teeth. "What should we do?"

Professor Onyx turned those violet eyes on her, then. "If I were a responsible professor, I'd bring you two somewhere safe. I'd keep you well out of all this."

"But you're not going to do that," said Rowan. "Are you?"

The corner of the professor's mouth twitched—Rowan almost would have called that a smile. "No. I'm not quite so responsible as that. And I need help."

"So this is our way in?" said Will, putting his hand on the circle of stone. It seemed set into one of the rolling hills in the wilder section of the Witherbloom campus.

"Yes. It's an old maintenance passage I found when I was a student." The professor set her hand on the door and muttered something under her breath. With a slow grinding that seemed alarmingly loud to Will, the circle of stone parted, retreating into the side of the hill. On the other side was a long dark tunnel.

"They let students down here?" he asked.

Rowan and Professor Onyx both arched an eyebrow.

"No," said Will. "No, I guess not."

Rowan summoned a sparking ball of light into her hand and took a few cautious steps down the passage, the professor and Will following close behind.

"Is there going to be, um," started Will, "anything waiting for us down there?"

"I don't know," said Professor Onyx. "It's possible. Nobody at Strixhaven has used these tunnels in a long time, but I'm hardly the only one who knows about them. I believe Extus has been sending his people through them for months now."

"Extus?"

"The man responsible for all of this. The leader of the Oriq."

Will felt something catch in his throat. "Ah. So the only thing we need to worry about is a bunch of murderous mages wielding dark magic."

"Toughen up, Will," said Rowan. "It's nothing we haven't seen before."

"Is that so?" Professor Onyx seemed amused. "You two are hardly the most likely heroes in all this. But I suppose I'm not one to talk."

What that meant, Will had no idea.

Extus strode down the curving corridors of the Biblioplex, running one hand along the fine wooden shelves. So much wisdom in those old books—and yet not a drop of it seemed to be helping them now. It was odd to hear the habitual quiet of this place once again, only now the silence was occasionally broken by the screams of a student caught inside.

“Extus!”

He turned at the sound of his name. One of his agents approached, carrying a heavy book with frayed, yellowing pages. Tavver, if he judged the voice correctly—a younger member, and quite dedicated to the cause. He had already been on several missions deep into the heart of the school.

“I found it in the East Wing, just as you said, sir.”

“Fine work.” Extus took the book and wiped off a layer of dust. Gilded letters shone in the low light.

“What is it, sir? If you don’t mind me asking,” said Tavver.

“The work of another brilliant mind overlooked and left to rot. They are so quick to throw us away if we don’t suit their purpose.” He held out a hand, feeling benevolent. “You will be rewarded for everything you’ve done today.”

Just as the agent took his hand, Extus spotted the student in Silverquill robes over his shoulder. She was bleeding badly, one arm dangling limp at her side, but she glared at them both with an expression of utter fury. He *felt* the hate radiating from the spell she was weaving, an orb of perfect darkness, which she whipped straight toward him.

Without hesitation, Extus tightened his grip on Tavver’s arm and pulled him close, spinning him into the spell’s path. The agent’s body bowed under the impact, a scream bouncing off the inside of his mask as he went limp and dropped to the floor. The student raised her arms, trying to gather more energy, but she was spent. Extus flung a bolt of crackling energy sailing through the air that hit the student dead-on. As she crumpled, the library went quiet once again.

He glanced down at the body of his masked agent, now still. Without a second look, Extus continued on.

“You found this as a student?” marveled Will, his voice bouncing eerily off the walls of the stone tunnel.

“How long ago was that?” asked Rowan. She held their only light, a jumping bit of spark-magic that did odd things to their shadows.

“A very long time ago,” Professor Onyx said. “It was a very different time, and I was a very different person back then.”

They emerged into what looked like a cave chamber. Above, the gray stone ceiling vanished into darkness. A chasm separated the ledge where they stood from another tunnel, which he could barely make out in the low light; a wooden bridge spanned the abyss.

“Um, is there some other way to cross?” Will asked, eyeing the frayed rope and ancient-looking boards.

“You know, I never found out.” Professor Onyx stepped lightly on the edge of the bridge. Rowan followed her, stepping with alarming speed over the rotten planks.

“Slow down,” Will said, his pace steady and slow behind her.

“Each minute we waste here is one the Oriq spend hurting people,” Rowan said over her shoulder. Each stride forward sent chunks of wood falling into the chasm below.

A crack split the air, bouncing off the walls. Stones skittered down as clouds of dust bloomed around them. Rowan took another step and the wood snapped beneath her.

Will dove as Rowan fell, locking one hand around her wrist. Knocking more of the boards away, he heaved and pulled, lifting Rowan back through the bridge. They landed in a heap, then crawled the rest of the way.

“Thanks,” said Rowan, her voice shaky.

“You’d do the same for me.”

“Come on,” said Professor Onyx, on the other side. She barely seemed to notice their near-death experience. “Hurry along.”

“What does he want?” said Will. “Extus, I mean. What is he here for?”

“There are any number of things he could be after. Tomes of great value, magical artifacts—the Biblio-plex is full of things an aspiring megalomaniac might want.”

“So where are you taking us?”

“I’m taking you where I would go, if I wanted to cause the most damage possible.”

Will only stared as she continued down the tunnel.

“We need to keep moving,” said Rowan, nudging him forward.

Extus rested one hand on the smooth, cool wood of the double doors leading to the Hall of Oracles. They had been locked, but thankfully, the Oriq attack had happened too quickly for any wards to be activated and set in place. With a brief exertion of will, he blasted the doors off their hinges and stepped inside.



Hall of Oracles | Art by: Piotr Dura

Encircling the room were stern, wizened visages carved in stone—oracles, long dead but not forgotten. Extus thought he noticed a certain scorn in their flinty eyes, as if even from the grave they didn't approve of what he was doing here. As if they didn't think he belonged in their ranks.

It didn't matter. They were dead. And when he was done, they would be glad that they were.

His gaze shifted to the ceiling, and even with his mask, he had to squint against its light. The Strixhaven Snarl hung in the air, tendrils of energy whipping and snapping around the hall. Mana from the primordial origins of this world, still swirling in a maelstrom of power. Below it sat a series of stone rings, nearly as old as the vortex itself—containment circles, Extus knew. Its light cast the entire room in a soft blue glow, sending shadows dancing across the floor.

Yes, he thought. *This will do.*

Opening the book in his hand, he flipped through the yellowed pages until he found what he was looking for.

Footsteps sounded from the corridor as Oriq agents filed into the room. Each of them carried a book or scroll. Extus nodded, glad that his mask hid the giddy smile stretched across his face. "Good. Array them as we discussed. It's time."

One by one, the agents placed the books and scrolls carefully in front of their leader until the ancient texts formed a semi-circle opened before him. Pausing for only a moment to savor the occasion, Extus began to read.

Liliana expected to have to fight her way to the Snarl—there was no way the Oriq would leave their ultimate prize unguarded, after all—but she hadn't expected her charges to be so enthusiastic about this part of their "adventure." She hardly had to kill anyone; at the first sign of one of the masked Oriq, Rowan would zap them with a current of energy that left them twitching on the ground. Even Will was quite useful, forming shells of ice around the fallen Oriq agents so when their muscles stopped seizing,

they wouldn't be able to do much more than shiver. When they reached the Hall of Oracles, though, the doors were already ripped apart. Inside, she could make out a group of masked figures silhouetted by the rippling light of the vortex within. At their center, one of them was incanting something from a large heavy tome.

She could feel the arcane currents in the air shifting, listening, in a way she had felt too many times before. Powerful dark magic was at work here; even the Kenrith twins seemed to notice something, both of them going very still at her side.

"We're too late," said Liliana. "He's already bound himself to the Snarl."

"Not yet we're not." Rowan was the first to break the trance that seemed to hold them all, rushing into the room.

"Wait!" called Will, running after her before Liliana could stop him. *Fools—they can't face him with that much power at his disposal!* she thought.

Already the masked mages were turning, their hands alight with bright fire and bubbling venom and other crude, vicious spells. Rowan screamed with a mix of fury and a frightening delight as lightning crawled over her skin and jumped to a group of Oriq, unbridled power let loose. Smoke curled from under their hoods as they collapsed. *That girl is a force to be reckoned with already*, thought Liliana. *A few more years, and she'll be truly terrifying.*

But Rowan was still too inexperienced to sense the Oriq agent reaching out behind her, fingers crackling with killing power. Liliana concentrated, and time seemed to slow for a moment as she felt, through the arcane energies swirling in the air, the little light of the man's soul. With a savage thrust of will, she pushed it free of his body, which dropped in a heap on the floor.

That was when the spell splashed over her. *What?* thought Liliana, head jerking to the origin of the attack. Extus, the man holding that heavy book, had one hand extended. She hadn't sensed the buildup of any offensive magic, though—not the warmth of fire nor the sickly sensation of death magic. What had he hit her with?

Suddenly the room seemed to bend and sway underneath her feet. Everything spun uncomfortably; a sense of vertigo arose in her stomach. It was a feeling not unlike planeswalking, though sick and twisted. The last thing she saw was the Kenrith boy—looking not at her, but at his sister. Terrified, though whether it was for her or *of* her, Liliana couldn't say. Then her vision went black.

When she opened her eyes, the light of the Snarl was gone.

Liliana blinked as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She moved to sit up, her hand dragging through dirt and leaves, and looked around, her mind finally clearing enough to recognize the shapes of the forest around her. *Forced translocation magic.* She'd never been hit by that before.

She climbed to her feet. Ahead, she could just make out one of the torches that led the way to Strixhaven. The campus itself was somewhere in the far distance, beyond sight.

Try not to die, you two. I'm coming—but it's going to be a long walk.

Rowan stared at the spot where Professor Onyx had been, then turned to Extus. "What did you do to her?"

The masked figure made no reply. With a growl of frustration, Rowan extended a hand toward him. The air split with a roar as a bolt of lightning coursed in his direction, but the Oriq leader only gestured

toward her. The lightning simply *stopped*, then dropped from the air, shattering on the ground as if made of glass. He waved casually, as though batting a fly, and Rowan saw the air bend and warp as a wave of force rushed toward her. She closed her eyes and held up her hands—but instead of being torn apart by the spell, she was only peppered with shards of ice as the wall Will had thrown up was shattered.

“Rowan, listen to me!” shouted Will, grabbing her shoulder. “We need to synchronize our magic, like we used to.”

“You said it yourself—I can’t control my powers anymore!” spat Rowan. “There’s something different now. Our magic is changing.”

“Yeah,” said Will. “You’ve gotten *stronger*. But I’ve gotten more controlled. Together, we can do it. There’s no other way!”

But that wasn’t true. Rowan looked back at Extus and the storm of raw magic surging and glowing behind him. The Snarl, Professor Onyx had called it. She could feel the power radiating off of it, more power than any one mage could use. She could take it, draw it out, just as she’d drawn the power from that Prismari student’s water elemental. “We can do what he’s doing—we can draw on the Snarl. Use the same dirty trick!”

“That’s too dangerous!” said Will. “It’s too much power—you’ll kill yourself! You’ll destroy all of Strix —”

He was interrupted by another wave of force roaring out from where Extus stood. Will threw up another shield of ice, but this time the spell was strong enough to punch through and knock them both across the room.

Rowan pushed herself into a sitting position, head ringing. Not far away, she could see Will doing the same. Something was pooling at her feet, she realized, soaking through her boots. With alarm, she saw that it was blood.

Not her blood, though, and not Will’s. Rivulets of the stuff seemed to be spreading out throughout the whole room. She traced their path, her gaze drifting toward the Snarl hanging above Extus. Where it had glowed blue before, now it shone a deep red.

A bone-rattling roar shook the hall, sending cracks splintering across the walls and shaking centuries-old dust from the rafters. Another crack ripped through the room and a piece of the ceiling plummeted toward them.

Rowan dove toward Will, and they both tumbled away just as the stone crashed into the floor. Another boulder fell, crushing the limp body of an Oriq agent nearby and making Rowan flinch.

More blood flowed from the concentric stone circles on the floor in front of Extus, bubbling as if from a fountain. What had started as a trickle grew into a deluge. The sweet iron reek filled her nose.

Under the Snarl, Extus spread his arms wide. “Rise, Great One! I call upon you, Blood Avatar! Unleash your wrath upon this unfair world!”

From the bubbling fountain of blood in that stone circle, two points began to take shape, stretching and curving into the shape of horns. Something was dragging itself free.

Rowan pushed herself backward until she hit the wall. Not horns, but a helmet of ancient bronze. What arose, soaked in gore, was massive and only vaguely humanoid. In each of its four muscular arms,

it clutched a cruel weapon, the edges and spikes too many for Rowan to take in altogether. It was a creature of war, that much was clear. A being whose only purpose was to unmake what had stood for centuries.

This was Extus's plan all along. This was what they had been trying to stop. And now, their failure could mean the death of them all.