



# Heir of Shadows

**Author:** *Cali Mann*

**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Ancient power. Three fated heirs. One woman who must claim her place among them... or watch their world burn.

When Marigold is ripped from her quiet life of anonymity and thrust into the ruthless halls of Wickem Academy, she uncovers a legacy steeped in secrets and magic—one tied to her father's treason and a necromantic bloodline that marks her as both a threat and a target. To survive, she must navigate a world of cutthroat politics, ancient magic, and dangerous alliances.

Three dangerously compelling heirs—Cyrus, the fire-wielding warrior haunted by his mother's death; Elio, the illusionist prince masking pain behind perfect charm; and Keane, the quiet portal mage carrying shadows in his soul—stand between her and the answers she desperately seeks. Bound by ancient power and their own dark secrets, these heirs can't decide whether to protect, claim, or destroy her.

As corruption spreads through Wickem's magic, Marigold must master her newfound abilities and uncover the truth about her father's death. Trust becomes her deadliest gamble—especially when her power may be the key to saving not just the heirs, but magic itself.

Welcome to Wickem, where bloodlines reign supreme, old magic stirs in the shadows, and the heart's pull can be the most dangerous magic of all.

Dive into a new series from USA Today bestselling author Cali Mann, featuring a steamy paranormal romance, with enemies-to-lovers tension, forced proximity, and a tantalizing "why choose" dynamic.

**Total Pages (Source):** 96

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Marigold

“Mary, Mary...” Mr. Conrad called as he crept through the house.

I have never hated my name more than at this moment.

Peering through the closet-door slats, I searched the hall for my tormenter. One hand gripped the ragged edges of my now-buttonless shirt, and I forced myself to take slow, even breaths. The shadows in the closet seemed to deepen around me, as if they were responding to my fear. Nonsense. I took a breath and almost choked on the heavy scent of rose air freshener. Mrs. Conrad kept her linens smelling like a damn garden.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he called.

I twisted my mother’s ring on its silver chain around my neck. For some reason, the metal was as cold as an ice cube. I squinted through the slats, exhaling when I saw he was headed down the hall toward the master bedroom. Twisting the ends of my shirt, I tied them in a knot under my breasts. But my eyes stayed glued to Mr. Conrad.

Don’t you dare turn around.

If I just waited until he went inside the bedroom, I could escape down the stairs. Reaching in the pocket of my half-apron, I pushed aside my earbuds, and took hold of my phone. My thumb tapped against the screen, but I didn’t dare call my mother. And

who else could I call? The police, to Mr. Conrad's own home? I was just the maid.

"Mary," he said, his voice slurred, "Don't you know I came home just for you? I thought we could have a little fun..."

I bet you did, asshole.

"Billy told me you are a lot of fun."

Bastard. I closed my eyes, my stomach clenching. Billy isn't an old man, an old married man. Not that I should have slept with him either, but Billy'd been home from college for the summer, all muscled from playing soccer, and pretty boys were my kryptonite. I'd let myself have fun with the rich jerks from time to time, even though I knew better, but never with someone old enough to be my father. Stupid Billy. He shouldn't have told Mr. Conrad about it. I was going to murder him for that.

I opened my eyes, and peered out through the slats again.

And he was inside the master bedroom. My heart hammered in my chest as I whispered a prayer to whatever was out there: Just let him get to the bathroom in the rear. I leaned closer to the door, watching, and the wood squeaked. No! I slid down to a crouch, making myself smaller, but he didn't hear, or at least he didn't reappear.

"One, two, three," I counted silently. Now or never.

I bolted toward the stairs and leapt onto the banister. The polished wood sent me rocketing down at terrifying speed, my heart lodging in my throat. Unable to brake, I shot off the end and crashed into the wall, my boot punching through the plaster.

Before I could pull my foot free, something stirred behind the wall. Small scraping sounds came from the hole. Oh no. Not again. A furry body sprang from the hole,

fixing me with unnaturally black eyes. The shadows around it writhed unnaturally, and I bit my lip. I was imagining it. Not like before. Just a mouse. The creature darted up the stairs, trailing darkness like a cloak. I couldn't do anything but watch it go.

Mrs. Conrad was not going to like that.

I hauled myself to my feet, ready to get the hell out of there, when I froze. My stomach twisted as I watched more mice—no, a whole stream of them—spill out of the wall like some nightmare parade. Their little bodies moved in eerie unison, a tiny army on a mission, each one trailing wisps of shadow that shouldn't exist. Not just a mouse. Shit. The stench of rot hit me, and I gagged.

Mrs. Conrad was really not going to like that.

With a frustrated grunt, I shook the plaster off my boot and made a beeline for the front door. I was done. No more lecherous old men. No more creatures. No more! Or at least I thought I was—until a high-pitched scream from upstairs made me freeze. I groaned, my hand tightening on the door handle.

“Mother!” Mr. Conrad cried. “No!” He stood on the balcony above the entryway, and I started to cringe back, but he wasn't looking at me.

The translucent figure of an elderly woman floated above the entry hall. Mrs. Conrad Senior had died years ago—I'd dusted her portrait enough times to know her face. The ring was icy against my collarbone as energy surged through me, familiar yet foreign. The shadows around her form twisted and coiled like living things.

I leaned against the door, trying to catch my breath and glaring up at Mrs. Conrad Senior. Why did this stuff always happen to me? Shadows that twisted with odd power? Weird dead things that appeared whenever I was freaked out, whether it was a school test or slimy Mr. Conrad. It couldn't be real!

But this asshole was. I gave myself a shake, forcing my focus back on escape. Throwing the door open, I bolted down the drive, not stopping until I reached the wrought iron gates at the end. I gripped the bars, waiting for a wave of dizziness to pass.

Then I pulled my phone from my apron pocket, and ordered a ride share, my fingers trembling.

Three minutes. I could handle three minutes. My eyes scanned the Conrads' front yard, watching for movement while trying not to think about the apparition and the strange mice.

The streetlight at the end of the driveway flickered and went out. The temperature seemed to drop, and my ring turned ice cold against my skin. The shadows deepened unnaturally, seeming to respond to my terror.

But something else moved within that darkness—too fast to be natural. My heart hammered as more dark shapes emerged, moving with an awful, fluid grace that made my skin crawl.

## Page 2

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“If this is a trick, I’m going to kill you,” I threatened as I backed toward the gate, fumbling with my phone. The ride was still two minutes away.

As the figures drew closer, I caught a glimpse of their faces in the moonlight—inhumanly pale with sharp teeth that couldn’t be real. This had to be another hallucination: like the ghost, like the mice. But the ring against my chest still felt like it was made of ice, and every instinct screamed danger.

The air beside me suddenly... tore open. There was no other way to describe it—like reality itself had split, showing swirling light within. My eyes darted between the tear and the creatures, my pulse racing.

A woman in a black suit stepped out of the impossible hole. My brain refused to process what I was seeing. Air whooshed around her. I tried to take a step back and almost tripped—my legs weren’t working properly. My heart pounded against my ribs, my breath coming in short, useless gasps.

“Get behind me,” she ordered, but I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe.

The creatures—no, monsters—shifted unnaturally, their movements too smooth, too fast. My stomach clenched. They weren’t human. They weren’t anything I had words for.

“What—” I tried, but my voice came out in a broken gasp. The woman’s hand shot out, and light cracked the air like lightning. The creatures recoiled, hissing, their eyes gleaming with something awful.

My body finally obeyed. I stumbled backward, slamming into something solid—her. I barely had time to register her grip on my arm before she was dragging me toward the swirling light, the air around it pulsing with unnatural energy.

“Through. Now!” she commanded.

“Are you insane? What is that—” My voice pitched too high, half a scream.

Another creature lunged. I had never known what pure, raw terror felt like until this moment. My vision blurred, my ears rang, my instincts screamed to run, but I could do nothing.

Then the woman’s hand flared again, and I was falling forward, through the impossible light, through nothing and everything all at once...

...into my living room. My knees hit the carpet hard, my breath still coming too fast. Mom sat frozen on the couch, her mouth open. I clutched my chest, trying to convince myself I was still alive.

The woman stepped through after me and straightened her jacket like this was all perfectly normal.

And I just stared at her.

2

Marigold

My knees ached where they’d hit the carpet, but I barely noticed. My breathing hitched, quick and ragged. I was alive. I was in my living room. But the air still felt wrong—like the nightmare hadn’t let go of me yet.

My hands shook violently as I clutched my chest. The last few seconds played on repeat—monsters, glowing light, impossible portals.No, no, no. That wasn't real. That couldn't be real.

I turned toward the woman who had pulled me through reality itself. She smoothed back her already smooth hair, as if ripping open the universe was just another Tuesday for her. My pulse pounded in my ears. She had light in her hands. Magic. Real magic. And she was standing in my house.

I scrambled backward until I hit the couch. “Who—how—” My throat closed. “What the hell was that?”

“I'm Ms. Parker,” the woman introduced herself, as if we were meeting for a business lunch rather than... whatever just happened. “From Wickem Academy. And we need to leave. Now. Before more come.”

I stared at her, my heart still racing and my mind struggling to process what I'd just seen. “More what? What were those... things? How did we get here? What—”

“All excellent questions,” she said, checking something that looked like a compass, but glowed unnaturally. “Which I will answer after we get you somewhere safe. Pack quickly. You've just drawn a lot of unwanted attention.”

She turned to my mother, who still hadn't moved. “Ms. Brook. I imagine you have questions too. But right now, your daughter needs to come with me. She needs protection. Training. Or what happened tonight will only be the beginning.”

“Protection?” Mom's voice shook. “From... from what? What just happened? How did you get in here?”

“Ms. Brook—” Ms. Parker started, but I interrupted.



“Those things at the Conrads’—they weren’t real. They couldn’t be. Like the ghost wasn’t real, like the mice weren’t...” I trailed off as cold settled in the pit of my stomach. If they were real... If I wasn’t crazy...

“All of it is real, Marigold.” Ms. Parker’s stern expression softened slightly. “Just like the incidents when you were younger. Your cat that came back from the grave. Those dead birds knocking at your window during tests.”

“How do you know about those?” Mom demanded.

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“Mom...” I said, wrapping my arms around my nauseous stomach. “You remember those things, too? You always said they were just my imagination.”

“Because they had to be,” Mom insisted. “Things like that aren’t possible. They’re not...” She turned to Ms. Parker. “Who are you? Really?”

“As I said, I’m from Wickem Academy,” Ms. Parker said. “But more importantly, I’m part of the Shroud Guard. We protect people like your daughter from things like what just tried to attack her.”

“Things like...” I swallowed hard. I’d had a letter from Wickem Academy, and I’d shoved it to the back of a drawer. What if I’d responded? What if it had stopped... “What were they?”

“Vampires.”

I barked out a laugh, but it died in my throat at her serious expression. “Vampires? Like... Dracula vampires?”

“Much worse, actually.” Ms. Parker checked that strange compass again. “And they’re particularly drawn to untrained magical ability. Especially necromancy.”

Necromancy. The word made my stomach twist, like something inside me already knew it was true.

Mom went pale. “Like... death magic? My daughter isn’t... she doesn’t...”

“The mice,” I whispered, feeling numb. “They were all dead, weren’t they? And Mrs. Conrad’s ghost...” My legs trembled and I leaned against the back of the armchair.

“Your father’s gift,” Ms. Parker confirmed. “He was one of the most powerful necromancers of his generation. Until—”

“James?” Mom sank back onto the couch. “He was... Magic was real? All this time?”

Gesturing to the matching rings Mom and I wore, Parker said, “The protection charms you wear—”

Mom interrupted, “They were to be our wedding rings.”

I fingered the ring on my necklace. This was my father’s?

Parker nodded. “They’ve been helping hide your abilities, but after tonight’s display...” She gestured at the compass, which was pulsing with an ominous red light. “We need to get you somewhere safer. Somewhere with proper magical protection.”

“Wickem.” I said the name slowly. I’d ignored it when the acceptance letter had come in the mail. I’d figured it was a scam. Who invites someone to attend a college they didn’t even apply to?

But now I took a steadying breath and asked, “It’s not just a college, is it?”

“It’s a university for witches. But you, Marigold, are more than just a witch.”

Mom just gaped at her.

“Her father is one of a long line of Grimley witches to attend Wickem,” Parker

confirmed, then turned back to me. “But he was also a Council member and a member of one of the four most powerful magical families. And you are his heir.”

The room spun. “I’m... what?”

“A royal heir,” Ms. Parker said quietly. Her eyes jumped from us to her compass while she looked increasingly agitated. “Which makes you an even bigger target.”

“James was... royalty?” Mom asked, scrubbing her hand over her face. Then she frowned at Ms. Parker. “If he was so powerful, why did he leave us with nothing?”

Ms. Parker’s face darkened. “No one knew about Marigold. The Council believed your bloodline ended with your father’s execution.”

“Execution?” Mom’s voice broke. “James was executed?”

I felt like I might throw up. She’d never told me anything about my dad, not even his name. I’d imagined all sorts of things about my missing dad, but not this. “He was killed? For... for what?”

“That’s complicated.” Ms. Parker checked the compass again and frowned. “And not a conversation we have time for right now.”

She turned to Mom. “Ms. Brook, I know this is overwhelming. But your daughter needs to come with me. The vampires won’t stop coming now that they’ve sensed her power.”

I sank down next to Mom, my head spinning. “This morning I was just a maid. Now I’m... what? A witch? A necromancer? Magic royalty?”

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“All of the above.” Ms. Parker’s compass pulsed faster. “And right now, you’re also a beacon for every vampire in the state. Pack quickly. I’ve called for a Guard detail to protect your mother, but you need to be behind Wickem’s wards before more hunting parties arrive.”

Mom followed me to my room, her movements jerky with shock. I pulled out my battered suitcase while Ms. Parker stood guard at my bedroom door, that strange compass still pulsing ominously.

“Magic,” Mom whispered, picking up a shirt with shaking hands. “All those weird things over the years... the dead cat that kept showing up in your room...”

I swallowed hard, grabbing clothes at random. “I thought I was crazy.”

“Three minutes,” Ms. Parker called. “More vampires entering the city limits.”

My hands trembled as I shoved things into the suitcase. What do you pack when your whole world turns upside down? When you find out you’re not just a maid’s daughter but some kind of magical princess with monsters hunting you?

“The scholarship letter,” Mom said suddenly. She rushed to the kitchen, moving faster than her bad back should allow. I heard drawers banging open, papers rustling.

“Ms. Brook—” Ms. Parker started.

“Here!” Mom returned with the cream-colored envelope, now crumpled from her grip. “It wasn’t just a scholarship, was it? ‘Legacy admission’—that’s what you

people called it?”

Ms. Parker nodded. “The wellspring itself sent the invitation.”

“The what?” I asked, struggling to zip my overstuffed suitcase.

“A source of magical power. One that recognized your bloodline.” She checked the compass again. “One that can protect you, if we get there in time.”

Mom tucked the admission letter in the pocket of my suitcase. Then she pressed her last twenty-dollar bill into my hand.

I tried to give it back but she closed my fingers around it.

“For emergencies,” she whispered, pulling me into a fierce hug. Her voice cracked. “I’m so sorry, baby. I should have... if I’d known what your father really was...”

“Don’t.” I hugged her tighter. “You couldn’t have known. I couldn’t have known.”

A thud from outside made us all jump. Ms. Parker’s compass flared bright red.

“Time to go.” Ms. Parker grabbed my arm but I pulled away.

“I can’t just leave her!” I looked at Mom, thinking of how vulnerable she was with her bad back. “What if more of those things come?”

“Marigold—” Ms. Parker started.

“No.” I moved to stand between Mom and the portal. “Send your Guard people now. I’m not leaving until they’re here to protect her.”

Mom touched my arm. “Baby, you’re in danger—”

“We’ve always protected each other,” I said fiercely. “That’s how we survived. I’m not running away while you’re not safe.”

Another thud outside. Closer. The ring around my neck felt like ice.

“The Guard is three minutes out,” Ms. Parker said, checking her compass. “The vampires are less than one minute away.”

“Then we fight.” My voice shook but I stood my ground. “Or we all go through that portal thing together. I’m not leaving her.”

Mom’s arms went around me. “My brave girl. But she’s right—you need to go where it’s safe. Where you can learn to control this... magic.” Her voice caught on the word. “I’ll be fine...” she looked at Ms. Parker.

“As long as you stay inside,” she confirmed. “They can’t cross the threshold.”

Mom nodded tightly. “I’ll be okay. I’ve survived worse than monsters, remember?”

“Mom...”

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“The Guard detail will protect your mother,” Ms. Parker said. Her voice softened slightly. “And once you’re trained, you’ll be able to protect her yourself. But right now, your untrained power is drawing them here. The longer we stay—”

A crash from outside. Mom flinched.

“Go,” she whispered, pushing me toward the portal. “Learn what your father couldn’t teach you. Learn to be strong.”

“I’ll send more Guards,” Ms. Parker promised. “A permanent detail. But we have to leave now.”

Tears burned my eyes as Mom gave me one final push toward the portal. “I’ll call,” I choked out. “As soon as I can. Don’t let anyone in—”

“Not even people I know,” Mom finished. “Go. Be safe. Be amazing.”

The last thing I saw before Ms. Parker pulled me through was Mom standing alone in our shabby living room, one hand pressed to her silver ring, the other raised in goodbye. Then reality twisted, and everything changed.

My head was still spinning from our portal jump to the Denver airport. Ms. Parker said we couldn’t actually portal directly onto the Wickem campus, but we could get as close as possible, which was apparently here.

We waited in a cafe at the busy airport for dawn.



“Won’t they come here?” I’d asked, nursing my caffeine fix, the only thing keeping me going after a sleepless night.

“No, it will take them time to find you across such distances,” Parker said. She’d indulged in a cup of plain coffee, without the three sugars and cream that I needed, but her eyes scanned the airport, in spite of her reassurances.

“Then can’t we go?” I kept checking my phone, but there were no new messages from Mom. I hoped she was okay.

“Best to wait for dawn,” she said. “They’re not as strong in daylight. Not powerless, but... less bold. We’ll be safer travelling then.”

Once the sun rose, we moved purposely across the airport. My single suitcase looked pathetically small, and my worn sneakers squeaked against the airport tile, while Ms. Parker looked crisp and professional, despite the night’s trials.

“Oh look, the Shadow Heir arrives.” A sharp male voice made me turn.

Two men approached us, both with dark copper hair and broad shoulders, and clothes that radiated old money. The younger one caught my attention immediately—tall and athletic with intense amber eyes. He was undeniably attractive, but he looked at me like something stuck to the bottom of his shoe. I was suddenly even more aware of my rumpled clothes and unwashed hair.

“Lord Raynoff.” Ms. Parker gave a stiff bow to the older one. “We weren’t expecting a welcome party.”

“A vampire attack within the city of Albany?” His voice carried absolute authority. “Of course the Council takes interest. Especially given who their target was.” His gaze swept over me, calculating.

I already felt small enough with the height difference, but I resisted the urge to shrink further.

“Marigold Brook,” Ms. Parker said formally. “This is Lord Raynoff. He’s the current head of the Witches’ Council and general of the Shroud Guard.”

I stared blankly, even my now caffeinated brain struggling to keep up with all the new information. “What does that mean?”

“Kind of like the president of witch society,” she said.

My stomach dropped. From cleaning houses to meeting presidents in less than forty-eight hours. Mom would never believe this. I could barely believe it.

“Hello, sir,” I managed, my voice smaller than I’d like.

“Marigold,” Raynoff said. “Three hunting parties, drawn by untrained necromancer magic. Quite the display of power for one so... unprepared.”

He offered his hand, and I shook it. A surge of something—power?—ran through me at the contact. I suppressed a shudder, hoping no one noticed.

“And this is my son, Cyrus.”

The son didn’t offer his hand. The temperature seemed to rise slightly as his scowl deepened. His amber eyes traced over my disheveled appearance with obvious disdain, the arrogance of his gaze. I couldn’t help noticing how his broad shoulders filled out his expensive jacket making my pulse quicken traitorously. I gave him a nod, fighting the urge to smooth my wrinkled shirt.

“You very much look like your father,” Raynoff said, studying me like I was a puzzle

he couldn't quite solve.

“Oh?” I asked, thinking of how often people told me I was the mirror image of my mom—same petite figure, same medium blonde hair, same brown eyes. Was he seeing something more in me than appearance? “Did you know my father well?”

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“Yes, I knew him,” Raynoff said, something dark passing behind his eyes. “Before he betrayed everything we built.”

“Traitor,” Cyrus muttered, his voice thick with disgust. The word crackled with heat that made my skin tingle.

No one else commented. The intensity of Cyrus’ stare felt like being scalded. He watched as if he was waiting for me to prove how unworthy I was—the traitor’s daughter.

I ignored him as best I could. “You’ll have to tell me about him,” I said to Lord Raynoff. “I never met him.”

Raynoff’s mouth tightened. “The Council will need a full report on last night’s incident, Guard Parker. The vampires growing bold enough to hunt in cities is troubling,” he continued, “Get her to Wickem quickly. We can’t afford another display like that.”

Parker gave a slight bow to Lord Raynoff and his son, and I did the same, not knowing the protocol. Then I followed her down the hall toward the exit. I could feel their eyes on my back, until we were through the doors.

Parker directed me to the parking garage and her navy-blue Subaru.

As we drove into the mountains, Ms. Parker explained more about witch society—the four Council seats passed down through families, the ongoing war with the vampires, Wickem’s role as a training ground for college-aged witches. But my mind kept

returning to Cyrus's scorn and his father's barely veiled hostility.

"The men back there," I said slowly. "The Raynoffs? They hate me because of my father?"

"Yes," Ms. Parker said, "But also..." She glanced at me with a frown, then back at the road. "Your heritage is half human, half witch. That will cause trouble for you."

My mouth dropped open. "Witches aren't human?"

She gave a tight smile. "Well, we are in most ways human, but when the magic runs through bloodlines, it's stronger."

"But I got it from my father?"

"Yes, but your mother has no magic," she said. "And Council seats are passed down through the strongest witches among us. That's why they are royal, why they have heirs."

I bit my lip, trying to understand.

"You may be weaker because of it," she said with a twist of her lips. "Or others may see you as weaker. They may," she paused and corrected herself. "They will make you prove yourself."

I didn't know anything about magic, and I was going to have to prove that I was strong enough? I swallowed.

I didn't even want to be here.

Except I had to be.

I had to learn to control my powers, and I had to keep Mom safe.

As if summoned, Mom's text glowed on the screen of my phone: I'm fine, honey. It's all quiet here. But I knew she hadn't slept any more than I had.

We continued on in silence, until Ms. Parker broke it with, "For first-time students, the final approach to Wickem has to be made traditionally. There are magical checkpoints built into the mountain path that help register and protect incoming students. Especially important given your... recent attention."

Everything felt surreal—just hours ago I'd been cleaning houses, and now I was fleeing supernatural attacks and meeting a magical nobility who seemed to hate me on sight.

The road narrowed as we climbed higher. Ancient pines pressed close on one side while a misty void dropped away on the other. The air grew thicker, heavier, like the atmosphere itself was trying to push us back.

"We're passing through the wards now," Parker said.

Before I could even ask what she meant, the magic hit me. Suddenly I could feel everything—every dead leaf rotting in the soil, every beetle carcass under rocks, every bird that had ever fallen from its nest. The mountain itself seemed to breathe beneath us, ancient bones buried in its core calling out in voices that scraped against my consciousness.

"I'm going to be sick," I gasped, pressing my hand against my mouth. Cold sweat broke out across my forehead.

"Deep breaths," Parker advised, but her voice seemed to come from very far away. "It's the wellspring. Your powers are responding to it."

Powers. I almost laughed. The mice at the Conrads had been like a spark compared to this inferno. The dead things under the earth whispered to me in voices that felt like home, like they'd been waiting all my life to speak. The shadows of the trees moved and writhed as we passed.

Then Wickem Academy appeared through the mist, all stone walls and towering spires that seemed to stretch into the clouds themselves. Gargoyles perched on every corner, their stone eyes following our approach with an awareness that sent shivers down my spine.

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But it wasn't just stone—I could feel the history in its walls; centuries of deaths large and small, each one calling out to be remembered. Students who'd died in magical accidents, teachers who'd spent their last breaths in classroom corridors, even the workers who'd fallen during construction—all of them reached out to me with eager whispers.

The iron gates swung open silently as we approached. Their intricate metal work depicted scenes of magic I was only beginning to understand—witches commanding elements, raising the dead, opening doorways between worlds. As we passed through them, the whispers of the dead grew stronger, more insistent. They knew what I was—knew what I could do. The very stones of the building seemed to recognize me, centuries of accumulated death magic reaching out in welcome.

And for the first time in my life, I knew too. I wasn't just Marigold Brook, the cleaning lady's daughter anymore. I was something else—something that made even the mountains remember their dead.

I just wasn't sure if that was a gift or a curse.

3

Cyrus

After meeting Marigold, we'd taken a portal back to campus. Father never wasted time in a car when he could make use of the family portal master.

Now, he stood at my dorm room window, staring out at the Rocky Mountains.



I dropped into a red velvet armchair. At twenty, I no longer bothered to stand at attention like a school boy—even if he still made me feel like one.

“You understand what needs to be done.” He didn’t look at me. Instead, he tapped his fingers on the windowsill in that restless rhythm they’d developed after Mother’s murder—a tell I’d learned was a warning sign for incoming criticism. “The Council can’t deny her entry, but we don’t have to make it easy.”

I exhaled. “I know.” Bywe, I knew he meant me. She was my problem.

The temperature in the room rose with my agitation. Ember shifted on his perch, my phoenix familiar’s feathers flickering between amber and crimson. The girl’s image burned in my mind—her defiance at the airport, the raw power that had stirred at her presence.

His gaze turned on me, flames in the depths of his eyes. “Control yourself.”

I clenched my fists, forcing my magic back into its cage. Fire licked at my fingertips before vanishing into my palms.

“I don’t need complications,” he said, turning back to the view, “not with vampire attacks burning through the north.”

Anywhere witches didn’t have easy access to a wellspring, they were vulnerable, and the vampire clans took full advantage. And it was Father’s job as head of the Council and general of the Shroud Guard to stop them no matter what it took.

“She’s nothing.” The words came out hot, desperate to convince us both. “Some untrained nobody. Wickem’s power will burn her out in a week.”

“Don’t underestimate her,” he said, his fingers returning to tapping the stone, “The

wellspring found her and called her to Wickem. That alone makes her dangerous.”

“How did it do that?” I asked. “How did the wellspring...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Father finally turned, his eyes hard as stone. “Just remember that your mother died investigating what James Grimley was doing with those bloodsuckers, and his daughter is likely more of the same. A traitor’s child and a human-witch half-breed.” He bit out the last words venomously, before sighing, rubbing his face. “There’s no telling what trouble she’ll cause.”

I nodded mechanically, the lesson beaten into me over the last fifteen years. Vampires were the enemy. They’d murdered my mother, and the half-breed’s father had helped them.

“The fourth seat’s been cold for twenty years,” he continued, voice frosting over. “We’ve forged something better from that void. Now his daughter appears...”

“We’ll take care of her,” I said.

His approval barely sparked. “Good. The Council meeting awaits. The vampire situation...”

He turned away, battle plans already consuming his attention. Our family portal master waited just outside my door to whisk my father back to his office. Of course he hadn’t really come to visit me—just to evaluate the surprise new heir and to ensure I understood my role in maintaining order.

My fire flared again, now that he was gone. All of this fuss over a half-breed? Sure, she had power, I’d felt it at the airport, but no control. And power needs to be controlled or it was useless—Father had taught me that.

After he left, I burst into the royal dorm's common room, my earlier control already fraying. Ember materialized in a burst of flame, the phoenix's feathers shifting between amber and crimson. The familiar space should have been soothing with its dark wood panels and leather-bound books, generations of power soaked into every surface. Instead, it felt like a fortress under siege.

"Damn half-breed," I muttered, flinging a fireball without thinking. It nearly hit an antique mirror—only to transform into a butterfly midair.

"Temper, temper." Elio didn't even look up from where he lounged on the velvet chaise, surrounded by his usual admirers. His perfect casualness, that practiced grace that came so easily to him, made my teeth grind. "What did the little cleaning witch do to ruffle your feathers so thoroughly?"

The massive fireplace roared to life, reflecting my rage. "A traitor's daughter doesn't belong in our school."

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“And yet.” Elio’s hands danced, creating intricate illusion-butterflies that drew appreciative gasps from his audience. “The wellspring seems to think otherwise.”

“The wellspring doesn’t think.” I scowled at Elio. He was always showing off, always hiding behind beauty and charm. And right when I needed someone to face this head on with me.

From his shadowed alcove, Keane spoke up, his quiet voice carrying unexpected weight. “I glimpsed her at the airport.”

A dozen small portals shimmered around him, each offering a different view of her arrival. His spectral fox familiar wove between them, quick and silent. Trust Keane to watch everything—and risk nothing.

“Her power...” he said. “It’s raw, but genuine.”

I stalked toward the fireplace. Ember’s wings spread, amplifying my aura of contained flame, and Elio’s sycophants scattered from the heat. The students repositioned themselves carefully—close enough to show loyalty, far enough for safety. At least the fear was honest, unlike Elio’s artificial charm or Keane’s endless equivocation.

“The Fourth Council seat has been empty since her father’s execution,” I growled. “Nearly twenty years with no heir. Because traitors’ bloodlines don’t deserve power.”

“And now she’ll be living in the royal dorm.”

Elio stood in a single, fluid motion—too graceful to be casual, too deliberate not to be a performance. His butterflies shimmered midair, morphing into a tiny illusion of Marigold: slouched posture, thrift-store clothes, that uncertain look from the airport frozen on her face.

Even his chameleon looked unsure, scales flickering like he hadn't made up his mind whether this was theater or real concern.

“A commoner in the Shadow Heir's suite. The witch world will have a field day with this scandal.”

“There's historical precedent.” Keane's portals rearranged themselves, showing ancient texts while his familiar, Wisp, watched with keen interest. Keane was always hiding behind his books, using knowledge to avoid taking a stand.

“Three previous occasions when the wellspring chose against traditional succession,” he said. “Each followed by significant political—”

“I don't need a history lesson.” I slammed my hand through the nearest portal, scattering it in a burst of heat and smoke.

Keane flinched. His familiar bristled.

Something in me hated causing that flinch, but he needed to learn who held the power. Head of the Council and its first seat were mine.

“Her father conspired with vampires,” I said. “The same monsters that tore my mother apart. We cannot let his daughter claim a seat among us.”

Ember trilled softly, a sound like mourning bells. My familiar had been born from Mother's ashes, and I'd been too young to remember bonding with him.

“Oh, I have several ideas.” Elio’s illusions shifted again, now showing the library. Echo’s scales had taken on an odd silvery sheen, almost like tears. “Picture it: our mysterious scholarship girl makes her grand entrance. Everyone watching, judging. Then...” The illusion-girl tripped spectacularly.

His audience laughed, and his smile brightened at their approval. “We simply help her understand where she truly belongs.”

“Through public humiliation?” Keane’s voice carried a hint of censure. New portals opened, showing past bullying disasters while his fox paced between them. “Historically, such displays often backfire—”

“Because you’d rather hide in your books than take action.” I moved closer, Ember’s heat making the air shimmer. Keane might be a mere freshman like the half-breed, but he was a royal, and he needed to choose—we all did. “Pick a side, Keane.”

His portals began closing systematically—retreat into research, his usual response to confrontation. Wisp pressed against his leg protectively. “Without adequate information—”

“Power isn’t about information.” I let flames dance across my fingers, Ember’s wings spreading to mirror my stance. Why couldn’t he understand? Why couldn’t either of them see what was at stake? “It’s about strength. Control. Order. The same order her father betrayed when he sold out his own kind to bloodsuckers.”

“We are the heirs,” Elio said, giving his audience a flirty bow. “It’s our right.”

They applauded, and once again, I wondered how enraptured these students were. Did they even see us here having this argument? I shook my head. It didn’t matter. Instead I watched Keane, the question hanging between us.

“No.” He met my gaze steadily, one of his rare moments of backbone that always caught me off guard. “Power isn’t about birthright. It’s about who deserves it.”

The flames sputtered—traitorous.

Elio’s fans watched, wide-eyed. So maybe theywererepaying attention. Waiting to see if I’d lose control.

Ember shifted on my shoulder, restless. I clenched my jaw, and another fireball surged to life in my palm.

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“Deserves it?” Elio laughed, trying to diffuse the situation. “Darling, that kind of thinking gets people executed. Just ask her father. Oh wait...”

“Enough.” I forced ice into my voice, gathering my control back around me like armor. Ember’s flames cooled to a steady amber glow. “The Council wants her gone. Are you with me or not?”

“Always, darling,” Elio drawled, “I do so love a performance.”

We both looked at Keane, who was already deep in another historical tome, new portals showing wellspring records. Wisp watched us all with her ancient eyes that seemed to see too much.

“I’ll observe,” he said finally, choosing each word with careful precision. “And advise. Nothing more.”

After they left, I stared into the flames, letting their heat ground me. But Ember’s wing brushed my cheek in an oddly gentle gesture.

“Don’t you start too,” I muttered. But I couldn’t quite silence the whisper of doubt in my mind: how had the wellspring chosen an heir? And if it had, how could she be unworthy?

I fed the flames higher, drowning out that thought in pure heat. Let it burn. Let everyone fear the fire. Fear was better than doubt.



Marigold

The cathedral doors of Wickem loomed like something out of a gothic horror novel. Big, dramatic, and absolutely judging me.

My legs trembled as I climbed the stone steps, still reeling from the overwhelming symphony of death magic saturating the grounds. Each whisper from the dead felt like silk against my skin—intimate and unsettling, and each shadow seemed to caress me as I passed.

The entrance hall stretched impossibly high, its vaulted ceiling disappearing into shadows that even the floating orbs of light couldn't penetrate. Ancient magic thrummed through the stone columns, their carved symbols shifting and flowing like living things when I wasn't looking directly at them. The dead things whispered about generations of students who'd walked these halls—some who'd never left, their presence lingering in every shadow.

Ms. Parker guided me through polished wooden doors marked 'Administration'.

Behind an imposing desk sat a man with steel-gray hair and glasses, his pristine suit making my travel-worn clothes feel even shabbier. The nameplate read "Mr. Fernsby, Director of Student Services."

"Miss Grimley." His voice was hard.

"It's Brook, actually." The name Mom had given me, the only name I'd known for eighteen years.

Mr. Fernsby's lips thinned. "Grimley was your father's name, and as his heir, it is your proper title here." He shuffled through my paperwork with precise, irritated movements. "Three days late for orientation. Not an auspicious start."

“I’ve always used Brook,” I insisted, but Mr. Fernsby was already moving on, sliding my student ID across his pristine desk. Sure enough, it shimmered with “Marigold Grimley” in elegant script. I squinted at the half-way decent photo of me. When had they even taken it? I’d only just arrived.

“You are your father’s daughter.” His disapproval was clear in every crisp syllable. “The sooner you accept that reality, the better. Your unusual background will make things challenging enough.”

The way he said “unusual” made it clear exactly what he thought of traitors’ daughters in his precious school—or maybe it was half-human witches. Either way, I’d heard that tone before, from a hundred rich clients who saw the servants as less than human. Oh joy, a whole new way to be hated.

“Ms. Wallace will show you around,” he said, clearly eager to be rid of me.

A woman stepped out from a nearby office, her sapphire blazer complementing her warm brown skin. Her smile at least seemed genuine, though something about it niggled at my senses. The dead things in the walls grew restless, whispering warnings I couldn’t quite catch.

Parker’s phone buzzed. “Councillor Raynoff needs me.” She squeezed my shoulder. “You’ll be fine with Ms. Wallace.”

I nodded, feeling a bit bereft as the only person I knew disappeared.

“Come along,” Ms. Wallace said, her voice kind and professional.

I was going to be alright.

That calm lasted precisely until we stepped into the main hall. Wallace’s form

shimmered like heat waves, transforming into something altogether different.

Where Wallace had been all business and brisk efficiency, the guy in front of me was pure charm wrapped in designer smugness. Pale blonde hair, tousled like someone had spent a fortune making it look effortless. Ice-blue eyes sparkled with mischief—and the kind of precision that could cut.

He moved like he knew exactly how he looked: lean, polished, and unfairly good at wearing clothes that probably cost more than my entire existence. My mouth went dry, which was just rude of my body, honestly.

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“Much better,” he purred. “Playing nice is exhausting.”

I watched as he stretched like a cat—fluid and smug. He looked like a swimmer: sleek on the surface, power underneath.

No, I couldn’t afford to be distracted. Not again. Not another pretty guy.

“Where’s Ms. Wallace?” I demanded.

“Oh, she’s probably still in her office.” He smiled, all cheekbones and trouble—gorgeous and sharp enough to cut if you weren’t careful. “Lovely woman, but far too... pedestrian to give tours to royal heirs. After all, we must maintain certain standards.”

His gaze swept over me, lazy and practiced, dragging across my thrift-store outfit like it personally offended him.

And yeah, okay—my brain clocked the insult. But my body? Still stuck on smile like sin, voice like velvet.

The dead things whispered urgent warnings. Not that I needed the reminder—charming rich guys were the most hazardous clients.

The ones who thought power could buy anything.

Or anyone.

“Who are you?”

“Elio Lightford.” He gave an elaborate bow that managed to be both graceful and mocking. “The sexiest Council heir,”—he gave a wink—”and your new guide to all things Wickem.”

Another heir. Seriously, how many of them were there? Parker had mentioned four Council seats—three now that my father was gone—but there was no way all of them were like this: beautiful, deadly, and radiating enough arrogance to flatten a city block.

The hall twisted around us, walls flowing like water as my orientation papers transformed into butterflies that scattered on the wind. I tried to grab them but they dissolved at my touch, leaving only the phantom sensation of wings against my skin.

With a swipe of Elio’s hand, my suitcase developed a mind of its own, tearing itself from my grasp and rolling away. I swallowed.

“Now then. Let’s begin the real tour, shall we?” His voice wrapped around me like silk; sweet and hypnotic. His pale blue eyes caught mine and my mind went foggy.

I was a sucker for pretty boys, and he was the most gorgeous I’d ever seen. I swayed closer. Everything else seemed to fade away except his gaze. His smile was dazzling, perfect—how had I ever thought it looked cruel?

“Come here, darling,” he purred, holding out one elegant hand.

Suddenly, all I wanted was to please him, to do whatever he asked. I smiled, taking a step forward, drawn by an overwhelming need to be closer to him. The voices of the dead things seemed distant, muffled by the honey-sweet fog in my mind. They seemed disturbed, but how could they be in the face of such perfection?

“That’s it. You want to make me happy, don’t you?”

I nodded dreamily. Of course I did. Nothing else mattered except his approval, his beautiful smile, his...

The dead things surged without warning, their frantic energy ripping through the enchantment—cold and jarring, like ice water in my veins. I stumbled back, gasping as my mind cleared. Horror and fury rushed in to replace the artificial devotion.

“How dare you—” I started, but his musical laugh cut me off.

“Oh, very good!” He exclaimed. “Most people don’t break free at all. But I’m up to the challenge.” Then he winked, and the floor vanished in front of my feet.

I stumbled back with a cry, heart hammering as I caught a glimpse of the twenty-foot drop into darkness. Cold air rose from the depths—but was it real? He’d already shown me he could twist what I saw, what I felt.

But that knowledge didn’t make my terror any less.

His musical laugh echoed around me. “Quick reflexes,” he said, somehow from right beside me. “But let’s see how you handle real challenges.”

“Like enchanting me wasn’t enough?” I spat, backing away.

“Oh, darling,” he said, running his hand down the side of my cheek and making me tremble. “That was just a greeting.”

He slid away, and three halls appeared where there had been one. In each, Elio beckoned with that same sharp smile. “Choose wisely. Though I doubt you will,” he said, with a casual shrug.

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I couldn't trust my eyes. Couldn't trust any of my senses after what he'd done to my mind. But the dead things—they'd broken through his enchantment. Maybe they could tell me what was real. So I watched them, and took a step toward one of the halls.

A skeletal mouse squeaked a warning. One of the Elios transformed into a snarling lion, massive and golden. Real or not, my body reacted with pure terror as it lunged. I stumbled back, a scream catching in my throat.

Raw power surged through me in response to my fear. Tiny skeletal defenders erupted from the stones—not just mice this time but rats, squirrels, birds, anything that had ever died in these halls. They formed a barrier between me and the lion, their bones clicking and chattering with shared purpose. I swallowed, my heart still beating frantically. I had no idea how I'd done that, or if I could do it again. Just like the mice at the Conrads, they'd responded to my emotions.

"Fascinating," Elio purred from the other corridors. Both versions of him watched with predatory interest. "Such power, even if it is crude."

Heat prickled down my spine, and I spun to find the copper-haired guy from the airport—Cyrus. Gone was the expensive jacket from the airport; now he wore a fitted black tee and dark jeans—simple, but somehow more dangerous. Like he didn't need designer layers to look lethal. The casualness only emphasized the coiled strength in his broad shoulders.

His amber eyes reflected very real flames as he studied me. "Playing games, Elio?" His voice was deep enough to feel in my bones.

“She needs to learn her place.”

Fire erupted from his hands, and this, I knew was real. The heat seared my skin as flames circled me, creating a ring that began slowly closing in. My skeletal defenders scattered, their tiny bones blackening in the intense heat, and it was just me and the flames. I curled in on myself, trying to keep my body away from them. Smoke filled my lungs, and I coughed.

I reached desperately for more dead things, panic giving my power an edge. They answered—a wall of bones rising between me and the fire. But the flames kept coming, eating through my defenses. Real danger, not just illusion.

“Interesting pets you have,” Elio purred, his voice coming from everywhere and nowhere. “Let’s see how well they follow orders.”

Something moved in the shadows beyond the flames—too fast, too fluid to be natural. Red eyes gleamed as pale figures emerged, inhumanly graceful. Vampires. Like the ones from the Conrads’. But were they real, or just more of Elio’s tricks?

The vampires blurred forward with supernatural speed. I tried calling more dead things, but between the closing ring of fire and my own terror, I couldn’t focus. The power was there, raw and desperate, but I couldn’t control it.

Then cold fingers seized my arm, grip like iron. Fear shot through me as fangs gleamed inches from my throat. My necromancy exploded outward in pure panic—and suddenly every dead thing in the building seemed to answer at once. The walls themselves groaned as centuries of tiny skeletons burst forth, a tsunami of bones drowning everything in their path.

“Enough.”



A shimmering window appeared—like Ms. Parker’s portal from earlier. Through it stepped another boy—lean and intense, dark hair falling into storm-colored eyes. A spectral fox curled around his shoulders, its misted form flickering with quiet menace.

Silver light exploded from the portals around him, flooding the hallway. The vampires recoiled—then shattered like glass, dissolving into mist and shadow. Illusions. Every last one.

My breath caught.

Of course they weren’t real. Just more smoke and mirrors. More magic thrown in my face without warning.

My hands were still shaking. My magic buzzed wild under my skin, raw and twitchy like it hadn’t figured out the threat was over.

I didn’t know what kind of test this was supposed to be, but I was already over it.

Raw power still surged through me, making the dead things chitter and swarm protectively. I couldn’t control them, couldn’t stop them—wasn’t even sure I wanted to.

“She’s an heir,” the new boy said quietly. “You can’t actually kill her.” He said it in such a casual way as if they could murder me if I’d been anyone else and I wasn’t sure which scared me more.

“Just teaching her where she belongs,” Cyrus snarled.

“Seriously?” My voice wavered, but I didn’t care. “That’s your idea of a lesson? Mind games? Monsters? Fire?”

Elio's mask cracked for just a moment. The corridors melted back into one.

“Brave little mouse, aren't you?” he asked with a sly smile. “Even when you're clearly outmatched.”

His words stung more than I wanted to admit. My pride wanted to spit something back—but my magic was still fizzing under my skin like a live wire, and I didn't trust my voice not to shake.

Then the quiet one spoke.

“I'm Keane Alstone, and I'm also an heir,” he said, blue eyes locking on mine with an intensity that made my breath catch. “The royal dorms are this way. I'll show you.”

Another heir. Of course there was another one. Because apparently one smug firestarter and a smirking demigod weren't enough—I needed the full set. Each of them impossibly powerful. Gorgeous. Unbothered.

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And me? I'd just found out I was a witch, and my magic was still rattling inside me like it hadn't figured out what body it belonged to. Which, honestly, same.

This was supposed to be my world now. So why did it already feel like I didn't belong?

"No more tricks," Keane promised, gesturing toward the perfectly normal-looking hallway between the administration offices and a closed campus store.

I wanted to refuse his help—wanted to prove I didn't need saving from rich boys and their games. But I could still feel the vampire's cold grip, the echo of Elio's enchantment thrumming in my skull.

The hallway looked normal now. But I didn't trust it. I didn't trust any of this.

As we walked, Cyrus muttered, "She's stronger than she looks."

"Indeed," Elio said.

I followed Keane, doing my best not to look as rattled as I felt. The dead things slunk back into the walls, but I could still feel them—watching, waiting, whispering.

Three heirs. All terrifying. All unfairly pretty.

And none of them made me feel like I belonged here.

Keane

I kept my portals open as I led her across campus, each window showing a different angle of our progress. Wisp slipped between them, my familiar's spectral form alert and watchful. Not just for security—though that was the excuse I'd give if anyone asked—but because I wanted to see how she moved through our world.

The Shadow Heir.

The cleaning girl who could command the dead.

Elio's illusions had cut deeper than necessary, even for him. And Cyrus... well, his fire hadn't exactly shown restraint. I'd stepped in before I had time to second-guess it. Something in the way she'd stayed standing, even when she was shaking, had struck harder than I expected.

Uncle would say I was being soft. He always did.

But watching her now, I knew I'd made the right call.

She walked like someone used to making herself small—shoulders tight, steps cautious. But her chin stayed lifted. Braced for the next hit.

Smart girl.

"This is the academic wing," I said, indicating the classrooms we passed. My voice sounded rusty from disuse. I hadn't ever played tour guide, being new to Wickem myself, but better that I accompanied her than leaving her to more of their "welcome". Something about their eagerness to break her had stirred an unexpected protectiveness in me. Maybe because I knew what it was like to be at someone else's mercy.

Her fingers absently reached for a silver ring on a chain around her neck. I could feel power emanating from it. I wondered if she knew it was enchanted.

A sharp pain lanced through my temples, stopping me cold. I closed my eyes, breathed through it. Wisp nudged closer—silent, steady, familiar. The headaches had been worse lately. Ever since Uncle upped the stabilization sessions.

Eight years of that routine, like clockwork. Since the fallout. Since my magic cracked wide open at ten years old and nearly took me with it. Necessary, yes. The price of control.

Without them, my portals turned volatile. Too wide, too unstable. Too dangerous.

Uncle made sure I never forgot that.

At least he handled the sessions himself—one of the few things he did that felt like care, even if the rest of him was all edges and strategy.

I pushed the thoughts aside and turned my attention back to Marigold. She was... beautiful. The kind of beauty that sneaks up on you. Long honey-blond hair, soft skin, curves that drew the eye before you could stop it. My gaze lingered. Too long. Heat flickered low in my spine—sharp, unexpected. I looked away.

Wisp's tail flicked once, slow and deliberate. She'd felt the shift in me. Of course she had.

Beauty didn't matter here. Not at Wickem. Not with her name. Not with where she came from.

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Marigold stopped at one of the display cases that lined the corridor and leaned in to look closer.

My gaze dropped—uninvited, automatic—to the curve of her ass. Tight jeans. Shapely.

I swallowed hard. Elio would laugh, say he didn't think I noticed anything but spell theory and pocket dimensions. But I did. Apparently.

I turned to the display. Similar cabinets lined the academic wing—some held trophies and pictures of Wickem's triumphs, and others held magical artifacts that were of particular importance to the school. But here, her gaze seemed to linger on the smaller trinkets—carved stones, delicate charms; items others might overlook. She especially seemed interested in an intricate gold key—also my favorite—her fingers tracing it in the air.

Perhaps she'd like to see my key collection sometime. "Pretty, isn't it?"

Marigold nodded, then seemed to catch herself, and moved on. As we moved on, her eyes didn't stop moving, scanning the floor, the corners, the spaces most people never noticed.

Searching for exits, I realized. For threats.

Another familiar survival instinct. I knew it well—the constant vigilance, the way your body learns to track footsteps, to read moods in the silence before a storm. Uncle had taught me those lessons thoroughly after taking me in, his idea of

“guidance” leaving marks that weren’t all visible. The therapy helped keep my magic stable, even if nothing could stabilize his temper or soften his cruel streaks.

The very air seemed to stir around her, shadow magic reaching out with curiosity to investigate this new power. The school itself responded to her passage, ancient enchantments recognizing royal blood.

She paused near a suit of armor, her hand going to her chest. “There’s someone in there,” she whispered.

Wisp’s ears pricked forward with interest as I nodded. “A knight who died centuries ago. Most necromancers can’t sense him anymore.”

I never had—not directly. I’d only read about the spirit or heard others mention the presence. But she felt it instantly.

Her power was raw but extraordinary. Untrained but instinctive. The wellspring had chosen well, whether anyone wanted to admit it or not. Honestly, I didn’t think the other heirs, or even the councilors, had known that the wellspring could call someone, though it was right there in the histories if anyone bothered to look.

We exited the academic building and turned up the covered walkway toward the royal dorms. On our right, were the gardens, and beyond them the dome of the auditorium. On our left, we passed the regular dormitories, their windows full of normal student life. Students lounged on benches outside, sharing coffee and pastries while practicing simple spells.

Marigold’s steps slowed, her suitcase bumping on the sidewalk behind her, and I caught her unconsciously licking her pink lips.

I forced my focus back to the context—not the movement that lit up my nerves like a

live wire. Attraction hit, fast and uninvited. Sharper than I was used to. I didn't feel this often. And I hadn't felt it like that in... far too long.

Turning to Marigold, I asked, "Are you hungry?"

"No, not really," she said with a small smile. "But I wouldn't say no to one of those chocolate croissant things."

I opened a portal and pulled one from the cafeteria, then handed it to her.

Her smile widened. "Thank you," she said, taking a bite and giving a little moan. "This is amazing."

That moan made something stir in me that had no business stirring, and I pushed it back down. My interest in her was curiosity, nothing more. Could be nothing more.

Wisp made a soft chuffing sound behind me—barely there. Not a laugh. Not quite.

Just acknowledgment.

Music drifted from someone's open window—some indie rock song I didn't recognize—and her head bobbed slightly to the rhythm before she caught herself.

"Could I stay there instead?" she asked quietly, stopping to watch students practice simple illumination spells on the lawn. She took another bite of her croissant.

"No."

The word came out sharper than I meant, and she flinched—just slightly, but enough.

Wisp pressed against my leg—a silent nudge to rein it in.



“The royal dorm exists for more than tradition. We’re heirs to the Council seats—future rulers of our world. That makes us targets.” I hesitated, then added, “The wards in our tower are ancient. They’re designed to protect bloodlines our enemies would love to erase. The regular dorms wouldn’t hold.”

What I didn’t say—what I never said—was that sometimes, the real threats weren’t out there. Sometimes, they were inside. My rooms had become my first real sanctuary in years—the one place Uncle’s reach couldn’t follow.

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Her chin lifted again, stubborn as ever. “Enemies like vampires?”

“Among others.” I chose my words carefully. “Power draws threats. The separation isn’t about being better—it’s about staying alive.”

“But they’re good enough for them?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “For the regular student?”

“It’s not a fair system,” I said honestly. “But it is the way it’s always been.”

She frowned.

“Still, it’s not like we’re totally isolated,” I said. “We still go to classes with everyone else, and these dorms have a cafeteria on the first floor—I often grab lunch or dinner there.”

Marigold didn’t respond, but I saw how her eyes lingered on a group of girls sharing coffee and textbooks. Normal students who didn’t have centuries of politics and power weighing on their shoulders.

I’d never wondered what it would be like to be one of them, and for the first time, that felt strange to me. Why hadn’t I? I’d never been one to accept the way things had always been in my studies, why had I accepted it in my life? I sighed.

But as we continued on our way, the royal dorm was already calling her—I could see it in the way shadow magic swirled around her feet, ancient enchantments recognizing one of their own. Each person’s magic had a unique signature, based on

their family and their strength, and the royals were always strong—even a half human witch like Marigold.

At the end of the covered walkway, the royal tower rose before us—ancient stone stretching toward the stars, its circular shape both elegant and forbidding. Massive doors dominated the entrance, their dark wood intricately carved with our emblems of power: Cyrus’s leaping flames, my silver-edged portals, Elio’s overlapping masks, and her skull sigil.

“The skull’s yours,” I said. “It’s like a key.”

She approached slowly, almost reverently, tracing the carved skull. Green magic sparked at her touch, following the paths her fingers took like phosphorescent trails. The doors recognized her, swinging open with a deep resonance that reminded me of funeral bells.

The entrance hall rose around us—crystal gleaming, marble polished to a mirror shine, and light from the chandelier scattering in fractured rainbows across the floor. I’d walked through it before. Twice. Maybe three times. Never really looked.

But she did.

She slowed just inside the doorway, eyes wide, head tilting as the light caught in her hair. Her fingers skimmed the stone like she needed to make sure it was real. No mask. No performance. Just wonder.

And the strangest part? I hadn’t seen any of it until she did.

“Through there,” I indicated a discrete archway beneath the sweeping staircase, “you’ll find the kitchens, and your rooms...” I gestured up the spiral steps where Wisp already gilded ahead, her ethereal form painting the stone with ghostly blue

light.

“The common room.” I gestured to it as we passed. “We share it as a kind of living room, and breakfast will be served here in the morning.”

I followed her up the stairs, keeping my eyes fixed on the light ahead instead of the way her jeans fit or the subtle sway of her hips.

Easier that way. Safer.

The skull motif appeared again on her door. Unlike the others, these rooms had been sealed since the day her father graduated Wickem. No one else had been powerful enough to claim them.

She pressed her palm to the door. Magic flared, ancient locks recognizing her blood. The door opened with a whisper of power that made Wisp’s form flicker.

I could have left then. Should have left. But I found myself lingering in the doorway, watching as she stepped into her inheritance.

Watching her explore, gently touching each item with quiet reverence. Her necromancy responded to the ancient magic in the room, dead things emerging from the shadows to welcome their new mistress.

“Thank you,” she said softly, turning back to me. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears, but her voice was steady. “For showing me the way.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Wisp pressed against my leg again, her usual nudge of comfort—but this time, she lingered. She knew what this moment meant, even if I couldn’t name it yet.

“I’ll be going now,” I said, “Close the door behind me.”

She crossed back to the threshold.

But before she could close it, I found myself speaking. “Once that door shuts, no one can enter without your permission. Not even other heirs.” I hesitated, then added, “Not even our illusions or portals can breach it. The rooms are yours alone.”

She paused, hand on the doorframe. “Why are you telling me this?”

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I recognized that look in her eyes—the desperate need for a space that was truly safe, truly hers. I’d worn the same expression just days ago when I discovered my uncle couldn’t enter my rooms, despite holding a Council seat. The protections didn’t think he was “family” enough. That small victory had felt like my first real breath in years.

“Everyone should have one safe place,” I said finally, the words carrying more weight than I intended. Something shifted in her expression—understanding, maybe. Or recognition.

She studied me for a long moment, then nodded. The door closed with a whisper of ancient magic, sealing her into her sanctuary. My portals showed only darkness where her rooms should be—the protection spells already at work.

Despite myself, I opened another window to watch her door. Just to observe, I told myself. But there was something intriguing about her. The way she noticed things others missed, like the dead knight in the armor. Or perhaps it was how she’d flinched at certain sounds as we walked, a reaction I recognized too well.

Wisp curled up beside my desk, her knowing eyes fixed on the portal. My familiar had always been good at sensing when something—or someone—might be important. Even now, her attention remained fixed on Marigold’s door with unusual interest.

Uncle wouldn’t like it. He’d be with the Council as usual, already viewing her as a threat to their control. I should stay away, focus on my studies, be the proper heir he demanded.

But as I finally closed the portal, that expectation felt... different. Like something had shifted.

And for the first time in a long time, I wasn't sure I wanted to fall back in line.

6

Marigold

For a long moment after Keane left, I just leaned against the closed door, my hand still tingling where I'd touched the skull sigil. The magic had felt...right. Like coming home, if home was a place you'd never been but somehow remembered.

No one can enter without your permission.

After years of living in apartments with broken locks and paper-thin walls, where every strange footstep in the hallway made me hold my breath—the thought of having a space that was truly secure made my throat tight. Especially after Elio's cruel tricks and Cyrus's barely contained rage. But then there was Keane...

I touched my lips, remembering the taste of the chocolate croissant he'd given me. Such a small thing, but it meant something. The way he understood what I needed—without making me say it out loud. He wasn't like the others. I just couldn't figure out why.

I forced myself to breathe, to really look at my new rooms. Like something out of a storybook—except this time, I wasn't the maid scrubbing floors. I was the girl with power in her blood.

Magic thrummed through the walls, flowing like water through invisible pipes. I could feel it. Pure, alive.

And the tower's magic, or the wellspring's or whatever it was, made my own power surge in response, and suddenly every dead thing in the building seemed to wake at once. Their whispers filled my head—mice and rats and birds that had lived and died in these walls, all trying to welcome me at the same time.

“Quiet,” I whispered, overwhelmed.

My fingers found my ring without thinking, twisting the silver band on its chain. The chaos settled slightly, like turning down the volume on too many voices.

Dust lay thick over everything—coating the furniture like gray snow. But dust didn't bother me. I'd cleaned plenty of other people's messes. This one, at least, was mine to tackle.

“Hello?” I called softly, feeling slightly foolish. But now that I'd managed to quiet the chorus of dead things to a manageable level, I wanted to properly introduce myself. Mom would think I was nuts, talking to the shadows, but it felt right.

Nothing appeared, but the room itself seemed to stir, like a cat waking from a long nap. Dust motes swirled in patterns too deliberate to be random.

A single skeletal mouse emerged from the wall, delicate as lacework bone. Its tiny skull tilted as it crept forward on needle-thin limbs, joints clicking softly with each step. Bits of shadow clung to its ribs like scraps of fabric, twitching like whiskers as it sniffed the air.

Unlike the overwhelming wave of welcome from earlier, this felt... manageable. Familiar.

Maybe I was learning how to hold it—this power, this place.



I moved through the space slowly, taking in everything with fresh eyes. The main room reminded me of a living room—if living rooms came with velvet armchairs, carved tables that looked like they were grown from the forest, and a fireplace of black stone that drank in the light.

The magic here hadn't left. I could still feel it in the air—thick and alive, pressing against my skin like mist from a waterfall. Not hostile. But not passive, either.

The study made me pause in the doorway. Shelves stretched from floor to ceiling, crammed with leather-bound books with titles like *Advanced Magical Theory* and *Necromantic Creatures*. A large desk dominated one wall, its surface bare except for a fine coating of dust.

Years of silence pressed against my skin. They'd said that no one had sat here since my father was a student, learning to wield the magic that now surged through my veins with too much force. I suspected it hadn't been so hard for him, since he grew up in this world.

I went back to my suitcase where I'd left it in the living room, and pulled out my box. Collecting little things—a feather, a pretty rock, a pendant—had been my habit for as long as I could remember. Nothing expensive, nothing stolen, just whatever pretty things I could find, buy, or trade for. After dumping out my pockets a hundred times, Mom had finally caved and got me a carved wooden box from the thrift store to keep “my treasures” in. I turned it over in my hands and smiled, then took it into the study and placed it on the dusty desk.

There. Now it's mine.

The bedroom was beautiful. A queen-sized bed, draped in green and black covers that, beneath the dust, promised softness I'd never known. Fluffy pillows piled high enough to drown in. And the glass doors—actual glass doors—that led to a balcony overlooking the school grounds and the mountains beyond.

I pushed them open despite the cold, letting the wind whip my hair back. The view stole my breath—mountains reaching into clouds, the campus' gothic architecture making every building look like it was from a fairytale. I'd never been this high up, never seen this far. The world seemed endless from here, full of possibilities I'd never dared imagine.

Except I was living them. A witch in a brand new world of magic.

As I stood there, my emotions must have leaked into my power. Small shapes stirred in the garden far below—birds that had died on windowsills, mice that had lived and died in the grounds. My hand flew to Mom's ring—I still couldn't think of it as my father's—as I tried to rein it in. Too much, too much. I hadn't meant to reach that far.

I stepped back inside, closing my eyes and tried to focus until the magic retreated once more. Going through the wards had caused something to awaken in me, and now I was brimming with power I neither understood or could control.

Shaking myself, I moved on to the bathroom. It nearly made me cry. Not just a bathroom—a truly private bathroom, with a separate shower and tub. The tub was deep enough to actually submerge in, with elegant copper faucets gone green with

age. Big fluffy towels sat stacked on the counter, and a beautiful silver-framed mirror hung above a marble vanity. After years of sharing cramped apartment bathrooms, this felt impossibly luxurious.

I spun slowly in the middle of the bathroom, elated and terrified and overwhelmed all at once. All this space—all of it mine.

No one can enter without my permission. No one can take it away.

The skeletal mouse from earlier had followed me, his tiny bone feet clicking softly against the marble floor. He watched me with hollow sockets that somehow still held intent, tilting his head in that curious way as I ran my fingers along the cool countertop.

When I opened a cabinet, he gave a sharp little chitter—encouraging? Judging? Honestly, hard to say—and scurried after me as I moved back into the main suite.

I texted Mom that I was here and safe. Then I went searching for cleaning supplies. Maybe there were spells for this—probably there were spells for this—but I didn't know them or even where to look for them.

And after the insanity of the day, I needed the familiar comfort of actual work. Something I knew how to do without the magic that kept threatening to spill over every time I moved.

Somehow I found a bottle of lemon soap and some cleaning cloths under the sink in the bathroom. I didn't know how or why my dad would have had to clean by hand, but I was grateful. Pulling out my phone from my suitcase, I set it on the counter and hit play on my indie playlist.

I filled the massive tub with hot water and soap, then stripped the bed and dragged all

the linens in. The towels followed, then the velvet cushion covers. Steam rose around me as I scrubbed, turning the water gray.

I sang along as “Complicated” played. The dead things in the walls picked up the rhythm, their quiet clicking like odd percussion.

The familiar motions helped settle me, helped me find a rhythm with the magic pulsing through the tower. It was like learning to breathe with too much air—not fighting it exactly, but finding a way to handle the excess. The silver ring felt warm against my chest, almost like it was helping maintain that delicate balance.

I dragged everything out to the balcony afterward, hanging sheets and towels over the railing. The wind whipped them like flags announcing my presence. Let the other students stare if they could see this high. Let them whisper about the half-breed heir doing manual labor.

At least the dead birds up here kept their distance, only watching curiously instead of all trying to crowd close like before. A crow cawed in the distance, and this time, it sounded like a live one.

These rooms were mine. This space was mine. And I refused to sleep on dusty sheets on my first night home.

Home. The word echoed in my mind as I watched my laundry dance in the wind.

The power in the walls thrummed in response, like the whole tower was acknowledging my claim. For now, I just stood on my balcony, letting the wind and the sunset and the carefully controlled presence of dead things remind me that I belonged here, whatever anyone else might say.

Morning light painted weird shapes on walls I didn’t recognize.

For a second, panic spiked—had we been evicted again? Was this another shelter? Then a skeletal mouse clattered across my nightstand, its tiny bone feet tapping like impatient nails, and it all came rushing back.

Wickem. Heir. Necromancer. Right.

I grabbed the orientation packet, accidentally jostling the mouse. He gave me an offended chitter and skittered to the edge. The elegant script made my stomach clench:

Welcome to Wickem Academy

Today's Schedule: Wednesday, September 1st

9:00 AM - New Student Orientation (Main Hall)

2:00 PM - Campus Tours

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5:00 PM - Welcome Ceremony (Auditorium)

\*Note: All Heirs required to participate in the ceremonial procession. Traditional robes mandatory.

Ceremonial procession.

In front of people.

And were the ceremonial robes those musty green things hanging in the closet? They'd need cleaning, but first I needed food before my stomach started digesting itself.

I groaned and flopped back onto the cloud-soft bed, which didn't help my motivation to move. More time with my fellow heirs. Just what I needed.

The clock on the wall read 8:15 AM, and my power surged with anxiety. A skeletal mouse scratched at the orientation papers with tiny bone-claws while another joined it, both watching with empty sockets as I fought to keep more dead things from manifesting.

"Just one at a time, okay?" I muttered, touching my silver ring. At least they didn't care if I was a half-breed.

Grateful I'd showered last night after cleaning, I forced myself out of bed. The travel-size toiletries I'd stuffed in my bag were pathetically inadequate for that gorgeous bathroom, but at least I had them. Note to self: find a store, if magical universities

even had those.

I pulled on my nicest jeans and a blue sweater that only had one small hole in the sleeve. The mirror above the marble vanity was too elegant to show me mercy—I looked exactly like what I was, a poor girl playing dress-up in a palace. I yanked my hair into a ponytail and tried not to think about how I’d look next to the other heirs in their designer clothes.

Then I crept out and down the stairs until I heard voices. Only these voices—including Elio’s musical tones—made me pause outside.

“Everything’s arranged for tonight. When she walks up those steps...” Elio said.

I crept closer to the vent, barely breathing. A female voice joined his, followed by soft laughter.

“...complete humiliation...” More laughter. “...never recover...”

The dead things stirred at my anger, but I pushed them back.

Of course the heirs had something planned. They wouldn’t just leave me be.

A flicker of movement caught my eye—one of Keane’s portals materializing. A note floated through, landing at my feet: Watch the third step at the ceremony. They’ve spelled it to collapse.

The portal vanished before I could process its warning. My skeletal mouse investigated where it had been, chittering uneasily.

I stalled as long as I could, but hunger finally drove me into the common room. A massive breakfast spread covered the table—pastries piled on silver trays, fruit

arranged like jewels, steaming coffee making my mouth water.

Elio lounged on a velvet sofa, a delicate china cup balanced in one hand like he was born to wield porcelain. My body tensed before my brain caught up—memory flashing hot and sharp from yesterday's illusions.

It wasn't fair. No one that cruel should look like that—like an airbrushed fantasy in human form.

A blonde girl perched on the arm of his couch in perfectly rumpled designer wear—probably worth more than everything I owned. And at his knee, a dark-haired guy leaned lazily against him like some spoiled lapdog. Elio absently stroked a hand through his hair, fingers threading with casual familiarity.

It wasn't performative. It was just Elio. Beautiful, terrifying, and completely at ease in his power—no matter who was watching.

They looked like a Renaissance painting of decadent royalty, the kind rich people hang in their foyers to remind you they've been wealthy since before your ancestors had shoes.

Keane sat half-hidden in an alcove, a book open on his lap. He'd helped me yesterday. Warned me just now. Could've been kindness. Could've been strategy.

He was quieter than the others, sharper too—and just as ruinously gorgeous. Dark hair falling into his eyes. That cut-glass jaw.

I hated the way my chest clenched just looking at them. All of them. Like I was on the outside of some cruel fairy tale, where the princes were monsters and the castle was a trap.



“Oh look, darlings,” Elio drawled, eyes gleaming. “Our little half-breed has emerged. Looking for scraps?”

Heat crawled up my neck as Cyrus shifted by the fire. The temperature in the room rose with him—no flames, not yet, but I felt them in my memory. Still, I couldn’t stop my eyes from catching on the way the firelight glinted off the copper strands in his hair.

He wore a dark Henley, sleeves shoved to his elbows, the soft fabric clinging just enough to his arms and chest to be annoying. Like the shirt had been designed specifically to test my resolve.

He looked relaxed. Dangerous.

Like he could burn the place down without bothering to stand up.

“She does have that hungry stray look,” the guy at Elio’s knee said, grinning.

I grabbed a cinnamon roll, fingers sticky before I even took a bite. “Just getting breakfast before orientation.”

“Orientation?” Elio’s smile sharpened. “That’s for regular students. Royals are exempt from such... basic requirements.”

“Except you, of course,” Cyrus added, voice all smoke. “You’ll need all the help you can get.”

“Though I’m not sure even orientation can teach proper etiquette.” Elio gestured delicately at my roll.

I looked down. Frosting on my fingers. No plate, no fork. Just me, standing in front of their curated perfection with a sticky, half-crushed pastry.

“I think I’ll take this to go,” I muttered, backing toward the door.

“Do run along,” Elio called sweetly. “And don’t forget about the ceremony. It’s quite the tradition—all those people watching.”

Behind me, their laughter curled like smoke.

Ahead, my first day at magical university.

And somewhere in the middle, me—alone, unsure, and already in way too deep.

7

Marigold

The shadows and the dead things in the walls stirred eagerly as I slipped into Wickem's main hall. Students filled the temporary benches, their voices bouncing off the stone in a flurry of words like "ley line resonance" and "elemental attunement." It might as well have been a foreign language.

I gripped my ring to keep my necromancy in check. A student nearby casually levitated their notebook like it was nothing. When I reached for my own magic, it surged like a broken dam, too fast, too much—and all the dead things perked up like I'd just shouted "Party." Not the best first impression. Unless the goal was a skeleton uprising.

"First day nerves?"

I spun to find a woman next to me. My heart lurched—after yesterday's funhouse horror show courtesy of Elio, this particular friendly face felt like a potential trap. But something about her energy felt different.

Where Elio's illusion had been diamond-sharp and perfect, this woman radiated honest warmth. She wore her dark hair in a neat bob that wasn't quite perfect and her brown eyes held actual kindness.

Even the dead things hummed with something close to relief. I was getting better at reading them—they seemed to like her.

“I’m Ms. Wallace—the real one this time,” she said with a sympathetic smile. “I heard about Elio’s... performance. I promise I’m the genuine article.”

I’d nearly been hurt, and she spoke casually, as if it was all a game. Sympathy or no sympathy, I could tell I’d be on my own here. Still, I studied her carefully, trying to catalog the small imperfections that made her real—the slightly crooked collar of her sapphire blazer, a scuff on one practical heel, the way her ID badge hung slightly askew. Maybe if I knew the differences, I could spot his illusion next time.

“Let me introduce you to some fellow freshmen. It helps to have allies when everything feels overwhelming.” She ushered me toward one of the benches.

She led me to a bench where two other students sat—a girl with close-cropped black hair and protective charms dangling from multiple piercings, and a tall guy with wire-rimmed glasses who radiated scholarly British propriety.

“Oh, thank death, another necromancer freshman!” the girl exclaimed with a grin that lit up her whole face. “I’m Raven. Yes, really, my parents are those kind of witches—all about the symbolic naming. It was either this or Morgana.”

I couldn’t help but smile back. After the other heirs’ cold disdain, her enthusiasm felt sincere. “Marigold,” I said, shaking her hand.

“I’m Lucas,” the guy said. “Just got accepted to the Theoretical Necromancy track, though that might be ambitious for the first semester.”

“Might be,” Ms. Wallace said with a glimmer of humor in her brown eyes. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Raven patted the seat next to her, and I slid into it. “It’s okay to be nervous,” she said. “I totally am too.” She looked around the great hall like she couldn’t quite believe she

was here. “I’ve wanted to go to Wickem forever, and now that I’m here...”

“It’s a lot,” Lucas said.

With a chuckle, I nodded. It was nice to have them voicing similar things to what I was feeling, although at least they’d known that Wickem existed.

A student a few rows ahead glanced back, eyes narrowing, before whispering something to their friend. I kept my head high, but the weight of their stares pressed down on me. So it wasn’t just the heirs who had a problem with me. Great.

My gaze was drawn to Raven and Lucas’ dead things playing with each other, the beetle and bird engaged in an impromptu game of chase while the mouse that had been following me watched with interest. At least they seemed to have control over their power—their dead things stayed small and singular, while I had to constantly fight to keep mine from multiplying.

“So,” Lucas asked, pulling out a course catalog thick enough to stun a horse, “which magical prep school? I was at Hawthorn in London—a bit stuffy but their necromancy program is unparalleled.”

“Riverside Academy,” Raven chimed in. “Though my parents almost sent me to Hawthorn too. Their research into theoretical applications of death magic is groundbreaking.”

They both looked at me.

“Um, a Sprayberry public in Albany?” I offered. Their blank looks made my cheeks burn. “It’s... not a magical school. Just regular public high school.”

“Wait.” Raven’s eyes widened as understanding dawned. “Are you the Shadow Heir?”

I nodded, bracing myself to be mocked.

But instead, Raven grinned and said, “That’s awesome. No wonder your power feels so strong—royal bloodlines usually are. Must be wild trying to handle all that without training though.”

Before I could respond, Lucas pointed toward the stage. “Look, President Sprig is about to speak.”

We all turned obediently to watch the stern looking man who took the stage. He was stocky, with close-cut black curls on his head, and his whole being radiated natural authority.

He introduced himself, and his voice carried effortlessly as he welcomed us and explained Wickem Academy’s dual track system—general magical theory for all students, plus specialized studies in our chosen disciplines. It all sounded so normal, like a regular college—but with magic.

After President Sprig finished up his speech and stepped down, Ms. Wallace appeared at my elbow again and urged me to follow her. “You can come back to your friends in a minute, Ms. Grimley.”

I winced at the name, but I expected I would need to get used to it. After all, Grimley had been my father’s name and that’s who I was to them in this place—a Grimley, a traitor’s daughter.

We waited at the back of the room, and a few minutes later, President Sprig joined us.

“Ms. Grimley,” he said, offering his hand.

I had a sudden urge to flee, but I was an heir and a necromancer—even though I’d discovered it in the last twenty-four hours. Meeting important people had suddenly become part of my everyday life. So I ignored the fluttery feeling in my chest, met the president’s eyes and shook his hand. Despite his formal demeanor, his face seemed unexpectedly kind. I was grateful for it.

“Given your background,” he said, choosing his words carefully, “we’ll need to arrange some catch-up coursework alongside your regular freshman load.”

I nodded. I’d expected as much, especially after hearing that Raven and Lucas had attended magical high schools. “I’ll work hard.”

The president smiled. “Ms. Wallace has helped design an accelerated program to bridge the gap.”

“We’ll get you up to speed,” Ms. Wallace added. “I’ve worked with students transitioning from non-magical backgrounds before. You’re not alone in this.”

“Really?” I asked. The idea that there might be others like me brought a small sense of relief.

The president nodded. “Ms. Wallace will help you with the details.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He headed off in the direction of the administrative offices.

Ms. Wallace turned to me. She lifted up a small, leatherbound book that hummed with magic. After flipping through it, she pointed to a page, “Here’s your revised schedule, including some remedial classes that start this week, and we can look into getting you some peer tutoring.”



“Are the remedial classes covered by my scholarship?”

“Your father’s estate covers everything, including spending money. Here,” Ms. Wallace said, pressing a silver credit card into my hand. It thrummed with contained power—I was still amazed at how much I could sense from everyone and everything.

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I hesitated before asking, “If there’s an estate, does that mean I can send money to my mom?”

Ms. Wallace’s expression softened slightly. “Yes, we can arrange that. There are accounts set aside beyond tuition.”

I smiled. The thought of still being able to help, maybe get Mom the surgery she needed—I couldn’t believe it.

“Is she safe?” I asked, half under my breath. “The vampires left her alone?”

Ms. Wallace nodded. “Yes, the Guard still has watchmen placed, but now that you aren’t there, there’s no reason they should pay attention to her.”

“They won’t go after her out of vengeance?” I asked. “Now that they can’t get to me?” Like Mr. Conrad had probably already done, pulled his contract from my mom’s company. I hoped she wouldn’t lose her job over that incident.

“Vampire clans aren’t that organized,” Wallace continued. “It shouldn’t be a problem.”

I nibbled at my lip.

She lay a hand on my arm. “The Guard will take care of your mom,” Ms. Wallace assured me. “Now we just need to focus on getting you settled and ready for the Third Week Trials.”

“Trials?” My stomach dropped.

“All students must demonstrate their abilities,” she said. “But don’t worry—we’ll have you well prepared.”

After Ms. Wallace finished her explanations, I walked back to Raven and Lucas in a daze, my mind spinning. Yesterday I was cleaning houses, today I had inherited money and magic and who knew what else. And in three weeks, I’d have to prove I deserved it all.

“You’ll need all the core texts,” Lucas said, marking items in a list on his phone. “Professor Cribley’s Basic Magical Theory is notorious—we have three books just for that class.”

“Wait, what?” I asked, trying to focus on what we were doing.

“Look,” Lucas said, pointing to a room on the same side of the hall as the administrative offices. A line of students stood in front of glass doors that were propped open, and the line wrapped around the main hall.

“That’s the campus store,” Raven said. “Where we get our textbooks and supplies and stuff.” She caught the face I made—then noticed what I was staring at. The catalog spread open on the bench between them. “We’re making a list.”

Oh yeah, on top of all these life revelations, I also had school. I glanced over at the campus store again. I was sure it hadn’t been here when I’d gone through before, but with the tricks the other heirs had played on me, I couldn’t be sure.

“Don’t forget Professor Undergrove’s Necromancy requirements,” Raven said, comparing her list to Lucas’ lists. “At least the store has everything—both regular supplies and magical components. Good thing too.” She gave a half-hearted scowl at

her beetle. “Boris here keeps stealing my crystals.”

“Boris?”

“My familiar,” Raven explained, scratching the skeletal beetle’s head. “Every witch bonds with one eventually. You’ll probably get yours soon, being an heir and all.”

Lucas continued, adjusting his glasses, “And you’ll need proper protective gear for Combat Training. I’ve heard that Professor Rivera doesn’t let anyone practice without full safety equipment.”

“Look at that line though,” Raven groaned. “We’ll be here forever. Maybe we should head up to the cafe first? Get some actual decent coffee while we wait for this chaos to die down.”

“Best view in the academic wing,” Lucas agreed. “And they do this amazing skull foam art in their lattes.”

“You had me at decent coffee,” I said, following them into the hallway that led toward the academic wing.

Raven and Lucas laughed like they were just normal college students. For a second, I could almost believe I was one too.

My skeletal mouse darted after Boris the beetle, their little bones clicking over the stone floor in a makeshift game of tag.

Necromancer. Heir. Scholarship kid.

For the first time since I got here, it didn’t feel like too much.

Tonight might be a disaster. But right now? I was still standing.

Elio

Echo's claws tightened on my shoulder as we crept through the maintenance tunnels beneath Wickem. The stone walls here were older than the campus above, worn smooth by centuries of magic flowing through hidden channels. Cyrus's fire cast dancing shadows, but even his flames seemed muted by the oppressive weight of old power.

"Careful," I muttered. "Getting caught down here would be... inconvenient."

Cyrus shot me a glare and snuffed the flame with a sharp flick. Darkness swallowed the corridor, heavier without his light. "You think I don't know that?"

His control had been slipping all week—heat in his footsteps, sparks when he spoke. Ever since the Council had announced they'd be attending the ceremony. Lord Raynoff didn't do pageantry, so their presence could only mean one thing: judgment. Assessment.

I twisted my rings absently, remembering my own freshman ceremony. The perfectly worded excuses from my parents, the empty seats where family should have been. But now the entire Council would attend for her—the Shadow Heir. The hypocrisy of it all...

"You're sure this will work?" Cyrus asked.

I grinned. "Oh, it will work. The only question is whether she'll rise to the occasion... or crumble."

Echo's scales rippled in sudden warning. Footsteps echoed from deeper in the tunnel network, accompanied by voices that didn't belong down here. We pressed into a dark alcove as two figures approached.

"...the connection must be maintained," a man said, his tone carrying unnatural weight. "Focus on the task at hand."

Lord Alstone. Keane's uncle. The Council member's presence in these maintenance tunnels was strange enough, but something about his voice made Echo's scales shift to a sickly color.

Cyrus tensed beside me, heat radiating from his clenched fists. I shook my head in warning—we couldn't afford to get caught down here.

Keane emerged first from the shadows. His movements were stiff, wrong somehow, like he was fighting against himself. His fox familiar kept flickering in and out at his feet—something I'd never seen happen before. A half-formed portal beside him bled darkness into the air.

His uncle followed. "We'll need to continue these sessions more frequently," he said. "We can't risk any disruptions. Not with the Shadow Heir's arrival causing instability."

"Yes, Uncle." Keane's voice sounded hollow, distant.

Another portal attempted to form at his fingers but its silvery edges collapsed, that same darkness spreading through the air. Wisp pressed against his legs before fading completely as Lord Alstone gripped Keane's shoulder.

They disappeared through a hidden door that melded seamlessly back into the wall.

“What the hell was that about?” Cyrus muttered, reigniting his flame, which was flickering uncertainly. “Since when does Keane meet his uncle in maintenance tunnels?”

“They have therapy,” I added quietly, “but here? And what’s wrong with his magic?”

“We should ask him what’s going on,” Cyrus said, staring at where they’d vanished.

“Would he tell us the truth?” I asked. Even though we’d grown up together, attended the same schools, Keane had been distant, especially since his parents’ deaths. “Besides, we have our own plans to worry about.”

“I don’t like it,” Cyrus insisted, watching after them. “The Council doesn’t come down here unless something important is happening. And did you see how he was moving? Like a puppet—”

“We stick to our plan,” I cut him off, though Echo’s colored scales betrayed my own unease flickering through grays and sickly greens. “For now.”

Despite my words, I glanced back as we continued on toward the auditorium. Even if we weren’t exactly friends, the heirs always stuck together, needed to stick together.

And if there was something wrong with Keane...then we were all in danger.

9

Marigold

That evening, the other heirs and I waited at the doorway for the welcome ceremony to begin. The circular auditorium stretched above us, its glass dome letting in the last rays of sunset. Students sat in ascending rows around the center stage. The front row



was half empty, and half filled with people I didn't know—well, except for Lord Raynoff.

“Ready, darling?” Elio's voice slid over me, sweet as spun sugar and just as sharp.

Despite the venom tucked in his tone, heat bloomed low in my stomach. I shook it off. Residual enchantment. That's all it was.

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His silver and violet robes shimmered with illusion magic, like moonlight turned into fabric. Every fold and flare seemed calculated to catch the light at the perfect angle.

But it was his familiar that drew my eye—a crystalline chameleon coiled around his shoulder clasp like a living brooch. Its scales shimmered with too-bright hues—acid greens, oil-slick purples, sapphire blue veined with white-gold. Its twin eyes rotated slowly, independently, like it saw everything from every angle and wasn't impressed. It flicked its tongue once. The air around it rippled.

Even his pet was unnerving.

Next to him, Cyrus radiated heat like a hearth on the verge of becoming a wildfire. His formal robes were black and ember-red, embroidered with living flames that danced across his sleeves in flickering patterns.

On his shoulder perched a phoenix, still as stone, its feathers layered in reds, golds, and molten copper that shimmered like smoldering coals. Each breath it took stirred heat in the air, and when it blinked, a faint flare sparked at the corner of its eye. Its long tail feathers drifted behind him in a slow curl, leaving behind ember trails that vanished before they touched the ground.

He looked like a weapon wrapped in velvet.

Keane stood slightly apart, as always—half-shadow, half-regal detachment. His navy and white robes were deceptively simple, but the white seemed to absorb shadow instead of reflect it.

His familiar—the spectral fox—moved like fog laced with moonlight. Its body shifted with every breath, part translucent, part solid, its bones glowing faintly beneath its silvery fur like a ghost halfway through materializing. It circled Keane in tight, deliberate loops, pausing only to fix its galaxy-bright eyes on the space ahead. Its tail split and rejoined as it moved. Two, then one. Then two again.

None of them spoke. They didn't have to.

Together, they looked like something out of a legend: heir, flame, illusion, shadow—and the familiars that matched them in power and precision.

And then there was me.

I tugged at the edge of my newly pressed green-and-black robes, which felt stiff and too formal, like I was wearing someone else's future. I didn't have a familiar perched on my shoulder, glowing or gleaming or trailing sparks. Didn't have a centuries-old family crest. Didn't have control.

But I could feel the wellspring beneath my feet now. The air here buzzed with it, thick with power—ancient, alive, and waiting.

And for the first time, I didn't feel it pulling away from me. I felt it leaning in.

President Sprig took center stage.

“Distinguished colleagues and learners,” he said with a bow toward the front row, where the Councilors sat backed by their Shroud Guard detail. “Today we gather to celebrate the opening of another year under unprecedented circumstances. The presence of our full Council honors us, even as it reminds us of the challenges our magical community faces beyond these walls.”

Then he turned to the students. “Wickem Academy is more than an institution—it is a bastion of magical excellence, where ancient traditions meet modern scholarship. To our new students: You represent the finest magical talent of your generation, chosen to uphold centuries of mystical learning. To our returning scholars: Your dedication honors the legacy of those who came before, while blazing new paths in magical discovery.”

“You may notice additional Shroud Guard presence today,” he continued, gesturing to the guards stationed along the back walls of the auditorium. Their tattoos glowed on their necks just like Ms. Parker’s. “While Wickem’s wards remain strong, we take no chances with the safety of our students and the security of our wellspring. The Guard’s vigilance allows us to maintain our focus on education and excellence.”

His staff struck the stage with a resonant boom. The floating orbs dimmed. Shapes carved into the stage’s surface began to glow with blue-white light, and my power surged in response. I gripped my ring tighter, trying to maintain control as the dead things stirred excitedly in the walls.

The four of us glided down the center aisle as our names were called. My eyes scanned over the audience and the four seats filled with the Councilors. Lord Raynoff I recognized, his face a mask of careful neutrality. Beside him sat two people with Elio’s blond hair and perfectly polished image. The fourth chair held a dark-haired man whose blue eyes held nothing of Keane’s intensity. Was that his dad?

When we arrived at the stage steps. One. Two. The third step—the dead things in the walls were practically shrieking about the trap. I deliberately stepped over it, grateful both for Keane’s warning note and my spirits’ confirmation. I don’t know if I would have trusted him, if they hadn’t agreed.

The step creaked ominously as my robes brushed it. A ripple of magic shivered through the air, though its exact nature remained hidden from me. I caught Elio’s

perfect mask crack just slightly, showing real surprise at my evasion. His familiar's scales shifted rapidly through shades of warning crimson and violet. But when I glanced at Keane, the relief in his eyes was sincere.

“As is tradition, we begin with the Heirs’ Offering.” President Sprig struck again, and the stage split open, revealing a swirling pool of raw magic that made my breath catch in my throat.

The surge of power was like nothing I’d felt before—even stronger than crossing the school’s wards. Every dead thing in the building responded at once, from the mice in the walls to birds that had died on window ledges centuries ago. My awareness exploded outward as they all tried to manifest, drawn to that ancient energy. Only my silver ring, cool and steady against my skin, helped me maintain some semblance of control.

Cyrus stepped forward first. Fire erupted from his hands, but this wasn’t like his usual aggressive flames. Dragons of pure light danced over the raw magic, each scale perfectly rendered in shades of gold and crimson. For just a moment, I glimpsed real joy on his face as he commanded such beauty. His phoenix spread its wings wider, trilling a note that seemed to make the very air vibrate with power.

Elio’s display was pure artistry. His illusions transformed the air into living history—ancient witches raising the school buildings, battles against darkness, triumph and sacrifice flowing like water. Each image was crafted with such precision that I found myself leaning forward, wanting to step into those remembered moments. His familiar’s scales shifted through dozens of colors, matching each scene’s emotional resonance.

Then Keane’s portals opened like windows into impossibility. They cascaded around the stage like a waterfall of starlight, each one offering glimpses of wonders—distant mountains, strange skies, places that shouldn’t exist. But the portal’s edges seemed to

fight against themselves— wanting to flow clean and silver like starlight, but something forced them into jagged, dark lines. The wrongness made my dead things recoil especially in the overwhelmingly pure power of the wellspring itself.

After he finished, I took a breath then stepped forward for my turn. As I moved closer, raw magic erupted from below the stage in a sudden geyser of pure energy that made the air crackle and shimmer. The ceremonial wellspring ripped open like a wound in reality, its power surging upward in ribbons of iridescent force. Ancient magic reached for me with invisible fingers, sending electric tingles across my skin and making my hair stand on end.

My necromancy exploded outward before I could stop it, the force of it nearly driving me to my knees. Every spirit in the building tried to manifest at once, drawn to that ancient energy like moths to an irresistible flame. The very stones seemed to exhale centuries of accumulated death magic, releasing echoes of everyone who had ever died within Wickem's walls. My silver ring burned cold against my skin as I fought for control, its protective magic straining against the overwhelming surge of power.

Past necromancers stirred in the stones, their long-dormant energies awakening to join the deafening chorus of the dead. Their voices whispered ancient secrets and half-forgotten spells, a symphony of shadow magic that threatened to drown out my own thoughts. The wellspring's power called to something deep in my blood, something that recognized this magic as its birthright, even as it threatened to overwhelm me completely.

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Just when I thought I'd lose myself to it, something else caught me. Not a barrier. Not a force pushing back. But a pull—like the other heirs' magic had reached for mine at the exact moment I reached for it.

Cyrus's flames turned blue where they met my spirits. Not cold, not weak—just different. Brighter. More like energy than fire. His phoenix flared its wings, letting out a sound that sent a shiver through the room.

Elio's illusions didn't just shimmer; they settled. The ghostly figures he created—meant to be untouchable, ephemeral—felt heavier, like my necromancy had anchored them. His chameleon's scales flared through a series of fast, anxious color shifts.

Keane's portals wavered—just for a second. The edges smoothed into something silver and clean. But then the darkness fought back, and his fox let out a small, distressed noise, pressing harder against his legs. Keane's hands curled at his sides.

We moved together without thinking, our magic weaving patterns older than Wickem itself. The differences that had divided us—blood, training, tradition—meant nothing to power that recognized its own. The raw magic below the stage surged in response, like something ancient was waking after a long sleep.

The shapes on the stage flickered—just for a moment. Not just in color, but in something deeper, something in the air. The weight of the room changed. It wasn't just my imagination. Even the wellspring itself felt different.

I glanced toward the front row. President Sprig's fingers tightened around his staff.

Not much. Not enough for anyone else to notice. But he had expected something different.

The Councilors sat still, unreadable in their high-backed chairs. Maybe nothing had changed. Maybe I had imagined it. But then I caught a shift in posture, a glance exchanged too fast for me to catch between them. And I wasn't the only one who noticed.

Cyrus was looking at his hands like his own fire had startled him. Elio's expression wasn't just impressed—it was calculating. And Keane...Keane wasn't looking at me at all. His fox pressed so tightly against his legs now that he barely moved.

The students murmured behind us. I caught fragments—"Stronger than last year's display"—"Did you see that phoenix?"—but their awe felt distant compared to the silence in the front row. The Council didn't speak. They barely moved. But something was different.

As we took our seats in the front row, I felt the shift in the air. Something had changed tonight—in us, in Wickem, in the very magic that flowed through these halls. The dead things whispered warnings I didn't yet understand.

Later that night, I stood on my balcony, letting the mountain air cool my skin. The wellspring's power still hummed through Wickem's foundations, but now I understood what I'd been sensing since I arrived. The pure energy flowing through the walls like clean water, feeding magic into every stone.

The skeletal mouse who'd been following me since my first day perched on the railing beside me, his bones catching the moonlight like bleached ivory. He looked like something pulled from a fairy tale's darker pages—delicate spine curved just slightly, ribcage hollow but sturdy, tail bones curling and uncurling like a question mark. Tiny whorls of shadow clung to his joints, twitching with life, and the faintest



green shimmer glowed from the sockets of his skull.

“Scout,” I said softly. His whiskers—made of braided threads of darkness, I realized—twitched at the name. “That’s who you are, isn’t it? My familiar.”

He chittered happily, climbing onto my outstretched hand. His empty eye sockets glowed with the same necromantic energy I’d felt during the ceremony. Not just random magic, but a true connection—like the phoenix’s bond with Cyrus or the chameleon’s understanding of Elio or Keane’s with his fox.

I studied him, heart tugging in a way I hadn’t expected. Then I slipped back inside and dug through my trinket box I kept on the desk. I pushed aside a smooth rock from a river, and the handful of beads from a broken bracelet until I found a bit of black ribbon, frayed at the edge but still soft. I picked it up, nodding to myself.

Then I tied it carefully around Scout’s neck, forming a tiny, crooked bow tie.

He stood straighter immediately, puffed up with pride like a skeletal gentleman ready to crash a royal ball.

“You like it?” I asked, and he clicked once, decisively. Yeah, he liked it.

Back outside, we watched the mountains dissolve into shadow while the wellspring pulsed below, calling to something ancient in my blood.

The others had felt it too. Cyrus’s flames had flared impossibly blue. Elio’s illusions had taken on weight and shape like they wanted to become real. Keane’s portals had glimmered silver.

For a moment, everything had worked exactly as it should. I was sure of that.

Now, with the ceremony fading behind us, something quieter stirred in my awareness. A slight wrongness in the air. Not everywhere—but in small patches, like cold spots in warm water. Places where the magic didn't sing—it hummed flat, or not at all.

I twisted my father's ring on its chain. The way my magic had flowed into the wellspring—it hadn't felt accidental. It had felt invited. As if something in this place recognized me, remembered me.

Scout shifted on the railing beside me, bones clicking softly. His empty eye sockets glowed faintly as he peered at the walls, and his tail curled in that curious question-mark shape.

He'd changed since I named him. Or maybe I'd changed.

"You feel it too, don't you?" I whispered.

He clicked in response—sharp, alert—and darted up my arm to perch on my shoulder. Not just company now. A part of me.

"We're staying," I told Scout. "Whatever's happening here—with the magic, with my father's legacy, with all of it—I need to understand."

Scout let out a soft, bone-dry chitter, like encouragement—or approval.

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The moonlight caught on his new bow tie as he turned his skull toward the distant halls of Wickem.

The dead things were quiet now, but not gone.

Waiting.

Just like me.

10

Cyrus

Blue fire. The image haunted me, no matter how I tried to dismiss it. My flames had never burned that color before—that impossible shade matching the raw power beneath the stage. Even now, hours after the ceremony, Ember’s feathers still held traces of that ethereal blue glow where Marigold’s necromancy had touched our magic.

I paced my rooms, trying to burn off restless energy. The temperature spiked, then dropped again, making the ancient stones groan. Ember watched from his perch, his black eyes sharp, too knowing.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” I muttered, flexing my hands. Flames coiled around my fingers, but the usual deep amber was tainted—still, still—by that impossible blue. I willed it back to normal, tried to force the color to bleed away, but it resisted. Like it had a will of its own.

Ember trilled, the sound carrying a distinct note of disagreement. He had been watching her since she arrived, drawn to her power in ways that made no sense. Phoenixes were creatures of life and rebirth. They shouldn't be drawn to death magic.

But then, none of this was following the rules I'd spent my whole life memorizing.

A sharp ding broke the silence—my father's message. The air in the room thickened before I even picked up my phone, heat rolling off me in waves as I read:

Your display at the ceremony was unacceptable. I watched your flames submit to lesser magic.

My grip tightened.

Have you forgotten what these creatures did to your mother? What that traitor's legacy represents?

The Council cannot appear weak, especially now. Show the Shadow Heir her proper place. Do not disappoint me further.

The phone screen cracked from the heat before I could stop myself. Ember launched into the air, circling me, his wings catching the candlelight like molten gold.

"Lesser magic?" I scoffed, but the words tasted like ash. I had felt it—our magic flowing together, becoming more. My father wanted me to reject it, but how could I, when it had felt so... right?

I turned sharply, catching my reflection in the window. The blue in my flames flickered like a ghost of something long buried.

Something buried with my mother.

Fire can warm as well as burn, she had told me once, when I was barely old enough to summon a spark. Control does not always mean suppression.

That had been before. Before grief turned my father into stone. Before the Council's lessons twisted what I knew of power into something cold and unyielding. Before I learned that fire was meant to consume, not embrace.

I clenched my fists, snuffing out the flames.

It doesn't matter. I wasn't my mother.

I had a duty—to the Council, to my family, to the world we had built. Marigold Grimley threatened that world. My father was right about one thing: I couldn't afford to be weak.

Ember flapped once, landing on my desk, his talons tapping deliberately against an open tome. I followed his gaze despite myself.

When magical signatures align naturally, no amount of artificial restriction can prevent their harmony. Such connections transcend traditional magical boundaries, creating new forms of power previously thought impossible...

I slammed the book shut.

"Enough," I snapped. The temperature in the room spiked again, making the window panes rattle. "The Council has its reasons. We can't just—"

I cut myself off. Because I didn't believe that.

Not fully.

And that was the problem.

Ember tilted his head, as if waiting for me to admit the truth to myself.

I exhaled sharply, raking a hand through my hair. “Fine. I’ll make things difficult for her. Show proper royal disdain. But...” My eyes dropped to my hands, where faint traces of blue still flickered in the firelight. “Maybe not quite as difficult as Father wants.”

But even as I said it, a whisper of dread curled in my stomach.

Because I knew—I knew—if I wasn’t careful, I would be the one consumed.

11

Marigold

The day after the ceremony, they had me jumping right into remedial classes. I couldn’t say I didn’t need it, but it all felt like too much, too fast. The energy from the wellspring still thrummed under my skin, a steady pulse of power, but when I tried to grasp it—to direct it—it slipped through my fingers like water through cracked glass.

Still, I arrived early, nervously fingering my father’s ring as Scout poked his head out of my sleeve to investigate our new surroundings.

Raven was already there, leaning back in a chair and twirling a strand of black hair while staring at a thick book—Third Week Trials: A History of Traditional Challenges. Her beetle was methodically exploring the desk beside her.

“You’re doing tutoring too?” I asked, sliding into the seat next to her.

“Nah, just moral support.” She grinned, closing the book. “Plus I heard Dr. Reyes is brilliant with theoretical applications. Thought I might pick up some tips before the trials.” She tapped the book meaningfully. “Did you know they test everything from basic spells to complex magical theory? Everyone’s freaking out about preparation.”

My stomach twisted. I needed to get my power under control fast if I wanted to avoid raising an army of dead things in front of the entire school.

“Speaking of freaking out,” Raven said, her voice dropping lower, “did you hear about the vampire attack near Fort Collins?”

“What?” I blinked, pulled from my spiral of worry about the trials. “No, I’ve been too focused on...” I gestured vaguely at my stack of remedial texts.

“My cousin’s in the Shroud Guard there. Says they’re getting bolder, coming closer to populated areas,” she continued. “And Fort Collins isn’t that far from here.”

A chill worked its way down my spine. “Great. So I have to master basic magic and avoid getting eaten.” I tried to joke, but my voice wavered. Scout pressed closer, sensing my anxiety. I turned to Raven. “Is that how they work? Drain our blood?”

She shuddered. “Yes, witch blood is particularly sweet to them, I’m told.”

“Are they another species?” I asked, thinking about how I was somehow both human

and witch. “Or are they made from humans like in the stories?”

“You don’t know?” Her voice held surprise.

“All this is new to me,” I reminded her.

“Vampires were once human, until they are turned,” she said. “They live in nests with their creator, their sire.”

“Do they look like humans? Could they pass among us?”

“Yes, they can,” she said slowly. “Though I expect we’d notice the difference in their energy.”

I remembered Ms. Wallace’s words about them “not being that organized”. “Do they have a greater government? Like the Council?”

Raven shook her head. “Their sires make treaties and work together sometimes, but mostly the clans are scattered.”

“Then how are they fighting a war?”

“Chaotically,” she said with a grim look. “We never know when or where they will attack.”

“That’s terrifying.”



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“Just stay inside the wards,” Raven said with forced lightness. “Wickem is the safest place to be.”

Just then the door opened, drawing both our attention. Expecting to see Ms. Wallace escorting the tutor she’d promised, I straightened in my seat. But instead, a woman entered alone—probably in her late twenties, with warm brown skin and her hair pulled back in a neat braid.

“Hello Marigold,” she said with a smile. “I’m Dr. Reyes. Ms. Wallace asked me to help catch you up on magical fundamentals.”

For the next hour, Dr. Reyes led me through increasingly complex magical exercises. Each time she demonstrated, her magic flowed effortlessly, making each spell look easy. Simple illumination—golden light forming in her palm. Basic levitation—her pencil lifting in the air as smoothly as breathing.

When I tried, my illumination spell exploded into a searing flare, making Raven shield her eyes. The next attempt fizzled out completely. The levitation charm shot the pencil to the ceiling so fast it got stuck, and when I finally wrestled my magic back under control, it just dropped like a rock onto the desk.

I gritted my teeth. I felt the magic inside me, the raw power humming, but every time I tried to shape it, it either surged too strong or refused to cooperate at all.

Dr. Reyes nodded approvingly. “Your power is impressive. You just need control.”

That was supposed to be reassuring. It wasn’t.

Because control wasn't something I had ever been taught.

The final straw came when I tried a simple warming spell. Instead of gently heating my tea, the entire desk burst into flames.

I shoved back my chair, heart pounding as Dr. Reyes calmly extinguished the fire with a flick of her wrist.

"Maybe I just don't belong here," I whispered, voice tight. The frustration—the humiliation—was too much. "Maybe they were right about me."

The air went cold.

"Mari—" Raven started, but I barely heard her over the ringing in my ears.

"No, she's right to doubt."

I froze.

Dr. Reyes's voice had changed. Colder. Sharper.

And then I saw it.

In the mirror behind the desk, her reflection moved—just a fraction of a second too late.

The dead things howled their warning. Too late, too late, too late—

My stomach clenched. "Elio."

The illusion shattered.

Where Dr. Reyes had stood, Elio straightened to his full height, his perfect mask fracturing around the edges. His chameleon's scales flickered deep red and black—colors I had never seen before.

Fury flared in my chest. "You tricked me."

Elio's smirk didn't quite reach his eyes. "Wouldn't be much of an illusion if I didn't."

"You knew how much this mattered to me," I spat. "And you—" My throat tightened, rage and humiliation warring inside me. "What? You just wanted to see if I'd break?"

His laugh was bitter, sharp as glass. "Everyone breaks eventually, darling. I just wanted to see how long it would take."

I wanted to hit him. To claw at his perfect, smug face, and wipe away that knowing expression.

"You're terrified," I said instead, my voice dangerously low. "That someone might see past your perfect performance. See the scared little boy desperate for approval."

His illusions flickered wildly—faces and forms spinning like a kaleidoscope gone mad. For a moment, I glimpsed him as a child, small and reaching for distant parents. Then as he was now, surrounded by admirers but completely alone.

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“Well played, little necromancer.” His voice was soft, almost wondering. Then his mask slammed back into place, his smirk sharp and unshaken. “Perhaps there’s hope for you yet.”

He turned to leave, every movement calculated for maximum effect. But at the door he paused. “Next time,” he said without turning around, “try not to let the trials consume you. Some of us prefer more creative challenges.”

“Next time,” I shot back, my pulse hammering, “try being yourself instead.”

After he left, I heard Raven release a shaky breath. “Holy shit, Mari,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “I thought he was going to... I’ve never seen him that angry.”

I collapsed back into my chair, suddenly exhausted. The weight of his deception—how thoroughly he’d played on my insecurities—hit me hard. Scout climbed into my palm, his tiny bone-feet oddly comforting against my skin.

“Are you okay?” Raven asked quietly, still not quite meeting my eyes. “What he did... that was cruel. And the way he looked at you...”

“Yeah,” I said, though I wasn’t entirely sure it was true. “Welcome to life in the royal dorm.”

But in the back of my mind, I kept thinking of that moment—when his mask had cracked. And how, for just a second, I had seen him.

The real Dr. Reyes arrived apologizing for the delay. As she began the actual lesson,

my mind kept drifting to that crack in Elio's performance.

My head was still spinning from Dr. Reyes's actual tutoring session when I made it back to the royal dorm. She'd been brilliant but demanding, and my brain felt stuffed with magical theory I was struggling to absorb. Scout had fallen asleep on my shoulder, probably as overwhelmed as I was by trying to learn control over my surge-prone power.

The common room was quiet except for Keane in his usual corner, surrounded by books. His silver fox lay curled at his feet, watching me with unnervingly intelligent eyes as I stepped in. The dead things in the walls stirred more than usual, but I couldn't tell if it was curiosity... or warning.

"Your familiar?" I asked, nodding toward the fox.

"Her name is Wisp," Keane said without looking up. His voice was quiet, even. Still, the fox's ears twitched, like she heard something deeper in the words than I did. "She's been with me since... for a while."

There was a pause—like maybe he wasn't used to talking about her. Or maybe he was choosing his words too carefully.

"Mine's Scout," I offered, as the skeletal mouse darted up and perched on the arm of my chair.

Scout twitched his shadow-thread whiskers like he was showing off.

Keane looked up long enough to nod politely. "Elio's familiar is named Echo. Cyrus calls his Ember."

That caught me off guard. I hadn't asked. "Why are you telling me this?"

His gaze returned to his page. “Information is power,” he said simply.

Cryptic. Of course.

But he’d answered anyway. That meant something.

Keane was, objectively, unfairly attractive. The kind of broody, bone-structure-blessed nonsense that made it hard to think straight, and it was increasingly unfair how that affected me. Here he was, being decent to me while also managing to remain infuriatingly unreadable. I couldn’t decide if he was trying to be kind or just keeping his distance in a more subtle way than the others.

Scout scrambled down to the floor, bones clicking softly as he made his way toward Wisp—clearly interested in meeting another familiar.

I expected the fox to ignore him, maybe even bristle or back away.

But instead, Wisp rose to her feet with slow, graceful movements and stepped forward, her misty form shimmering faintly. She lowered her head, nose twitching as she studied Scout with what looked like... curiosity. Maybe even recognition.

Definitely not the reaction I’d braced for.

“She doesn’t mind dead things?” I asked, watching their careful investigation of each other.

“Wisp’s seen enough strange magic to know what’s actually dangerous.” Keane’s hands trembled slightly as he turned a page. “And what just looks that way.”

I dropped into the nearest chair, my shoulders sagging the second I let myself stop pretending to be fine. No one was attacking me, testing me, or shoving me into

another magical mind game. For once, I could just... sit.

Between the magical theory overload, Elio's illusions, and trying to keep my power under control all day, I felt drained in a way that cleaning houses had never managed. And the illusion—that perfect deception Elio had spun around me—still lingered in my mind.

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My jaw tightened. “I can’t believe I fell for it. I thought I was getting better at seeing through lies, but he was so convincing. How am I supposed to trust anything I see anymore?” My voice came out sharper than I’d intended.

Keane glanced up, his usually cool expression softening just enough to surprise me.

“Elio’s good at what he does,” he said, not missing a beat. He knew exactly who I meant. “But even the best illusions have cracks. You did see through it. And now you know to be more careful.”

“I thought I was.” I exhaled, pressing my fingers to my temples. “He could’ve kept me fooled for hours. How many times has he done this before? What if I don’t catch it next time?”

Keane studied me for a long moment, then, unexpectedly, a small portal appeared beside my hand, its edges flickering slightly before steadying.

“Tea,” he said quietly... “It helps. With all of...” He gestured vaguely. “This.”

I took a careful sip, focusing on the familiar taste rather than the way his hands still trembled slightly. “This is... just chamomile?”

“Not everything magical requires actual magic,” he said, the corner of his mouth twitching in what might have been a smile. “Sometimes the mundane solutions work better.”

I focused on the warmth of the tea, grounding myself. I had almost been tricked,



yes—but I had seen through it in the end. That counted for something.

Through the open window, I could hear students practicing in the gardens below, preparing for the Third Week Trials. Their magic felt different than mine—more controlled, more deliberate.

“I should be down there,” I sighed. “Learning to control all this power before I accidentally raise an army of dead things during testing.”

“They’ve had years of preparation,” Keane said. “You’ve had days.” He hesitated, then added, “My mother used to say power isn’t about how much magic you have, but how you use what you’ve got.”

The past tense hung in the air. Wisp pressed against his legs, offering silent comfort. I wanted to ask, but something in Keane’s expression warned me not to push.

“Was she...” I started carefully, but couldn’t find the right words.

“Gone,” he said shortly. Wisp whined, low and mournful. “Both of them. But that’s not—” He stood abruptly, gathering his books. “Focus on the trials. Leave the past where it belongs.”

I thought he’d vanish into his room without another word, but he hesitated—just long enough to look back. His eyes caught mine, darker now, shadowed with something I couldn’t name.

Grief. Anger. Loneliness. All of it, maybe.

He didn’t say anything else. He didn’t need to.

And still, as he turned away, I couldn’t stop noticing—how the lamplight caught in

his hair, how still he carried himself, how beautiful he was even when trying to disappear.

Damn it.

12

Keane

The throbbing in my temples wouldn't let up. The wellspring ceremony had stirred something—the way our magic had flowed together, effortless, natural. Nothing like the careful control Uncle's therapy maintained. Nothing like the strict structure I had been taught my entire life.

I kept telling myself it was nothing. A fluke. An anomaly that would never happen again.

But even now, my portals wavered.

I focused on the book in front of me, trying to drown out the hum of restless magic under my skin.

Then a familiar voice cut through my thoughts.

“There you are,” Cyrus said, stepping into the aisle. His presence made the air feel tight, charged. “Hiding in the library again?”

I hesitated. Just for a moment.

Elio appeared a second later, lounging against the side of my table with practiced ease, his fingers idly spinning his rings. “Now, now. Is that any way to treat old

friends?”

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I turned a page. Didn't look up. Didn't react.

We'd been close once. Growing up, they were the only people who understood what it meant to be raised as an heir—what it meant to carry expectations like shackles. But after my parents died, everything changed. The therapy started. The distance grew.

I should say something. A joke. A quip. Instead, I turned another page.

Cyrus exhaled slowly, heat radiating from him in deliberate waves. Ember shifted on his shoulder, feathers flickering between gold and embers. "Tell me this. What happened to observing and advising with the half-breed situation?"

"She's an heir," I said, my voice steady. "Like us."

"Like us?" Elio's laugh held no warmth. He leaned in, lowering his voice just enough to feel conspiratorial. "Darling, we've known each other too long for that little performance. What is it really?"

I forced my expression blank.

What could I say? That I saw something of myself in her? That the way she fought to keep control, the way she resisted their game, reminded me of my own desperate attempts to hold onto who I was? That I wanted to protect her, but I was too much of a coward to do it?

No.

Instead, I said nothing.

Elio's smirk sharpened like he could hear the words I refused to say.

"The wellspring showed us something," he continued smoothly. "Something that has our parents very... concerned."

Cyrus folded his arms. "Magic needs structure. Control. Not whateverthatwas."

The words echoed Uncle's lessons too closely. My head throbbed harder.

Elio's gaze turned assessing. "Our parents have been clear." A pause. "She doesn't belong here. And you, darling, need to remember where your loyalties lie."

Cyrus was less theatrical about it. He just watched me carefully. "Unless there's some reason you're so invested in helping her?"

I swallowed.

"No," I said finally. "No reason."

The silence stretched.

Cyrus studied me a moment longer. Then, with a curt nod, he stood. "Then stay out of our way. Let us handle the half-breed problem."

Elio didn't follow immediately. He lingered, watching me like he expected me to say something else. His chameleon flickered through shifting shades of violet—curious, amused, waiting.

"Poor thing," Elio murmured. "You really do try so hard to stay neutral."

I didn't answer.

They left. The absence of their presence should have been a relief, but instead, it felt like something closing around my throat.

Wisp pressed against my leg, her spectral tail curling around my ankle. Her form flickered with unease.

I closed my book. Not that I'd absorbed a word.

Their words echoed louder than I wanted to admit. She doesn't belong here. Stay out of our way. Where do your loyalties lie?

My temples throbbed. The pain had gone from dull to blinding, like my magic was fighting against the rules meant to keep it caged.

I should've said something. Should've stopped them.

But I hadn't.

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Wisp leaned into me, solid and cold. She didn't speak—she didn't need to. She knew.

I stared at the closed pages in front of me, vision blurring.

And told myself it didn't matter.

That keeping control was more important than doing the right thing.

That silence wasn't the same as betrayal.

I told myself that.

And tried to believe it.

13

Marigold

Friday afternoon, I found them in the common room—Cyrus in an armchair by the fire, Elio sprawled across a velvet sofa, and Keane lurking by the windows with a book. The moment I entered, the temperature rose, and the air shimmered with barely contained magic. They'd clearly been waiting for me.

Elio's usual elegant sprawl looked forced today, tension coiling in his shoulders. His perfect mask was brittle around the edges, and when he saw me, his light eyes flashed with something darker than his usual calculated disdain. Beneath that polished veneer, I glimpsed wounded pride—he still hadn't forgiven me for seeing through his

illusions.

“Ah, our little half-breed arrives,” Elio drawled, stretching lazily as if he hadn’t just been watching the door. “We were just discussing the deplorable state of our shared space.”

Scout stirred in the front pocket of my sweater—he didn’t like the heat, and neither did I. Cyrus’s magic radiated in slow, curling waves, but he kept his gaze fixed on the papers in his lap, feigning disinterest. Keane, still by the window, didn’t look up from his book. But he wasn’t reading. He was listening.

“Someone isn’t maintaining the proper magical standards,” Cyrus said without looking up. “This dorm has centuries of tradition in its maintenance.”

I twisted my ring on its chain. “The room looks fine to me.”

“Oh, but that’s exactly the problem.” Elio stood in one fluid motion, and despite everything—despite how much I loathed him—my breath hitched at how effortlessly graceful he was.

Damn him.

“You can’t even feel the enchantments woven into this space, can you?” He stepped closer, his voice dipping into mock pity. “Centuries of refinement, generations of our families strengthening the foundation. But to you, it’s just a room.”

Magic crackled in the air around me, and suddenly, my comfortable jeans and sweater vanished. In their place, an outfit materialized—a maid’s uniform, the skirt indecently short, the bodice tight enough to make my breathing shallow.

Heat flooded my skin, but I refused to flinch. I turned toward the door, but Cyrus’s



flames flared, sealing my exit.

The dead things stirred at my call, ready to answer.

I shoved them back. No. If I lashed out, if I let them see me break, I'd never earn their respect. Never prove I belonged here.

Chin lifting, I faced them again.

Their reactions made my stomach twist.

Elio's gaze dragged over me, his smirk widening. Cyrus, who had barely looked at me before, now watched with darkened amber eyes, his fingers clenched around his papers. And Keane—Keane flicked his gaze over me, then quickly looked away, the muscle in his jaw ticking once.

He wasn't stopping this. That betrayal cut deeper than any of Elio's taunts.

"Keane," Elio commanded. "Fetch our new maid appropriate supplies."

A portal shimmered open, its edges wavering slightly before steadying, and a cloth and bottle of lemon cleaner fell at my feet. I looked at Keane. He still hadn't met my eyes.

The silence stretched. Then, finally, he turned a page in his book.

A sharp, cold thing lodged in my chest.

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Fine. They wanted a show? Then they'd get one.

I bent to gather the supplies, gripping the cloth too tightly. The bodice of the uniform cinched across my ribs, stiff and unforgiving, shoving my breasts upward until the neckline bordered on obscene.

Their gazes tracked every movement as I wiped down the mantle. The too-short skirt shifted against my thighs, the fabric whispering across bare skin and leaving goosebumps in its wake.

My heart hammered—not just with humiliation, but with something sharper, something hot and coiled in my veins.

Cyrus sent me to clean under Ember's perch, where the phoenix deliberately scattered ash. Every time I bent down to wipe the soot, I felt his gaze pressing against the back of my thighs.

"You missed a spot," he said, voice rougher than before. His fingers were still curled around his papers, but he hadn't moved a page in minutes.

I forced my gaze away.

Elio, of course, was worse. He stretched lazily across the sofa, forcing me to step around him. When I tried, his fingers brushed against my bare calf, slow and deliberate.

"Careful now," he murmured. "Wouldn't want you to fall."

The moment his magic nudged me, I knew what he was doing—but I refused to give him the reaction he wanted. Instead of scrambling, I let my fall be controlled, landing lightly on my hands and knees. I knelt there for a long moment, just to watch his smirk twitch in surprise before I pushed myself up slowly.

“Predictable,” I murmured, brushing imaginary dust from my skirt. “For an illusionist, your tricks lack originality.”

Elio’s smirk twitched, just slightly. His fingers dug into the velvet cushion, as if holding the moment still. He hadn’t expected me to recover so smoothly.

I kept moving, cloth in hand, but something strange prickled at the edges of my senses. The air in the common room didn’t just hum with magic—it vibrated, like threads stretched too tight. I couldn’t name what I was feeling, not yet.

But I could tell the differences.

Cyrus’s magic burned in slow waves, thick and hot like coals under my feet. Elio’s shimmered, slippery and too perfect. And Keane’s... his was quieter. Deep and shifting, like the silence before a storm.

I didn’t understand how I was noticing it, only that I was. The patterns overlapped, tangled, fighting for dominance in a space none of them were willing to share.

Whatever spellwork had been built into this dorm over generations—it wasn’t at rest.

Elio leaned forward, his smirk laced with something darker. “Such a shame. All that raw power, reduced to menial labor. Though you do have experience with that.”

My stomach churned, but I made myself keep watching. I didn’t understand what I was seeing—just that each type of magic left its own echo behind. Fire sparked in

heavy waves, illusion shimmered like glass bending light, and portals pulsed with sharp, shifting edges. I couldn't read the patterns, not really.

But sensing them gave me something to hold onto. Something that wasn't their eyes tracking my every move.

By the time I finished, my frustration had reached its breaking point.

"Adequate," was all Cyrus said when I finished.

The illusion shimmered away, leaving me in my real clothes, covered in dust and ash. The relief was instant, but the heat of their attention lingered.

I turned to leave, pulse thrumming. "I hope I gave a good show," I muttered, bitterness slipping out before I could stop it.

Elio laughed. "Passable, darling. Passable."

I didn't wait for more mockery. Didn't look back.

Scout curled into my shoulder as I fled the common room and headed up the stairs to my suite.

Once I had slammed my suite door behind me, only then did I let myself breathe. Only then did the shaking start.

I hated that they got to me. Hated that part of me had wanted their attention, even as it made my skin crawl.

They wanted a spectacle. They wanted submission.

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But I was still standing. And I wasn't done.

14

Cyrus

The training dummy erupted in flames, my control slipping for the third time that morning. Ember trilled a sharp warning from his perch as Professor Rivera extinguished it with a quick flick of his wrist.

“The hell are you doing to my equipment?” He circled me, arms crossed, his Shroud Guard tattoo dark against his neck. “That’s the third one today.”

I dropped back into stance, jaw clenched. The martial arts forms usually centered me, gave me focus. But today, every strike felt wild, every movement full of restless energy I couldn't burn away.

The image of Marigold in that damn maid's uniform refused to leave my head. The way she had looked up at me, jaw set, daring me to do something—to stop it, to make it worse, to acknowledge it at all. Her flushed cheeks, her fists clenched too tight around the cleaning cloth. Not broken. Not even close.

I slammed my fist into the next dummy, channeling fire through the strike. The foam surface bubbled and melted too fast.

“Save some for the vampires, kid.” Rivera tossed me a practice staff, stepping into a ready stance. “Though I’m starting to think they’re not what’s got you out here before

dawn.”

“Just reports of increased activity near Fort Collins.” I spun the staff, flames dancing along its length. “Father says—”

“Your father’s not the one destroying my training yard.” Rivera came at me fast, forcing me to block a complicated series of strikes. “This about the new heir?”

Heat flared in my core, a dangerous surge of power I barely caught in time. Rivera still had to leap back to avoid getting singed. “She’s nothing.”

“Right.” He smirked, pressing his attack. “That’s why you’re out here at ass o’clock burning up my dummies.”

I growled and launched into a combination that should have knocked him back. But he’d been training me since I was twelve, and he read my moves too easily.

“Sloppy.” His staff caught me behind the knees, sending me sprawling onto my back. “You’re broadcasting your strikes like a rookie. What happened to that perfect Raynoff control?”

Control. That word burned worse than my flames.

I’d had control when she was on her knees in front of me. When I pretended her presence didn’t affect me. When I forced my expression blank, refusing to acknowledge the way my pulse jumped every time she moved, stretched, bent—

I rolled to my feet fast, fire licking over my forearms, but Rivera didn’t look impressed.

“Shut up,” I muttered.

“Make me.” He grinned, wolfish, as he settled into a defensive stance. “Unless you’re too distracted thinking about whatever’s got you worked up.Or whoever.”

Ember launched from his perch, circling overhead. His flames should have burned red-gold. But instead, I caught traces of blue, like during the wellspring ceremony. Like her magic. My stomach twisted, but I forced my magic back into submission.

I attacked with everything I had, trying to burn away how much I hated wanting someone I was supposed to despise. We’d been trying to break her, but damn Elio and his games had unintended consequences.

Rivera met me strike for strike, forcing me back, matching my movements too damn easily. My grip on the staff tightened as the fight stretched on, sweat dripping down my back, muscles burning from the effort.

By the time we finished, we were both breathing hard, and half the training yard was littered with smoking ruins of practice dummies.

“Better,” Rivera admitted, clapping me on the shoulder. But his tone still held that knowing edge. “Next time try hitting things before you get this worked up.”

“There won’t be a next time.” I shrugged off his hand, turning away before he could see too much in my face.

“Sure,” he said easily. “Just try not to burn down the whole academy while you figure that out.”

He left me there in the grey dawn, surrounded by destruction that hadn’t managed to burn away a single unwanted thought. Ember’s flames still flickered with that traitorous blue tinge, like even my familiar was laughing at my predicament.

Perfect Raynoff control.

Right. Like that was working so well for me lately.



15

Marigold

“You survived your first week,” Raven said, tugging me along Wyckhaven’s Main Street. “That deserves a celebration.”

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to smooth down my skirt. I didn’t know how they’d convinced me to come, let alone dress up for this. After yesterday, I wasn’t sure I’d ever even want to wear a skirt again.

“Maybe I should study more,” I hedged, but the truth was, I wanted this. A normal night. A chance to feel like I belonged here—not just as the heir no one wanted, but as Marigold, a girl having fun with her friends.

“Which is exactly why you need this.” Lucas’s British accent made everything sound more reasonable than it was. “Everyone goes to The Cauldron after orientation week. It’s tradition.”

“Besides,” Raven added, waving her bangle-covered arm, “you haven’t even seen the town properly yet. There’s more to this place than just the college.”

I glanced around at the mountain town’s main drag. At first glance, it looked like any other tourist trap—cutesy boutiques, a coffee shop with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves visible through the windows, and an antique store that probably charged a fortune for actual junk. But something felt... different.

“Is everyone here...” I lowered my voice. “Like us?”

Raven hushed me. “No, this is mostly just a regular human town. But there’s some bits that are extra special.” She pulled me down a side street, past a row of abandoned storefronts with boarded windows.

“What do they think about the college?” I asked, trying to keep up with her quick steps. “About us?”

“Most of them are charmed not to think about it too hard,” Lucas said with a laugh. “But we’re not supposed to do any magic in front of them just in case.”

“This way!” Raven led us onto another street, this one darker.

Most of the buildings looked like abandoned remnants of old mining operations. We stopped in front of one hulking brick building with faded letters spelling out “WYCK MINING CO.” across its facade.

“This is the famous magical nightclub?” My skepticism must have shown because Lucas laughed.

Raven pressed her palm to a section of brick wall where the mortar formed a subtle spiral pattern. Scout scampered down my arm to investigate, his tiny skeletal form clicking excitedly.

“Most people walk right past this place,” Raven said, tracing the spiral with her finger. Magic rippled through the air, making my teeth ache. The dead things stirred, but not with their usual eagerness—more like they were simply acknowledging another kind of power.

The wall melted away, revealing a doorway spilling out music and laughter. Two

older students flanked the entrance, their hands glowing as they checked magical signatures.

“Fresh meat?” one asked, smirking at me. His eyes lingered on me. “There’s something unusual about this one.”

Raven stepped forward. “She’s with us. She’s the Shadow Heir.”

His smirk vanished. The glow around his hands intensified briefly, then he nodded. “Welcome to The Cauldron. Mind the wards—they bite.”

Inside, the space stretched impossibly large, industrial bones transformed by floating orbs of light. The music thumped with a familiar song, and I couldn’t help but smile, even as my eyes automatically sought out the other royals in the crowd.

“Freshmen to the left,” Lucas guided us toward the bar. “Upperclassmen get the good spots.”

I found them easily enough—they commanded attention without trying. Elio held court on floating cushions, his illusions creating a private aurora borealis overhead. A group of admirers hung on his every word.

When his gaze met mine across the room, something cold curled in my stomach. I swallowed hard. What game was he going to play tonight? And would I get out of it with anything intact?

The memory of that damn uniform still burned against my skin—tight fabric, too-short hem, their eyes like hands.

I forced myself to blink it away. This wasn’t then. This was just a party. Just noise. Just fun.

Couldn't they leave me alone for one night?

Cyrus was by the massive fireplace, his fire wards pulsing with protective energy as flames danced higher. Even with the thump of the music, I could hear bits of the group around him discussing the upcoming trials.

“Everyone's really serious about these trials, aren't they?” I asked, anxiety creeping in as I watched older students practicing control exercises even while socializing.

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“They test everything,” Lucas confirmed, his scholarly tone slipping through. “Magical theory, practical application, control under pressure. The Third Week Trials are meant to ensure everyone is challenged appropriately.”

“Which is exactly why we should be celebrating now,” Raven added quickly. “Because next week will be nothing but studying and practicing.”

A bartender with arms covered in snaking black tattoos that seemed to move separately from his skin was mixing something that changed colors. “Freshman? Try the Novice’s Blush. Goes down easy.”

Lucas paid despite my protest. The drink looked like liquid sunset and tasted like summer berries. Warmth spread through my chest as Scout explored the counter. “Alcohol?”

Raven grinned.

In full tour guide mode, Lucas explained, “The Cauldron is a student-run bar, and serves everyone regardless of age. The older students say it’s tradition, and as long as no one causes real trouble, the Wickem staff ignore it.”

I took another swallow. “It’s delicious.” We crossed to one of the tall tables with our drinks, away from the crush of the bar.

“Where’s Keane?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Over there.” Lucas pointed to a shadowy corner. “Though he shouldn’t be. He’s a

freshman like us.”

Keane sat alone at a small table, but near Elio and Cyrus. There was a carved wooden box in front of him and he seemed to be studying it intently. Several of his portal windows were open showing pages of text, and Wisp drifted between them.

The corner of my lip lifted. I didn’t think he quite got the point of going out to a nightclub.

“He’s not like us,” Raven corrected Lucas. “He’s a royal...” She trailed off, glancing at me. “Of course you’re... one of us too, Mari.”

“Thanks,” I said with an awkward smile.

The distance between regular students and heirs was stark, woven into every look, every whisper. The way people moved around them like planets caught in their orbit, careful, reverent. And me? I was caught somewhere in between, neither truly part of them nor truly apart. It left me feeling untethered, a misplaced puzzle piece forced into the wrong picture.

I hadn’t chosen this. I hadn’t asked to be an heir. And yet, despite their circles of admirers, I saw the loneliness in them, too. A gilded isolation, the price of power.

Maybe it was better to be on this side of the room. With people who saw me, rather than what I represented.

Climbing onto one of the bar stools, I let the thrum of the indie rock music settle into my bones and took a sip of my drink. The edge started to dull—just a little. Some of the tightness in my shoulders unraveled. Maybe tonight wouldn’t be so bad.

The dead things were quiet here, buried beneath layers of magic. For once, they

didn't crowd my senses with whispers of forgotten secrets or tug at my awareness with unseen hands. I almost felt... comfortable.

Scout skittered across the bar top with Boris. Raven and Lucas were deep in debate over which professors would be judging the trials.

Then Elio's voice sliced through the noise. "Well, well. Look who thinks she belongs here."

My fingers tightened around my glass, the warmth from the drink instantly forgotten.

Elio appeared beside me. He looked as effortlessly poised as ever, but I knew the cruelty lurking beneath the illusion. Knew how easily he played people like a musician with an instrument, plucking at their vulnerabilities until they bled.

The memory of that damned maid's uniform—the way he'd reduced me to nothing but an object of mockery, the way he'd watched, waiting for me to break—made my stomach turn.

"I didn't realize they served cleaning staff," he continued, voice dripping with false concern. "Though I suppose someone has to mop up after hours."

The words landed sharper than they should have, because wasn't that still how they saw me?

His illusions started to swirl. The dead things stirred, recognizing the artifice just as they had in the classroom, and I did too. But my victory in seeing through his magic felt hollow now.

"What's wrong, Elio?" I tried to sound defiant, but my voice wavered. "Afraid I'll see through your magic again?"

For just a moment, the mask cracked. Just a fraction of a second where something darker, something real, slipped through.

But before he could answer, Cyrus's fire wards surged closer, heat rolling off him in waves. The temperature spiked, clashing against my own magic in a suffocating press of heat and cold.

“Problem?” Cyrus asked, his voice all slow-burning amusement. His magic wrapped around mine, fire pressing against ice, heat curling in places I didn't want to acknowledge. His amber eyes dragged over me, deliberate, like he was peeling back layers—burning away the pieces of me that still thought I could belong here.



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“No problem.” I stood, ignoring how the dead things scratched at the edges of my awareness. “I was just leaving.” Scout scampered up my arm to my shoulder.

“Aww, don’t go,” Elio drawled, stepping into my path. “We’re just getting to know you. Tell us, what other little talents are you hiding?”

“Besides the obvious,” Cyrus added, flames dancing between his fingers. “Maybe you have some... private talents.” His gaze swept down my body in a way that made me feel naked, exposed.

I should feel nauseous, sickened, but something about the heat he gave off made my pulse gallop. My eyes and cheeks felt hot as I remembered similar looks from rich guys I’d cleaned for—the ones I’d sometimes given in to, proving exactly what they thought of me.

I opened my mouth but no words came. My throat felt too tight.

Across the room, Keane stayed seated. No glance. No flicker of hesitation. Even Wisp had vanished from view. I was alone. And they all knew it.

“Maids do tend to like their extra tips,” Elio said, moving closer. His hand ghosted over my bare knee—casual, lingering. Like he already owned me. “How much time did you spend on these... scrubbing floors?”

My breath hitched, stomach twisting between nausea and something else, something hotter, something I wanted to rip from my own skin. I clenched my fists, nails biting into my palms, the sting barely grounding me.

The dead things surged beneath the floorboards, their anger matching mine. Scout bristled on my shoulder, his tiny skeletal form trembling.

“Not very royal behavior, is it?” Elio’s illusions twisted, shadows forming grotesque reflections of my past. The weight of their magic pressed in, suffocating. “But then, what else should we expect from a half-breed? The traitor’s bastard, trying to play at being an heir.”

Something cracked deep inside me. Cold, hollow, endless. The temperature plummeted, frost racing up my fingers, cracking through the glass. My pulse pounded in my ears, my magic thrumming wildly, reaching for something—anything—to shield me from the weight of their laughter, their words, their touch.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Cyrus pressed, stepping closer. The heat of his fire magic clashed with the cold of my necromancy. “Your father sold us out to the vampires. Who will you sell us out to, Marigold?”

The glass exploded in my hand, shards slicing into my palm, but I barely felt the sting. Tears burned hot behind my eyes, but I refused to let them fall.

They were right. I didn’t belong here. Would never belong. I was nothing but a joke, a spectacle, something to be toyed with and discarded. My magic surged against my ribs, a desperate, frantic pulse that I couldn’t contain—stop stop stop stop—but it was too late.

The dead things erupted through the walls—rats and raccoons and what might have been a very angry possum, their skeletal forms a chaotic mess of fury and fear. But it wasn’t controlled. It wasn’t power. It was panic and pain and the desperate need to escape.

Elio’s illusion anchors shattered. Cyrus’s fire wards leapt dangerously high. People

screamed— not just at my undead army, but at me. The half-breed. The cleaning girl. The traitor's daughter who dared pretend she was one of them.

I ran.

Behind me, Raven shouted my name, but I couldn't turn back. Couldn't bear to see the pity in her eyes. Or worse—the disgust.

I didn't stop until I hit the cool night air, sucking in desperate gulps that did nothing to ease the tight band constricting my chest. The dead things followed, angry and protective, until I forced them back, their presence receding like the tide.

My father's ring pressed cold against my skin, like it was trying to anchor me. But what good was power when they could strip me bare with just their words?

Scout curled against my neck, his tiny bones trembling. But even his comfort couldn't stop the tears that finally spilled over.

They'd reminded me exactly what I was. And no amount of magic could change that.

The dead things hovered just at the edge of my awareness, silent now. Waiting.

I wasn't ready for Monday. Wasn't ready for any of this. But I didn't have a choice.

I had to find a way to survive. Even if the only thing I could count on was the dead.

The night closed around me as I stumbled away from The Cauldron, trying to outrun their words, their touches, their knowing smiles.

Trying to outrun the truth of myself.

Elio

I slipped through the hidden door in the tower's uppermost level, my wards recognizing me like old friends. The circular room opened to the stars through enchanted glass, mountain winds composing their own wild symphony outside. Here, in my sanctuary, the carefully choreographed performances could finally falter.

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The mirror showed what I never let others see—disheveled hair, shirt untucked, illusions stripped away. Echo's scales shifted through shades of storm and twilight, betraying the tempest I'd been holding back since that afternoon.

I pressed a hand to my face, exhaling slowly, but the memories refused to fade. Her in that maid's uniform, the fabric clinging in ways that had made my mouth go dry. The flush on her cheeks, the defiance in her eyes even as she knelt before us. The way my body had reacted traitorously—like it hadn't gotten the message that I was supposed to ruin her, not crave her. That I was supposed to break her, not imagine what she'd feel like undone beneath my hands for entirely different reasons. I dug my nails into my palms, willing the thoughts away, but they curled through my mind like smoke, inescapable.

And then tonight at The Cauldron, pushing too far, watching her finally break and run.

I told myself it was satisfaction I felt. Another perfectly orchestrated humiliation.

But the way my magic had reacted—caught on hers like silk snagging on a sharp edge—said otherwise. The memory of last semester surfaced—Zhang's broken expression as he packed his bags, his name already fading from whispered conversations, as if he'd never existed. I'd thought it was just another game, another victory.

But watching Marigold run tonight, I felt it again—that same sick twist in my gut. Like I had carved someone out of existence, and the space they left behind was hollow.

With Zhang, I'd told myself it was just strategy. That it didn't matter. That the long nights, the shared laughter, the way he'd looked at me like I was more than the sum of my charm—that none of it meant anything.

I'd just been following orders then too, being Mother's perfect puppet.

"The performance is slipping, isn't it?" I murmured to Echo. "Just like you." My chameleon had been presented in that ornate cage on my twelfth birthday.

"A proper familiar for a proper heir," Mother had said, her immaculate smile never reaching her eyes. "One that will help maintain your illusions, darling. After all, appearance is everything."

But Echo had defied expectations, her scales becoming a window into every truth I tried to hide. Just like now, as they shifted to that deep violet that only ever emerged around Marigold. Betraying how she affected me more than I wanted to admit.

That wasn't the only dissonance haunting me tonight. Keane had been off in the tunnels, his magic bleeding darkness like ink through water. He was losing control, and I was doing nothing to help.

My violin waited in its case, patient as always. It had been there through every illusion, every deception. But tonight, even its strings felt like they belonged to someone else—just another performance I was losing control of.

I pulled the violin free, setting it beneath my chin. No sheet music tonight. Tonight wasn't about the show. The first notes emerged raw and haunting, aching with everything I couldn't say in words. My unwanted arousal during the maid scene. The sick satisfaction mixed with shame at The Cauldron. The way her defiance made my flawless charm feel hollow and strained.

The music built, shifting, wilder now. How she'd flushed, how she'd met my eyes with fire even on her knees. How I'd wanted to break her—and how each success left me feeling more broken instead. Just like with Zhang.

I played until my arms burned, until the ache in my chest unraveled through the notes. When the final sound faded, the room felt too still. I reached up and wiped my cheek before I even registered the dampness.

Echo let out a low trill, scales darkening to that deep violet that spoke truths I didn't want to hear.

I wiped my face harder. No. I do not mourn a girl I was meant to break. I do not shatter over someone whose ruin should have been a victory.

I lowered the violin gently, like closing the curtain on a scene I wasn't meant to play. Tomorrow, I'd return to the stage. I would be perfect. Flawless. Untouchable.

But for now, in this moment, I could admit that something had shifted. That maybe, for all the ways I had tried to destroy her, she had unraveled me first.

Even if it meant acknowledging that what had started as a cruel game had become something far more dangerous.

17

Marigold

Monday morning, I woke to sunlight streaming through the tall windows and Scout chittering urgently from my nightstand. After almost a week in the royal tower, I'd started to grow used to the dead things' whispers, but today they felt sharper—more insistent. They picked up on the tension winding through my body, the unease coiling

in my stomach.

The Cauldron hadn't just been another fight. It had been a warning. A lesson in exactly where I stood. And I refused to let it break me.

Their words still echoed in my head—Elio's cruel taunts, Cyrus's burning scrutiny, the way they had stripped me down to something small and dirty and unworthy. But worst of all was Keane's silence. His careful inaction, as if watching from the shadows absolved him of any guilt.

I sat up, pressing the heels of my hands into my eyes.

"I know, I know," I muttered to Scout as he clicked his skeletal feet impatiently. "Everything changes today."

But really, everything had already changed. In my talks with Mom over the weekend, I'd been careful to be circumspect. Everything was fine, and I was adapting well. I didn't want her to worry, but I was worried. Would I ever find my place here?

I yanked on my jeans, fingers clenching the fabric. A week of their relentless cruelty, and I was still here. Still trying. Like an idiot.



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The silver band of my father's ring was cool against my chest, a weight I wasn't sure how to bear. Had he truly been a traitor? Had I inherited that stain? It felt like the entire world had already made up its mind.

By the time I emerged into the common room, breakfast was already in full swing. The oversized dining table groaned under enough food to feed twenty people, though only four of us sat there. Or rather, four heirs and their familiars. Scout shrank against my wrist, clearly sensing the tension in the air.

Cyrus sat at his usual spot by the fireplace, his fire wards pulsing in slow, controlled waves as he read over a Trial prep book. But the temperature in the room spiked the moment I entered. Ember preened from his perch, sending tiny sparks toward Scout—more aggressive than usual. A warning.

Elio occupied the window seat, his long fingers lazily flipping through his own notes. At first glance, he looked the same as always, perfectly poised and unbothered, but I noticed the slight tension in his shoulders, the way Echo's pastel scales remained duller than usual. He was watching me without watching me, and I hated that I noticed.

Keane was in his usual place, buried in a book, his dark hair falling forward to obscure his expression. He didn't glance up. Didn't acknowledge me. He was just... letting it all happen. Again.

The silence felt too heavy, thick with the ghosts of Saturday night.

"Late again, darling?" Elio drawled, breaking it. He didn't look up, but there was

something off about his tone—something between mockery and I didn't know what.

I glanced at the ornate clock. 8:17. Late, as usual. Some habits were hard to break when you'd spent years eating when you could, not when the clock told you it was time.

A portal flickered beside my plate, dropping off my now-customary morning coffee. The edges of the magic wavered—not wrong, just... uncertain. I flicked my gaze toward Keane. His fingers twitched against the page, hesitating before he finally turned it. Like he wanted to say something. Like he knew it wouldn't matter.

The dead things whispered, unsettled.

Cyrus turned a page, his grip too tight. As I reached for the pastry tray, heat curled through the silverware—not scalding, just enough to make me notice. A test. His magic flickered unsteadily, like even it wasn't sure how far to push me anymore.

I kept my grip light. I would not give them the satisfaction of seeing my hands shake.

I was studying my class schedule when another kind of warmth bloomed against my back. I froze. The scent of expensive cologne, dark and spiced, curled around me.

Elio.

Elio leaned in, his breath warm against my skin, and I hated the way my pulse jumped. Not because of him. Because my body was a traitor.

“I'm sure someone of your... background will have no trouble finding your way,” he murmured, his voice smooth as silk. “The Academic Building is quite impossible to miss. It's the large one. With the doors.”

I made my voice flat, unimpressed. Let him think I didn't care. "I'll manage."

His magic shimmered between us, subtle, meant only for me to see. There was something different about it now, though—less playful cruelty, more uncertainty. Like the Cauldron incident had left cracks in both of us, and neither of us knew what to do with them.

I stepped away from his warmth, ignoring the flicker of irritation—and something else—that crossed his face. Echo's scales rippled in confusion, as if reflecting emotions Elio himself wasn't ready to admit.

A tiny portal winked open next to my coffee cup, breaking the moment. A note drifted through, Keane's familiar handwriting scrawled across it: Take the path by the normal dorms, enter through the south entrance. Room 204 is on the second floor. The staircase by the campus store is usually less crowded.

A small, quiet act of help. Too small. Too late.

I glanced toward Keane, but he still didn't look at me, his face carefully neutral as he flipped another page. Like nothing had happened. Like I wasn't still standing in the fallout of it all, drowning in it.

The weight of my father's ring pressed against my skin. A reminder of the things I couldn't change, the past I couldn't outrun.

I grabbed my coffee, standing taller even as exhaustion gnawed at me. As I turned toward the door, I made sure to move slowly, deliberately, forcing them to sit with my presence. The flames in the hearth flickered lower as I passed. Even their magic seemed to hesitate.

Ten minutes later, I was caught in the flood of students rushing to their first class.

They all seemed to know exactly where they were going, their spells precise and controlled as they levitated books or conjured forgotten supplies. Scout pressed closer, overwhelmed by the chaotic swirl of magical signatures.

“Is that her?” A girl’s voice rose above the clamor—low, but loud enough for me to catch.

I knew exactly who they meant. The whispers followed me like static into the academic building.

“Yeah. That’s Grimley’s kid. The necromancer.”

“I heard her father tried to destroy the Council.”

“Didn’t he kill someone?”

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“Why did they even let her in here?”

“Because the wellspring sent for her, or something. Creepy, right?”

The words cut deeper than they should have. After the Cauldron disaster, my defenses were already hanging by a thread. I kept my head down and pushed through the crowd, my stomach twisting with every hushed voice that carried my name. Saturday night had turned me into the latest gossip, like those celebrity meltdowns people share on social media. Now I wasn't just the cleaning lady's daughter playing at being an heir—I was a traitor's daughter who'd totally lost it and ran away. Great. Nothing says “I belong here” like having a magical breakdown in front of everyone. Mom always said “hold your head high,” but right now, I just wanted to disappear.

“Mari! Over here!” Raven's voice cut through the noise, a lifeline pulling me back. She stood with Lucas by the stairs, her protective charms clinking as she waved me over.

“Thank god,” I breathed, hurrying to them. “I was starting to think I'd never find it.”

“The building's layout takes some getting used to,” Lucas said, his British accent somehow making everything sound more reasonable. “But there's actually quite a logical pattern to the room numberings based on historical—”

“Less history, more walking,” Raven interrupted. “We've got two minutes before Cribbley closes the door.”

We made it with seconds to spare, sliding into seats near the back of the Basic

Magical Theory classroom. Lucas immediately pulled out three different notebooks, while Raven's skeletal beetle Boris scuttled over to greet Scout.

The classroom was overwhelming in ways I hadn't expected—not just the soaring windows or the ancient runes carved into the stone walls, but the magic itself. It moved through the space like a living current, charged with the lingering presence of generations of witches who'd mastered it.

Professor Cribley swept in, her silver-beaded braids catching the morning light. “Welcome to Basic Magical Theory,” she began, her warm voice carrying effortlessly through the room. “We'll begin with something fundamental—illumination magic. Please take a few minutes to review the basic forms in chapter one, then we'll all practice together.”

My stomach dropped.

Illumination magic. The spell Elio had mocked me for in remedial class. The spell I had failed at, over and over, under his careful, amused scrutiny. My fingers curled into fists beneath my desk.

I quickly opened my textbook, flipping to the chapter on basic illumination. The diagrams showed proper hand positions and energy flows, but something about the illustrations caught my eye—there seemed to be a pattern to how the magic moved. I tried to focus on that instead of the memory of Elio's smirk, of how effortlessly he had conjured perfect spheres of light while I fumbled beside him.

Professor Cribley demonstrated with a casual wave of her hand. A perfect sphere of golden light appeared above her palm. “The light orb is foundational magic,” she explained. “Take a moment to study the energy flow, then try creating your own at your own pace.”

She paused, her expression serious. “And remember, illumination magic is not just about convenience. It is a vital defense against vampires, whose abilities thrive in darkness. Learning to wield light effectively could mean the difference between survival and being caught unprepared.”

All around me, orbs of light bloomed like stars. Lucas produced three at once, setting them spinning in a complex formation while consulting his ever-present notebook. Raven’s glowed with a slightly purple tinge that matched her hair, her magic steady and focused.

“Here,” Raven whispered, tilting her book so I could see her notes. “Try thinking of it like... collecting sunlight in your palm. And not the way Elio was teaching you before. That was all wrong on purpose. This is the right way.”

I tried. I really did. But the moment I reached for power, my magic hesitated.

My father’s ring felt like a weight around my neck, cold against my skin. The dead things stirred, responding to my need—but that wasn’t what I was supposed to be using. I needed warmth. Light. The opposite of what came naturally.

Nothing happened.

“It’s okay,” Lucas murmured, pausing his light show. “Try breaking down the components. Energy gathering first, then containment, then illumination...”

I forced myself to follow his steps, pulling at the magic in the way he suggested. This time, something responded—but not how I intended. The shadows around my desk deepened, pooling unnaturally beneath my fingers as the dead things reached toward me. A chill ran through the room.

“Of course she can’t even manage a light orb,” someone muttered from across the

room.

Another voice snickered. “Well, necromancers aren’t exactly known for being warm and fuzzy, are they?”

Scout tensed against my neck. My jaw clenched. I willed the shadows back, forcing my magic into submission, but it was too late. The moment had already passed, and I had failed. Again.

The rest of class passed in a blur of frustrated attempts and careful notes. My hand ached from copying diagrams, and my head throbbed from trying to force my necromantic power into unfamiliar patterns. I hadn’t given up, but I also hadn’t succeeded.

After class, Raven gave me a sympathetic look as we packed up. “Don’t worry. We’ll practice together later. You’ll get it.”

“Thanks,” I managed, grateful for their support but needing some time alone.

Instead of heading to lunch, I slipped away to one of the small courtyards behind the academic building. Ancient trees cast dappled shadows across stone benches, and the dead things whispered quietly in the walls. It felt private enough to practice without an audience—and right now, I couldn’t handle anyone else watching me fail.

I exhaled slowly, holding out my hand. Just light, I told myself. Just warmth. No shadows. No dead things.



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A flicker of something glowed at my fingertips.

For half a second, I thought I had it. Then it sputtered out, leaving nothing but darkness in its wake.

18

Marigold

“Time for spells?” I asked Dr. Reyes, still stinging from my failure to create an orb yesterday.

“Before we attempt any spells,” Dr. Reyes said, “you need to learn how magic actually feels. Close your eyes.”

I hesitated, remembering Elio’s illusion trick last week. “I’d rather keep them open, if that’s okay.”

Understanding flickered across her face. It was amazing how the staff seemed to know about the heirs’ games, but they never stopped them.

“Of course,” she said. “Just focus on your breathing then. Magic moves in currents—some fast and sharp like wind, others steady and strong like stone. You feel it instinctively. Now, we need to help you understand what you’re sensing.”

The energy in the room thrummed like an unseen tide, shifting and pulsing around us. Some currents were smooth and easy, like air lifting a bird’s wings. Others felt dense

and unmoving, as if pressing against stone. Scout chittered softly from his perch on my shoulder, reacting to the unseen forces.

“Good.” Dr. Reyes moved around the room, her hands tracing invisible lines in the air. “Most young witches learn to sense magical flows over years of training. But you’re already picking up on them instinctively. That’s part of your necromancy—your ability to perceive what lingers beyond the surface.”

She picked up a book from the stack she’d brought. “Here—what do you feel?”

I stretched my awareness toward the book. “It’s... dense. Solid. Like packed earth or stone warmed by the sun.”

“That’s Professor Rivera’s magic,” she confirmed. “His evocation specializes in earth reinforcement, making spells more durable. Combat witches like him leave strong imprints.”

She lifted another book. “And this one?”

I hesitated. “Lighter. Fast-moving, but with structure. Like... weaving threads in the air.”

“Professor Cribley’s magic,” she said. “Every witch’s magic carries their unique signature. The longer they use magic around the item or in the space, the more their signature accumulates.” She smiled at my surprised look. “Think of it like fingerprints. No two are exactly alike.”

But something else caught my attention—a current that felt different from the others. Wrong somehow. The dead things in the walls grew restless, pulling away from it.

“Some of them feel... strange,” I said carefully, watching her reaction. “Not like

Rivera's or Cribley's magic. More like..." I remembered how the wellspring's energy had felt that night—pure and clean—compared to this sticky wrongness.

Dr. Reyes's expression sharpened with interest. "Strange how?"

"Like oil on water. The dead things don't like it. They avoid those areas."

"Interesting." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Most students can't distinguish between different types of magical flows this early. Your father had a similar sensitivity, though."

My heart jumped at the casual mention of him. But before I could ask, she continued.

"Try reaching for one of the clean currents," she instructed. "Don't try to use it yet—just feel how it moves. Notice how natural magic forms patterns."

I extended my awareness like she had shown me. The pure magic felt like sun-warmed water, flowing in natural patterns that made perfect sense. Scout helped me trace one current across the room, showing me how it connected to others. It reminded me of how our magic had harmonized during the ceremony—not forced, just... natural.

"The oldest families have the strongest signatures," Dr. Reyes added. "Their magic has layered itself over generations, reinforcing the spells in spaces they consider their own."

"So, the royal dorm..." I trailed off, suddenly understanding why the common room felt the way it did. It wasn't just their presence—it was the centuries of magic before them.

Dr. Reyes nodded. "You're beginning to see the patterns."

My necromancy recoiled instinctively as we encountered another wrong flow. The dead things in the walls grew agitated, their warnings more urgent now.

“What happens when you touch the... different currents?” I asked.

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“Magic should flow naturally, like water finding its path.” Dr. Reyes demonstrated, her own power moving smoothly through the air. “Any resistance usually means you’re trying to force it in unnatural ways.” She hesitated. “Like during the ceremony—did you try to make your magic work with theirs? Or did it simply... happen?”

“It just happened,” I admitted. “Like it knew what to do better than I did.”

Something flickered in her expression—concern? Warning? “You have good instincts about magical currents. Trust them. But be careful who you tell about your sensitivity.”

I gathered my books slowly. “Dr. Reyes? Is it normal for magic to feel so different in different places?”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Magic is complex. The important thing is learning to work with natural flows rather than against them.” She paused. “Come see me if you notice anything... unusual. Especially in places where old magic runs deep.”

As Scout and I headed to our next class, I couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d been warning me about something. The dead things whispered more urgently now, drawing my attention to places where wrong magic leaked through otherwise clean flows.

I just wished I understood what it all meant.

Raven and I emerged from the academic building, the crisp mountain air a welcome relief after a morning of lectures and failed spells. Students moved in shifting clusters around us, their conversations layering like woven threads of magic—some threads bright and warm, others darker, whispering things I didn't want to hear.

Raven stretched, shaking out her hands. "Death, that class was brutal. If I never have to hear the phrase 'arcane symbiosis' again, it'll be too soon."

I nodded absently, my fingers drumming against my books. Yesterday still weighed on me—the failed light spell, the way the whispers had followed me down the halls.

But more than that, a lingering unease curled low in my stomach. Like someone was watching me.

Scout chittered softly, his tiny skeletal form pressing closer to my skin. A warning.

And then I saw him.

Keane stood at the entrance to the courtyard, half in shadow, half in the weak afternoon light. He wasn't blocking my way, wasn't even looking directly at me—but he was there, his presence impossible to ignore. His magic curled and shifted around him, portals flickering in and out of existence like thoughts half-formed and discarded.

Raven noticed my silence and followed my gaze. "Are we avoiding him, or pretending he doesn't exist? Just need to know so I can adjust accordingly."

My grip tightened on my books. "We're walking past him like he's just another heir who stood by and watched."

Raven's expression turned unreadable, but she didn't argue.

We stepped forward. Keane's head lifted slightly, his gaze flickering toward me for the briefest moment before he looked away again. The muscle in his jaw flexed, his fingers tightening at his sides as his magic flared—just for a second—before he forced it back down. He was trying to keep his distance. Trying to do exactly what I had told myself I wanted.

So why did it make my pulse pound?

Scout bristled against my shoulder, sensing the conflict knotting inside me.

I could still feel Keane's presence even as I passed him, like the ghost of fingertips skimming my skin. He wasn't touching me. Wasn't saying anything.

Raven must have felt it too, because she glanced between us, lips pressing into a thoughtful line. "You know," she said lightly, "for someone you're ignoring, you're very aware of him."

"I'm not—" I cut myself off, forcing my shoulders to stay straight as I kept walking. "He doesn't matter."

A lie. One that tasted bitter on my tongue.

We had nearly passed him completely when Keane finally moved. His voice was quiet, but it slid through the air like the edge of a blade. "I heard about the orb lesson."

I froze mid-step, then forced myself to keep going. "Hope it was entertaining."

He didn't reply immediately. Just watched me, his magic curling inward like he was holding something back. Then, softer, "That wasn't what I meant."

I hesitated. For a breath, I wanted to turn, wanted to demand what he did mean. But the memory of his silence in the common room, at The Cauldron, at every moment when I had needed someone to stand up for me, slammed through me like a wall. I clenched my jaw and kept walking.

He let me go.

And I hated that part of me had wanted him to stop me.



19

Keane

I hadn't meant to watch her quite so closely. But tracking her movements had become almost unconscious—a window here, a glimpse there, just to ensure she was safe after what happened at the Cauldron on Saturday. Just to observe, I told myself. Nothing more.

Nothing to do with the way she looked in that damn maid uniform. Or the way I did nothing while they humiliated her.

She had knelt there, fire in her eyes, refusing to break even as they taunted her. And I had done nothing. Promised them I wouldn't interfere. Loyalty to the heirs came first. I had told myself that again and again, but it didn't stop the way my stomach had twisted as Elio toyed with her. As Cyrus pushed her past her limits. As I sat there and let it happen.

And now she wouldn't even look at me.

I had tried. A quiet nudge here, an open portal there. Small offerings, barely enough to be called apologies, but she saw them for what they were. And she ignored them all the same.

Wisp flickered uneasily beside me as I hesitated. I knew where she was—tucked away in a reading alcove, far from the chaos of the main study area. I should leave her be. She wanted nothing from me. She had made that clear when we crossed paths

in the hall this morning, her eyes burning with unspoken accusation before she turned away.

I should leave.

Instead, I stepped through a portal, closing the distance before I could stop myself.

She startled at my arrival, knocking over a pile of notes. Scout chittered irritably at me from her shoulder.

“Sorry,” I said quickly, keeping my distance. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Spy on me through your portals?” A hint of a smile took the sting from her words, but there was something else behind her eyes—something bruised and wary. “I’m starting to get used to it.”

I swallowed hard. “I wasn’t—I just...”

“Haven’t spoken to me for a while?” she finished, voice tight. She bent to retrieve her scattered notes, movements sharp, controlled. “The dead things notice when your little windows appear.”

“You’ve been avoiding me too,” I pointed out before I could think better of it.

She froze. Then, exhaling sharply, she shoved the papers back into a messy pile. “You didn’t stop them.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry—not just for what happened Saturday, but for the uniform, for all of it. I should have done better.”

Scout clicked his jaw in a sound that might have been agreement. Wisp flickered

uncertainly.

“What are you working on?” I asked quickly, hoping to move past everything I already knew I’d done wrong.

She hesitated, then gestured to her notebook. “Basic magic. Everyone else seems to just know how to do these things. Make light, move objects. But when I try...” She showed me her notes—messy but methodical, patterns half-formed. “It’s like speaking a language where I only know three words.”

She was trying so damn hard. Not just to memorize—to understand. And that got to me—in a place I didn’t want to think about.

“You’ve actually got the right idea,” I admitted. “You’re just making it more complicated than it needs to be. Think of magic like...” I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “Like water finding its way through pipes. It needs a clear path.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Is this another setup? Like Elio’s little trick with remedial class?”

“No.” I meant it. “Would it help if I showed you? Sometimes seeing it makes more sense than reading about it.”

She watched me carefully, weighing the offer. Then, finally, she gave a short nod. “Fine.”

I opened a small portal in my palm, just large enough for Scout to peer through. On the other side, I created a view of the sunset over the mountains. The edges darkened slightly but she was too focused to notice.

“See what’s happening?” I ran a finger along the edge of the portal. “It’s just about

shaping the path—like digging a channel for water to follow. Magic wants to move. You're just giving it direction. The books make it sound more complicated than it is, but it comes down to intention. You need to show it where to go."

She leaned in, notebook ready, and her scent washed over me—something floral mixed with old books. "So when I try to make light..."

"You're creating a path between your magic and where you want the light to appear." I kept my voice steady despite her proximity. "Here, watch what happens when I make the portal bigger and smaller."

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I demonstrated a few simple adjustments, careful to stick to basics. Nothing that would trigger the worse headaches that came with advanced portal work.

Even after years of therapy, my magic was still unstable. The treatments helped—they had to, or my portals would be completely unpredictable by now—but lately I needed more sessions to maintain the same control. Uncle said that was normal, that power like mine required constant maintenance. But like everything else with him, it came with a cost, but at least this pain served a purpose.

“Oh!” Her eyes lit up with understanding. “That’s why everyone keeps talking about clear intentions.”

“Exactly.” The throbbing in my temples intensified. “The same idea probably works with your necromancy, though in a different way.”

We spent the next hour breaking down the basics, finding simple ways to understand what the textbooks made overly complicated. When she asked about my portals, Wisp’s distress made my head spike with pain.

“That’s... different,” I said carefully, closing the demonstration portal. Its edges had grown almost black. “Family magic. We should focus on the basics for now.”

Scout and Wisp had settled on the window ledge, quietly communicating in the way familiars did—more instinct than language.

It wasn’t the interaction that caught my eye, though—it was the small, fraying black ribbon tied neatly around Scout’s neck. A crooked little bow tie. Handmade.

Thoughtful.

Of course she'd done that. Given him a piece of herself.

The same girl who'd faced down three heirs and cleaned ashes off the hearth without flinching had also tied a bow on a skeletal mouse like he deserved to be seen.

I felt that twist again—guilt and something else, sharper.

She wasn't just trying. She was reaching—to understand this world, to belong in it, to shape it with the same stubborn grace she brought to everything.

And I'd sat there like stone while Elio humiliated her.

I cleared my throat, looking back at the text between us. She didn't need my regret. She needed someone who believed she could do this.

"You're actually a good teacher," she said as the light faded outside. "Why help me, though? After Saturday night..." Her voice faltered. "Won't the others be angry?"

They would. Any hint of alliance would be seen as betrayal. But watching her struggle, seeing her work so hard to understand...

"The others don't control me," I said finally. "And..." I hesitated. "I know what it's like to feel lost in this place."

Something in her expression softened. "Because of your parents?"

I shouldn't tell her. Shouldn't risk this connection. But the words came anyway. "They died when I was young. My uncle raised me, but he..." The memory of his lessons—the cruel punishments, the cold calculation, everything except the

therapy that kept my magic from spiraling completely out of control. “He’s not someone who explains things patiently.”

Understanding filled her eyes—not pity, but something worse. Recognition. Scout chittered softly, and Wisp’s form stabilized, as if drawing comfort from the shared understanding.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

20

Marigold

The necromancy classroom was nothing like I’d imagined. Instead of a dark, creepy dungeon, it was bright and open, with tall windows and cushioned practice areas. Protective symbols in faint blue chalk marked the walls—simple but layered, their power woven deep. I could feel the traces of magic left behind by past students when I touched the stone, like fingerprints you can still see on glass even after you’ve wiped it down.

It was the first time I had entered a space at Wickem and felt like I belonged.

The class was a mix of upper and lower years, all working in the same space, reinforcing the idea that necromancers learned from one another.

The professor, an older man in a dark suit with Mediterranean features, called together the small group of freshmen—me, Raven, Lucas, and two others.

“Today, we begin with foundational practice,” Professor Undergrove explained. “Given recent vampire activity near Fort Collins, we will focus on defensive techniques. However, understanding the difference between summoning and

protection is crucial. First—” He gestured to the diagrams on the board.

“We will start with a protective circle against vampires. This is a fundamental necromantic defense, disrupting their corrupted life force and preventing them from crossing. Mastering this will be essential for your Third Week Trials, where defensive magic will be tested alongside summoning skills.”

A girl near the front raised her hand. “Professor? Is it true that necromancers can sense vampires? Since they’re... you know, dead?”



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And a guy asked, “And can we control them?”

Undergrove’s expression turned serious. “Excellent questions. Vampires exist in a unique state between life and death. Most necromancers can sense their presence, but controlling them?” He shook his head. “That requires exceptional power. The kind not seen since...” His eyes flickered to me for just a moment before he caught himself. “Let’s focus on what youcando.”

“Your father,” Raven whispered, low enough that only I could hear. “He could control them, couldn’t he?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t know. Not really. I’d only learned his name ten days ago—learned he was a witch, a necromancer, a traitor. A man I’d never met, never even heard a bedtime story about. Just whispers. Accusations. Shadows shaped by other people’s grief and fear.

So I kept tracing the protective diagram, letting the motion settle me. This, at least, I understood. The shape of the lines, the flow of intention. This was mine. Something solid. Something I could build with my own hands instead of inherited doubt.

“Vampires resist necromantic control because they retain a twisted form of life force,” Undergrove continued. “They are not truly dead but exist in a corrupted state. This makes them uniquely dangerous. The key to defending against them is precision—your magic must create an unbreachable boundary.”

I pressed my palm to the floor, focusing on the symbols. Keane’s voice flickered in my memory: Magic needs a clear path. I exhaled slowly and let the power flow.

The circle responded instantly. Mist coiled along the edges, energy layering in a way that felt structured and solid. The dead things whispered their approval.

“Excellent, Miss Grimley,” Undergrove said, stepping closer. “You’ve reinforced the boundaries naturally. A well-formed protective circle repels before a creature even reaches it.”

“Show off,” Raven whispered, but her grin was proud. Boris, her skeletal beetle, abandoned her carefully drawn circle to investigate mine, clicking its approval.

Lucas was already making notes. “Your energy distribution is incredibly efficient.”

Warmth flickered in my chest. Praise wasn’t something I was used to, but here, it didn’t come with a catch. I had earned it.

Across the room, upperclassmen whispered, their words barely audible. Half-breed. Traitor’s daughter. My spine stiffened.

“Ignore them,” Raven murmured, her protective charms clinking softly.

Undergrove moved on, instructing us to erase our circles and prepare for the next exercise. “A summoning circle functions differently. Instead of repelling, it invites. Instead of rejecting the dead, it calls them forth. Precision remains key.”

Summoning had always come easily to me, but this time, I followed the method carefully. Clear path. Structured flow. The energy formed a perfect lattice as I reached out—not forcing, but requesting. A presence stirred.

A skeletal cat emerged, its form well-defined, energy weaving naturally into place.

“Well done,” Undergrove murmured. “Summonings should be stable, not chaotic.”

For once, my magic wasn't too much. It was exactly what it needed to be.

As the lesson ended, Professor Undergrove approached. "Your natural affinity is clear," he said quietly. "But the trials will test more than just necromancy. Have you been practicing the basic magical forms?"

The memory of my failed illumination spell made my cheeks burn. "I'm... working on it."

He nodded understandingly. "Your father struggled with the traditional forms at first too. But he learned to adapt, to find his own way of working with different types of magic. You will too."

The mention of my father sent a confused ache through my chest.

"You knew my father?" I asked.

With a conspiratorial look, Professor Undergrove tapped the silver skull on the lapel of his black suit. "All of us necromancers stick together. You should stop by my office hours—we can talk more."

"Thank you," I said.

Whatever my father had done—or hadn't—it didn't change what I had to face. I couldn't carry his past and survive mine at the same time.

"I've got to work harder," I said under my breath.

"Hey, we've all got Third Week Trials to prepare for," Raven said. "We're in this together."

“I can help review the trial requirements,” Lucas offered. “I’ve been researching past challenges—”

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“And we can practice together,” Raven added. “The garden’s perfect for studying in the evenings.”

I hadn’t expected their immediate support. After so many years hiding what I could do, having friends who understood—whowantedto help—still felt surreal.

The cat’s form dissolved as the lesson ended, my magic releasing it smoothly. But I felt other presences watching, approval echoing from the generations who had stood in this same room before me.

I wasn’t just surviving here. I was learning to belong.

The violin music caught me off guard—haunting and beautiful, drifting through the royal wing’s early morning silence. I paused on the stairs, trying to trace its source, but the sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. Scout tilted his skull, tail twitching in slow rhythm, as the melody faded.

For once, I’d actually woken up early. The massive breakfast table stretched before me, silver serving dishes steaming with their usual excessive display. Without the weight of the other heirs’ stares, I found myself gravitating toward the pastry section.

“Just this once,” I told Scout, piling my plate with chocolate croissants, cream-filled danishes, and what looked like lemon tarts. My mother would have been horrified at the excess, but after a week of eating just one pastry under their judgmental gazes, the abundance was too tempting to resist.

I settled into my usual spot, relishing the quiet. The first bite of buttery pastry melted

in my mouth, and for a brief moment, I found peace in the middle of the battlefield.

Scout investigated the table's elaborate centerpiece, his crooked black bow tie bobbing proudly with each step. His delicate bones cast intricate, twitching shadows across the tablecloth—like a lace cutout come to life. The dead things whispered contentedly in the walls.

Then footsteps.

Cyrus strode in, fresh from his morning workout and an even more recent shower, wearing only loose training pants and—dear god—no shirt. His copper hair was still damp, and water droplets trailed slowly down his chest, catching the light. Overhead, Ember circled lazily, his flames casting a golden glow that highlighted every sculpted line of muscle.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to keep chewing. My mouth had gone dry.

He stopped short at the sight of me, genuine surprise breaking through his usual mask of indifference. “You’re... early.”

I made a point of taking another bite of my pastry, willing my face to stay neutral.

The temperature in the room rose slightly as he moved toward the coffee pot. I caught him eyeing my plate of sweets, and for a fleeting moment, something like longing crossed his face.

The violin music drifted through again, closer this time, and I couldn't help asking. “Do you know where that's coming from?”

Cyrus shrugged, pouring his coffee. But as he took a sip, he grabbed a chocolate croissant with practiced nonchalance, as if hoping I wouldn't notice.

“The trials start Monday,” he said, voice casual, but there was a weight behind it. As if he was reminding both of us that whatever this was, whatever uneasy truce lingered between us, it would be short-lived.

Before I could answer, Elio swept in—and for the first time, he wasn’t perfectly put together. His usual artfully tousled hair was actually messy, and Echo’s scales cycled through unsettled patterns. He must have been running late, something that almost made me smile.

“Well, well,” he drawled, though it lacked his usual polish. “Someone’s been holding out on us. Sweet tooth, darling?”

I leaned back in my chair, unbothered. “At least I’m on time.”

Cyrus snorted into his coffee, and Elio’s illusions wavered just enough to show a hint of color in his cheeks.

“Some of us have better things to do than arrive early just to hoard pastries,” Elio said smoothly. “Or perhaps just enjoying the view with your breakfast?” He raised an eyebrow at me.

Scout let out a tiny chitter and dramatically covered his eye sockets with his tiny skeletal paws, as if scandalized.

“Oh, please,” I muttered, but I kept my eyes firmly on my plate. Definitely not looking.

Cyrus exhaled sharply, irritated. “Some of us actually train in the morning,” he muttered, but the effect was somewhat undermined by the pastry flakes now clinging to his chest.

“The violin music earlier was beautiful,” I said, watching their reactions. “Does anyone here play?”

Elio’s teasing smile slipped for just a fraction of a second. Echo’s scales turned stormy gray, and Ember’s flames flickered uncertainly. That was interesting.

“I should get dressed,” Cyrus muttered, grabbing another pastry.

“Yes, please do,” Elio replied silkily. “Though I’m sure some of us are enjoying the current view.”



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I stood quickly, gathering my plate, and forced myself not to look at Cyrus's retreating form.

"Maybe during the trials, we'll all learn something new about each other." I arched a brow, letting the implication settle. "I wonder what else you two are hiding."

Elio's smirk faltered just a touch, and Cyrus nearly tripped over a chair leg on his way out.

Scout chittered, and I could have sworn he was laughing at all of us.

21

Marigold

Dr. Reyes arranged several objects on the table before me, each pulsing with faint magic. A silver compass, an old spellbook, a small vial of shimmering dust.

"Let's test your sensitivity to different magical currents," she said, watching me closely.

Scout twitched on my shoulder, his tiny bones clicking as he sniffed the air, the frayed black bow tie at his neck fluttering with the movement.

I could already feel the magic humming around us, but now that I was paying attention, the differences were startling. The compass's magic felt solid, unmoving—like stone warmed by the sun, steady and unwavering. But the

spellbook—it felt wrong. Not just old, but altered, twisted in a way that made my skin prickle. The dead things in the walls whispered uneasily.

I pressed my fingers against the book's leather cover, feeling the magic underneath. "This one's... forced. Like someone tried to shove magic into a shape it wasn't meant to be. It doesn't flow right."

Dr. Reyes nodded, her expression unreadable. "Good. And the compass?"

"Grounded. Rooted. Like... something that won't break, no matter what pushes against it."

"That's Professor Rivera's signature," she said. "His magic aligns with earth—sturdy, enduring, resistant to outside influence. But the book—" She tapped it lightly. "That magic has been restrained, shaped unnaturally."

I frowned. "Why would someone force magic like that?"

Before she could answer, the classroom door opened. Keane stood there, pausing as he caught sight of me. His usual composed presence seemed off—his portals flickered at his fingertips, their edges darker than before.

He frowned slightly, like he hadn't expected anyone to be here. Was he delivering a message? Picking something up? Whatever it was, he didn't linger—until our magic brushed.

The same wrongness I'd felt in the book threaded through his magic.

The dead things in the walls recoiled. Scout tensed. And before I even thought about it, I reached for my own magic, letting it brush against the edges of his.

The darkness shuddered, then—

For just a second, his portal lightened. Silver, steady, pure.

Keane inhaled sharply, as if feeling the shift. His eyes snapped to mine, startled.

And then, just as quickly, he pulled back, his expression hardening. The shadows crept back into his magic like ink bleeding into water. He turned without a word and strode down the hallway, his posture tight.

Dr. Reyes exhaled slowly, considering me. “Interesting.”

My pulse was still racing. “What? What was that?”

She studied me for a moment before answering. “Your father noticed similar anomalies in his research. Magic being redirected. Corrupted. And—on rare occasions—something pushing back against that corruption.”

I stared at her. “Pushing back how?”

Dr. Reyes picked up the compass again, rolling it between her fingers. “Some magic resists being forced into unnatural patterns. And some people—very rare people—can sense when magic is... out of place.”

I swallowed hard, my mind spinning. “Is that why the Council—”

“That’s enough for today,” she interrupted, suddenly cool. “Be careful, Marigold. Not everyone appreciates their methods being questioned.”

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The dead things murmured warnings. And for the first time, I listened.

Lunch with Raven and Lucas had almost felt normal. Almost.

The dining hall buzzed with students, the scent of roasted chicken and fresh bread mingling with the faint crackle of background magic. I was mid-bite into my sandwich, actually enjoying myself, when a slow, creeping warmth curled around my skin.

At first, I barely noticed. It was September, and the hall was packed—body heat alone could explain the shift. I rolled up my sleeves and kept eating.

Then the warmth turned into a slow burn. My skin prickled. A bead of sweat trickled down my spine.

I set my sandwich down, pressing my palms against the cool wood of the table. “Is it just me, or is it—”

“Hot?” Raven frowned. “No, it’s fine.”

Lucas gave me a confused look. “Feels normal to me.”

A slow ripple of laughter carried across the hall. And that’s when I knew.

I didn’t have to look to know where he was. But I did anyway.

Cyrus lounged at a table across the way, perfectly composed, stirring his coffee like

he hadn't just turned my body into a damn furnace. His amber eyes met mine across the room, gleaming with quiet amusement.

The heat surged. My skin flushed, fire curling low in my stomach—not the good kind, the kind that made my limbs weak and my breath come short.

I sucked in air, but it was thick and stifling. My vision blurred at the edges. My magic stirred, instinctive, reaching for the cool touch of the dead things in the walls—fight back, they whispered.

I clenched my fists, pulse hammering. What could I even do in a room this full? Summon a dozen rats onto the table? Call up a ghost in the middle of lunch?

Scout chittered anxiously, his tiny claws digging into my shoulder.

No. Not here. Not like this.

But the panic made my control slip. Shadows curled unnaturally beneath my fingers. Plates rattled along the table. The half-eaten sandwich on my plate molded over in an instant, black decay spreading across the bread.

Lucas cursed and yanked his tray away. Raven's eyes widened.

Laughter.

A single, sharp whistle from across the hall. Elio.

The temperature spiked higher—Cyrus's final shove.

A small portal bloomed silently beside me, barely the size of a coin. Through it flowed a whisper of cool air, breaking the heat just enough for me to catch my breath.

It vanished instantly, but not before Scout noticed, his tiny skull turning toward a far corner of the room. My gaze followed and I caught a glimpse of Keane, head bowed over a book, one hand slightly extended beneath the table. His expression didn't change, but his eyes met mine for half a second before returning to his page.

I reached for my water glass—except my grip slipped, and suddenly, ice-cold liquid sloshed down my front.

A few gasps. More laughter.

I sucked in a breath, blinking down at my soaked shirt. The wet fabric clung to me, and of course I'd chosen white today.

Across the hall, Elio raised his glass in a mock toast.

“Oops,” Cyrus murmured, just loud enough for me to hear.

Raven was already grabbing napkins, muttering something murderous under her breath, while Lucas looked seconds away from hexing someone. But what could they do against heirs? Even the teachers looked the other way.

My hands curled against the table. My power still pressed at the edges of my control, itching for release.

And I wanted to use it. Wanted to see their smirks falter. Wanted to watch them scramble when the dead things responded.

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But this wasn't the time. Not in front of everyone.

So I forced the power back down, locking it away with gritted teeth.

Then, very deliberately, I met Cyrus's gaze again.

And I smiled.

A slow, measured thing.

His own smirk faltered for just a fraction of a second—just enough to let me know he hadn't expected that.

Fine. He wanted to remind me of my place?

I'd let him have his victory today. But my day was coming.

And when the time came, I'd make damn sure he regretted this.

As I gathered my things to leave, a tiny, folded note appeared through another fleeting portal on the edge of my tray. I slipped it into my pocket without looking.

Later, alone in my room, I'd find the simple message: Your control today. Impressive.

The third-floor study room in the academic wing had the best views of the mountains, but right now I could barely appreciate it through my growing frustration. Scout chittered encouragingly from my shoulder, his crooked little bow tie bouncing like a cheerleader's ribbon with every twitch as I tried the detection spell for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Like this." Raven demonstrated again, her protective charms clinking as she moved her hands in a precise pattern. A soft pulse of magic revealed the traces of old spells lingering in the room's corners. "You have to maintain a light touch while extending your magical awareness."

"Think of it like creating a map," Lucas added, his skeletal bird familiar hopping between spots where past magic had left marks. "The trials often include hidden elements that must be detected."

I took a deep breath and tried again, reaching for my magic the way Dr. Reyes had taught me. But instead of the gentle searching probe the textbook described, my necromancy surged. Scout chittered a warning just before every trace of past death in the room became blindingly obvious—from mice that had died in the walls decades ago to the remnants of countless dead insects.

"Sorry!" I pulled back quickly as the dead things stirred. "I didn't mean to—"

"That's actually impressive," a new voice said.

I turned to see a tall girl standing by the next table. Long copper hair, pulled back in a simple braid. No makeup, no flash—just steady posture and eyes that didn't miss much.

"Hi," she said, "I'm Aurora Raynoff."



Raynoff. My stomach did a slow twist. That wasn't a name you forgot—not with Cyrus walking around like a firestorm waiting to happen.

The study room went dead silent.

Whispers from the other students started immediately.

“Raynoff? Withher?”

“Why is she even talking to the Shadow Heir?”

“I thought Cyrus wanted her gone.”

The tension tightened, coiling low in my gut. Aligning with her could paint an even bigger target on my back. I opened my mouth to say... something.

But Aurora just smiled again—warm, like she hadn't heard a thing—and pulled over a chair. “Mind if I join? I could use the practice too.”

Raven immediately shifted to make room. “Aurora's in our Practical Applications seminar.”

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“The one where I keep detecting emotional traces instead of proper Raynoff power signatures.” Aurora demonstrated, her magic revealing pink-tinged echoes of past students’ feelings. “Family’s thrilled about that.”

I hesitated, glancing at Lucas and Raven, but they didn’t seem bothered by her presence. Maybe I shouldn’t be either.

Before I could respond, the sophomores at the next table weren’t even pretending not to watch.

“Did you see that? All the death magic she stirred up?”

“Why is Raynoff sitting with them?”

“I dunno. Maybe she’s got a thing for necromancers.”

They muttered as they packed up their things and moved to the other side of the room.

Aurora rolled her eyes. “Don’t mind them. My family’s reputation scares people into thinking we’re all like Cyrus.”

“And we both know that’s not true,” Raven added. “I mean, you’re at least thirty percent friendlier.”

Aurora snorted. “Cyrus would probably call me a disgrace to the bloodline. Can’t wait to hear the next lecture about ‘proper Raynoff discipline.’”

“Every family has its standards,” Lucas noted dryly. “Though some enforce them more rigorously than others.”

I could relate to that. My father’s legacy hung over me like a ghost no one would stop mentioning.

“Maybe we should take this somewhere with more space,” Aurora suggested. “The practice rooms on the first floor are usually empty this time of day.”

The practice rooms were smaller than regular classrooms but had the advantage of being warded specifically for magical accidents. Protective runes marked the walls, glowing faintly blue as we entered.

“Much better,” Raven declared, setting up her books again. “Now nobody cares if things get a little too... detailed.”

I tried the detection spell again, focusing harder on controlling the energy flow, on keeping my necromancy contained while reaching for magic traces...

The dead things surged without warning. Every trace of past magic in the room became visible—not just spells, but the lingering echoes of everyone who had ever practiced here. Scout pressed against my neck, his steady presence helping me filter through the overwhelming information.

“Fascinating,” Lucas muttered, already scribbling notes. “The necromantic energy isn’t just detecting magic, it’s revealing layers of magical history—”

“Look at this,” Aurora interrupted, examining a particularly old trace I’d revealed. “That’s from when they first built these practice rooms. You can see the original warding patterns.”

She was right. Unlike my failed attempts at light magic, this felt natural. The dead things weren't interfering but enhancing, adding depth to what I could perceive. Through them, I could see how magic had shaped this space over generations.

"It's because death magic understands patterns," Aurora said matter-of-factly. When we all stared at her, she shrugged. "What? Everything leaves traces. You're just seeing the ones most people forget to look for."

"That... actually makes sense," Lucas mused. "You're not just detecting current magic, you're reading the accumulated magical history. Rather brilliant, really."

"But will it work for the trials?" I watched the layers of magical residue swirl through the air, Scout's sharp instincts helping me tell one type from another—cool, ancient, chaotic. "They're expecting standard detection spells."

"Hey." Raven's charms clinked as she grabbed my hand. "The trials test magical awareness, not limitations. And this?" She gestured at the complex patterns I'd revealed. "This is definitely awareness."

"Plus," Aurora added with a grin, "imagine their faces when you find things no one else even knows to look for."

We spent the next hour experimenting—learning to filter different types of magical traces, finding ways to focus on specific time periods, even discovering how to trace the path of active spells through the remnants they left behind.

By the end of the session, I could perform a detection spell that looked almost normal but revealed far more, guided by the dead things' perfect memory of what had come before.

"Progress!" Raven declared as we packed up. "See? We'll figure this out."

A sharp chime cut through the room. Raven pulled out her phone, frowning at the screen. “It’s my mom...” Her protective charms clinked softly as she answered. “Hey, what’s—”

The color drained from her face. Boris, her skeletal beetle, skittered anxiously across her notes.

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“Are they okay? How bad—? No, I understand. Yes. Keep me posted.” Her hands trembled as she lowered the phone.

“Raven?” Aurora moved closer, concern etching her features. “What happened?”

“My cousins were at Pike Place Market in Seattle.” Raven’s voice shook. “Vampires attacked. In broad daylight. They never—there’s a wellspring there, they shouldn’t have been able to—” She broke off, pressing her hands to her mouth.

“Were they hurt?” Lucas asked quietly, his bird familiar landing protectively on his shoulder.

“Marcus has a broken arm. Elena’s in shock, but physically okay. The Shroud Guard got there fast, but...” She swallowed hard. “Three people died before they could stop it. In the middle of the city. With a wellspring right there.”

The room went still. Scout curled tighter into the crook of my neck, his bones clicking softly as he shivered, tail wrapping around my collar like he could shield me.

Aurora squeezed Raven’s hand. “Come on. Let’s get you some air. Mountain View Cafe? My treat.”

“The skull foam art always cheers you up,” I added, trying to lighten the mood.

Raven managed a weak smile. “Yeah. Okay.”

As we headed upstairs, Scout nuzzled into the side of my throat, bones cool but

familiar. The dead things whispered uneasily in the walls, their murmurs sharper now, as if echoing my own unease. This attack wasn't just random vampire violence. It meant something more. Something worse.

If they could breach wellspring protections now... nowhere was truly safe.

The skull in my latte foam grinned up at me, its usual charm feeling hollow. Through the cafe's floor-to-ceiling windows, mountains stretched endlessly toward clouds tinged pink with sunset. Raven's hands still trembled slightly around her cup as she checked her phone again.

"Any updates?" Aurora asked.

Raven shook her head. "Mom says they're still at the hospital with Marcus. Elena's talking to the Shroud Guard about what she saw."

"At least they're safe," Lucas said, his voice carrying forced lightness. His skeletal bird familiar hopped closer to Boris on the table, offering silent comfort.

Aurora stirred her drink absently. "I don't understand how this happened. The Market's close to the wellspring. That should have been enough."

"Maybe that's why the vampires targeted it," I suggested. "To show they could breach even a wellspring's influence?"

Raven swallowed hard. "Mom said the Shroud Guard had to cover it up. Make it look like a normal attack for the humans. They spun it as some kind of gang violence. But—" she exhaled shakily, "—that doesn't change the fact that it shouldn't have happened at all."

Silence settled around our table, heavier than before. Scout pressed closer against my

neck, while Boris clicked anxiously across Raven's protective charms.

"We should head to Rivera's combat training," Lucas said finally. "After this, I don't think any of us can afford to skip defensive magic practice."

23

Marigold

We filed into the combat hall expecting the usual routine—paired sparring, maybe another lecture on stance adjustments. But the moment we stepped inside, something felt off. The air was too still, too heavy. The scent of charred wood and old magic clung to the walls like an unspoken warning. Rivera stood at the front, arms crossed, his expression carved from stone. And behind the glass viewing panel, Lord Raynoff watched us like we were already on the battlefield.

Rivera's gaze swept the students before settling on me. "You all know why we're here. The Seattle attack wasn't a one-time event. It was a message. The vampires are growing more aggressive, more organized. The defenses we've relied on aren't holding."

A murmur passed through the students, but it wasn't surprise. We had known about the attack since yesterday. What we didn't know—what Rivera wasn't saying—was how bad things had really gotten.

"From now on, your combat training will reflect reality," he continued, his voice harder than usual. "Vampires don't fight fair, and they don't fall for brute force. You'll be fighting in teams today, because if you try to take them alone, you will die."

The dead things in the walls stirred uneasily at his words, their whispers sharp with



warning. Scout shifted higher on my shoulder, his little bones tense but his presence steady—like he was keeping watch for both of us.

The heirs weren't unaffected either. Cyrus's flames flickered erratically, his usual sharp control slipping. Elio stood a little too still, his golden eyes watchful. And Keane... Keane was the only one who hadn't moved, but shadows curled unnaturally around his boots.

Rivera's eyes flicked back to me. "Grimley. With the heirs."

My stomach dropped. I wasn't ready for this. Basic spells still gave me trouble—how was I supposed to fight alongside them?

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Cyrus muttered something under his breath.

Elio smirked. “Well, this should be entertaining.”

Keane didn’t react. He hadn’t looked at me once.

I squared my shoulders, trying to hide how my hands trembled. “Fine.”

Around the hall, other students were divided into small groups, each assigned different combinations of magical disciplines. I caught sight of Raven, paired with two students who specialized in defensive enchantments, their runes already glowing faintly. At least they knew what they were doing.

Rivera gestured toward the far end of the hall, where the enchanted combat doors pulsed with magic. Lord Raynoff watched in silence as shadows poured into the hall.

The vampires weren’t real, but they might as well have been. Constructs made of combat magic, designed to mimic real enemy attacks—fast, relentless, and deadly if you hesitated even a second too long.

Each team faced different challenges. To our left, a group of students held their ground with warding spells, barriers of shimmering silver light flaring to life. Further down, illusionists worked together to distort reality. But I couldn’t focus on their techniques—my magic was already surging in response to the threat, raw and unstable.

Cyrus moved first, fire racing over his arms as he launched an explosive wave that

sent two creatures skidding back. Keane opened a portal to reposition us—

And then his magic wavered.

I felt it before I saw it—a ripple in the air, like space bending the wrong way. The portal's edges stuttered, jagged like cracked glass.

The vampire twisted at the last second and lunged, slipping through the glitching spell.

Keane didn't react in time. His portals had always been steady, even when distracted—but now, the silver rim sputtered between brilliance and shadow.

The vampire construct spun midair, claws outstretched—closing fast.

That drop in my stomach came before the thought. A gut-deep certainty: he wouldn't stop it.

My magic moved before I could.

Shadows surged forward, not as an attack, but as instinct. A pulse of raw necrotic force crushed the construct to nothing before it could reach him. It wasn't a spell. It wasn't planned. It was something older than training.

The power didn't stop. It kept building, feeding off my panic, my need to protect. The dead things responded to my fear, rising from every corner of the room. I couldn't control it—couldn't even try. All I could do was let it flow.

“No more screw-ups,” Cyrus snapped, yanking Keane upright. “We finish this together.”

I barely heard him. My magic was everywhere now, wild and desperate. But it wasn't alone. It wasn't just pushing outward, it was pulling.

Cyrus's fire wrapped around my shadows, not consuming them, but shaping them. The edges of his flames flared deep blue, something flickering beneath them that didn't belong.

Keane's portal, the one that had wavered and cracked, suddenly stabilized. No effort. No adjustment. It simply... fixed itself. His fox pressed harder against his legs, ears flat, as if sensing something Keane couldn't.

Elio's illusions solidified. His conjured images had always been beautiful, but now they carried weight. Like they weren't just projections but remnants of something real. His chameleon's scales flashed through a rapid-fire sequence of colors, unsettled.

When the last construct fell, the hall was silent, except for our breathing. For a second, no one spoke.

Cyrus flexed his fingers like they didn't feel like his own. His phoenix, usually still and regal after a fight, kept his wings slightly spread, watching the space where the construct had disappeared.

Elio was still watching Keane. Not me. Keane.

And Keane... Keane hadn't moved. Wisp had pressed so tightly against his legs now that her claws dug into the fabric of his pants. Keane's hands clenched at his sides, but he wasn't looking at the battlefield anymore—he was staring at where his portal had failed.

Behind the glass, Lord Raynoff's face didn't change, but something in his posture

shifted.

Rivera folded his arms. “That was... unexpected.” He said it too neutrally. Too carefully. Like he was measuring the weight of what had just happened.

Our magic had moved like it was remembering, instead of learning.

24

Cyrus

I found her in the east training corridor, still flushed from class, her skin damp with sweat and exertion.

My magic had never worked so perfectly with anyone else's. Not just mine—Keane's portals had locked into place, Elio's illusions had solidified, and all of it had centered around her. The moment our power had intertwined, something had clicked into place, something I didn't understand. And that thought had been clawing at me since combat practice, burrowing into my brain like a splinter I couldn't remove.

Wrong. Unnatural.

And yet, my control had never felt sharper than when our power had intertwined.

That was unacceptable.

"Running away?" I called, letting heat curl into the narrow space between us. "Not very heir-like behavior."

Marigold turned, chin lifting in that defiant, infuriating way that made me want to burn something just to see if she'd flinch. "Neither is stalking people in hallways."

"Stalking?" Flames licked along my knuckles as I stepped closer, reveling in how her pupils flared in the dim light. "Don't flatter yourself, Grimley."

“Then what do you want?”

Her breath hitched, so quiet I almost missed it. But I didn't.

“To remind you what you really are.” I slammed my palm against the stone beside her head, caging her in. Magic surged between us, crackling like an approaching storm. Like gravity itself wanted to pull us together. “A half-breed playing at being one of us.”

She didn't shrink away. Didn't cower like she should have. Like she would have, if she had any sense. Instead, shadows curled at her feet, dancing along my fire without fear.

“Is that what's really bothering you?” Her voice was softer than before, but deadly precise. “Or is it that my half-breed magic worked so perfectly with yours?”

A surge of heat shot through me—fury and something darker, something I refused to name. My flames roared higher, catching the edge of her sleeve. The fabric smoldered but didn't burn. My control slipped—but not enough. Not enough to make her afraid.

Why wasn't she afraid?

“You think because our magic didn't fight each other, that it means something?” I leaned in, the heat between us unbearable. “You think one battle where our power fit together too easily makes you my equal?”

Her lips parted, breath uneven, but still she held my gaze. Still, she didn't yield.

“I think you're terrified.” Her voice was quiet but razor-sharp. “Not of me being weak—of me being strong.”

I growled, my hand slamming onto the other side of her, trapping her completely. The temperature spiked, a bead of sweat rolling down her throat. I followed it, unwillingly.

She was so close now. Close enough that the scent of charred fabric mixed with something softer—something uniquely hers.

Her shirt began to smoke, but still, she didn't flinch.

"I could burn you to ash right now," I ground out, my voice low, rough. A warning. A promise. A lie.

"But you won't." She shifted slightly, tilting her chin up—bringing us closer. Daring me. "Because you felt it too—how right our magic worked together. How natural it was."

Nothing about you is natural. The words almost left my lips, but my fire betrayed me first.

At the places where the heat licked closest to her, the flames burned blue.

Her lips curved. "Your fire says otherwise."

A snarl tore from my throat, and before I could stop myself, I grabbed her arms, pushing her harder against the wall.

She gasped—not in pain. Not in fear. But in something far more dangerous.



We were too close.

Her magic curled around mine, cool shadows slipping into the heat, not fighting it, but melding.

I should have pulled back.

I should have walked away.

Instead, I stood there, my grip tightening, my breath shallow, as if I was the one caught.

Her chest rose and fell unevenly against mine, her breath fanning across my cheek.

“I hate that you affect me like this,” I growled.

Her lashes flickered. “Like what?”

Her lips were inches from mine, close enough that I could taste the answer if I leaned in.

I almost did.

Instead, I shoved myself away from her, putting distance between us before I did something I couldn’t take back.

The heat in my chest refused to settle, my flames still edged with that damning blue.

“Stay away from me, Grimley.” The warning came out hoarse, too raw.

She straightened, brushing ash from her singed sleeve with infuriating calm. “Is that a threat, Raynoff?” Her lips curled slightly, eyes sharp. “Or a promise?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

I turned before she could see whatever was written on my face, before she could see the thought that had been gnawing at me since class. This wasn’t just magic reacting. It was something deeper, older. And I didn’t know what terrified me more—what it meant for her.

Or what it meant for me.

“Both,” I muttered.

But as I stalked away, my pulse still hammering, I knew the truth. She was already inside my head. Already under my skin.

The real threat here wasn’t what I could do to her. It was what she was doing to me.

Ember trilled softly, his flames still edged in that cursed blue.

Everything was changing.

And I was powerless to stop it.

I hadn't meant to play that particular piece.

The melody was too raw, too unpolished. Mother would be horrified to hear me indulging in something so simple, so real. But tonight, the familiar notes settled into my bones, a release I hadn't realized I needed. The weight of the day—the combat lesson, Rivera's warning, the way Marigold didn't just stand against us but fought beside us—clung to me.

Echo's scales rippled with remembered pain as I drew the bow across the strings. Up here, beneath the endless stars, I could breathe. No illusions to maintain, no audience to dazzle, no perfect heir to pretend to be. Just music, stripped of performance.

And then—another presence. Impossible.

The violin screeched to silence as my eyes snapped open. Marigold.

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I went still. Not from shock—I didn't let myself be shocked—but from something colder.

She shouldn't be here. My wards should have turned her away. No one was supposed to be able to walk in.

But she had. Like the rules had never applied to her.

“How did you—” I started, then bit the words off. Didn't matter. She was here.

Marigold tilted her head, utterly unfazed. “The dead things see through illusions. They prefer truth.”

“And you keep showing up where you're not wanted.” The words came out sharper than intended.

My fingers tightened around the violin's neck. Truth. A dangerous word. One I had spent years perfecting the art of avoiding.

“Truth is overrated,” I said smoothly, but my voice wasn't quite as steady as I wanted it to be. She wasn't just listening to the music—she was listening to me. I didn't like the way that felt. Exposed. Real.

“Is it?” She gestured to the instrument I still clutched like a shield. “That didn't feel like a performance.”

A flicker of something too real passed through me. I reached for my usual charm, my

practiced indifference. “Everything is a performance, darling. Some of us just do it better than others.”

But Echo betrayed me. My treacherous familiar, shifting her scales to that deep violet that always emerged around Marigold. Her tiny skeletal mouse scampered to the windowsill, studying Echo with unnerving intelligence.

“Why this piece?” she asked, but there was a blade in her voice now, hidden beneath curiosity. “It’s not exactly what I’d expect from you.”

“Then maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do,” I said, then deflected. “You know it?”

She moved into the moonlight like it had been choreographed, the highlights in her honey-blond hair catching every glint—and I despised the way my gaze followed.

“My mom used to hum it while cleaning houses. On the bad days, when bills were piling up. Said it reminded her that beauty could exist even in hard times.”

Something twisted in my chest. I had spent the afternoon watching her command magic in a way that had made even Rivera pause, and now, she spoke like this—like she wasn’t even aware of how her words landed.

“It was just a piece I learned for performance,” I lied. “But it wasn’t perfect enough for Mother.”

She turned to face me, and for the first time, I didn’t want to meet her eyes. I could feel her seeing through me again.

“Maybe that’s why you play it up here,” she said softly. “Where no one can judge if it’s perfect.”

My fingers traced familiar patterns on the violin's polished surface, seeking comfort in its familiar weight. "Why are you really here, Grimley? Come to mock the pampered heir's secret hobby?"

"I followed the music." Her gaze was steady, challenging as she had stepped closer—just enough that the space between us felt like a choice.

I should tell her to leave. Should send her back with a smirk and a cutting remark, let her know exactly where she stood. Because this was dangerous.

And yet—I didn't want her to leave.

I could take her right now. Pull her against me, kiss her hard enough to make her stop looking at me like that—like she saw past every carefully crafted lie, and wasn't afraid of what lay underneath.

But she would know the truth. And that was why I didn't move.

Without speaking, I lifted the violin back to my shoulder and began to play.

This time, I didn't fight the defiance in the melody. The strength. The edge that had nothing to do with technique.

Marigold sank onto the couch, listening in a way that unnerved me—like she wasn't just hearing the music, but the pieces of me I usually kept buried. The ones she had been pulling to the surface since the moment she arrived.

Echo and her mouse watched from the windowsill in something like an uneasy truce, while magic hummed clean and pure around us.

By the time the last note faded, she was already standing. She moved toward the door

without a word, but at the threshold, she paused. When she looked back at me, something in my carefully constructed world trembled.

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“Music is meant to be felt, not perfected.”

Then she left.

I could have stopped her. Could have thrown up another illusion, crafted the perfect retort, built the walls back up before she tore them down further.

But I didn't.

For a long moment, I just stood there, her words settling into the cracks she kept finding in my defenses.

Then, slowly, I lifted the violin once more, drawing the bow across the strings. The melody her mother had hummed through hard times.

This time, I didn't try for perfection. I simply let the truth echo in the dark.

26

Marigold

After leaving Elio's sanctuary, I returned to my chambers, but sleep refused to come. I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, but my thoughts wouldn't settle. They kept circling back to him.

The infuriating, calculating bastard who kept making my life miserable. The one who had humiliated me, tricked me, made me question every step I took at Wickem. The



one I was supposed to hate.

But tonight... something shifted.

It wasn't just the music. It was him.

I had seen him without his mask—not the golden prince, not the illusionist who played tricks with words and light, but the real Elio. And the truth of him had unraveled something inside me.

Scout clicked against my shoulder, the small bones of his body vibrating with something unreadable.

“I know,” I murmured, rolling onto my side. “It’s not supposed to feel like this.”

But it did.

And that was the most dangerous part.

Scout suddenly stiffened, then his tiny skeletal feet tapping a frantic rhythm against my shoulder before he sprang down, darting toward my office with unmistakable intent.

“What is it?” I whispered, rising to follow.

A strange energy hummed in the air, something familiar.

Scout clicked excitedly. On the shelf was a leather-bound volume. It hadn't been here before. I was certain of it. But now nestled between books I'd already sorted through, it sat waiting like it had been left for me. Only I was the only person who could enter these rooms...so who had sent it?

The skull sigil of the Fourth Council Seat was embossed on the cover—my father's seat. My inheritance. The leather felt warm beneath my fingers, pulsing, alive.

I flipped open the cover, and my breath caught.

The first page held precise but urgent handwriting:

My dearest daughter,

If you are reading this, then the wellspring has called you home despite efforts to keep you away. There is much I wish I could tell you directly, but some truths are too dangerous to commit plainly to paper.

Know that appearances deceive, and what seems like betrayal may hide loyalty, while trusted authorities may conceal deeper threats.

The answers you seek are hidden in these pages, but they must be earned carefully. Trust your instincts about magic's true nature. Watch for signs in the wellspring's song.

And remember—even the cleanest water can be forced down poisoned channels.

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With love and hope,

Father

The words blurred as I reread them, my heart hammering. Poisoned channels.

I thought of Keane's magic, of the way the shadows in his portals had spread. The way my own magic had pushed back against the wrongness in him.

This wasn't just about my father.

This was about the Council's fear of our magic. The fear of what happened when our power worked together.

I flipped through the pages and the writing looked like mundane records at first—dates, meeting notes, adjustments to warding spells—but the patterns were wrong. Too structured. As if they weren't notes at all, but something hidden within them.

Scout leaned against my wrist as I turned the pages, while the dead things whispered hints I couldn't quite catch. Between the lines of dry political proceedings, I caught glimpses of another story—one about questioned loyalties, dangerous discoveries, and a man desperately trying to protect something precious.

Dawn found me still reading, my mind spinning with half-formed theories. This book held answers. The truth about Keane's magic and what was wrong with him—or maybe what was being done to him.

The sound of movement in the hall made me close the journal, tucking it safely away. But its weight remained, pressing against my ribs like a question I wasn't yet ready to answer.

The dead things stirred uneasily, shifting at the edges of my awareness. Scout let out a sharp, urgent chitter, his tiny bones clicking in agitation.

The key to understanding all of it lay in my father's careful notes.

But first, I had to learn how to read them. Because whatever had started eighteen years ago was still in motion. And I was already part of it.

27

Marigold

I arrived early to Basic Magical Theory, using the quiet time to practice modulating my magic. After several evenings in the library with Keane—and after what happened in Combat Class—I was finally starting to get it. But using necromancy for delicate magic still felt like trying to water a garden with a fire hose.

On the desk in front of me, Scout puffed up like a tiny skeletal coach, tail curling dramatically as if bracing for either triumph or disaster as I attempted the levitation charm.

The trick, according to Dr. Reyes, was learning to access basic magical currents without letting your primary power overwhelm them. Like turning down the volume on one instrument so you could hear the rest of the orchestra.

“Just like Keane said,” I muttered, making notes. “Keep it simple.”

Ancient runes carved into the walls pulsed with soft light as other students filed in. I traced the diagrams I'd drawn in my notebook—careful notes about different types of basic magic and how they should feel when performed correctly. The technical terms still tangled in my mind, but at least now I understood what I was trying to achieve.

“Now then,” Professor Cribley said, her silver-beaded braids catching the light as she gestured. “Who can explain the fundamental principle of magical adaptation? How do we adjust our innate powers to perform standard spells?”

Hands shot up around me. Even Raven, who'd been doodling skeleton designs in her notebook, straightened with enthusiasm. I slid lower in my seat, cheeks burning. This was exactly what I'd been struggling with.

“Miss Grimley?” Professor Cribley's kind smile did nothing to ease the knot in my stomach. “Perhaps you'd like to try? I noticed you've been putting in extra hours with Dr. Reyes.”

Scout leaned against my neck, responding to my anxiety. A few students shifted away, but Raven just grinned and gave me a thumbs up.

“I...” I swallowed hard, glancing at my carefully organized notes. “Something about... adjusting power levels?” The definition I'd memorized slipped away under the pressure.

Snickers rippled through the room. Lucas shot me a sympathetic look while frantically trying to send me signals with his hands. He'd spent time helping me study, and I was already letting him down.

“Not quite.” Professor Cribley's smile dimmed slightly. “The fundamental principle states that every witch must learn to—”

A knock interrupted her. The door opened to reveal Keane, looking somehow both awkward and devastatingly gorgeous.

My heart did a traitorous little flip.

We had been meeting for tutoring on and off, and even though I was getting better at sorting magical energies, I was nowhere near getting better at sorting him. Some days, he seemed like a friend—a quiet, intense presence who made things easier to understand. Other days, he was distant, unreadable, barely acknowledging me outside our library sessions.

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It was exhausting. And frustrating. And incredibly distracting.

As Keane walked past, I became painfully aware of how close he was. The scent of ink and fall air clung to him, something crisp and clean that made my stomach tighten in a way I absolutely refused to think about.

When he opened a small portal to deliver a message to Professor Cribbley, I couldn't help noticing the wrongness at its edges. It bled into the surrounding energy, a dark vein threading through otherwise clean silver magic.

While the professor read her message, Keane lingered near my table, apparently fascinated by the room's architecture. But I noticed how his eyes kept darting to my open textbook, where I'd highlighted key passages about magical adaptation.

Another tiny portal opened next to my hand, no bigger than a playing card. Through it, I glimpsed neat handwriting:

Think of cleaning supplies—you don't use industrial strength cleaners on delicate surfaces. Magic needs similar careful handling.

I barely stopped myself from rolling my eyes. Even when he was helping, he was annoyingly cryptic.

The portal's edges flickered with that same wrongness, but when our magic connected through it, everything felt clean and natural again. Scout relaxed slightly, seeming to confirm my observation.

“It’s like...” I raised my hand when Professor Cribley resumed her lecture. “How you need different levels of cleaning solution for different materials? Some tasks need full strength, but others require a gentler touch?”

“Exactly!” Professor Cribley beamed. “An unusual analogy, but perfectly accurate. Every witch must learn to modulate their primary power, adjusting it to suit different magical tasks. Even the strongest magic must sometimes be applied delicately.”

When I glanced back, Keane was gone—but another small portal delivered a note:

Your hard work is showing. Library later to review resonance theory for the Trials?

A warm thrill spread through me, followed quickly by frustration.

Why was Keane helping me? Why did he go from cold and distant to quietly supportive in ways no one else saw? Was he being kind or was this just another part of whatever game the heirs played?

“Someone’s got an admirer,” Raven whispered, wiggling her eyebrows. Boris the beetle clicked his legs in what seemed like agreement.

“He’s just being nice,” I muttered, but the warmth in my chest betrayed me.

“The Third Heir doesn’t do ‘just nice’ with anyone,” Lucas observed quietly. “Did you see how long he stayed? Usually he’s in and out before anyone notices him.”

I tried to focus on Professor Cribley’s lecture but my mind kept drifting—between the wrongness in Keane’s portals, and the way he had quietly, unobtrusively helped me again.

Scout had curled up next to the spot where the portal had appeared, his tiny skeletal



form managing to look both smug and concerned.

And unfortunately, I knew exactly how he felt.

Sleep wasn't coming. Even Scout had given up trying to soothe me, curled in a skeletal ball on my pillow while I stared at my open magical theory textbook. The words blurred together, refusing to stick. My mind kept circling the same two thoughts—Keane's magic isn't right, and I shouldn't care this much.

Finally, I threw off my covers. Maybe some tea would help. The royal dorm's kitchen was just downstairs—one of those inexplicable luxuries that came with being an heir. I'd barely used it, still not quite believing I was allowed.

Padding barefoot down the dark steps, my oversized sleep shirt brushing my knees, I instinctively extended my magic the way Keane had taught me—soft, careful; sensing instead of overwhelming. The kitchen ahead glowed with years of accumulated magic—happiness, comfort, connection. But Keane's presence inside was different. That now-familiar corruption threaded through his magic, dark veins running beneath the surface.

He stood at the counter, measuring cocoa powder into two mugs with his usual precise, controlled movements. He wore dark pajama pants and a faded t-shirt, something that made him look softer than usual. More approachable. Wisp flickered briefly visible beside him, her blue light casting shifting shadows before fading again.

“Couldn't sleep either?” I asked softly.

He didn't startle, though I hadn't made any noise. “I heard your steps.” At my confused look, he added, “Portal users develop good spatial awareness. Hard to sleep some nights because of it.”

“Is that why you’re making hot chocolate at...” I squinted at the clock, “three in the morning?”

“Thought you might join me,” he said, not quite meeting my eyes. “I saw all those theory books you were hauling up to your room earlier. Figured you might need a break.” A faint blush colored his cheeks.

I should not find that attractive. And yet.

He handed me a mug, and as our fingers brushed, something happened. A pulse of magic passed between us, and suddenly the corruption in his portals didn’t feel so distant or theoretical anymore—it felt like something I wanted to chase out of him, to fix.

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My magic surged toward his instinctively, pushing back the darkness for just a second.

Keane inhaled sharply, his hand lingering longer than necessary before he pulled away. The moment stretched between us, charged with something I didn't understand and definitely wasn't ready to name.

"We used to make hot chocolate too," I said quickly, trying to ignore the heat still tingling along my skin. "But nothing this fancy."

"My mother's recipe." His voice softened around the edges. "She said chocolate fixes most things, but magical chocolate fixes everything—especially study fatigue."

"Tell that to my Magical Theory grade."

The joke slipped out automatically—my usual deflection when things got too real. But instead of pulling away, Keane smiled.

"I failed my uncle's pre-Wickem magical theory assessments." He said it like it didn't matter, but the tension in his shoulders told a different story. "My uncle was... displeased."

'Displeased' sounded like an understatement. Wisp flickered back into view, curling against Keane's leg in what seemed like a protective gesture.

He hesitated, then sighed. "Spent every night that summer in the library, studying with Wisp. Not because I cared about the grade. Because I couldn't stand

disappointing anyone else.”

I hesitated, unsure how to respond. His struggles were different from mine, but the pressure to prove ourselves—that was something I understood.

“I had to work through high school—we barely had enough money to make ends meet—so there wasn’t much time for studying. But—”

“But you kept trying.” Something in his voice made me look up. Keane’s blue eyes met mine, filled with understanding instead of pity.

I swallowed. This was the most honest conversation we’d ever had.

“Some days I still feel like I’m playing dress-up,” I admitted, gesturing at my theory notes peeking out of my bag. “Like someone’s going to realize I don’t belong here.”

“You belong here more than most of us.” He took a sip of his chocolate, considering. “I see how hard you’re working to understand everything properly. That matters more than being born into it.”

Something about the way he said it made my throat tighten. I wanted to believe him.

He winced suddenly, pressing two fingers to his temple. I noticed the shadows around him seemed to deepen, tendrils of that strange darkness pulsing outward.

“Are you okay?” I asked, reaching out but stopping short of touching him.

“Just a headache.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. “The stabilization sessions with my uncle have been... more frequent lately.”

“Stabilization sessions?”

He nodded, looking away. “Portal magic can be unstable. Has been since my parents died. Uncle’s therapy helps keep it under control.” His fingers traced a pattern on the counter, something that looked almost like a warding symbol. “Without it, well... things get dangerous.”

The darkness at the edges of his magic shifted, almost reacting to his words. I studied it, focusing on the way it moved—not like a natural shadow, but something oily, invasive.

“Is that what the therapy’s for?” I asked carefully. “To fix the... darkness?”

His head snapped up, eyes widening. “You can see it?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “When your portals flicker, there’s something wrong in them.”

He tried to open another portal to show me something—a memory of his mother, I thought—but this time the darkness at the edges was unmistakable. Wisp whined softly and Scout pressed against my hand in warning. Keane closed the portal quickly, rubbing his temples again.

“Uncle says it’s just part of the process,” he said, his voice tight. “The treatments work. They have to.”

There was something he wasn’t saying, something beneath the careful words. The shadows around him seemed almost sentient, pulling at him in ways that made my necromancy recoil. Whatever these “treatments” were, they didn’t seem to be helping.

But before I could push further, he changed the subject.

“What about you?” he asked, his voice deliberately lighter. “What was life like before all this?”

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Instead of pressing, I pulled out my phone, showing him my wallpaper—Mom and me wearing aprons, grinning after our first big contract. “Before everything changed,” I said softly.

Keane studied the picture for a long moment. Long enough that I felt it.

We stayed there until the sky started to lighten, sharing stories of the people we’d been before Wickem. He told me about learning portal magic in his family’s library, and about Wisp appearing when his parents died—like he’d found a friend when he needed one most. I told him about Mom’s cleaning business, and about the weird things that used to happen around me that suddenly made sense when I’d come here.

Between stories, I kept noticing how he’d pause, squint slightly, like fighting against pain. Each time, the shadows in his magic would pulse stronger. If his uncle’s “therapy” was supposed to be fixing his portals, it was doing a crappy job.

And when I finally stood to leave, I hesitated, my fingers tightening around my empty mug. Something protective and fierce welled inside me—I didn’t just want to understand his magic anymore.

I wanted to save him.

28

Marigold

Professor Undergrove’s office felt like stepping into another century—or maybe one

of those stuffy antique shops where everything costs more than my mom's monthly rent. Dark wooden shelves lined the walls, crammed with ancient texts and trinkets that set my collection-obsessed fingers twitching. A silver skull—larger than the pin on his lapel but clearly matching—sat on his desk beside neat stacks of papers. Scout immediately perked up, sensing something about the skull that I couldn't quite read.

“Ah, Miss Grimley.” He looked up from his grading, gesturing to the chair across from him. “I was hoping you'd stop by before the trials.”

I settled into the leather chair, trying not to fidget. “You said you knew my father?”

“James was among the most talented colleagues I've had the privilege to work with.” He touched the skull pin absently. “Brilliant mind, especially when it came to theoretical applications of necromancy. The traditional Council families never quite understood his approach.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your father saw connections others missed. He believed necromancy could be used for more than just commanding the dead—that it offered insight into the very nature of magic itself.” Undergrove's eyes grew distant. “His final research... well.” He cleared his throat. “That was a long time ago.”

“Was he really working with vampires?” The question burst out before I could stop it.

“Your father,” Undergrove said carefully, “was one of the few who truly understood vampire magic. He studied how they corrupted life force, how they turned clean magic sticky and wrong.” His hands trembled slightly as he closed his office door. “That's why the accusations were so absurd to those who knew him. James spent his life trying to protect witches from vampire corruption, not help them spread it.”



“Then why did everyone believe he betrayed us?”

“Because he discovered something about how vampires interact with wellspring energy. Something that made powerful people very uncomfortable.” Undergrove’s voice dropped lower. “After that attack in Seattle... well, the patterns he documented are becoming harder to ignore.”

Undergrove’s expression tightened.

“Your father,” he said carefully, “was many things. But a traitor?” He shook his head. “The evidence at his trial was... convenient. Too convenient, some might say.”

Scout chittered softly, and the silver skull on the desk seemed to gleam in response.

“What was he researching?” I asked. “Before he...”

“Something about ancient magic. The old ways.” Undergrove’s voice dropped lower. “He spent hours in the restricted archives, studying texts about magical resonance and energy patterns. Said he’d discovered something vital about how magic actually worked.” He paused, choosing his words with obvious care. “The Council didn’t appreciate his questions about traditional practices.”

“Did he leave any notes? Research materials?”

“Nothing that was ever found.” But something in his tone made me think there was more to that story. “Though perhaps that’s for the best. Sometimes knowledge can be... dangerous.”

The dead things in the walls stirred uneasily, responding to something in his manner.

“Professor,” I started, but he held up a hand.

“I’ve already said more than I should.” He adjusted his jacket, the skull pin glinting. “Focus on your trials, Miss Grimley. Show them what a necromancer can really do.” His smile held sadness. “Your father would be proud of how far you’ve come already.”

As I stood to leave, he added quietly, “Be careful who you trust with questions about the past. Not everyone appreciated your father’s... innovative thinking.”

I paused at the door. “Professor? Do you think he was really guilty?”

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Undergrove was silent for a long moment, staring at the silver skull. “I think,” he said finally, “that truth is rarely what the Council claims it to be.” He met my eyes. “Good luck in your trials, Miss Grimley. And remember—sometimes the dead know more than the living are willing to admit.”

Walking back through the castle’s ancient halls, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Undergrove had been trying to tell me something important without actually saying it. Scout pressed close, clearly unsettled by whatever he’d sensed in that office.

The trials suddenly felt more significant than just proving my magical ability. I was walking in my father’s footsteps—and something about those footsteps had frightened people in power.

I just hoped I was ready for whatever that might mean.

The library had become my refuge, especially with Third Week Trials starting Monday. Professor Undergrove’s words from this afternoon still echoed in my mind: Your father saw connections others missed.

Was that why the Council had really executed him? Because he discovered something they wanted to keep hidden?

Scout helped me trace the magical currents flowing through the library walls, our detection skills growing stronger with practice. The pure energy from the wellspring flowed clean and strong here, but we’d found patches of that same sticky wrongness I’d noticed elsewhere. The dead things in the walls avoided those spots, their whispers growing uncertain when we got too close.

I tried to focus on my notes, memorizing the diagrams I'd need for the Trials. But my thoughts kept circling back—to Undergrove's careful hints, to my father's research, to the growing weight of everything I didn't yet understand.

And, unhelpfully, to Keane.

Our evening study sessions in this corner had become oddly comforting over the past weeks. What had started as reluctant tutoring had shifted into something quieter, more companionable. I'd find myself listening for his footsteps, for the soft whisper of a portal opening nearby.

"Can't sleep again?" Keane's quiet voice made me jump.

I looked up to see him stepping through a closing portal, and something in his appearance made me pause. His movements were more careful than usual, his eyes slightly unfocused. The corruption in his magic seemed darker tonight, spreading like ink through water—wrong, unnatural.

"Just trying to understand all this before Monday." I gestured at my open book, studying him with growing concern. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," he said, but his voice lacked conviction. "Just came from my uncle's." He left it at that, as if it explained everything.

The stabilization sessions. He'd mentioned them before—briefly, reluctantly. Now I wondered what they really entailed.

He moved closer, but I noticed how he braced himself against the bookshelf for a moment, as if gathering strength. Wisp flickered near his feet, more unstable than usual, while Scout tensed against my palm.

“I saw your work in class today.” His voice stayed low, controlled despite whatever strain he was under. “You’re making real progress.”

I exhaled, half relieved, half unsettled by how quickly he’d changed the subject. “Thanks to your help.”

“I was looking for you,” he admitted, his careful composure slipping just slightly.

My heart stuttered. “Through your portals?”

His lips parted slightly, hesitation flickering across his face. “They have a way of finding what matters.”

The quiet admission hung between us. Whatever his uncle’s sessions involved, they hadn’t stopped him from seeking me out afterward. That meant something, though I wasn’t sure what.

Instead of continuing, Keane lifted a hand, opening a small portal beside us. Through it, I could see the night sky—but not as it appeared from the library windows. This view was impossibly close, like we could reach out and touch the stars themselves. The edges of the portal shimmered, cleaner than I’d seen from him tonight.

“There’s a meteor shower,” he said, offering his hand. “You’ve been studying for hours. Maybe a short break would help?”

I hesitated, but only for a moment. I should have said no. I should have gone back to my notes, to my father’s secrets, to the safer distance between us.

Instead, I took his offered hand.

His fingers curled around mine, warm and steady, and where our magic touched,

everything clicked into place. No darkness, no wrongness, just that same perfect harmony I'd felt before—the way magic was meant to be. I felt him relax slightly, some of the tension easing from his shoulders.

We emerged on one of Wickem's highest towers, far above the library's peaked roof. The stars stretched endless above us, silver-bright against the deep velvet sky. The first meteor streaked across the horizon, leaving a trail of white fire in its wake. Scout and Wisp moved to the tower's edge, while we stood in silence.

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

"Yes."

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When I glanced over, he wasn't looking at the sky.

The realization sent warmth curling in my stomach, spreading through my limbs. The quiet moments we'd shared over these weeks—the brush of hands passing books, the shared smiles when I mastered a difficult concept, the way he always seemed to know when I needed encouragement—they'd all been leading to this moment.

Keane's gaze dipped to my lips for the barest fraction of a second before he caught himself. I saw the moment he tried to stop this.

He failed.

His lips met mine, and my heart fluttered.

His kiss was gentle, careful—like he was afraid I might shatter. Or maybe he was the one who might break. My hands curled into his shirt, pulling him closer instead of pulling away. If there was hesitation in him, I wanted to erase it, to tell him that whatever this was, I wasn't running.

The dead things in the tower walls sighed happily, their whispers full of ancient memories of other kisses shared beneath these stars.

When we finally broke apart, his forehead rested against mine, breath uneven, pulse unsteady.

I should have said something, but my thoughts were a tangled mess—because I hadn't just kissed Keane. I had wanted to.

His fingers stayed tangled with mine, the warmth between us undeniable, and yet—

The pure energy flowing through our joined magic only made the corruption in his other spells more alarming. Whatever these stabilization sessions were supposed to accomplish, they seemed to be doing the opposite. But I didn't know how to tell him that without driving him away.

Undergrove's words surfaced again. Your father saw connections others missed. Had my father discovered something about magic itself? Something the Council hadn't wanted to be revealed?

"I should take you back to your studies," Keane murmured. But he didn't move.

"Probably." I didn't move either.

Not yet. Not while the stars were still falling, and his hand was still in mine, and our magic still hummed with something unspoken between us.

So we stayed. Watching meteors paint silver trails across the sky while we pretended we were still studying. He corrected me when I fumbled the details of a magical equation, his voice dipping into something lower, softer.

Neither of us let go.

29

Keane

She'd been staring at the same page for ten minutes, her brow furrowed in that way that made me want to smooth away her worries. Wisp pressed against my leg as I approached her table in the library, my familiar's form flickering slightly with shared



anxiety.

“Lost in thought?” I asked, sliding into the chair beside her. The after effects of my last stability session still lingered, making my temples throb, but I pushed the pain aside. Today wasn’t about Uncle’s therapy or Council politics. Today was just for us.

“Just struggling with the theory.” She closed the book with a sigh. Scout greeted Wisp, their forms intertwining in a way that made something in my chest ache. My familiar had never connected with anyone like this before.

I glanced around to ensure we were alone before letting my fingers brush hers on the table. “Then maybe we should study somewhere else.”

Her pulse jumped beneath my touch. “What?”

“Silverpine Pages in town. It’s warded, and they have better coffee than the dining hall.” Heat crept up my neck as I traced patterns on her hand, remembering how she’d felt in my arms under the stars. “Plus, I found some old texts there that might help with your theory work.”

“So this is just about studying?” The teasing note in her voice made my heart stutter.

“The town’s actually perfect,” I said quietly, fighting the urge to pull her closer. “Somewhere we don’t have to worry about Cyrus or Elio walking in.” Somewhere I could pretend we were just two people finding each other, not heirs.

I opened a portal, focusing hard to keep the edges stable. The familiar interior of the bookstore shimmered into view, and for a moment the pain in my head spiked—a reminder that I needed another therapy session soon. Wisp’s form wavered, but I forced the portal steady. Control mattered more than comfort.

“Come on,” I said, offering my hand more boldly now that we were hidden between the stacks. “Just for an hour.”

Her fingers slid into mine like they belonged there. The simple contact made my magic flow more naturally, as if she anchored it. Scout chirped excitedly, already scrambling toward the portal while Wisp pressed closer to my side.

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Silverpine Pages folded around us, quiet and familiar. Dust motes drifted in the golden afternoon light, softening the edges of worn leather chairs and high shelves. It felt like a place half-remembered—warmth clinging to the silence like a memory that hadn't faded yet.

“The owner's a retired professor,” I explained, leading her to my favorite corner nook. It felt important somehow, sharing this piece of my world with her. “She stocks some interesting magical theory texts in the back room for students.”

“It's perfect,” she breathed, taking in the atmosphere. Her eyes sparkled with quiet wonder, and I had to look away before I did something stupid. Scout was already exploring while Wisp curled up nearby, more relaxed than I'd seen him in weeks.

When I returned with our drinks—spiced chai for her; I'd noticed her eyeing it at breakfast—the pain in my temples had faded slightly.

“How did you know?” she asked, surprised by the drink.

I couldn't quite hide my smile. “You always smell the chai at breakfast but never take any. I figured you wanted to try it.” My hand found hers again, grounding me as another headache threatened.

She stared at me like I had just handed her something far more important than tea. Then she blushed behind her mug, and suddenly, the trials, Uncle, the corruption in my portals—none of it mattered.

“So,” I said, though I kept getting distracted by the way she licked a stray drop from

her lip, “the problem isn’t with your power—it’s with how you’re accessing it. Most witches pull magic through themselves, but necromancers are different. You’re more like... a conductor.”

I sketched diagrams with my free hand, but my focus kept slipping. The scent of chai mixed with the warmth of her beside me, and my thoughts strayed to the way her lips had felt against mine.

“Marigold?”

She startled, clearly as lost in watching me as I was in watching her. “Sorry, I was...”

“Distracted?” I couldn’t help smirking, my voice dipping lower. She was close enough that I could see the freckles dusting her collarbone, the rise and fall of her breath.

“You’re impossible,” she muttered, but she didn’t pull away when I leaned in and kissed her softly.

The next hour blurred—theoretical discussions mixed with quiet laughter, stolen glances, the occasional brush of fingers that sent warmth curling low in my stomach. Scout and Wisp played between the shelves while I pretended my head wasn’t pounding.

Then, as she traced the edge of her book thoughtfully, she frowned. “With all these vampire attacks lately...” She hesitated before meeting my gaze. “Is Wyckhaven protected like the college is? With the wellspring and wards?”

I exhaled, sitting back. “The wellspring’s magic extends out, but it’s not as strong in town as it is on campus. That’s why there are extra protections in place.” I glanced toward the door, lowering my voice. “If a vampire breached the town, warning alarms

would go off. People would have time to retreat inside before the Guard responded.”

Her fingers tightened slightly on her mug. “So it’s happened before?”

“Not in Wyckhaven.” I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “But with the attacks lately, everyone’s more on edge.”

She absorbed that, nodding, but I saw the tension in her shoulders. I wanted to reach out, but what reassurance could I offer? That nothing would happen? That I wouldn’t let anything happen to her?

Walking her back through my portal to campus, I checked carefully before pulling her close for one last kiss. Reality pressed in again—Uncle would be furious if he knew, the trials were coming, and something dark was spreading through my magic. But her touch still felt like coming home.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For the chai. And the help.”

“Anytime.” I hesitated, brushing her cheek, wishing I could tell her everything. About how much worse the headaches were getting. About the true nature of Uncle’s therapy. I’d told her about the stabilization sessions, but not what they really cost me—how each one left me more hollow, more wrong. How scared I was of what was happening to my magic. Instead, I just asked, “Maybe we could... study there again sometime?”

“I’d like that.” She squeezed my hand once before letting go.

As I watched her walk away, Wisp flickering anxiously at my feet, my magic wavered, edges of the portals turning ragged. The therapy would help—it always did—but being with her made me wonder if stability had to hurt quite so much. For a few precious hours, I’d gotten to be just a boy taking a girl he liked on a date. No

Council politics. No Uncle's harsh lessons. No constant fear of losing control.

I just hoped I could hold onto that feeling when the headaches got bad again. When Uncle's help left me too drained to pretend everything was fine.

I just hoped I could hold onto that feeling when everything else was turning dark.

30

Marigold

The arena hummed with layered magic, old enchantments woven into the stone beneath my feet. Protective sigils flared along the edges, marking boundaries that had existed for centuries. Even the air felt different here—charged with expectation, thick with the weight of generations of witches who had stood in this exact spot, proving themselves.

And now it was my turn.

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The observation box loomed above, high-backed chairs filled with the most powerful figures in our world. I didn't have to look to know they were watching—waiting. Their scrutiny pressed against my skin like a second layer of cold. Lord Raynoff sat among them, expression carved from stone. Cyrus stood rigid beside him, arms crossed, his gaze fixed on me. He hadn't looked away once.

I forced my shoulders back. I wasn't here for them.

Scout pressed closer to my collar, sensing my resolve. The dead things beneath the trial grounds whispered encouragement, old voices who had watched too many students rise and fall here. I wouldn't be one of the ones who fell.

Professor Rivera strode to the center of the field, his gaze sweeping over the gathered freshmen. "Each of you will face an individual trial suited to your abilities," he announced, his voice cutting through the morning chill. "Step forward when your name is called." He glanced down at his list. "Marigold Grimley."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Of course I would be first.

Cyrus tilted his head slightly, as if daring me to fail.

I ignored him and stepped into the trial circle.

Professor Undergrove's voice echoed in my mind. Your father saw connections others missed. What had he meant? And why had it felt like a warning?

The challenge crystal flared to life in front of me. "Generate controlled flame."

A test of magical adaptation. A challenge that should be impossible for someone like me.

Heat prickled at my skin as I raised my hands, summoning power the way Dr. Reyes had drilled into me. I reached for the flow of magic—not death, not summoning, but something lighter, something—

The fire flickered once, then died.

Murmurs from the crowd. A flicker of something amused in Lord Raynoff's gaze. He wasn't surprised. He was expecting this.

No. Not like this.

I closed my eyes, shutting out the whispers, the weight of expectation pressing down on me. Think. Magic follows intent. Magic follows purpose.

I wasn't a fire witch. I wasn't like Cyrus or the others. But I understood how magic moved, how it wove itself into the world.

Magic follows connections.

The dead things understood fire. They had watched it consume buildings, seen it flicker in hearths, danced in its embers.

I reached for that memory, for the way heat had felt against their long-gone bones. The wellspring's energy rose to meet me, not fighting, not resisting—merging.

A flame flared to life in my palm, cold at first, then warming, twisting into something that wasn't just fire, wasn't just necromancy, but a harmony of both.



The murmurs in the crowd stopped.

Even the Council members sat forward slightly.

I turned my hand, letting the flame shift color—golden first, then edged with silver, then something deep and midnight-dark. Not the blue of Cyrus’s flames, not the illusions of Elio’s magic, but something entirely my own.

Cyrus’s smirk vanished.

The senior student hesitated, then nodded. “Trial complete.”

I exhaled slowly, the flame vanishing between my fingers. I had done it.

And I had seen the moment Lord Raynoff’s expression flickered—not in anger, but something colder. Calculation.

As I left the trial grounds, stepping past the line of waiting students, I let my gaze meet Cyrus’s for half a second. His fire had burned against mine in combat drills, had raged hotter when we fought, but in that moment, I saw something else in his eyes.

Not just anger. Something closer to fear.

Cyrus

The trial arena smelled of cold stone and scorched magic, the September air thick with tension. Protective wards shimmered overhead, pulsing with magic older than any of us. This was the Heirs' Challenge—the moment where we proved, beyond any doubt, why bloodlines mattered.

I rolled my shoulders, eyeing the others. Elio stood with his usual air of detached amusement, illusions curling like wisps of smoke at his fingertips. Keane's stance was unreadable, but his gaze drifted toward Marigold too often. And then there was her—standing at the edge of the circle, shadows shifting around her feet, the weight of every Council member's scrutiny pressing down on her.

And yet, she stood tall. Defiant.

I clenched my fists, heat coiling beneath my skin. My flames had already reacted to her presence, surging to that impossible shade of blue I had only seen twice before—the night of the Welcome Ceremony, and again in Combat Class.

That was the second time our magic had merged.

Now we were being forced into a third.

“All heirs, step forward,” Professor Rivera commanded. “Today, you will demonstrate why the Council seats pass through bloodlines. Why power requires control.”

We moved into position—fire, illusion, portals, and death magic forming a circle of raw potential. I caught the flicker of a smirk on Marigold’s lips, like she already knew what was coming. Like she could feel it too.

The Council watched with sharp, assessing gazes. They had hated what happened at the Wellspring. And if our magic blended again, if it resonated the way it had before—

That would mean it wasn’t a fluke. It was something inevitable.

“The task is simple,” Rivera continued, his Shroud Guard tattoo pulsing faintly. “Four elemental constructs, each designed to counter your individual magics. Only by working together can you overcome them.”

The arena shifted, stones groaning as the constructs materialized—beasts of pure elemental force. Fire, shadow, lightning, and raw magic, each built to push us beyond our limits.

“Begin.”

The fire beast struck first, a swirling inferno that should have responded to me alone. I met it with my own flames, willing them to burn hotter, brighter—

And then it happened.

The moment Marigold moved, my fire reacted. Not just to the threat—but to her.

The flames surged forward, not red, not gold, but that same unnatural blue. The same color that had flickered through them at the Wellspring. The same color I’d told myself was a fluke. A trick of the light.

It wasn't a trick. It was happening again.

My magic didn't just burn—it reached. Not for destruction, but for something else. Like it knew where it belonged.

Elio's illusions wrapped around her shadows, turning something intangible into something deadly. I saw the moment he felt it too—his usual arrogance slipping into something dangerously close to awe.

Keane's portals should have wavered—but they didn't. Not this time. The silver edges gleamed sharp and perfect, fluid as breathing.

For a perfect moment, we moved as one—

Fire and death and illusion and space bending together into something that shouldn't be possible. Something the Council had tried to prevent.

The constructs never stood a chance.

Elio's illusions splintered the shadow beast, breaking it apart before it could reform. My flames consumed the fire creature completely, but instead of vanishing into the heat, Marigold's magic shaped it, twisting the inferno into something controlled, something wielded. Keane's portals worked in seamless synchrony, directing the lightning beast's attacks against itself.

It was effortless. Terrifyingly effortless.

And then something shifted.

I felt it before I saw it. Something off. Something unstable.

Keane's portals, once fluid and clean, twisted. Not just a flicker. Not just hesitation.

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Something in them bled. Darkness seeped into what should have been silver light, like ink spreading through water. Like corruption.

“Keane!” Marigold’s voice held more than just warning. She reached for him instinctively, her magic brushing his, and for a second, his power stabilized.

But only for a second.

I snapped my focus back to my flames, willing them to burn hotter, brighter—

And they refused.

They weren’t mine anymore. Not entirely.

I could feel Marigold’s necromancy woven into them, could feel the pull of something larger than us, something ancient.

Too late.

The lightning construct struck Keane hard, his magic shattering for half a breath. His hands trembled as he forced another portal open, but the corruption in it was unmistakable now. Dark veins spread through what should have been clean silver light.

Wrong. That was wrong. Keane never lost control.

Elio’s illusions snapped into place, masking the error, while Marigold’s necromancy

surged to fill the gap in our defenses.

But I wasn't the only one who had seen it.

My father's fingers curled slightly against the armrest. Not anger. Recognition. He had seen this before. He just hadn't wanted to admit it.

The Lightfords exchanged a glance. Lady Lightford whispered something to her husband, and his jaw tightened, his usual smirk gone.

And Alstone?

Alstone was already looking at Keane.

Not with satisfaction. Not with concern. But with barely restrained fury.

Because whatever had just happened, it meant something was wrong with his methods. And that was unacceptable.

We finished the trial as expected, our combined power overwhelming the constructs. But that moment of perfect harmony was gone, replaced by something darker. More dangerous.

"What the hell was that?" I demanded as we left the field. My flames still burned blue where they brushed against Marigold's lingering power.

Keane straightened, but his careful mask couldn't hide how Shadow pressed anxiously against his legs. "Nothing."

Liar.

I knew how Keane moved, how he fought. And that hesitation, that corruption threading through his magic—that wasn't him.

My father's presence weighed heavy from the stands, demanding control, demanding perfection. But for the first time, I wasn't sure control was the answer.

Not when all our magic had worked together so naturally, before the darkness crept in.

Not when my flames still burned that pure blue, remembering how right it felt when we stopped fighting each other.

Not when Keane—the most disciplined of us all—was being consumed by something that felt fundamentally wrong.

As we walked off the field, the whispers started about how right we'd looked together, before the darkness took hold.

Ember let out a low trill, fire flickering blue at the edges. Still wrong. Still shifting. I clenched my jaw. Everything was moving—fast, sideways—and we didn't get a say in any of it.



Keane

The moment the trial ended, I knew something was wrong.

Not just because of the whispers in the stands, or the lingering hum of magic in my veins, but because of the way my uncle watched me.

Lord Alstone never displayed overt displeasure. He never needed to. The weight of his gaze was enough. It dissected and decided before I could even open my mouth. I had known that gaze since I was ten years old—since the moment my parents died, and he took me into his control.

Wisp curled around my wrist, her shifting form flickering between solidity and smoke. She was reacting to me—to my magic.

The magic had steadied during the trial, stronger, cleaner than it had been in years. Because of Marigold. Because when our magic worked together, mine felt whole.

And that was a problem.

I forced my expression blank as I approached the Council's observation box. My uncle had already risen from his seat, hands folded behind his back, every inch the picture of authority. To the outside world, he was the composed and respected Lord Alstone. To me, he was the architect of every carefully measured punishment meant to mold me into something useful. Something compliant.

And today, I had failed him.

No. Not failed. Just... faltered.

A flicker of instability in my portals. A breath too long. A hesitation that shouldn't have existed. But slight didn't matter when you bore the Alstone name. When your family's magic was supposed to be unshakeable.

By the time I reached him, my hands were steady, my face carefully neutral. "Uncle."

He studied me for a long moment, expression unreadable. Then, finally, he spoke. "You are slipping."

My jaw tightened. "It was a momentary miscalculation."

His gaze sharpened. "Your magic was unstable. Again."

The last word was like a knife slipping between my ribs. He hadn't been at the Welcome Ceremony. He hadn't seen that combat class. But somehow, he already knew.

"I will correct it," I said quickly, but his silence stretched between us, pressing heavier with every second.

"You said that last time."

The breath I took was slow, controlled. "It won't happen again."

His expression didn't change, but I knew what was coming next. The stability sessions.

They had been growing more frequent since the start of term. I had never questioned them—not since my parents' deaths left my magic erratic and dangerous. But lately,

the sessions felt different. Harder.

The aftermath was always worse than the session itself. The nausea, the headaches, the sense of something pressing against the edges of my mind. And every time, it took longer to recover. To remember how portals were supposed to feel.

I had always assumed that meant I was the problem. That I needed more control, more correction. But now...

Now I wasn't so sure.

Twice now, Marigold's magic had made mine steadier than any therapy session ever had. As if my power wasn't broken, just suppressed. As if the very thing my uncle insisted was dangerous—the thing the Council feared—was the only thing that actually made me whole.

Lord Alstone placed a hand on my shoulder, a gesture that might have looked fatherly to anyone watching. To me, it felt like a collar tightening.

“Come,” he said. “We’ll discuss your progress.”

Progress. That was what he called it.

I nodded once, silent, and followed him toward the tunnels beneath the Council chambers—the part of Wickem no one visited unless they had to.

Wisp let out a soft, uneasy whimper in my mind.

I didn't soothe her.

Because, for the first time, I wasn't sure I believed my own reassurances.

33

Marigold

I couldn't sleep.

The wellspring's power still hummed through my veins hours after the trials, but that wasn't what kept me awake. My mind tangled between what had happened on the field—the way my magic had burned in perfect sync with the others, the flicker of realization in Cyrus's eyes—and what had happened before.

Keane's kisses.

We had stolen time together before the trials—his lips had been warm against mine, hesitant at first, then deepening into something certain. He had taken me into town, away from the others, where we could just be. But as soon as we returned to Wickem, he had pulled away, keeping a careful distance whenever we weren't alone.

And then, after the trials, his uncle had called him away.

Scout chittered softly from his perch on my bedside table, picking up on my restlessness. I exhaled and pushed back the covers. Maybe watching the mountains from the common room would help settle me. Maybe I'd stop feeling like something

was unraveling just out of sight.

I wasn't surprised to find Keane already there, standing at the window.

Wisp flickered at his feet, her form shifting between solid and spectral, never fully settling. The way Keane stood—shoulders tense, hands curled into loose fists—wasn't right. His magic pulsed erratically around him, tiny rifts opening and closing like nervous tics.

"Can't sleep?" I asked softly.

He turned, and the look in his eyes made my breath catch. Shadows lingered beneath them, his expression tight. Something had happened after the trials when he walked away with his uncle. I'd seen the way he flinched when his uncle touched him.

"Too much on my mind," he murmured. His voice was quiet, but it carried the weight of something unspoken.

The space between us felt charged. Scout scampered to join Wisp by the window while I moved closer, drawn by that same pull I'd felt before the trials. The same pull I had felt every time I was near him.

"The way our magic worked together today..." he started, voice low.

I swallowed, watching the way his hands clenched like he was bracing for something. "Was that all it was?" The words slipped out before I could stop them. "Just magic?"

His jaw tightened. Another portal flickered to life at his side, the edges darker than they should be, unsteady. "Marigold..."

I wanted him to say it. I needed him to say it.

“About what happened before the trials...” His voice was rough, like he was forcing the words out. “It doesn’t change anything. I still want this—I still want you.”

My breath hitched. Scout clicked excitedly, and Wisp’s form brightened, flickering silver for a brief moment. The air between us felt fragile, on the verge of breaking apart or snapping into something inevitable.

Keane lifted a hand, brushing his fingers lightly against my cheek, the touch familiar now after our stolen moments together. But tonight, there was tension in it, something strained beneath the warmth. His magic trembled at the edges, flickering unstable.

My breath caught.

Wisp pressed closer to him, stabilizing, and for the first time since I had walked in, his magic stilled.

“Well, isn’t this cozy?”

The moment shattered.

We sprang apart as Cyrus’s voice cut through the room. He stood in the doorway, flames curling around his fingers, Ember’s wings casting golden light that made everything feel too exposed. The temperature spiked instantly.

Cyrus’s gaze moved between us, sharp and assessing. His smirk was in place, but it didn’t reach his eyes. His fingers flexed, and the flames around his hands burned just a little too hot.

Keane tensed beside me, but he didn’t step away. His posture was braced, guarded—not against me, but against Cyrus.

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Cyrus tilted his head, his eyes narrowing. His attention flicked between Keane's magic, still unsteady despite Wisp's presence, and the careful way he stood, as if he were hiding something. As if he were weaker than he should be.

"Having trouble sleeping?" His tone was casual, but there was something beneath it. Something sharp.

"Just restless after the trials," I said quickly. Too quickly.

Cyrus's gaze snapped to mine, something flickering in his expression—something that looked too close to recognition. His magic flared for half a second, his flames flickering blue. His smirk deepened, but there was tension in it, like he had just realized something he didn't want to admit.

"Right." His flames curled tighter around his hands, restless. Unsettled. "Because that's all this is. Just trial aftermath."

But the way he said it sent something cold down my spine. Like he wasn't talking about tonight at all.

The temperature in the room spiked. Cyrus lingered for another breath, his gaze flicking back to Keane before finally turning and stalking away.

Keane's expression had gone carefully blank, but I knew him well enough now to see through it. Wisp pressed against him protectively, despite her increasingly unstable form

I hesitated, then reached out, catching his wrist before he could move away. “Keane, if it’s not that you’re pulling away from me... then what is it?”

He didn’t answer.

Just looked at me for a long moment, something fractured and unreadable in his expression, before slipping away into the shadows.

I let him go, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very, very wrong. The corruption around him wasn’t just present—it was fighting.

Scout chittered in concern, pressing close against my shoulder.

After Keane left, I went back to my rooms, but sleep was impossible.

I sat on the balcony, staring at the stars. I had always loved these quiet hours, when the world was still and the dead things whispered softer, when the weight of the world didn’t feel quite so crushing. But tonight, I couldn’t settle. The night air felt too sharp, too electric.

Keane had told me the trials didn’t change anything—that he still wanted this, wanted me. But something was wrong. Something his uncle had done. He wouldn’t talk about it, and that terrified me. I had never seen him that shaken. Not even when his magic failed during the trials.

I got up. I had to do something. Maybe I wouldn’t get answers from Keane. But my father’s diary had to hold something useful—some clue I’d missed.

Heading into my office, I opened the diary and spread the pages of my notes from Keane’s magic theory lessons. Scout perched beside me, occasionally tapping certain symbols with his tiny skeletal paw. The dead things always whispered when I



touched this book, but tonight, they felt more urgent—more expectant.

“Look at this pattern,” I murmured to Scout, tracing a sequence that appeared multiple times. “It’s like... magic flow diagrams, but they don’t match standard wellspring theory.”

The margins were filled with what looked like random notations, but they formed distinct patterns when I really studied them. Some mirrored the natural flow of wellspring energy I’d felt during trials. Others... didn’t.

One section caught my eye—the word Cornerstone appeared repeatedly, always marked with a specific symbol. My father’s handwriting was neat but hurried around these entries:

Project Cornerstone reports inconclusive. C insists control is necessary, but I remain unconvinced. Energy flow unstable.

I frowned. Control? Control over what?

Scout chittered excitedly at another passage:

Experiment records incomplete. Need more wellspring readings before conclusions drawn. Resistances increasing. If energy is self-correcting...

Self-correcting? My brow furrowed. I knew wellspring energy was powerful, but my father’s words implied something more than just a power source.

The next several pages contained complex magical theory equations, but I could barely make sense of them. Some phrases stood out, though:

- ley line anomalies - energy strain from unnatural constraints - further manipulation

risks instability

My stomach twisted. Had my father been studying something dangerous? Or had he been trying to stop it?

The final entries were different—more urgent, almost frantic:

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They won't listen. The readings are clear. Pushing beyond natural limits will only—

The sentence cut off abruptly. The date was just days before his execution.

I sat back, exhaling shakily. Something about Project Cornerstone got him killed.

I traced my fingers over the ink, thinking of the diary's weight in my hands, the torn pages, the whispers of the dead. Had my father really died for this?

Scout pressed against my hand as I carefully closed the diary. I wasn't ready to share this yet. Not even with Keane. Not yet.

But I might not have a choice for much longer.

34

Elio

Mother's perfect smile didn't waver as she reviewed the trial reports, but her fingers tapped a precise rhythm against the desk—one, two, three. The same rhythm she'd used when I was young, counting my mistakes during illusion training. Echo's scales shifted to warning gray, my familiar always more honest than either of us could afford to be.

"Fascinating." She set the papers down with movements so controlled they seemed artificial. Everything about Lady Lightford was crafted. "And you say your magic simply... blended with the others? After all the years we spent training you to

maintain proper magical boundaries?”

“I maintained perfect control of my illusions,” I said carefully, though Echo’s scales darkened further as Mother stood.

“Did you?” Her smile remained perfect while her eyes went cold. “Because from where I sat, it looked like you let your carefully trained magic mingle with that untrained half-breed’s chaos. Like you’d forgotten every lesson about the importance of proper magical discipline.”

I thought of how my illusions had merged with Marigold’s power during the trials, gaining substance and depth I’d never achieved through careful control. Stronger, not weaker.

“The faculty seemed impressed—”

“The Council,” she cut me off, “expects the Lightford heir to demonstrate mastery over his magic. Not this amateur blending of powers like some untrained freshman.” Her fingers moved to straighten my already-perfect tie. “We spent years teaching you how to properly channel and control your magic. Or was all that training wasted?”

“Of course not, Mother.” I kept my voice smooth, pleasant. Empty. “It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.” She turned away, but paused at the door. “Your father wishes to discuss your... regression. Do try not to disappoint him with more examples of undisciplined magical behavior.”

The walk to Father’s study felt like marching to execution. My thoughts kept drifting to orientation week, when Cyrus and I had seen Keane in the tunnels beneath the auditorium. He’d been moving wrong, his usually precise portal magic bleeding

darkness while his uncle spoke about “proper control” and “correcting unstable tendencies.”

Father’s study doors opened before I could knock. He sat behind his massive desk, every illusion perfectly maintained to project power and authority. But lately, I’d started noticing things—how forced the magic felt around him, how Echo shifted uneasily in his presence.

“Ah, my disappointing son.” His greeting was pleasant, poisonous. “Quite the display during trials. Tell me, was it worth throwing away years of careful training just to let your magic run wild with that untrained creature’s power?”

“I didn’t lose control,” I said, but the words felt hollow even to me. Echo pressed closer, her scales cycling through warning colors.

“No?” Father’s illusions rippled with barely contained anger. “Then explain to me why my son, who has been trained in proper magical discipline since he could walk, allowed his power to blend so carelessly with others?”

I remembered Keane’s voice in the tunnels, flat and mechanical: “The therapy helps maintain control, Uncle. The therapy removes unstable tendencies.”

“Lord Alstone has been sharing some fascinating insights about heir stability,” Father continued, watching me too closely. “About how untrained magical impulses can be... corrected. Perhaps it’s time we considered a more intensive approach to your magical education.”

My stomach turned.

“And speaking of control issues,” Father’s voice took on a dangerous edge, “weren’t you supposed to handle the half-breed girl? Make her understand she doesn’t belong

here?”

“We’re working on it,” I said carefully, though my stomach churned at the memory of her standing up to our cruel games. At how her untrained power had made my illusions stronger, not weaker.

“Work faster.” His fingers drummed against the desk. “Lord Alstone’s methods may need to be... expanded if she continues encouraging this undisciplined behavior.”

I swallowed hard. “I understand the importance of discipline.”

“Do you?” Father’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Because your performance today suggested otherwise. Blending magic like an untrained child? Letting your carefully honed illusions mix with that half-breed’s raw power?” He stood, his own illusions crackling. “We did not spend years training you in proper magical control to have you throw it away on such... reckless displays.”

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“It won’t happen again,” I promised, the words bitter on my tongue.

“No,” he agreed softly. “It won’t.”

I stopped in my room to grab something before heading back when sounds in the corridor made me freeze.

Mother’s voice carried clearly: “...the half-breed’s untrained magic is spreading dangerous ideas. This blending of powers could undo everything we’ve worked for...”

“Lord Alstone’s methods have proven effective at maintaining control,” Father replied. “Though some find his approach... extreme.”

Echo’s scales shifted to deep purple as I made a decision. Mother’s private study would be empty now. Time to find out what they were really afraid of.

Time to understand why they’d rather break magic than let it flow freely.

They’d trained me to channel magic exactly as they demanded, shaped every spell until the control was flawless. But for the first time, I was starting to question whether their carefully structured paths were really making magic stronger.

Something was very wrong at Wickem. I just had to prove it before they decided I needed Keane’s kind of “corrective therapy” too.

Before they broke my magic the way they were breaking his.

Keane

Wisp prowled restlessly through the library stacks, her form flickering with increasing instability while I pretended to focus on explaining magical resonance patterns to Marigold instead of watching how the silvery moonlight caught her honey-blond hair. The instability in my magic writhed beneath my skin, making it harder to maintain control.

“So the energy has to match the intention,” she mused, leaning closer to examine my notes. Her shoulder pressed against mine as she traced a diagram, sending electricity skittering across my skin.

“Exactly.” I tried to keep my voice steady as her fingers brushed mine reaching for another page, fighting to keep my portals stable as they wavered and bled at the edges. “Like during the trials, when our magic—”

But she was already turning toward me with that smile that made thinking difficult. Before I could pull away, she closed the distance between us. The kiss was soft, playful—and for just a moment, the darkness receded. When she pulled back, her eyes held mischief, though I caught a flash of concern as Wisp’s form wavered again.

“Sorry,” she said, not looking sorry at all. “You’re just really attractive when you’re being all scholarly.”

Heat crept up my neck, but beneath it, the darkness stirred. I should push her away. Should tell her how my magic was deteriorating, how Uncle’s therapy was changing something fundamental inside me. Instead, I let myself lean into her warmth. “I thought you wanted help with magical theory.”



“Maybe I just wanted an excuse to get you alone.” Her teasing tone made my pulse quicken. But then she bit her lip, suddenly serious.

“Actually, there’s something else I wanted to show you.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a leather-bound journal, the embossed skull sigil of the Fourth Council seat catching the firelight. Wisp’s ears pricked forward with interest, though her form flickered, dissolving at the edges like smoke.

“You remember how I told you about my father’s journal?” she said carefully. “I think there’s something hidden in here. Something I don’t understand yet.”

She opened to a dense page of routine Council records, but her fingers traced the thin, deliberate marks in the margins.

“Look at these patterns.” She tapped a repeated set of lines and symbols. “They don’t look random. And certain words are marked, but I don’t know what it means.”

I tried to focus, but shadows clung to the edges of my vision, the wrongness inside me curling tighter. Still, my love of puzzles stirred beneath the haze.

“These could be cipher keys,” I murmured, pointing to a recurring sequence. “See how these marks connect? Like pathways between seemingly unrelated sections.”

Her eyes lit up with realization. “That’s what I was missing.”

But her expression shifted to concern as she looked at me again. “Keane, your hands are shaking.”

I blinked down at them, at my fingers twitching like a marionette’s strings had been pulled too hard. I pulled away, but she caught my wrist. The touch sent clean magic

sparking between us, temporarily driving back the darkness.

She was too close. Those deep brown eyes fixed on mine, full of questions, full of knowing. I couldn't hold the mask anymore—didn't want to. Not when every breath I took around her made my restraint feel like a cage about to crack.

So I let go.

I kissed her hard—none of the careful control I was known for, none of the calculated distance. Just raw, unfiltered need. Teeth and tongue, hungry, claiming. I felt her gasp into my mouth, surprise melting into want as she gripped my shirt, dragging me closer like she needed this too.

Her hand still clutched the journal, but the other slid into my hair, nails grazing my scalp in a way that made my pulse stutter. She met me with equal force, kissing me back with heat and urgency, like we'd been circling this for too long.

There was no finesse in it—just mouths crashing, lips parting, our tongues tangling in a mess of hunger and too much feeling. I barely registered moving her backward until she bumped into the library stack, and still I couldn't stop. I didn't want to. Her hips tilted toward me, her breath catching as I deepened the kiss again, again, chasing that edge of oblivion.

Everything narrowed to the feel of her. The way she tasted—like defiance and magic and something I didn't deserve. The scrape of her teeth against my lower lip. The way her magic sparked against mine, chaotic and familiar all at once.

I wanted more. I wanted all of her.

And that scared the hell out of me.

We only broke apart when the sound of something shifting nearby snapped the moment. We were both breathing hard, lips swollen, skin flushed. Her eyes searched

mine like she could still feel the truth of what I hadn't said. What I couldn't say.

Wisp's unstable form flickered at the edge of my vision—sharp and immediate. The price of losing control. Of wanting.

My hand dropped from her waist, but the heat didn't leave my skin.

I couldn't afford this.

But gods, I needed it more than I'd ever admit.

"We should probably actually study some of these patterns," she said, though her voice carried that same reluctant breathlessness as mine. She smoothed her shirt, but not the flush lingering on her cheeks.

"Probably," I echoed, gathering her scattered notes—fingers brushing hers longer than I needed to. I told myself it was accidental. It wasn't. I was selfishly hoarding every moment of quiet magic between us.

"Though I can think of better things to do with you in dark corners of the library."

Her blush deepened—gorgeous and real—and it lit something sharp and warm in my chest. But as she began explaining another section of the journal, the glow faded. I heard her voice, but my thoughts twisted around the bitter truth: she was pouring her heart into solving mysteries, while I was becoming one.

She deserved someone honest. Someone whole.

And I was lying every time I smiled and let her believe I was fine.

"We'll figure it out," I said, hating how easily the words came. "Together."

She looked up from her bag, her smile soft—trusting. It wrecked me.

Then her eyes narrowed, just slightly. She knew me too well already.

“What is it?”

I hesitated, then reached into my pocket for the small package I’d been carrying for days. Maybe I couldn’t tell her the truth, but I could give her this. “I have something for you. It’s not much, but...”

Her eyes widened as she unwrapped the delicate silver bracelet. A small antique key dangled from it, catching the moonlight. “Keane...”

“I noticed how you collect special things,” I said quickly, suddenly nervous. “And I thought... well, since I collect keys...” I trailed off, watching her trace the intricate pattern on the key’s surface.

“It’s beautiful.” Her voice was soft as she held out her wrist, letting me fasten the bracelet. The key settled perfectly against her pulse point.

“I don’t know what it unlocks,” I admitted. “I’ve had it for years, but could never figure it out. Then I realized... maybe it was waiting for you.”

She pulled me down for another kiss that made my head spin, that made me forget for just a moment about the instability spreading through my magic. When we finally broke apart, her eyes were bright with emotion. “I’ll treasure it.”

I watched her go, touching my lips where I could still feel her warmth. Wisp pressed against my leg, but her form was flickering more erratically now, barely holding together. My magic surged unstably as she disappeared around a shelf, my portals wavering with sickly edges as I gripped the table hard enough to make my knuckles

white.

The key glinted on her wrist—a promise I wasn't sure I could keep. Uncle's therapy sessions were getting more frequent, leaving my magic more unstable each time instead of steadier. Soon there might not be anything left of me that worked right.

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But for now, I let myself feel that fragile hope. Even knowing I'd have to break it soon.

36

Marigold

“Marigold, what’s up with you today?” Raven asked, squinting at me over the top of her textbook. “You’ve been smiling at nothing for like five minutes. Did you win the magical lottery and not tell us?”

“I’m not—” I cut myself off, feeling warmth creep up my neck. Damn it. I hadn’t even realized I was smiling.

“See? You’re doing it again.” Raven grinned and leaned in, her bracelets clinking softly on the table. “Come on. Spill.”

“There’s nothing to spill,” I said quickly, flipping through my notes for Magical Theory. Scout shifted restlessly against my neck, sensing my discomfort. I tried to focus on the diagrams in front of me, but my mind kept circling back to Keane—his rare, soft smiles, the way his fingers brushed mine during quiet moments in the library. The intense way he kissed me like I was something he didn’t want to lose.

Raven wasn’t buying it. “Lucas, back me up. Something’s going on with her.”

Lucas glanced up from his meticulously organized notes. “She does seem... distracted.” He adjusted his glasses thoughtfully. “And unusually cheerful.

Statistically abnormal.”

“I am not a statistic,” I muttered, shooting him a glare.

“Okay, fine. You don’t want to tell us who’s got you all dreamy-eyed. I get it. For now,” Raven teased. “But I’ll figure it out eventually.” She settled back into her chair, still smirking.

I sighed and buried my face in my hands. This was exactly why I hadn’t said anything about Keane yet. It wasn’t just that I didn’t want the rumors to start flying—dating a Council heir made you a target for gossip even if I technically was one too. It was also... complicated. Keane and I had agreed to keep things quiet for now.

But part of me hated keeping it from Raven and Lucas. They were my friends. They wouldn’t judge me. At least, I didn’t think they would.

“Anyway,” I said, steering the conversation away from myself, “don’t you have something more important to focus on? Like the fact that Magical Theory is kicking our asses?”

“Don’t remind me,” Raven groaned, flipping through her textbook. “All this resonance and ley line crap makes my brain hurt. Why can’t magic just be simple for once?”

“It’s only complicated if you don’t understand the underlying principles,” Lucas said in his ever-patient tone. He tapped his notes. “Resonance, for example, is—”

“Blah, blah, magical nerd stuff,” Raven interrupted with a smirk. “We know, Lucas. We’re just here to make fun of you for explaining it.”



“Very mature,” he muttered, but there was a faint smile on his face.

Despite myself, I relaxed a little. They always managed to make me laugh when I needed it most.

Raven suddenly perked up, pointing to a section in her textbook. “Hey, check this out—‘Historical Wellspring Interference.’ That sounds important.”

Lucas frowned and leaned over to read it. “Hmm. Yeah, it’s one of those old theories about how wellsprings can act independently under certain conditions. Supposedly, during times of magical instability, they can influence events—like trial outcomes or major battles.”

“Like they’re alive?” I asked, curiosity outweighing my earlier embarrassment.

“Not alive the way we are,” Lucas clarified, flipping to another reference. “But they’re deeply tied to ley lines, which are basically magical circulatory systems. Some historians think wellsprings can sense when those systems are threatened and respond accordingly.”

Raven snorted. “Magic with a built-in defense system. Sounds like a fantasy novel.”

I didn’t laugh. My mind was racing, connecting dots I hadn’t noticed before. The wellspring’s energy had surged during the trials, just like it had when I crossed Wickem’s wards. And then there was my father’s journal—

It had just appeared on my shelf after the trials. No one had entered my room. No one could enter my room.

But there it was, untouched by dust, waiting for me.

Scout shifted, claws pricking against my skin. He knew. He'd known the moment I picked it up.

"Marigold?" Lucas's voice broke through my thoughts. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I shook my head, still trying to make sense of it all. "It's just... I didn't even apply to Wickem. They sent me a scholarship out of nowhere. Ms. Parker said the wellspring was involved, but I didn't think it was literal."

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Raven leaned forward, eyes widening. “Wait, what? The wellspring sent for you?”

“I don’t know.” I hesitated, glancing between them. This wasn’t something I’d talked about with anyone, not even Keane. But Raven and Lucas weren’t like the heirs. They wouldn’t twist this against me. “Ms. Parker said the wellspring ‘called me home.’ She made it sound like a legacy thing, because of my father. But now I’m not so sure.”

I glanced down, brushing my thumb over the edge of the table, hesitating. “After the trials... something weird happened. I found a journal on my shelf. I’d never seen it before, but it had my father’s name inside—his handwriting, his spells, his thoughts.” My voice dropped. “No one could’ve put it there. My room’s magically sealed. But it was just... there. Waiting. Like it had been placed for me.”

Raven’s mouth parted slightly, eyes wide.

Lucas leaned forward, curiosity flickering before his expression turned serious. “If your room is warded, and no one else could’ve gotten in...” He paused, thinking. “If the wellspring really did call you home—then maybe it didn’t just summon you. Maybe it’s... guiding you. Giving you tools.”

He tapped his textbook, voice picking up speed. “There are records of wellsprings calling witches during times of instability. It’s rare, but not unheard of. If the wellspring sensed danger or corruption, it might’ve reached out to you not just because of your necromancy—but because it wants you to do something about it.”

“Your dad’s legacy might have something to do with it too,” Raven added.

The mention of my father made my stomach twist. I pressed a hand to my chest, feeling the cold weight of the ring beneath my shirt. The dead things stirred softly in the walls, their whispers laced with unease.

“That would explain the weirdness in the trials,” Lucas continued. “If the wellspring’s corruption is affecting magical stability, it could be why your magic’s been acting up—and why Keane’s portals have been... off.”

I flinched at the mention of Keane’s magic. They didn’t know about us, but Lucas had hit closer to the truth than he realized.

Keane’s magic hadn’t felt right for weeks, but after the trials, I could no longer convince myself it was just stress. His uncle had called him away, and when he came back, it was worse. Something was being done to him.

“So, what do we do?” I asked quietly.

“We keep digging,” Raven said. “There’s gotta be more info on this in the archives. Maybe even something about your dad’s connection to the wellspring.”

Lucas nodded. “Agreed. If the Council’s hiding something, we need to find out what.”

A spark of determination flared in my chest. I wasn’t facing this alone. Raven and Lucas had my back. Together, we’d uncover the truth—no matter how deep the corruption ran.

The lecture hall’s curved ceiling reflected the dim afternoon light filtering through Wickem’s enchanted windows, giving the space a muted, overcast glow. I settled into my usual seat near the back as Scout clicked quietly on my shoulder, his small claws pressing into my uniform as if sensing my tension. Raven and Lucas flanked me, their

notebooks already open, ready to dig into whatever information we could find.

“Think this’ll help with your dad’s diary?” Raven whispered, pretending to scribble notes.

“Maybe.” I twisted the ring around my neck. “That letter he left was vague, but if there’s anything about wellsprings or old Council politics, I might get more context.”

Lucas adjusted his glasses, scanning the syllabus. “History tends to repeat itself. The trick is recognizing the patterns.”

“Which is easier when you aren’t relying on a Council-approved version of events,” Raven muttered. I snorted, but didn’t disagree.

Professor Holloway entered, setting down a stack of books before addressing the class. “Today, we’re continuing our discussion on ley lines and magical stabilization. Turn to chapter seven.”

The sound of pages turning filled the hall. I flipped to the section, my pulse kicking up at the title: The Era of Broken Lines.

“The period following the Great Accord saw one of the largest recorded instances of ley line destabilization,” Holloway said. “For decades, magical scholars debated the cause, but the leading theory suggests a combination of overuse, unregulated wellspring manipulation, and external magical pressures.”

My fingers tightened around the edge of my book. Unregulated wellspring manipulation? That sounded eerily familiar.

“During this time, wellsprings across multiple continents experienced surges that altered their behavior. Certain spells failed outright, while others—necromantic

spells, in particular—became dangerously amplified.”

A ripple of interest passed through the students, and I felt more than saw Elio shift slightly in his seat. Across the room, Keane sat perfectly still, his posture measured. He wasn’t looking at me. Wasn’t reacting. But I knew him well enough now to see the tension in the way his hands rested on his desk, too still, too precise.

“This era also saw the emergence of factions who sought to control or redirect ley line energy for political gain,” Halloway continued, carefully neutral. “While the official records cite natural causes, some evidence suggests more deliberate interference.”

A silence settled over the room, thick with unspoken thoughts.

“Are you implying someone caused the instability?” A student near the front asked, frowning.

“The records we have suggest multiple possibilities,” Halloway answered smoothly. “It’s always important to examine historical trends with a critical lens.”

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Raven nudged me, her expression gleeful. See? she mouthed.

At the front of the room, Cyrus made a low sound—almost a scoff, but not quite. His arms were crossed, Ember preening irritably on his shoulder. “If instability like that happened again, it would be handled,” he said, his voice level.

“Handled?” Lucas asked, raising an eyebrow. “By who?”

Cyrus’s jaw tensed. “By those who understand how to maintain balance.”

He wasn’t as sharp about it as he usually would have been. I noticed the way his fingers tapped absently against his knee. He was doubting something.

Keane, beside him, finally spoke, though his voice was quieter than usual. “You’re assuming we’d notice the instability in time to stop it.”

The shift in the room was nearly imperceptible, but I caught it. The heirs were usually forceful about defending the Council. Today, they weren’t arguing outright. They were choosing their words carefully.

Professor Halloway cleared her throat. “The important takeaway is that magical systems, even those maintained by the most powerful institutions, are not infallible. History has proven that time and time again.”

My pulse picked up. That was the closest thing to a warning I’d heard from any professor here.

Lucas leaned toward me. “This fits with what we found yesterday,” he murmured. “And if the wellspring is reacting now—”

“We don’t know that,” I whispered back, but the words felt hollow even as I said them.

I thought of my father’s journal appearing in my room, untouched by dust. Thought of the way the wellspring’s energy had surged during the trials. Thought of the feeling I’d had since stepping onto Wickem’s grounds—that something unseen was watching. Waiting.

Cyrus shifted again, exhaling sharply. “Speculation isn’t useful. The Council has safeguards in place for a reason.”

For once, no one challenged him.

“This period of instability,” Halloway continued, “coincided with the first major vampire wars. As wellsprings weakened, vampires grew bolder, attacking regions where ley line disruption had compromised magical defenses.”

I felt Cyrus tense at the mention of vampires. Everyone knew about his mother’s death, but now I wondered—had she been investigating these same patterns?

“The correlation between wellspring corruption and vampire aggression remains a subject of debate,” Halloway said carefully. “Though historical records show vampires consistently target areas where magical energy has been... altered.”

“You mean where they can break through the wards more easily,” Cyrus said, his voice tight. Ember’s feathers flickered with barely contained flame.

“That’s one interpretation.” Halloway’s measured tone suggested there was more she



wasn't saying. "What's clear is that wellspring stability and vampire containment have always been... intimately connected."

Professor Holloway let the silence sit for a moment before moving on to ley line theory. But I barely heard her. My mind was spinning.

If the wellspring wasn't just responding to corruption—but actively choosing new protectors—then everything I thought I understood about magic, about my father's place in this, was even more tangled than I'd feared.

And worse, I wasn't the only one starting to ask questions.

37

Elio

Echo's scales shifted from deep purple to an unsettled gray as another of Keane's portals bled shadow across the library's evening quiet. My chameleon familiar had been increasingly agitated lately, especially around portal magic that should have been clean.

I kept my usual pose of disinterest, pretending to read while watching Marigold from the corner of my eye. She sat by her usual window, bathed in the soft glow of moonlight, utterly absorbed in whatever magical theory nonsense Keane was whispering to her.

She fascinated me. She always had, though I hadn't wanted to admit it. Not when it was easier to mock her, to push her, to play my role as the charming, untouchable Lightford heir.

But things were different now.

Cyrus had been the first to say it outright—that something was going on between Marigold and Keane. I'd known before that, of course. I was good at noticing what people tried to hide. The way Keane looked at her when he thought no one was watching, the way her magic wove with his too easily, too naturally. It wasn't just compatibility. It was something deeper.

And that made it dangerous.

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Keane emerged from the stacks, his steps too careful, his face a mask of neutrality. Echo's scales flickered between storm-dark and silver as I watched them—Marigold's effortless warmth, Keane's instinctive pull toward it.

My gaze flicked to his wrist, where faint tendrils of corrupted magic curled at the edges of his latest unstable portal. Lord Alstone's influence was all over it.

And I knew exactly what that meant.

Because I had seen the records in my mother's study.

The secret compartments in her desk weren't nearly as clever as she thought they were. All those years learning sleight of hand, the subtlety of illusions—of course I'd find them eventually. I'd expected more evidence of her ambition, notes on how she manipulated the other Council families, maybe even leverage over my father.

What I found was worse.

Detailed reports, dating back years. Records of magical interventions, corrections, stabilizations. A long list of names—some I recognized, some I didn't.

And Keane's was one of them.

The notes on him weren't the longest, but they were damning. His uncle had been 'adjusting' his magic since he was a child. Long before his portals ever faltered. Long before he was labelled unstable.

The treatments hadn't been about fixing him.

They had been about making sure he never realized he hadn't been broken in the first place.

I took only some of the documents, pieces I thought it likely she wouldn't miss. If my mother ever realized I'd seen them, she'd make my life miserable in ways even I couldn't predict.

Keane had no idea what had been done to him. And he wouldn't listen if I told him.

So I watched instead.

Watched as Marigold reached for his hand, offering steady magic where his own wavered. Watched as, for a moment, the corruption receded, his portals stabilizing with a kind of raw purity I hadn't seen in years.

Then, just as quickly, the darkness clawed its way back in.

Echo's tail curled tighter around my wrist.

"I know," I murmured. "It's getting worse."

A new voice broke through my thoughts.

"Ah, Mr. Lightford."

Lord Alstone's voice slid through the library's hush, and every muscle in my body tensed. Echo's scales went ashen white.

I flicked my fingers subtly, weaving a quick illusion around Keane and Marigold. It

wouldn't hold under direct scrutiny, but it didn't need to. As long as I stayed silent, the spell would convince his mind to overlook them.

I turned my head slightly, just enough to catch the scene through the gaps in the shelves. Lord Alstone's gaze swept the library, searching. "Have you seen Keane?"

I tilted my head in feigned thought. "Not recently. But you know how he is—always lurking in the shadowy corners."

His mouth twitched at the word 'shadowy,' but he didn't correct me. He merely nodded. "Remind him about our appointment tomorrow."

My smile was sharp. "Of course. Always happy to help with family matters."

He left without another word, but the magic he left behind felt wrong—oily, like a smothered flame.

When I glanced back, Keane was rubbing his temple, his jaw tight. Marigold leaned in, concern in every line of her face, and for a moment, I thought he might tell her. Might confess everything.

But he didn't.

Because he didn't know.

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And Marigold—Marigold was starting to see things the rest of us had been taught to ignore.

Her magic had already shifted things none of us understood. The trials had proven that. She had proven that.

I let my illusion fade slowly, making sure Lord Alstone was gone before stepping away from my hidden perch between the stacks.

Echo flicked her tail once, her colors still storm-cloud dark.

“I believe we’ve seen enough for one evening,” I murmured, rising to leave.

As I passed, Scout was investigating one of Keane’s portals, the skeletal mouse chittering softly, disturbed. The dead things always did seem more honest than the living.

I would know.

I had spent my life crafting beautiful lies.

But lately, watching Marigold made me wonder what it would be like to simply be real.

Late one night, Marigold and I sat together in a quiet corner of the library, the dim light pooling around us like we existed in our own little world. My phone said it was almost midnight, and we were the last ones here.

Uncle hadn't wanted us spending time together—he'd made that clear during my last stabilization session—but I couldn't seem to listen.

I couldn't seem to stay away.

But my temples throbbed as I tried to stabilize the portals circling around us. Lately, they had been... off. My magic felt wrong, tainted, like it carried echoes of my uncle's therapy sessions—like he was watching, even now.

Your magic needs constant maintenance, his voice rattled in my skull. Without it, you'll become unstable. A danger to yourself. To her.

I clenched my jaw and focused on Marigold.

She was still here, still grounding me. If I could just stay in this moment, maybe I wouldn't shatter under the weight of what was coming.

She sat cross-legged on the sofa, flipping through her father's diary and her own notes. Scout clicked industriously at the pages, his tiny skeletal paw tapping out patterns like he was trying to decipher something himself.

The bracelet I'd given her dangled from her wrist, the key swaying back and forth like a pendulum.

"Have you figured out anything about the cipher?" she asked. "I can't seem to make heads or tails of it."

I swallowed. I hadn't told her that Uncle didn't want me helping her with the diary.

"I think he was using..." I started, but my mind blanked as she shifted, her knee brushing mine. Magic hummed where we touched, clean and right in a way that made my stomach twist.

Wrong. It wasn't supposed to feel this right.

"Keane?" she looked up, and suddenly we were much closer than I'd intended. Close enough to see the hints of violet in her pretty brown eyes, the way her lips parted slightly when she was deep in thought.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly. "You seem distracted."

I blinked.

"I'm fine," I lied. I wasn't fine.

I wasn't supposed to be here. Not with her. Not when every moment with her made it harder to obey. Not when Uncle's magic coiled deeper into my bones every time I left his therapy sessions.

"I'm just thinking about how naturally our magic works together."



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Her expression softened. “Like it was meant to.”

She bit her lip, and my eyes tracked the movement before I could stop myself.

Warmth flooded me.

“Kind of like now...”

The air between us felt charged, crackling with possibility. My magic stirred restlessly, wanting to reach for hers—not just power calling to power, but something deeper. Something that felt like destiny and danger all at once.

I reached out, taking her hands in mine, and my portals steadied. The shimmering silver light pulsed in time with my heartbeat, the way it had before the therapy sessions became so frequent.

“You make me better,” I said, not knowing exactly what I meant by it. I found myself lifting my hand to brush a strand of hair from her face. Her skin was warm beneath my fingers, alive with necromantic energy that called to my own power like a siren song.

“Keane,” she whispered, her voice grounding me like a tether. I pressed my forehead to hers, trying to memorize her scent, her warmth, the feel of her body against mine. This had to last.

“Don’t forget me,” I said quietly, the words slipping out before I could stop them. She blinked, surprise flickering in her eyes. Don’t let me forget myself.

When our lips finally met, it felt like every portal in the world opening at once—that same rush of power and possibility. But where our first kisses had been gentle exploration, this held deeper hunger. Her fingers tangled in my hair as I pulled her closer, need overwhelming caution.

Our magic rose to meet our passion—my portals shimmering with silver light while shadows deepened around us, responding to her power. The combination should have been discordant, but instead it felt perfectly balanced. Like two halves of something ancient finally reuniting.

I shouldn't be here. Every second spent with her tightened the noose around my neck. Tomorrow, my uncle would sense this. He'd press harder, push the therapy harder until my magic bent completely to his version of stability.

But tonight? Tonight was mine. Marigold was mine. Even if I had to pay for it tomorrow in blood.

Marigold made a soft sound against my mouth, threatening what remained of my control. My hands slid down her back, tracing the curve of her spine as she pressed closer. I guided her into my lap, wanting—needing—to eliminate any remaining space between us.

“Tell me to stop,” I managed between kisses, though it nearly killed me to say it. “If this is too fast...”

“Don't you dare,” she said. “I want you.”

Those words, more than anything physical, broke the last of my restraint. I caught her mouth again. But this wasn't just passion—it was recognition. Understanding. Two people who'd grown up in the shadows of dead parents, finally finding something real in each other. And I needed this moment.

Our magic surged around us—portals gleaming silver, shadows deepening in response. The air pulsed with raw energy, something that belonged to us alone. My uncle's taint couldn't reach here. Not now. I kissed her fiercely, daring the world to break this moment.

She responded with equal fervor, her hands slipping beneath my shirt to trace patterns that felt like fire against my skin. Each touch sent sparks of magic dancing between us.

My lips trailed a path down her neck, my fingers gently undoing the buttons of her shirt. Then I spread it open, and traced the delicate lace edge of her bra reverently. She was here and she was real. I needed this.

Marigold's breath quickened as I stroked her nipples through the thin material, her body arching towards me in response. When she did that she rocked herself against my hardening dick, and I swallowed hard.

"You're so beautiful," I murmured, meeting her gaze.

She smiled and removed the rest of her shirt and bra, tossing them aside. I watched her, tracing every curve with my eyes.

"Do we need a condom or something?" she asked softly. "I've never done it with a witch."

A warm chuckle rose in my chest. "Then you're in luck, because there's a spell for everything." I traced the rune on her lower belly, and she took note of the details, then I leaned closer to her ear and whispered the words.

"Just that?" she asked in surprise.

Nodding, I said, “Protects from pregnancy and from disease. Not that I’m...” I blushed.

“I know,” she said. “I trust you.”

Desperately I wanted to be worthy of that trust, but I wasn’t sure if I could. Uncle... I pushed the thoughts away, needing to be here, now, with her.

Then her hands reached up to help me with my shirt. As my skin was exposed, she leaned in, pressing soft kisses across my chest, her fingers tracing the contours of my muscles. Each touch sent warmth skittering through me.

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I lifted her chin, our eyes meeting, and I kissed her again, my touch gentle yet passionate. I leaned down kissing and stroking her breasts. They were perfectly sized, fitted to my hands, and the nipples hardened as I flicked my thumb across them.

Our lips met once more, and my hands found their way to her waist, pulling her closer. Our magic continued to intertwine, creating a powerful connection that deepened with each passing moment.

Lifting her effortlessly, I turned and laid her back against the cushions. Then I kissed my way down her body, paying homage to every inch of skin with my lips and tongue. By the time I reached her navel, she was trembling beneath me, her breaths uneven.

I undid the clasp of her jeans, and Marigold lifted her hips, allowing me to slide the clothing off. She wore a simple pair of black panties underneath, and I couldn't resist running my fingers over the lace edge

"Gorgeous," I whispered and trailed kisses down her stomach. My hands roamed over her thighs, tracing patterns on her skin that made her shiver.

"Keane," she moaned.

I nipped at the waistband of her panties before sliding them off as well. Marigold's legs fell open for me willingly, and I took in the sight of her—bare and exposed to my hungry gaze. She really was beautiful and oh so real.

Leaning forward, I pressed a kiss to the inside of each thigh, slowly working my way

towards my ultimate destination.

Marigold's breaths came quick and shallow as I teased her with light touches along the edge of where she wanted me most. Finally, unable to hold back any longer, she reached down and tangled one hand in my hair while using the other to guide me to her apex.

I eagerly complied, dipping my tongue between swollen folds until she was writhing beneath me with pleasure. I worshipped her the way I wanted to—with my mouth, my hands, my everything. Licking her, savoring her, drawing every moan, every shuddered breath from her body like a prayer.

Her thighs trembling around my face as I pushed her closer, coaxing her toward the edge but never letting her fall too soon. My fingers slid inside her, and she choked on my name as her body arched off the couch.

Her hips bucked against me as she drew closer and closer to ecstasy. When it hit, her body tensed, her back arching, her hands clenching in my hair as she came, moaning my name like it was the only thing anchoring her to the world. I held her through it, my tongue working her through every aftershock, my fingers pressing deep until she was trembling beneath me.

Only when she finally sagged against the cushions, her breathing ragged, did I lift my head, pressing one last reverent kiss against her thigh.

She blinked at me, dazed, her lips parted. "Keane..."

I stood, taking off the rest of my clothes. Then I kissed my way back up her body, letting her taste herself on my lips as I settled between her legs. My cock throbbed with need, but I didn't rush.

I never wanted to rush this.

She reached between us, wrapping her fingers around me, and I groaned, pressing my forehead to hers. Her touch was tentative at first, then bolder, stroking me slowly.

“Marigold—” I caught her hand, stopping her before I lost the last of my restraint.

She laughed breathlessly, utterly wrecked but still teasing.

“Now Keane,” she whispered. “I want all of you.”

A shudder racked through me at her words. She didn’t just want sex. She wanted me.

I lined myself up, pressing in slowly, inch by agonizing inch, watching every flicker of emotion cross her face. I felt her stretch around me, felt the moment I was fully inside her, buried in the only person who had ever made me feel whole.

I thrust into her slowly at first, savoring the way she clenched around me, the way her nails raked down my back, the way she breathed my name like it was salvation.

“Stars above,” I groaned against her neck, “you feel so good.”

“Keane,” she gasped, rocking her hips experimentally, and I lost the last thread of my sanity.

She met my rhythm, her body moving with mine, and it wasn’t just making love. It was something deeper, something carved into my bones, something that felt like fate.

I wasn’t careful anymore. I couldn’t be.

I pushed deeper, harder, dragging her against me with every thrust, needing her

closer, needing all of her. My hands gripped her hips like she was the only thing keeping me from falling apart, like she was the only thing anchoring me to this world.

Her moans grew louder, more desperate, and I felt her unraveling beneath me.  
“Keane, I’m—”

“I’ve got you, love.”



And then she shattered.

Her orgasm tore through her, her walls clenching around me so tightly I nearly came with her. But I held on, watching her fall apart in my arms before finally letting myself go. I came with a groan, burying myself inside her, my body shaking, magic surging around us.

Later, we lay tangled together on the cushions, my portals shimmering softly overhead, forming a dome of privacy. Her necromantic energy pulsed gently around us like a protective barrier, her dead things keeping silent watch. Scout had curled up beside Wisp, both familiars nestled together, radiating a rare sense of peace.

Marigold's fingers traced lazy patterns across my chest, her touch grounding me. "That was..." She sighed contentedly and nuzzled closer. "We should probably do that again. Soon."

A soft laugh escaped me, the sound surprising in its rawness. I tightened my arms around her, letting myself breathe her in, letting myself believe I could stay like this—staywhole—just a little longer. "That's a plan I can get behind."

She tilted her head to meet my gaze. "I care about you, Keane." The words were simple, but they carried a quiet strength that hit me harder than I expected.

"I care about you too," I said softly, the admission pulling something from deep inside me. I brushed a kiss across her temple and whispered, "More than I should."

Her smile was soft but knowing, as if she understood all the unspoken fears between

us. She didn't push me to explain. Instead, she simply whispered, "Stay with me." Not a command, just a request—one that somehow meant more than any promise.

"I'm not going anywhere tonight." But I couldn't promise her tomorrow.

Wisp shifted at the edge of the portal dome, its form shimmering uneasily as the silver light began to pulse with irregular shadows. The edges of my portals began to waver and crack, growing more unstable by the moment. A warning. A reminder of what was creeping ever closer.

"What's wrong?" Marigold's voice was quiet but alert, her hand pausing on my chest.

I shook my head, forcing the tension from my jaw. "Nothing. Just... tired." It was a lie, and she probably knew it, but I couldn't tell her the truth. Not now.

She hesitated, her gaze lingering on me for a long moment before finally settling back against my shoulder. "Okay," she whispered, her breath warm against my skin.

I swallowed hard, trying to push away the creeping fear, the echoes of my uncle's magic clawing at the edges of my mind. Just a few more hours. Just a few more moments where I could pretend this was real—that I wasn't already slipping away from her. From myself.

39

Marigold

The faint scent of burning herbs drifted through the classroom as I slipped into my seat, the smoke curling from warding braziers placed near the walls. A soft hum of layered magic, subtle but steady, pressed gently against my senses.

But beneath it, I could still feel him—the ghost of Keane’s touch lingering on my skin, the warmth of his hands, the way he had looked at me like I was the only thing anchoring him.

It had felt real. He had felt real.

For once, he hadn’t been distant or held back by others’ demands. And yet, that image kept colliding with another—the dark edges of his portals, pulsing with something unnatural.

I hadn’t imagined it. His magic was deteriorating.

I tightened my grip on my notebook. Forced channeling. That was what my father’s journal had called it. Trying to redirect magic in unnatural ways, compressing it into controlled structures.

I had spent hours last night tracing the ciphered notes, recognizing my father’s frustration as he detailed how Project Cornerstone tried to reshape natural wellspring currents—forcing them through artificial constraints.

Like trying to reroute a river through pipes too small, he had written.

That was what Keane’s magic felt like now—straining, unnatural, like it was being forced into a shape it was never meant to take.

Scout clicked softly, sensing my unease as I opened my notebook. Beside me, Raven glanced over, her eyebrows quirked in concern.

“You alright?” she whispered.

“Yeah, just... distracted.” I forced a weak smile.

She didn't look convinced, but before she could push further, Professor Esteban entered the room. His arrival was marked by the steady clink of enchanted medallions on his coat—restoration sigils designed to amplify healing magic.

“Today's lesson will focus on maintaining magical balance,” he announced. “Specifically, how different types of magic interact to protect and sustain wellsprings.”

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I straightened, glancing at Raven. The wellspring. I had felt its pulse beneath Wickem's foundations, the steady current of power running through the ley lines.

"Wellsprings serve as anchors for ley lines, fueling the magical ecosystem around them," Esteban continued. "When properly nurtured and protected, they enhance all forms of magic. However, they are not indestructible. Historical accounts have shown that in times of magical strain, wellsprings have destabilized—sometimes with catastrophic results."

I tightened my grip on my pen. My father had written about this, too.

"Contrary to popular belief, protecting wellsprings isn't solely the job of combat witches or the Shroud Guard. Collaboration between magical disciplines has always been crucial. Necromancers, healers, and evokers each play a role in ensuring stability."

A boy near the back scoffed. "Yeah, I'm sure necromancers are just great for keeping things stable."

Laughter rippled through the room, low and biting. My shoulders tensed.

"Necromancers understand patterns better than anyone," Esteban countered coolly. "Death energy, when properly managed, reveals imbalances long before they become visible to other magic users."

The whispers died down.

“Miss Raynoff, would you assist in today’s demonstration?”

Aurora stood, flicking back her copper hair. “Sure, Professor. You want me to keep it warm and friendly?”

Esteban nodded. “Precisely. Fire, while often seen as destructive, has historically played a vital role in both protection and restoration. Please demonstrate controlled life-energy infusion.”

Aurora held out her hands, and flames bloomed, steady and warm—not destructive, but sustaining.

“Observe how the flame stabilizes the magical field,” Esteban said. “Evokers have traditionally used fire to purify ley lines and sustain energy flows.”

The way Aurora’s fire pulsed in rhythm with the room’s magic made something in my chest tighten.

Keane’s magic didn’t pulse. It jolted. It stuttered. It fought against itself.

Because it wasn’t flowing naturally anymore.

“Miss Grimley,” Esteban called. “Would you care to assist in demonstrating how death traces interact with restorative magic?”

I hesitated, but Scout nudged me forward.

I walked to the front, slowly reaching for my magic. The dead things stirred at the edge of my senses—curious, but not disruptive.

I extended my awareness to meet the warmth of Aurora’s fire. Instead of clashing,

our magic balanced. Death energy rooted the flame, stabilizing it.

“It’s... balanced,” I murmured. “The death traces aren’t disrupting the energy. They’re reinforcing it.”

“Precisely,” Esteban said. “This is how wellsprings have been safeguarded throughout history.”

The room fell silent. The tension had shifted. No longer hostile—curious.

As I returned to my seat, Aurora leaned over. “See? You’re a natural. Let them talk all they want.”

I smiled faintly, but my mind was elsewhere.

The diary had said the same thing.

Magic was meant to flow freely. Not forced. Not controlled.

And yet, Keane’s portals weren’t free-flowing anymore.

His magic was being caged. Compressed.

Like the Council was trying to reshape him—the same way they had tried to reshape wellsprings.

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The thought sent a chill through me.

I hadn't applied to Wickem. The school had sent for me.

The wellspring had called me.

Not just for me.

For what I could see. For what I could do.

I swallowed hard, glancing down at my notes. Keane's magic wasn't breaking on its own.

It was being broken.

And the Council knew exactly how.

40

Cyrus

The training room was too cold. My flames flickered uneasily across my skin, reacting to something I couldn't name. Across the sparring mats, Keane struggled with another portal that shouldn't be giving him trouble. Darkness bled from its edges in a way that made Ember ruffle his feathers and hiss softly.

"Focus," I snapped, more harshly than intended. But watching one of our own



weaken like this set my teeth on edge. “You’re leaving gaps in the defensive line.”

“Sorry.” Keane’s voice lacked its usual quiet confidence. His eyes were shadowed, his posture tight—and something about his magic prickled at the edge of my senses. It didn’t feel right. Not the clean, surgical precision I was used to from him.

It felt... burnt. Wrong.

A flicker of movement caught my attention. Marigold had arrived early for combat class, Scout perched on her shoulder. Something in my chest tightened at how naturally her necromancy reached for my fire, like during trials when our magic had flowed together perfectly.

“Your uncle’s therapy sessions are getting more frequent,” I said quietly as Keane closed another unstable portal. “And your control is getting worse, not better.”

“I don’t need your concern.” But his fingers pressed against his temples in obvious pain. His portal fox hadn’t manifested in days—never a good sign for a witch’s familiar bond.

“It’s not concern.” I kept my voice hard. Emotions were dangerous territory. “It’s practical. Your portals are becoming a liability.”

Movement by the door drew my attention again. Marigold had started her warm-up exercises, her old sweater discarded to reveal simple training gear, a tank top that exposed way too much of her cleavage and hip-hugging leggings. Her honey-blond hair was pulled back in a messy braid, exposing the elegant curve of her neck. My flames flickered higher without my permission.

“She notices too,” I added, watching Keane’s expression. “The wrongness in your magic.”

His face went carefully blank. “She doesn’t understand our world.”

“No?” My laugh held no humor. “She’s the only one who saw through Elio’s illusions. The only one who felt how our magic could work together during trials.” The only one who made my flames dance like they had a mind of their own.

Another portal stuttered open—not silver, not clean. Just wrong, bleeding magic that twisted in the air like smoke off spoiled meat.

Ember launched, letting out a sharp cry as the corruption spread. Even he felt it—a creature born of flame, recoiling from cold.

“Enough.” I grabbed Keane’s arm, ignoring how cold his skin felt. “Whatever game you’re playing—”

“Mr. Raynoff.” Professor Rivera’s voice cracked through the air. “A word about the training schedule?”

I released Keane, but not before saying quietly: “If you hurt her with whatever this is, I will burn you to ash.”

The threat surprised me as much as him. Since when did I care what happened to the Shadow Heir?

“Worried about her?” Keane’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “How unlike you, Cyrus.”

He disappeared through another shadow-bleeding portal before I could respond. My flames surged with frustration, and I had to take several breaths to control them.

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When I turned back to the training floor, I found Marigold watching me. Scout chittered something that made her bite her lower lip in concern. The simple genuineness of her worry made my chest ache.

“Mr. Raynoff?” Rivera called again.

“Coming.” I tore my gaze from Marigold.

Ember settled on my shoulder with a restless flutter, feathers ruffling like he could still feel the rot bleeding off Keane’s portal. My fingers curled into fists.

Something was wrong with the magic here. Deeply wrong. And Keane wasn’t saying a damn word about it.

I followed Rivera back toward the dueling floor, the heat of Ember’s wings warm against my throat.

And for once, it wasn’t enough to keep the cold off my spine.

41

Marigold

The library waseerily silent, the warm scent of old parchment and books doing nothing to ease the tension crawling up my spine. The shadows flickered strangely along the towering bookshelves, bending unnaturally around the portal pulsing at the far end of the room. And in front of it—Keane.

He stood rigid, his posture unnaturally stiff, like a marionette held by invisible strings. The flickering candlelight barely touched him, swallowed by the darkness curling around his feet. But what made my stomach twist wasn't the portal or the corrupted magic—it was the book clutched in his hands.

My father's diary.

“Keane?” My voice cracked, my breath shallow. This is a nightmare. This isn't real.

But it was.

The portal behind him shimmered, the darkness at its edges wrong, pulsing like something alive. Shadowy tendrils licked outward, hungrily curling around his ankles. His eyes, those deep stormy blue I knew so well, were voids of blackness now.

“You don't have to do this.” My breath was unsteady as I edged closer, each step a plea. “This isn't you. I know you, Keane. We meant something to each other. Were all your words—just empty promises?”

Something flickered in his expression, so brief I almost missed it. The slightest tension in his jaw. The faintest twitch of his fingers on the diary's worn cover. For one heartbeat, he was mine again.

Then it was gone.

“Step back, Marigold.” His voice was hollow, distant. Not his.

“Not without you.” The words ripped from me, desperate, aching. I surged forward, reaching for him, grabbing his wrist before he could step into the portal. “You're stronger than this! Fight him! Fight whatever he's done to you!”

“Keane, please,” I begged, gripping his sleeve, my fingers digging into the fabric. His magic surged against mine, a flicker of silver breaking through the darkness for a single heartbeat—pure, untainted—before the corruption swallowed it whole. His breath hitched, his fingers tightening on the diary like he was fighting something unseen.

I lunged for it, desperate to stop him, and in the struggle, the delicate pages tore. Loose fragments fluttered to the floor, scattered between us like the last remnants of something broken beyond repair.

Keane froze.

For just a second, his magic faltered. Silver fought against the blackness bleeding from his portals, like a single star trying to hold back the void. His chest rose sharply, a shuddering breath forcing its way through clenched teeth.

“Keane, please,” I begged, gripping his sleeve, my fingers digging into the fabric. “I know you’re still in there. Come back to me.”

His head tilted down—just enough that our foreheads nearly touched. His fingers twitched, hesitating, like he wanted to hold on to me.

“Keane...” I whispered, my heart breaking with every breath. Please.

His jaw clenched. The moment slipped away.

But just before it did—just before the darkness swallowed him whole—his lips parted, barely moving. “Find the Last Witness.”

The words were so faint, I almost thought I imagined them. But then his magic surged—dark and unrelenting.

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“Keane,” I tried again. “This isn’t you.”

“You don’t know anything about me.” His voice cut like a blade. Flat. Devoid of the warmth that made me love him.

The words were worse than a strike. I sucked in a sharp breath, reeling from the finality of them.

Cold terror flooded my veins. He was slipping through my fingers.

With a cry, I yanked on his arm, trying to pull him away from the portal. He barely staggered, but for a moment, he didn’t push me away.

Then his magic surged—dark and unrelenting. The force threw me back. The impact sent me crashing against a bookshelf, pain jolting up my spine. My vision blurred, the edges tinged with shadow.

By the time I blinked away the haze, Keane had already stepped into the portal, the diary clenched in his fist, but the torn pages left behind.

“No!” I lurched forward, but it was too late. The portal closed with a low, echoing boom, sealing him away from me.

Silence fell.

I pressed my hands against the cold stone, my whole body trembling. Keane was gone. The boy who had kissed me like I was the only thing keeping him tethered to

the world. The boy who had made love to me like we had forever.

Had it all been a lie?

I reached for the scattered pages, my hands shaking as I gathered them. Fragments of what was left of my father, fragments of what was left of Keane.

My hands curled into fists. No. He hesitated. He had fought, even if just for a moment. That had to mean something.

But he had still left me. He had still betrayed me. And I wasn't sure I would ever forgive him for it.

I clutched the torn pages to my chest, my breath coming too fast. My first instinct was to run—to put as much distance as possible between myself and the gaping wound Keane had left in my heart. But my feet moved before I could decide where to go. Not back to my room. Not to Elio or Cyrus. The cold air burned my lungs as I veered toward the east wing, my body pulling me toward the old service tunnels beneath Wickem.

I didn't understand why. Only that I had to go. That something was waiting for me in the dark.

The whispers of the dead grew fainter as I descended the steps, leaving only a heavy, humming stillness. I followed that feeling deeper into the tunnels, my hands trailing along the damp stone walls. The cold grounded me, numbing some of the pain I couldn't shake.

Keane's face hovered in my mind—his expression when we kissed under the stars, the warmth in his touch. He wasn't like the others. He was supposed to be different. But now...

Now I wasn't sure who I could trust.

The humming grew louder, vibrating in the stone beneath my feet. I turned a corner and stepped into a vast underground chamber.

I froze.

At the center of the room was a pool of shimmering light. Magic. It wasn't just visible—it was alive, pulsing with quiet, rhythmic power. The wellspring. The heart of Wickem's magic.

I approached slowly, the light casting long shadows that danced across the rough walls. The dead things remained silent, watching from the edges of my awareness. For once, they weren't trying to warn me. It was like they understood I was meant to be here.

I sank to my knees at the edge of the pool and stared into its depths.

Shapes moved beneath the surface—vague impressions of people and places, memories half-formed. I thought I saw a man's face for a moment. My father? No... it disappeared too quickly to be sure. My reflection stared back at me, distorted by the rippling light.

"Why would you take it from me?" I whispered into the empty chamber. My voice cracked. I wasn't talking to the wellspring. I was talking to Keane.

My fingers grazed the surface of the pool. The instant I made contact, a surge of magic jolted through me.

It wasn't hostile—just overwhelming. Memories that weren't mine filled my mind—other witches who had stood here, generations who had drawn from the



wellspring's power. I felt their fears, their triumphs, their grief. And something darker.

A shadow.

At the edges of the pool, tendrils of corruption twisted through the light like black smoke. The clean energy pulsed harder, pushing against the darkness, but it couldn't drive it away. The tendrils clung, growing slowly, like rot spreading through a wound.

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I gasped and pulled my hand back, my heart racing. This was it. This was the wrongness I'd been sensing since the day I crossed the wards into Wickem. It wasn't just in the trials or in Keane's faltering magic—it was here, at the heart of the school.

And no one else seemed to see it.

My hand trembled as I clutched the chain around my neck, feeling the weight of the silver ring I wore. My mother's ring. My father's ring. The only thing left that tied me to them.

"Why show me this now?" I asked softly.

The wellspring didn't answer with words, but its presence pulsed gently, steady and grounding. It didn't feel like it was asking anything of me. It wasn't demanding that I be stronger or that I figure everything out on my own. It simply acknowledged me.

For the first time since Keane betrayed me, I felt... seen.

The tears came then. Silent and hot, they slipped down my face as I stared into the light. I didn't try to stop them. The wellspring didn't judge. It just pulsed quietly, its magic brushing against my senses like a soft reassurance.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do yet, but I knew this much: the corruption was real. And it was spreading.

If no one else was going to fight it, then I would.

I stood slowly, wiping my face with the sleeve of my jacket. The dead things stirred softly in the walls, waiting. The darkness at the edge of the pool seemed to ripple, as if watching me leave.

When I finally stepped out of the tunnels and back into the cold night air, my breath came out in slow, visible puffs. The ache in my chest hadn't disappeared, but it felt... manageable now.

Keane had hurt me. That wouldn't change.

But I wasn't going to break because of it.

The wellspring had shown me what was at stake. I had a part to play in this. I wasn't going to let anyone—Keane, the Council, or whoever else had tainted this magic—stop me from finding the truth.

I walked toward the dorms, shoulders straighter than before. Whatever came next, I wasn't facing it alone. The wellspring had seen me. And I had seen it.

42

Marigold

The next day, I was called to the auditorium. The whole space felt wrong. Where the welcome ceremony had filled it with clean, natural magic, now something oily and corrupted seeped up through the floor. The Council members sat in their formal chairs arranged before the stage—three powerful figures whose very presence made the magic currents twist and writhe.

Cyrus and Elio stood to either side of the doors like ornate statues—perfect heirs performing their roles. But I caught the tiniest flicker of Cyrus's fire magic

responding to my presence and the way Echo's scales shifted uneasily on Elio's shoulder. Even forced apart, our magic still reached for each other, still remembered how perfectly it had flowed during trials.

Lord Raynoff dominated the center, power radiating from him in controlled waves. To his right, Lady Lightford sat with perfect poise, a mirror of Elio's elegance. To his left, Lord Alstone watched with a measured expression, but something lurked beneath it—an edge that hadn't been there before. The fourth chair—my father's seat—stood empty, a silent reminder of the chaos they had worked so hard to contain.

"Miss Grimley." Lord Raynoff's voice carried easily in the acoustics designed for ceremonies. "Your recent behavior has become... concerning."

"Particularly your unstructured approach to magical education," Lady Lightford added. "Such unpredictable methods can be quite dangerous."

The grand doors opened. Keane entered, moving with a grace that was wrong. Not stiff. Not unnatural. Just... deliberate. Too deliberate. His blue eyes slid past me too smoothly, looking through me rather than at me.

But then, for a fraction of a second, the barest hesitation, like he had to force himself to keep walking.

"Your father had similar theories about letting magic flow... naturally." Lord Alstone's voice held a carefully measured concern. He nodded to Keane. "Show her what unstable magic leads to."

Keane's hands moved in patterns that felt twisted, wrong. A corrupted portal opened, and through its darkness, I saw my father's diary floating in that wrong space between spaces. The leather-bound book I had studied so carefully, trying to decode his secrets.

“When Keane told us about this,” Lord Raynoff said, his tone regretful but firm, “we recognized the same dangerous theories that led your father to nearly destabilize years of careful work.”

Lady Lightford lifted the diary with elegant fingers. “Such a shame. But we cannot risk these disruptions spreading. The next generation must understand the importance of proper magical structure.”

“Is this what Project Cornerstone is about?” I demanded, my voice raw. “Forcing magic into unnatural patterns?”

The Council exchanged glances. Lord Raynoff leaned forward, expression almost paternal. “You misunderstand, Miss Grimley. Project Cornerstone represents progress—proper regulation and control of magical power. Something your father unfortunately failed to grasp.”

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“Then why does Keane’s magic feel wrong?” I pressed. “Why does it bleed darkness instead of flowing naturally?”

“Wrong?” Lord Alstone’s voice held genuine confusion mixed with irritation. “The stability sessions are helping him. Teaching him proper control, just as they’ve helped countless others.”

“Such dangerous ideas about ‘natural’ magic,” Lord Lightford drawled. “Really, this unstructured approach to power is precisely why we need more rigorous controls.”

“The wellspring itself shows—”

“The wellspring is a power source,” Lord Raynoff cut in firmly. “One that requires careful management and proper channeling. Your father’s theories about ‘natural’ magic flow nearly destabilized years of careful work. We cannot allow such chaos to spread again.”

“You’ve been in our world barely a moment, dear girl,” Lady Lightford added with artificial sweetness. “Don’t pretend you understand forces we’ve spent generations learning to properly direct.”

Lord Alstone stepped forward. “This goes beyond mere defiance. She’ll disrupt everything we’ve built. The stability we’ve maintained—”

“Peace, Lazlo.” Lord Raynoff raised a hand. A command, not a request.

For a breath, Alstone didn’t move. His jaw flexed. His fingers twitched, just barely,

like he was resisting the urge to reach for something—to slam his hands against the table, to do something more than just stand here while Raynoff played the reasonable one.

But then, slowly, his shoulders eased back, his lips pressing into a thin, forced line. Obedient. For now.

Lady Lightford stepped forward, lifting the candle with graceful precision. “Consider this a necessary correction.” The flame touched the diary’s edge. “For your own protection.”

I lunged forward, but Cyrus’s flames erupted in a perfect circle, caging me. There was a delay—so small no one else might have noticed. A fraction of a second where he hesitated, where his fire should have moved instantly, but instead flickered like it was... considering.

It still burned blue where it met my magic.

His face was blank, but his fingers curled slightly at his sides. Tense. Frustrated. Like he was fighting something, though I couldn’t tell if it was me or himself.

Magic pressed against me, thick and heavy, like unseen hands forcing me to my knees. Not cruel—corrective. They truly believed they were helping, showing me the right way.

I caught Keane’s eyes across the flames. For a heartbeat, I saw silver light fighting through the corruption in his magic. “You told me to trust you,” I whispered. “Did you mean it?”

Then Lord Alstone’s hand clamped on his nephew’s shoulder, and the darkness swallowed that last glimpse of hope.

The diary crumbled to ash while they watched with calm, measured satisfaction.

All except one.

Alstone didn't watch the book. He watched me. Still. Unblinking. Not satisfied.

The others had already dismissed me. To them, this was over. A lesson delivered. A warning given.

But I had the strange feeling that Alstone wasn't done.

Beneath the floor, something stirred. A pulse of clean energy, natural and right. The pressure faltered for half a heartbeat.

"You see?" Lord Raynoff said softly. "Even now your magic resists proper control. But we can help you learn, as we've helped all our children learn."

"Consider carefully," Lady Lightford added. "None of us wish to see you follow your father's tragic path."

The magic released me suddenly. I sagged, catching myself before I hit the floor, trembling from the effort to stay upright.

"You are dismissed," Lord Raynoff said. "Keane, escort Miss Grimley to her rooms. Ensure she has time to... reflect on today's lesson."

The Council swept from the room, their decision made, their guidance delivered. The heirs remained behind.

I refused to look at Keane. I couldn't bear to see that mechanical emptiness again.



Instead, I looked toward Cyrus and Elio. Cyrus' flames still tinged blue, but he didn't meet my eyes. I didn't expect sympathy from Elio. I didn't expect anything at all.

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And yet—he shifted. Just slightly. A half-step forward, too small to mean anything. Too small to be real. But he’d done it before he could stop himself.

Echo’s scales shimmered in rapid, uneasy pulses. Warning colors. A heartbeat of silent distress. Not for me. For him.

I didn’t give them the chance to speak. I turned and walked away.

43

Elio

I found her in the deepest part of the library, exactly where I knew she’d be. Echo’s scales flickered between deep purple and storm-gray, betraying emotions I usually kept buried.

“Go away, Elio.” Her voice was raw—not just from crying, but from screaming. From breaking. From every goddamn thing they had taken from her today.

“Haven’t you done enough to me?”

She didn’t just mean today. She meant every illusion, every trick, every game.

The bitterness in her tone made me flinch. Echo’s scales darkened to ash-gray, reflecting my shame.

“No games,” I said quietly, taking a careful step forward. “Not after what I saw

happen to Keane.”

She whirled on me, dark eyes blazing. “Like you care what happens to any of us. All you do is play with people. Turn them into your personal entertainment.” She shoved me hard, the impact surprising. “The maid’s costume? The illusions making me doubt everything I saw? Was it fun, watching me break?”

I let her hit me again. Let her shove, let her spit her rage at me, let her words cut.

Because I deserved worse.

“I’m sorry.”

The words tasted like salt and blood. I wasn’t used to saying them. I wasn’t used to meaning them.

“I was cruel. Deliberately cruel. Because that’s what was expected of me.”

“Don’t.” Her voice cracked. “Don’t try to charm your way out of this.”

“No charm. No masks.” I held up my hands, letting her see the tremor in them. “Just... please. Let me show you something. In the sanctuary.”

She laughed, bitter and sharp. “More violin confessions? More pretty illusions? I am so sick of you people thinking I’m something you can use!”

“You’re right not to trust me,” I admitted. “I’ve given you every reason not to. But something’s wrong with Keane’s magic—you’ve felt it too. And I... I think I might know why.”

She stared at me, breath unsteady, emotions warring across her face. “Why should I

believe anything you say?”

“You shouldn’t.”

That made her hesitate. Just a little. Enough for me to step closer, enough for her not to back away.

“But for once in my life, I’m terrified of what’s happening. And you’re the only one who noticed before it was too late.”

Her hands were shaking, just a little. Like she was holding herself together by sheer force of will. Like she was afraid to believe me.

After a long, excruciating silence, she nodded once. “If this is another trick...”

“It’s not. I swear it.”

We headed back to the dorm and then up to my sanctuary. The enchanted dome stretched above us, revealing the vast night sky. My violin case sat untouched in its corner—I hadn’t played since watching Keane’s magic turn wrong. Some pain went too deep for music.

“The magic feels different here,” she murmured, moving cautiously to the window. “Clean, like during trials.”

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“Because it’s protected.” I pulled out a single sheet of paper—a fragment of notes in my mother’s elegant script about “concerning magical resonance” and “stabilizing unstable magic.”

She scanned it quickly, her expression guarded. “What is this?”

“Something I found in Mother’s study. About how magic is supposed to be controlled.” I watched her carefully. “When was the last time you saw Keane’s portals shine proper silver?”

She stiffened. “Not since trials.” Her fingers traced the words on the page. “When our magic worked together...”

“Exactly.” I let my illusions drop completely, something I hadn’t done in years. “The way you make us question everything we were taught about control.”

Her breath hitched. “His magic started changing after that. But why?”

“I don’t know. Not really.” The half-truths I’d planned died on my tongue. “But I think... I think they’re afraid of how naturally our magic works together.”

She turned away, wrapping her arms around herself. “Why are you really showing me this, Elio?”

“Because I’m tired of performing. Of pretending I don’t see what’s happening to him.” I moved closer, drawn by the way her magic reached instinctively for mine despite everything I’d done to her. “Because I need you to understand how sorry I

am. For all of it.”

“It’s not enough,” she whispered, but she didn’t pull away. “Just being sorry doesn’t fix what you did.”

“I know.”

Echo’s scales blazed brighter, wilder—like Marigold’s magic was pushing into mine, like mine was answering.

We both felt it.

Her fingers twitched, like she wanted to recoil, but didn’t. My own breath came too fast, my illusions slipping further than I’d ever let them in front of someone else.

“It’s not supposed to be like this,” she whispered. But she wasn’t moving away.

Neither was I.

“We have to figure out what they’re doing to him,” she said finally. “And if you’re still on their side, I don’t need you.”

Something in my chest twisted. “I’m not.” It wasn’t entirely true. Not yet. But I wasn’t Marigold’s either. I was somewhere in between, for the first time in my life.

We stood there under the endless sky, holding onto a fragile trust built on shared fear and genuine remorse.

It wasn’t forgiveness. Not yet. But maybe it was a start.

Marigold

Keane appeared in my doorway just before midnight, his magic feeling wrong in a way that made my skin crawl. The sight of him tugged painfully at my heart. Beneath the mechanical coldness of his movements, I saw a flicker of someone I still recognized. The boy who had kissed me under the stars. The one who had traced magic through the air like it was a story waiting to be written. The boy who had loved me.

But something was off. Scout hissed. The dead things wailed.

“Please,” Keane whispered, his voice brittle but almost familiar. “I need your help in town. I think... I think I can fight it. But not alone.”

I wanted to believe him. Stars above, I wanted to believe him. But his magic felt wrong, distorted somehow. Like it wasn't quite his anymore.

I reached for him anyway, my fingers trembling. Maybe if I touched him, I could pull him back.

He flinched away from me. “Meet me at the old mining warehouse. Quickly,” he said, then turned and walked stiffly down the stairs.

The wrongness in his magic lingered long after he'd gone.

I moved through Wickem's grounds quickly, wrapping my jacket around me over my pajamas. The dead things whispered urgently as I slipped past the wards and into town, their voices sharp with warning. I ignored them. How could I refuse Keane? How could I not try to save him?

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But the warehouse district felt wrong.

The usual background hum of protective wards was missing, leaving an eerie silence that made my skin crawl. Scout pressed against my neck, trembling. I could sense the disturbance before I even saw them—

Vampires.

Not many, maybe six or seven, but they moved with lethal precision, herding me toward the center of the square.

A child's scream pierced the night.

Two vampires had cornered a family, their eyes still fixed on me. A trap. This was all a trap.

“Not happening.”

Elio materialized beside me, his illusions fracturing into mirrored versions of himself, confusing the vampires' supernatural senses.

“We saw him pass the common room,” he said quickly, Echo's scales flashing warning colors. “Something was wrong. When you followed him...”

“Behind you!” Cyrus's voice cracked like a whip. Blue flames exploded between me and the vampire lunging for my throat. The creature screamed, reeling back, but recovered unnaturally fast.



“The wards aren’t working,” I said, reaching for the buried dead as more vampires emerged from the shadows. “How is that possible?”

His flames sparked dangerously. “Only Council members can affect the ward matrix—”

Cyrus swore under his breath, his flames flickering erratically. Elio went still beside me. Something had changed.

Then I felt it. A shift in the air, a weight pressing down on the battlefield, like the magic itself had pulled tighter around us.

Lord Alstone was here.

But what made my heart stop was who stood beside his uncle—Keane. His eyes empty, his posture rigid. Like a puppet on strings.

The pain that surged through me felt sharper than any blade. This wasn’t just a trap.

“Get the civilians out!” I ordered, drawing power from the old cemetery. Skeletal hands erupted from the earth, forming a barrier between the vampires and the fleeing family.

Cyrus hesitated for a fraction of a second, then nodded. His flames herded the townspeople to safety, while Elio’s illusions fractured into solid forms that shielded their escape. We moved together instinctively, like we had during trials.

A vampire blurred toward me, faster than any human should have been. But Cyrus was faster.

His flames wrapped around me, burning with that impossible blue color they’d shown

during trials. The vampire screamed.

“They’re already dead,” I realized suddenly. “That’s why they recover so quickly. But it also means...”

I didn’t have to fight them.

I had to undo them.

I reached deep into my necromancy. Didn’t fight it. Didn’t hold back.

The dead things surged forward, and the vampires hesitated—confused by my control over the very force animating them.

“Together,” Elio said quietly. But not like a plan. Like a realization.

Cyrus hesitated. Just for a second. I saw the moment it hit him, the moment his instincts fought back against years of training.

But his flames wove through my necromancy anyway. Elio’s illusions bent around it, giving my power form. And for the first time, I knew exactly how it was supposed to work.

We moved in perfect synchronization.

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The vampires fell back, overwhelmed. Their coordinated movements faltered as my power disrupted their unnatural existence.

A portal appeared behind Lord Alstone and Keane, and Alstone disappeared into it.

For a split second, Keane's magic hesitated. Just a breath of resistance before the portal pulled him in after his uncle.

That wasn't nothing.

"What was Lord Alstone doing here?" Cyrus's flames still burned that pure blue, responding to my nearness. "Why would he—"

Shouts from the direction of Wickem interrupted him. Professor Rivera led a group of faculty through the streets, responding to emergency calls.

Too late. Lord Alstone and Keane were gone.

"Are you alright?" Cyrus asked roughly. He wasn't looking at me, but his flames still curled protectively nearby.

"They thought I'd be alone," I said, watching the faculty secure the area. Scout pressed close, still trembling. "They didn't expect..."

"Us?" Elio's voice held none of its usual polish. Just raw, shaken honesty. "Neither did we."

We stood together in the silence that followed—our magic still humming, frayed and tangled from what we'd just done. Something had shifted between us. Not trust, not yet. But something close.

“We'll get him back,” Cyrus said, his voice low, ragged with guilt he wasn't ready to name.

“And figure out what's happening to his magic,” Elio added. His perfect mask had slipped, and this time, he didn't bother fixing it.

We had more questions than answers, but one thing had changed—tonight, we'd fought as one. Not rivals. Just witches. And that meant something.

Cyrus exhaled sharply, then turned away, his fire flaring brighter. “I'm going to talk to my father.”

The sudden steel in his voice snapped me out of the haze. He moved like a storm gathering speed, magic burning hotter than I'd ever felt it—his flames licked blue at the edges, tainted by something deeper, older.

“Vampires this close to campus?” he growled. “After what they did to my mother? Lord Alstone has to answer for this.”

“Cyrus—” I started, reaching for him.

But he spun, eyes blazing. “Don't.”

The word cracked through the air like a whip. With one last glance at the horizon, he stalked into the darkness, flames trailing behind him like the tail of a comet.

Elio stepped closer, his hand a steady weight on my arm. “Let him go,” he said

quietly, all traces of mockery gone. “Some demons need facing alone.”

I watched Cyrus vanish into the night, my chest tightening with the weight of everything we still didn’t understand. The adrenaline faded, leaving only the echoes—fangs glinting in the dark, Keane’s corrupted portals writhing like serpents, his uncle’s cruel smile as they vanished below.

45

Cyrus

The Raynoff estate loomed against the twilight sky, all sharp angles and dark stone. I’d grown up in these halls, learned to control my flames in the training yard after Mother’s death. After vampires ripped our family apart.

But tonight, I wasn’t thinking about that.

I was thinking about Keane’s magic flickering silver for a heartbeat before Alstone forced him through that portal. About Marigold standing between us and an army of vampires, commanding death itself as if it answered only to her. About the way my fire burned blue again—not just near her, but near Elio, too.

I stormed through the front doors, still reeling from the night’s chaos. The house was too quiet, too controlled. Magic hummed through the stone, layered protection spells pressing down on my skin like unseen hands. The weight of generations of Raynoffs watching, judging, expecting me to fall in line.

Not tonight.

My father stood in the study doorway, posture rigid, power coiled around him like a barely-leashed storm. Behind him, golden light flickered—his fire magic, always

perfectly controlled, unlike mine. Unlike what mine had become.

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“You shouldn’t be here,” he said. “Not in this state.”

“Oh?” I stepped closer, embers flickering at my fingertips. “Would you rather I pretend everything is fine? Pretend that I didn’t just watch Alstone command a vampire attack and nearly tear Keane apart?”

A flicker of something—real shock—crossed his face. He hadn’t known. That only made my blood boil hotter.

“Alstone wouldn’t—” he began, but I cut him off with a sharp laugh.

“Wouldn’t what? Work with the very creatures you’ve sworn to eradicate? Let his own nephew rot under his control?” My flames flared higher, licking dangerously close to the doorframe. “Because I saw it. I saw Keane fight back, even for just a second. And I saw what Alstone did to him when he resisted.”

Father’s expression darkened, but it wasn’t denial I saw. It was uncertainty. Worry.

“If this is true,” he said slowly, “then Alstone has lost control. That makes him dangerous.”

“He was already dangerous.”

Silence stretched between us, thick with unspoken words. Then my father’s eyes narrowed. “Your fire.”

I clenched my fists, forcing the flames back to gold, but we both knew it was too late.

“What’s happening to it?” he asked, voice low.

I wanted to lie. To tell him it was nothing, just a trick of the light. But the words wouldn’t come.

Instead, I turned sharply. “I need answers. And since you don’t have them, I’ll find them myself.”

His magic flared—brief, sharp—but he didn’t stop me. Not this time. He was too consumed by Alstone’s betrayal to bother holding the reins any tighter.

I didn’t look back.

My footsteps echoed down the hall, each one pulling me further from his fury and closer to something older—quieter, but just as dangerous.

The study doors loomed at the end of the corridor, still sealed. Fifteen years untouched. Fifteen years of silence behind wood and wards.

Even as a child, I’d felt the grief pressing against that threshold like a storm held back by sheer will.

But tonight... tonight the air felt different. The magic around the lock didn’t resist. It hummed. Expectant.

A pulse of magic, old and waiting. The wards rippled as I stepped closer. The moment my flames flickered blue, the lock clicked open.

I hesitated for just a breath before pushing inside. The room smelled of parchment and aged magic, undisturbed for over a decade. My mother’s presence lingered in the meticulous order—books stacked just so, quills resting in their holders, a half-



finished research paper still lying on the desk as if she had only stepped away for a moment.

My heart pounded as I rifled through the documents. Most were standard research notes, but then—

A single report, tucked between the pages of an old spellbook.

H.R. expressing concerns about heir magical resonance. Further observation required.

The same words from the trials. The same words from Keane's failing magic. My hands trembled as I turned the page.

Cornerstone remains unstable. Leylines shifting. Control faltering. We are missing something vital.

Cornerstone.

The word sent ice through my veins. Project Cornerstone wasn't just old research. It was something she had been actively investigating before she died.

I flipped through the notes faster now, searching for something—anything—that explained why this was happening. And then I found it.

A letter. Not a report. Not a formal research note. A hastily written message tucked beneath the pages.

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If I don't return, it means they've found me. The contact will know what to do.

There was no name. No signature. Just a final warning, meant for someone else.

But someone had taken the next page. The last entry, the final piece—gone.

I stood there, breathing hard, the words burning into my memory. If they've found me. Found her for what? For this research? For getting too close?

I couldn't stay here. If my father caught me now—if he saw what I'd found—

I folded the notes, slipping them into my coat, and made my way back through the halls. The house remained quiet, my father still in his study, lost in his own thoughts of Alstone's betrayal.

By the time I stepped into the cold night air, one thing was certain.

My mother hadn't just died in a vampire attack.

She had been silenced.

46

Marigold

The path back to Wickem blurred in the dark, lit only by the low pulse of magic still crackling in the air. My limbs ached, my thoughts scattered, every step pulling me

further from the fight but no closer to steady.

“Come on,” Elio murmured, tugging lightly on my elbow. “You’re barely standing. I know somewhere safe.”

I didn’t argue. I didn’t have the energy to.

We climbed the narrow tower steps in silence. Elio’s sanctuary opened around us, bathed in the pre-dawn light. The enchanted dome overhead reflected a sky of shifting constellations, though the stars outside were beginning to pale with the coming dawn. It felt different tonight. More grounded. Morereal. Like Elio himself when he dropped his carefully crafted masks.

“The stars are different tonight,” I murmured, stepping into the room. The constellations wheeled slowly above us in his illusions, their glow softer than before. I traced one of the patterns absently, letting the familiar light soothe my fraying nerves.

“You need rest,” he said gently, his hand brushing against my arm. His touch was warm, steady. Safe.

“I can’t.” The words slipped out before I could stop them. I turned to him, exhaustion dragging at my limbs. “Every time I close my eyes, I see Keane’s portals. See the way his uncle looked at me, like he already owned him...” My voice broke, and I bit down on the flood of fear threatening to consume me.

“I know,” Elio whispered. He stepped closer, guiding me to the worn couch by the window where we’d spent hours poring over his mother’s letters.

Echo settled on the windowsill, her scales shifting slowly through muted colors—deep blues, soft purples, the shades of a restless heart.

I wanted to pull away. I should pull away.

But I didn't.

My body betrayed me before my mind could catch up—leaning into him, seeking his warmth, his steadiness.

“Why did you really bring me up here?” I asked softly, my cheek resting against his shoulder. “This isn't just about getting me to rest.”

His hand slid to my back, tracing soothing circles that made my breathing slow. “Because you need somewhere safe to break. Somewhere you don't have to be strong for everyone else.”

My throat tightened. He wasn't wrong, but I didn't want to admit it—not to him, not to myself.

“I can't break,” I whispered. “If I do... I don't know if I'll be able to put myself back together.”

“You can.” He turned slightly, facing me fully. His usual perfect mask was gone, leaving only raw sincerity in his eyes. “And I'll be here when you do. I've got you.”

Something inside me cracked. I made a soft, strangled sound and buried my face in his chest. The tears came hard and fast, fear and guilt spilling out in ragged sobs. He didn't speak—just held me tighter, his hand stroking my hair, his breath steady and grounding.

“I miss him so much,” I choked out between sobs. “Everything feels wrong without Keane. Like... like I lost him for good, and I don't even know how to fix it.”

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“I know,” Elio murmured. His voice was quieter now, rough around the edges. “But you’re not alone. Not anymore.”

I pulled back just enough to meet his gaze, my cheeks wet and flushed. “Why are you helping me? Really?”

His hand moved to cup my cheek, his thumb gently wiping away a tear. “Because you make magic feel real again.” The admission seemed to cost him something, his voice low and steady. “You saw through every illusion, every perfect performance. You showed me what power should be—when it’s real, not just a trick for the crowd.”

My breath hitched. His eyes—usually veiled behind wit and charm—were wide open now, stripped of every shield. No performance. No illusions. Just Elio.

A jolt went through me. I was still Keane’s... or I had been. Those feelings didn’t just disappear because he was gone. But with Elio looking at me like that—like he actually saw me, not the heir or the half-breed or the problem—it was hard to pretend I wasn’t caught in something dangerous. Something real.

I swallowed hard. “This doesn’t mean I’ve stopped caring about him.”

Elio didn’t flinch. “I wouldn’t expect you to.” His hand lifted, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear with careful intent. “But that doesn’t mean this—” his gaze held mine, unrelenting, “—isn’t real too. Wanting something else doesn’t erase what came before.”

He didn't say love. Of course he didn't. That wasn't his language. But the steadiness in his voice, the softness in his touch—it was the closest I'd ever seen to Elio Lightford letting himself feel something without artifice.

“You mean that,” I whispered, leaning into his hand.

“I do.” His fingers trailed along the line of my jaw, leaving behind sparks of warm, clean magic that settled low in my spine. Echo's scales shifted, flaring that impossible violet again—color rippling with intensity. The air between us pulsed, alive with magic and want, like the breath the sky takes just before a lightning strike

“No more illusions,” he promised, but something flickered behind his eyes. Fear. Maybe just a little.

“That's not easy for you, is it?” I murmured.

His hand traced my jaw, his touch reverent. “No. But I think... I think I want to try. With you.”

“Elio...” I didn't know if it was a warning or a plea.

He tilted my face up—slowly, so slowly, like he was giving me every chance to pull away.

I almost did. For half a breath, I almost stepped back.

But then his fingers traced my cheek, his thumb catching a stray tear, and I was lost.

“You,” I breathed.

His kiss was feather-light at first, a tease—like he was testing just how badly I

wanted this. But the moment our mouths met, the hesitation burned away. He deepened the kiss with startling urgency, his hand sliding into my hair and tugging just enough to draw a gasp from my throat.

I barely had time to breathe before his tongue traced the seam of my lips, demanding more. I opened to him, and everything else fell away. There was nothing soft about this. It was heat and hunger, his teeth grazing my bottom lip before he captured it, pulled, sucked, until I was clinging to him like he was the only thing keeping me grounded.

“You’re incredible,” he breathed against my lips, his voice raw and husky.

I answered with another kiss, letting my hands wander. Our magic surged around us—light from his illusions and my shadows deepening until the room felt like a star-filled abyss holding only the two of us. It wasn’t just power; it was recognition. Understanding. Two people who had seen through each other’s masks and found something worth holding onto.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered, my voice shaking with both need and vulnerability.

“Never,” he promised, his mouth moving to my neck, each touch igniting sparks beneath my skin. His teeth scraped, a teasing bite, before soothing the spot with his tongue. A slow, wicked rhythm designed to make me ache.

His hands slid beneath my shirt, fingers teasing along my bare skin, reveling in the way I shivered beneath his touch. “So sensitive,” he murmured, pleased. “Every reaction... mine.”

A thrill shot through me as he slowly lifted my shirt, deliberately drawing out the moment. He tugged it over my head but left it hanging from my wrists, trapping my arms above me as he surveyed his prize. I was bare before him, having forgotten even

a bra in my haste to leave the dorm.

“Mari, look at you.” His eyes darkened, and his illusions flickered.

He bent down, taking one nipple into his mouth, teasing with slow, deliberate flicks of his tongue. His hand found the other, rolling it between his fingers, alternating between pleasure and restraint, keeping me on edge.

I arched beneath him, my breath coming in short, desperate gasps. “Elio, please—”

“Not yet,” he murmured, the wicked grin returning. “I want to savor you.”



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His lips traveled lower, mapping my body with kisses and teasing bites. When he reached the waistband of my pajama pants, he paused, his eyes meeting mine. Seeking permission. Waiting for the inevitable surrender.

“Yes,” I whispered, barely able to form words.

With a slow, practiced ease, he stripped away the last barriers between us. He stepped back, devouring me with his gaze, his eyes flickering with heat and something deeper.

“Mari,” he murmured, almost reverently. “More gorgeous than any illusion I could ever create.”

He stepped closer, sliding his fingers along the soft skin of my inner thighs. Heat pooled at my core—a mixture of longing and urgency.

His fingers danced teasingly close to where I craved him most, but he took his time, relishing the way my breath quickened and my body responded to his every caress. I could hardly contain myself, biting my lip to suppress the desperate sounds threatening to escape.

“Fascinating,” he murmured, watching the way my breath hitched. “Every time I touch you here... you tremble. Like you need this.”

He chuckled softly, a low rumble that vibrated against me as he finally allowed his fingers to glide upward, sliding into my folds.

“Mari,” he breathed again, as if overwhelmed by the sight and feel of me.

He stroked my folds softly, circling my clit, while his eyes watched my reactions. He didn’t rush, didn’t overwhelm—he studied me, watched me, learned every sound, every tremble, every gasp.

Then he plunged a finger inside, then two. I moaned aloud, gripping his shoulders and pulling him closer, my legs trembling. The world around us faded into a hazy blur, the only thing that mattered was the intoxicating connection between us.

“So wet for me,” he murmured, almost to himself. “Good girl.” His fingers dipped inside me, and pulled out, his thumb patiently stimulating my clit with gentle touches.

“Elio,” I gasped. My eyes were on him, on this beautiful man who knew exactly how to please me. My nails dug into the fabric of the couch as pleasure coiled tight inside me.

“You’re exquisite like this,” he whispered as he pushed me toward the edge. Then his fingers slowed, patiently drawing out every bit of pleasure, before speeding up again. “Falling apart for me.”

I moaned, losing myself to the sensations. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t speak—the world collapsed down to him and his teasing touches.

Then he backed away, watching me. He leaned down and traced the prevention rune on my lower stomach with a finger still wet from my juices.

“Do you know what this means?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Good,” he said. “Then let me ruin you properly.”

He draped me over the arm of the couch, my chest pressed against the worn fabric, my back arching as he positioned me exactly how he wanted. His hands trailed down my spine, slow and deliberate, teasing every nerve ending along the way.

“Perfect,” he murmured, his voice thick with approval. “So beautiful like this... pliant, waiting.”

“Elio,” I gasped, wriggling, trying to turn my head to look at him, but he pressed a hand to the center of my back, keeping me exactly where he wanted me.

“Ah, ah,” he chided, amusement laced with something darker. “No peeking, darling. Just feel.”

His fingers skimmed over my hips, then down to the soft skin of my inner thighs, brushing against where I ached for him but never quite giving me what I needed. His touch was maddening—feather-light, infuriatingly slow.

“Elio,” I groaned, shifting my hips, seeking more.

“Yes?” His thumb circled my clit, light enough to make me tremble but not enough to satisfy. “Tell me what you need.”

“You,” I gasped, my fingers clenching against the couch as frustration built inside me.

He chuckled, warm and low, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to the small of my back. “Then you shall have me.”

His fingers left me, the sudden absence making me whimper, but then I heard the

unmistakable sound of metal clinking—his belt, his zipper. The air thrummed with anticipation, with the quiet hum of magic and heat between us.

“Are you ready?” His voice was rough, unsteady in a way that sent a thrill through me.

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“Yes,” I whispered, pressing back against him.

The moment I said it, he thrust into me, filling me completely. A gasp tore from my lips as I stretched around him, the sensation overwhelming, delicious.

“Elio,” I moaned, my forehead pressing into the couch as pleasure coiled deep in my core. I wanted to see him, to watch the way he unraveled, but I couldn’t. He kept me like this, shrouded in sensation, teased by the unknown.

“Feel me,” he groaned, his hands gripping my hips, holding me in place as he pulled back and thrust into me again, setting a slow, agonizing rhythm. “That’s all you need to do.”

His fingers found my clit again, stroking in time with his movements. The dual sensation sent a bolt of pleasure through me, making me arch, making my breath come in ragged gasps.

I reached back blindly, my fingers grasping at anything, but he caught my wrist, twisting it behind me and pinning it to my lower back. The shift made me cry out, the angle deeper, his control absolute.

“Mari,” he rasped, his own restraint slipping. “You feel unreal.”

I was unraveling, every thrust pushing me closer, every whispered praise setting my skin on fire. The world outside this moment ceased to exist—all I knew was the push and pull of him, the heat, the pleasure, the ache.

“Elio, please,” I whimpered, desperate, teetering on the edge.

He leaned over me, his breath hot against my ear. “Come for me, darling.”

The moment he said it, I shattered, pleasure crashing over me in waves so intense I saw stars. My body clenched around him, dragging him into his own release. He groaned my name, his voice raw as he pulsed inside me, his grip on my hips tightening as he rode out the pleasure.

For a long moment, we stayed like that, tangled in the aftermath, our breaths uneven. His lips pressed to my shoulder, soft now, reverent.

“You were exquisite,” he murmured, finally releasing my wrist and smoothing his hands over my back. “But I do wish I could’ve seen your face.”

I let out a breathless, sated laugh, still coming down from the high. “Next time.”

He chuckled, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me back against his chest. “Oh, darling, there will be a next time.”

Afterward, Elio tugged me onto the couch and into his arms. Our bodies were still trembling from the intensity of what we’d shared, but now there was peace in the silence between us. No masks, no illusions. Just skin, warmth, and the steady rhythm of his breathing against mine.

His hand found mine, our fingers lacing together as we lay tangled in each other. Slowly, our breaths evened out, rising and falling in unison. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the remnants of our magic hum softly around us, light and shadow twining like something ancient and instinctive.

Later, he moved quietly across the room and picked up his violin. The familiar sight

of him with the instrument sent a pang through me—I was used to Elio performing, his pursuit of flawless perfection. But this... this wasn't that.

He didn't play for the crowd. He played for me.

The first note shivered through the air, raw and aching. It wasn't polished. It wasn't charming. Each phrase bled into the next like something torn open and left to pulse in the light. A confession in sound—the only language he trusted more than illusion.

A shiver slid down my spine. The melody held the weight of everything we weren't saying—the chaos of the night, Keane's absence, the shared wounds we both pretended not to feel. Echo's scales rippled with every shift in tone, catching flickers of dawnlight through the enchanted dome above us.

I stood slowly from the couch where I'd curled up earlier, drawn in by the way the music wrapped around us like a truth spell. It sank into my bones, mapped across my skin like a ghost of his touch. My breath caught as the final note faded, stilling the room like the pause before sunrise.

Elio lowered the violin, but didn't move. His gaze found mine, raw and open. "We'll get him back," he said quietly. "Keane. Every wellspring they've poisoned. We'll undo it all."

"I know." My voice was steady. I crossed the space between us and reached for him—no hesitation this time. He caught me as I moved into his arms, one hand sliding around my waist, the other pressing the violin gently aside.

He drew me back toward the couch, guiding me down without breaking eye contact. I curled into his side, and this time, we didn't speak. Our magic met in quiet pulses—steady, honest. Unmasked.

Echo settled nearby, her scales finally still, deep purple flickering softly.

“Together,” I whispered again, and his hand found my hip, grounding me. Steady and real.

I let my head rest against his shoulder, let the thrum of his heartbeat steady mine. The tension bled away, and in its place: something tender. Quiet. Whole.

Whatever came next, we would face it. No more illusions. No more masks.

Just this.



47

Elio

Dawn crept through the sanctuary, bathing the room in soft gold. The stars of my enchanted ceiling had faded to pale echoes, but the space still felt untouched by the world outside. Marigold lay curled beside me, wrapped in my shirt, her breathing slow and steady. Her magic lingered in the air, mingling with mine, a warmth I wasn't sure I was ready to name.

For once, I didn't reach for an illusion. No careful performance, no deflection—just reality, settling uncomfortably in my chest. I should have felt triumphant, taking something for myself instead of playing to the expectations of others. Instead, all I could think was: what now?

I traced my fingers over Echo's scales as the familiar shifted restlessly, sensing my unease. Last night had changed something. I had changed something. And now, in daylight, I didn't know what to do with it.

A crackling pulse of displaced magic sent Echo's scales flashing crimson. My wards flared in protest as someone forced their way through.

Cyrus.

He stood in the doorway, his flames curling in tight, volatile movements, still tinged with that unnatural wellspring blue. His gaze swept over the room and landed on Marigold. He stilled.

The silence stretched, charged and brittle. His flames flared once, sharp and instinctive, before he forced them back under control.

“Your wards need work,” he muttered, stepping inside like he owned the place. His voice was rough, edged with exhaustion and something else I couldn’t place.

“They worked fine before you barged in,” I shot back, moving to block his path. My magic still hummed with disrupted energy where he had forced entry, and the invasion grated on my nerves. “How did you even—”

“I traced you here,” he interrupted, his tone sharp. His amber eyes gleamed with an intensity I didn’t like. “Did you really think I wouldn’t find you after last night?”

Before I could respond, Marigold stirred beside me. A slow inhale, her fingers tightening slightly in the fabric of my shirt as awareness settled in. She didn’t flinch, didn’t panic—but she took a measured breath before slipping free of the blankets, movements careful, deliberate.

Cyrus’s gaze flicked between us, unreadable. He didn’t say anything about what he saw, but the way his flames curled inward, controlled and contained, told me he was filing it away for later.

Instead of commenting, he dropped a stack of papers onto my desk. The edges were singed, the ink smudged in places.

“These were my mother’s,” he said. “They’ve been locked away for fifteen years, untouched.”

Marigold, now fully awake, moved toward the desk. She hesitated for only a second before picking up the first page. “I still have some pages from my father’s diary. They might connect to this.”

She searched for her coat and patted the pockets, frowning, then exhaled in relief as she pulled out the crumpled sheets. “I didn’t want to leave them behind.”

I set down my mother’s notes alongside them. “Then we put everything together.”

We worked in silence, piecing together fragments of stolen knowledge. Project Cornerstone was referenced repeatedly—sometimes clinical, sometimes desperate. Mentions of vampires. Blood magic. Corrupted wellsprings. Warnings about heir resonance.

“They weren’t just experimenting on Keane,” Marigold murmured, staring at one of the notes. “They were trying to find a way to do it to all of us.”

Cyrus’s flames burned hotter. “If they’ve already started, that means whatever Alstone is doing to Keane isn’t a mistake—it’s a blueprint.”

My stomach twisted. “And if it’s tied to blood magic...”

Marigold’s voice was barely a whisper. “Then it’s connected to the vampires.”

Cyrus flipped through another set of notes, his jaw tight. “This ‘Last Witness’—it comes up in both my mother’s notes and your father’s diary.”

Marigold scanned the pages, brow furrowing. “It’s never named. Just... referenced. Like they were protecting their identity.”

I exhaled sharply. “Or like they went into hiding.”

The weight of the realization settled over us. There was someone out there who knew the truth—someone Marigold’s and Cyrus’s parents had trusted. Someone the Council had failed to erase.

“We find them,” Cyrus said, his voice firm. “We get answers. And we stop this.”

Marigold nodded, her grip tightening on the last remnants of her father’s words. “No more running. No more waiting.”

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I reached for her hand, grounding myself in the way our magic naturally harmonized. A part of me knew I should let go—but I didn't.

Cyrus studied us for a long moment, something shifting in his expression. Then, finally, he nodded.

“Together,” he said.

Echo's scales rippled with amusement as Cyrus spread the papers across my desk. The dynamic between us had shifted. None of us said it aloud, but we felt it. We weren't just uneasy allies anymore.

I nodded, raising a simple illusion to show the tunnel network beneath Wickem. “Start with what we know.”

Marigold's voice was unwavering. “We find the Last Witness. We stop Project Cornerstone. And we get Keane back.”

I pulled her closer, letting Echo's scales reflect what I couldn't say aloud.

No more masks. No more lies.

Cyrus's flames burned blue. “For Keane. For all of us.”

Looking at them—fierce, unshaken Marigold in my shirt, determined Cyrus with his clean flames—I knew we had something stronger than the Council's corruption.

Something real.

48

Keane

Oil. Always oilnow, sliding through my thoughts, making everything distant and wrong. Uncle's voice echoed in the spaces between spaces, commanding through corrupted wellspring energy.

Show me what she found in the research.

Memory flickered—Marigold's face crumpling as I took her father's last warnings. Her hand reaching for me as corrupted portals pulled us apart. My body moving like a puppet while something inside screamed against the wrongness.

Wisp? Where was Wisp?

A flicker of pure blue light in the corner of my vision. My familiar trying to reach me through the corruption. But Uncle's tainted magic ran too deep, poisoning everything it touched.

That wasn't what Uncle wanted. Strength above all else. He thought the corruption was a tool to wield, not a sickness eating through the magic at its source.

Good boy. Just like we practiced, with the controlled energy.

But he was wrong. He didn't understand what was happening to me, what this taint truly was. Or maybe he did—and he didn't care. Maybe he thought sacrificing me was a fair price to unlock this new power.

Wisp pressed closer, her form barely visible through the taint. Trying to remind me of something. Someone.

Brown eyes filled with tears. Honey-blond hair catching starlight. Teaching her about natural portal magic in the library. Kissing her beneath falling stars while our magic flowed clean and true.

She makes your magic weak. Natural. Uncontrolled.

“No.” The word came out broken, the first thing I’d said of my own will in... how long? Days? Weeks?

Pain lanced through my temples as Uncle’s corrupted magic tightened. But Wisp surged forward, lending me pure wellspring strength.

More fragments broke through the wrongness. Cyrus’s flames turning that impossible blue where they met Marigold’s necromancy. Elio’s illusions gaining substance as her clean power touched them. The three of them defending Wickem while I... while I...

You belong to the controlled power now. To us.

But other memories fought back. Mother teaching me how magic should flow naturally, like clear water. Father’s gentle corrections when my portals wavered between spaces. Their faces the day before they died, worried and determined.

Had they fought this too? This oily wrongness in their thoughts, this corruption of pure magic?

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Wisp's form stabilized slightly, showing me images through its spectral windows. Marigold working with Cyrus and Elio, their magic harmonizing naturally. The way they'd looked at me during the vampire attack—not with hatred, but with determination to save me from the corruption.

They weren't just searching for me. They were preparing for something bigger. But they didn't know. They couldn't.

If they understood what I'd become, what was inside me, they wouldn't be fighting to bring me back. They'd be fighting to stop me.

Duty. The word triggered something. A memory of Mother's voice: "True magic isn't about control, love. It's about letting power flow naturally."

Flow.

The corruption cracked slightly. Wisp pressed into the gap, its clean warmth fighting the wrongness.

I pushed against Uncle's presence in my mind. "Get OUT!"

Pain exploded behind my eyes. The portals around me shuddered, their edges jagged with that oily darkness.

You can't fight this, boy. It runs too deep.

He was right. I could feel it poisoning my bones, my magic. But Wisp showed me



something else—Marigold refusing to give up on me. Cyrus and Elio putting their animosity aside to help her. The way our magic had flowed together during the trials, before the corruption.

The way it could flow again. If I chose it.

I opened a portal—a real one, edges clean and silver like water. Through it, I glimpsed Marigold in Elio's sanctuary, their heads bent together over maps. Searching for me. Planning some kind of rescue. But they didn't know.

Pain lanced through my skull. Flashes of old therapy sessions. Questions I'd asked but wasn't allowed to remember.

Who else knew?

What did my parents—

The Last—

The thought shattered before I could grasp it, drowned under Uncle's control.

Wisp's form solidified fully as my own will crystallized. We couldn't break Uncle's corruption completely—not yet. But we could fight it. Could choose, moment by moment, to be more than his tool for poisoning magic itself.

We could choose them. Even after Uncle used me to lure her into the vampire attack. Even knowing how much that betrayal must have hurt.

The corruption would return. The taint ran too deep to escape alone. But I wasn't alone anymore.

I had Wisp. Had hope.

Had a reason to fight back.