

A Mad Glimpse of Research

Two scholars stand in the middle of a room—or what might be the middle. The space bends unnaturally, folding in on itself while stretching outward, too close and too far all at once. Your mind protests the impossibility, but some deeper part of you whispers acceptance, insists this is normal. Somehow.

You see companions beside them, yet not quite beside them. Their forms shimmer, cloaked in colors that burn with impossible intensity—shades you've never known and cannot unsee. These colors seep into the room, staining the air without obscuring anything. The two Lalafell nod in tandem, their movements slow, deliberate, as if the moment stretches across centuries. Their hands rise, and the radiant hues surrounding them bleed together, pooling in the center of the space.

Their faeries drift like spectral shadows, threading filaments of their own aether into the coalescing colors. The orb that emerges pulses with grotesque life, a shimmering tangle of purple and green, breathing as if it hungers. The threads weave themselves into a lattice of staggering complexity, a web spun with precision so alien it defies comprehension. As you shift your stance, you feel the shift ripple across the room, an unseen mirror echoing your motion through no sense you can name. Your partner shifts too, the air between you shimmering with angles, lines, sigils—symbols that burn in your mind as much as in the room. Energy gathers in the unseen curves, building toward a single, dreadful focus.

You hope, pray in the way you were never taught, that this time will be different.

It isn't.

The web quivers. A beat, a tremor—and then collapse. The casters see it too late. The power surges, devouring their aether in a heartbeat. Their faeries unravel, dissolving in waves of screaming color that shatter against the roiling core. The orb pulses, pressing against the fragile web that might have restrained it. It groans and shrieks, its voice alive with the color of rot and the texture of searing light, a terrible sound that exists inside your teeth and under your skin.

Your partner moves before you can think, manifesting a shield to cage the energy. They stagger, the strain visible in every flicker of the barrier. You cast your magic, the spell long prepared, to drag the four bodies behind you and your partner, a desperate bid to shield them. You can hear shouting—your friend? A plea for help? It's swallowed by the surge of aether breaking through the barrier, clawing at the edges, tearing at the shield as you try to patch it, mending holes that open faster than you can close them.

The world fractures.

You see it coming—slowly, unbearably slowly. The fabric of existence unravels, threads peeling away like dried skin. The air turns inside out, and the colors scream in shapes you can no longer understand. The shield collapses, and your partner spins toward you, their eyes wide with something between desperation and resolve.

You don't hear their words.

You feel them unmaking you, not in vengeance but in a terrible, deliberate act of preservation. They shape you, twist you, forcing you into something that will survive the rupture, even as their body dissolves into nothing.

The colors shatter into blinding light.

And then, nothing.

Nothing except the knowledge that you have been saved. And cursed.

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