



A Mess of Sage

Author: Radman Zhang



Xavier's questionable revelation seemed to spark a somewhat unjustified confidence in everyone else, as they began wandering about the room, caught up in the fantastical nature of the moment.

You can see Josh and Ori trying to make conversation with some of the other guests, and laughing at the confused, monosyllabic replies they're getting. Leisl somehow made it to the other side of the room, and you hear her squeal with delight as she peeks into a neighbouring corridor.

You sigh. Sure, the situation might be kinda cool, but there's something so hopelessly *wrong* about it all. Outside the windows, you can only see pitch blackness. If you pay close attention, you can tell that the movement of the guests as they wander back and forth simply repeats, as if they are automata. Heck, maybe even their conversation is repeating. Other than you and your friends, Detective Waverly seems like the only dynamic character in the scene, rushing about from place to place, asking questions and taking notes in a yellow, frayed notebook.

"Xav," you ask, "do you have any idea on how we'll get out of this?"

"Huh?" He seems like he's been woken up from a dream. "Um... I don't actually know. Do you reckon there's an exit to the mansion?" The two of you begin scouting the building. The nearby corridor leads to an aquarium full of clownfish, where you see Leisl tapping the glass with child-like curiosity. The double doors, to the kitchen, the stairs up from there, to the servant quarters, where Xav sees the Count's body (sans eyes) for the first time. He bends down to examine the body, and goes a little pale.

"It actually seems so real, doesn't it..." he murmurs.

"Xav... we've checked the whole mansion. There aren't actually any other rooms. There's no exit." You're starting to get worried now. "How are we supposed to get out?"

He slowly rises from the body. "Maybe... maybe we need to finish the story to get out."

The hell? "What's that supposed to mean?"

He looks you in the eye, that old geeky excitement starting to overtake his discomfort. "We need to finish the movie. Solve the mystery. Catch the killer. Once it's over, surely we'll be able to get back!" You're about to tell him that this is the most ridiculous thing you've ever heard, until you realise it actually kinda seems reasonable, given the circumstances.

"...sure? And how are we gonna do that?"

He's got a grin all over his face now. He taps his nose, and says, "Inspector Xav. On the case."



Before you can object, he's dashed past your disbelieving face back into the kitchen to begin his interrogating the servants. *I did not sign up for this*, you think, as you follow his descent down the stairs.



Dear Sir/Madam,

I have enclosed for you two documents- a poem and a list. Good luck!

Yours truly,

The School of Puzzles

Just as kittens must clowder

Together we assuredly must chain, flock together like birds of a feather

Scramble about our town becoming psychotic, pack your bags and we shall evacuate

Bring nothing! Simplicity. It gives us perspectives, like Cubism. Pocket emptied out.

If it gets loud, bring an earplug. Rake the leaves before you adjourn, lest Mama be mad.

Mama always babbled greatly! Eat your veggies. Eat this pill. Murder is wrong. Don't be late.

Let us leave as one, as a team, union, sheaf, bundle, coalition, as friends, as comrades,

Together we will commandeer a force of chariots, a horsecar army

And together we will invade China, Ukraine, and Bermuda. Ascension to the throne!

We are assured of our victory through tarot readings. Major Arcana! Troop onwards Sons,

As trumpets bless us with blasts of long tenuti. Tuft is all who dare to stand against us.

And when the mole drove away, betrayal futile, we stood tall as Kings.



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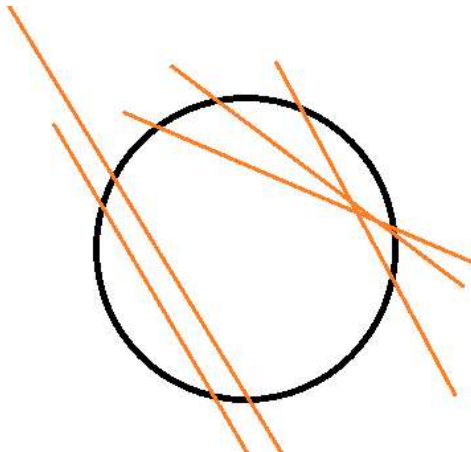
1. Cyperus Rotundus
2. Scavengers who typically works in riverbanks
- 3.



4.



5.



6. The basic stems of an embryo plant



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7.



8. Classic US foods consumed in sports stadiums

9. Jewel, from the Chronicles of Narnia

10.



11. Bite-sized snacks you might consume at a formal event

12.

