



Darkbirch Academy

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Description: "Two predators now circle me in this den of enemies. One I came to hunt, and one I never saw coming."

Dark mages don't deal in warnings — only executions. So when assassin-in-training Esme Salem is tasked with infiltrating a magical defense academy and eliminating Kieran Mazrov — a deadly mage with powers that could erase her kind from existence — it should be treacherous but simple. A poisonous jab to his throat. A garrote bracelet slit across his neck. No hesitation.

What she doesn't expect is Professor Dayn. Calculating. Controlled. Lethal in every line of his body — which emits literal heat when he enters a room. He's supposed to be an academic, but nothing about him screams scholarly. And the more she tries to pursue her mission, the more dangerous he becomes...

She came to kill. She might just end up undone — unless she can undo both predators first.

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At Darkbirch, they taught us early: light illuminates the surface, but darkness touches what light never dares. While most mages train to purify, we learn to tempt, twist, control.

I stand atop the highest turret of Heathborne Academy's castle, feeling the night's icy wind against my skin. I pull out a tiny, ivy-green tablet from my cloak pocket and swallow it. My tongue, throat, and stomach burn unpleasantly for several heartbeats, but it has the desired effect. My whole body becomes nimble, supple, and I can manipulate myself into the narrow space of a nearby chimney's opening, the way a contortionist could only dream of doing.

I slide down the cramped chute, my body deforming further. I admit I'm glad I can't see myself because I'd probably give myself nightmares. Which, I promise, is hard to do.

When I reach the base of the chimney, I crawl unsteadily out of a cold fireplace. I pull another lozenge out of my pocket—this one crimson—and swallow it. The limbs of my body slowly strengthen and normalize.

I cast my eyes around the chamber in which I've emerged: the first hall of Heathborne's cherished library. I get up and walk quietly toward the exit. This isn't the room I'm here for. Clearblood books—or books for "good magicals," as they like to think of themselves—are mostly trash anyway.

I peer around the library's towering, arched doorway. Dim lanterns line the wide

corridor outside, but it is empty, as expected at one in the morning. The plush burgundy carpets soften my footsteps, and I speed up to a jog until I reach the end of the corridor where a narrow doorway awaits. It leads to a coiling service staircase. I take it quickly, tracking the turns, every sense alert as I descend.

All semblance of comfort vanishes when I reach the ground floor and I'm left with bare stone walls and floors. I prefer it down here. No softness, no lies.

Before me stands a granite door with an iron lock. Of course, I expected it to be secured. What cell isn't?

I reach for the mini knife in my belt and unsheathe it. I glance briefly at its pointed tip, satisfied with the amount of pitch-black firegrease smeared on it, and thrust it into the keyhole. The lock clicks a few seconds later and gives way like softened wax. I shove the door open.

A deafening siren shatters the silence.

I curse under my breath.

That... complicates things.

They evidently upped security after our last break-in.

Oh, well. We can do this the hard way.

I pound down the stone stairwell with no further regard for the noise I make. I can't even hear my breathing with the blaring siren. Though, I wish they had been a little more creative—it sounds like they borrowed this from a retail store. Like, how about a wailing banshee or a screaming ghost?

Speaking of spirits... I pause for a moment to utter my favorite chant, which my grandmother taught me. All the dim lights go out and the air becomes deathly cold.

I smile a little.

They'll have a nice surprise when they come through that door.

I proceed down the rest of the steps, using the light from a thin flashlight in my belt, and find the final door I'm seeking at the bottom. I use my little blade to open this one, too.

I ignore the second set of alarms this breach sets off, but wish I brought my earmuffs. I doubt Heathborne's health and safety team reviewed these systems.

Inside the next chamber is my destination. Hulking in one corner is a sorry sight. And I admit my heart hurts a little. My younger brother, Jax Salem, slouches in a chair, his arms suspended by chains so he can barely rest, although I see that he tries. A fire lights in my veins as I see what they've done to him.

"Esme, what the hell?" he croaks upon noticing me. His raven-black hair is slick with sweat and it sounds like he hasn't drunk anything for at least twelve hours. His face is more purplish than pale and his clothes are in shreds, revealing deep cuts that crisscross his muscular chest.

It's a good thing I arrived now. Much longer and they would have grown tired of torturing him for information.

"You mean what took me so long?" I ask. I look into his storm-cloud gray eyes that mirror my own, and shrug. "Corvin thought you might be able to get yourself out."

Irritation flashes across his face at the mention of our head trainer. "It's because of

him that?—”

“Talk later,” I interrupt, already setting to work on his chains. He needs to conserve his strength—we’re not out of here yet. I slick more of the alchemical grease onto my blade, and seconds later, it hisses and glows, heat thrumming through the metal. Searing enough to bite through the chains. The cuffs can wait.

Once I’m done, I pull him to his feet and we hurry from the chamber, scaling the stone steps beyond. The lights are still out, the temperature still gravely cold, and as we reach the top flight of stairs, we pass the first wave of Heathborne’s troops who attempted to reach us. They lie strewn on the steps, motionless, all the flesh ripped from their faces, which are now nothing but a bloody mess.

“You brought grandma’s crew?” Jax pants.

“We needed backup,” I shoot back, then point to a narrow door on our right. “This way.”

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I already hear more clearbloods thundering down the service stairwell. I can't command the spirits of my grandmother and her biddies again after such a brief interval without them getting waspish with me, but I have other methods. Jax isn't at full capacity, obviously, but he does his best to keep up with me as we race through the corridors toward the main entrance. There aren't many exit points in this building, and we may as well leave in style.

I pour on the speed when the giant oak doors of the main entry hall come into view. We spill into the room.

Something crashes behind us, sending tremors through the floor. My brother groans and drops to his knees on the floor beside me, though I cannot see what injury caused him to falter.

I whirl around to lay eyes on an imposing figure dressed fully in dark-gray armor. He has apparently leaped down at least a flight of stairs and hurtles toward me with speed that surprises me.

"You're not going anywhere, darkblood," a deep, baritone voice, dripping with malice, utters from behind his visor. He's close enough that I catch the reflection of my pale face, mostly concealed by a black mask, and dark hair in his metal face guard.

I am not sure whether to flame him for his arrogance in attacking my injured brother or for threatening me as he did, and I decide to do it for both.

Just as I claw my hands, a voice bellows from the staircase. "Mazrov, STOP! You're

not strong enough yet! We can't risk losing you!"

The words catch me off guard. My hands involuntarily still. My focus shifts. I stare into the mysterious person's visor. He's close enough that it no longer hides everything.

Electric-blue eyes lock onto mine, edged in something impossible. Fire.

A gasp escapes me.

Who—what—is he?

He halts, apparently listening to the reprimanding voice, and noticing that I have not yet counterattacked.

My brother groans again, more deeply, and I realize I need to pivot. As much as I hate leaving any Heathborne collegian upright, this one will have to wait.

I grab a small syringe from my belt and inject my right arm's vein with the blood-orange liquid it holds. An uncontrollable surge of energy rockets through me, lending me the strength to both drag my brother to the door and yank it open with impossible speed. Outside, our ride awaits.

2

Isander sweeps toward us from the shadows of an oak tree. His icy, much-paler hands brush against mine as he takes my brother from me and pulls him onto his back, then engulfs my waist with one steely arm. His silver-speckled midnight eyes and jaw, too chiseled for his own good, are inches from my face, and I expect he has ulterior motives for putting me in the front seat—so to speak—but I say nothing for now.

We need to go.

Our vampire colleague extends his powerful, leathery-black wings and launches us into the air. I grip my brother's arms, which are secured around Isander's neck, ensuring his hold stays firm as the ground speeds away from us.

The mages spilling out of the academy quickly become mere dots.

That's a downside to mainstream magical society persecuting perfectly useful creatures like vampires: they seek refuge with enemies.

We are now above an immense, pitch-black lake, but even that soon becomes obscured as Isander rises higher, into a stretch of clouds. He does well to hide our tracks completely and, as I pull off my face mask, I consider encouraging him.

But then his head lowers. I feel the strands of his dark hair tickle my skin and the cool caress of his lips against my neck.

"Es, just one time," he whispers against me and I admit it sends a shiver down my spine. His hold around my waist tightens, pulling the contours of my body completely flush against his. "You've kept me waiting so long."

I release one hand from my brother and grip Isander's jaw with it, raising his head to meet my death glare. He knows not to test my boundaries further and yields, though a smirk plays on his lips.

"Will you ever give in?" he breathes.

I ignore his question, his hooded eyes, and the huskiness of his voice. Truth be told, I have a penchant for vampires. They're my favorite kind of influx into our academy, and Isander—one of our newest recruits—has somehow sensed my weak spot

quickly. Perhaps I'll consider his proposal later. But right now, I am concerned for my brother, who hasn't lifted his head since being placed on Isander's back. I still don't know what caused him to fall to the floor in that entrance hall. He has no additional visible wounds.

"Jax," I call. "What happened?"

He is breathing but doesn't respond. My stomach tightens. Who was that bastard back there?

We pierce through the darkness of Darkbirch Coven's protective shield. Agonized screams engulf us, each belonging to spirits of clearbloods who preferred to sell their souls to us and live in an eternal purgatory, rather than risk passing on and finding out what death holds. Now they form our barrier and help keep us safe.

To be honest, death was probably the better deal.

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I glance down at the graveyard that sprawls immediately in front of us once we've passed the barrier.

"Drop me here, then take Jax home," I tell Isander. "I'll see you at the academy later."

He sets me down among the gravestones, and I keep an eye on the distance between his handsome face and mine. He wisely tries nothing and takes flight again with my brother. I sigh as I watch Jax's severely weakened form disappear with Isander into the trees bordering the graveyard. The woods hold our coven's residential quarters, and my mother is the best person to give Jax the immediate attention he needs. As head apothecary of the coven infirmary, there are few more experienced.

And we urgently need to discuss what I saw in Heathborne... but first I have to do something that cannot wait.

I cast my eyes around the sea of graves, breathing in what has probably been my favorite scent since I was a child: damp earth. Blame it on the countless hours I spent here with my grandmother. It's basically our community's vegetable patch.

You see, the common description of us as "darkbloods" is, at best, rudimentary. Just like clearbloods' conception of death is. The way we see it: Death is a garden and we are its gardeners.

Take this yard, for example. It's filled with flowers and seeds that keep on giving... if you know where to find them, and how to use them. If you don't or make a mistake... well, you find out soon enough.

I pick my way toward the headstone where my grandmother lies. Esther Esme Salem. She died before I was born, so my parents gave me her middle name in her honor. And I have come to speak with her almost every day since I learned to talk.

I kneel at her gravestone, draw out the small knife from my belt, and cut my palm. I smear my blood across her name etched into the stone. A small bloodflower, dainty like a deep-crimson hibiscus, blooms in the soil next to me, and I close my eyes.

A skull appears in my mind's eye, the delicate skull of my grandmother, lying in the soil beneath me. She nods, and her spectral voice, simultaneously distant and intimately close, fills my ears: "Thank you, child." Hopefully my gift will put her in a good mood for the next time I call her.

Because, naturally, nothing comes for free.

Unless of course you've sold your soul to us, like a dumb clearblood. Then you're basically screwed.

I sheathe my dagger and hurry toward the woods.

3

When I reach our family lodge, its ivy-ridden exterior looms cold and still. No lights, no movement.

"Mom? Jax?" I call, wondering if they might have gone down to the basement. I can't imagine why they would have, when our ten-foot dining table would have done fine for an at-home treatment.

The lights are also out in the house of my aunt, uncle and three cousins, which stands next door to ours. But that's to be expected: they were all deployed, along with my

younger sister Brynn, as emergency reinforcements to Bloodbane Coven three days ago after a clearblood strike.

The heavy tapestries lining our entryway seem to absorb what little moonlight enters, their embroidered scenes of ancient mage battles fading into the gloom.

My gaze drifts briefly but inevitably to the single photograph perched on the mantel—my father's face frozen in time, his sharp cheekbones casting shadows across features so similar to my own; his gray eyes holding secrets I'll never know.

He left for Tarnhollow—a fledgling clearblood coven five hundred miles east of Darkbirch—thirteen years ago, when I was ten years old. It should have been a routine reconnaissance mission, but he never returned. Bloodbane and two other neighboring covens helped us send trackers, but the only answers we ever got were rumors which reached us of pyres burning in Tarnhollow's square.

For years, my mother came to this exact spot every evening and stared at his photograph. She never said it aloud, but we all knew she was waiting. If I'm honest, I waited too. Even after we stopped lighting the spirit-lanterns, and when the bond-ritual scars on my wrist stopped aching, the magic gone cold. Some nights, I still dream of smoke curling against a distant horizon, and wonder if his spirit chose the afterlife over us—or if the clearbloods found ways to ensure he couldn't return to us even in subtle form.

I exhale. Either way, it doesn't matter anymore.

I tear my eyes away from the picture. Focus.

Jax.

My mother must have taken him straight to the infirmary, which means his condition

is worse than I thought. Isander probably escorted them both there.

I glance at my watch. It's still several hours before sunrise. I stop by my bedroom and briefly glance around at its sparse interior. I've barely spent any time here since I moved into the academy's dorms. I grab my old snakeskin whip, tipped with a silver blade, which stands in a white-porcelain vase behind the door, then hurry back out of the house.

Darkbirch is always wild, but when the sun sets, the creatures we harbor shed the last pretense of civility.

The infirmary path stretches before me, a ribbon of dirt cast in flickering lantern light. Ten minutes. That's all it should take. But the woods in this area are hungry, and twenty steps in, I already hear the pound of paws and the wet rasp of something breathing too hard, too close.

I turn slowly.

Red eyes float in the dark. Teeth glint like shards of glass.

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Soren.

My whip uncoils in my grip, its silver blade catching what little light there is. “Watch your step,” I snarl.

The wolf freezes. Massive and muscle-bound, his hackles bristle like daggers along his spine. Moonlight glints in the strands of saliva dripping from his jaws. He hasn’t backed down—he’s just weighing the cost of disobedience.

I let the whip crack. The sound splits the air like a gunshot.

For a heartbeat, he hesitates. Then, with a growl that shakes the leaves overhead, he vanishes into the trees. Probably to tear out the throat of the first animal he finds, or possibly even his mate.

I pick up my pace, pretending not to notice the trio of incubi lounging in the oak branches above. Their barely-there attire—more suggestion than fabric—is designed to tempt ruin. One blows me a kiss, the air thick with jasmine and sin, and something darker that curls low in my spine.

About a minute later, a voice like velvet brushes my ear. “Darling, you’re wound tight.” He emerges from the shadows in a slow ripple of moonlight and heat, a dark fae sculpted from illusion and intent. His fingers sketch circles in the air, and the space beneath them shimmers like disturbed water—half-magic, half-invitation. Then his lips brush the shell of my ear, feather-soft, daringly close. “Let me... loosen you.”

I sidestep his advance with a glare. Honestly, it’s like walking through a supernatural

frat house out here.

I heave a sigh when the infirmary finally looms ahead. I close the distance rapidly and shove open the heavy oak doors. The air hangs thick with the scent of crushed yarrow and something metallic. I push through the cluster of eight defense officers crowding Jax's bed, their uniforms creating a wall of black leather and crimson insignias.

Our defense academy's head, Corvin, looms at the top of the bed, his scarred hands clutching the bedframe. My mother's fingers work methodically, smearing yellow ointment across Jax's temples. My brother's face twitches violently, veins standing out like blue rivers beneath his too-pale skin.

My mother notices me enter and looks up. "What the hell happened to you?" she snaps before I can utter a word. She finishes applying the ointment and turns to me, hands on her hips. Her cold blue eyes rake over me.

I grip the bedrail. "We were almost out," I say. "Then this armored bastard—Mazrov—dropped from the upper level. Jax was moving despite the torture injuries, but then... suddenly he was on his knees and it seemed Mazrov did something to him. But I don't know what. And then someone called Mazrov off. Said he wasn't 'strong enough' yet to take me on." My nails dig deeper into the wood. "What's wrong with Jax?"

A dry swallow. A flicker of her tongue over her lips. My mother—rarely nervous—stands too still, her fingers curling into loose fists before forcing them flat again.

"His symptoms are... strange," she replies. "Mental fracturing. Temporal disorientation. But what's most concerning is his aura. It's... weakened."

I stare at her. What? Our aura is what defines our identity as magicals. More than identity, it is our lifeblood. Without it, we are ash.

“Esme, you need to tell us every single detail you can about this.” Corvin steps forward and I have never seen his dark eyes so serious. His thin lips set in a hard line.

“I saw the man’s eyes,” I say. “They were bright blue, but I saw fire. That’s the only way I can think to describe it. There was... fire in his eyes.”

The air in the room turns to ice. No one seems to breathe. No one moves. My mother’s face is a reflection of the expression carved into every other face in the room: pale, wide-eyed, disquieted.

“Are you sure, Esme?” Her voice is barely a whisper, but it cuts through the silence like a blade.

I don’t blink. “I told you exactly what I saw... What does it mean?”

Corvin’s gaze snaps to my brother’s prone form, his brow furrowing so deeply it shadows his eyes. His jaw clenches—once, twice—before he turns on me with a predator’s stillness.

“You’ll be wanted at a council meeting.”

4

Jax’s pale face lingers in my mind as I head through the woods to the academy.

Council meeting. Those words never bode well. But I’ll have to wait until tomorrow for whatever revelations they have in store. They apparently need time to prepare.

And I need some rest—hopefully at least six hours of unconsciousness.

As I cross the final thicket of trees, Darkbirch Academy rises before me... like a sin that never bothered to repent. Its jagged silhouette cuts into the night sky—black stone bleeding into stars. Unlike Heathborne, all polished stone and moral posturing, Darkbirch doesn't pretend to be anything but what it is: a ruthless, spell-bound relic of power. Gothic. Vast. Alive. It doesn't sit on the land so much as possess it.

It's not welcoming.

It's not safe.

But gods, it's beautiful.

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The grounds surrounding it are untamed, deliberate in their danger. Thorned vines coil up the eastern wall like serpents, twitching at passing footsteps. Bone-trees—white and leafless—line the walkways like silent sentinels, their bark smooth as skin, their roots capable of drinking more than water.

I pass under the archway carved with runes that glow faintly beneath moonlight—wards keyed to repel the uninvited. Their hum stirs something low in my bones, familiar and sharp. The academy may be vast, but it knows its own. And it knows me.

Most of the dorms cling to the main structure, rows of uniform stone tucked behind the most central tower. But mine stands apart—secluded by design and by request, a shadowed turret in the northwest wing. By tradition, private rooms are reserved for those sufficiently... accomplished—or dangerous—to warrant solitude during nightly hours when energy tends to run wild among our kind. My placement here isn't entirely due to privilege.

A narrow stone staircase curls up through ivy-draped walls, leading to my turret. Shadow-kissed and quiet. It smells of charred incense, old paper, and faint ozone—scents that have clung since my earliest days here.

Thanks to the majority-mage population's constant attempts to eradicate us from existence, every darkblood youth undergoes a minimum of three years of specialized combat training once they hit twenty-years-old, after general training and education. Darkbriar serves as the central training ground for several covens—especially the smaller ones that can't sustain their own programs. It's not just an academy. It's a war machine wearing the bones of a school.

We might be fewer than the clearbloods, but we're smarter. And we don't flinch when it gets bloody.

A single lantern burns outside my door, flickering with a rose-gold flame that no wind can snuff out. I press my hand to the iron handle, and the wards behind it respond with a faint ripple, recognizing my presence.

Inside, the air is cooler. Still. My space is simple by choice: shelves crammed with grimoires and dried herbs, a selection of my favorite weapons leaning neatly against the wall, and a bed that's more function than comfort. But the view is unmatched—my window stares out over the sprawling woods, twisted and wild, the glass etched with faint protective glyphs that glint when the moonlight hits them just right.

It's not much.

But it's mine.

And it never judges me for what I am.

I sleep like a brick until early afternoon. I'm not disturbed for any classes; everyone who matters knows I've been out on a mission.

The message comes in while I'm mid-shower, steam curling through the air as my pager buzzes on my bathroom counter. Corvin, of course. Always direct.

Council meeting. One hour. Don't be late.

No theatrics. No delivery crows clawing at the window, no dramatic smoke trails spelling my name across the room. Just a blunt message, crackling on plastic like I live in 1994.

Even in our world, some things stay charmingly outdated.

I dress quickly. Black pants, tall boots, crimson tunic—senior uniform. No excess. No flair. Just function. I twist my hair into a tight bun, then slip out through my quarters' second door, into the narrow stairwell that winds down into the academy's interior.

The corridors are nearly deserted as I make my way through the academy's west wing. Most students are sequestered in their classes, leaving the vaulted hallways quiet except for the occasional echo of my footsteps against the obsidian floors.

I pass the Transmutation Hall and pause as stifled cries and low, wavering moans bleed through the heavy oak door. The sound is familiar—somewhere between agony and surrender, ritualized and raw. Professor Sylth is teaching advanced body manipulation today. No quick-fix tablets, but longer-term... modifications.

Further down, the scent of blood and sulfur seeps from beneath the Alchemical Studies chamber. I catch snippets of Professor Morrigan's husky voice demonstrating the proper way to extract essence from still-living specimens. A student's nervous laughter cuts off abruptly, replaced by a collective gasp as something apparently goes spectacularly wrong—or right, depending on one's perspective.

The underground corridor leading to the council chamber passes the Stimulus Annex, where advanced students are trained to refine sensation into spellwork—pleasure, pain, and everything between. Today's lesson appears particularly intense—the room pulses with waves of energy so potent I can feel them brushing against my consciousness, a coiled force pressing at the edge of my thoughts. Riona staggers out, cocoa-brown hair clinging to her damp skin, caramel eyesglazed. She leans against the wall, breathless and trembling, a flush still blooming across her cheeks.

“Oh, hey, Es,” she gasps briefly, noticing me. I barely have a chance to respond

before she stumbles back into whatever charged torment forced her to leave.

I reach the ancient doors of the council chamber just as the clock tower strikes the hour. The doors' carvings depict our founders in sweeping scenes of ritual and dominance—etched in reverence rather than humility. I trace my finger along the familiar pattern of the blood lock and press my palm against it.

The massive doors swing inward silently, revealing the circular chamber beyond.

The air in the meeting room hangs heavy, thick with the weight of centuries-old magic. I slide into my assigned seat at the long oak table, observing the lines of concern etched into the seven faces of our coven's leadership council. Their postures are rigid and ancient tomes stretch before them. They certainly haven't summoned me here to compliment my extraction mission.

Old Warden Blythe sits with her spine perfectly straight, her silver-streaked hair pulled back so tightly it must hurt. Next to her, Director Reinhardt's fingers drum an irregular rhythm on the yellowed parchment before him. The others maintain that peculiar stillness that comes with age and power—they don't need to fidget to command attention.

At the head of the table stands Corvin, his tall frame casting a long shadow across the ancient wood. "Salem," he says. "Thank you for joining us."

I simply nod, keeping my face a careful mask of respectful attention.

The room smells of old magic—iron, earth, and the faintest trace of blood. Ancient books line the stone walls, their spines bearing titles in languages long dead to all but us. This is the inner sanctum of Darkbirch's military institute, a place where only the gravest matters are discussed.

“We have a situation,” Corvin continues, placing his palms flat on the table. “One that requires your... particular talents.”

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I resist the urge to roll my eyes. My “particular talents” usually mean someone needs killing, information needs extracting, or something valuable needs stealing. The Salem family has served as the coven’s shadow hands for generations. Of my generation, my brother and cousins typically handle espionage, reconnaissance, and targeted sabotage missions—outside of emergency duty call—while I take the ones requiring a certain creative brutality.

My twenty-year-old sister Brynn, on the other hand... she’s still a first-year, and honestly, I don’t know how she ended up in this bloodline. She treats the library like a sanctuary and every mission like a personal attack. But Darkbirch doesn’t leave much room for softness. There’s a reason many just call it Darkbitch.

“You’ve identified a threat,” Corvin goes on, his voice dropping lower, “apparently unlike any we’ve encountered before.”

“What do you think this is?” I ask.

I notice Director Reinhardt flipping through a file across the table. It contains images of my sick brother in his infirmary bed and apparently his full medical record.

“We prefer not to speculate at this point,” Corvin replies. “We need intel and evidence. But we can say your brother’s condition is?—”

“Unprecedented,” Warden Blythe finishes for him, her voice cracking like autumn leaves. “It appears this ‘Mazrov’ doesn’t just damage the body. He damages the aura itself.”

Something cold unfurls in my stomach. “But how?” I ask. I know our auras—our magical essence—can be temporarily drained or blocked, but actual damage? That’s supposed to be impossible.

Corvin runs a hand through his graying hair. “We don’t know. According to your mother’s report, your brother described a sensation of... burning, deep within his core. Like his magic was being... burned away. If that’s the case and he was subjected to whatever Mazrov did for longer, it’s logical to assume it could cause complete aural collapse. Full disintegration of magical essence.”

“We’ve never seen anything like this,” says Elder Farrow from the far end of the table, speaking for the first time. His voice, despite his advanced age, remains clear and cutting. “Not in all our recorded history.”

“And do you think this... Mazrov... is a clearblood?” I ask, frowning deeply.

“Again, we can only speculate,” Corvin replies. “But whatever he is, he’s evidently their development. A weapon in creation.”

Of course. The clearbloods would be the ones to develop something so fundamentally against the natural order. They’ve always feared our connection to death and bloodmagic, considering it an abomination while conveniently ignoring the atrocities their own “immaculate” magic has committed.

“So what’s the plan?” I ask, already suspecting the answer. “Capture? Interrogation?”

Corvin and Elder Farrow exchange a glance, and I know immediately that I’m right about my role here.

“Elimination,” Corvin states flatly. “Mazrov’s ability to damage darkbloods’ auras is a threat to our very existence. We cannot allow such a weapon to remain in

clearblood hands.”

I lean back in my chair. “And you need me to get close enough to kill him.”

“Precisely,” Corvin nods. “You will infiltrate Heathborne as a transfer student.”

I can’t help the short, sharp laugh that escapes me. “A transfer student? I’m a senior, Corvin.”

“Heathborne Academy accepts advanced practitioners up to age twenty-five,” Director Reinhardt interjects. “Your cover will be as a specialized researcher in protective enchantments seeking to complete your education under their faculty.”

I tap the table with one black-lacquered nail. “And once I’m inside?”

“You will identify Mazrov’s true identity, learn everything you can about this aura-damaging capability, and then eliminate him before he can be deployed against us,” Corvin says.

The other council members nod in solemn agreement. The gravity of what they’re asking settles over me like a cloak. This isn’t just another mission—this is the most dangerous assignment I’ve ever undertaken. If this Mazrov can permanently damage darkbloods’ auras, he could render our entire coven powerless.

“What about my own magical signature?” I ask. “They’ll have detection systems for identifying darkbloods.”

Corvin gestures to Elder Reed, our resident specialist in concealments and disguises. The old woman pulls a small wooden box from beneath the table and slides it toward me.

“Inside is a supply of silver tablets,” she explains, her voice soft but clear. “Take one each day of the week, plus two to help your body acclimate to them before you arrive. They will temporarily rewrite your magical signature to appear as a clearblood. The effect lasts approximately twenty-four hours per tablet.”

I open the box cautiously. The tablets gleam with an unnatural brightness, and I can feel the complex magic radiating from them.

“There are... side effects,” Elder Reed adds, almost apologetically. “You will experience a moderate dampening of your natural abilities, which will also have some impact on your responsiveness to tablets and potions. Your connection to spirits will be nearly severed while under the influence of the tablets.”

The last one is a serious disadvantage. A significant portion of my war chest is my ability to call upon spirits, particularly my grandmother. Without that connection, I’ll be operating at maybe sixty percent of my capacity.

“So I’ll be walking into the stronghold of our enemies, with reduced powers, to assassinate someone who can permanently destroy what magic I’ll have left,” I summarize, not bothering to keep the dry sarcasm from my voice. “Sounds delightful.”

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“You won’t be entirely without resources,” Corvin says, ignoring my tone. “We’ve prepared documents, contact protocols, emergency extraction plans. You’ll have a limited ability to communicate with us, and we’ll position assets near Heathborne who can provide assistance if absolutely necessary.”

“How soon?” I ask.

“Three days,” Corvin replies. “We’ll integrate you on Monday, the beginning of their mid-semester. You’ll need tomorrow and the following day to memorize your cover identity and acclimate to the effects of the tablets before you cross into their territory.”

I nod, already mentally cataloging what I’ll need to prepare. Weapons that can pass as academic tools. Potions disguised as medicinal supplements. Communication devices that will bypass Heathborne’s protection wards, in case of an emergency. Security will have increased further following my successful extraction of Jax.

“There’s one more thing,” Warden Blythe says, her ancient eyes fixing on mine. “Since we have reason to believe that Mazrov’s capabilities are still developing and evolving?—”

“I need to act quickly,” I conclude. “Before he reaches his full potential.”

“Precisely,” Corvin affirms. “This is why we’ve selected you for this mission, Salem. You have the... decisive nature required.”

A polite way of saying I’m one most willing to slit a throat without hesitation. Fair

enough.

“You understand the stakes,” Elder Farrow says, not a question but a statement. “If this technology or magical ability spreads among the clearbloods, they could systematically destroy us. Not just our coven, but all darkbloods everywhere.”

I understand the stakes perfectly. This isn’t just about protecting our territory or resources—it’s about preventing extinction. And as much as the council frustrates me sometimes with their caution and politics, I have no intention of letting some clearblood weapon-maker threaten my family and my people.

“I’ll need everything we have on all of Heathborne’s security protocols,” I say, accepting the mission without explicitly saying so. “And full access to the armory.”

Corvin nods. “Already arranged. Report to the preparation chamber after this meeting. The full briefing package awaits you there.”

The council members begin gathering their documents, a signal that the formal part of this meeting is concluding. As they rise from their seats, Elder Reed places a gnarled hand on my arm.

“Be cautious, child,” she whispers. “More than your life depends on your success.”

I give her a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes. “When am I ever not cautious, Elder Reed?”

She doesn’t answer, just squeezes my arm once before releasing me. I understand her concern. This mission is different—I’ll be deep in enemy territory with reduced powers, hunting a target with unprecedented abilities, with minimal backup. The risk is extraordinary.

But then, so am I.

As the council members file out, Corvin remains behind, his tall frame silhouetted against the floating lights.

“Esme,” he says quietly. “There’s something else you should know.”

I wait, watching his face carefully.

“This mission wasn’t unanimous,” he admits. “Some felt we should attempt capture rather than assassination. Others thought we should send a team rather than a single operative.”

“But you overruled them,” I observe.

He nods once. “A team increases the risk of detection. And as for capture...” His eyes harden. “We cannot risk bringing something this dangerous into our territory. Not when we don’t understand it.”

I rise from my seat, tucking the file under my arm. “I won’t let you down, Corvin. I never have.”

“I know,” he says, and for just a moment, I catch a glimpse of something that might be concern beneath his usual stoic exterior. “That’s why it had to be you.”

As I leave the room, the weight of the mission settles fully onto my shoulders. In three days, I’ll be walking into the heart of enemy territory, playing a role that could get me killed or worse if I slip even slightly. But beneath that weight is something else—a thrill, a dark anticipation. Let Mazrov and his flame-filled eyes come for me. I’ll show him what happens when you threaten a Salem.

Grandmother Esther always said I had a talent for ending threats permanently. Time to prove her right.

5

The corridor outside the meeting chamber feels colder than it should, even for the underground levels of our academy. I walk with measured steps, the rhythmic tap of my boots against stone echoing off walls lined with centuries-old paintings depicting our ancestral victories. The weight of the mission file in my hands feels disproportionate to its actual size—a slim folder containing what could very well be a death sentence. Mine or Mazrov's. I'm determined to ensure it's the latter.

Torches flicker in iron sconces along the hallway, casting my shadow in multiple directions as I pass. Their flames don't warm the air; they never have. Our kind prefers the cold—it keeps the mind sharp and reminds us of the grave's embrace we've learned to manipulate rather than fear.

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I could have died four times last year alone, on missions less dangerous than this one. The difference then was I could call on my grandmother's spirit, draw on our ancestral magic, and fight with the full strength of my darkblood heritage. This time, I'll be walking into enemy territory with my power deliberately dimmed, hunting a target specifically designed to destroy me.

Lovely odds. Just how I like them.

The preparation chamber lies at the end of a seldom-used corridor, past the training rooms and armory. Few have clearance to enter it—only those assigned to high-risk covert operations. I've been here six times in my life. Two of those missions nearly killed me.

I press my palm against the heavy metal-bound door, feeling the familiar prick as the blood lock takes its sample. There's a moment of resistance, then a series of clicks as the ancient mechanisms recognize my bloodline and grant access. The door swings inward on silent hinges, revealing a chamber bathed in cool blue light.

"Welcome, Esme Salem," comes the disembodied voice of the room's guardian spirit. "Your preparation materials have been assembled as requested."

"Thank you, Keeper," I respond, stepping inside as the door seals shut behind me.

The chamber is circular, with a central table surrounded by shelves containing everything from weapons to potions to specialized clothing. The walls are lined with mirrors, enchanted to show different aspects of a person's appearance—physical, magical, spiritual. They'll be essential for ensuring my dark magical nature remains

concealed beneath my clearblood disguise.

On the central table lies an array of items carefully arranged around a detailed floor plan of Heathborne Academy. I set down my file and begin to examine what Corvin has prepared for me.

First, the identity documents. The cover is thorough—academic records from a minor magical academy in the western territories, recommendation letters bearing forged signatures from respected clearblood scholars, and a detailed background history. According to these papers, I am now Clara Winters, a promising young researcher specializing in protective enchantments, seeking to complete my advanced studies under Heathborne’s renowned faculty.

“Clara Winters,” I test the name aloud, tasting its falseness. “Orphaned at sixteen, raised by scholars, graduated with honors.” A lifetime of fabricated achievements and tragic background laid out in meticulous detail. Enough truth woven through the lies to make it believable—I did lose my father at a young age, after all, just not in the way these documents claim.

Next to the documentation are two small wooden cases. One contains a pile of silver tablets, each engraved with complex runes that shimmer under the blue light. These will be my greatest vulnerability and protection simultaneously—masking my darkblood nature while cutting me off from a significant portion of my power. The second wooden case is marked by a label that reads “counter-suppression” and contains a pile of white tablets. A note next to this case informs me that these tablets will reverse the effects of the silver tablets. Useful, in case of an emergency.

Beside the wooden cases sits a collection of weapons disguised as academic tools. A fountain pen with a removable cap revealing a slender poisoned needle. A ceremonial letter opener that doubles as a throwing knife. A researcher’s magnifying glass with edges sharp enough to sever an artery. An ornate bookmark that unfolds into a garrote

wire. And other useful weapons.

“Subtle,” I murmur appreciatively, testing the weight of the pen in my hand.

More practical items follow—like clothing in the Heathborne style, predominantly in their preferred colors of navy and silver. Cipher notebooks with hidden compartments. A collection of innocuous-looking vials labeled as health supplements that actually contain various potions—healing, strength enhancement, glamour, and one particularly nasty concoction that can melt internal organs if ingested.

At the far end of the table sits a small, unassuming silver compact mirror. I recognize it immediately as a communication device. When opened under specific conditions, it will create a momentary connection to its twin, held by my handler back at Darkbirch. A note informs me it’s for emergency use only—each activation risks detection by Heathborne’s magical surveillance.

I spread out the floor plans, studying the layout of what will soon be my hunting ground. I’ve never had to examine it in this much detail before. Heathborne Academy is massive—a sprawling castle complex with multiple wings, underground facilities, and heavily warded walls. The dormitories are in the east wing, research laboratories in the north, classrooms scattered throughout. Administrative offices occupy the central tower.

“Where are you hiding, Mazrov?” I murmur, fingers tracing potential locations. Security headquarters? Research labs? Private quarters?

A notation on the map catches my eye—a section marked with a warning symbol. “Restricted access. Protection ineffect.” That’s interesting. Whatever they’re hiding there might be worth investigating.

I look up from the papers at the nearest mirror, studying my reflection. My pale skin

and black hair could pass for a clearblood's with minimal adjustments; I might dye or glamour my hair brown. My eyes are the problem—they carry the distinctive storm-cloud gray of the Salem bloodline, with the subtle red flecks that mark me as a practitioner of blood magic.

The silver tablets will hide those magical markers, but I'll need glamour or colored lenses as an additional precaution. On the shelf beside me, I find a small case containing lenses that will turn my eyes a more clearblood-appropriate blue.

I step back from the table, taking a deep breath as I center myself. Before I go any further with preparations, there's something I need to do.

"Grandmother," I whisper, closing my eyes and reaching for that familiar connection. "I need your guidance."

The air grows colder around me as I channel a small amount of my blood essence, opening the pathway between worlds. The torches dim slightly, and I feel the distinctive prickle along my spine that signals a spirit's approach.

"Child," comes my grandmother's voice. "You seek to walk among our enemies."

I open my eyes to see her translucent form standing before me, her silver-streaked hair in its traditional braids, her posture as regal in death as I imagine it was in life. Here she chooses to manifest herself fully, unlike in the graveyard earlier, and I am grateful for that at this moment.

"The council has assigned me to eliminate a threat," I explain. "One who can permanently damage our auras."

Her ghostly features sharpen with concern. "Such power violates the natural order. It must not be allowed to spread."

“That’s why I’m going,” I say. “But I’ll need to take these.” I gesture to the silver tablets. “I’ll be cut off from you and the ancestors for days.”

Grandmother Esther’s spirit drifts closer, her form flickering slightly in the blue light. “You have never relied solely on our power, Esme. Your strength comes from within as much as from your bloodline.”

“But your guidance?—”

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“Will remain with you, even when you cannot hear my voice,” she interrupts. “Trust what I have taught you. Trust your instincts.”

Her spectral hand reaches out, hovering just above my cheek in the closest approximation of a touch that her current form allows. “You carry the Salem blood. It will not fail you, even when disguised.”

I nod, drawing strength from her confidence. “I’ll succeed, Grandma. I always do.”

“Be cautious,” she warns. “The clearbloods may appear weaker for their disconnection from death, but they have developed other magics to compensate. Do not underestimate them.”

“I won’t,” I promise. “I’ll be back before the next full moon.”

She smiles, her form already beginning to fade. “I will be watching from beyond the veil, child. Make your ancestors proud.”

With that, she’s gone, leaving behind only a lingering chill in the air and the faint scent of grave soil that always accompanies her manifestations. I take a moment to compose myself, knowing it may be at least a week before I can speak with her again.

I turn back to the table and pick up one of the silver tablets, examining it closely. Small enough to swallow easily, yet powerful enough to fundamentally alter how my magic presents itself to others. I should test its effects now, to be prepared.

“Recording vitals and magical signature before tablet consumption,” announces the

Keeper's voice as magical sensors activate around the room.

I place the tablet on my tongue, grimacing at its metallic taste as it dissolves. For a moment, nothing happens. Then a wave of coldness spreads from my center outward, different from the comfortable chill of death magic—this is an emptiness, a sudden absence where my connection to ancestral power should be.

I gasp, steadying myself against the table as my knees weaken momentarily. The mirrors around the room shimmer and adjust, showing me the change as it happens. My magical aura, normally a deep crimson shot through with threads of silver, shifts and pales to a clearblood's typical blue-white.

"Fascinating," I murmur, straightening up and approaching one of the mirrors. The physical discomfort passes quickly, but the sense of disconnection remains. I can still access my personal reserves of magic, but the wellspring of power I usually draw from my bloodline is muffled, as if behind a thick wall.

I attempt a simple blood magic spell, pricking my finger and attempting to form the droplet into a small sentinel bird—a trick I've been able to do since childhood. The blood rises sluggishly, forming only a crude approximation of a bird before collapsing back into a formless drop.

"Magical capacity reduced by approximately forty percent," the Keeper informs me. "Darkblood signature successfully masked. Detectable power now registers as standard clearblood classification."

Not ideal, but workable. I'll need to rely more on my physical skills and intelligence than magical nature. Fortunately, I've never been one to depend solely on power when cunning will suffice.

I turn to the collection of clearblood clothing, selecting a tailored navy jacket and

matching skirt that fits the Heathborne aesthetic while allowing enough freedom of movement for combat if necessary. The fabric is enchanted to resist minor spells and staining—practical for both a student and an assassin.

I try on the colored lenses next, blinking as they settle into place. My reflection now shows a young woman with clear blue eyes, dressed in scholarly attire, with nothing to suggest her darkblood heritage. Clara Winters looks back at me—ambitious, intelligent, and utterly fabricated.

“Perfect,” I say, satisfied with the transformation. “A model clearblood student.”

I return to the documents, continuing to memorize details of my cover identity as the tablet’s effects wear on. By morning, I’ll know Clara Winters better than she would know herself, if she existed. Every fictional achievement, every fake relationship, every forged credential must become as familiar to me as my own history.

The weight of the mission settles more firmly on my shoulders as the reality of what I’m about to do sinks in. Infiltrating Heathborne isn’t just dangerous—it’s potentially suicidal. If they discover my true nature, I’ll face the kind of execution that clearbloods reserve for darkbloods: prolonged, public, and designed to destroy not just my body but my spirit’s ability to transition peacefully.

And yet, failure isn’t an option. If this Mazrov truly has developed a way to permanently damage darkblood auras, he represents an existential threat to everyone I care about. My brother, my mother, the rest of my remaining family, my entire coven—all vulnerable to a weapon that could strip away the very essence of who we are.

I gather the documents and begin arranging them in the slim briefcase provided for Clara Winters’ academic materials. My fingers brush over the small scrap of notes I’ve made—vulnerabilities to look for, potential allies, emergency extraction

protocols.

In the polished window across the room, I catch a glimpse of my reflection. With my back straight and my gaze determined, I look every inch the confident clearblood scholar. No one would guess at the darkness flowing through my veins or the lethal intentions behind my carefully constructed smile.

I nod to myself, a silent affirmation of my readiness for what's to come. The mission is clear, the stakes understood, and the path forward set. In three days, I'll walk through Heathborne's gates as one of them. And then, when the moment is right, I'll show them exactly who I really am—the last face their precious Mazrov will ever see.

The clearbloods think they've created the perfect weapon against my kind. They're about to learn they've merely provided the perfect target for mine.

6

I cross the threshold into Heathborne Academy with the carefully measured steps of someone who doesn't belong but is determined to pretend otherwise. The grand entrance hall stretches before me, dripping with the kind of ostentatious wealth that only clearbloods think impressive. Golden light filters through stained glass windows, casting colorful patterns across marble floors that probably cost more than what my entire coven lives on for a year. I force my lips into the hesitant smile of a new transfer student. If these pretentious idiots only knew what was walking among them.

A robed administrator with a painfully tight bun approaches, clipboard clutched to her chest like it contains state secrets instead of class schedules. The woman's smile is professionally vacant as she checks my forged documents.

"Miss Clara Winters," she reads. "Welcome to Heathborne. We're delighted to have a

transfer of your caliber join us mid-semester.”

I duck my head in rehearsed modesty. “I’m honored to be accepted.” The words taste like ash in my mouth.

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She hands me a thick leather-bound student manual that weighs as much as a small child. “Everything you need to know about conduct, scheduling, and our proud history is contained within. We expect you to have it memorized by week’s end.”

Of course they do. Clearbloods and their obsession with rules—as if writing something down can actually control the chaos of the world. I’ve already memorized their security protocols from the information Corvin provided me. The rest is just clearblood self-importance bound in expensive leather.

“Thank you,” I murmur, clutching the manual to my chest as if it’s precious. “I’ll study it thoroughly.”

“See that you do.” She gestures toward the grand staircase. “Your orientation tour begins in ten minutes in the Hall of Champions. Don’t be late.”

As she clicks away on sensible heels, I allow myself the luxury of an internal eye roll. Hall of Champions. Could they be any more obvious about their superiority complex?

I follow the stream of students up the marble staircase, maintaining a careful distance. My disguise isn’t just my physical appearance. It’s in how I hold myself—slightly hunched, eyes downcast, moving with the tentative steps of someone unsure of their place. The opposite of how a Salem woman carries herself.

The hallways of Heathborne are a strange fusion of medieval castle and modern academy. Ancient stone walls rise to vaulted ceilings, but security cameras disguised as ornamental gargoyles track movement at regular corners. I don’t remember seeing those last time I was here.

Magical wards shimmer almost invisibly along doorframes—apparently detection spells that would immediately sound alarms if I were foolish enough to approach without the silver tablets’ protection. I believe those are new too.

“Watch it,” snaps a tall, auburn-haired boy as I accidentally brush against his arm. The silver crest pinned to his lapel marks him as one of the elite clearblood families. Probably never had to apologize for anything in his life.

“Sorry,” I whisper, shrinking further into my disguise. The urge to slip a paralysis tablet into his water flask is nearly overwhelming, but I resist. I’m not here for petty revenge.

I’m here for something much bigger.

The Hall of Champions proves to be exactly as pompous as its name suggests. The massive chamber’s walls are lined with oil portraits of clearblood heroes throughout history, their expressions uniformly smug and self-satisfied. Beneath each portrait, glass cases display “artifacts of significance”—mostly weapons used to slaughter my kind.

I spot three different exits, two visible security cameras, and a panic button disguised as an ornamental rosette on the wall near the podium. Mentally, I map the quickest escape routes, calculating how long it would take to reach each one while dodging potential pursuers. Seven seconds to the side door, twelve to the main entrance, eighteen to the smaller exit behind the podium. Always know your exits—first rule of infiltration that Darkbirch taught me.

A gaggle of first-years huddles near the center of the room, wide-eyed and reverential as a tour guide drones on about “the sacred duty of protecting magical integrity.” I drift toward them, assuming the same awestruck expression while internally composing creative curses for every ancestor praised in this hall.

“The Purification Crusade of 1746 marked a turning point in our ongoing battle against corruption,” the guide announces, gesturing to a particularly gruesome painting of darkbloods being rounded up for execution. “Under the leadership of Grand Purifier Hartwell, the southern territories were cleansed of dangerous influence.”

Cleansed. How clinical they make genocide sound. That “cleansing” wiped out three entire darkblood families, including my father’s cousins. The rage that bubbles up inside me threatens to crack my carefully constructed facade, but I swallow it back like bitter medicine. Focus on the mission. That’s why I’m here.

Mazrov—the clearblood’s most effective weapon against us. Heathborne’s golden boy.

A commotion near the entrance draws my attention. Students step back, creating a path as a group enters the hall. The atmosphere shifts immediately—heads turn, conversations halt, and a strange tension fills the air. Even the tour guide stops mid-sentence, her expression switching from boredom to alert deference.

And then I see him.

Mazrov.

He moves with military precision but natural grace, his dark-gray armor absorbing the light around him like a black hole. The reflective metal guard covering the upper half of his face can’t hide what makes him truly distinctive—those eyes. Bright blue with an inner fire that seems to burn from somewhere inhuman.

He scans the room with practiced efficiency, and I lower my gaze just before his sweep reaches me. Don’t attract attention. Don’t stand out. Just another starry-eyed clearblood student admiring their hero.

“As I was saying,” the tour guide continues, her voice noticeably higher, “Heathborne Academy takes pride in training the next generation of protectors. And speaking of protectors—” she gestures toward Mazrov with poorly disguised reverence “—we are honored to have Senior Guard Kieran Mazrov observing today’s orientation.”

The students around me practically vibrate with excitement. A girl to my left actually sighs. It takes me every ounce of self-control not to gag audibly.

I risk another glance. Kieran Mazrov. Up close, he is even more imposing than his reputation suggests. He stands still, almost unnaturally so, as if conserving energy. His hand rests casually on the hilt of a blade that’s definitely not standard issue—the metal has a strange iridescent quality that suggests enchantment.

How many darkbloods has that blade sliced open? How many of my people might he have already attempted to hunt with those burning eyes?

For a heart-stopping moment, those eyes fix directly on me. I keep my expression neutral, even as my pulse hammers in my throat. The silver tablet I took should hide me completely, but something in his gaze feels... searching. Penetrating. As if he can sense something isn’t quite right.

Then his attention shifts away, continuing his scan of the room, and I exhale slowly through my nose. I’ll need to be exceptionally careful around him. For all I know, he has enhanced senses.

As the tour continues, I maintain my position within the group while keeping Mazrov in my peripheral vision. I note how he moves, how he positions himself in the room—always with his back to a wall, always with clear sightlines to all entrances. He’s vigilant but not visibly tense. Confident in his territory.

Except this isn’t just his territory anymore. Now it’s my hunting ground too.

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I run through the plan again, mentally checking each step. Get established. Earn trust. Find a way to get Mazrov alone. Strike without leaving evidence (if possible). Exit during the ensuing chaos.

Simple, except for the part where I have to kill perhaps the most dangerous clearblood ever to hunt my kind.

The tour guide finally releases us with instructions to proceed to the dining hall for the welcome luncheon. As the group disperses, I linger, pretending to admire a particularly hideous painting while actually watching Mazrov's reflection in its glossy surface. He speaks briefly with a senior administrator, his posture deferential but not subservient.

A wolf pretending to be a guard dog. But I come from a line of wolf-hunters.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and allow myself a small, secret smile as I turn toward the dining hall. Grandmother always said every mission should be approached with a certain amount of joy in one's heart. The joy of purpose. The joy of vengeance.

And I intend to enjoy every moment of bringing down the clearbloods' favorite weapon, right under their pretentious, self-important noses.

7

The day passes in a blur of false smiles and carefully measured words. By the time darkness falls over Heathborne, my face aches from maintaining my mask of eager

curiosity, but I've mapped three more exit routes and memorized the patrol schedules of the daytime guards—most importantly, Mazrov's.

I slip my key into the lock of my assigned dormitory room, listening for the satisfying click before pushing the heavy oak door open. Once inside, I lock the door behind me and lean against it for a moment, finally allowing my carefully constructed facade to slip away. The tension in my shoulders releases with an audible crack as I roll my neck and stand tall for the first time since entering this wretched place.

My assigned quarters are unexpectedly luxurious—a testament to Heathborne's wealth and their desire to keep their precious students comfortable. The four-poster bed with its navy silk curtains dominates one wall, while a polished mahogany desk sits beneath a leaded glass window. Bookshelves line another wall, already stocked with clearblood texts on magical theory and protective enchantments—all carefully curated for "Clara Winters" and her supposed academic interests.

"Home sweet home," I mutter sarcastically, dropping my leather satchel onto the desk with a thud.

The first order of business is security. I move methodically around the room, checking for surveillance devices or magical wards. My fingertips trail along the undersides of furniture, probe the corners of picture frames, and test the integrity of the window seals. Standard procedure—trust nothing in enemy territory.

I find two monitoring charms embedded in the ceiling cornices and a subtle tracking enchantment woven into the carpet. Amateur work, really. Nothing that indicates they suspect me specifically, just the standard surveillance they likely maintain on all new transfers.

"How considerate," I whisper, carefully leaving the monitoring devices intact. Disabling them would only draw attention.

After confirming the room is secure enough for my purposes, I move to the window. The glass is cool beneath my fingertips as I push the casement open. Night air rushes in, carrying the scent of pine and water. I lean against the stone windowsill, letting my gaze drift across the sprawling grounds to where Heathborne Lake stretches like spilled ink beneath the moon.

The lake's surface ripples with silver light, deceptively beautiful. I know what lies beneath those waters—the remains of darkblood bodies, dumped there during the purges. Clearbloods love to build their monuments atop our graveyards.

I exhale slowly, allowing myself this brief moment of quiet contemplation. I think of my brother—of his far-too-pale skin and protruding veins. By now, they've likely begun a healing ritual. They'll have probably taken him to the oldest section of Darkbirch's graveyard, where the boundary between worlds is thinnest. Mom would oversee the preparation herself, wrapping him in burial linens soaked in a mixture of sacred herbs and his own blood. Then they would lower him into the prepared grave, six feet of loose soil cascading down as the elders chant the ancient words that will draw the healing spirits to him.

He'll probably lie there for a week—conscious but immobile, his body sustained by magic while ancestral spirits work to repair the damage to his aura. The spirits will surround him like a cocoon, feeding their essence into the wounded parts of his magical core. It's excruciating, my mother once told me. Like being slowly turned inside out while remaining fully aware of every moment.

But it's likely his best chance. Maybe his only chance, if Mazrov's attack damaged his aura as severely as I fear. Normal healing methods can mend flesh and bone, but aura damage requires something deeper, something primal that only the dead can provide.

I press my fingers against my temples, pushing away the image of my brother buried

alive, ghostly fingers probing the wounded places in his soul. He's strong. He'll endure it. He has to.

A soft chime from my enchanted watch pulls me from these dark thoughts. Time for my tablet of the day. I retrieve the silver disk from its hidden compartment in my luggage, grimacing as I place it on my tongue. The metallic taste floods my mouth, followed by that distinctive cold emptiness as it suppresses my natural abilities.

I move to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. In the mirror, Clara Winters stares back at me, blue eyes revealing nothing of the darkness that lurks beneath. Tomorrow, the real work begins. I need to get closer to Mazrov.

A knock at my door startles me. I hadn't expected visitors.

"Just a moment," I call out, quickly assuming Clara's demeanor—shoulders slightly hunched, voice pitched higher than my natural tone.

When I open the door, I find myself face-to-face with a young woman about my age, her platinum blonde hair cut in a severe bob that frames sharp features and calculating green eyes.

"You're the transfer," she states, not bothering with introductions. Her gaze sweeps over me, assessing. "I'm Valerie Hargrove. Student liaison for new arrivals."

"Clara Winters," I respond, extending my hand with just the right amount of earnestness. "Thank you for stopping by."

She ignores my outstretched hand, instead shoving a folder at me. "Your final schedule. Orientation missed some details." Her tone is clipped, efficient. "Breakfast begins at seven-thirty. Don't be late or you'll miss announcements."

I accept the folder with a grateful nod, maintaining my facade. “I appreciate it. Is there anything else I should know that wasn’t covered today?”

Valerie’s eyes narrow slightly. “Stay out of the west wing after hours. It’s restricted. And the professors here don’t tolerate mediocrity.” With that pearl of wisdom delivered, she turns on her heel and strides away, leaving me standing in the doorway.

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I close the door softly, dropping the folder onto my desk. Charming welcome committee. Though her warning about the west wing intrigues me...

A strong gust of wind sweeps through the room, making me shiver. I return to the window, reach out, and pull the casement toward me. That's when I notice something flickering in the glass.

A shadow towering behind me—too solid, too deliberate. My body reacts before conscious thought can form. I whirl, knife already drawn from my sleeve in one fluid motion?—

My dorm room stares back at me, innocent in its stillness.

The lamplight cowers in the corners, casting elongated shadows that seem to breathe. The silence presses against my eardrums like a physical weight.

Yet the air... it feels violated. Hanging thick and charged around me... like the space between thunderclaps, dense as mercury, vibrating at a frequency that sets my teeth on edge. It's not the familiar prickle of magic. I don't know what it is. I've never sensed anything like it. It somehow feels... primordial. Ancient. A wrongness that predates civilization itself. Like reality has been punctured, and something is seeping through the wound.

And I swear the air feels hot, even though I only just closed the window.

I force a deep breath and try to pull myself together.

Am I succumbing to an extreme bout of paranoia, or could the silver tablets be corrupting my perception? Elder Reed would have warned me of hallucinations, wouldn't she? Unless she didn't know... They're a relatively new invention and she might not know every detail about them.

I retreat to my bed with measured steps, muscles coiled tight. But I don't sheathe my knife. Not as I take a careful sip of water, not as I slide beneath the sheets. The room remains still, but the dark feels somehow heavier... Watching.

8

I don't know how I managed to fall asleep, but somehow I drifted off in the early morning hours. And when I wake, my room feels more... normal. No apparent sign of another presence having been in the room. Everything is in its place, my furniture untouched.

Maybe it was a hallucination?

If so, I hope it won't be a recurring event. The last thing I need on this mission is unstable senses.

I try to push all thoughts of the night aside as I prepare for the day ahead.

I study the updated class schedule Valerie delivered. I'm pleased to see my first lecture was delayed due to an ill professor. Now I'm not expected at any class until early afternoon... leaving me with hours to slip into the shadows and begin my pursuit of Mazrov.

Twenty paces ahead, Mazrov moves with the fluidity of a predator, his dark-gray armor absorbing the daylight that streams through the vaulted windows. I keep my steps light, my cipher notebook open as if reviewing class notes while my pen

scratches a detailed record of his movements. Nothing escapes my notice—not the slight tilt of his head when he senses something amiss, not the way he scans each corridor before he turns.

Mazrov appears to maintain loyalty to the guard patrol schedule I studied yesterday with clockwork precision. At least, so far. Breakfast hall precisely at seven-thirty. Five-hundred steps from his quarters to the training grounds. Exactly eighteen minutes in the Hall of Champions before his first patrol. I've been waiting for him to do something interesting.

Like now.

He veers left where he should continue straight, his shoulders squared with purpose. I duck behind a cluster of students discussing some trivial protective charm homework, using their animated gestures as cover while I scribble in my notebook: 11:42 AM – Eastern corridor deviation. Deliberate pace suggests destination, not wandering.

I've perfected the art of blending in at Heathborne. My unremarkable brown hair is pulled back in a sensible ponytail. My robes are perfectly pressed but not immaculate—trying too hard attracts attention as surely as neglect.

Mazrov pauses at an intersection, and I immediately halt, pretending to examine a notice board plastered with announcements about upcoming dueling competitions and lectures on clearblood combat history. The nonsense they teach here would be laughable if it weren't so dangerous.

Darkbloods are driven by malevolence. Engaging with them is futile. They must be cleansed or eliminated.

The propaganda makes my blood simmer, but I manage to keep Clara's face placid, interested only in whether Professor Thornfield's exam will cover protective or

offensive wards.

The corridor Mazrov has chosen fills with the cloying scent of lemon and sage incense, burning in elaborate golden censers hung from the vaulted ceiling. I wrinkle my nose slightly. Clearbloods and their obsession with purification—as if smoke and herbs could cleanse what lives in the shadows of their own hearts. The marble floors gleam painfully bright, enchanted to repel even the slightest speck of dust, much like Heathborne itself tries to repel any trace of darkblood influence.

I allow three students and a professor to pass between us before following. The morning rush provides perfect cover—young clearblood apprentices scurrying to their lessons, carrying stacks of books on counter-curses and combat techniques. I join their flow, another fish in the academic stream, while keeping Mazrov's dark-gray silhouette in my peripheral vision.

He moves differently here, I notice. His steps deliberate but somehow more... cautious? My pen moves across the page, creating a cipher only I can read. To anyone glancing over, it would look like course notes, but each symbol maps his movements, each line chronicles his behavior. Darkbirch didn't send me to merely observe routine patrols. I need to understand why Mazrov—why his entire unit—has been granted special dispensation within Heathborne's hierarchy.

And why his eyes burn with that unnatural fire.

The crowd thins as we enter the western wing. Here, the architecture shifts subtly—the ceilings lower, the windows narrower, as if the building itself is holding its breath. I slide my notebook into an inner pocket of my robes and extract a small crystal lens, a trinket that appears decorative but allows me to observe reflections around corners.

Mazrov stops suddenly, his head cocking slightly. I immediately turn to a water

fountain, bending to take a sip while monitoring him through the crystal held casually against my textbook.

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“Are the western archives still restricted?” he asks a passing instructor, his voice carrying the edge of command despite the deferential words.

The older man—Professor Caldwell, who teaches Advanced Warding—stiffens slightly. Interesting. “Clearance hasn’t changed, Guardian Mazrov. Third level and below remain sealed except to those with Headmaster Rothmere’s explicit permission.”

Mazrov nods once, dismissively. “Just confirming security protocols.”

I make a mental note: Tension between academic and military branches regarding archive access. Mazrov testing boundaries of authority, using security as pretext.

When the professor leaves, Mazrov remains still for several beats. Too still. I can almost feel the hairs rising on the back of my neck. His posture has shifted, his awareness expanding outward like ripples in a pond. He’s sensing for followers.

I casually open my textbook and walk toward a stone bench beneath a window, sitting down among other students. Just another clearblood apprentice struggling with theory before midday practical lessons. My heart maintains its steady rhythm through years of training. Esme Salem might break into a cold sweat at this moment, but Clara Winters has nothing to hide.

Mazrov continues down the corridor. I exhale softly, counting to sixty before gathering my things and following.

We enter a section of Heathborne I’ve never visited—the archival passages that

connect the western teaching wing to the central keep. The latter is the heart of the clearblood stronghold, a towering structure that houses vital research facilities and the council chambers where the academy's most influential leaders supposedly convene. Based on the map Corvin provided me, it appears the only way to access it is via the west wing.

Mazrov moves with greater caution now, his footsteps barely audible against the stone floor. The passage narrows, and maintaining distance becomes challenging. I pause at one of the paintings on the wall, pretending to study it while watching his reflection in a decorative mirror positioned at the end of the hall—another stroke of luck. Or perhaps not luck at all. Grandmother Esther always says our ancestors guide our steps when we walk dangerous paths.

He approaches a door—heavy oak banded with iron, marked with symbols that make my vision blur slightly when I try to focus on them. Warding runes, old ones, designed to discourage attention rather than actively repel. Clever. Most would walk past without noticing the door at all.

I draw a quick sketch of the symbols in my notebook, my hand moving from memory rather than direct observation. Mazrov glances over his shoulder, scanning the corridor, and I'm already absorbed in tracing a finger over a nearby stone carving, a new student appreciating Heathborne's architecture.

His fingers hover over the door's surface, not quite touching it. Is he... feeling for something? The air shimmers slightly, like heat rising from summer-baked stones. Magic, subtle but potent, ripples outward. I resist the instinct to throw up protective wards of my own. Clara Winters wouldn't sense the energy, wouldn't know to shield herself from its probing tendrils.

The lock clicks open without Mazrov inserting a key. Interesting. Very interesting.

He slips inside, the door shutting soundlessly behind him. I count his footsteps as they fade—seventeen before they're swallowed completely by whatever lies beyond.

I approach the door cautiously, not touching it but studying the warding runes more directly now. My heart beats a steady rhythm against my ribs. This is what I came for—whatever lies beyond this threshold matters enough to warrant Mazrov's deliberate deviation from routine, matters enough for subtle but powerful concealment magic.

The sound of voices from the main corridor forces me to retreat. Two guardians in matching gray armor round the corner, their conversation cutting off abruptly when they spot me.

The taller one nods toward the main hall. "This section isn't meant for general student access."

"Oh!" I press a hand to my mouth, eyes widening. "I'm so sorry. I thought it was only restricted after hours, and... I mean, there weren't any signs... I'm simply fascinated by pre-founding-era architecture."

"Return to the public areas," the second guardian says, not unkindly but firmly.

I nod, gathering my books with flustered movements. "Of course. Sorry to disturb you."

As I walk away, I listen for their next moves. They position themselves on either side of the door Mazrov entered. Guards, then. Whatever lies beyond is significant enough to warrant protection but not important enough to keep permanently staffed.

Or perhaps they only arrive when someone accesses the room.

For some reason, there don't appear to be security cameras in the immediate vicinity. I wonder why.

I make my way back to the crowded main hall, processing what I've learned. Mazrov has access to a warded archive room that requires special clearance. He appears to check this room at irregular intervals, breaking from his routine to do so. Two guardians arrive to stand watch when he accesses the room.

The pieces don't form a complete picture yet, but they're beginning to align.

I find a quiet alcove near the Hall of Champions, where sunlight pours through a massive circular window whose stained glass depicts the founding of Heathborne. My pen moves across the page of my notebook, making sure I've properly recorded every detail while it's fresh in my mind. The rune configurations, the guard positions, the professor's reaction to Mazrov's question about archive access. Small pieces that Darkbitch can use to understand what Heathborne is hiding.

Something tickles at the back of my mind—a memory of something I learned in Darkbitch about clearblood research into blood magic. Their desperate attempts to understand our power while condemning its use. Could that room contain forbidden knowledge? Texts on darkblood practices that Heathborne's leadership studies in secret while publicly denouncing them?

The irony would be delicious, if not so dangerous.

I close my notebook and tuck it away. Today's surveillance has been productive, but I need to maintain my cover. I have a Protective Theory class in a few minutes, and Clara Winters never misses lectures. I stand, straightening my robes, adjusting my glasses once more.

For now, I'll continue my role as the perfect clearblood student. But tonight, when

darkness falls and the academy grows quiet, Esme Salem will pay that locked door another visit.

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After all, locks have never been much of an obstacle for me. And I'm very curious to see what secrets the clearbloods are trying so hard to hide.

9

The restricted wing's entrance stares at me like a challenge. I slip my hand into the hidden pocket sewn into my Heathborne uniform and extract a small vial of shimmerslick, the viscous liquid catching what little light filters through the hallway windows. It's one of Darkbirch's finest creations—undetectable to clearblood wards and worth more than a month's salary for most operatives. But for what waits behind this door? Worth every drop.

I check the corridor once more. Empty.

The shimmerslick coats my fingertips with a cool tingle as I rub a thin layer around the keyhole's edge. Unlike the brutal firegrease I've used in Darkbirch operations, this substance leaves no trace and triggers no alarms. It seeps into the mechanism, identifying the tumblers, reading their pattern like a lover's touch. I close my eyes and feel the lock's secrets transfer to my fingertips. Three quick turns, using just the pressure points the shimmerslick reveals to me, and the mechanism yields with a satisfying click.

No alarms. No flashing lights. No thundering footsteps of clearblood guards. Just the nearly imperceptible whisper of well-oiled hinges as I slip inside.

The restricted wing embraces me with its cool, still air. The temperature drops several degrees in here—a stark contrast to the carefully regulated warmth of Heathborne's

public areas. They clearly don't want staff lingering. A corridor stretches before me, dimly lit by enchanted sconces that emit a bluish glow, casting long shadows that dance across the stone walls. Unlike the polished, inviting appearance of the academy's main halls, this wing makes no effort to hide its true purpose. Steel-reinforced doors line both sides, each bearing classification symbols and warding runes that would normally repel unauthorized entry.

Were it not for my silver tablets, those wards would be screaming my darkblood nature to every security system in the building. Instead, they remain dormant, unaware of the viper in their midst. And I spot no cameras inside here either. Do they not want to be seen here?

I don't know which door Mazrov entered. Some doors bear additional markings—red slashes, golden circles—classification systems I file away for future reference. The third door looks unremarkable compared to others, its only distinguishing feature a small etched symbol that resembles a crescent moon intersected by a line. Might as well start with the odd one out.

My shimmerslick pack has only one more application left before it loses potency. Hopefully I've made the right choice. I repeat the process and the lock surrenders. I push the door open just enough to slip through, then ease it closed behind me.

To my surprise, I find myself in an office. Though I'm not sure what I was expecting or hoping to find—maybe an alchemy chamber of some kind. Heavy blackout curtains, currently drawn, frame the tall windows of the room. A massive oak desk dominates the center, its surface covered with stacks of papers, open folders, and what looks like complex analytical equipment.

The air here feels charged, as though recently disturbed by powerful magic. I've felt this sensation before, in the aftermath of Darkbirch's more potent rituals. It's the residue of significant energy manipulation.

I approach the desk cautiously, my trained eyes scanning for trip wires or proximity alarms. Finding none, I begin to examine the desk. The papers are meticulously organized despite their scattered appearance—this is a system, not chaos.

The first document I touch bears Heathborne's official seal and a classification marking I've never encountered before—a double ring with a slash through it. My eyes narrow as I scan the technical jargon. Energy transference protocols. Aura stabilization parameters. Containment field specifications. The language is obscure, cloaked in technical terminology that would mean nothing to most readers.

But I'm not most readers.

These are experimental procedures for manipulating the energetic fields that surround living beings. Every clearblood and darkblood possesses unique aural signatures—it's what allows our respective detection wards to identify friend from foe. These papers detail methodologies for altering those signatures at a fundamental level.

I carefully shift to another stack, finding schematic drawings of what appears to be a chamber. Annotations mark power intake junctions, resonance amplifiers, and containment barriers. It reminds me of the blood ritual circles our coven would create for our most sacred ceremonies, but with a mechanical precision that feels wrong—sterile and unnatural.

A third document catches my eye—a chart tracking what appears to be stability readings from multiple subjects. The graph lines peak and valley dramatically, most terminating in sharp downward plunges marked with red timestamps. Failures, then. But two lines continue past where the others end, stabilizing into synchronized patterns that mirror each other perfectly.

My heart quickens. This is beyond concerning. The clearbloods are, in fact, experimenting with something fundamental to our natures, something that could alter

the very essence of what makes us what we are. We suspected it, but seeing the confirmation sends a jolt of urgency through me.

I carefully turn over a diagram, frowning at the complex annotations. This one shows two silhouettes connected by lines of force—energy channels artificially created between them. Notes in precise handwriting detail “sympathetic resonance” and “harmonic stability achieved post-exposure in subjects 7 and 12.”

Whatever they’re doing, it appears to involve connecting living beings’ energetic fields in ways never meant to be connected. The implications make my skin crawl. This isn’t mere research—it’s playing with the fundamental forces that separate kinds.

As I reach for another folder, I freeze.

Footsteps pad along the corridor outside. Someone is approaching the door.

I quickly but carefully return the papers to their exact positions, my training taking over as I scan for hiding places. I slide behind the heavy curtains, positioning myself in the narrow space between the window and the thick fabric. The velvet brushes against my cheek, its scent of dust and age filling my nostrils.

The door opens with deliberate slowness and heavy footsteps enter—measured, purposeful. Not the hurried stride of someone who’s forgotten something, but the cautious approach of someone who suspects intrusion.

“Strange,” Mazrov’s voice carries across the room, low and contemplative. “I could have sworn...”

I regulate my breathing, calling on the training that’s kept me alive through dozens of missions. In, out. Shallow. Silent. My heart pounds against my ribcage, but I force

myself to remain perfectly still as I hear him moving around the room.

His footsteps pause at the desk. Silence stretches for what feels like eternity. Is he noticing something out of place? Did I fail to return a document to its exact position?

“Security override Kappa-37,” he says suddenly, his voice clear and commanding. “Run diagnostic on room fourteen.”

A soft hum fills the air. Some kind of scanning system I hadn’t detected.

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“All security parameters normal,” responds a disembodied female voice.

Mazrov makes a sound—half sigh, half growl. “Extend scan to residual energy signatures.”

Another hum, higher pitched.

“Trace atmospheric disturbance detected,” the system responds. “Consistent with door opening approximately four minutes ago.”

“And yet no entry logged in the security system,” Mazrov muses. He moves again, footsteps drawing closer to my hiding place.

I press myself further into the shadows, feeling the cool glass of the window against my back. Through a tiny gap in the curtains, I catch a glimpse of him—tall and imposing in his dark-gray armor, his movements bearing the unmistakable precision of military training.

He pauses, those unnaturally bright blue eyes sweeping the room once more. They linger on the curtains for a heartbeat longer than I’d like. Does he know? Is he toying with me?

But instead of ripping the curtains aside, he returns to the desk and begins gathering papers into a folder. “Double security protocols on this wing,” he commands the system.

“Acknowledged,” the system responds.

He moves efficiently, collecting key documents and securing them in what appears to be a warded case. I take mental notes of which papers he prioritizes—the synchronized graph, the dual silhouette diagram, the technical specifications for the chamber.

“Subjects 7 and 12 are scheduled for phase three soon,” he says, apparently dictating notes to the system. “Observation indicates increasing harmonic resonance even when physically separated. The hypothesis appears correct—once initialized, the connection self-strengthens without additional stimulus.”

I commit every word to memory. Whatever experiment they’re conducting, it’s progressing rapidly.

After what feels like hours but must only be minutes, Mazrov completes the task he’s come for. He scans the room one final time, those flame-bright eyes narrowing slightly as they again pass over my hiding place. Then he turns and strides toward the door.

It closes behind him with a soft click that sounds like freedom to my straining ears. Still, I remain motionless for another full minute, counting my heartbeats until I’m certain he’s truly gone.

Only then do I emerge from behind the curtain, my mind racing with implications. The clearbloods are experimenting with some kind of artificial connection between subjects—a forced bond that affects their very essence. And they’ve had success.

I approach the desk once more, quickly photographing the remaining documents with a concealed micro-lens embedded in my bracelet. The technology is our own—darkblood innovation that captures images using shadows rather than light, undetectable to clearblood security systems.

When I've gathered all I can, I make my way to the door, listening carefully before easing it open. The corridor remains empty. I slip out, pulling the door locked behind me.

As I navigate back through the restricted wing toward the main academy halls, my mind catalogs everything I've learned. The clearbloods are venturing into territory they don't understand—the fundamental energies that define us. They're creating connections between subjects that shouldn't exist, forcing bonds where nature intended boundaries.

What's their endgame? Weaponization seems the obvious answer. It always is with clearbloods. They never can resist turning discovery into dominance.

By the time I emerge back into the bright, polished halls of Heathborne's public face, I've composed myself fully into Clara Winters once more.

But beneath that careful mask, my darkblood heart beats with urgency. What I've discovered could change everything about this mission—and perhaps the future of the eternal shadow war between our kinds.

I want to call Corvin and tell him everything I've found immediately, but communication is only for emergencies. I need to forge ahead to the next step, as fast as possible: eliminating Mazrov. Then I can return to Darkbirch.

The wide corridors feel deserted at this hour, my footsteps echoing against stone walls. I maintain Clara's careful gait, though my mind races. These experiments had to explain Mazrov's unnatural abilities. He's not just their weapon but their successful prototype.

I turn down the east corridor leading to the dormitories but hesitate mid-step. Faint footsteps echo behind me.

I don't turn immediately. Instead, I pretend to adjust my satchel, using the movement to scan the corridor behind me in my peripheral vision. There—at the far end where the passage curves—is a shadow darker than it should be. Too tall to be a typical Heathborne guard. Even too tall to be Mazrov.

I continue walking slowly and force myself not to look back directly. But as I pass a decorative mirror, I catch a glimpse of the figure. It's moving with deliberate stealth, keeping pace with me but maintaining distance. The silhouette is massive—taller and broader than any normal person should be. And it's following me.

A chill runs through me, but my first instinct is to confront, to challenge—Esme Salem doesn't flee from threats. But Clara Winters would, and Clara Winters would never place herself in unnecessary danger. I adjust my strategy accordingly, continuing my walk with slightly quicker steps.

This is no ordinary patrol guard. And it's definitely not Mazrov—this figure stands at least a head taller than him. Whoever—whatever it is—slips quickly into the shadows every time I attempt to get a better look.

My pulse quickens as I make a sharp turn down another corridor. The presence follows, its movements unnaturally fluid for something so large. There's something wrong about the way it moves—too graceful, too precise. The air around me feels suddenly overcharged: intense and... reminiscent of the energy I felt last night.

I'm not hallucinating now, surely?

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The dormitory wing lies just ahead. I can make out the ornate archway that marks its entrance, the lanterns casting pools of golden light. The presence behind me grows more palpable with each step—a weight in the air, a disturbance in the natural flow of things.

I break into a run, my footsteps echoing loudly against the stone floors. The sound of pursuit behind me is nearly silent—just the barest whisper of movement.

I reach my door, fumbling with the key as I feel the presence draw nearer. The lock yields, and I throw myself inside, slamming the door shut. My breath comes in short gasps as I press my back against the solid oak, listening intently for any sound from the corridor.

Nothing. No footsteps, no breathing, no scratch of claws or rustle of clothing. Just a heavy silence that presses against my ears like cotton.

I slide down until I'm sitting on the floor, my knees drawn up to my chest. This doesn't make sense. Why would something follow me but not confront me? If Heathborne suspected my true identity, they wouldn't send some shadow creature to stalk me—they'd have guards breaking down my door this very moment.

The silence stretches, becoming almost more unnerving than active pursuit would be. I force myself to breathe deeply, to think clearly. Perhaps it was merely a senior guardian on night patrol? But that doesn't explain the unnatural height, the strange quality of movement.

A soft whisper of sound breaks the silence—paper sliding against wood. I freeze,

watching as a small folded note appears beneath my door, pushed through the crack beneath the door with slow deliberation.

I stare at the cream-colored paper, my pulse hammering in my throat. The note sits there, innocent yet threatening in its unexplained presence. I wait another full minute, straining to hear any sound from the corridor. Nothing.

With careful movements, I reach for the note, unfolding it to reveal elegant, slanted handwriting:

“Attend combat class 9:00 AM tomorrow with Professor Dayn.”

No signature. No explanation. Just a directive that raises more questions than it answers.

I feel a prickle of annoyance, spring up, and yank open the door, half-expecting to confront the mysterious stalker—but the hallway stretches empty in both directions, silent and still as a tomb. The shadows between the enchanted lanterns seem deeper than they should be, but there’s no trace of the person that followed me.

10

The combat classroom smells of steel, sweat, and something else—a lingering scorch mark of power that hangs in the air like invisible smoke. I slide into a desk near the back wall, positioning myself with sightlines to all exits.

A part of me has no idea why I’m sitting here. This nine o’clock class doesn’t clash with any other class in my schedule, but I don’t take directives from strangers in enemy territory. Another part of me knows perfectly well: I have to find out who left me that note, which possibly this “Professor” may know. I don’t have time to waste completing my mission, but curiosity—and, frankly, irritation, at this point—can’t let

this go.

Plus, the day is still young.

Unlike the opulent Hall of Champions, this room embraces a stark utility. The walls are bare stone, floor marked with a large circular arena surrounded by tiered seating. Ancient weapon racks line the perimeter, holding everything from traditional swords to more specialized magical implements. Each bears signs of actual use—nicks, wear patterns, blood stains not quite scrubbed away. Not decorative museum pieces like the ones in the hall, but working tools of violence.

I look again at the exits—main double doors behind me, smaller door to the right that likely leads to an equipment room, and what appears to be a private office entrance behind the instructor's platform. Two visible security cameras track movement from opposite corners, though I suspect more are hidden. This room has fewer magical wards than the main halls, presumably because combat magic is practiced here, and interference would be counterproductive.

A tall blonde girl slides into the seat beside me, her uniform crisp and precisely arranged. "You picked a dangerous spot," she whispers, nodding toward my chosen seat. "Professor Dayn likes to make examples of students who sit in the back."

"Oh," I reply, infusing my voice with appropriate nervousness. "I didn't know. I thought sitting in front would be worse."

She laughs, a brittle sound. "There is no safe place in this room. I'm Patricia, by the way." She extends her hand with the entitled confidence of old clearblood money.

"Clara," I respond, grasping her hand with a grip calibrated to be just shy of confident. "Transfer student."

“Well, Clara, just a friendly warning—don’t volunteer for anything today. Dayn’s first-day demonstrations tend to end in the infirmary.”

Interesting. I file away this piece of information, mentally adjusting my approach. If injury is common, it might provide opportunities to slip away and get to Mazrov. The medical wing would likely have different security protocols than the academic sections. So long as I wasn’t injured too badly, obviously, which I don’t intend to be.

The room fills quickly, students jostling for what they perceive as safer positions. The air grows thick with anticipation, conversation dwindling to nervous whispers. Three minutes before the scheduled start time, the main doors slam shut with enough force to rattle the weapon displays. No one enters. I scan the room, noting the confusion rippling through the student ranks.

Then I feel it—a wave of heat, rolling across the room like the breath of some massive beast. The temperature spikes several degrees in seconds. Sweat prickles along my hairline as the air begins to shimmer near the instructor’s platform.

He simply appears, as if stepping through an invisible doorway. No magical flash, no theatrical smoke—just absence, then presence. Professor Dayn.

I almost swallow my tongue. It’s... him. The room spikes with intensely unsettling energy, bringing back a rolling wave of *déjà vu*. The stalker.

The rumors didn’t do him justice. He stands at least six-foot-four, with a frame that manages to be both lean and imposing. His features carry a sharp, aristocratic precision—high cheekbones, straight nose, jawline that could cut glass, framed by obsidian locks. But it’s his eyes that arrest my attention. Even from this distance, they burn with an internal light, shifting between amber and molten gold as he surveys the room.

“Preparation,” he announces, his voice sending an involuntary shiver down my spine,
“is the difference between victory and death.”

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He wears no armor, just a simple black shirt and tailored pants, yet carries himself with the absolute authority of someone who has no need for protective gear. As he moves forward, I note the inhuman grace of his steps—too smooth, too measured. Not a single wasted motion.

“You entered this room unaware that you were already being tested,” he continues, pacing a tight circle around the central arena. “The door locked precisely three minutes ago. The temperature rose by twelve degrees. The oxygen content decreased by four percent.” He stops, scanning our faces. “And not one of you noticed all three changes.”

A cold certainty settles in my stomach. I had noticed the door and the heat, but not the oxygen shift. A potential weakness in my perception he’s already identified.

“Combat is not about strength,” Dayn says, rolling up his sleeves with deliberate precision. “It is about awareness. Control. Anticipation.” With each word, he moves closer to the student section. “Without these, you are merely waiting to die.”

The scent emanating from him reminds me of hot metal and ozone—like lightning striking stone. It’s not unpleasant, but distinctly inhuman.

His gaze sweeps the room once more, and for a heart-stopping moment, it locks onto mine. Something flickers across his expression—the slightest narrowing of eyes, the barest hint of a frown. Recognition? Suspicion? Before I can analyze it further, he turns away, directing his attention to a muscular boy in the front row.

“You. Stand.”

The student scrambles to his feet, visibly trembling.

“Attack me,” Dayn orders, stepping into the center of the arena.

“Sir?” The boy’s voice cracks.

“You heard me. Attack. Use whatever means you have at your disposal.”

The student hesitates, then lunges forward with a clumsy right hook. Dayn doesn’t appear to move at all, yet suddenly the boy is flat on his back, gasping for air.

“Predictable. Telegraphed. Weak.” Dayn doesn’t even look at the fallen student as he addresses the class. “Your first mistake is believing you can win. Your second is showing your intention before you act.”

He gestures, and the boy rises into the air, suspended by invisible force, then deposited back in his seat.

“Magic,” Dayn continues, “is a tool, not a solution. Reliance on magical ability creates weakness.” I’m unsure if it’s my imagination, but his voice seems to carry an edge of personal bitterness. “When magic fails—and it will fail—what remains is the body, the mind, and the will to survive.”

As he speaks, I study his movements, looking for tells that might reveal his true nature. My files mentioned nothing about a Professor Dayn—Corvin’s intelligence was incomplete. And Dayn... definitely represents an unknown variable in my mission parameters.

What the hell is he?

“Today,” he announces, “we will assess your baseline capabilities. One by one, you

will demonstrate your current combat form. Magical and physical abilities both.”

He begins calling students forward alphabetically. Each demonstration follows the same pattern—a brief display of combat skills, followed by increasingly impossible tasks designed to push them to failure. Dayn’s critiques are surgical, exposing weaknesses with brutal efficiency. Some students leave the arena in tears, others with injuries, all of them shaken.

As the demonstrations continue, I feel his attention returning to me periodically, like the heat of a spotlight passing over my skin. Each time, I keep my expression neutral, my posture unremarkable. But somehow, I have the uncanny sense that he sees through it.

“Winters,” he finally calls, and the name feels wrong in his mouth, almost as if he knows it’s not truly mine. “Your turn.”

I rise, adopting the slightly uncoordinated movements of someone with basic combat training but little practical experience. As I step into the arena, the air around Dayn seems to distort, heat waves rising from his skin.

“Your file says you transferred from Westlake Academy,” he states, circling me with predatory assessment. “Known for theoretical rather than practical education. Let’s see what bad habits we need to correct.”

I perform exactly as Clara Winters should—competent basic forms, but nothing exceptional. I deliberately leave openings in my stance, telegraph my movements just enough to appear untested. All the while, I feel his eyes boring into me, seeking something beneath the surface.

“Your foundation is weak,” he announces, stopping directly behind me. His proximity sends an involuntary shiver across my skin. Heat radiates from him like a

furnace. “Your body knows what to do, but your mind hesitates.”

Without warning, his hand closes around my wrist, turning my arm to expose the inside of my forearm. His touch burns—not excruciatingly, but like stepping too close to an open flame. For one terrifying moment, I think he’s searching for the dark blood marking hidden beneath my glamour.

“Interesting,” he murmurs, too low for anyone else to hear. “You favor your right side despite being naturally left-handed. A deliberate choice, or compensation for injury?”

My heart hammers against my ribs. The file created for Clara Winters says nothing about handedness. This observation comes purely from his own analysis of my movements—movements I thought I had controlled perfectly.

“Old training habit,” I respond, keeping my voice steady.

His lips curve into something dark and slow, too predatory to be called a smile. “Habits reveal truth when we most need to hide it, Miss Winters.”

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The way he says my false name carries a subtle emphasis that sends ice down my spine. He releases my wrist and steps back, addressing the class again.

“Miss Winters demonstrates the danger of theoretical knowledge without practical application. A competent opponent would exploit no fewer than fourteen weaknesses in her form.”

He turns away, dismissing me back to my seat. As I return, I notice my wrist bears a faint red mark where his fingers gripped me. Not a bruise—more like a... sunburn.

The remaining students complete their demonstrations, but Dayn’s attention continues to drift back to me periodically throughout the session. Each time our eyes meet, I feel an unsettling pull, like standing too close to a powerful magnet. It takes conscious effort not to react, not to let my disguise slip.

As the class nears its end, Dayn returns to the center of the arena. “Combat is not a subject learned from books or demonstrations. It requires practical application under real conditions. Therefore, each of you will be assigned to shadow one of Heathborne’s security personnel for the remainder of the semester.”

Murmurs of surprise ripple through the room. This wasn’t mentioned in any of the materials I studied during mission preparation.

“These assignments are not negotiable,” he continues, producing a list from thin air. He begins reading names and assignments, each pairing seemingly random until he reaches mine.

“Clara Winters,” he says, his burning gaze fixing directly on me once more. The room falls unusually quiet. “You will mentor under Senior Guard Mazrov.”

The air constricts around me, a collective intake of breath from the other students. Beside me, Patricia gasps softly.

“That’s never happened before,” she whispers. “No one gets assigned to Mazrov. He doesn’t take students.”

I keep my expression blank despite the alarm bells ringing in my mind. This can’t be coincidence. Either Dayn somehow knows something about my true purpose, or some twisted fate has just delivered exactly what I came for, wrapped in the most dangerous package possible.

Dayn continues reading names, but his eyes linger on me for a moment longer, something like amusement flickering in their molten depths. When he finally looks away, I feel as though I’ve been released from a physical grip.

As class concludes, students file out with nervous chatter about their assignments. I deliberately take my time gathering my things, monitoring Dayn from my peripheral vision. He stands perfectly still at the center of the arena, watching the exodus with predatory patience.

I’m nearly at the door when his voice cuts through the diminishing noise.

“Miss Winters. A moment.”

The few remaining students shoot me pitying glances as they hurry out, leaving us alone in the cavernous room. I turn, maintaining Clara’s hesitant demeanor despite every instinct urging me to leave.

Dayn approaches with that same measured grace, stopping just close enough to be uncomfortable. Up close, the heat emanating from him is even more pronounced, as if his skin barely contains some internal inferno.

“Mazrov can be...” he pauses, searching for the word, “difficult. Many find his methods extreme.”

“I’ll adapt, sir,” I respond, keeping my voice appropriately deferential.

His head tilts slightly, studying me with unsettling intensity. “Yes, I believe you will. Adaptation seems to be your specialty.”

My cheeks feel hotter, though whether from his proximity or my own rising nerves, I can’t tell.

“Is there a particular reason you selected me for this assignment?” I ask, allowing just enough nervousness into my voice to seem natural.

His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. He leans slightly closer, and I catch a trace of cinnamon and smoke on his breath. “Let’s call it intuition, Miss Winters. I’ve found that the most interesting students benefit from the most challenging circumstances.”

“Right, sir,” I manage, fighting the urge to step back.

“You’ll receive notice of your schedule with him soon.” He turns away, dismissing me without another word.

And I wonder exactly how I will receive that. Through another note under my door?

As I exit the stifling heat of the classroom into the relatively cool corridor, my mind races. This assignment puts me exactly where I need to be—close to Mazrov, with

legitimate access to his routines and vulnerabilities. It's an intelligence goldmine, the kind of opportunity that would normally take weeks to manufacture.

But Dayn...What on earth is he, and what is he playing at?

There was recognition in those burning eyes, some awareness that saw past my carefully constructed facade. Enough to expose me? I don't know. His interest deeply unsettles me. At the very least, it's enough to mark me for special attention. And special attention is the last thing an infiltrator needs.

What I know for certain is I need to finish this and get out as soon as possible. Because it appears two predators now circle me in this den of enemies—one I came to hunt, and one I never saw coming.

I glide through Heathborne's grand ballroom like a shadow among stars, each step calculated despite the ridiculous silver gown I've squeezed myself into. The clearblood elite swirl around me in their finery, oblivious to the predator in their midst.

I've determined it would be foolish to wait for whenever Dayn or Mazrov decide to start my formal "training." I obviously can't trust either of them. I can't play by their schedule—which could very well be a trap. I need to end this, now, and get out.

Thankfully, I learned this very evening presents an interesting opportunity.

Through the crush of perfumed bodies and tinkling crystal, I keep my eyes fixed on the target: Mazrov. The weight of the poison-filled syringe against my thigh reminds me why I'm here.

The ballroom drips with excess—chandeliers that spiral toward the ceiling like frozen waterfalls, tables laden with food no darkblood would ever taste by invitation. A string quartet plays something classical and tedious in the corner. I resist the urge to sneer at the display. Clearbloods and their performances of civility while they torture my kind in the chambers below.

I adjust the thin chain at my neck—a hollow silver pendant that houses a potion granting me temporary glamour. I've changed my transfer student persona. To everyone here, I appear as a minor noble from the northern territories. Forgettable. Unimportant. Perfect for my purpose.

Mazrov stands across the room, wearing the formal uniform of Heathborne's elite guard rather than his usual gray armor. Even in ceremonial dress, he looks dangerous—rigid posture, alert eyes scanning the crowd. The experimental subject of the clearbloods' military program doesn't get nights off, apparently. His duty tonight appears to be to blend in while remaining vigilant, watching for threats.

Like me.

I angle my path through the crowd, careful not to move directly toward him. A waiter passes with drinks, and I take a glass, sipping the bland, fizzy liquid while assessing the security layout. Two uniformed guards at each entrance. Four plainclothes agents dispersed through the crowd—I identify them by their too-perfect posture and the slight bulge of concealed weapons under their formal wear.

None of them notice me. None of them will until it's too late.

I place my empty glass on a passing tray and drift toward a cluster of laughing nobles. I position myself at their periphery, nodding and smiling at appropriate intervals while scanning the room over their shoulders. Mazrov hasn't moved from his position near the eastern wall, his gaze methodically sweeping the ballroom.

"And you're from where again, dear?" A woman with an elaborate feathered headdress suddenly addresses me.

"Northbrook," I lie smoothly. "My father's estate borders the Silverwood."

"Oh! Do you know the Hemsleys?" Her eyes brighten with interest.

"Distantly," I murmur, then gesture vaguely across the room. "If you'll excuse me, I believe I see an old acquaintance."

I slip away before she can respond, cutting through the crowd with practiced ease. Each step brings me closer to Mazrov, but never directly. I pause to examine a particularly gaudy ice sculpture, then drift toward the refreshment table, steadily decreasing the distance between us.

My hand slides discreetly to the slit in my gown, fingers brushing against the syringe strapped to my thigh. The poison inside—a darkblood concoction that leaves no trace—will stop his heart in seconds. Clean. Silent. By the time anyone notices something is wrong, I'll be halfway across the ballroom, just another shocked guest witnessing a tragedy.

Twenty feet away now. I pretend to admire a painting on the wall nearby, angling my body so I can watch him from the corner of my eye. Fifteen feet. I accept another drink, using it as prop and shield. Ten feet. I engage a tipsy diplomat in brief conversation, smiling emptily at his pompous observations about trade agreements.

Five feet. I'm close enough to spot the barely perceptible earpiece Mazrov wears for communication with the other guards. One moment of distraction is all I need.

As if summoned by my thoughts, a minor commotion erupts across the ballroom—someone's dropped a tray of glasses. Mazrov's head turns slightly toward the noise, assessing the threat level.

Now.

I move swiftly, closing the final distance with practiced steps that make no sound despite my formal shoes. My fingers close around the syringe, pulling it free from its hiding place as I position myself directly behind him. One quick jab at the exposed strip of neck between his collar and hairline, and this threat to my kind will be eliminated.

I raise my hand?—

Heat sears across my wrist like a band of molten metal. My fingers spasm involuntarily as pain shoots up my arm. The syringe stays hidden in my palm, but my strike halts mid-motion.

“Attempting assassination at a diplomatic function? How disappointingly crude.”

The voice slides over me like ice water. I don’t need to turn to know who it belongs to, but I do anyway, meeting the amber-gold eyes of Professor Dayn. He stands beside me, one hand casually extended to grasp my wrist, his formal attire impeccable. To any observer, we might be greeting each other, except for the white-hot agony radiating from where his skin touches mine.

“Try harder,” he murmurs, his voice pitched low enough that only I can hear.

My breath catches. What?

I attempt to twist free, but his grip tightens. The pain intensifies, and I feel something beneath the surface of my skin—a burning sensation that seems to seep into my blood. When he finally releases me, I have to fight to maintain my composure, to not clutch my injured wrist to my chest.

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Mazrov turns, his fire-blue eyes narrowing as he notices us. For a heart-stopping moment, I think he recognizes me through the glamour, but his gaze slides away after an assessing look.

“Professor,” he acknowledges with a curt nod. “Is there a problem?”

“None whatsoever,” Dayn replies smoothly. “I was just becoming acquainted with this charming visitor from the north. Though I believe she was about to depart.”

His eyes lock with mine, and the message is clear: leave now or face worse consequences.

I force a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes. “Indeed. The hour grows late.”

As I step away, I glance down at my wrist. Red marks circle it like a bracelet, but these aren’t simple pressure marks from his grip. They’re runes—ancient symbols that glow faintly beneath my skin with an inner fire. I pull the sleeve of my gown down to cover them, my mind racing. These aren’t normal burns; they pulse with magic I don’t recognize.

Nearby guests have begun to watch our interaction with mild curiosity. A few whisper behind jeweled fingers, no doubt wondering about the tension crackling between the professor and the unknown northern noble. I need to maintain my cover and exit before more attention falls on me.

“Until next time, Professor,” I say coldly, inclining my head slightly.

“Oh, I assure you,” he says, his voice carrying an undercurrent of something that sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine, “there will be a next time, Miss Salem.”

My blood freezes. He knows who I am. My disguise didn’t fool him for a second.

I turn and make my way toward the exit, fighting the urge to run. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, drowning out the music and chatter. The pain in my wrist throbs in counterpoint, the runes seeming to tighten with each pulse. As I pass other guests, I maintain my composed façade, but inside, my mind churns with implications.

Dayn not only recognized me through magical disguise but intervened precisely when I was about to strike. Was he watching me the entire time? And these marks—what magic has he used on me? The burning sensation continues to spread slowly up my arm, not damaging but... claiming.

I push through the massive doors of the ballroom, nodding politely to the guards as I pass. Only when I’m in the empty corridor do I allow my face to show the fury and confusion roiling within me. I examine my wrist again. The runes have settled into my skin like a brand, no longer glowing but clearly visible—a circle of intricate symbols I can’t decipher.

The worst part isn’t the pain or even the mysterious marking. It’s the inexplicable feeling that blooms beneath my anger—a disturbing fascination with the man who just thwarted me. The way his eyes held mine, the controlled power in his grip, the absolute certainty in his voice. He’s dangerous in ways I don’t fully understand, and that makes him both my enemy and a puzzle I suddenly, desperately need to solve.

I slip into an alcove where I return my appearance to Clara and tuck the useless syringe back into its hidden pocket. Tonight’s mission was a failure, but the war is far from over. Mazrov remains a threat to my coven, and now ProfessorDayn has revealed himself as definitely something more than just another clearblood academic.

I touch the marks on my wrist gingerly. They don't hurt anymore, but they pulse with a strange warmth that connects to something deep inside me. Whatever game Dayn is playing, he's made a critical mistake by marking me.

He's made this personal.

12

The corridors of Heathborne grow quieter as night deepens, the sounds of the banquet fading behind me like a bad dream. I've abandoned the silver gown for my customary Heathborne uniform, retrieved from a pre-arranged hiding spot in an unused guest chamber. The marks on my wrist continue to pulse with uncomfortable heat, visible even in the dim light of the corridor. I trace one finger over the intricate runes, trying to decipher their meaning. Whatever magic Professor Dayn used, it hasn't faded—if anything, the connection feels stronger now, like an invisible tether pulling me through these shadowed halls.

I should be halfway back to the coven by now, reporting my failure and planning our next move against Mazrov. Instead, I find myself lingering, driven by a need to understand what happened. What these marks mean. What Dayn knows about me.

The rational part of my mind screams that this is a trap, that I'm endangering myself and the coven by remaining within these walls. But the marks on my arm tell a different story—this magic has already bound me in ways I don't understand. Running won't sever this connection.

As I round a corner into a particularly deserted corridor, the torches along the wall suddenly dim, plunging the space into near-darkness. The temperature increases several degrees. I reach for the knife concealed at my hip, scanning the shadows.

“Your blade won't help you here, Miss Salem.”

The voice emerges from the darkness behind me. I spin, weapon already drawn, to find Professor Dayn standing where nothing but empty corridor existed seconds ago. He's changed from his formal attire into a simpler dark tunic and pants, but the effect is no less imposing. If anything, the absence of clearblood finery makes him appear more dangerous—more authentic.

“What did you do to me?” I demand, gesturing with my marked wrist while keeping my knife steady in my other hand.

His amber eyes shift, catching the faint torchlight and reflecting it back with an inhuman glow. “I prevented you from making a catastrophic mistake. You should be thanking me.”

“I'll send a fruit basket,” I snap. “Now remove these marks.”

A smile ghosts across his face, there and gone so quickly I might have imagined it. “I can't. More accurately, I won't.” He gestures down the corridor. “Walk with me.”

“I'm not going anywhere with you.”

“You already are.” He nods toward my marked wrist. “Those runes have been guiding you toward me since you left the ballroom. Why else would you still be wandering these halls instead of fleeing Heathborne entirely?”

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The realization that he's right sends a chill through me. My feet have been carrying me through the castle without conscious direction, following some invisible pull.

"What have you done to me?" I repeat, hating the tremor that's crept into my voice.

"Nothing irreversible." He turns and begins walking away, his movements fluid and soundless. "Come. Unless you'd prefer to remain ignorant of the magic currently working its way through your bloodstream."

I have choices. I could attack him from behind—but the memory of that searing grip makes my wrist throb in warning. I could try to escape Heathborne—but without understanding these marks, I'd be bringing an unknown magical influence back to my coven. Or I could follow him and learn what I'm dealing with.

I choose knowledge.

My knife remains in my hand as I follow him through winding corridors and down a narrow stairwell. The walls transition from the polished stone of the main castle to rougher, more ancient construction. We're heading into the older sections of Heathborne Academy, away from the dormitories and formal classrooms, into spaces few students ever see.

Finally, Dayn stops before a heavy wooden door reinforced with iron bands. He places his palm against it, murmuring words too low for me to catch. The door swings inward without a sound, revealing a classroom unlike any other in Heathborne.

No ornate furnishings or clearblood emblems here—just bare stone walls lined with shelves of ancient texts and strange artifacts. A large table dominates the center of the room, its surface carved with symbols similar to those now branded on my wrist. A few chairs are scattered about, and iron sconces hold flames that burn with unnatural steadiness, casting the room in amber light.

“Enter,” Dayn says, standing aside.

I hesitate at the threshold. “Is this where you torture the darkbloods who fail to assassinate your colleagues?”

His expression doesn’t change, but something flickers in those inhuman eyes. “If I wanted you dead or imprisoned, Miss Salem, you would already be in the cells beneath us. This is a place of instruction.”

“I didn’t sign up for lessons.”

“Yet here you stand.” He gestures again to the room. “Your choice, of course. Leave, if you prefer to wonder why those marks will continue to burn when you attempt to harm a certain individual in Heathborne. Wonder why your blood magic might falter at crucial moments. Wonder how much I know about your coven’s movements and your grandmother’s grave.”

The mention of my grandmother decides me. I enter the room, keeping the table between us. “How do you know about my grandmother?”

Dayn closes the door behind him with a wave of his hand—no physical touch, just pure magical control. The implications aren’t lost on me.

“I know many things about your family, Esme Salem. The question you should be asking is why I haven’t shared that knowledge with my clearblood colleagues.” He

moves to the table, his fingers tracing the symbols carved into its surface. “Show me your wrist.”

I don’t move. “Answer my question first.”

His eyes lift to mine, and for a moment, they shift from amber to molten gold, pupils narrowing. “I don’t respond well to demands. A lesson you should learn quickly if we’re to have a productive relationship.”

“We don’t have a relationship.”

“We do now.” He extends his hand across the table. “Your wrist, please.”

The “please” surprises me enough that I find myself moving forward, reluctantly extending my arm across the table. The marks have deepened since I last examined them, the runes more defined, like ancient writing etched into my skin.

Dayn’s fingers are surprisingly gentle as they encircle my wrist, turning it to examine the marks from all angles. Despite the gentleness, heat emanates from his touch—not burning this time, but unnaturally warm, as though his body temperature runs several degrees hotter than a normal human’s.

“Binding runes,” he explains, tracing one symbol with his index finger. Where he touches, the mark flares briefly with golden light. “Ancient magic, predating the division between darkbloods and clearbloods. These particular ones create a restriction bond.”

“You’ve enslaved me?” I try to jerk my arm away, but his grip tightens just enough to hold me still.

“If I wanted a slave, I’d choose someone less argumentative.” His tone remains even,

almost academic. “These runes don’t control you. They only prevent specific actions—like killing certain members of Heathborne’s staff.”

“Mazrov,” I say flatly.

Dayn inclines his head. “Correct.”

“Why do you care if I eliminate him? He’s just a clearblood experiment, a disposable guard.”

“And your solution is a clumsy assassination attempt at a public event?” He releases my wrist with a dismissive gesture. “If I hadn’t intervened, you’d be in chains right now, undergoing interrogation.”

My ego prickles. He talks as if I’ve never successfully assassinated anyone before, and I needed his intervention. As if I need him to control the situation. He’s like an assassin’s version of a cockblock.

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“Kieran Mazrov may look like a simple guard,” he continues, “but he’s more valuable to Heathborne than you perhaps realize. His death would have brought a level of scrutiny down upon your coven that you are not prepared to handle.”

The certainty in his voice gives me pause. “You talk like you care what happens to my coven.”

“I care about... balance.” He moves away from the table, selecting a heavy tome from one of the shelves. “The clearbloods’ crusade against your kind disrupts ancient equilibriums. Their experiments with Mazrov and others like him are... concerning.”

He places the book on the table between us, opening it to reveal pages covered in symbols matching those on my wrist. “Your attempt tonight was doomed from the start. Not because of any failure in your skills—which are considerable—but because your approach was fundamentally flawed.”

“So you decided to mark me instead of just telling me this?” I snap.

“Would you have listened?” His eyebrow arches slightly. “Or would you have dismissed me as another clearblood protecting his own?”

He has a point, though I’m not about to admit it. “And what exactly do you propose now?”

“Training.” He taps the open book. “These runes don’t just restrict—they also enhance. Your darkblood magic has raw power, but it lacks refinement. Precision. I can teach you methods that will make tonight’s crude assassination attempt look like

a child's game."

I stare at him, trying to read past that impassive face to whatever lies beneath. "Why would you teach a darkblood how to be a more efficient killer?"

"As I said—balance." His eyes meet mine across the table. "And because you intrigue me, Esme Salem. Not many would have infiltrated tonight's gathering with such confidence. Fewer still would remain standing here, questioning me, after being discovered."

There's something in his gaze that sends an unwelcome heat through my body, entirely different from the burning of the runes. I force myself to look away, down at the ancient text.

"And if I refuse your... training?"

"The runes remain either way. But without proper instruction, they'll continue to interfere with your magic in unpredictable ways." He closes the book with a decisive snap. "More importantly, you'll miss an opportunity to learn about Mazrov and the other experiments Heathborne is conducting—information your coven desperately needs."

He's offering me exactly what I came for, wrapped in terms that make it sound like he's doing me a favor. The strategic part of my mind recognizes the value of an insidesource at Heathborne. The suspicious part wonders what he gains from this arrangement.

"What's your price?" I ask bluntly.

For the first time, something like genuine amusement crosses his features. "Direct. I appreciate that." He leans forward slightly, his presence suddenly filling the room

despite the minimal movement. “I require assistance with matters that require... a darkblood’s unique perspective.”

“You want me to spy for you?”

“Think of it as an exchange of information beneficial to both parties.” He straightens. “Your coven seeks to understand and counter the clearbloods’ newest weapons. I seek to ensure... certain lines of magical experimentation are not crossed. Our interests align more than you realize.”

The rational choice would be to leave, to return to my coven and find another way to deal with Mazrov and the mysterious marks. But something keeps me rooted in place—curiosity, yes, but also a strange recognition. The way Dayn speaks of balance, of ancient magics that predate the blood divisions... it echoes to stories my grandmother once whispered to me, so long ago I hardly remember.

“One session,” I say finally. “I’ll try one session, and then decide if this arrangement has merit.”

Dayn nods once, his expression unchanging though something like satisfaction flickers in those inhuman eyes. “Tomorrow night. Same hour.” He moves toward the door, which swings open at his approach. “And Salem? Next time you attempt to enter Heathborne, use the eastern passage behind the groundskeeper’s shed. The wards there are weaker, and the guard rotation leaves a ninety-second gap every hour.”

He’s giving me infiltration advice for a fortress he supposedly serves. The contradiction only deepens my curiosity about what—or who—Professor Dayn really is.

“You will learn,” he says as I pass him at the doorway, his voice dropping to a near-

whisper that nonetheless carries an undeniable command. “And next time, you won’t falter.”

Our eyes meet in the dim light of the corridor, and for a heartbeat, I glimpse something ancient and powerful shifting beneath his human facade. The marks on my wrist pulse in response, a warm current that travels up my arm and settles somewhere deep in my chest.

“We’ll see who’s teaching whom, Professor,” I reply, injecting as much defiance into my tone as I can muster.

His lips curve in the barest suggestion of a smile. “Indeed we will.”

As I turn away and head back through the darkened corridors, I’m acutely aware of his gaze following me. The stone walls of Heathborne seem to close in around me, whispering of secrets and dangers I’m only beginning to understand. Yet mingled with the apprehension is a treacherous thrill of anticipation.

Whatever game we’ve begun tonight, I intend to win it. Even if victory means learning to play by his rules—for now.

13

The chamber Dayn has chosen for today’s lesson is the same that he brought me to yesterday, lying deep within Heathborne’s east wing. I stand in the center of the room, my hands steady despite the quickening of my pulse. This close to Dayn, my every sense sharpens. Each of his movements could reveal something crucial, something I can use. The casual way he observes me tells me he’s either genuinely at ease or putting on a masterful performance. Either way, I’m here to learn—just not what he thinks.

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“Your posture is better than Winters’, Salem,” Dayn remarks. The name still jars me—no more “Miss Winters,” no more pretense. He knows who I am, what I am, yet here we stand, predator and prey uncertain of which is which.

“I’ve been practicing,” I reply, keeping my voice neutral.

Dayn’s amber eyes flicker with that strange internal fire. “Show me a containment ward.”

I don’t know why he’s asking to see this, but I resolve to play along for now. I extend my hands, palms facing each other. Between them, a sphere of energy forms—clearblood magic, not my natural affinity, but I’ve become adept at mimicking it. The sphere pulses with a pale blue light, its surface rippling like disturbed water.

“Adequate,” Dayn says, circling me slowly. Heat radiates from him, and I resist the urge to step back. “But you’re still thinking like a darkblood. You’re trying to command the energy rather than channel it.”

“Force of habit,” I mutter, adjusting my technique. The sphere stabilizes, its light growing steady.

“Habits can kill you in this world, Salem.” His voice drops lower. “Or they can save you, if they’re the right ones.”

I dissolve the energy sphere, letting my hands fall to my sides. “Is that what we’re really here to discuss? Habits?”

Something shifts in his expression. “No. We’re here because you need to understand what you’re facing.” He moves to the chamber door and locks it with a flick of his wrist. The sound of magical wards activating hums through the stone walls. “No interruptions, no surveillance.”

My body tenses, ready for combat. “That’s rather dramatic, Professor.”

“What do you know about dragons, Salem?” he asks, ignoring my comment.

My breathing slows as I stare at him, taken off guard by his question. “I... They’re extinct... Hunted to extinction centuries ago during the Blood Wars.”

In response, Dayn rolls up the sleeves of his formal academic robe, revealing forearms roped with lean muscle and etched with intricate markings that I could have mistaken for tattoos at first glance. But as I watch, the markings begin to burn with dark amber light.

“What are—” I begin, but stop as the temperature in the room increases. The air between us shimmers with heat haze.

“I am the last of my kind, or near enough.” Dayn’s voice lowers, deepens. “The last of those that went into hiding, and watched the world forget.”

My mind races to process his words. Dragons—actual dragons—still exist? The Salem family archives mention them only as ancient enemies, beings of fire and destruction that plagued darkblood covens before the clearbloods rose to power.

“You don’t believe me.” Dayn holds out a hand, palm up. A flame appears, dancing above his skin—not magical fire conjured from the air, but something that seems to emerge from within his flesh itself. “This is what Heathborne wants. Not just my knowledge, but what I am.”

I force myself to breathe evenly, to show no fear. “You’re saying you’re a dragon? A literal, fire-breathing, treasure-hoarding dragon?” I can’t believe I just said that.

“The treasure-hoarding is a stereotype,” he says with unexpected dryness. “But yes, in essence.”

“But... how...?” My voice trails off as I look over his predatory human form, and only now do I recall a detail of one of the ancient stories I heard as a child: dragons shifting between skins, sometimes beast, sometimes man.

Was that one of their actual abilities, or another legend twisted over time into myth? I feel a moment’s hesitation—a primal instinct that urges me to leave, to run, even though it goes against my very nature. I stay rooted, needing to press for more.

“Shapeshifting,” I say, my skepticism barely masking my curiosity. “Is that something you can do?”

“Perhaps this will suffice?” His eyes flash, the amber darkening to molten gold. His skin ripples, and for a moment, dark scales shimmer across his neck before fading back to human appearance. It’s brief but unmistakable—inhuman, ancient, terrifying.

I swear before I can stop myself. My grandmother’s stories were true. The nightmare creatures that haunted darkblood history aren’t myth.

Dayn’s expression hardens. “I am bound to this place, Salem. To Heathborne. To its purpose.”

“Why would a dragon serve clearbloods?” I ask, my mind still reeling from the fact I’m standing in front of something that should not even exist.

“Not by choice, obviously. They performed a tethering ritual on me fifty years ago.

An ancient binding spell that even your coven has forgotten.”

I’ve never heard of such a ritual, but I’m familiar with the concept of binding spells.

“What does this binding do?”

“It chains my essence to their purposes. More specifically, it allows them to siphon my power—my innate dragon magic—and channel it through their chosen vessels.”

The pieces click together with horrifying clarity. “Mazrov,” I breathe.

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Dayn nods once. “The guard who hunts you is no ordinary clearblood. He’s what they call an Emissary—bound to me through the ritual, given access to draconic power without the inconvenience of actually being a dragon.” His face is still a controlled mask, but I don’t miss the moment his lip curls slightly in something akin to disgust. “My fire flows through his veins, corrupted and twisted to serve their ends.”

I think of Mazrov’s unnatural eyes, the way he moves with predatory grace. “That’s how he damages auras so permanently.” It’s not just clearblood magic—it’s something older, more primordial.

“Correct.” Dayn begins pacing, heat shimmering around him with each step. “Heathborne has been experimenting with this process for decades. Mazrov is merely their most successful specimen—but not their last. They intend to create more.”

My mission parameters shift in my mind like falling dominoes. I came to eliminate Mazrov, to destroy the threat he poses to darkbloods everywhere. But if Heathborne can simply make more like him...

“How many can they bind to you?” I ask, my voice hardening.

“The ritual can support three bonds at once. Mazrov is the only active Emissary now, but they’re preparing two more candidates.” Dayn’s eyes lock onto mine. “Your brother was being evaluated as a potential candidate, by the way.”

The room seems to tilt around me. “Jax? They wanted to turn my brother into?—”

“Into a weapon against his own kind, yes.” Dayn’s voice is merciless. “His darkblood

abilities would have made him even more effective than Mazrov. Fortunately, your extraction was successful.”

I struggle to maintain my composure, anger threatening to cloud my judgment. “So I kill Mazrov, and two more take his place. That’s what you’re telling me.”

“Unless you address the source.” Dayn’s gaze bores into mine, challenging me.

“You,” I say flatly. “Without you, there’s no dragon magic to bind.”

A dangerous smile spreads across his face. “Now you understand.”

“Why tell me this? You realize I’ll report it to my coven.”

“Because, Salem, we find ourselves in a position of mutual interest.” He steps closer, the heat of his body washing over me. “Your people slaughtered mine for years before the clearbloods rose to power.”

I stand my ground, refusing to back away. “Dragons burned us first,” I counter sharply. “You hunted us like cattle. My ancestors have the scars to prove it.”

“Your ancestors were parasites,” he hisses, eyes flashing gold. “Feeding on death and pain.”

A wire tightens in my chest. “Your kind breathed fire on our villages because you enjoyed watching us scream,” I snarl. The temperature in the room rises with our anger, the air between us shimmering.

“We were the guardians of natural order,” Dayn’s voice rises, his academic facade slipping to reveal something ancient and wrathful. “Before your people learned to corrupt it with your blood rituals.”

“We honored the dead,” I spit the words at him. “We gave meaning to mortality while your kind soared above, playing gods.”

We’re inches apart now, the room crackling with tension. My heart hammers against my ribs, adrenaline flooding my system—partly from anger, partly from something else I refuse to acknowledge. His proximity triggers something primal in me, a recognition of power that both repels and attracts.

“And yet,” he says, his voice dropping dangerously low, “here we stand, the last of the dragons and a daughter of Salem, facing the same enemy.”

I’m suddenly, uncomfortably aware of the heat radiating from his skin, the strange magnetic pull of his presence. My body responds traitorously, a flush spreading across my skin that has nothing to do with the elevated temperature of the room. Is this another power of his I’m not aware of? Is he manipulating me via the runes he stamped on me?

“Temporary alignment of interests doesn’t make us allies.” I try to control the anger in my voice.

“No,” he agrees, his eyes trailing slowly over my face in a way that makes my skin prickle. “But it makes us something far more interesting.”

I step back, needing distance to attempt to calm down, to clear my head. “This changes nothing,” I say after a tense pause. “I have my mission.”

“It changes everything,” Dayn counters. “Your mission was based on incomplete information. You came to eliminate Mazrov, believing him to be the source of the threat. Now you know he’s merely a symptom.”

He’s right, damn him. I need to reevaluate. I exhale. “If what you say is true about the

ritual, killing Mazrov alone won't stop Heathborne," I say reluctantly.

"No, it won't." Dayn returns to his desk, putting welcome space between us. "They'll simply bind another Emissary to me and continue their work."

I cross my arms, studying him with a grimace. "And what exactly do you want from me, Professor? I doubt you're offering yourself as a target."

"Freedom," he says simply. "Break the binding ritual, and I'll ensure Heathborne can never create another Emissary."

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I narrow my eyes. “And once you’re free? You’ll what—peacefully retire? Somehow I doubt that.”

A smile curves his lips, predatory and ancient. “What I do after is my concern. But I can promise it won’t involve darkbloods. My quarrel was never truly with your kind.”

I don’t trust him—can’t trust him—but the strategic calculation is clear. If Dayn is the source of Heathborne’s power, then he’s the logical primary target. Mazrov becomes secondary.

“I need to think about this,” I say finally.

“Of course.” Dayn glances at the ornate timepiece on the wall. “Our lesson time is nearly up, anyway.”

Some “lesson.”

My skin feels too tight, too warm as I gather my things. The revelation about dragons, about Dayn himself, has upended everything I thought I knew.

“Same time tomorrow?” he asks, his tone returning to that of the formal professor, though something darker lingers in his eyes.

“I’ll be here,” I lie.

As I leave the chamber, my resolve hardens into crystal clarity. Dayn is the key—the source of Heathborne’s experimental threat. He must be eliminated first, then

Mazrov.

14

I press my back against the cold stone wall, counting the seconds between guard rotations. One and a half minutes exactly. Heathborne Academy's clockwork precision makes infiltration both easier and more dangerous—miss your window by a heartbeat and you're caught in the open. I withdraw a small vial from my inner pocket, the liquid inside gleaming with an unnatural blue light. The draught that will let me sense magical barriers. I down it in one bitter swallow, my senses immediately sharpening as the world takes on layers of luminescent energy signatures.

I check my weapons one more time. The silver dagger in my left boot, coated with a mixture of nightshade and juniper oil that's deadly to most supernatural beings. The thin wire garrote wrapped around my wrist, which I removed from my bookmark and disguised as silver bangles. And my primary weapon, tucked into a custom sheath at the small of my back—an obsidian blade infused with ancient binding runes. The blade was marked for "apex predators" in our historical texts. If Professor Dayn is as powerful as he suggests, I'll need something with more bite than standard issue.

The corridor empties as the patrol passes. I slip forward, keeping to the deepest shadows, my footfalls silent on the polished stone. Dayn's quarters are hidden behind an unassuming door at the far end of the faculty wing, distinguished by a small brass nameplate.

I reach the door and press my palm against the smooth wood, feeling for wards... but there are none. The lock is next—a simple mechanical affair that takes me less than ten seconds to pick. Dayn's surprising lack of reliance on security is either arrogance or misdirection. I'll know soon enough.

I ease the door open just wide enough to slip through and close it silently behind me.

The chamber is dark, illuminated only by thin strips of moonlight filtering through narrow windows. My eyes adjust quickly, revealing a space that feels... wrong. Not because it's extravagant or threatening, but because it's so sparse. I find myself in a room that resembles a monk's cell more than a professor's quarters.

A single dark wooden table sits in one corner, its surface bare except for a leather-bound book. No papers, no personal effects. Two high-backed chairs stand sentinel beside it, carved from the same dark wood but lacking any cushioning or comfort. A narrow bookshelf is tucked in another corner of the room, and heavy drapes frame the windows, their thick material designed to block both light and sound. The floor beneath my feet is hardwood, worn smooth by age but meticulously maintained.

I move farther into the room, my senses alert for traps. The air feels warm and dry, as if I've stepped into a desert climate rather than the perpetually chilly castle. There's ascent in the air—something metallic and ancient, like heated copper mixed with amber and ash.

Through an arched doorway, I glimpse what must be the bedroom. I move toward it, each step measured and silent. The heat intensifies as I approach.

The bedroom is as austere as the outer chamber. A massive bed dominates the space, its frame made of a dark metal. The sheets are crimson—silk, from the way they catch the light. No pillows. No blankets. The room's only other furniture is a tall wardrobe pressed against the far wall.

And there, in the center, lies Professor Dayn.

He sleeps shirtless, his upper body completely bare from his toned chest down to the taut, defined muscle of his abdomen, the blood-red sheets tangled around his hips. His muscles are lean but corded with strength, more like weaponry than flesh. There's no sign of the burning patterns that mark him. Perhaps hidden. Perhaps

dormant. Except for an ever so faint, hypnotic glow that seems to linger just beneath the surface, as if his very blood hums with something ancient and untamed. I feel heat radiating from him from several feet away. My throat feels suddenly much too dry.

His skin has an unusual sheen to it, almost iridescent where the moonlight touches his shoulders and arms. The effect should make him appear vulnerable, but even in sleep, power emanates from him in palpable waves. The bed looks almost like an altar with him sprawled across it, like some ancient god at rest.

I grip my obsidian blade tighter.

I force my eyes away and scan the room again, checking for additional security measures before approaching the bed.

Three steps closer, and I can see Dayn's face clearly now. In sleep, his sharp features appear almost carved from stone. His dark hair, usually perfectly styled, falls across his forehead in a surprisingly human display of disorder. His breathing is deep and even, the soft rise and fall of his chest creating a deceptive image of peace.

I've killed before. It's part of being who I am: a Salem, an agent of Darkbirch. But those targets were active threats—clearblood officials ordering raids on our safehouses, informants about to expose our operatives. Killing a sleeping man, however deserving, feels different. I push the thought aside. Sentiment has no place in this mission. Besides, he's branded me with his runes.

I take another step forward, my blade now poised for the killing strike. I'll need to be precise—the heart or the throat. Anything else, and a being of Dayn's power might survive long enough to retaliate. The obsidian blade feels unusually heavy in my hand, the ancient darkblood runes etched into its surface pulsing with a faint red glow that almost matches the sheets beneath Dayn's sleeping form.

One more step. I'm close enough now to sweat from the unnatural heat emanating from his body. Close enough to notice the subtle markings on his skin.

I trust my training. Trust my blade. Trust the legacy that flows through my veins.

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I adjust my grip on the obsidian knife, aligning the blade with the spot where Dayn's heart should be. One clean thrust. That's all it will take. One moment of violence to save countless darkblood lives. One death to prevent a greater slaughter.

I take a final breath, steeling myself.

And Professor Dayn's eyes snap open.

15

His eyes opened like twin flames igniting in the darkness—molten gold irises that seem to burn from within.

Before I can complete my strike, Dayn's hand snaps up with inhuman speed, catching my wrist in a grip that feels like heated iron. The obsidian blade hovers useless, inches from his chest as he smiles up at me, his expression calm. There's not a trace of surprise in those burning eyes—only a predatory satisfaction that turns my blood cold.

“Esme Salem,” he says, my true name rolling off his tongue with disturbing familiarity. “How thoughtful of you to pay me a visit.”

I twist my arm, trying to break his hold, but his fingers only tighten until I feel the bones in my wrist grinding together. In a blur of movement too fast to track, Dayn pulls me forward while simultaneously rising from the bed. The world tilts, and suddenly my back slams against the mattress, the air rushing from my lungs in a surprised gasp. His bodypins mine, one hand still locked around my wrist, forcing the

blade away from us both. His other arm bars across my throat—not choking, but a clear warning.

The heat of him burns through my clothes. This close, I can see faint patterns beneath his skin, glowing ember-lines that trace his veins and muscle. Dragon magic. Ancient and terrible.

“If you wanted me undressed,” he murmurs, his face hovering inches above mine, “you could have said so.”

My free hand finds the secondary blade at my hip, but Dayn shifts his weight, his knee pressing my arm into the mattress before I can draw the weapon. The crimson sheets tangle around us, silk sliding against my skin like blood.

“I’d rather stab you than touch you,” I spit back, struggling against his hold.

His laugh is low and dangerous. “And yet, here we are, doing both.”

I try to buck him off, but it’s like attempting to shift a mountain. His body is a furnace against mine, radiating heat that makes sweat bead at my temples. The runes on my obsidian blade pulse in response to his proximity, as if recognizing something kindred in his unnatural fire.

“Killing me is impossible for you, little witch,” Dayn says, his voice dropping to a conversational tone that’s somehow more frightening than anger. “Though I admire your courage in trying.”

“I’ve killed things more dangerous than you.”

“No,” he says simply. “You haven’t.”

His certainty unnerves me. I scan the room, looking for anything that might help me escape, but there's nothing within reach. Just the austere furnishings and the man pinning me to his bed.

"I knew you'd come," Dayn continues. "The moment I marked you with the runes, I knew you'd try to eliminate the threat. Darkbirch is nothing if not predictable in their paranoia."

"It's not paranoia when clearblood extremists are actually hunting us," I counter, still testing his grip for weaknesses. There are none.

"Is that really what you think I am? A clearblood zealot?" Something like disappointment crosses his face. "You haven't been paying attention in class, Esme."

The way he says my first name sends an unwelcome shiver through me. I wrench my hand back, twisting in a move that should have broken his hold. Instead, he lets me go deliberately, my sudden freedom throwing me off balance. I lunge sideways, rolling away from him across the silken sheets, but he's faster. His hand catches my ankle, dragging me back beneath him with effortless strength.

"Let me go," I hiss, my free leg kicking out at his chest.

He catches it mid-air, his burning palm wrapping around my calf. "Not until we understand each other."

I twist again, using the momentum to bring my knee up between us. It connects with his abdomen, but he barely flinches. Instead, he shifts his weight, pressing me deeper into the mattress. His face hovers above mine, those golden eyes reflecting flames that aren't in the room.

His breath fans hot against my face, carrying that same ancient scent—copper and

amber, something elemental that makes my pulse quicken despite myself. I slam my forehead against his, a desperate move that sends stars exploding behind my eyes but barely causes him to blink.

“Is this what you wanted?” he growls, catching both my wrists in one hand and pinning them above my head. He slides off my garrote bracelet and chucks it across the room. “To feel what real power is?”

I arch my back, trying to throw him off, my body sliding against his bare chest. The contact sends an electric current racing through my veins that has nothing to do with magic and everything to do with the impossible heat of his skin against mine.

“I want you dead,” I snarl.

His eyes darken to burnished bronze as his free hand finds my throat, thumb pressing lightly against my pulse point. I feel my heartbeat hammering against his hand, betraying the electricity coursing through me.

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“If you wanted me dead,” he whispers, his lips almost brushing my ear, “you would have struck faster, while my eyes were closed.”

I twist violently, managing to free one hand. In a flash, I’ve slipped the silver dagger from my boot and drive it toward his side. He catches my wrist again, but not before the blade grazes his ribs, drawing a thin line of blackish blood flecked with gold.

His eyes flare with something primal—anger, respect, hunger—I can’t tell which. The room’s temperature spikes as he wrenches the dagger from my grip and tosses it across the room.

“You fight dirty,” he says, voice rough.

“I fight to survive,” I counter, using his momentary distraction to hook my leg around his waist and using the leverage to flip us. For a heartbeat, I’m on top, straddling him, my hands braced against his chest. His skin burns beneath my palms like a forge.

“There she is,” he murmurs, a dangerous smile curving his lips. “The predator beneath the mask.”

I press my advantage, reaching for the obsidian blade I’d dropped earlier, but Dayn surges upward, one hand tangling in my hair, yanking my head back to expose my throat. His other arm locks around my waist, holding me against him.

“You’re not the only one who can fight dirty,” he growls against my neck, his breath scorching my skin.

I claw at his shoulders, nails digging into flesh that feels like heated marble. He hisses, not in pain but something darker. He flips me onto my back again with such force that the air leaves my lungs in a gasp.

I lash out with my elbow, catching him across the jaw. His head jerks sideways, but he recovers instantly, capturing both my hands and returning them above my head. Our bodies press together, chests, hips, the thin fabric of my clothes doing nothing to shield me from the scorching heat of him.

I buck against him, trying to throw him off, but succeed only in creating a friction that sends a dangerous current of awareness through both of us. His eyes flare brighter, pupils dilating as his grip on my wrists tightens.

The air crackles with tension, neither of us moving. My chest heaves against his, our breaths coming in rapid bursts as we lock eyes—his molten gold burning into my disguised blue. Something electric passes between us, a recognition beyond words. Power recognizing power. Predator recognizing predator—even though his physical strength is far greater than mine.

I can feel his heartbeat hammering against mine, unnaturally hot, unnaturally fast. The runes he branded me with pulse in time with it, as if responding to his proximity. My muscles strain against his grip, but I've stopped actively fighting. He's stopped actively restraining.

His voice drops to a low growl. "I suggest we call this a truce, for now."

Suddenly, the weight pinning me down vanishes. Dayn releases my wrists and pushes himself away in one fluid motion, leaving me gasping on his crimson sheets. The abrupt absence of his direct heat makes the room feel cool by comparison.

I scramble upright, my hand reaching instinctively for the blade that isn't there. Dayn crosses to the wardrobe with unhurried steps, his back to me—an irritating show of confidence. The ember-lines beneath his skin pulse once before fading to a dull glow as he retrieves a simple white shirt. He pulls it over his head in a casual motion, the fabric settling over the strange markings on his skin, hiding whatever power pulses beneath.

I push myself off the bed, straightening my rumpled clothes, and scan the room for my weapons. The obsidian blade lies on the floor near the foot of the bed. The silver dagger has skittered under a side table. Both might as well be miles away with Dayn standing between us.

He gestures to a high-backed chair. "Sit."

"I prefer to stand," I reply, edging toward the obsidian blade.

Dayn's mouth quirks in a half-smile. "Your preference is noted. However—" he flicks his wrist and the blade slides across the floor, coming to rest at his feet, "—I insist."

I weigh my options, but don't see many at the moment, other than to scowl at him, move to the chair, and perch on its edge, muscles tense, ready to spring into action if necessary. Dayn takes a seat opposite me.

"Now that we've dispensed with the pretense of you murdering me tonight," he says, his tone turning conversational, as if we'd been discussing the weather rather than trying to kill each other moments ago, "I suggest we discuss the proposal I made to you earlier."

The proposal. His words in the classroom echo in my mind. Break the binding ritual, and I'll ensure Heathborne can never create another Emissary.

“You’re asking me to help you break your binding contract with Heathborne,” I say, watching his face for any reaction. “Why should I trust you’d follow through on your end of the bargain?”

Dayn leans forward, those golden eyes studying me with unnerving intensity. “Because unlike the clearblood aristocracy you so despise, I keep my word.”

“Your word means nothing to me.”

“And yet, here you are.” He gestures to the space between us. “Not dead, despite your attempt on my life, and still listening.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “I’m listening because you’re holding me captive.”

“Am I?” He raises an eyebrow. “The door is right there, Esme. You’re free to leave whenever you wish... Of course, whether you’d make it back to Darkbirch is another matter.”

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The threat hangs in the air between us. We both know I could try to escape—and we both know that his runes, the extent of whose powers are still unclear to me, remain carved on my skin. While he's alive, I doubt I can risk returning to my coven without putting the lives of everyone I care about at risk.

I stare back at him in disgust.

“You need me,” I say, after a beat. “Otherwise, I’d already be dead.”

“Perceptive.” Dayn rises from his chair and walks to the window, his back to me again. “As explained, what I’m proposing will benefit us both. The binding ritual that connects me to Mazrov is the same one that gives Heathborne the ability to create Emissaries in the first place. Break that bond, and my bond to Heathborne, and you neutralize the clearbloods’ greatest weapon against your people.”

“And grant you freedom in the process,” I say, eyes narrowed.

Dayn turns back to face me, moonlight casting half his face in shadow. “Yes, freedom. The chance to pursue my own interests without being leashed to Heathborne’s agenda.”

“Which are?”

“None of your concern.” His tone carries a finality that makes it clear he won’t elaborate.

I rise from the chair, matching his stance. “You expect me to help you break free so

you can become an even greater threat? I'm not a fool, Dayn."

"No, you're not," he agrees, stepping closer. "You're a survivor. And right now, survival means working with me."

The air between us thickens with tension.

After a moment, he continues, "The steps required to break the binding are, admittedly, dangerous. And they require someone with darkblood abilities. Your connection to death essence is... unique. Essential."

"You're asking me to risk my life to free you?" I say flatly.

"The alternative is watching your people die," he responds. "Mazrov was just the prototype. Heathborne has plans to create an entire division of Emissaries, each one designed specifically to hunt darkbloods."

I set him with a hard glare. "I thought you said only three can be bound to you at once."

"Currently," he replies, "but they're working on ways around that."

I don't know whether to believe him. Dragons aren't known to be trustworthy creatures with their friends, let alone with their enemies. Still, a chill runs through me at the idea that he could be speaking the truth. "Do you have proof of this?"

"I've seen the blueprints. The resource allocations. The training grounds being prepared." His golden eyes lock with mine. "They'll be operational within six months."

I pace away from him. If what he's saying is true—and that's a significantif—then

that is obviously a threat we can't afford to risk. We'd struggle to stand a chance against an army of fully-developed Mazrovs. Maybe even an on-the-loose dragon would be better than that. After all, my kind managed to drive them to near-extinction centuries ago. Here, we'd be dealing with only one.

"What exactly would this ritual entail?" I ask, turning back to him. I loathe to play his game, but unless and until I figure out how to kill him, I don't see a better way to spend my time here.

"Three phases," Dayn replies, something like satisfaction flickering across his features. "First, locating the physical manifestation of the binding—a relic hidden somewhere in Heathborne. Second, preparing the counter-ritual, which requires ingredients only accessible to someone with your... particular talents. And third—" he pauses, his eyes taking on that burning quality again, "—performing the unbinding itself."

I frown. "Why haven't you already done the first step? Why would you need my help for that?"

"First, because there's a risk searching for it could attract... attention. Attention I wish to avoid until I'm ready to actually perform the ritual. Second, two heads are likely more useful than one for this."

"And the risks in all of this?" I ask.

"Considerable." He doesn't bother to sugarcoat it. "The ritual could kill us both if performed incorrectly. Even if successful, there will be... consequences."

"What kind of consequences?"

"The kind we'll deal with when the time comes."

I glare at him while weighing my options. They're painfully limited.

If I refuse, I'm probably as good as dead, either now or later when Heathborne unleashes their Emissaries. Dayn's assertion that Heathborne is planning to create an army of them rings true: how else will the Emissaries be truly effective against us? Clearbloods never stop at one when they can have more.

If I agree to help Dayn, I'm still gambling with my life, but potentially incurring less of a risk for the future of all darkbloods. I don't appreciate his vagueness regarding possible consequences, but the situation looks pretty grim either way.

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“Fine,” I finally say, the word feeling like a bitter, toxic surrender. “I’ll help you break the bond.”

Something flashes in his eyes—triumph, relief, or something darker—before his expression smooths back to careful neutrality.

“A wise decision.”

“But understand this,” I continue, stepping closer until we’re almost touching, my voice dropping to a whisper that promises violence. “If you betray me, if a single darkblood dies because of you, I will find a way to destroy you. I don’t care what it costs me. I don’t care what ancient power burns beneath your skin. I will end you.”

A slow smile spreads across his full lips. “Promises, promises. I wouldn’t expect less from a Salem.”

17

Libraries are supposed to be sanctuaries of knowledge. This one feels more like a prison cell with prettier walls. I trace my finger along the spine of an ancient tome, feeling the crackle of old leather beneath my skin while acutely aware of Dayn’s presence behind me. The soft glow of enchanted lanterns casts our elongated shadows across the towering shelves of Heathborne’s ancient library, and I can’t decide which I despise more—the musty smell of clearblood propaganda disguised as scholarship or the fact that I need this insufferable man’s help to find what we’re looking for.

“The section on pre-schism artifacts should be this way,” Dayn murmurs, his voice

barely audible above the ambient hum of magical preservation wards that keep these precious clearblood relics from crumbling to dust. A fitting metaphor for their entire culture—sustained only by artificial means.

I follow him with deliberate steps, maintaining enough distance to make it clear this is an alliance of necessity, not choice. My silver tablet dissolved hours ago, its effects stilllingering in my system like a bad aftertaste. It dulls my connection to my blood magic just enough to avoid detection, but also makes me feel half-blind in a place saturated with hostile energy.

“Remind me why we couldn’t just steal the unbinding relic directly?” I ask, scanning the section labels as we pass. “Instead of this scholarly treasure hunt.”

Dayn pauses, turning to face me with that infuriating half-smile that never quite reaches his eyes. They burn amber in the low light, like embers waiting to ignite.

“Because, dear Clara—or should I say Esme?—Heathborne doesn’t keep their most valuable artifacts on display. The binding rune relics are hidden beyond conventional space. We need the location cipher.” His tone suggests I’ve asked why water is wet. “Unless you’ve suddenly developed the ability to phase through dimensional barriers?”

I narrow my eyes. “I’ve developed plenty of abilities that would surprise you, Professor.”

“I sincerely doubt that.” He turns away, dismissing me with casual cruelty.

The worst part is that he’s right. I can’t just stumble upon an object that exists partially outside normal reality. The binding rune artifacts—ancient tools from before the blood divide—are our only hope of severing his connection to Mazrov and dismantling Heathborne’s plans for creating an army of Emissaries. But

acknowledging that means admitting I need him, and I'd rather swallow broken glass.

"So, I assume your earlier announcement that I would train under Mazrov was pure bullshit?" I ask.

"It helped catch your attention," Dayn replies. "Whether it will actually come to fruition remains to be seen..."

I exhale slowly, willing for patience.

We reach a secluded alcove lined with reading tables. Dayn selects several volumes from a nearby shelf. I watch his hands, noting how the ambient heat around him makes the air shimmer slightly. Another reminder of what he is—something ancient and deadly wearing the costume of a professor.

"Start with these," he says, placing three texts before me. "Look for references to the Primordial Marks or Ancient Bonds. Anything mentioning convergence points or liminal chambers."

I pull the nearest book toward me, a weathered tome with faded runic inscriptions along its binding. "You'd think you'd be quicker at following clues than hunting for shadows," I remark dryly.

His lips curl slightly. "And you'd think you'd stop overanalyzing old paper."

I roll my eyes and turn my attention to the text. The pages are brittle beneath my fingers, covered in dense academic prose and annotated diagrams of runic configurations. My Darkbirch training included ancient languages, but these symbols predate even the oldest darkblood traditions.

We work in tense silence for nearly an hour. I feel his gaze occasionally flick toward

me, assessing my progress or perhaps just monitoring my movements. When our eyes accidentally meet, I pointedly return to my research, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing my discomfort.

“Anything useful?” he eventually asks.

“If you consider three hundred pages of clearblood self-congratulation useful, then yes,” I reply. “Otherwise, no.”

Dayn closes his book with controlled precision. “Let’s try a different approach. We’ll cover more ground if we split up.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Worried I’ll slow you down, Professor?”

“Worried you’ll miss something critical.” He glances around the vast library space. “Take the eastern stacks. I’ll check the restricted section behind the archivist’s desk.”

“And how exactly am I supposed to get into—” I stop myself, realizing he’s already anticipated my objection.

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He slides a small brass key across the table. “Academic privileges. Try not to look so surprised that I’m actually helping you.”

I pocket the key without thanks and rise from the table. “Just remember our agreement. This isn’t about saving your skin—it’s about preventing Heathborne from creating more monsters like Mazrov.”

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes. “Careful, Ms. Salem. Your hatred is showing.”

“It never left.” I turn away before he can respond.

The eastern stacks rise before me like a labyrinth of knowledge, each shelf stretching from floor to ceiling with narrow ladders providing access to the highest volumes. I climb one, running my fingers along dusty spines, searching for anything related to binding runes.

Alone with my thoughts, I allow myself to acknowledge the bitter truth: I’m trapped in this alliance with a man I’d gladly kill at the first opportunity. A man who represents everything my family has fought against. Yet here I am, dependent on his knowledge, his connections within Heathborne, his understanding of the binding magic that created the first Emissary.

I find a promising volume tucked between larger tomes, its spine marked with symbols similar to those in my briefing materials. The text inside is dense, written in an archaic form that requires my full concentration to decipher. Most of it discusses theoretical applications of binding magic, but a passage near the middle catches my

attention:

“The convergence of both blood lines through ancient bonds creates a threshold neither living nor dead. Such vessels become pathways between realms, accessible only through the Relic of Severance.”

I trace the accompanying diagram with my finger. This could be it—a reference to the unbinding ritual and the artifact we need. I memorize the page and continue searching, finding scattered references that begin forming a cohesive picture.

When I return to our meeting point, Dayn is already waiting, a shadow of impatience crossing his features.

“Did you actually find something useful, or were you just hiding from me?” he asks.

I slide my discoveries across the table. “References to the Relic of Severance. Multiple sources pointing to a common location.”

His eyes scan the pages quickly, his expression shifting from skepticism to approval. “This confirms what I found. The relic is kept in a dimensional fold accessed through the academy’s foundation stones.”

“You mean the tunnels beneath Heathborne.” The realization hits me with unpleasant clarity. “Where security is tightest.”

“Where magical currents are strongest,” he replies. “The academy was built over an ancient convergence point. The founders weren’t just being symbolic—they were harnessing power.”

I process this information, mentally calculating the risks. “So, we need to access these tunnels, find the specific location where the dimensional fold opens, and extract the

relic without alerting Heathborne's security or triggering any protective enchantments."

"Simple, isn't it?" Dayn's sardonic tone matches my own thoughts.

"Why do I get the feeling you're enjoying this?" I ask, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

"Because you assume I enjoy everything that causes you discomfort." He gathers the books, returning them to their proper places with meticulous care. "A flattering but incorrect assumption."

Before I can respond, the distant sound of footsteps echoes through the library. The night custodian—or worse, a security patrol. Dayn reacts instantly, extinguishing the nearby lantern and pulling me into a shadowed alcove between two tall bookcases.

The sudden darkness is complete, and I find myself pressed uncomfortably close to him, feeling the unnatural heat that radiates from his skin. His hand on my arm is firm but not painful, a silent command to remain still. I hate that my body automatically complies, trained to recognize tactical necessities even when they involve unwanted proximity.

We stand frozen as the footsteps grow louder, then pass directly in front of our hiding place. Through the narrow gap between shelves, I glimpse a robed figure carrying an enchanted lantern, its blue light casting eerie shadows as it moves deeper into the library.

"Just the archivist," Dayn whispers, his breath warm against my ear. "But we've stayed too long."

I step away from him the moment the danger passes, creating distance between us.

“We have what we need anyway. The tunnels beneath Heathborne, a dimensional fold, and the Relic of Severance.”

“Not quite all we need.” Dayn pulls a folded parchment from inside his coat. “This is a partial map of the underground network. Incomplete, but better than wandering blindly.”

I take the map, studying its faded lines and cryptic annotations. “And you just happened to have this?”

“I’ve been planning this extraction for longer than you’ve been infiltrating Heathborne, Ms. Salem.” His tone is measured, almost clinical. “Procuring that map is something I was comfortable doing in advance.”

The implication that I’m somehow less prepared than him stings, but I swallow my retort. The map is genuinely useful, showing paths I wouldn’t have known existed.

“We should go,” I say instead. “Separately. You first, then me after five minutes.”

Dayn nods once, a curt acknowledgment of the tactical wisdom. “Meet at the eastern service stairwell in twenty minutes. It leads directly to the lower levels.”

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“I know where it is.” I fold the map carefully and slip it into my pocket.

He pauses, studying me with an intensity that makes me want to look away. “I know you resent needing my help, Esme. But remember—I need yours equally. Neither of us survives this alone.”

With that uncomfortable truth hanging between us, he turns and disappears into the shadows of the library, leaving me alone with ancient books and the weight of our unlikely alliance.

I count to three hundred in my head before following, moving silently through the darkened aisles toward the exit, the map of Heathborne’s underground tunnels a tangible reminder of what comes next—a dangerous descent into the literal and figurative foundations of everything I’m fighting against.

18

The eastern service stairwell smells of mildew and forgotten things. I descend the narrow steps, one hand trailing along the damp stone wall, the other resting on the knife concealed at my hip. Twenty-three steps down, the ambient magical hum of Heathborne changes pitch, becoming deeper, more primal. Thirty-seven steps down, and the temperature drops noticeably, my breath forming small clouds in the air. Fifty-two steps, and I’ve left the academic pretensions of the institute behind. Down here, beneath layers of stone and enchantment, Heathborne reveals its true nature: a fortress built on secrets, power, and blood.

Dayn waits in the shadows at the bottom, his silhouette barely distinguishable from

the darkness except for the amber burn of his eyes. They seem brighter down here, as though feeding off the ancient magic that pulses through the foundation stones.

“You’re late,” he says, not bothering to lower his voice. The thick walls swallow sound, making even whispers feel isolated.

“I was ensuring we weren’t followed.” A partial truth. I also needed those extra minutes to center myself, to firmly reestablish the mental barriers between myself and this asshole.

He doesn’t challenge my explanation, instead turning to face the narrow archway that leads deeper into the underground labyrinth. Enchanted sconces flicker to life as we approach, casting weak, wavering light that somehow makes the darkness beyond them more oppressive rather than less.

I take the map out of my pocket and hand it to him.

“It shows three possible routes to the central chamber,” Dayn says, unfurling the parchment between us. “The western path is shortest but heavily warded. The northern route is longer but designed for supply transport—wider passages, fewer defensive measures.”

I study the faded lines of the map, noting details he hasn’t mentioned. “And the eastern path isn’t marked at all beyond this first junction. Why?”

“Perhaps because it was too difficult to map.” His tone is matter-of-fact, academic. “The eastern tunnels lead directly beneath the original foundation stones, where the dimensional convergence is strongest.”

“Which means that’s exactly where we need to go.” I fold the map decisively. “The Relic of Severance would be kept where the veil between dimensions is thinnest.”

Dayn's expression shifts subtly—surprise, perhaps, or reluctant respect. “Correct. Though I'm curious how a Salem assassin developed such insight into interdimensional magic.”

“We're not all just knives in the dark, Professor.” I move past him toward the eastern tunnel entrance, deliberately taking the lead. “Some of us actually study what we fight against.”

The passage narrows almost immediately, the ceiling dropping so low that Dayn has to stoop slightly to avoid scraping his head on the rough stone. The walls glisten with moisture, and occasional symbols—faded with age but still imbued with lingering power—flicker as we pass. I recognize some from my Darkbirch training: warning markers, territorial claims, directional indicators. Others are older, their meanings lost even to darkblood scholars.

We walk in tense silence for several minutes, the only sounds our footsteps and the occasional drip of water from unseen crevices. The air grows increasingly thick with magical residue, making it harder to breathe normally. I find myself taking shallow breaths, as much to limit my exposure to whatever enchantments linger here as to manage the stale, ancient air.

Dayn pauses suddenly, and I turn to see him holding up one hand. “Wait.”

I stop, more out of tactical sense than obedience. “What?”

Instead of answering, he walks forward a few steps, then kneels, examining the floor several paces ahead of us. His hand hovers over a seemingly ordinary section of stone, fingers splayed as though feeling for something invisible.

“Pressure trigger,” he finally says. “Connected to a ward line that runs through this entire section.”

I scan the passage, noting the subtle differences in the stone's coloration where the floor meets the wall. "A clearblood defense system? Or something older?"

"Both." He rises smoothly. "The original protections have been reinforced, adapted. Tripping this would activate both ancient and modern countermeasures."

"Lovely." I step closer, careful to avoid the trigger point he identified. "Can we disarm it?"

"Not without tools and time we don't have." He gestures to the narrow ledge along the left wall. "We'll have to edge around it."

The ledge is barely six inches wide, slick with moisture, and runs along a section of wall decorated with uncomfortably sharp decorative stonework. I assess it with practiced eyes, calculating risk versus necessity.

"After you, Professor." I gesture mockingly. "Unless you'd prefer I go first?"

A flicker of something—irritation? amusement?—crosses his features. "Age before beauty? How conventional of you."

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Before I can reply, he's moving, pressing his back against the wall and sidling along the narrow ledge with surprising grace for a man his size. I note the way he navigates the tight space, adjusting his weight distribution with each step, and reluctantly file it away as another piece of evidence that "Professor Dayn" is far more than the academic persona he presents.

When he reaches the other side, he turns to watch my crossing. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing me struggle, so I move with deliberate precision, calling on years of Darkbirch training. My foot slips once on a particularly damp section, but I recover instantly, my body responding before conscious thought can interfere.

"I suppose you're here to admire the dark as well as the danger?" I quip as I reach the safe side, noticing his steady gaze.

His lips quirk into something almost like a smile. "I admire efficiency, though I doubt you'd surrender your penchant for theatrics."

Our eyes meet briefly in the dim light, a moment of mutual challenge that feels oddly like recognition. I break contact first, turning to face the continuation of the passage. The tunnel splits here, branching into three narrower corridors that all curve away into darkness.

"The map didn't show this junction," I observe, pulling it from my pocket to confirm.

"As I said—incomplete." Dayn studies the three options with narrowed eyes. "We need the path that follows the original foundation line." He lays his palm flat against the central passage's entrance, closing his eyes briefly. "This one. I believe the stones

here are part of the original structure.”

We continue deeper, the passage gradually sloping downward. The enchanted sconces grow fewer, the darkness between them stretching longer, until we’re walking through pools of weak light separated by intervals of complete blackness. During one such dark stretch, my foot catches on something—a loose stone, perhaps—and I stumble forward.

Dayn’s hand shoots out, catching my arm before I can fall. His grip is firm, his palm radiating that unnatural heat that seems to be his constant state. I pull away as soon as I’m steady, resenting both the assistance and my momentary vulnerability.

“Thanks,” I mutter, before I realize what I’m saying.

He doesn’t acknowledge it, already moving forward again. “There should be a chamber ahead. According to the oldest records, it served as a ritual space before Heathborne was even constructed.”

“The perfect place to hide an artifact of primordial magic.” I follow, keeping a more careful eye on my footing.

The passage widens suddenly, opening into a circular chamber perhaps twenty feet in diameter. Unlike the crude tunnels, this space shows signs of deliberate craftsmanship—smooth walls inlaid with complex patterns of metal and stone, a vaulted ceiling from which hang dormant crystal fixtures, and a floor laid out in concentric circles of alternating materials.

“Well, this certainly looks like somewhere important,” I remark, taking in the ancient grandeur.

Dayn moves to the center of the room, his expression more animated than I’ve ever

seen it. “This is a convergence chamber. One of the oldest in existence.” He turns slowly, examining the walls with the intensity of a scholar discovering a long-lost text. “The patterns here predate the blood divide. They’re pure binding magic, the original form.”

I remain near the entrance, scanning for threats rather than academic curiosities. “Fascinating history lesson, but we’re here for the relic, not a tour of magical archaeology.”

He shoots me a look of genuine irritation. “Understanding this chamber is essential to finding the relic. These patterns aren’t decorative—they’re functional. They create and maintain the dimensional fold where the Relic of Severance is hidden.”

Before I can respond, a low rumble shakes the chamber. Dust drifts down from the ceiling, and the metal inlays in the walls begin to glow with a pale blue light.

“What did you do?” I demand, hand going to my knife.

“Nothing.” Dayn moves away from the center, eyestracking the spreading glow. “The chamber is reacting to our presence. It’s defensive.”

The rumbling intensifies, and sections of the floor begin to shift, stones rising and falling in a complex pattern. The air fills with a high-pitched whine that sets my teeth on edge, and I feel the distinct signature of powerful magic building around us.

“We need to leave,” I say, already backing toward the entrance. “Now.”

Dayn doesn’t move, his eyes fixed on the changing patterns in the floor. “No. This is part of the access sequence. The chamber is testing us.”

“Testing or trying to kill us?” The entrance behind me suddenly seals itself, stone

flowing like liquid to close the passage. “Dayn!”

He ignores my alarm, kneeling to examine one of the rising stone sections. “These are keystone triggers. They respond to specific magical signatures.” He looks up at me, his expression unreadable. “We need to activate them in the correct sequence to access the dimensional fold.”

“And if we get it wrong?”

The subtle shift in his posture tells me everything I need to know.

“Wonderful.” I scan the room, identifying the pattern of moving stones. They rise and fall in sequence, creating a complex dance of potential triggers. “Any idea what the correct sequence might be?”

“It would follow binding rune principles. Balance, containment, connection, release.” He points to different sections of the floor. “We need to activate these four stones in that order, within the same cycle.”

The cycle seems to repeat approximately every thirty seconds, giving us a narrow window to hit all four triggers. I watch one complete sequence, memorizing the timing.

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“You take the two on the left, I’ll handle the right,” I say, already moving into position. “On my mark.”

He nods, for once not arguing or questioning my lead. We position ourselves near our respective triggers, watching the pattern unfold once more to confirm the timing.

“Three, two, one, mark,” I call, dropping onto the first trigger point as it rises.

Dayn hits his simultaneously, and I feel the magical current shift around us. I count under my breath, tracking the seconds until I need to move to the second trigger. When I reach fifteen, I launch myself across the room, landing precisely as the stone rises to meet me.

Again, Dayn matches my timing perfectly. The blue glow in the walls intensifies, and the whining sound changes pitch, becoming almost musical. The concentric circles in the floor begin to rotate in alternating directions, creating a disorienting visual effect.

“It’s working,” Dayn calls over the noise. “The dimensional fold is beginning to open.”

The center of the chamber seems to blur, reality itself becoming indistinct as the fold forms. Through the distortion, I glimpse something solid—a pedestal perhaps, with an object resting upon it.

Suddenly, a new sound cuts through the chamber—a sharp cracking that echoes from all directions. The floor beneath my feet trembles violently, and several of the crystal fixtures crash down from the ceiling, shattering on impact.

“What’s happening?” I shout, dodging falling debris.

“The chamber’s protections are fighting the opening!” Dayn moves toward the center, where the dimensional fold continues to widen despite the increasing chaos. “The fold is unstable!”

A large section of ceiling gives way, massive stones plummeting toward us. I react instinctively, diving across the rotating floor sections to knock Dayn clear of the impact zone. We hit the ground hard, rolling away as the stones crash down where he had been standing.

“I thought you knew what you were doing,” I hiss, pulling myself to my feet.

“The chamber shouldn’t be reacting this way.” For the first time, I hear genuine confusion in his voice. “Unless—” He breaks off, scanning the walls with renewed intensity. “There’s a secondary trigger system. A failsafe we activated along with the fold.”

Another violent tremor shakes the chamber, and a fissure opens in the floor between us and the center where the dimensional fold continues to waver. Behind the fold, I can now clearly see a pedestal holding what appears to be a small, dark object—the Relic of Severance.

“We need that relic,” I remind him, calculating the distance across the growing fissure.

“We need to survive first.” Dayn points to a section of wall that has begun to glow red rather than blue. “That’s the failsafe trigger. If we can deactivate it, the chamber should stabilize.”

I follow his gesture, identifying the now-pulsing section of intricate metalwork. The

patterns remind me of something I've seen before—not in Heathborne's library, but in my grandmother's grimoire. Blood magic principles repurposed into binding runes.

"I can disable it," I decide, already moving along the edge of the room toward the glowing section.

"How?" Dayn's skepticism is clear even through the chaos.

"Just keep that fold open!" I reach the wall, examining the pulsing runes up close. They're indeed a hybrid system—ancient binding magic infused with more recent blood-based protections. A trap designed specifically to kill anyone trying to access the relic.

I pull my knife from its sheath, examining its edge in the fluctuating light. Not ideal, but it will serve the purpose. With practiced precision, I slice across my palm, letting blood well up before pressing my hand directly against the center of the pattern.

The reaction is immediate. The red glow intensifies, burning against my skin, but I hold firm, focusing my will through the blood connection. I'm not using darkblood magic exactly—that would be detected instantly by Heathborne's wards—but something older, something my grandmother taught me that walks the line between tradition and instinct.

The pattern fights me, trying to complete its deadly sequence, but blood responds to blood. The runes begin to dim, their power redirecting through my offered sacrifice rather than into the chamber's destruction sequence.

When I finally pull my hand away, the wall has gone dark, and the violent tremors subside. The dimensional fold at the center stabilizes, its edges crisp and clear rather than wavering.

Dayn stands at the edge of the now-stationary fissure, staring at me with an expression I can't quite interpret. "How did you know that would work?"

I wipe my bloodied palm on my pants, the cut already clotting. "Salem family tradition. We've been dismantling clearblood traps for generations."

He studies me a moment longer before turning back to the dimensional fold. "The relic is accessible now, but the fold won't remain stable for long."

I move to stand beside him, looking across the narrow fissure to where reality bends around the ancient pedestal. "So how do we reach it?"

"We don't." Dayn pulls a small crystal from his pocket. "We bring it to us."

He holds the crystal up, angling it so light reflects through its facets and into the fold. The beam seems to stretch impossibly, crossing the dimensional barrier to touch the relic on its pedestal. For a moment, nothing happens. Then the small dark object—what I can now see is a polished stone disk etched with intricate markings—begins to glow in response.

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“Is it working?” I ask, watching the interaction of light and shadow.

“Wait.” His concentration is absolute, the crystal held steady in his unwavering grip.

Slowly, the disk begins to move, sliding across the pedestal toward the edge of the fold. It hovers there momentarily, caught between dimensions, before suddenly shooting forward through the opening. Dayn catches it with his free hand as the dimensional fold collapses behind it, reality snapping back into place with an audible crack.

The chamber grows quiet, the blue glow fading from the walls, the floor settling back into its original pattern. Only the fallen debris and the fissure running through the center of the room remain as evidence of our intrusion.

Dayn examines the relic, turning it carefully in his hands. The disk is perhaps three inches in diameter, made of a material I don’t recognize—neither stone nor metal, but something that seems to absorb rather than reflect the dim light.

“The Relic of Severance,” he confirms, his voice hushed with something like reverence. “One of the original artifacts used to create binding runes.”

I stare at the unassuming object, surprised by its simple appearance given its significant power. “And this will break your connection to Mazrov? Disrupt Heathborne’s entire Emissary program?”

“With the proper ritual.” He carefully wraps the disk in a cloth before securing it in an inner pocket of his coat. “Which brings us to the next challenge.”

I glance toward the sealed entrance of the chamber. “Getting out of here?”

“That’s the least of our concerns.” He gestures to the walls around us. “The chamber’s activation will have triggered alarms in the main security system. We have perhaps fifteen minutes before security forces arrive.”

“Then we should move.” I turn toward where the entrance had been, studying the seamless stone. “Can you reopen the passage?”

Dayn’s eyes scan the room, and suddenly he moves to a different section of wall, where he presses his palm against a pattern in the inlay. The stone ripples beneath his touch, revealing a narrow opening barely visible in the dim light. “Looks like we have an emergency exit. Probably created for the original builders, hopefully long forgotten by current security.”

I raise an eyebrow, genuinely impressed despite myself.

He slips through the opening, and I follow close behind, finding myself in an even narrower passage than the one we arrived through. This one feels older, the stone worn smooth by centuries of occasional use. It winds upward at a steeper angle, with no enchanted sconces to light our way.

Dayn produces a small orb of amber light that hovers above his palm, casting just enough illumination to guide our steps. The passage bends and twists, occasionally branching, but he navigates with unwavering confidence.

“The relic on that wall,” I say after we’ve walked for several minutes. “You didn’t know I could disarm it.”

“No.” His admission comes reluctantly. “That was... unexpected.”

“You were going to let me die in that chamber.”

He glances back at me, his expression unreadable in the amber glow. “I was calculating the odds of reaching the relic before the chamber collapsed. Your survival wasn’t my primary concern.”

“At least we’re honest about where we stand.” I match his pace, refusing to fall behind. “I’d do the same if our positions were reversed.”

“I know.” Something like respect colors his tone. “It’s why this alliance works. We both understand its limitations.”

We continue in silence after that, ascending through the forgotten veins of Heathborne Academy, each step bringing us closer to the next phase of our dangerous plan. The Relic of Severance is secured, but obtaining it was the easy part. The unbinding ritual still lies ahead, and with it, the true test of our unlikely partnership.

19

The greenhouse looms before us, a massive cathedral of glass that captures the full moon’s light in its thousand panes. I flex my fingers, readying myself for what comes next. Breaking into Heathborne’s restricted botanical collection isn’t exactly sanctioned curriculum, but then again, Professor Dayn isn’t exactly a conventional teacher.

Of course, after we obtained the relic, Dayn reminded me that we have certain... ingredients to collect, in order to perform the actual ritual.

His amber eyes catch the moonlight as he turns to me. “The wards are strongest at the entrance,” he murmurs, his voice barely audible above the whisper of wind through

the trees. “We’ll use the service door on the eastern side.”

I follow him along the perimeter, staying close to the shadows. My cover identity as a timid scholarship student feels impossibly thin right now. One wrong move, and I’ll be explaining to my coven why I got caught stealing botanical components with a dragon masquerading as a combat instructor.

“Moonfire essence is essential,” Dayn had explained earlier. “Without it, the binding spell won’t take hold.”

Now, as we reach the small door nestled among climbing ivy, I watch him place his palm against the lock. A muted red glow emanates from beneath his fingers, and I catch the acrid scent of melting metal.

“Crude,” I mutter.

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His lips twitch slightly. “Efficiency, Salem. Something you might learn from.”

I hold back my reply as the door swings open. We slip inside, and I’m immediately engulfed by humid, perfumed air that clings to my skin like a second layer of clothing. The interior of the greenhouse stretches before us, a labyrinth of exotic plants bathed in ethereal moonlight filtering through the glass ceiling. Pathways wind between beds of vegetation—some familiar, many not.

“The moonfire lilies will be in the center,” Dayn says, already moving forward. “They only bloom directly beneath the full moon.”

Great. Plants as stubborn as you.

I follow him down the narrow path, careful not to brush against any of the specimens. Some of these plants could kill a witch with a single touch—a fact I’m acutely aware of from my own botanical training at Darkbirch.

“Watch the vines near your feet,” Dayn warns without turning. “Strangling ivy doesn’t distinguish between enemies and trespassers.”

As if on cue, a tendril unfurls from a nearby pot, reaching lazily toward my ankle. I step over it, noticing how it recoils. I wonder if it can somehow sense the subtle death essence that clings to my aura—my darkblood signature that the silver tablets are supposed to conceal.

“The ivy seems to dislike me,” I observe.

“I won’t comment on that,” Dayn mutters.

I follow, keeping my steps light on the stone path. “Maybe I should push you into them,” I say, absentmindedly toying with the idea. “Would save a whole load of trouble.”

“You have an open invitation to try.”

I almost feel like getting into another tangle with him... but maybe somewhere less deadly. All around us, plants rustle and shift in ways that have nothing to do with wind. The Heathborne botanical collection is infamous for its carnivorous specimens, cultivated over centuries for research and, occasionally, punishment.

As we navigate deeper into the greenhouse, I notice Dayn’s gaze lingering on a cluster of black-petaled flowers nestled in a bed of ash.

“Widow’s Lament,” he says, unexpectedly. “Your grandmother would appreciate these. They’re particularly effective in death chants when harvested during the dark moon.”

I stop mid-step, narrowing my eyes. “How would you know?”

His voice drops lower. “Dragons have long memories, Salem.”

Before I can respond, a nearby plant—something resembling a pitcher but large enough to consume a small child—lunges toward us. Its maw opens, revealing rows of thorn-like teeth dripping with digestive acid.

Dayn moves with inhuman speed, shoving me against the stone wall while extending his other hand toward the plant. A burst of concentrated heat hits the predatory flora, and it recoils with a hiss that sounds disturbingly sentient.

For a moment, neither of us moves. His body is pressed against mine and the sheer proximity sends an unwelcome jolt through my system—my senses suddenly hyperaware of everything about him: the scent of ember and something ancient beneath it, the unnatural heat radiating like a furnace pressed against my chest. I feel the solid contours of him, the tension in his muscles as he remains alert for further threats.

I push away from him with more force than necessary, reclaiming my personal space.

He looks at me in mild surprise at my rather violent motion, but doesn't say anything.

"Let's keep moving," I mutter, straightening my jacket.

After a moment, he asks, "Did I offend your delicate sensibilities, Salem?" His voice carries that insufferable edge of amusement.

"I could list exactly how you offend me but we'd be here all night," I reply coolly.

I continue down the winding path and turn my thoughts to another subject. One I've been curious about for a while. "So, tell me, Dayn. How does an ancient dragon end up playing professor at Heathborne? Seems like quite the demotion from... whatever it is dragons typically do."

Dayn's eyes flick toward me, the gold in them catching the moonlight. The corners of his mouth twitch—not quite a smile, but close. "What do you think it is we do?"

"Oh, I don't know," I reply, carefully sidestepping a cluster of pulsing blue mushrooms. "Trading ancient hoards and terrorizing villages? Going from that to dealing with snotty clearbloods sounds like a step down, in my book."

"I see your knowledge of dragon history comes from bedtime stories."

“Then enlighten me.”

He pauses at a junction in the path, considering which way to turn. “Dragons have always been... curators of knowledge. The hoarding instinct isn’t about gold. It’s about information.” He gestures left, and we continue deeper into the greenhouse.

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“So... you’re spying on students?” I raise an eyebrow.

“I prefer to think of it as collecting information,” he replies.

I frown. “But how does that reconcile with your story that you were forcibly bound to this place decades ago?”

“I came here with innocent intentions, believe it or not.”

I almost snort at the word “innocent.”

“After centuries in shadows, even dragons desire a change of scenery,” he continues, and his voice turns bitter. “I suppressed my magic to blend in, to walk among humans and clearbloods without attracting attention. But I underestimated Heathborne’s detection abilities.” He gestures vaguely at his chest, where I know the binding runes lie hidden beneath his clothing. “One moment of carelessness, and I found myself... recruited.”

“That’s a strong risk you took for some probably useless knowledge collection,” I say, studying his face carefully.

He tilts his head, and moonlight catches the sharp angles of his profile. “Knowledge is never useless, Salem. Even the most mundane details can become critical with time.”

I search his face for signs of deception. After years of training to detect lies, I’ve become adept at spotting the subtle tells—a flicker of an eyelid, a slight tension

around the mouth, a momentary shift in breathing. But Dayn's face remains frustratingly unreadable. Either he's a phenomenal liar, or he's telling the truth.

"You expect me to believe you were outsmarted by clearbloods?" I ask, skepticism evident in my tone. If there's anything I've learned about Dayn, it's that he's sharp. He misses nothing—or close to.

"No," he says, resuming our path toward the center of the greenhouse. "I expect you to understand that even the most powerful beings have blind spots. Mine was underestimating how far clearblood magic had evolved."

I consider this as we navigate around a cluster of plants whose leaves follow our movement like predatory eyes. Something still doesn't ring true to me about his story, but I let it go for now. It looks like we've finally arrived.

"There," Dayn whispers, pointing ahead.

The greenhouse opens to a circular chamber at its center, where the full moon shines directly through a domed ceiling. There, in perfectly arranged concentric circles, grow the moonfire lilies—their petals translucent and glowing with internal blue-white light. They pulse gently, like heartbeats, synchronized to some rhythm I can't quite detect.

"Beautiful," I whisper, despite myself.

"And deadly," Dayn adds, approaching the nearest bloom. "Touch them with bare skin, and they'll burn to the bone."

I pull out a pair of thin gloves that I keep in my pocket and slip them on. "I'm prepared."

Dayn produces a small crystal vial. “Three drops from the center of each bloom. No more, no less. The stability of the entire binding depends on precise measurements.”

I nod and carefully approach the nearest lily. Its glow intensifies as I near it, as if responding to my presence. I tilt the bloom and press gently at its base. A droplet of luminescent liquid forms at the center, hanging for a moment before falling into the vial. It’s mesmerizing—light made liquid, captured in glass.

“Two more,” I murmur, moving to the next bloom.

That’s when we hear it—a male voice carrying through the humid air.

“...third time this week something’s triggered the perimeter alarm. I want a full sweep of the greenhouse.”

Dayn moves faster than my eye can track. One moment he’s beside the lilies, the next his hand clamps over my mouth as he pulls me behind a massive leaf of some elephant-ear plant. The leaf is easily six feet across, providing momentary concealment.

His body curves around mine, sheltering me from view. I feel his chest against my back, his arm wrapped tightly around my waist, his presence once again intensely close. His lips brush my ear as he whispers, “Not a sound.”

The beam of a flashlight sweeps across the greenhouse, cutting through the mystical glow of the nocturnal plants. From our hiding place, I see Mazrov moving methodically down the path we just traversed.

My heart pounds so loudly I’m certain he’ll hear it. Dayn’s hand remains firmly over my mouth, his other arm like an iron band around my middle. With each second, the heat from his body intensifies, as if his dragon nature surges closer to the surface in

response to danger.

Mazrov pauses near the chamber entrance, his flashlight beam playing over the moonfire lilies. “Someone’s been here recently,” he says to an unseen companion. “The lilies are agitated.”

I feel Dayn tense behind me. His grip tightens fractionally, and I realize he’s preparing to fight if necessary. The thought should be comforting—he’s certainly lethal enough to handle a guard—but something in me recoils at the idea of him revealing his true nature here. If he’s exposed, my cover might be compromised as well.

After what feels like an eternity, Mazrov turns away. “Secure the perimeter and check back in fifteen minutes. I want hourly patrols for the rest of the night.”

The flashlight beam retreats, and footsteps fade into the distance. Still, Dayn doesn’t release me immediately. He waits, listening with senses far keener than mine, before slowly removing his hand from my mouth.

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“They’re gone,” he confirms and releases me.

I turn to face him, keeping my voice low. “We need to finish and get out.”

He nods, but there’s something different in his gaze now—a heightened intensity, an almost predatory focus. We return to the lilies, working quickly to collect the final drops.

As I secure the vial, I notice his attention fixed on my hands—specifically, on the cut I made amidst the chaos of the relic chamber, which has reopened after pushing through some thorny undergrowth. A thin line of blood has seeped through my glove.

“Your blood,” he says, his voice deeper than usual, something calculating behind his amber eyes. “It carries the signature of your magic. Strong. Ancient.”

I frown at him, confused. He already knows my ancestry. Why is he acting surprised now?

“What?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nothing,” he says, but his eyes linger on the blood seeping through my glove. “We need to leave. Now.”

Something about his reaction unsettles me, but there’s no time to question it. I tuck the vial carefully into an inner pocket of my jacket as we retrace our steps through the greenhouse, moving with greater urgency now. Behind us, the moonfire lilies continue their pulsing glow, marking our intrusion in their silent language. At the

service door, Dayn pauses to listen once more before we slip out into the night.

As we walk into the darkness, I can't shake the sensation of his eyes following me—not with casual interest, nor even with assessment. As if it doesn't matter that we've almost been caught. As if the possibility of his exposure is nothing compared to whatever is playing out behind those eyes. It makes me uneasy, the intensity of it. There's something else there, something that somehow makes me think of... ancient hungers... forgotten wars.

I clutch the vial of moonfire essence in my pocket and quicken my pace. Whatever game we're playing, whatever ritual we're preparing, I'm certain that Dayn hasn't revealed all his cards. And in my experience, that's when things get truly dangerous.

20

The next ingredient we need to collect is apparently in the infirmary.

At night, it smells like death masked by disinfectant—a poor disguise, in my opinion. I follow Dayn silently down the sanitized corridor, my footsteps soundless on the polished floor, keeping my distance from him. I'm still unsettled from the way he looked at my blood. It seems he's uniquely able to sense my signature even through my suppression tablets.

I try to focus. We're in this place now for someone else's blood. And this task requires precision—stealing blood from the very leaders who would execute me if they knew my true identity. I find a certain poetry in that.

“The blood repository is in the eastern wing,” Dayn murmurs, his voice barely audible. “Past the treatment rooms.”

I nod, not bothering to ask how he knows the layout so intimately. Now I know

dragons hoard knowledge like treasures, and Dayn apparently has centuries of collection behind him.

The white walls of the infirmary seem to glow under the dim emergency lighting. Clearblood aesthetics—everything bleached and scrubbed of character. I prefer the shadows, the honest darkness that doesn't pretend to be something it's not.

“Wait.” Dayn extends an arm, blocking my path.

Around the corner, a night nurse shuffles through papers at her station, yawning widely. Her aura pulses with exhaustion—an easy target for suggestion, if I had full access to my abilities. Instead, I watch as Dayn steps forward, subtly adjusting his posture to appear more human, more approachable.

“Excuse me,” he says, his voice transformed into something warm and solicitous. “I’ve been asked to review some treatment protocols for tomorrow’s combat training.”

The nurse blinks sleepily. “Professor Dayn? It’s nearly midnight.”

“Which is why I’d prefer not to disturb anyone else.” He offers a thin smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, and I note how easily he lies. “The eastern repository should have what I need.”

I hang back, adopting the meek posture of the scholarship student I’m supposed to be. Clara Winters, timid and forgettable. The nurse’s eyes slide over me without interest.

“I suppose that’s fine,” she says finally. “The night healer is attending an emergency in the dormitories—lightning practice gone wrong. Should be back within the hour.”

“We won’t be long,” Dayn assures her, already moving past.

Once we're beyond her view, I catch up to Dayn, keeping my voice low. "That was almost too easy."

"Clearbloods trust authority without question," he replies, something like contempt coloring his tone. "It's their greatest weakness."

"And what's yours, Professor?" I can't help asking.

His amber eyes flick to me, momentarily bright as molten gold. "Curiosity, perhaps. A dangerous trait for both our kinds."

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We reach a set of double doors marked with medical runes—protection and preservation symbols that glow faintly blue. The blood repository lies beyond, housing samples from every senior staff member. Monthly donations, Dayn had explained, part of Heathborne’s emergency protocols for healing high-value personnel.

Dayn studies the wards with clinical detachment. “These are basic preservation enchantments, not security measures. They’re designed to maintain the samples, not prevent theft.”

“They never anticipated someone would want to steal blood,” I observe.

“Why would they? Blood magic is a darkblood practice.” His fingers trace the air just above the runes. “To clearbloods, blood is merely... medical material.”

I watch as he manipulates the wards, his fingertips leaving trails of heat in the air that distort the magical signatures without disrupting them. It’s elegant work, I’ll admit—not destroying the protections but temporarily convincing them we’re authorized personnel.

“Your turn,” he says after a moment. “The door requires physical access.”

I reach for the lock, a standard mechanism rather than amagical one. This, at least, is familiar territory. I extract a thin metal tool from my sleeve and work it into the keyhole. After a few moments, it clicks open.

The repository beyond is a compact room lined with refrigerated cabinets. Each

drawer bears a name and designation, organized with military precision. The clinical chill raises goosebumps on my arms.

“We need blood from someone with true authority,” Dayn says, scanning the labels. “Not merely a teacher—someone whose essence carries the weight of Heathborne itself.”

“The Headmaster,” I suggest.

Dayn shakes his head. “Too obvious if it goes missing. We need someone senior but not irreplaceable.”

His fingers stop at a drawer labeled “Archmage Levon, Combat Arts Division.”

“Perfect,” he murmurs. “An elder with battle experience. His blood will carry both authority and power.”

The drawer is sealed with additional wards—more serious than those on the door. These will detect tampering, and I doubt Dayn’s heat trick will work here.

“I need to use my magic,” I say quietly. “Stand watch.”

Dayn moves to the door without argument, his back to me. It’s a small gesture of trust—or perhaps just pragmatism. Either way, I take advantage of the moment.

My full darkblood powers are suppressed, but I hope I’m able to tap into them enough to pull this off. I close my eyes and try to sink as deeply into them as I can.

My senses expand, the world suddenly sharper, deeper, more alive, as I relax into my natural state. I can feel the pulse of death and life in everything around me—including the preserved blood in the drawers.

Working quickly, I draw a bead of my own blood from the cut I got earlier. I smear it across the ward on the drawer, whispering, “Blood recognizes blood.”

My grandmother’s teaching echoes in my mind. Magic isn’t about domination—it’s about recognition. Everything contains life and death; we merely need to speak to the parts that understand us.

The ward shimmers, recognizing a kindred essence—not in my clearblood disguise, but in the fundamental nature of blood itself. It doesn’t break, but bends, allowing me access without triggering the alarm.

Inside the drawer, neat rows of vials filled with dark crimson liquid sit in temperature-controlled slots. Each bears a date and batch number. I select the most recent one, sliding it carefully into a padded case that Dayn hands me.

As I close the drawer, I sense him watching me.

“Impressive,” he says. “Few darkbloods master blood recognition so young.”

The world dulls around me as I slip out of my natural state. “I’d think fewer dragons recognize darkblood techniques by name.”

His expression remains neutral, but something flickers in his eyes. “As I told you, I’ve lived a long time.”

Before I can respond, footsteps echo in the corridor outside—too heavy for the night nurse. Dayn moves swiftly, pulling me behind one of the cabinets. I’m acutely aware of the vial of elder blood in my pocket, pressed between us.

“...don’t care what protocol states,” a male voice carries through the door. “After that incident in the greenhouse, we’re checking all secure areas.”

I curse. Mazrov. Again. His voice unmistakable even through the door.

“The wards haven’t been triggered,” a second voice responds. “And the night healer would have?—”

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“The night healer is dealing with three first-years who thought midnight lightning practice was a good idea,” Mazrov snaps. “Check. Every. Room.”

The door handle turns. I hold my breath, feeling Dayn’s heartbeat against my shoulder—steady as a metronome. His hand moves to my waist, fingers splayed across my lower back. For one alarming moment, I think he’s going to use me as a shield or distraction.

Instead, he whispers a single word in a language I don’t recognize. The temperature in the room plummets suddenly, frost forming on the cabinets. The lights flicker and die.

The door opens, and Mazrov’s silhouette appears, backlit from the hallway.

“Power fluctuation,” the second voice says. “The refrigeration units must be overloading the circuit.”

Mazrov steps inside, his hand moving to the weapon at his belt. His eyes—unnaturally blue and blazing—scan the darkness. For a terrifying moment, his gaze passes over our hiding spot.

“These samples can’t be allowed to thaw,” he says finally. “Get maintenance up here immediately.”

The door closes. Their footsteps retreat down the hallway.

I release my breath.

“That was close,” Dayn whispers, finally stepping away from me. The loss of his heat is almost shocking in the frozen air. “We need to leave before maintenance arrives.”

As we slip out of the repository, carefully reclosing the door and resetting the wards, I can’t shake the uneasiness of our earlier exchange.

“You’re keeping more secrets than you’re sharing,” I accuse him quietly.

He turns, his amber eyes momentarily flaring gold. “Every dragon has scales they don’t show, Esme,” he says, his voice low. “Just as every witch has spells she keeps unspoken.”

We exit through an emergency door, the cool night air a relief after the sterile chill of the infirmary. The vial of elder blood sits heavy in my pocket—another piece of Dayn’s mysterious ritual acquired, another step across whatever this chessboard is.

And with each step, I’m less and less sure who’s truly in control.

21

The early morning sky bleeds purple through narrow ground-level windows as we descend into Heathborne’s forbidden catacombs. Each step down the worn stone staircase feels like crossing a threshold—not just between above and below, but between clearblood propaganda and buried truth. The air grows colder, heavier with each step, thick with centuries of dust and forgotten history. I run my fingers along the damp stone wall, feeling a connection to this place that Dayn, for all his ancient knowledge, cannot share. Somewhere in these tunnels rest the remains of my people—darkbloods whose existence Heathborne has tried desperately to erase.

The third ingredient required is darkblood ash.

“Stay close,” Dayn murmurs, his voice oddly muted in the dense underground air. “The layout changes periodically. A clearblood security measure.”

“Against what?” I ask. “They’ve already killed those they were afraid of.”

He doesn’t answer, which is answer enough. The living aren’t the only things clearbloods fear.

We pass through an archway riddled with preservation runes. They flicker weakly, starved for maintenance, like neglected headstones. I reluctantly cast a small illumination spell, just enough to see the immediate path ahead. The pale blue glow reveals corridor walls lined with stone coffins, stacked three high. Most bear no names, just simple carved symbols.

“Darkblood burial marks,” I whisper, tracing one with my fingertip. The symbol resembles a crescent moon pierced by a dagger—the emblem of a family line I don’t recognize. “I thought clearbloods destroyed all darkblood remains during the Purification Crusades.”

“They tried,” Dayn says, ducking beneath a low archway. “But these catacombs predate Heathborne itself. When clearbloods built their academy, they simply sealed off this section rather than risk disturbing the older magic.”

“Older magic that might have fought back,” I translate, a hint of pride warming my chest. Even in death, my ancestors resisted.

The passage narrows, forcing us to proceed single file. Dayn leads, his body radiating heat that cuts through the catacomb chill. I follow close behind, hyperaware of the oppressive weight of stone above us and the countless remains surrounding us. For darkbloods, proximity to ancestral remains represents both power and responsibility—we guard our dead, and in return, they lend us strength. I wonder if

the spirits here know that one of their descendants finally walks among them after centuries of abandonment.

A sharp crack echoes as Dayn's foot connects with something brittle. He freezes, then kneels to examine the floor. I peer over his shoulder to see fragments of bone scattered across the stone.

"Someone's been here before us," I whisper.

"Not recently," he replies, examining the dust patterns around the scattered remains. "Decades ago, at least. Probably researchers from the academy."

The thought of clearblood academics poking through darkblood remains makes my blood burn. "Looking for what?"

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Dayn rises, his amber eyes reflecting my light spell. “Weaknesses. Methods to counter your bloodline magic. The usual.”

We continue deeper, the passage gradually widening into what was once a small ceremonial chamber. Stone benches line the walls, and in the center stands a low altar, its surface dark with ancient stains. Blood rituals, performed right under where generations of clearblood students would later study, blissfully ignorant. The irony isn’t lost on me.

“How much further?” I ask, checking my watch. We’ve been underground nearly twenty minutes—any longer and we risk discovery.

“Just ahead.” Dayn gestures toward a narrow archway on the far side of the chamber. “The oldest burial sites are through there.”

As we approach the archway, I notice symbols carved into the surrounding stone—warding runes, but not clearblood designs. These are older, their patterns reminiscent of the protection spells my grandmother taught me. Darkblood magic, preserved in stone.

“Wait.” I hold out my arm, blocking Dayn’s path. “These are blood wards. They won’t let just anyone pass.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Then I defer to you.”

I withdraw a small silver knife from my boot—not the most ceremonial tool, but it will serve. Pricking my cut, I let several drops of blood fall onto the central rune.

“Blood of my blood,” I murmur in the old tongue, the words rising unbidden from some deep ancestral memory. “I seek passage to pay respects to those who came before.”

The runes flare briefly with dull red light, then fade. A soft grinding sound follows as the sealed archway opens slightly—just enough for us to squeeze through.

“After you,” I tell Dayn, curious to see if the wards will accept him.

He gives me a knowing look but steps through without incident. I follow, wondering what that means. The wards should have rejected non-darkblood visitors. Either they’ve weakened over centuries, or there’s more to Dayn than I understand—neither option particularly comforting.

The chamber beyond takes my breath away. Unlike the utilitarian design of the outer catacombs, this space was created with reverence. The ceiling arches high, supported by columns carved to resemble ancient trees. Burial niches line the walls, each sealed with stone slabs bearing intricate carvings. The floor is inlaid with a spiral pattern that leads to a central platform where several free-standing sarcophagi rest.

“The founders,” Dayn says quietly. “The first darkblood families to establish what would later become Heathborne.”

I stare at him, suspicion flaring. “How do you know that? This history was systematically erased.”

“Not erased,” he corrects. “Obscured. The truth has ways of persisting, if you know where to look.” He steps toward one particular sarcophagus, its lid carved with a symbol I recognize with a jolt—a crescent moon intersected by what looks like a forked flame.

“The Salem line,” I whisper, approaching the stone coffin with reverent steps. “My family.”

“One branch of it,” Dayn confirms. “The record keeping wasn’t quite as precise back then.”

I place my palm against the cool stone, feeling a faint resonance, like the echo of a heartbeat long stilled. “This is what we need? Ash from my own family line?”

“The ritual requires darkblood ash with a spiritual connection to the practitioner,” Dayn explains. “Your family’s remains will respond more readily to your blood magic.”

The realization of what we’re about to do hits me fully. We’re going to disturb an ancestor’s rest—a profound taboo in darkblood culture. Yet part of me understands the poetic justice: using the remains of a Salem who witnessed the founding of what became Heathborne to help break its hold on a creature it now imprisons.

“I’ll need more privacy for this,” I say, meeting Dayn’s gaze steadily. “Turn around.”

To my surprise, he complies without argument, moving several paces away and facing the entrance. I once again call on my natural abilities. The world sharpens, deepens, as my connection to death magic resurges.

I remove the small knife again and this time cut more deeply across my palm, letting the blood pool. Darkblood rituals require sacrifice—the price we pay for communing with what lies beyond. I begin the incantation my grandmother taught me, words passed down through generations of Salems.

“Blood to blood, ash to ash,” I murmur, letting my blood drip onto the sealed lid. “I call upon the tie that binds us through the veil. Honored ancestor, I seek your aid in

the war that never ended.”

The chamber grows colder, my breath forming clouds in the suddenly frigid air. The blood on the sarcophagus doesn’t drip or pool but seems to sink into the stone itself, disappearing as if absorbed. The carvings begin to glow with faint red light.

“By blood right and line descent, I ask for what remains when flesh has fallen,” I continue, the words growing stronger as I feel the presence of something ancient stirring. “Not to disturb your rest, but to carry your essence forward in our shared purpose.”

A low grinding sound fills the chamber as the sarcophagus lid shifts slightly. From within the narrow gap, a fine, dark ash begins to rise—not falling out but floating upward, defying gravity. It hovers in the air before me, swirling in patterns too deliberate to be random.

I hold out the small leather pouch Dayn provided earlier, opening it wide. “I receive this gift with gratitude and purpose,” I finish the ritual. “When our task is done, what remains will return to rest.”

The ash streams into the pouch of its own accord. Once the last particles enter, I pull the drawstring tight and tie it with three knots, sealing the ritual.

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The temperature in the chamber gradually returns to normal. I turn back to Dayn.

“It’s done,” I say, my voice hoarse.

Dayn approaches, his amber eyes studying me with unsettling intensity. “Are you alright?”

“Don’t pretend concern,” I snap, tucking the pouch safely into an inner pocket. “We got what you wanted. Let’s go.”

He reaches for the pouch. “I should carry it. The proximity to your blood might activate it prematurely.”

I step back. “No. This is my ancestor, my responsibility. I’ll carry it.”

“The ash isn’t just a component, Esme,” Dayn says, his voice lowering. “It’s a conduit for death magic. Even with your abilities suppressed by that tablet, your natural affinity will cause the ash to react.”

“Then I’ll be careful.” I start toward the exit, unwilling to continue the argument in this sacred space.

Dayn follows, his footsteps unnaturally quiet on the stone floor. “Your grandmother would approve of your reverence,” he says after a moment.

I stop abruptly, turning to face him. “Stop doing that. Stop talking about my family like you knew them.”

“I didn’t say I knew her,” he replies carefully.

“But you imply it. Just like you somehow knew exactly where to find a Salem grave in catacombs that supposedly no one has accessed in centuries.” I step closer, glaring up at him. “What aren’t you telling me, Professor?”

For a moment, something ancient flickers in his eyes—not the dragon’s gold, but something older, something that recognizes me in a way I don’t understand.

“Many things,” he finally says. “But none that would help us complete our task tonight.”

I hold his gaze for another long moment before turning away. “We have the ash. Let’s get back before someone notices we’re gone.”

As we make our way back through the winding passages, I can’t shake the feeling that the ash in my pocket pulses with each beat of my heart—a tiny echo of an ancestor long dead, awakened and aware. And though I wouldn’t admit it to Dayn, I feel watched by countless unseen eyes as we leave the catacombs, as if the entire darkblood history buried beneath Heathborne has stirred at the presence of a Salem in their midst.

What troubles me most isn’t the weight of their judgment, but the sense that they recognize Dayn too.

22

The maintenance shaft behind Heathborne’s north tower wasn’t designed for comfort. I squeeze through the narrow opening, scraping my shoulder against rough stone as I follow Dayn into darkness. The acidic smell of old moisture and something like oxidized metal fills my nostrils as we descend. According to Dayn, these tunnels

predate Heathborne itself—remnants of an older structure that once stood here, built directly over the convergence of seven powerful ley lines. The perfect place to tap ancient power, and the perfect place to die if we make one wrong step.

We are here for the fourth, and I hope final, ingredient that requires collection.

“Watch your footing,” Dayn warns, his voice echoing slightly in the confined space. “The structural integrity diminishes the deeper we go.”

“Reassuring,” I mutter, testing each stone before committing my weight. My small light spell illuminates only a few feet ahead, revealing uneven floors and walls that seem to sweat with moisture. “How much farther to this convergence point?”

“Three levels down, then east through the old sanctum chambers.” He moves with inhuman confidence in the near-dark, his body radiating just enough heat to create a subtle halo in the cold, damp air. “The water source sits at the precise center where all seven ley lines intersect.”

I follow closely, careful not to lose sight of him in the twisting passages. The walls around us change as we descend, transitioning from rough-hewn stone to more deliberate architecture. Ancient runes appear, carved into the walls at regular intervals—not clearblood symbols, but something older. They pulse faintly as we pass, responding to our presence.

“These markings,” I say, gesturing to a particularly intricate set. “They’re not darkblood or clearblood.”

“Because they predate the schism,” Dayn replies without turning. “From when magic was simply magic, before your kind and the clearbloods divided it into opposing philosophies.”

“My kind didn’t divide anything,” I shoot back. “Clearbloods hunted us because they feared our connection to death.”

Dayn makes a noncommittal sound and continues forward. The passage widens into what was once a ceremonial antechamber. Crumbling pillars support a ceiling carved with a celestial map—stars and constellations positioned as they would have appeared centuries ago. Water trickles down one wall, collecting in a shallow basin before disappearing through a crack in the floor.

“The first sign of the convergence,” Dayn says, nodding toward the water. “The ley lines’ energy pulls groundwater toward the center. The closer we get, the more apparent the flow becomes.”

I step carefully around the basin, noting how the water seems to shimmer with faint blue luminescence. “Why exactly do we need this water for your ritual?”

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“The binding spell that constrains me operates on fundamental magical principles,” he explains, leading us through an arched doorway on the far side of the chamber. “To break it requires elements that embody those same principles. The convergence water represents pure magical potential—neither darkblood nor clearblood, but the raw source from which both traditions draw.”

The next passage slopes downward steeply, with crude steps carved into the floor. The runes along these walls glow brighter, pulsing with increasingly visible energy. The air feels charged, like the moment before lightning strikes.

“The clearbloods have no idea what’s beneath their precious academy, do they?” I ask, feeling the surge of raw magic against my skin even through the suppressing effect of my silver tablet.

Dayn’s laugh is short and cold. “They built here deliberately, to control the convergence. But over generations, I suspect most forgot what they were guarding and why.” He glances back at me, eyes reflecting my light spell. “Institutional memory is surprisingly fragile. Something your coven understands well.”

I want to ask what he means by that, but the sudden intensification of the runes’ glow distracts me. They’re pulsing faster now, their light casting animated shadows across Dayn’s features.

“Something’s wrong,” I say, instinctively reaching for my knife. “The runes shouldn’t be?—”

“Down!” Dayn shouts, spinning toward me.

I drop instinctively as a blast of pure energy erupts from the wall beside me, scorching the air where I stood a heartbeat earlier. The tunnel fills with blinding light and the smell of ozone.

Before I can react, Dayn lunges forward, grabbing my wrist with bruising force. He yanks me forward as another energy blast erupts behind us, this one powerful enough to crack the stone floor. We run now, no longer concerned with stealth as the entire passage system seems to awaken around us.

“Defensive system,” Dayn calls out between breaths. “Triggered by prolonged presence near the runes.”

Another blast strikes the ceiling ahead, raining stone fragments down. Dayn swerves, pulling me through a side passage I hadn’t even noticed. His grip on my wrist burns, but I can’t pull away without risking separation in the increasingly chaotic tunnel system.

We emerge into a larger chamber just as the most powerful blast yet strikes. The shock wave throws us both forward. I crash hard against Dayn’s back, and we tumble together onto the stone floor as the passage behind us partially collapses.

And that’s when it happens.

The moment his skin connects with mine—his hand still gripping my wrist, my body pressed against his—something like electricity arcs between us. But it’s not pain I feel. It’s awareness. Sudden, overwhelming awareness of Dayn—not just his physical presence but something deeper, more fundamental. I feel the ancient fire at his core, the weight of centuries pressing on him, the constant strain of maintaining human form around something vast and inherently different from humanity.

From his sudden stillness and the flaring gold of his eyes, I know he’s experiencing

something similar—a flash of access to my essence, my connection to death and ancestors, the magic that flows through Salem bloodlines.

We break apart almost violently, scrambling away from each other. My heart pounds as if I've run miles, and my skin tingles where he touched me.

“What the hell was that?” I demand, my voice unsteady.

Dayn stands slowly, brushing dust from his clothes with an outward calm betrayed by the lingering gold in his eyes. “An unexpected complication... likely triggered by the electric atmosphere.”

“Don't evade,” I snap, keeping my distance. “That was some kind of magical connection. I felt—” I stop, unwilling to articulate exactly what I felt. “Explain. Now.”

He studies me for a long moment, visibly deciding how much to reveal. “Dragon magic and darkblood magic have certain... compatibilities that neither side cares to acknowledge.”

“Bullshit.” The word echoes in the cavernous space. “Pure darkblood magic connects to ancestors and death. Dragon magic is about fire and transformation. They're fundamentally different.”

“Are they?” Dayn counters. “Both draw power from life force—you from the preserved essence of your ancestors, dragons from our own internal flame. Both manipulate energy that clearbloods can only access indirectly through structured spells and rituals.”

I shake my head, unwilling to accept this connection. “Even if that were true, it doesn't explain what just happened when you touched me.”

Dayn sighs, a sound like steam escaping. “During the ancient wars, before the clearblood-darkblood schism, certain darkblood families discovered they could form magical bonds with dragons—connections that amplified both sides’ abilities.”

The implications hit me like another blast wave. “You’re saying darkbloods and dragons were allies?”

“Initially.” His expression darkens. “Until your ancestors discovered they could use those bonds to control dragons. To drain our power.”

“That’s not—” I begin, but uncertainty stops me. My knowledge of that ancient history is fragmented at best. The Purification Crusades destroyed so many of our historical records.

“Your coven wouldn’t preserve that particular history,” Dayn says, reading my hesitation. “The Salem line was especially adept at forming these bonds. It’s why your family rose to prominence among darkbloods.”

Anger flares in me, hot and defensive. “If that were true, dragons wouldn’t be nearly extinct while darkbloods are hunted to the edge of survival. You’re twisting history to suit yourself.”

“Am I?” His voice sharpens. “Who do you think taught clearbloods to fear darkblood magic? Who showed them the techniques to suppress your powers? Dragons survived your ancestors’ betrayal, Salem. We just chose a different path than outright war.”

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The accusation lands like a physical blow. “You’re saying dragons helped clearbloods hunt us?”

“I’m saying both our kinds made choices in an ancient conflict that neither fully remembers.” Dayn steps closer, his heat intensifying. “The irony that we now find ourselves requiring each other’s help would not be lost on our ancestors.”

I back away, mind racing with implications. If he’s right—if dragons helped develop the techniques that clearbloods use against my kind—then our current alliance is built on centuries of betrayal. Yet I can’t deny the flash of connection I felt when we touched, a resonance that felt ancient and somehow right despite everything logical telling me to run.

“We need to keep moving,” Dayn says, breaking the tense silence. “The convergence point is just ahead, and that collapse will likely attract attention.”

I follow at a careful distance, hyperaware of his movement, his heat, the space between us that seems charged with new significance. The passage widens further, opening into a perfectly circular chamber. Unlike the rough construction of the tunnels, this room was crafted with precision—a perfect dome with a small pool at its center, fed by water that seems to flow upward from the floor rather than down from above.

The water glows with shifting colors—blues, purples, occasionally flashes of gold—and gives off no reflection. It’s as if the pool contains liquid light rather than water.

“The convergence.” Dayn’s voice holds genuine reverence. “Seven ley lines meeting at a single point, creating one of the most powerful magical nexuses in existence.”

I approach the edge of the pool cautiously. The energy here is palpable, pressing against my skin like gentle hands. I can feel the raw power pulsing in rhythm with my heartbeat.

“This is why Heathborne was built here,” I realize aloud. “Not to educate young clearbloods, but to control this power source.”

“Finally, something we agree on.” Dayn produces a crystal vial from his pocket. “We need only a small amount. Too much, and the energy density could shatter the container—or us.”

He kneels at the pool’s edge, carefully dipping the vial into the glowing liquid. The water flows into the container of its own accord, as if eager to be collected. When the vial is half-full, Dayn withdraws it and seals it with a stopper inscribed with stabilizing runes.

“Four components gathered,” he says, tucking the vial away. “Now we need only?”

He freezes, head tilting slightly. I hear it a moment later—footsteps, methodical and measured, approaching from a connecting passage. The particular rhythm is unmistakable.

“Mazrov. Again,” I whisper.

Dayn’s eyes scan the chamber before settling on a narrow alcove carved into the wall—barely large enough for one person, let alone two. Without discussion, he pulls me into it.

One of his arms wraps around my waist, holding me still. The memory of our earlier magical connection makes this forced proximity electric with tension. I'm acutely aware of every point of contact between us, wondering if another flash of connection will occur—half fearing it, half curious.

The footsteps grow louder. From our hiding place, I can see the entrance to the chamber as Mazrov emerges. His eyes sweep the room methodically, and I hold my breath. Dayn's arm tightens fractionally around me, whether in warning or preparation for action, I can't tell.

Mazrov approaches the convergence pool, studying it with clinical detachment. He kneels where Dayn had been moments before, examining the ground, then reaches into the water. Unlike the welcoming flow we witnessed, the liquid seems to recoil from his touch.

"Contamination detected," he says aloud, his voice echoing in the chamber. "Cross-reference with known breaches."

He's not speaking to us or to himself, I realize. He's reporting to someone—or something.

Dayn remains perfectly still behind me, but I can feel the tension coiling in him, the subtle increase in his body temperature as the dragon responds to threat. His breath ghosts warm against my ear, and despite everything—the danger, the revelations, the centuries of conflict between our kinds—I can't help but lean back into him for a moment, seeking the stability of his presence.

"Resuming patrol route," Mazrov announces to his unseen audience before turning and exiting the chamber through a different passage than the one we entered through.

We remain frozen in our hiding place long after his footsteps fade, neither of us quite

willing to break the forced intimacy of our position. When Dayn finally speaks, his lips are so close to my ear that I feel the words as much as hear them.

“Now we know why the defenses activated,” he murmurs. “Mazrov wasn’t here by coincidence. He’s monitoring the convergence.”

I turn slightly, finding myself face-to-face with him in the narrow alcove. This close, I can see flecks of gold in his amber eyes, the subtle inhuman texture of his skin. “Monitoring for what?”

His gaze holds mine, filled with ancient knowledge and something that might be regret. “For exactly what we just did. He’s monitoring for intruders like us—or darkbloods—accessing Heathborne’s most revered resource... The water we took isn’t just a component for my freedom. It’s a key to something much older—something both our kinds once fought to control. Raw power.”

In this moment of fragile truth, pressed together in darkness with centuries of conflict between us, I’m struck by the weight of choices I never made but must now answer for. Salem and dragon. Darkblood and fire. Ancient allies turned bitter enemies, now forced together by circumstance.

23

The four components sit on Dayn’s desk like offerings to a forgotten demigod—moonfire essence glowing with ghostly blue light, elder blood, dark and viscous in its crystal vial, the pouch of ancestor ash that seems to pulse with my own heartbeat, and the convergence water shifting colors like a trapped aurora. I keep my distance from them and Dayn, the memory of our magical connection still burning under my skin like a brand I never asked for. His chambers feel smaller now, the walls closer, the air between us charged with unspoken complications.

“Four components,” Dayn says, arranging them in a precise diamond pattern. “Each representing a fundamental magical principle. And we have the Relic of Severance, safely stored in my bedroom. Now, there’s just one final element we need.”

I fold my arms. “What?”

His amber eyes lift to mine. “The fifth component,” he says, “is Mazrov himself.”

I nod once in understanding. Of course. He was the one I came here for in the first place.

Dayn’s fingers trace the air above the moonfire essence, which pulses brighter in response. “He’s the living embodiment of the binding spell. A physical anchor with consciousness. The clearbloods call it an Enforcer—a combination of flesh, alchemical enhancement, and binding magic.”

“So, we need to...”

“Kill him.” Dayn says it simply, without malice. “Not just kill him—unbind him through the proper ritual. Death alone won’t suffice. His binding to me must be severed with the same principles that created it.”

I push away from the wall. “That’s why you need my death magic.”

“Precisely. Darkblood connection to death is uniquely suited to severing such bonds.”

“I assume you have a plan for getting him here?” I ask.

Dayn’s smile is cold and confident. “You’ll lure him.”

“Excuse me?”

“Mazrov may be enhanced, but he follows human routines. Every evening, he visits the Heathborne Village’s tavern—The Broken Lantern. He drinks a glass or two of whiskey and returns to the academy by midnight.”

“And you expect me to what? Flutter my eyelashes and he’ll follow me back to your lair?” My voice drips with sarcasm.

“Something like that.” Dayn’s eyes assess me. “Surely your academy training included seduction techniques for infiltration? I’m certain you’ve been trained to adapt to any mission parameter. This is no different.”

“It’s entirely different,” I reply. “You want me to seduce amagically enhanced guard who could snap me in half, and somehow convince him to follow me back to the academy—where we’ll kill him in a ritual that, if discovered, would get me executed on the spot.”

“I’m still working on the details, but when you put it that way, it sounds rather exciting.” His tone remains maddeningly calm.

“It sounds like suicide.” I glare at him. “And if your brilliant plan fails, I’ll be the one caught red-handed while you maintain plausible deniability.”

“If you can suggest a better approach, I’m all ears.”

“Why not just grab him now? Ambush him during his patrol? Or set me up to ‘train’ under him, as you originally said you would?”

“Because—”

A sharp knock at the door silences us both.

Our eyes lock in instant understanding of the threat. That particular rhythm—three evenly spaced knocks followed by two quick ones—belongs to only one person at Heathborne.

Dayn moves with inhuman speed, dragging me toward a bookshelf on the far wall. He presses a hidden catch, and the shelf slides silently inward, revealing a narrow space behind it. Before I can react, he pushes me into the darkness and steps back, the shelf sliding closed until just a thin gap remains—enough for me to see into the room but not enough to be seen.

“One moment,” Dayn calls toward the door, his voice perfectly controlled.

He quickly sweeps the ritual components into a desk drawer, then adjusts his academic robes and smooths his expression into one of mild annoyance at the interruption. The temperature in the room seems to lower as he reins in his dragon nature.

When he opens the door, Mazrov stands in the threshold like a statue carved from midnight—his dark armor absorbing the light from the hallway torches, his unnaturally bright blue eyes scanning the room in mechanical sweeps.

“Professor Dayn,” Mazrov’s voice is flat, precise. “May I come in?”

“It’s rather early for official business, isn’t it?” Dayn makes no move to step aside.

“This won’t take long.” Mazrov doesn’t wait for further invitation, simply steps forward with such clear intent that Dayn has no choice but to move or make physical contact.

From my hiding place, I control my breathing, keeping it shallow and silent, inhaling the smell of ancient books. I can see part of the room through the small gap, enough

to track Mazrov as he moves in a precise circuit, examining Dayn's quarters.

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“Is there a purpose to this inspection?” Dayn asks, his tone just short of insubordination.

Mazrov completes his circuit before answering. “There have been multiple security breaches in the past twelve hours. The moonfire greenhouse. The blood repository. Disturbances in the lower levels.”

“Interesting,” Dayn says, the picture of academic detachment. “And you’re here because...?”

“Your movements have been irregular since Monday.” Mazrov turns to face Dayn fully. “You’ve missed scheduled check-ins.”

I frown, wondering what Dayn has been doing since Monday: early preparation for this, spying on me?

“I wasn’t aware that faculty members were subject to investigation if they miss a few check-ins.” Dayn’s voice carries just enough edge to communicate displeasure without crossing into open defiance. “My movements have been entirely supportive of my work, and I have had a large amount of class work to catch up on.”

“You are not standard faculty, Professor.” The emphasis Mazrov places on the title strips it of any respect. “Your continued presence at Heathborne is contingent on compliance with very specific terms.”

“Terms I have not violated.”

“That remains to be determined.” Mazrov moves toward the desk, his gloved hand hovering just above its surface. “Management has concerns about your loyalty.”

“My loyalty has never been in question.” Dayn’s posture shifts subtly—a predator preparing for possible conflict. “I’ve served Heathborne faithfully for decades.”

“Service without choice is not loyalty.”

“Do you have specific accusations to make?” Dayn asks, drawing Mazrov’s attention away from the desk where our ritual components are hidden.

“Not yet.” Mazrov’s blue eyes flash brighter for a moment. “But I will be watching you more closely.”

“As you wish.” Dayn’s voice turns dismissive. “If that’s all, I have classes to prepare for.”

Mazrov moves toward the door but stops at the threshold. Without turning, he says, “There’s a scent in this room that doesn’t belong.”

My heart stutters. Even with the silver tablet suppressing my magic, could he somehow detect my presence in a small, enclosed room?

“I was testing student assignments today,” Dayn replies smoothly. “Several counteractions for blood rituals under controlled conditions. Perhaps that’s what you’re detecting.”

Mazrov remains motionless for several heartbeats, then nods once. “Report any unusual student activities directly to me. That is protocol.”

“Of course.”

After Mazrov departs, Dayn waits a full minute before approaching the bookshelf. When it slides open, I step out quickly, putting immediate distance between us.

“That was too close,” I say, keeping my voice low. “He can smell darkblood magic even through suppression tablets, at least in this small space.”

“Not surprising.” Dayn locks his chamber door. “Mazrov is improving every day, and he was specifically designed to detect magical signatures outside clearblood patterns. He’s a hunter at his core.”

“Why didn’t you seize him right then?” I demand. “He was right here, alone. We could have completed your ritual immediately.”

Dayn shakes his head. “And raised immediate alarms. Mazrov reports to management too regularly. His sudden disappearance would trigger lockdown protocols throughout Heathborne. We’d never complete the ritual before security forces discovered us.”

“Why did you originally offer to let me train under him?” I ask.

Dayn shrugs. “As I mentioned, it was an effective way to command your attention.”

I roll my eyes. “So instead you want me to lure him away during his free time.”

“Precisely. When he’s in the village, his check-ins are reduced to once per night, at midnight. If we take him from the tavern, we’d have nearly four hours before anyone realizes he’s missing.”

I pace the room, weighing our options. As much as I hate to admit it, Dayn’s plan makes strategic sense. A controlled environment, extended timeframe, and minimal witnesses.

“What makes you think he’d follow me at all? If he’s so mechanically focused on duty? How do you even know he’ll be attracted to me?”

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“I’ve detected he’s into women, so... you’ll do.” I scowl at him as he continues, “The clearbloods may have enhanced him, but they couldn’t eliminate all weaknesses. His tavern visits serve a purpose beyond routine—they’re designed to maintain the human elements of his psychology, preventing complete detachment. During those hours, he’s significantly more susceptible to... certain influences.”

Meaning human desire. I suppress a shudder at the thought of getting close to this strange enforcer.

But it seems time to finally do what I came here for: deliver the bastard who injured my brother to the slaughter.

24

After a day of sleeping through classes and catching naps during free periods, I find myself back in Dayn’s quarters, staring into a mirror.

I barely recognize the woman staring back. Gone is Clara Winters, the timid scholarship student. Gone is Esme Salem, the darkblood operative. In their place stands a stranger with smoky eyes, tousled hair, and lips painted the exact shade of spilled blood. I’ve transformed myself into every woman’s envy—or so I hope. The sleek black dress Dayn procured from who-knows-where hugs curves I usually keep hidden under practical clothing. I barely recognize myself.

“You look like you’re attending a funeral, not seducing a man,” Dayn comments from his position by the bookshelf, where he’s been watching me prepare with unsettling intensity.

I shoot him a glare through the mirror. “Perhaps I’m planning both.”

“Your natural cynicism is showing. Try for something more... inviting.”

“Would you prefer I giggle and bat my eyelashes?” I ask, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Perhaps throw in a hair toss every few seconds?”

Dayn approaches, his reflection appearing behind mine in the mirror. “I would prefer you succeed.”

Our eyes meet in the reflection. I take a step forward, breaking the connection.

“This dress is ridiculous,” I say, tugging at the hemline that sits inches higher than anything I’d voluntarily wear. “I can barely move in it.”

“That’s rather the point,” Dayn replies, leaning against the wall with studied casualness. “The restriction forces a certain kind of movement. More... deliberate.”

I roll my eyes, but try an experimental walk across the room, adapting my usual stride to the constraints of the fabric. The result is a slow, swaying gait that emphasizes my hips. I feel ridiculous, but when I glance back at Dayn, the shimmer of gold in his eyes tells me it’s having the intended effect.

“Better,” he says, his voice slightly rougher than before. “But your face is still announcing that you’d rather be anywhere else.” He straightens, coming closer. “You need to look at him like he’s the answer to a question you’ve been afraid to ask.”

“Poetic,” I mutter, trying to arrange my features into something less murderous. “Any other acting tips from the dragon’s guide to seduction?”

Dayn circles me slowly, his gaze clinical and uncomfortably thorough. “Lower your

chin slightly when you look up at him. It creates vulnerability.” He demonstrates, tilting his head to show me the angle. “And when you speak, let your voice drop. Like a secret only he deserves to hear.”

I practice the chin tilt, feeling utterly ridiculous. “This is absurd.”

“It’s tactical,” he corrects. “No different than adopting a fighting stance. You’re weaponizing perception.”

“If you say ‘men are simple creatures,’ I might actually stab you.”

His mouth quirks in that almost-smile. “I was going to say Mazrov is a simple creature. The clearbloods designed him for function, not complexity.”

I turn back to the mirror. My hands are steady despite the knot of tension in my stomach. This is far from my first undercover operation, but something about tonight feels different. More personal, perhaps because Dayn will be watching, evaluating.

Also, I have, in fact, never used seduction as a strategic tactic, but I’m not about to inform him of that.

“When he approaches you, don’t respond immediately,” Dayn continues, stepping closer to adjust the strap of my dress with clinical precision. “Let him wait. Count to three before you even look at him.”

“I know how to flirt,” I snap, pulling away from his touch. “I didn’t spend my entire life in combat training.”

“Evidence suggests otherwise.” His eyes travel from my face to my hands, which I realize I’ve balled into fists. “Relax your fingers. No man approaches a woman who looks ready to punch him.”

I force my hands to unclench. “Unless that’s what he’s into.”

“Mazrov was designed for duty and obedience, not pain and pleasure.” Dayn circles me again, his gaze critical. “When you walk, imagine drawing a line with your hips. Your usual gait suggests you’re marching into battle.”

“Maybe because that’s exactly what this is,” I mutter, but I try again, softening my stride.

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“Better.” He nods approvingly. “But your smile.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “It doesn’t reach your eyes.”

I attempt to correct this, forcing my lips to curve upward, but his expression tells me I’ve failed miserably.

“That’s not a smile,” he says drily. “That’s a threat display.”

“Maybe if you stopped critiquing every move I make?—”

“Don’t you want help?” he asks. “Would you prefer to improvise when you’re face to face with a magically enhanced killing machine, while you’re operating at about thirty percent of your usual capacity?”

I exhale slowly through my nose. He’s right that my magical abilities will be smothered even more, since I will have to take two suppression tablets to reduce my darkblood signature, thanks to Mazrov’s improving detection skills. “Fine,” I say. “Show me.”

He approaches, standing behind me as we both face the mirror. “A genuine smile starts here,” he says, lightly touching the corner of my eye. His finger traces a path down to the edge of my mouth. “Then travels here. Think of something that actually pleases you.”

“Like succeeding in this mission and being rid of you?”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “If that works.”

I try again, visualizing completing the ritual, returning to Darkbirch victorious, and seeing my brother healthy. My reflection shows a subtle but decidedly more authentic smile. Not radiant, but at least no longer threatening bodily harm.

“That’s more convincing,” Dayn says. “Now let’s see you walk again.”

I shoot him a withering glance. “Is this a seduction lesson or a runway class?”

“The two aren’t as different as you might think.” He steps back, gesturing for me to proceed. “Movement is language. Yours currently says ‘I will kill you if you approach.’”

I make another attempt, consciously softening my stride, letting my hips sway more naturally.

Dayn watches with his analytical gaze. “Better. Now add a slight hesitation when you turn—like this.” He demonstrates, the movement oddly graceful despite his masculine frame. “It creates a moment of vulnerability, an opening he’ll instinctively want to protect.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about manipulating men for someone who isn’t human,” I observe, mimicking the turn he showed me.

His lips curve. “Dragons have studied human behavior for millennia. Your species is remarkably consistent in its weaknesses.”

“And what are dragon weaknesses?” I ask, seizing the opportunity. “For academic purposes, of course.”

“Nice try.” He adjusts the fall of my hair, his fingers briefly brushing my neck. “Also, it’s survival instinct,” he continues. “Dragons who couldn’t charm humans rarely

survived long enough to reproduce.”

Dragons... reproduced with humans? That is news to me. Then again, everything about dragons is news to me.

“Charming isn’t the first word I’d associate with you,” I say, recovering my equilibrium.

“I save it for special occasions.” He returns to his normal stance, the intensity returning to his eyes. “When you speak to him, maintain eye contact for three seconds, then look away—preferably at his mouth. It suggests interest without desperation. And as for the voice: lower, slower. Each word should feel like honey.”

I clear my throat. “Like this?” I attempt, lowering my pitch.

“Gods above, no. Softer. Combat requires adaptation to your opponent’s weaknesses. Mazrov responds to vulnerability, not strength.”

“So I should act helpless?” The very thought makes my skin crawl.

“Not helpless,” he corrects, his voice dropping lower. “Available. There’s power in apparent surrender. Sometimes the most effective way to control someone is to let them believe they’re in control.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Is that how you’ve survived so long among clearbloods? Letting them think they control you?”

“We’re discussing your performance, not mine,” he replies coolly.

“Then perhaps you should demonstrate properly,” I challenge, crossing my arms. “Show me exactly how I should approach Mazrov.” I’m getting fed up with all his

complicated advice.

Dayn's expression shifts subtly, calculation replacing irritation. "Very well."

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Without warning, he transforms. Not physically—there's no scale or claw in sight—but something fundamental changes in his presence. His shoulders soften, his stance opens, and his eyes... his eyes take on a warmth that seems to reach directly for something primitive in my brain.

He approaches me slowly, each step deliberate yet seemingly casual. "Imagine I'm Mazrov," he says, his voice pitched lower than usual. "I've noticed you across the tavern, sitting alone."

Despite knowing this is just demonstration, I feel my pulse quicken as he stops before me, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from him but not so close as to invade my space.

"You glance up," he instructs softly. "Not immediately. Let him wait."

I count to three in my head, then raise my eyes to his, trying to mimic an inviting look.

"Better," he murmurs. "Now look away—not quickly, but as if something else momentarily caught your interest."

I follow his direction, turning my gaze toward the window before looking back at him through my lashes.

"Good." His approval shouldn't please me, but it does. "When he speaks to you, tilt your head slightly. It exposes your neck—a subconscious signal of trust."

I do as instructed, feeling increasingly ridiculous yet strangely powerful as I see his pupils dilate slightly in response.

“May I join you?” he asks, the question deceptively casual. Without waiting for my answer, he takes the seat next to me at the imaginary bar. “When he makes this move, don’t shift away immediately. Let him believe his presence is welcome.”

I force myself to remain still, though every instinct screams to maintain distance.

“Now,” he continues, his voice a murmur, “he’ll offer to buy you a drink. Accept with gratitude, but not eagerness. You want him interested, not suspicious.”

“I know how to accept a drink,” I say, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

“Do you?” His eyebrow arches. “Show me.”

I clear my throat, softening my expression. “That would be lovely,” I say, my voice deliberately lower, smoother than my natural tone. I allow a small smile to touch my lips, then glance down at my hands before meeting his eyes again.

“Not terrible,” Dayn concedes, “but your shoulders remain tense. Remember, a less confident woman might be nervous around an attractive man with Mazrov’s authority. You find him intriguing, if a bit intimidating.”

“Should I twirl my hair around my finger too?”

“Sarcasm is unbecoming in a seductress,” Dayn says dryly. “But a little genuine laughter would help. Your eyes light up when you laugh—it’s quite transformative.”

“I wasn’t aware dragons were such keen observers of human beauty,” I say, deflecting from the unexpected compliment.

“We’re keen observers of everything.” He leans slightly closer. “When he moves into your space like this, don’t retreat. Instead, lean forward slightly—it suggests interest and creates intimacy.”

I follow his instruction, bringing our faces uncomfortably close. The amber of his eyes seems to darken, flecks of gold appearing at the edges.

“Good,” he murmurs. “Now touch his arm briefly—casual contact establishes a physical connection that can be built upon.”

I hesitate, then lightly place my fingers on his forearm. The heat of him burns through the fabric of his shirt, and for an instant, I feel that strange connection flicker between us again—much fainter than before, but unmistakable. I’d thought it was a temporary reaction triggered by our proximity to the raw power of the convergence waters, but it seems there is still some intermittent after-effect. I try to shake it aside. I need to focus.

Dayn’s jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. “You’re learning,” he says, his voice dropping lower. “But seduction is more than just physical proximity.” His eyes hold mine with unsettling intensity. “The tavern has private guest rooms.”

“And?” I withdraw my hand, suddenly needing distance.

“The guest rooms are reserved for travelers and the occasional Heathborne visitor,” Dayn explains, his eyes never leaving mine. “All conveniently located on the ground floor, with large windows facing the back garden.”

I catch his meaning immediately. “Easy extraction points.”

“Precisely. You need to convince Mazrov to book one of those rooms for the night.”

I blink, the implications washing over me. “You expect me to?—”

“No,” Dayn interrupts. “But you need to make him believe that’s where the evening is headed.” His eyes darken, the gold flecks becoming more pronounced. “Once he’s in that room, vulnerable and distracted, we’ll have our opportunity.”

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My throat feels suddenly dry. “I’ve never had to?—”

“Never had to seduce a man into a private room?” Heraises an eyebrow. “I find that difficult to believe, given your training.”

I lift my chin. “My missions typically involve more direct approaches.”

“Ah.” Understanding crosses his features. “Then do you want more specific instruction?”

I consider it for a moment, then nod. I’ve come this far in his “class,” I might as well see what other gems of wisdom he has to offer.

He steps closer. “When the conversation has established sufficient connection, you’ll need to create desire—urgent enough that he’ll suggest privacy.”

“And how exactly do I do that?”

Instead of answering verbally, Dayn reaches out, his fingers brushing my bare shoulder.

His touch leaves a trail of heat that has nothing to do with his dragon nature. “Once you have him alone,” Dayn continues, “you’ll need to keep him... occupied until we can make our move.”

I hesitate. “How far exactly am I expected to go with this charade?”

“Far enough to keep him distracted,” Dayn says, his fingers trailing down my arm with deliberate slowness. “But not so far that you lose control of the situation.”

His demonstration is becoming uncomfortably effective. I step back, needing distance. “I understand the concept.”

“Do you?” He follows, closing the space between us again. “The key is to make him believe he’s the one in control while never relinquishing your own. A delicate balance.”

“I can handle delicate balances,” I say, more confidently than I feel.

“Show me,” Dayn challenges, his eyes glinting dangerously. “Convince me to follow you to a private room.”

I hesitate, then decide to accept the challenge. If I can’t convince Dayn in practice, I doubt I’ll manage with Mazrov.

I let my shoulders relax and take a step toward him, deliberately softening my gaze. I tilt my head slightly, exposing my neck as he taught me, and allow my lips to part.

“You know,” I say, lowering my voice to a whisper that forces him to lean closer, “it’s getting rather... crowded in here.” I let my eyes drift to his mouth before meeting his gaze again. “I’ve heard the rooms here are quite... private.”

Something flickers across Dayn’s face—surprise, perhaps, at how quickly I’ve adapted to his instruction. Or maybe it’s something else. The gold in his eyes intensifies.

“Have you?” he responds, playing along. “And why would we need privacy?”

I step closer, eliminating the space between us. My fingers trace a path up his arm. “Some conversations are better had behind closed doors,” I murmur. “Don’t you think?”

His hand catches mine, stopping its upward trajectory. For a moment, I think I’ve overplayed my hand, but then his thumb brushes across my wrist in a slow circle.

“What kind of conversation did you have in mind?” His voice has dropped even lower, rumbling in his chest.

I lean in until my lips are nearly touching his ear. “The kind that doesn’t require many words.”

When I pull back, Dayn’s eyes have darkened considerably, the gold now a molten ring around his pupils. The air between us feels charged, electric.

Then his academic demeanor returns and he pulls away. “Convincing,” he says, though his voice is more rugged than before. “I think you’re ready, Salem.”

“I agree,” I mutter. Enough practice.

25

The Broken Lantern sits in Heathborne’s lower district, a place where clearblood guards come to forget the rigidity of their duties and indulge in cheaper pleasures. Its wooden sign hangs from a single chain, creaking in the evening breeze as I approach. Inside, the air is thick with smoke and the pungent scent of spilled ale. Candles flicker in iron sconces, casting long shadows across the uneven floorboards.

I rely on my ingrained magic for my glamour tonight, rather than a pendant around my neck, because the latter would be too conspicuous for this particular task...

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I pause at the entrance, letting my eyes adjust to the dim light while scanning the faces of patrons.

And there he is. Mazrov sits alone at the far end of the bar, his imposing figure unmistakable even without his dark-gray armor. Instead, he wears civilian clothes—a plain shirt that stretches tight across his shoulders and dark pants that do little to diminish his military bearing. His fingers wrap around a glass of amber liquid, and I note he's only halfway through his first drink. Good. I need him clearheaded enough to follow me but dulled enough not to question too deeply.

I adjust my posture, letting my shoulders drop and my hips sway as I weave through the crowd. Dayn's instructions echo in my mind—and I note it's the first time I've willingly accepted any advice from him. And probably the last. I feel gazes tracking my movement, but I focus only on my target, approaching the empty stool beside Mazrov with nonchalance.

"Is this seat taken?" I ask, my voice soft and pitched slightly higher than my natural tone.

Mazrov looks up, those unnatural eyes assessing me with military precision. Something flickers in them—recognition? No, just the standard wariness of a man trained to see threats everywhere.

"It's free," he says, turning back to his drink.

I slide onto the stool and signal the bartender. "Whatever he's having," I say, then turn to Mazrov with a smile carefully calibrated to suggest shy interest. "I'm new to

the area. Thought I'd see where the locals drink."

He gives a noncommittal grunt, but I catch his eyes straying to the neckline of my black dress.

"You look like you know your way around here," I continue, accepting a glass from the bartender while maintaining eye contact. "Maybe you could tell me what's worth seeing in Heathborne?"

Mazrov shifts on his stool, his posture loosening slightly. "Depends on what you're looking for." His voice carries the clipped precision of military training, but there's a hint of something else beneath it—curiosity, perhaps.

I lean closer, as if sharing a secret. "I'm not really sure what I'm looking for. Sometimes it's better to be... surprised." I allow my fingers to brush against his forearm, the touch light but deliberate.

He doesn't pull away. Progress.

"Heathborne's not known for surprises," he says, but there's a new tension in his shoulders that has nothing to do with suspicion. "The Academy keeps things orderly."

"You work there?" I ask, injecting admiration into my voice. "I've heard it's quite impressive."

Pride straightens his spine. "Senior guard."

I widen my eyes. "That sounds important. Dangerous, even."

His mouth quirks in what might be the beginning of a smile. "It has its moments."

The conversation continues, a careful dance of feigned interest and strategic revelations. I tell him I'm visiting a cousin who works in the town, that I've always been fascinated by Heathborne's history. Each disclosure is crafted to seem spontaneous while building a persona he'd hopefully find both unthreatening and intriguing.

An hour passes, our stools gradually shifting closer together, my hand occasionally brushing his arm or shoulder. I laugh at his dry observations about academy politics, not all of it feigned—some of his insights might prove useful later. The alcohol has softened his rigid demeanor, though I notice he's still nursing just his second drink. Alert, then, but relaxed enough for my purposes. And, thankfully, my double dosage of suppression pills seems to be doing the trick of concealing my darkblood signature—at least for now.

However, when I make my sultrier moves and attempt to get him to a guestroom, he insists he can't stay the night. He doesn't budge, no matter how much I stroke his arm.

Fortunately, Dayn and I agreed on a Plan B on our way here.

I glance casually toward the window at the far end of the room and catch sight of Dayn's amber eyes watching us. I raise my right arm casually, as if stretching—a sign that bedroom antics are failing. I see his scowl even from this distance. This is going to complicate matters, but at least all is not lost.

"It's getting late," I say eventually, glancing toward the main entrance. "I should probably head back to my lodgings."

Something like disappointment flashes across his face before he masks it. "I'll walk you," he offers, exactly as we'd hoped. "The lower district can be unpredictable after dark."

I bite my lip, as if considering the propriety of his offer. “That would be nice. Thank you.”

We leave the tavern, the night air cool against my skin after the stuffy interior. I walk close beside him, our shoulders occasionally touching as I guide our path subtly toward the alleyway where Dayn waits. The streets are mostly empty now, with only a few drunken stragglers making their way home. Perfect.

“My lodgings are this way,” I say, nodding toward the narrow passage between two buildings. “There’s a shortcut through here.”

Mazrov hesitates, his brows drawing together. The instincts of a trained guard haven’t been entirely dulled by alcohol and attraction. “Why this way? The main road would be safer.”

I step closer, looking up at him through lowered lashes. “I thought... maybe we could take a moment for ourselves. Without all those eyes watching.” I place my hand on his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath my palm. “Unless you’re not interested?”

The suspicion in his eyes battles with desire. I can almost see him reasoning that no real threat would be so brazen, so obvious in their intentions. A classic mistake. People always underestimate the effectiveness of transparency as a disguise.

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“Lead the way,” he says finally, his voice rough with anticipation.

I take his hand, pulling him toward the alley’s entrance where shadows wait to embrace us. His fingers are warm against mine, and for a brief moment, I feel an unexpected twinge of—not guilt, exactly, but awareness of the line between manipulation and cruelty. I push it aside. Mazrov is not an innocent. He’s a senior guard at an institution that has systematically persecuted my kind for generations, and who personally attacked my brother.

As we step into the darkness of the alley, his grip on my hand tightens slightly. Perhaps some instinct warns him even now. But it’s too late. We’ve already passed the first of Dayn’s carefully placed runes, invisible to the naked eye but humming with dormant power.

Just a few steps more.

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The trap lies ahead, ancient runes carved into the cobblestones beneath a thin layer of dirt and grime, invisible to anyone without the knowledge to see them. I guide Mazrov forward, my fingers intertwined with his as if we’re nothing more than a pair of lovers seeking privacy. The weight of his trust is almost tangible—a misplaced faith that will shatter in moments. Above us, the narrow strip of night sky between buildings seems to darken further, as if even the stars sense what’s coming.

“It’s quieter here,” I murmur, stopping at the exact center of Dayn’s carefully prepared trap. The cobblestones beneath our feet conceal binding runes that have

waited patiently, dormant but eager. I turn to face Mazrov, placing my free hand against his chest as I step backward, positioning him perfectly.

“You’re still nervous,” Mazrov observes, his voice softening as he misinterprets my calculated movements for hesitation. “There’s nothing to?—”

The runes activate the instant his boot crosses the final boundary. Amber light erupts from between the cobblestones, shooting upward in a perfect circle around him. The sudden illumination transforms the dingy alley into a stage for what’s to come, casting long shadows against the brick walls on either side.

Mazrov’s reaction is immediate—and far from human. His eyes flare with that unnatural blue fire. The memory of Jax falling to his knees in agony burns hot in my mind as Mazrov lunges toward me.

“Binding activated,” Dayn’s voice echoes from the shadows, a note of satisfaction evident in his tone.

I spring backward, narrowly avoiding Mazrov’s grasp. His fingertips graze my cheek, slicing through the glamour I’ve maintained all evening like a blade through silk. I feel the magic unravel—my carefully constructed persona dissolving in an instant. The alluring stranger who flirted with him at the tavern melts away, revealing what lies beneath: my true self, Esme Salem, darkblood and enemy.

I relied on glamour instead of contact lenses to change my eye color to green tonight, so now he sees my red-flecked irises.

Mazrov freezes, his face transforming as recognition dawns. The lingering desire in his gaze hardens to hatred so quickly it’s almost comical.

“Darkblood,” he snarls, the single syllable dripping with venom.

His hand extends toward me, fingers splayed in an unnatural position. Something invisible and cold slithers through the air between us. Even from a distance, I feel it seeking the edges of my aura, trying to find purchase in the very essence of my being. I instinctively brace for the agony I witnessed in my brother's eyes, the terrible draining sensation that had left him helpless. But the pain never comes. Instead, Mazrov's expression contorts with confusion as his attack collides with an invisible barrier—a barrier that pulses with a faint amber glow wherever his power touches it. His attack disperses like water striking hot metal, hissing and evaporating into nothing. Dayn's boundary runes aren't just containing Mazrov—they're protecting me.

I drop all pretense. "Nice to meet you."

He doesn't answer with words. Instead, he hurls himself against the barrier, his body crashing into the invisible wall created by the binding runes. The impact sends ripples of amber light cascading through the air, but the containment holds.

"I wouldn't bother," I say, circling him slowly. "Those are binding runes. Ancient magic, predating your precious Academy's understanding."

"They won't hold me," Mazrov growls, his voice deepening to something that echoes unnaturally in the confined space.

"Perhaps not indefinitely," comes Dayn's voice as he steps from the shadows at last. "But they'll hold you long enough."

Mazrov's attention snaps to Dayn, and I witness a new emotion flash across his face—something beyond rage. Betrayal. "Professor?" Confusion momentarily overrides his anger. "You're working with... this?" He gestures toward me with undisguised disgust.

Dayn approaches the glowing circle with measured steps, his hands weaving complex patterns in the air. With each gesture, the amber light intensifies, reinforcing the magical barrier. His eyes have begun to shift from amber to molten gold, betraying the dragon within.

“Not everyone at Heathborne is as loyal to your cause as you believe, Mazrov,” Dayn says. “Some of us remember the world before the schism. Before darkbloods were hunted for the crime of existing.”

“You’re a traitor,” Mazrov seethes.

“No,” Dayn replies matter-of-factly. “I’m considerably older than your Academy. My loyalties predate its existence.”

A sharp pulse emits from his barrier, and the next thing I know, Mazrov lies crumpled on the ground, unconscious but still breathing. The blue fire in his eyes has been extinguished, leaving him looking strangely human and vulnerable. His body occasionally twitches, as if fighting some internal battle even in unconsciousness.

I feel a swell of satisfaction, of relief... but I’m also keenly aware of how deftly Dayn has just disabled a deadly threat to my kind.

He turns to me. Light from the activated runes casts shadows across his face, accentuating the sharp angles of his cheekbones. His gaze locks onto mine with an intensity that is both familiar and inscrutable. An involuntary shiver runs through me as I realize his eyes hold a hunger I’ve seen before... like back in the greenhouse when I bled. At other fleeting, yet equally unsettling, moments during our so-called alliance thus far.

“Every dragon has scales they don’t show, just as every witch has spells she keeps unspoken.” His words come back to me. And I’m reminded that the last thing he’s

done tonight is protect me. He's merely protected himself—and whatever his agenda truly is.

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Just like I must protect mine, in whatever our final step holds.

“Well done,” his voice breaks the silence as he begins the process of binding Mazrov’s hands with enchanted cord. “Your performance was quite... convincing.”

“I’m glad you approve,” I murmur.

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“So where exactly are we taking him?” I ask, observing Dayn carefully as he finishes binding Mazrov’s unconscious form.

While his attention is on the guard, I extract a small wooden box from my pocket, retrieve two white tablets, and swallow them. The bitter taste of the counter-suppression pills dissolves on my tongue. Within seconds, I feel a rush of power flooding back through my veins. My skin tingles as my darkblood signature reasserts itself.

Now that I’m done with my job of luring Mazrov, and since we’re currently outside Heathborne, there’s no need to continue operating at only thirty percent of my power while around Dayn. Of course, his runes are still stamped on me, but at least I don’t have the added weight of the pills.

“Not Heathborne—yet,” Dayn responds, rising to his feet.

“Change of plan?” I ask.

“A detour,” he replies.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.”

He throws me my small pack, containing my regular clothes, which he’s been looking after. Then he unfurls a large canvas sack—the kind farmers use for transporting grain—and unceremoniously stuffs Mazrov’s bound form inside. The guard’s head lolls lifelessly, though the steady rise and fall of his chest confirms he’s merely unconscious.

I follow behind cautiously as he strides away from the alley, his pace brisk despite carrying a six-foot guard’s weight. Mazrov’s sacked form looks so vulnerable hung over Dayn’s shoulder, his normally imposing presence reduced to deadweight.

Dayn’s boots click sharply against the cobblestones as he turns down a narrow path that winds away from the village. I keep pace, my senses on high alert. I instinctively stoop and brush my fingers against the hilt of the dagger in my boot.

“Your aura is stronger,” Dayn observes suddenly without turning. “Counter-suppressants?”

Of course he noticed. “The double dosage served its purpose. No point in operating at low capacity when we might encounter... complications.”

“Wise,” he says, his voice low. “Though I wonder if it’s me you hope to prepare for.”

“Maybe I just don’t trust you to watch my back,” I say, my tone light but edged with enough bite to make it clear I’m not joking.

Dayn pauses, glancing over his shoulder with a faint smile that doesn't reach his molten eyes. "A fair assumption. Though..." He pauses, then faces forward again and continues walking.

"Though what?" I ask. "You were about to say something profound, weren't you?"

"We should focus, not talk."

I resist pointing out that he was the one who started the conversation, and set my eyes on the path ahead.

The streets thin out as we approach the village outskirts, houses becoming sparser, the glow of lanterns disappearing behind us. Dayn's silhouette cuts a sharp figure against the moonlit landscape and I realize we have almost reached the woods that border the village.

They open before us like a gaping maw, ancient trees standing sentinel. Moonlight filters through the canopy in dappled patches, barely illuminating a narrow path.

We walk in silence for several minutes, the forest growing denser around us. My senses—no longer dulled by suppression pills—pick up the whispers of nocturnal creatures, the subtle shifts in magical energy that permeate these woods. Old magic. Angry magic. This place has witnessed bloodshed.

A clearing emerges where an apparently abandoned stone structure stands, partially reclaimed by the forest. Moss crawls up the walls, and part of the roof has collapsed, but the remainder appears sturdy enough. The building seems ancient, perhaps even predating Heathborne itself, with symbols carved into the stone that I don't recognize.

"What is this place?" I ask as we approach.

“A temporary stop.” Dayn kicks open the rotting wooden door, which groans in protest.

I step slowly inside after him. The air is stale and heavy with dust. Moonlight streams through gaps in the roof, illuminating a space that might once have been a chapel or meeting hall. The floor is stone, worn smooth by centuries of footsteps, and the walls bear faded markings that might be runes or writing in a language long forgotten.

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Dayn drops the sack in a corner, none too gently. Mazrov's body makes a dull thud as it hits the stone floor. He kneels beside the sack, presses his palm to the ground, and begins to trace a complex pattern around Mazrov's concealed form. Golden light follows his fingertip, etching a circle of runes that pulse with the same amber glow as the marks on my wrist. Another shield.

"Just a precautionary measure," he explains without looking up. "He shouldn't wake up for hours. I need to make some... preparations in Heathborne, before we bring him there, and then I'll return. I'll be back in less than an hour."

"And I'm supposed to wait here with him?" I glance at the sack.

"Yes." Dayn moves toward the door, then pauses. "Just try not to break anything while I'm gone. Some things in this world are truly irreplaceable."

I frown as he disappears, unable to tell if he's referring to the building, to Mazrov, or to something else entirely. That's the problem with Dayn—layers upon layers of meaning, each one potentially a trap.

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The ancient stone walls seem to watch me as I pace the length of the musty room. Thirteen steps from the decaying door to the far wall, ten steps across. I've mapped the space in minutes, a habit ingrained from years of training. 'Always know your environment,' Corvin would say. 'It might save your life.' Right now, what might save my life remains frustratingly unclear. I cast a glance at Mazrov's bound form in the corner, still motionless within the sack, the golden runes of Dayn's shield casting

an ethereal glow across the dusty floor. The air feels charged, as if the very stones are holding their breath, waiting. For what, I don't know.

Moonlight filters through the broken sections of the roof, casting long fingers of silver-blue light across the chamber. The beams intersect with the golden glow of Dayn's runes, creating patches of strange, greenish illumination that shift and dance. The walls are covered in markings—some appear to be deliberate carvings, others the morerandom scratches of time and circumstance. I run my fingers along one sequence that seems more intentional than the rest: a series of interlocking circles with lines radiating outward like stylized suns. They remind me of the protection symbols my grandmother once drew around her home during the dark moon, though these are older, more primal somehow.

The skimpy black dress I wore to seduce Mazrov clings uncomfortably to my skin, the fabric itching against the goosebumps rising on my arms. I retrieve my pack from where I dropped it near the entrance and pull out my combat clothes—reinforced black leggings, a long-sleeved thermal top, and my familiar leather jacket with its numerous hidden pockets and weapon sheaths. I position myself in a corner where I can keep an eye on both Mazrov and the door while I change, though I doubt the unconscious guard poses any immediate threat.

As I peel off the clingy dress, the cool air raises more goosebumps across my exposed skin. I change quickly, efficiency trumping modesty. The familiar weight of my combat clothes feels like armor, not just against the chill but against the uncertainty of my situation. I tuck the dress into my pack—no sense leaving evidence behind—and secure my hair back into a tight braid. Each motion is practiced, automatic, allowing my mind to focus on more important concerns.

With my physical comfort addressed, I move closer to survey the rune shield Dayn placed around Mazrov. I didn't get a chance to properly examine the one he drew earlier. I'm careful not to touch it—I've seen what Dayn's magic can do. The circle is

approximately eight feet in diameter, with Mazrov's bagged form at its center. The runes themselves pulse with an amber light that matches the marks on my wrist, but these are far more complex, layered in concentric rings.

I recognize some of the symbols from my training in blood magic—containment glyphs, binding markers, sensory dampeners—but others are wholly unfamiliar. They don't align with any magical system I've studied, neither darkblood nor clearblood. Some appear to have been drawn in a language that predates our modern runic alphabets, with shapes that seem to twist in my vision if I look at them too directly. Dragon magic. Ancient and powerful in ways I can barely comprehend.

The temperature in the room suddenly plummets, my breath crystallizing in front of my face. It's a familiar cold—not the ambient chill of a stone building at night, but the bone-deep freeze that accompanies spiritual manifestation.

The air in the center of the room shimmers, light bending around a point that seems to absorb the moonbeams. A figure begins to form—transparent at first, then gaining a translucent solidity.

“Grandma,” I gasp.

My grandmother's familiar weathered face emerges from the shimmer, her silver-streaked hair in its usual traditional braids.

But something is wrong. Her form stutters, fragments of her image appearing and disappearing like a broken projection. Her mouth opens to speak, but no clear sound emerges, just a distorted echo that bounces off the stone walls.

“Ch-Ch-Child,” her voice finally breaks through, distant and fractured.

I instinctively move toward her, then stop as I feel a burning sensation from the runes

on my wrist. They glow brighter now, pulsing with what appears to be agitation. Of course—Dayn’s markings aren’t just limiting my power, they’re interfering with my connections to darkblood magic in all its forms, including ancestral communication.

“Grandma, I can barely hear you. A... uh... A dragon has marked me.”

That’s... definitely the weirdest thing I’ve ever said to my grandmother. I should probably write it down, for future therapy sessions.

What do I expect her to reply? “A dragon has marked you? Esme, I hope you at least got his number. That’s quite the first impression.”

I show her my wrist, the runes now burning hot against my skin, and I can almost hear the universe cackling at my expense. A dragon has marked me. Sure. Because being a darkblood operative with a vendetta against clearblood authority and a lethal, aura-destroying machine wasn’t complicated enough. It had to throw in ancient, unpredictable magical bonds—just to keep things interesting. Clearly, what my life was missing was a dash of dragon drama, because, you know, ancient magical contracts with beings who haven’t been seen in centuries are exactly the kind of commitment I was looking for. Forget dating—apparently, I’m now bound to a creature whose idea of a relationship involves magical coercion and the occasional life-threatening ritual. Perfect. Just what I always wanted in a partner—mysterious, dangerous, and, let’s not forget, hundreds of years old. I’m sure that won’t come with any baggage.

Or maybe she’ll say, “Esme, don’t play with fire.” “Esme, don’t talk to strangers.” “Esme, don’t let ancient, manipulative dragons carve their runes into your wrist.”

But she’ll be thrilled to know I didn’t ask for this. It just sort of happened. Like a bad tattoo after a night of questionable decisions—except instead of whiskey, it was a dragon with a god complex and a penchant for dramatic flair.

In truth, I don't know how much Esther Esme Salem knows about dragons because she rarely spoke of them to me, and I can't rely on what comes out of Dayn's mouth. But I think she must at least sense ancient magic in the room.

Her image flickers violently, parts of her form dissolving into mist before reforming. "The d-d-dragon's b-blood," she manages, her voice skipping like a damaged recording. "You must... t-take it into you."

I stare at her. "What?"

"D-Drink his blood, child." Her eyes widen in her flickering form. "B-Before the Unbinding. Y-You must."

The urgency in her voice injects ice in my veins. My grandmother was many things—ruthless, demanding, occasionally cruel in her teachings—but she was never one for melodrama or false warnings. That never changed in her death.

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“Wh-Why? And what do you mean?” I ask, but her form is already beginning to dissipate, the connection weakening. “And how?! Grandma, how do I?—?”

“J-Just... f-find a w-way,” she interrupts, her voice fading. “Y-You must... d-drink his blood.”

Her image collects into a swirl of mist, then scatters as if blown by an invisible wind. The temperature in the room gradually begins to rise back to its previous chill rather than the supernatural freeze of moments before.

I stand frozen in place, unsure of how to even start processing what my grandmother just instructed me.

Drink dragon blood.

Dayn’s blood.

Right.

Sure. Why not, Grandma? I’ll just waltz up to Dayn and ask him nicely for a sip.

Because that’s going to be a casual conversation starter. Hey, Dayn, mind if I borrow a cup of your ancient dragon plasma? I promise it’s not for anything weird. Of all the cryptic warnings my grandmother could have given me from beyond the grave, she chose this.

And she didn’t even tell me why I need to drink it. Or anything about it. I’m good at

following instructions—it's been drummed into me during my time at Darkbirch Academy—but I'm not in the business of consuming supernatural bodily fluids without at least a leaflet on potential side effects.

I run my fingers through my hair, dislodging my carefully constructed braid. "Drink his blood. Right. Because that's not weird at all." My voice echoes in the empty chamber, sounding hollow and slightly manic. I press my palms against my eyes and take a deep breath.

Dragon's blood. Probably tastes like a mix of battery acid, molten metal, and superiority complex. I wonder if it comes in flavors. Maybe a nice hint of cinnamon would make it go down easier.

But beneath my sardonic thoughts, fear coils in my stomach. Grandmother never appeared to me like this—fragmented, desperate. "Before the Unbinding," she'd said. What does she think could happen to me if I don't drink it? And how would she know? How could she possibly understand what the Unbinding Ritual entails when Dayn himself has been so secretive about its requirements? Unless... unless she knows something about dragons that I don't. The thought is troubling. Why didn't she tell me more about them?

I glance at my wrist where his runes pulse steadily. The man who marked me, the dragon whose blood I apparently need to drink. The same man who's made it abundantly clear he sees me as a tool at best, a liability at worst.

"Just ask him nicely," I mutter. "Because that's a totally normal request." I pace the chamber, my boots kicking up dust with each agitated step. "Drink the blood of a manipulative, arrogant dragon professor who's probably older than this building."

I glance at my wrist again, where his runes pulse with amber light. The same runes that are currently preventing me from communicating properly with my grandmother.

The same runes that give him an alarming degree of control over me.

“And what exactly happens if I ‘drink his blood?’” I make air quotes with my fingers to an audience of ancient stones and one unconscious guard. “Do I turn into a dragon? Grow scales? Start hoarding gold and virgins?” Or worse, become like Dayn?

The absurdity of my situation hits me all at once, and I can’t help but laugh—a short, sharp sound that bounces off the walls.

The mere thought makes my stomach turn. I’ve consumed some questionable substances during my training—poisons to build immunity, strange herbal concoctions to enhance my senses—but this? It’s a new level of revolting.

I slide down the wall until I’m sitting on the dusty floor, my knees pulled up to my chest. This is ridiculous. Absolutely ridi?—

The sound of approaching footsteps cuts through my thoughts. Dayn is returning—on foot rather than his vanishing act, for some reason—and I have mere seconds to compose myself. I stand up quickly, dusting myself down, positioning myself near one of the walls in a casual stance.

The rotting door creaks open, and Dayn’s imposing silhouette fills the frame. His amber eyes immediately lock onto mine, narrowing slightly as if sensing something amiss.

“Problem?” he asks, his voice deceptively casual.

I shrug, my face a carefully constructed mask of indifference. “No.”

“Good,” Dayn replies, though his tone suggests he doesn’t believe me. “It’s time to move.”

He crosses to where Mazrov lies and checks the runes surrounding him. With a flick of his wrist, the golden light dims, then vanishes completely. He hoists the sack onto his shoulder with disturbing ease.

“We’re heading back to Heathborne?” I ask, gathering my pack.

“Yes. The preparations are complete.” He gestures toward the door. “After you.”

I step outside, the cool night air a welcome relief after the musty confines of the stone building. The forest seems different somehow, the shadows deeper, the moonlight sharper. Or maybe it’s just my nerves, stretched taut as bowstrings.

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We begin our trek back through the woods, Dayn a few paces behind me. I can feel his eyes on my back like physical pressure. The weight of my grandmother's warning sits heavy in my chest.

Drink his blood. Right. Should I just ask for a free sample? Maybe suggest a blood donation drive? Hey, Dayn, feeling charitable today? The Blood Bank of Esme is running dangerously low.

The forest path narrows, forcing us to walk single file. Branches reach out like grasping fingers, occasionally snagging my jacket. In the distance, I can just make out the silhouette of Heathborne's towers against the night sky, a dark mountain of stone and secrets. I reluctantly pop a suppression pill and begin to glamour myself back into the appearance of Clara Winters, blue eyes included. We're getting close.

"You're unusually quiet," Dayn observes from behind me. "Second thoughts?"

"Just strategizing," I reply, stepping over a fallen log. "Trying to predict how many ways this could go horribly wrong."

"A worthwhile exercise," he says, and I swear I can hear amusement in his voice. "Though futile. The variables are too numerous."

"That's comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be."

We lapse back into silence. The runes on my wrist pulse in time with my heartbeat, a

constant reminder of the connection between us. A connection I apparently need to deepen by ingesting his blood. Fantastic.

Hey, I've been thinking about starting a new liquid diet. Got any recommendations? Perhaps something dark, ancient, and directly from your veins?

I stifle a snort at my own absurdity. Focus, Esme.

"Something amusing?" Dayn asks.

"Just contemplating the ridiculousness of my life choices." I push a low-hanging branch out of my way. "Never thought I'd be escorting an unconscious clearblood guard through the woods with a dragon."

"Life is full of surprises."

"Is that what this is? A surprise? Because it feels more like a carefully orchestrated trap."

Dayn shifts Mazrov's weight on his shoulder. "Perception is subjective."

"Philosophy now? Really?"

The trees begin to thin as we approach the edge of the forest, and I can see Heathborne's imposing silhouette growing larger against the night sky. I quicken my pace slightly, eager to get this over with.

"Slow down," Dayn says behind me. "We need to approach cautiously."

I roll my eyes where he can't see. "Right, because two people carrying what's obviously a body-shaped sack won't attract attention regardless of our speed."

“Your sarcasm is noted but unnecessary,” he replies coolly.

We fall into silence as we continue our trek. The runes on my wrist pulse rhythmically, almost mockingly. Drink his blood. Drink his blood. My grandmother’s words echo in my head like some demented nursery rhyme.

I glance back at Dayn, studying his profile in the moonlight. His jaw is set, eyes focused ahead, carrying Mazrov’s considerable weight as effortlessly as if the guard were made of cotton. How exactly does one casually extract blood from a dragon? I imagine myself attempting small talk while palming a syringe: So, lovely weather we’re having. Mind if I just... tap a vein?

The absurdity almost makes me laugh out loud again.

“Sure nothing’s on your mind?” Dayn asks without looking at me.

“Just wondering if dragons are blood type O-negative. You know, universal donors and all that.”

His step falters slightly—the first sign of surprise I’ve ever seen from him. “An odd question.”

“I have a naturally inquisitive mind.”

“Indeed.” His voice is flat. “Though I suggest focusing your curiosity elsewhere.”

We emerge from the forest onto a narrow path that winds its way toward Heathborne’s service entrance. The massive stone walls loom above us, windows dark except for the occasional flicker of lamplight. Guards will be patrolling, but Dayn seems unconcerned, striding forward with purpose.

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“I assume you have a plan for getting past security with our... package?” I ask, nodding toward Mazrov’s form.

“The guards won’t see us,” Dayn says simply.

“Invisibility spell?” I raise an eyebrow. “Fancy.”

“Not exactly.”

As we approach the service gate, I notice the two guards stationed there standing unnaturally still. As we draw closer, I see their eyes are open but vacant, staring straight ahead without tracking our movement.

“What did you do to them?” I ask, waving a hand in front of one guard’s face. No response.

“They’re merely... elsewhere at the moment,” Dayn replies. “They’ll remember nothing of our passing.”

“Must be convenient, being able to mind-wipe people at will,” I mutter as we slip through the gate. “Do you ever use that trick at faculty meetings?”

“Tempting,” he says, and I swear I catch a slight smile on his lips before it vanishes.

We move through the darkened service corridors of Heathborne, our footsteps echoing softly against stone. I match my pace to Dayn’s, careful to stay close as we navigate the labyrinthine passages. The walls feel like they’re closing in, ancient

stone breathing with secrets. Or maybe that's just my imagination, fueled by the increasingly bizarre situation I find myself in.

"So," I whisper, breaking the tense silence as we turn down yet another identical corridor. "What's your blood type anyway? Just curious. For science."

Dayn doesn't even glance at me. "I don't believe dragon blood falls within standard human classification systems."

"Right. Of course not. That would be too convenient." I step over a loose flagstone. "Probably tastes terrible anyway. Like, I don't know, fire and brimstone? Liquid arrogance?"

This earns me a sideways look, his amber eyes glinting in the dim light. "You have a peculiar fixation with blood this evening."

"Just making conversation." I shrug. "Better than discussing the weather or how we're smuggling an unconscious guard through the castle."

I scan the corridor ahead, mapping possible escape routes should we encounter trouble. Old habits.

"Your grandmother visited you," Dayn says suddenly, his voice low and matter-of-fact.

I nearly trip over my own feet. "What?"

"In the stone chamber. You had a spectral visitor." He continues walking as if he'd merely commented on a change in temperature. "What did she tell you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lie, the words feeling clumsy on my

tongue. “Though if you’re suggesting I talk to ghosts now, I’m flattered you think I’m that powerful while under the influence of your runes.”

“The runes on your wrist flared. They respond to certain... interferences.” His tone remains casual, but there’s an edge to it now. “Ancestral communication would qualify.”

Fantastic. My magical monitor apparently doubles as a spirit detector. “If you must know, she just wanted to check if I was eating enough vegetables. Very concerned about my fiber intake.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Dayn shifts Mazrov’s weight again with ease. “Salem matriarchs aren’t known for their nutritional advice.”

We turn down another corridor, this one narrower than the others. The air feels different here—charged somehow, as if the very stones are holding their breath. Ahead, a door stands partially hidden in an alcove, the wood ancient and marked with symbols similar to those in the forest chamber.

“Here,” Dayn says, stopping before it. He presses a palm against the center of the door. The symbols carved into the wood begin to glow with the same amber light as his eyes, pulsing in a complex rhythm. The door swings inward silently, revealing a spiraling staircase descending into darkness.

“After you,” he says with a gesture that might almost be mistaken for courtesy if I didn’t know better.

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I step through the doorway and onto the first stair. The darkness below seems to swallow the light, an impenetrable void that makes my skin prickle with unease.

“I don’t suppose dragons come with built-in night vision they can share?” I ask, testing the next step with my foot before committing my weight to it.

“No need,” Dayn says, close behind me. He snaps his fingers, and balls of amber light appear, floating along the walls of the staircase like ethereal lanterns. “Better?”

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“Obviously,” I mutter, but I’m secretly grateful for the illumination. I prefer not to waste my own abilities on something as mundane as lighting.

The stairs spiral downward in a tight coil, the walls close on either side. It feels like descending into the throat of some ancient beast. Which, considering who I’m with, is perhaps not the most comforting metaphor.

We descend in silence for what feels like an eternity, the only sounds our footsteps. The staircase seems to go impossibly deep, far below what should be the foundation of Heathborne. The air here feels charged, almost liquid with magical potential. We must be close to the convergence point, that nexus of ley lines beneath Heathborne’s foundation.

After what feels like a hundred steps but is probably closer to fifty, the staircase finally opens into a chamber that steals my breath. Not with beauty, but with power. The room pulses with energy so thick I could swim through it. Seven channels of light converge in the center, each a different color—vibrant blue, deep red, verdant green, brilliant white, midnight black, shimmering silver, and molten gold.

“Impressed?” Dayn asks, his voice oddly subdued in this space.

“It’s alright,” I shrug, though my racing heart betrays me. The runes on my wrist hum in response to the ambient energy, sending tingling sensations up my arm.

Dayn moves toward a stone altar positioned just beyond where the streams of light meet. He lays Mazrov’s sack-wrapped form on it with surprising gentleness.

“So this is where the magic happens? Literally?” I survey the chamber, noting ancient symbols carved into every surface, some familiar from my darkblood training, others completely foreign. “Cozy. Though your interior decorator should really consider some throw pillows.”

“Your attempts at levity mask your discomfort poorly,” Dayn observes, beginning to arrange items on a smaller table beside the altar—a silver bowl, several vials of liquid in varying colors, a knife with a blade that seems to absorb light rather than reflect it.

On the floor, I also notice the items we’ve risked our lives to collect: the Relic of Severance nestled in an iron box, the vial of iridescent moonfire flower essence, elder blood in its crystal phial, the small pouch of darkblood ash, and the convergence water in a sealed glass flask.

I decide to keep my mouth closed for now and study Dayn as he works, his movements precise and economical.

How exactly am I going to do this? Perhaps I could nick him during the ritual? Create some minor “accident” that draws blood? But would a small amount even be enough? My grandmother could have at least specified the amount.

“You’re staring,” Dayn says without looking up from his preparations.

“Just admiring your work ethic,” I murmur.

Dayn arranges the final items with methodical precision, his fingers tracing patterns in the air above each component. The convergence waters shimmer in response, tiny ripples forming on the surface despite the sealed container. The moonfire essence glows brighter, pulsing as if in rhythm with the ley lines beneath us.

“There,” he says finally, stepping back from his meticulous arrangement. He turns to

face me, his amber eyes glowing with an intensity that makes the runes on my wrist burn. “Now for the final preparation.”

“And that would be...?”

“Blood.” He steps toward me, shortening the distance between us with predatory grace. “Your blood, to be precise.”

“My blood?” I almost splutter but manage to keep my voice level despite my racing thoughts. “That was never on the list.”

“It’s not something that could be collected in advance.” His eyes track across my face, searching for something. “The blood must be fresh. And willingly given.”

“Willingly given,” I repeat. “That’s an interesting stipulation.”

“The binding between myself and Heathborne was created using darkblood sacrifice. Their mages captured and drained seven darkblood practitioners to forge the chains that hold me. Symmetry demands that darkblood willingly given is required to break those chains.”

The word sacrifice hangs in the air like a blade, sharp and heavy. My stomach twists.

My people—murdered, their blood harvested like a crop, their lives extinguished to chain a dragon to this institution. How many covens lost members in that ritual? How many children lost mothers or fathers?

And what is going to happen to me down here if I don’t manage to drink Dayn’s blood?

“Symmetry,” I repeat, my voice remarkably steady despite the disturbance inside me.

“So you need me to balance the scales. Poetic.” I pause. “And what happens if I say no?”

“Then the ritual fails. And our arrangement becomes... problematic.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You mean you’d kill me?”

He exhales. “I mean the consequences would be undesirable for both of us. As you already know.”

I pause again, the beginnings of a plan forming. “So you need my blood,” I state flatly, fighting to keep my face impassive. “How much are we talking?”

Dayn steps closer, his movements deliberate but unexpectedly soft, as if approaching a skittish animal. The intensity in his gaze is tempered by something almost like hesitation—an unfamiliar vulnerability that makes my pulse quicken. He reaches for my hand, his fingers brushing against the runes on my wrist with a gentleness that contrasts sharply with the heat of his touch.

“Not much,” he says, his voice low and measured. “Just enough to begin the ritual. A few drops willingly offered will suffice.”

His thumb traces the edge of the rune and I feel it flare in response, a warm, tingling sensation spreading up my arm. His other hand comes up to cradle my wrist, turning it slightly so that the pale skin of my inner arm is exposed. His touch is careful, almost reverent, but there’s an undercurrent of something darker—a hunger that he’s barely keeping in check.

I swallow hard, forcing myself to keep still even as every instinct screams to pull away. “And how exactly do you planto collect it? Should I just hold out my hand and say ‘take what you need?’”

Dayn’s gaze drops to the curve of my neck, lingering there with an intensity that makes my skin prickle. His fingers tighten slightly around my wrist, not painfully, but enough to anchor me in place. “The blood must be taken directly,” he says, his voice low and deliberate, “from a point where life flows closest to the surface. The neck is... efficient.”

For a moment, I can't breathe. My pulse hammers beneath his fingertips, betraying the calm I'm desperately trying to project. "Efficient," I echo, my voice tight. "Of course. Why waste time when you can just... bite me?"

His expression doesn't change, but there's a flicker in his eyes—something that might be amusement or irritation. "You misunderstand. This isn't some primal act of savagery. It's a ritual necessity. The exchange must be precise, controlled."

"Controlled," I repeat, my tone dripping with skepticism. "Because that makes it so much better."

His thumb brushes over the runes again, and I feel them warm beneath his touch. "Your sarcasm isn't helpful," he says evenly.

"Neither is your lack of warning." I pull my hand free from his grasp, stepping back to put some distance between us. My heart is racing now, my mind spinning with too many thoughts at once. Drink his blood. That's what my grandmother said. But now it's my blood he needs—and not just any blood. Blood taken from my neck, like some kind of twisted intimacy.

Dayn watches me carefully, his body still as stone but his gaze sharp enough to cut glass. "This isn't negotiable," he says finally. "The ritual requires your cooperation."

"And if I refuse?" I ask again, though I already know the answer.

He exhales slowly, as if weighing his words. "Then we both lose something vital." His tone softens imperceptibly, though the edge remains. "I don't want to force you, Esme. But time is not on our side."

I press my lips together, forcing myself to think rationally despite the storm raging inside me. My mind races, analyzing possibilities, strategies, angles.

A slow breath escapes me as I settle on my move.

I meet his gaze, my jaw clenched. “Fine. I’ll give you what you need. But on one condition.”

Dayn’s expression doesn’t shift, but his eyes narrow slightly, a flicker of wariness breaking through his calm facade. “And that would be?”

“You let me drink some of your blood in return.”

The silence that follows is deafening. For the first time since I’ve known him, Dayn looks genuinely unsettled. He takes a step back, his amber eyes flaring with something I can’t quite place—anger, disbelief, maybe even fear.

“Absolutely not,” he says, his voice low and cold as winter stone.

“Why not?” I press, stepping forward to close the distance he just created. “If it’s just a ritual necessity, what’s the harm? Symmetry, right? You take mine, I take yours. Seems fair.”

His jaw tightens visibly, a muscle twitching in his cheek as he regards me with an intensity that would make most people shrink back. But I hold my ground, my chin lifted in defiance.

“Esme,” he says slowly, each word deliberate and laced with warning, “you have no idea what you’re asking for.”

“Enlighten me then.” My voice is steady despite the tremor in my chest. “Because from where I’m standing, it sounds like you’re fine with taking what you need from me but draw the line at returning the favor.”

The air between us crackles with tension, the convergence of ley lines beneath us amplifying the energy until it feels like the room itself is holding its breath. Dayn's gaze locks onto mine, and for a moment, I think he might refuse outright—might shut me down with a cutting remark or simply walk away.

But then something shifts in his expression—subtle but unmistakable. The faintest flicker of uncertainty crosses his face before it's quickly masked by practiced composure.

“Drinking my blood isn't some trivial act,” he says finally, his tone measured but edged with caution. “It's not like sipping a drink at dinner or sharing a meal. My blood carries power—ancient power. It could... overwhelm you, in ways you can't predict or control.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Funny how you're suddenly concerned about my well-being when it comes to your blood but were perfectly fine with taking mine.”

Internally, however, his words give me concern. In what ways could it overwhelm me? Then again, my grandmother wouldn't have asked me to do something fundamentally detrimental to me, would she? Her advice was given to help me survive. Help us all survive. I have to trust her.

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His lips thin into a sharp line, and I can see the gears turning behind his eyes as he tries to find a way to counter my argument without revealing too much.

“There are risks,” he says grudgingly after a long pause.

“And yet you want me to take risks,” I counter swiftly, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring at him. “You said at the start that this whole ritual is risky.”

He exhales sharply through his nose before turning away from me altogether—though only briefly before spinning back around to face me.

“Esme.” His tone is clipped now—all pretense dropped leaving nothing but raw irritation behind instead. “Don’t be difficult.”

I laugh, a high-pitched thing that pierces through the chamber. “Difficult? You want to talk about being difficult?” I begin to pace before him, leopard-like. “Alright. Let’s review, shall we? You’ve marked me with magical runes without my consent, dragged me across this academy on a scavenger hunt for mystical ingredients, nearly gotten me killed multiple times, and now you want to drink my blood from my neck like some supernatural parasite. But I’m the difficult one for asking for equal treatment?”

I take a step toward him, my finger jabbing in his direction. “You know what’s difficult? Trying to decipher your cryptic dragon riddles. Difficult is being expected to trust someone who’s been a threat to my life more times than I’ve had hot meals this week. Difficult is standing in this creepy underground chamber with a man who apparently finds the concept of reciprocity completely foreign.”

Dayn's expression remains impassive, but I catch the slight twitch at the corner of his eye.

"If I were being difficult," I continue, warming to my theme, "I would have left you to deal with everything on your own. I would have refused to help collect your little ritual ingredients. I would have smashed your precious convergence water, scattered your darkblood ash to the winds, and danced on the shattered remains of your Relic of Severance." I gesture wildly toward the collection of ritual components. "But instead, I've been remarkably accommodating, considering the circumstances. I've followed your instructions, played your games, and now I'm simply asking for basic fairness. But oh no, that makes me difficult."

I pace a small circle, my boots echoing against the stone floor. "And let's not forget that I'm still here despite your constant condescension. Do you know how many times you've looked at me like I'm something you found stuck to the bottom of your pretentious dragon shoe? I've counted. It's a lot."

Dayn watches me with an expression caught between annoyance and something that might almost be amusement.

"You want difficult?" I continue, my voice rising slightly. "I could show you difficult. I could start asking detailed questions about your mysterious past, your convenient position at Heathborne, your apparent ability to mind-control guards. I could demand explanations for every cryptic comment and shadowy glance. I could insist on a detailed breakdown of exactly what these runes—" I thrust my wrist toward him, "—are doing to me every minute of every day."

I stop directly in front of him, close enough to feel the unnatural heat radiating from his body. "But I haven't. I've been a model of cooperation and restraint. So don't you dare call me difficult when all I'm asking for is a simple blood exchange that you were planning to initiate anyway."

Dayn remains silent for a long moment, his amber eyes fixed on mine with an intensity that would make most people shrivel. I hold his gaze, refusing to back down.

Finally, he speaks, his voice unnervingly calm. “Are you quite finished?”

“Not even close,” I snap. “But I’ll pause for your rebuttal. This should be entertaining.”

He sighs, a sound so human it almost throws me. “Your grandmother told you to drink my blood, didn’t she?”

The question catches me off guard, and I feel my face betray me before I can school my expression.

“That’s what I thought,” he continues, satisfaction coloring his tone. “What you don’t understand—what she couldn’t possibly have explained in her weak state—is what my blood would do to you. But if you want to do it anyway... You know what? Fine. I’ll let you drink my blood. And you can live with whatever the consequences are.”

His agreement catches me mid-breath. I expected him to continue arguing, pushing back. Is this another game play by him? I don’t know. But what I do know is that I trust my grandmother more than him. And, for now, it seems I’ve gotten what I wanted.

“Fine,” I say, defiant.

“Fine,” he replies.

The silence stretches between us like a rubber band pulled taut, ready to snap. Dayn's amber eyes burn into mine, his jaw clenched tight enough to crack walnuts.

"So... how exactly do we do this?" I ask, glancing around the chamber.

"I'll go first," Dayn says, stepping toward me.

I hold up a hand, stopping him. "Absolutely not."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. If you go first, what guarantee do I have that you'll follow through with your end of the bargain?" I cross my arms. "For all I know, you'll get what you need and then conveniently decide I'm not 'ready' for dragon blood or whatever excuse you concoct."

His eyes narrow dangerously. "You doubt my word?"

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“Let me think about that for exactly zero seconds—yes. Yes, I do.” I gesture vaguely at our surroundings. “This entire situation screams ‘trap.’ So forgive me if I’m not eager to bare my neck before securing what I need.”

“And if I have the same concerns?” Dayn counters. “How do I know you won’t take my blood and then refuse to give yours?”

“And watch as Heathborne becomes a factory for darkblood slaughtering armies? I’ve come this far, I’m unlikely to withdraw at the last minute.” I pause at his dissatisfied expression, tapping my foot on the ground. “Otherwise, we need to do this simultaneously. That’s the only fair way.”

He frowns. “And how do you propose that would work?”

“You drink from my neck while I...” I pause, considering further. My grandmother hadn’t specified any part of his body that I had to get blood from. She’d just urged me to drink his blood. If the body part were crucial, I’m certain she would have included it in her memo. “While I drink from your wrist. That way, we both get what we need at the same time, and neither can back out.”

Dayn stares at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Finally, he nods. “Acceptable. Let’s get this over with.”

He steps closer, close enough that I can feel the heat surging off him. “Your collar,” he says, gesturing to my top. “It’s in the way.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Hm?”

“You’ll need to remove it.”

“Excuse me?”

“The ritual requires direct access,” he says, as if explaining something to a particularly slow student. “Your clothing is hampering that access.”

I stare at him, wondering if this is some elaborate power play. “You want me to strip. For a ritual.”

“Not entirely,” he clarifies. “Just enough to provide the necessary... exposure.”

“Right,” I say, drawing out the word. Because nothing says ‘ancient magical ceremony’ like partial nudity.

I hold his gaze for a long moment, then shrug off my unzipped jacket. “Fine. But if this turns out to be some weird dragon fetish thing, I’m walking out.”

“Noted,” he says, his expression unreadable.

I pull my top over my head in one fluid motion, leaving me in just my practical black sports bra. The air of the chamber raises goosebumps across my exposed skin, despite his heat, and I resist the urge to cross my arms over my chest. I refuse to show discomfort.

“Happy now?” I ask, dropping my top onto a nearby stone bench.

Instead of answering, Dayn begins unbuttoning his own shirt, his fingers moving with startling efficiency.

“What are you doing?” I ask. “You only need to roll up your sleeve for me to access

your wrist.”

He shrugs out of the shirt, revealing his impossibly chiseled torso marked with intricate patterns that seem to shimmer beneath his skin.

“The ritual requires symmetry,” he says, as if that explains everything.

He steps closer, his bare chest radiating heat like a furnace. The runes beneath his skin pulse with amber light, matching the rhythm of the ones on my wrist. I force myself to hold my ground despite the instinct to back away.

“This isn’t a simple procedure,” he says, his voicedropping to a lower register. “What we’re about to do... it creates a connection. Temporary, but significant.”

“Define ‘connection,’” I say, suspicion creeping into my tone.

“Blood carries memory, intent, power.” His eyes track over my face, searching. “When you drink mine, you’ll see fragments of my past. When I drink yours, I’ll see yours.”

My stomach drops. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“It’s not optional.” He reaches for my hand, turning my wrist gently to expose the runes. “These mark you as connected to me already. The blood exchange will deepen that connection, but only briefly.”

I jerk my hand away. “More information you conveniently withheld until the last minute.”

“Would you have agreed earlier if I’d told you?”

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“That’s not the point.”

“It’s precisely the point.” His tone remains even, but there’s an edge to it now.

“We’re wasting time, Esme. Mazrov won’t remain unconscious forever.”

I glance at his form on the altar, then back to Dayn. His eyes hold mine, challenging, waiting.

“Alright,” I concede. “But only what’s necessary for the ritual. No extra... sightseeing.”

“I’ll try to restrain my curiosity,” he says dryly.

He reaches for my shoulder, his touch unexpectedly gentle as he guides me closer. The heat of his bare skin near mine sends an involuntary shiver down my spine.

“Cold?” he asks, his breath warm against my hair.

“Hardly,” I mutter.

I don’t even see him move. In one fluid motion, Dayn pulls me against his chest, one hand tangling in my hair while the other wraps around my waist. His body burns against mine, all hard planes and searing heat. I gasp at the sudden proximity, my hands instinctively bracing against his bare chest. The runes beneath his skin pulse beneath my fingertips, sending vibrations up my arms.

“Wait—” I start to say, but the word dies in my throat as his lips brush against my

neck. Not a kiss, but something more primal—testing, tasting. His breath is scorching against my skin, raising goosebumps despite the heat. My heart hammers frantically, and I know he can feel it, can hear the blood rushing through my veins.

I raise my foot and fumble for the dagger concealed in my boot, my movements clumsy with adrenaline. My fingers close around the hilt as his mouth travels up the curve of my neck, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. I pull the blade free, my hand shaking slightly as I bring it to his wrist.

The cool metal touches his skin, and he pauses, his lips still pressed against my pulse point. I feel rather than see his smile against my neck.

“Clever girl,” he murmurs, the words vibrating against my skin.

With a quick motion, I slice the blade across his wrist. Dark blood wells immediately—not red but something deeper, almost black with flecks of gold swirling within it. The scent hits me—metallic but with undertones of smoke and something ancient, like petrichor after a lightning strike.

I stare at the blood, suddenly hesitant. My grandmother’s warning echoes in my mind, but now faced with the reality, doubt creeps in. What will this do to me? What connection will it forge that Dayn seemed so reluctant to share?

While I hesitate, Dayn doesn’t. His grip on my waist tightens, pulling me impossibly closer. His lips part against my neck, and I feel the sharp scrape of teeth—not human teeth, but something more feral, more dangerous. My breath catches in my throat as he hesitates for just a heartbeat, his tongue flicking out to taste the salt on my skin.

Then pain, bright and shocking, as his teeth pierce my flesh. I gasp, my back arching involuntarily. It’s nothing like I expected—the sharp sting quickly gives way to something else entirely, a flood of heat that spreads from the puncture through my

entire body. It's intimate in a way I wasn't prepared for, invasive yet strangely pleasurable. His mouth works against my neck, the gentle suction sending waves of sensation down my spine.

My knees threaten to buckle, but his arm around my waist holds me upright, pressed against him like we're caught in some macabre dance. The dagger in my hand suddenly feels heavy, almost forgotten. The cut on his wrist still bleeds freely, dark rivulets running down his arm. My grandmother's warning pounds in my ears, competing with the thundering of my own pulse.

Drink his blood.

Through the haze of sensation, I manage to lift his wrist to my mouth. The scent is stronger now—ancient, powerful, intoxicating. I press my lips to the wound, hesitating at the last moment as doubt crashes through me. What if this is exactly what he wants? What if my grandmother was wrong?

But Dayn's already drinking from me, his teeth deeper now, sending waves of heat through my body that make it hard to think. Each pull of his mouth against my neck draws a gasp from my lips, my body responding traitorously to his touch. It feels like a lot more than a few drops.

Before I can second-guess myself further, I close my eyes and press my mouth to his wrist.

The first taste explodes across my tongue—metallic yet sweet, burning like dark molasses and ginger but smoother, with undertones of something ancient and wild. It's nothing like human blood, nothing like I expected. It scorches down my throat, igniting every nerve ending as it goes. I feel it spreading through me like liquid fire, racing through my veins until I'm burning from the inside out.

Images flash behind my closed eyes—a mountain range I’ve never seen, bathed in crimson sunset; a woman with copper hair and steely gray eyes; hunters approaching in a forest clearing; hands tracing runes onto parchment; flames engulfing a village; a battlefield strewn with bodies; a night sky filled with wings.

His memories. His past. Fragments and glimpses, too quick to grasp fully, but enough to feel the weight of centuries pressing down on me. Loneliness. Rage. Power. Loss.

His arm tightens around me as I drink, drawing me closer until there’s not a breath of space between us. My free hand grips his shoulder for support, nails digging into his flesh as the sensations threaten to overwhelm me. His skin burns beneath my touch, the runes pulsing faster, matching the frantic rhythm of my heart.

I feel his teeth withdraw from my neck, but his lips remain, tongue sweeping over the wound in a gesture that’s both practical and disturbingly intimate. The sensation sends a shudder through me, and I nearly lose my grip on his wrist.

“Enough,” he murmurs against my skin, his voice rougher than I’ve ever heard it.

But I can’t stop. The taste is addictive, the power intoxicating. Each swallow sends another rush of heat through my body, another flash of memory behind my eyes. I want more. Need more.

His hand tangles in my hair, pulling sharply to break my connection to his wrist. “I said enough, Esme.”

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I gasp as our contact breaks, his blood still on my lips, my body humming with energy. The chamber seems to spin around me, the streaks of colored light blurring. My legs tremble, threatening to give way beneath me. I clutch at Dayn for support, my fingers digging into the hard muscle of his shoulders.

“Easy,” he murmurs, steadying me with both hands now that I’ve released his wrist. The wound there is already closing, the dark blood slowing to a trickle before stopping completely. “The first time is... intense.”

That’s an understatement. My entire body feels electrified, my senses heightened to an almost painful degree. I can hear the slow drip of water somewhere deep in the stone walls, smell the ancient dust and the copper tang of blood in the air. Even Dayn’s heat against my skin seems magnified, each point of contact between us like a brand.

“You should have warned me,” I manage to say, my voice sounding distant and strange to my own ears.

“Didn’t I?” he asks, one hand still at my waist, keeping me upright.

I try to pull away, needing space to process the riot of sensations coursing through me, but my limbs refuse to cooperate. A wave of dizziness hits me, and I sway dangerously.

“The disorientation will pass,” Dayn says, his voice closer to my ear than I expected. “Give it a moment.”

“What did you... see?” I ask, suddenly remembering his words about blood carrying memory. The thought of him witnessing fragments of my past makes me feel exposed in a way that has nothing to do with my state of undress.

He’s quiet for a beat too long. “Enough,” he finally says, the word heavy with meaning.

Before I can press him further, he releases me abruptly, stepping back as if he too needs distance. The sudden absence of his heat leaves me cold, my skin prickling with goosebumps. I reach for my discarded top, pulling it on with hands that aren’t quite steady.

“The ritual,” I remind him, desperate to focus on something concrete. “We should continue.”

Dayn nods, turning toward the altar where Mazrov still lies unconscious. His back is to me now, the intricate patterns beneath his skin shifting with each movement like living tattoos. He looks to one side, and I notice a smear of my blood on his lips before he wipes it away with the back of his hand.

“Are you ready?” he asks, not looking at me as he pulls his own shirt back on, fingers working quickly at the buttons.

I’m not sure what I’m ready for anymore. My body still hums with foreign energy, my thoughts scattered and unfocused. But I nod anyway, moving to join him at the altar.

“What happens now?” I ask, working to keep my voice level.

“Now,” Dayn says, his eyes meeting mine with an intensity that steals my breath, “we unbind a dragon.”

I swallow hard and force my mind to focus despite the dizzying effects of Dayn's blood still coursing through my veins. He moves with methodical precision, arranging the collected items in a specific pattern around Mazrov's unconscious form.

"Stand here," Dayn directs, pointing to a spot directly opposite him across the altar.

I take my position, watching as he uncorks the vial of moonfire flower essence. The iridescent liquid catches the light from the convergence streams, fracturing it into prismatic patterns across the stone walls.

"Your hands," he says, extending his own across Mazrov's body.

I hesitate before placing my palms against his. His skin burns against mine, the contact sending another jolt of awareness through my system. The wound on my neck throbs in time with my heartbeat, a constant reminder of our exchange.

"The ritual has three phases," Dayn explains, his voicetaking on a formal cadence I haven't heard before. "Severance, dissolution, and release. We must complete all three before the convergence lights shift."

"And if we don't?"

His eyes meet mine, deadly serious. "Let's focus on succeeding."

Without further preamble, Dayn begins to chant in a language I don't recognize—guttural and fluid, with syllables that seem to fold back on themselves in impossible ways. The runes beneath his skin pulse brighter with each word, and I feel answering vibrations from the marks on my wrist.

The air in the chamber grows heavy, pressing against my skin like a physical weight. The convergence streams begin to undulate, their colors intensifying until they're almost painful to look at directly.

"Now," Dayn says between phrases of the incantation, "pour the moonfire essence over the relic."

I release his hands and reach for the vial, my movements steady despite the power building in the room. The liquid seems alive as I pour it over the Relic of Severance, flowing not downward but inward, absorbed completely by the ancient object. The relic begins to glow from within, pulsing in rhythm with Dayn's chanting.

"Sprinkle the ash," he directs, never breaking the flow of his incantation. "Around him."

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I sprinkle the darkblood ash in a circle around Mazrov's form. Each particle seems to hover momentarily before settling, as if reluctant to complete its journey. As the circle closes, the ash ignites—not with normal fire, but with dark flames that cast no light and consume nothing.

The elder blood comes next, its crystal vial warm to the touch. Following Dayn's direction, I uncork it and pour a thin stream across Mazrov's chest, watching as it seeps into his body, disappearing as if absorbed through skin.

Dayn's chanting grows louder, the unknown language seeming to twist the air itself as the convergence streams respond, coiling toward us like sentient beings. The room trembles, dust raining from the ancient ceiling as power builds to a crescendo.

“The water,” Dayn commands, his voice strained with effort. “Now!”

I grasp the sealed flask of convergence water, breaking the wax seal with my thumb. The moment the seal breaks, the water inside begins to glow, shifting through colors that match the streams surrounding us. I pour it in a spiral pattern over Mazrov, starting at his feet and working upward toward his head.

The water doesn't pool or drip but hovers above him, forming a perfect mirror of the spiral I've traced. With the final drop placed at his forehead, Dayn slams his palm down onto the Relic of Severance and the entire pattern ignites.

Light explodes outward, temporarily blinding me. When my vision clears, I see Mazrov's body levitating above the altar. His back is arched unnaturally, his arms and legs splayed as if suspended by invisible strings. The runes that had been hidden

beneath Dayn's skin now appear on Mazrov's exposed flesh, burning through his clothes, mapping identical patterns across his torso.

Dayn continues chanting, but now his words seem to cause him physical pain. Sweat beads on his forehead, and his hands shake where they grip the altar's edge. Blood—his blood, that strange dark liquid shot through with gold—begins to seep from runes in his arms, tracking down his skin in glistening rivulets.

"Phase one complete," he gasps between words. "Severance initiated."

The runes on Mazrov's body pulse once, twice, then begin to detach—literally peeling away from his skin like living things, floating in the air between him and Dayn. With each separation, Mazrov's body jerks violently, and Dayn's face contorts in what appears to be equal measures of pain and relief.

"The dissolution," Dayn manages, his voice strained. "Your turn."

My heart hammers against my ribs as I step forward. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do, but some instinct—perhaps guided by the dragon blood still coursing through my system—directs my movements. I place my hands on either side of Mazrov's head, feeling a strange buzzing sensation where my skin meets his.

Words form on my tongue—words I don't recognize but somehow know. A darkblood incantation, ancient and powerful, rising from somewhere deep within me. The language flows from my lips as if I've spoken it all my life, though I couldn't translate a single phrase.

As I speak, the floating runes begin to dissolve, their golden light fragmenting into countless motes that swirl around us like a storm of fireflies. Mazrov's body relaxes incrementally with each dissolved rune, his features softening from their rictus of pain.

The final rune—the largest, positioned over Mazrov’s heart—resists the dissolution. It pulses defiantly, sending out waves of energy that clash with the convergence lights.

“It’s fighting back,” I gasp between words of the incantation. The strain of channeling this much power threatens to overwhelm me.

“Don’t stop,” Dayn commands, his voice ragged. He places his hands over mine, his skin burning like a brand. “Complete the phrase.”

The last words of the incantation tear from my throat, raw and powerful. The stubborn rune fractures with a sound like shattering glass, golden fragments spinning outward before dissolving into the swirling maelstrom of light.

Mazrov’s body convulses once, violently, then goes completely limp. The golden connection between him and Dayn snaps with an audible crack, and Dayn staggers back as if physically struck. For a moment, he looks almost diminished—less substantial somehow, his features drawn with pain and exhaustion.

“Phase two complete,” he rasps, bracing himself against the altar. “Dissolution achieved.”

But there’s no time to rest. The convergence lights grow more agitated, the colors bleeding into each other as they spin faster around the chamber. The air thrums with potential energy, the stone walls vibrating with it.

“The final phase,” Dayn says, straightening with visible effort. “Release.”

He moves to stand beside me, his arm brushing mine as we face the altar together. Without being told, I know we must speak in unison now. The words rise between us, his voice twining with mine as we recite the final incantation.

Power builds with each syllable, the convergence lights responding to our joined voices. They coalesce around us, through us, binding us momentarily in a cocoon of puremagical energy. I feel Dayn's presence brush against mine, memories overlapping, emotions bleeding across boundaries that should be impenetrable.

I see Heathborne as it was when first built, the stones fresh-cut and gleaming. I see the ritual that bound Dayn to this place—seven darkbloods arranged in a circle, their lives extinguished one by one as mages in clearblood robes chanted. I feel his rage, his helplessness, his decades of patient planning.

And I know he sees my memories too—my training at Darkbirch, my fear when Jax was injured, my grandmother's lessons, the constant vigilance that has shaped my life.

The final words of the incantation hang in the air between us, vibrating with potential. Together, we reach for the Relic of Severance, our hands closing around it simultaneously. The metal burns in our grip, growing hotter with each passing second until it's nearly unbearable. The relic melts between our fingers, transforming into liquid light that flows up our arms, tracing intricate patterns across our skin before sinking beneath the surface.

A shockwave of energy explodes outward, throwing us both backward. I slam into the wall, the breath knocked from my lungs. Through swimming vision, I see Dayn similarly sprawled across the chamber, his face contorted in a grimace.

The convergence lights whirl in a frenzy, spinning faster and faster until they blur into a solid ring of prismatic energy. The ring contracts, focusing on Mazrov's lifeless form before suddenly expanding outward in a blinding flash.

When my vision clears, Mazrov's body remains on the altar, but something fundamental has changed. The oppressive weight of Dayn's connection to him has

vanished, the threads that once bound them together now completely severed. The air feels lighter somehow, charged with potential rather than constraint.

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“It’s done,” I gasp, pushing myself to my feet. “You’re free of him.”

Dayn rises slowly, his movements uncharacteristically stiff. “Half done,” he corrects, his voice rough. “I’m free of him, but not yet of Heathborne itself.”

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The runes on my wrist pulse urgently, responding to the ambient energy still swirling through the chamber. The convergence lights haven’t settled—they continue to rotate, though more slowly now, as if waiting.

“The second unbinding,” Dayn says, approaching me with measured steps. “Are you ready?”

I nod, though truthfully I have no idea what to expect. The first ritual nearly drained me completely, and I can still feel Dayn’s blood coursing through my system, altering my perceptions in subtle ways.

“This one will be... more difficult,” he warns, stopping before me. “The binding to Heathborne is more fundamental than my connection to Mazrov. It’s woven into the very fabric of this place.”

“What do we need to do?” I ask, straightening my shoulders despite my exhaustion.

“The same components, but used differently.” Dayn gestures to the ritual items, which have transformed during the first unbinding. The elder blood has become a crystalline powder, the convergence water now a viscous gel, the darkblood ash

reconstituted into a small obsidian dagger.

He picks up the dagger, turning it over in his hands. The blade's edge seems impossibly sharp.

"The binding was created with sacrifice," he says, his eyes meeting mine. "The unbinding requires the same."

My stomach drops. "Meaning?"

"Not death," he clarifies. "A different kind of sacrifice. Willing surrender."

Before I can ask what he means, Dayn takes my hand, turning it palm-up. The runes on my wrist pulse in response, matching the rhythm of the convergence lights. His eyes meet mine, amber depths now swirling with gold.

"Your darkblood essence is the key," he says. "Not your death—your power. Freely given."

I swallow hard. "And what does that mean for me?"

"It means I need you to surrender a portion of your darkblood abilities—temporarily—to break the final binding."

The obsidian dagger gleams in his other hand, its edge catching the swirling lights. My instincts scream caution, but something deeper—perhaps influenced by his blood still flowing through me—urges trust.

"How?" I ask, my voice steadier than I feel.

Dayn guides me back to the altar where Mazrov's body still lies. "Stand across from

me,” he instructs, positioning himself at Mazrov’s head. I take my place at his feet, the convergence lights spinning between us.

“Place your hands on the altar,” Dayn says, laying his own palms flat on the stone surface. As I comply, the runes on my wrist flare with sudden heat, spreading up my arm in intricate patterns I’ve never seen before. They mirror those beneath Dayn’s skin, creating a visual resonance between us.

“The convergence point beneath Heathborne is a nexus of power,” Dayn reminds me, his voice taking on that formal cadence again. “Seven ley lines meeting at a single point—a rare phenomenon that the founders exploited to bind me here. To break that binding, we must disrupt the convergence temporarily.”

He lifts the obsidian dagger, its blade catching the swirling lights. “This will not harm you permanently,” he assures me, though his tone suggests discomfort. “But it will... extract a portion of your essence.”

“And I’m just supposed to trust you on that?” I ask, eyebrow raised despite my racing heart.

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. “After everything we’ve been through, I’d hope for at least a modicum of trust.”

“Hope springs eternal,” I mutter, but I don’t withdraw my hands.

Dayn begins the incantation, different from the first—this language is sharper, more angular, with sounds that seem to cut the air itself. The convergence lights respond immediately, their rotation accelerating as they contract into a tighter spiral.

With a swift, precise movement, Dayn draws the obsidian dagger across his palm, dark blood welling immediately. He extends his bleeding hand to me, expectation

clear in his eyes.

I hesitate only briefly before taking the dagger and mirroring his action, slicing my own palm open with a quick, practiced motion. The pain is sharp but familiar—blood magic often requires such sacrifices.

“Join your hand with mine,” Dayn instructs, holding his bleeding palm above Mazrov’s chest.

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I press my bleeding palm against his, our fingers interlacing as our blood mingles. The sensation is immediate and overwhelming—a rush of power that travels up my arm and spreads throughout my body. The runes flare brilliantly, no longer just on my wrist but covering both our arms in matching patterns of light.

“Now,” Dayn commands, his voice resonating with power that seems to vibrate in my bones.

I don’t need further instruction. The words come to me unbidden, rising from some deep well of knowledge I didn’t know I possessed. Perhaps it’s his blood in my system, perhaps it’s something older, more primal. Whatever the source, I somehow speak alongside him, our voices twining together in a language that predates history.

The convergence lights respond violently, spinning faster until they blur into a solid ring of prismatic energy. The elder blood powder rises from the altar, suspended in the air between us, forming intricate patterns that shift and change with each phrase of the incantation.

I feel a pulling sensation deep in my core, as if something essential is being drawn from me. It doesn’t hurt exactly, but the sensation is profoundly unsettling—like watching a piece of yourself detach and float away. Darkblood essence, the fundamental power that makes me who I am, flows out through my palm where it mingles with Dayn’s blood.

The combined essence rises, joining the swirling patterns of elder blood. The convergence gel liquefies, flowing upward against gravity to join the maelstrom of power building above Mazrov’s form.

The chamber begins to shake, stones grinding against each other as the very foundation of Heathborne responds to our ritual. Dust rains from the ceiling, and in the distance, I hear the faint sound of alarm bells—the academy’s magical defenses recognizing the threat.

“Don’t stop,” Dayn urges as I falter momentarily. “We’re nearly there.”

I redouble my efforts, gripping his hand tighter as we continue the incantation. The pull on my essence intensifies, becoming almost painful now. It feels as though I’m being hollowed out, vital parts of me siphoned away to fuel this ancient magic.

Is this what my grandmother warned me about? Is this why she insisted I drink his blood first?

As if in answer, I feel a surge of heat from my stomach—the dragon blood I consumed earlier rising to meet the challenge. It flows through my system, as if countering the draining effect of the ritual, preserving my core self even as my darkblood essence is drawn out.

Understanding dawns. Without his blood to protect me, this ritual might have taken far more than a “portion” of my essence—it might have drained me completely.

The power between us crests like a wave, our joined blood glowing with a light that’s neither amber nor red but something entirely new. Dayn’s incantation rises to a fever pitch, and I match him word for word, our voices resonating. The convergence lights spiral inward, converging into a single point of blinding radiance.

“The final words,” Dayn gasps. “Speak them with me.”

Together, we utter the last phrase of the ritual—three words in that ancient language that feel like fire on my tongue. The light explodes outward, a shockwave of pure

power that shatters the remaining ritual components. Our joined hands are wrenched apart by the force, sending us staggering backward.

The very foundations of Heathborne shake violently. Dust and small stones rain from the ceiling as the convergence point beneath us destabilizes.

I drop to my knees, gasping for breath as I feel my darkblood essence rushing back into me—not diminished, but transformed somehow. As if the dragon blood in my system has altered it, creating something... unfamiliar. I flex my fingers, watching as shadows dance between them with new fluidity.

Across the chamber, Dayn has fallen to all fours, his body wracked with violent tremors. The runes beneath his skin pulse erratically, some fading entirely while others burn brighter than before.

“Dayn,” I call out, struggling to my feet.

His eyes snap to mine—no longer amber but blazing gold, pupils contracted to vertical slits. For a heart-stopping moment, I see something else looking back at me through those eyes—something vast and ancient and decidedly not human.

Then the moment passes, and he slumps forward, catching himself on trembling arms. The runes beneath his skin settle into a steady glow before fading to barely visible traces. When he looks up again, his eyes have returned to their usual amber hue, though flecks of gold still dance in their depths.

“It’s done,” he says, his voice rough with exertion. “The binding is broken.”

As if to confirm Dayn’s words, the convergence lights flicker once, twice, then

stabilize into a new configuration—still seven streams, but no longer forced into a tight spiral. They flow more naturally now, weaving around each other in an ever-shifting dance that seems almost joyful in its newfound freedom.

Dayn rises unsteadily to his feet, his usual grace temporarily abandoned. He looks different somehow—less contained, more vital. The air around him shimmers slightly, as if barely containing the power within.

“So,” I say, still trying to stabilize my breathing, “if I hadn’t drunk your blood, I wouldn’t have survived that, right?”

He shakes his head. “Incorrect. You would have survived. It would have been a strain, and painful, but your bloodline is powerful enough to ensure there wouldn’t have been permanent damage. I guarantee you that.”

I frown, narrowing my eyes on him, wondering how he could guarantee such a thing. His expression appears matter-of-fact, earnest almost, but his words don’t make sense. If it’s true that I could have survived the unbinding ritual without his blood, then why did my grandmother desperately insist I needed to drink it? She wouldn’t have said it for no reason. One of the two stories has to be subverting the truth. And my grandmother isn’t a liar.

Dayn likely knew I would die before the ritual was completed. And, of course, he didn’t tell me.

I glance at him, not sure why it even bothers me. It’s not like I ever thought he was trustworthy.

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It doesn't bother me, I decide, and focus on the immediate issues. Like trying to come to terms with the new sensation of... power coursing through me. I feel almost hesitant to move, like my body is a stranger to my own brain, like I'm no longer certain of my own abilities.

The shrilling of alarms grows louder overhead.

"We need to move. Now." Dayn is across the room in an instant, his movements once again fluid and predatory. His fingers close around my wrist, the touch uncomfortably electric against my still-sensitive skin.

The urgency in his voice propels me forward despite my lingering disorientation and the fact that he's the last person I want touching me right now. He pulls me out of the room toward the spiral staircase, his grip unyielding.

"Where are you going?" I ask, wrenching my hand away as we reach the base of the stairs. I cast one last glance back at Mazrov's lifeless form before beginning the climb. Maybe I should feel a little somber, given that, at the end of the day, Mazrov was just a pawn in Heathborne's power play: honored only for his usefulness, valued simply for being awilling guinea pig. But it's a struggle to feel much except relief.

The shrilling grows louder, more insistent.

Dayn doesn't answer my question, just scales the steps, casting illumination from his palm to guide us. We ascend the staircase at a punishing pace, but somehow my muscles don't burn as much as they should after the effort of the ritual. My own body feels strange, lighter somehow, my movements imbued with a vitality that wasn't

there before.

The relentless wail of the alarms is joined now by distant shouts—guards mobilizing, the whole Academy awakening to threat within its walls.

When we reach the hallway at the top of the stairs, it pulses with red warning lights, the alarm system fully activated.

“Dayn,” I try again, frustrated. “Where exactly?—”

I stumble, a wave of sensation suddenly slamming into me with such force that I nearly double over. It’s like nothing I’ve experienced before—a presence, no, multiple presences, flooding my awareness with an unmistakable signature.

“Darkbloods,” I gasp, my head snapping up toward the ceiling. “There are darkbloods in the building.”

The realization hits me with perfect clarity. Not just any darkbloods—trained operatives, at least two dozen, maybe more. I can sense them moving through the upper levels of Heathborne with deadly purpose. My newly heightened senses map their positions with startling precision, like pinpricks of familiar energy against the backdrop of clearblood signatures.

Is this something like what Mazrov felt, when he sensed me? It hits me suddenly, and I can’t help but wonder if, in an ironic twist, I myself now have abilities similar to, or even stronger than, Mazrov’s. After all, we were both subjected to dragon essence, albeit via different methods. How far do these abilities stretch? I feel suddenly even more uncertain in my own skin.

A distant crash reverberates through the stone walls, followed by shouts and the unmistakable crackle of combat magic. Darkbirch agents.

“My people are here,” I whisper, then louder, “They’re here!” Urgency courses through me.

“Esme—” Dayn starts, but I’m already moving, breaking away from him and heading toward the nearest stairwell that will take me up.

“They’ve come for me,” I say, certainty flooding through me. The timing can’t be coincidental—my grandmother’s warning, the urgency in her fractured message. She must have sent them, knowing what was about to happen. I need to get to them.

Dayn moves with inhuman speed, suddenly blocking my path. “You can’t go up there.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “Get out of my way!” I hiss. I try to sidestep him, but he mirrors my movement.

“Your magic is unstable,” he insists, his eyes flaring gold at the edges. “The blood exchange, the ritual—you have no idea what you’re capable of right now. It’s too dangerous.”

“For whom?” I demand. “For me, or for your plans?” Whatever they even are.

Another explosion rocks the building, dust raining from the ceiling. The sounds of battle grow louder—magical discharges, shouts of pain, running footsteps.

“They’re fighting and dying while we stand here arguing,” I snarl. “They came for me, Dayn. I’m not going to hide while they risk their lives!”

I try to move past him again, but his hand shoots out, gripping my shoulder.

I flash him a dangerous look. “Unhand me.”

His fingers dig into my shoulder, the pressure just shy of painful. “No,” he says, his voice dropping to that dangerous register that makes the air around us vibrate. “I can’t let you leave.”

Something in me snaps. Maybe it’s the dragon blood coursing through my veins, maybe it’s my newly transformed darkblood essence, or maybe it’s just the culmination of days spent dancing to Dayn’s tune. Whatever the cause, power surges through me like a tidal wave, dark and potent.

I don’t think—I act. My hand flies up, breaking his grip with a twist I learned in my first year at Darkbirch. Shadows leap from my fingertips, solid as steel but fluid as water, wrapping around his wrists like living shackles.

Surprise flashes across his face, quickly replaced by something darker. “Interesting,” he murmurs. He flexes his wrists against the shadow restraints, his expression darkening. “Release me.” The command carries weight, but I stand my ground, the shadows tightening in response to my resolve.

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“No.” The word tastes different on my tongue—powerful, certain. “I’m going to my people.”

In a blur of movement, Dayn twists his hands in a complex pattern. The shadows splinter and dissolve as he breaks free. Before I can react, he’s on me, one hand pinning my shoulder to the wall, his face inches from mine.

“Your new abilities are impressive,” he says, his voicedeceptively soft, “but don’t forget whose blood flows through your veins... whose essence fuses with yours.”

My breath hitches at the cadence of his voice, my heartbeat quickening in spite of myself. But then I rally, and slam my palm against his chest, channeling darkblood energy in a concentrated burst. The force throws him back several feet, his boots skidding against stone as he maintains his balance.

“What do you want, a medal?” I ask.

His eyes flash molten gold. “Don’t make me hurt you, Esme.”

“Funny. I was about to say the same thing.”

We circle each other in the narrow corridor, the alarms screaming overhead. Another explosion rocks the building, seemingly closer this time. My people are fighting their way downward.

Dayn moves first, feinting left before striking right. I anticipate the move, ducking under his arm and landing a blow to his ribs. My enhanced strength surprises us

both—he actually grunts a little.

“You’re stronger than you should be,” he observes, eyes narrowing.

“Maybe you’re just weaker than you think.”

His smile is all predator. “Let’s test that theory.”

He lunges, faster than human reflexes could track, but my dragon-blood-enhanced senses allow me to sidestep. I grab his outstretched arm, using his momentum to slam him into the wall. Stone cracks under the impact.

Dayn recovers instantly, spinning to catch my wrist. The contact sends a jolt of electricity between us, our mingled blood recognizing its counterpart. For a heartbeat, we freeze, the sensation momentarily overwhelming.

I recover first, twisting free and summoning a wave of shadows that surge toward him like a tide. Dayn counters with a barrier of golden light that turns the shadows to mist on contact.

“Your grandmother didn’t tell you everything,” he says, advancing slowly as the mist dissipates.

I back away, gathering power for another strike. “Spare me the lecture.”

“You’re becoming something new, Esme. Neither purely darkblood nor?—”

A barrage of my shadow projectiles force him to dodge and weave. Right now, I don’t care what I’m becoming as long as I get to my people. They could be dying—this moment—for me.

I lunge forward, feinting to the right before pivoting left toward a side passage. Dayn anticipates my move, materializing in my path with that infuriating speed of his. The corridor behind me offers no escape either—we're locked in this deadly dance, neither willing to yield.

"There's no point in running," he says. "The exits are sealed. Heathborne's defenses have activated."

Then I'll make my own exit. I summon shadow energy to my fingertips, surprised at how easily it flows now, responding to my will with barely a thought. I hurl a concentrated blast at the wall beside me. Stone cracks and splinters, creating a jagged opening into an adjacent corridor. Without hesitation, I dive through, rolling to my feet on the other side.

"Clever," Dayn mutters, his voice following me.

I sprint down the unfamiliar hallway, my enhanced senses mapping the layout as I go. Darkblood signatures pulse above me like beacons, drawing me upward. I need to find a staircase, anything to get me closer to my people.

The corridor splits ahead. I take the right fork, sensing it curves back toward the central part of the building. I race around a corner and find what I've been searching for—a narrow staircase leading upward. I take the steps two at a time, the sounds of battle growing louder with each flight of stairs.

I burst through a door onto the next level, only to find my path blocked by a wall of amber light—one of Dayn's barriers. Before I can find another route, he materializes behind me.

We clash in a blur of movement, light against shadow. I land a solid kick to his abdomen that forces him three steps backward. The building shudders again as

another explosion rocks the higher floors. The momentary distraction costs me—Dayn pins me against the wall, his forearm across my throat.

Before he can open his mouth, I headbutt him, the impact sending stars across my vision but forcing him to loosen his hold. I slip free, rolling away and coming up in a crouch.

Dayn wipes a trickle of blood from his lip. “Your grandmother’s using you, Esme. Just like Heathborne used Mazrov.”

His words almost freeze me. “Don’t you dare speak about my grandmother!” I hurl compressed shadow at him like a javelin.

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He deflects it with a sweep of his arm, the shadow dissipating against his barrier. “Why do you think she was so insistent that you drink my blood? It wasn’t to protect you. You didn’t need to drink it to survive the ritual. I swear my life on it.”

I refuse to let his words penetrate. Instead, I feint left, then dive right, rolling through an open doorway into what appears to be... a laboratory. Glass cases line the walls, filled with strange specimens and artifacts. I scan the room quickly, looking for anything I can use against Dayn. My eyes lock on a collection of runed objects under a protective barrier—experimental magical items, if I had to guess.

Dayn stalks into the room after me, his movements controlled and predatory. “I suggest you stop running. It only delays the inevitable.”

I back away, circling the central workbench to keep it between us. “Here’s a fun fact: you lost the right to dictate my life the second that binding snapped. You’re not my keeper—or even my problem, anymore.”

“It’s more... complicated than that.” His gaze locks onto mine, and I see something in his eyes that makes my blood run cold. It’s not anger, not even the predatory gleam I’ve come to expect from him. No, this is something deeper, more primal—a raw, unfiltered intensity that feels like staring into the heart of a storm.

“Esme,” he says, his voice low and gravelly, laced with a warning that reverberates through my bones. “You don’t understand what’s at stake here.”

I hold his gaze, refusing to back down despite the unease coiling in my gut. “Enlighten me then. Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re breaking

your end of the deal. You were supposed to leave me the hell alone after all this!”

He takes a step closer, and the air between us seems to thicken. “You don’t understand,” he says again, his voice low and guttural, resonating with a power that almost makes the room vibrate. “This isn’t about deals or agreements. It hasn’t ever been. And especially not now you’ve drunk my blood.”

My heart pounds faster. What does he mean?

I leap onto the workbench, kicking a tray of instruments at his face before flipping backward. Dayn deflects most of the projectiles, but a scalpel catches his cheek, drawing a thin line of that strange dark blood.

“Eager for more of me?” he asks quietly, touching the wound.

I fight to ignore the sensation that floods through me at the memory from the ritual chamber; of the press of his chest flush against mine; of his warm mouth sucking my skin, his slick tongue tracing my pulse; of the taste of his blood, rich and dark as a curse, overwhelming my nerves and senses; of my desperate, primal need to drink more of it. It lives under my skin. My body still trembles for it...for him.

With a growl, I summon shadows to my fingertips, condensing them into razor-sharp blades that extend from my hands like claws. This new control over shadows feels instinctive, as if I’ve always been able to shape darkness itself.

Dayn’s eyes narrow at the display. He moves with blinding speed, and the next thing I know, his hand closes around my throat. The shadow blades dissipate as my concentration breaks.

“Stop fighting me,” he growls, his face inches from mine. “I’m trying to protect you.”

I knee him in the stomach, then bring my elbow down on his forearm, breaking his grip. As I drop to my feet, I sweep his legs, sending him backward into a display case. Glassshatters, specimens and preservation fluid spilling across the floor.

“I don’t need your ‘protection,’” I gasp, rubbing my throat. “I need to get to my people.”

Dayn rises from the wreckage, glass shards falling from his shoulders. His eyes burn gold now, pupils contracted to vertical slits. The air around him shimmers with heat.

“Your people,” he says, his voice dropping to dangerous levels, “are here touseyou. Why else would they send an entire army just to collect one operative? Has that ever happened in the history of your covenant? Darkbirch is large for a darkblood sanctuary, but not large enough to risk many for few.”

I throw a compressed ball of shadow energy at him, anger pulsing through my veins. He catches it in his palm, the darkness sizzling against his skin before he crushes it to nothing.

“My grandmother wouldn’t?—”

“Your grandmother,” he interrupts, advancing, “knew exactly what drinking my blood would do to you. She wanted you transformed. More powerful. More valuable to your covenant.”

I back away, gathering more power. The shadows in the room respond to my emotions, writhing against the walls in response to my disturbance. The laboratory is a maze of equipment and specimens, giving me an idea.

I back toward a heavy metal door at the far end of the lab, while he advances steadily. “She wanted me transformed into what?” I ask, continuing to retreat.

“A weapon.” His eyes track my movements. “A hybrid creature with both darkblood abilities and dragon attributes. Useful. Controllable. Precisely what your coven needs in their ongoing war.”

The next explosion is close enough to shake dust from the ceiling. I need to end this now.

“You know what, Dayn?” I say, shifting my weight to my back foot. “Maybe you’re right.”

His step stalls for a moment—clearly not the response he expected.

I use that second of surprise to strike. I hurl a concentrated blast of shadow energy not at him, but at the ceiling above him. Stone and metal crash down, forcing him to dive forward. I leap backward through the doorway, slamming my palm against the control panel beside it.

The heavy metal door hisses shut just as Dayn reaches it, his hand slamming against the reinforced surface.

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I press my hand against the door, feeling the cool metal beneath my palm. Power surges through me, a strange fusion of darkblood magic and whatever has awakened within me from his blood. The runes on my wrist pulse in response, and suddenly I know what needs to be done.

I don't think—I act. My fingers trace an unfamiliar pattern across the door's surface, the motion instinctive yet precise. Shadows pool at my fingertips, flowing like ink as they follow the path I draw. Runes form beneath my touch, ancient and complex, their meaning incomprehensible to me but their purpose clear: containment.

The barrier builds and the runes flare to life as I complete the final stroke, their dark glow pulsing with power. The shadows deepen around them, solidifying into a barrier that seals the doorway.

Dayn punches the other side, the impact reverberating through the metal. His eyes burn molten gold through the small observation window. He steps back from the window, his form beginning to shimmer—attempting manifestation. But as his body starts to dissolve into golden motes of light, the runes on my barrier blaze brighter. The air around him thickens, resisting his transformation with visible force. The golden particles that should carry him elsewhere instead scatter and fade, reforming into his solid form.

His eyes widen slightly in a mixture of surprise and something like dark admiration. I see him murmur to himself through the glass, his mouth forming the words, “Good girl.”

I don't know how long my containment spell will "contain" Dayn. Five minutes, ten minutes, an hour, forever. As long as it gives me enough time to get to my people, right now I don't care.

I turn and sprint down the corridor, Dayn's warning still echoing in my mind. My grandmother wouldn't use me like that, would she? She's strict, demanding, sometimes ruthless in her methods... but to frighten me into drinking Dayn's blood without mentioning the purpose, without providing even the slightest explanation or detail which I could use to make my own choice, just for the purpose of turning me into a useful weapon? That feels like a step too far, even for her.

I shake my head, refusing to dwell on it. I need to focus.

The corridor ahead branches into three separate pathways. I sense my glamour has faded—I must have dropped it during my struggle with Dayn—but something tells me I no longer need it. I close my eyes briefly, extending my senses outward like feelers. The darkblood signatures pulse strongest to the left—up two more floors, moving with purpose through Heathborne's east wing. I head that way, my footsteps unnaturally light, almost silent against the stone floor.

As I round the corner, I come face to face with a squad of clearblood guards—five of them, armed with suppression rods and barrier shields. They spot me immediately, their expressions hardening as they recognize me.

"Halt!" the lead guard shouts, raising his rod. "Darkblood, you are under arrest for conspiracy against Heathborne!"

I don't stop. I don't even slow down. Something new surges through me—a confidence that borders on arrogance, a certainty in my own abilities that I've never felt before. The shadows around me seem to deepen, responding to my presence like loyal pets.

The lead guard fires his suppression rod, a bolt of pale blue energy hurtling toward me. Time seems to slow as I watch it approach. Before, I would have dodged, rolled away, used the environment for cover. But now...

I raise my hand almost lazily, and shadows leap from my fingertips, forming a shield of pure darkness. The suppression bolt strikes it and... dissolves, absorbed completely. The shadows ripple like water before settling back into a smooth barrier.

The guards falter, exchanging alarmed glances. "What the hell...?" one mutters.

I don't give them time to regroup. With a flick of my wrist, I send the shadow shield surging forward like a wave. It crashes into the first two guards, wrapping around them like living tar. They struggle against it, but the more they fight, the tighter it grips, pinning their arms to their sides.

The remaining three spread out, trying to flank me. One fires another suppression bolt while the others advance with barrier shields raised. I sidestep the bolt with a speed that surprises even me, my body moving faster than my thoughts can track. The sensation is exhilarating, like my muscles have been waiting for this moment, for this power.

"Enough games," I mutter, feeling the shadows respond to my irritation. They rise from the floor, from the walls, pooling around my feet like liquid night. I thrust both hands forward, and the darkness surges toward the remaining guards in three separate tendrils. They try to raise their shields, but the shadows simply flow around them, striking from behind, wrapping around their ankles and wrists.

Within seconds, all five guards are immobilized, their weapons clattering uselessly to the floor as the shadows bind them. They struggle against their restraints, eyes wide with a fear that would have bothered me before. Now, I simply step past them, the shadows parting to let me through before solidifying again behind me.

“What are you?” one guard gasps as I pass.

I don’t answer. I’m not entirely sure myself anymore.

The stairwell at the end of the corridor leads upward, toward the sounds of battle that grow louder with each step. Two more flights of stairs, and I burst through a doorway into chaos. The hallway before me is a battlefield—scorch marks blacken the walls, furniture lies splintered and smoking, and the air is thick with the residual energy of recently cast spells. A group of clearblood soldiers has taken a defensive position at the far end, pinning down what must be my fellow Darkbirch operatives behind an overturned stone table.

I recognize Riona’s dark head poking out briefly to hurl a blast of necrotic energy at the clearblood position. Beside her, Atlas maintains a shield of bone fragments, his face strained with effort. They’re outnumbered at least three to one, and while they’re holding their own, they can’t advance.

I don’t announce myself. I simply act.

Shadows pool at my feet, then surge forward like a tidal wave, flowing across the floor with impossible speed. The clearblood soldiers don’t notice until it’s too late—the darkness rises around their ankles, solidifying into unbreakable bonds. Their startled shouts draw the attention of my teammates, who turn to see the source of this unexpected assistance.

“Esme?” Riona’s voice is a mixture of relief and confusion.

I stride forward, the shadows continuing to rise around the trapped clearbloods. With each step, I feel power thrumming through me, intoxicating in its potency. A soldier manages to free one leg and aims his weapon at me. I don’t even break stride—with a flick of my wrist, shadows wrap around the barrel of his gun, crushing it like it’s

made of paper.

“How are you doing that?” Atlas asks, his shield dropping as he stares at me in astonishment. Apparently these two weren’t briefed about my likely newfound power.

Instead of answering, I focus on completely immobilizing the clearblood soldiers, the shadows rising to their chests now, immobilizing their arms.

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“We need to move,” I tell my teammates, gesturing toward the end of the corridor. “The rest of our team—where are they?” It’s a rhetorical question, because I already sense them scattered around various parts of the building, but with a concentration two floors up.

Riona confirms this, still staring at me with wide eyes, then asks, “What happened to you, Esme? Your aura is...”

“Later,” I cut her off. “We need to regroup and get out of here.”

As we move past the trapped clearblood soldiers, one manages to free an arm, producing a small silver device from his pocket. Before I can react, he activates it, sending a pulse of energy rippling through the air.

The wave hits me like a physical blow, staggering me backward. It’s a signature amplifier—designed to boost magical signatures to make them easier to track. My newly enhanced darkblood signature must now be broadcasting like a beacon throughout Heathborne.

“Run!” I shout to Riona and Atlas. “They’ll be coming for us now.”

We sprint down the corridor toward the central staircase. Behind us, boots thunder against stone as reinforcements respond to the amplifier’s signal. As we round the corner, we collide with another squad of clearblood operatives—elite ones this time, their uniforms bearing the silver insignia of Heathborne’s special forces.

“Take cover!” Atlas yells, diving behind a stone column as energy bolts streak past

us.

I don't follow his lead. Instead, I step forward, directly into the path of fire. Riona screams my name, but I barely hear her. Something is rising within me—instinct, power, knowledge that isn't entirely my own. The runes on my wrist flare to life, their pattern spreading up my arm in intricate whorls.

The first energy bolt strikes me squarely in the chest—or it should have. Instead, it dissolves inches from my skin, absorbed by a barrier I didn't consciously create. The next three bolts meet the same fate, dissipating harmlessly against an invisible shield that seems to pulse with my heartbeat.

“What the hell?” one of the operatives mutters, adjusting the settings on his weapon.

I feel a smile spread across my face—predatory, confident, unfamiliar. “My turn,” I whisper.

I thrust both hands forward, and darkness erupts from my palms—not the controlled shadows from before, but something wilder, more primal. It surges forward like living smoke, engulfing the squad of operatives before they can retreat. Their screams cut off abruptly as the darkness solidifies, cocooning each of them in separate prisons of shadow.

“Esme...” Riona's voice is barely audible, tinged with awe and something like fear. “How are you doing that?”

I stare at my hands, watching as tendrils of shadow continue to dance between my fingers. “I don't know,” I answer honestly. “It just... responds to me.”

Before Riona can reply, another explosion rocks the building, this one closer than the last. Dust and fragments of stone rain down from the ceiling.

“We need to keep moving,” I say, already turning toward the staircase.

We race up the steps and I take them two at a time. The landing at the top opens into a large atrium—Heathborne’s grand hall, its vaulted ceiling rising three stories above us. And there, engaged in fierce combat with a battalion of clearblood elite guards, are at least forty Darkbirch operatives. They’ve formed a defensive perimeter around the room’s center, using overturned furniture and debris as cover. Energybolts and necrotic blasts crisscross the space, leaving scorch marks on the ancient stone walls.

Among them, I spot Corvin, his tall frame unmistakable as he directs our forces. Beside him, Isander’s leathery wings snap open as he launches into the air, avoiding a barrage of suppression bolts before diving toward a group of clearbloods, his midnight-speckled eyes gleaming with focus.

Two figures dart through the shadows at the edges of the battle, too graceful to be human. One emerges into a shaft of moonlight from the shattered skylight above: Lirienne, a female fae with obsidian skin, her eyes glowing with an ethereal violet light. With a flick of her wrists, she summons thorny vines that burst from the stone floor, entangling three clearblood guards. A second fae with hair the color of autumn leaves, Laken, arrives at her side, assisting her.

Three more vampires emerge from a side corridor, launching into the fray to assist Isander.

“There!” Riona points toward a gap in the clearblood line. “We can break through there!”

Before I can answer, Corvin turns, spotting me through the chaos. His expression shifts, eyes widening in a mixture of relief and something else—alarm? He gestures frantically toward me, shouting something I can’t hear over the chaos of battle.

“Esme!” His voice finally breaks through, powerful enough to carry across the atrium. “Isander! Extract Esme now! All units retreat to extraction points! Fall back to Darkbirch!”

Isander’s head snaps in my direction, his wings already unfurling to their full span. He launches himself over the battle, dodging energy bolts with grace, his trajectory aimed directly at me.

Operatives begin disengaging, laying down cover fire as they back toward the exits. It’s a coordinated withdrawal, clearly planned in advance. They came here with explicit orders—get me out, then leave immediately.

Isander lands before me in a powerful rush of air and flashes me a grin. “Time to go.” He’s already moving, arms wrapping around my waist as his wings snap open. Then we’re airborne, his powerful wings propelling us upward toward the shattered skylight. The battle recedes below us, growing smaller with alarming speed.

We burst through into the night air, the cool breeze a shock against my skin. Below, Heathborne is in chaos—magical alarms blaring, lights flashing, figures rushing through the courtyard. I glimpse our team executing a perfect fighting retreat, covering each other as they make for the extraction points at the perimeter.

Wind whips my hair across my face as we ascend, the castle shrinking beneath us. But even as we gain altitude, my mind races. Dayn’s words echo uncomfortably in my thoughts.

Your grandmother wanted you transformed. More powerful. More valuable to your coven.

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I can't argue that this was an unusually resource-intensive extraction. If I'm honest with myself, I'm certain this many agents wouldn't have been deployed for me if I were not suddenly... more valuable—my ancient bloodline be damned.

I flex my fingers, watching shadows dance between them effortlessly. The power coursing through my veins feels different from anything I've ever known—darker, more primal, yet strangely harmonious with my darkblood essence. What if Dayn wasn't entirely wrong? What if this transformation was exactly what my grandmother intended?

The thought should disturb me more than it does. Being manipulated, used as a pawn in some greater scheme—it's everything I've fought against at Heathborne. And yet...

I summon a tendril of shadow to my palm, watching it coil and twist with perfect responsiveness. The sensation is exhilarating, like discovering a limb I never knew I had. I can feel every shadow below us, sense the darkness between stars above. My awareness extends outward in all directions, and I feel as if I could map the world, in ways I never imagined possible.

Is this really so terrible? This power thrumming through me feels like liberation. Like potential. Like I could reshape the world if I wanted to.

"You're different," Isander observes, his voice carrying over the rush of wind. "Something in you has changed."

I don't answer, too caught in the intoxicating rush of energy surging through my system. I feel invincible, unstoppable, like I could take on Heathborne's entire army

single-handedly and emerge victorious. Is this what Dayn feels all the time? No wonder he carries himself with such arrogance.

A deafening crack splits the night, so powerful it reverberates through my bones. Isander falters mid-flight, his wings missing a beat as we both turn toward the sound.

Below us, Heathborne's north-east wing is splitting apart, stone walls crumbling as something massive forces its way through from within. The castle's architecture groans and gives way, centuries-old masonry collapsing like paper as an enormous form emerges from the rubble.

First comes a massive clawed hand, obsidian scales gleaming like polished onyx in the moonlight, each talon at least five feet. Then a serpentine neck, powerful and sinuous, supporting a head that could swallow a carriage whole. Wings unfurl next, vast membranes that blot out the stars as they spread to their full, impossible span.

Isander gasps, his arms tightening around me as he hovers in place, transfixed by the sight below.

The dragon shakes debris from its scales, golden flecks shimmering across its massive obsidian body, its eyes burning with ancient intelligence as it surveys the destruction around it. The beast turns its massive head skyward, nostrils flaring as it draws in the night air. Those eyes—molten gold with vertical pupils—lock onto us with terrifying precision.

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“Isander,” I whisper, unable to tear my gaze from the creature below, “we need to move. Now!”

But Isander remains frozen, his wings beating mechanically to keep us aloft while his

body tenses with primal fear.

“Fly, Isander!”

Too late. The dragon’s massive wings snap downward in a powerful stroke, propelling its enormous body skyward with impossible speed. The air displaces violently around it, creating a shockwave that nearly tears us from the sky. Isander curses, banking sharply to avoid the beast’s initial lunge.

The dragon’s massive form cuts through the air, each powerful wing beat closing the distance between us. Isander swerves frantically, his movements growing increasingly erratic as primal terror overwhelms his training.

“We can’t outfly it!” he shouts, his voice cracking. “Nothing outruns a dragon!”

I summon shadows to my fingertips, ready to defend us, but deep down I know it’s futile. The gap between our power and the dragon’s is like comparing a candle to a forest fire.

Isander attempts a desperate dive, hoping to use the castle’s towers as cover. The dragon anticipates the move, its massive body curving through the air with impossible agility. A gleaming talon extends with surgical precision as the beast sweeps past us.

There’s a sickening sound—halfway between a tear and a snap—as the dragon’s claw slices through the delicate membrane of Isander’s left wing. His scream pierces the night as our trajectory instantly destabilizes.

We spin wildly, Isander’s remaining wing beating frantically against the sudden imbalance. His arms, once secure around my waist, begin to slip as he fights for control.

In the same fluid motion that crippled Isander, the dragon's massive foreclaw wraps around my torso. I'm torn from Isander's grasp with such swift precision that I barely register the transition.

"ESME!" Isander's scream fades as he plummets toward the ground below.

The dragon's grip is surprisingly gentle—firm enough to prevent escape but careful not to crush me. I struggle anyway, darkness coiling around my hands as I prepare to strike.

"Sorry, but I couldn't let that bat fly off with what's mine."

The voice resonates directly in my mind, deep and rich with a resonant quality that vibrates through my very bones. Dayn's voice, yet transformed—ancient and powerful, layered with harmonics no human throat could produce.

Fury explodes through me like wildfire. "What's YOURS?" I snarl, shadows erupting from my skin in violent spikes. They batter uselessly against his obsidian scales. "Put me down RIGHT NOW!"

"After all the trouble I went through to come get you? I think not."

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We're rising higher now, the castle shrinking beneath us as powerful wings carry us into the cloud cover. I can see my team below, regrouping around what must be Isander's fallen form. Some point upward, but they're too far away to help.

"They'll hunt you," I threaten, still struggling against his grip. "Every darkblood coven will?—"

A sudden chill cuts through the night air, so intense that frost forms instantly on the dragon's scales. The temperature plummets with unnatural speed, the kind of bone-deep cold that can only mean one thing: spirits. Many spirits. A shimmering silver mist materializes around us, coalescing into translucent figures that float impossibly in the night sky. At their center, her silver-streaked braids unmistakable even in spectral form, stands my grandmother.

"Release her, dragon." My grandmother's voice echoes with power, amplified by the chorus of spirits surrounding her. The spirits of Darkbirch Coven—a graveyard of darkblood practitioners, their forms translucent but unmistakable in their ceremonial robes.

Dayn's throat emits a low growl, a sound that reverberates through the night sky like the beginnings of thunder. His mental voice crashes through my mind, though he addresses my grandmother.

"Esther Salem, a pleasure to meet. But perhaps you should give me one reason why I should listen to you, an apologist for Galia?"

I frown, my fury momentarily frozen by confusion. Apologist for Galia? Galia...She

was my great, great grandmother. Known to be a fearsome defender of her coven... and if my memory of our family tree serves correctly, died in combat during the Blood Wars, her spirit never located. The Blood Wars, the centuries' old battle between darkbloods and dragons, which supposedly drove the latter to extinction.

"Come now," my grandmother replies, her voice steely. "You're not still fretting over old quarrels, are you? Helena would disapprove. Release our child."

My frown deepens. Helena? She was Galia's mother. My great, great, great grandmother. I know little about her except that she lived in a coven to the south.

Something about the cadence of Dayn's voice shifts at the mention of her name and he lets out a sharp, resentful laugh. "As if you know Helena. I doubt you've even studied her history."

"I have, more than you think," my grandmother responds coolly. Her spectral form drifts closer, her weathered features set in fierce determination.

"Then you wouldn't utter her name in the same breath as Galia's," Dayn replies, his voice bordering dangerously on a growl.

The conversation deeply confuses me. But clearly this dragon is up in my family's business way more than I thought.

The spirits begin to move in unison, forming a perfect circle around us. Their joined hands glow with ethereal light as they begin an incantation—words that seem to bend the very fabric of reality as they're spoken. The air thickens, coalescing into a translucent dome that begins to close around us.

Rage pulses from Dayn's massive form, his scales heating until they glow like embers against the night sky. I feel his grip tighten fractionally around my torso.

The spectral shield continues to form, the dome shrinking inward with each syllable of the spirits' chant. Dayn's wings beat powerfully against it, but the barrier holds, forcing him to hover in place.

"What are you doing?" I demand of my grandmother, my voice cracking with frustration and fear.

Her ghostly eyes never leave the dragon. "Protecting you, child. As I have always done. Unfortunately, our ancestors failed to finish what they started."

The spectral shield contracts further, the pressure building as two ancient powers clash. I can feel Dayn's rage building, his massive body tensing for a more violent response.

The spirits' chant rises to a crescendo, their spectral forms pulsing with ancient power. My grandmother's voice cuts through the ethereal chorus, her words carrying the weight of centuries.

"By the blood of Salem, by the covenant of Darkbitch, we bind you, dragon!"

The dome constricts violently, pressing against Dayn's massive form. His scales begin to smoke where the spectral energy touches them, the magic of steadfast darkblood spirits working to contain him.

"Enough games," Dayn's mental voice thunders through my mind. His massive jaws part, and a sound emerges that defies description—not quite a roar, not quite a word, but something more primal. The sound vibrates at a frequency that seems to shatter reality itself.

The spectral barrier ripples, its perfect form distorting as if struck by an invisible force. My grandmother's face contorts with surprise and strain as she and the other

spirits fight to maintain their containment.

“Hold!” she commands, her voice echoing across the night sky. “He cannot break the combined will of Darkbitch!”

Dayn’s massive head rears back, golden eyes blazing with fury. “Cannot?” His mental voice drips with disdain. “Your coven’s arrogance hasn’t changed in centuries.”

His entire body suddenly ignites with golden fire—not normal flame, but something more fundamental, as if the very essence of his being has transformed into pure energy. The fire spreads outward in concentric waves, each pulse more powerful than the last.

The spirits waver, their formation breaking as the golden energy tears through their spectral barrier. I hear cries of pain—sounds I didn’t think spirits could make—as their forms begin to dissipate under the onslaught.

“Impossible,” my grandmother gasps, her own form flickering as the golden fire washes over her. “No dragon has this?—”

“You underestimate the power of your own blood,” Dayn’s voice resonates, low and dark, each word punctuated by another pulse of energy.

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The spectral dome shatters completely, fragments of ethereal light scattering across the night sky like broken glass. The spirits of Darkbirch Coven recoil, their forms destabilizing as they struggle to maintain cohesion.

My grandmother's eyes lock with mine one final time, her expression a mixture of fury and desperation. "Esme!" Her voice is fading, growing distant as her form begins to dissipate. "Remember what I?—"

Her words cut off as a final wave of golden energy erupts from Dayn's form, so powerful it temporarily blinds me. When my vision clears, the spirits are gone, scattered to the winds by the sheer force of his power.

Before I can process what's happened, Dayn's wings snap downward in a powerful stroke. The world around us blurs, colors smearing together like wet paint. I feel a sensation of compression, as if the very fabric of space is folding around us. I have a horrifying, gut-wrenching sense of being unmade, molecule by molecule.

The world disappears in a violent explosion of golden light.

Then, darkness. Complete and absolute.

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Consciousness returns in fragments—first sensation, then sound, finally sight. My body feels heavy, weighed down by exhaustion so profound it takes effort just to lift my eyelids. When I do, crimson silk greets me, draped across my body in luxurious folds. I'm lying in the center of an enormous four-poster bed carved from dark wood,

ornate patterns etched into its surface.

I bolt upright, heart hammering against my ribs.

Where am I?

The last thing I remember is being clutched in Dayn's massive claws, watching my grandmother's spirit dissipate into the night sky.

My darkblood senses flare instinctively, reaching outward to map my surroundings. The magic in this place hits me like a physical force—thick, ancient, almost viscous in its potency. It fills the chamber like invisible smoke, causing the runes on my wrist to pulse in response. My enhanced powers practically sing in its presence, begging to be unleashed.

The chamber itself is a study in gothic luxury—massive stone walls hung with tapestries depicting strange symbols, a vaulted ceiling lost in shadow above, intricate rugs covering portions of the stone floor. Candles burn in ornate holders, their flames perfectly still. The air carries a heady scent of incense and spices.

My jacket hangs from an elaborate hook near a heavy wooden door, looking absurdly mundane against such opulent surroundings.

I check myself quickly—same clothes as before, though my boots have been removed and placed neatly beside the bed. No obvious injuries, though every muscle aches with the lingering effects of whatever magic transported me here.

Moving cautiously, I slide from the bed. The stone floor is cool beneath my feet as I cross to the chamber's only window—a tall, narrow opening with no glass, just empty space framed by carved stone. The sight beyond steals my breath.

An underground city stretches before me, contained within a cavern so vast I can't see its boundaries. Buildings rise like stone teeth from the cavern floor, their architecture unlike anything I've seen—part gothic cathedral, part impossible geometry, structures that seem to defy gravity as they twist toward a ceiling lost in darkness above. Streets wind between them, illuminated by pale orange lights that cast everything in an ethereal glow. Figures move through those streets—some human-shaped, others decidedly not.

What is this place?

A sound behind me—the heavy door opening with a whisper of well-oiled hinges. I spin, shadows instantly gathering at my fingertips as I drop into a defensive stance.

A woman enters, her movements possessing an unnatural grace that sets my nerves on edge. She appears human at first glance—delicate features framed by almost silver hair, skin with a subtle luminescence that catches the pale light filtering through the window. But as she draws closer, I notice the inhuman perfection of her features and a subtle shimmer that seems to ripple across her skin.

She smooths down her jade-colored dress and bows deeply. “My lady, I hope you find your accommodations suitable.” Her voice carries a melodic quality. “I am Nyssa, assigned to attend to your needs during your stay in Draethys.”

“Draethys,” I breathe. That’s what this place is called. “What am I doing here?”

Nyssa gives me an apologetic look, her features softening. “I simply carry out orders, my lady.”

“Whose orders?” I ask, shadows unconsciously gathering around my feet.

“I serve the Draxion family,” she replies, her tone deferential as she lowers her gaze.

My heart races at the name. Draxion. It sounds ancient, powerful... and completely unfamiliar.

“Where is Dayn?” I press. “I need to speak with him urgently.”

Nyssa’s expression remains serene, though a flicker of confusion passes through her eyes. “I don’t know anyone called Dayn, my lady.”

I stare at her, disbelief flooding through me. “Dayn... The dragon who brought me here.”

“Oh. No, my lady,” she replies, her voice gentle as if speaking to a confused child. “You were brought to Draethys by Lord Daynthazar of House Draxion... eldest son of the ruling dynasty.”

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EPILOGUE: BRYNN

So, I return home to find that my brother's been buried underground and my sister's been carried off by a supposedly extinct dragon.

That's a first, even for Darkbirch.

And they have the audacity to cast shade in my direction for wanting a quiet life; as if I'm somehow the villain for not signing up to their meltdowns.

Oh, and let's not forget that Grandma's spirit has been scattered. Along with ninety-seven percent of our coven's spiritual anchors. Which, in case anyone forgot, are the only things standing between us and full-on security collapse. They're the reason the clearblood spirits trapped in our barrier don't break loose and eat us alive. They're not just guardians—they're the magical power grid, the prison wardens, and the emergency failsafe all rolled into one.

It'll take at least three months for them to piece themselves back together—if they even can. In the meantime, we're running on fumes. The only graveyard spirits we have left are the ones currently wrapped around my comatose brother like spectral duct tape.

So again, I ask: who thought it was a good idea to send every single remaining spirit after Esme?

No, seriously. I want names. If it was Grandma's idea, I'd scatter her soul myself.

This is what happens when people mistake recklessness for leadership. Throw the entire spiritual foundation of the coven behind a single attack, and now we're all scrambling to patch unraveling seams with a handful of haunted gauze.

To say the coven is in chaos would be an insult to chaos. Chaos at least implies some kind of structure. This? This is more like watching a bonfire eat a library while everyone argues about candle placement.

And now, as if all that weren't enough, Corvin has announced "emergency restructuring measures." Which, in council-speak, means someone's about to be sacrificed and it won't be the ones in velvet robes.

Naturally, it's falling on us—the younger generation. More drills. More magical combat rotations. And a shiny new trial system that hasn't been used in over a century because it was deemed "psychologically destabilizing." You know, fun things like mirror duels that force you to fight your worst memory. Or being dropped into pocket dimensions where the rules change every hour and nothing you kill stays dead. Or the Severance Test—where you're magically bound to a partner and only one of you leaves with your powers. And let's not forget the Grave Recall, where you relive the final hours of a dead ancestor, magic and all. My personal favorite? The compatibility trials that pair you with someone you'd rather feed to a demon than share a classroom with.

Which brings me to Chad Valgrave. My "mentor." And I use the term loosely, because he's more like a hex in human form. He watches me like I'm some volatile potion he's itching to uncork just to witness the carnage. Every syllable that leaves his mouth is razor-sharp, precision-crafted to draw blood. He savors the moment people recoil. Especially me.

And then there are the incubus twins, whose relentless pursuit has transformed my dorm into a fortress after sunset. They keep trying to get into my pants—psychically, magically, physically—sometimes all at once. One tried to charm my bedsheets. The

other left a soul-bonding sigil in my laundry. I now ward my pajamas and sleep with a blade under my pillow.

And that isn't even the start of my list.

But sure, I'm the soft one.

No.

I call me functional under siege.

And considering I haven't hexed anyone bald yet, I'd say I'm showing remarkable restraint.

FML.

What's next?

Turn the page...