







# Christmas with a Cursed Werewolf (Feuding Hearts Christmas)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** The magic here is dying, and if she stays, the curse will consume us both.

A beautiful stranger shows up at my cursed castle.

She claims an email brought her here.

But I didn't send it.

She's a librarian, too curious for her own good.

Her timing couldn't be worse—this place is cursed, and so am I.

And the magic here is dying.

She should leave before she gets too close.

But I can't let her go.

Every second she's here, I'm drawn to her.

And when I see her in the library, looking at me like I'm not a monster...

I wonder if Christmas brought her to save me.

But I know how this ends. I'll have to push her away.

Or the curse will claim us both.

Still, I'd rather risk it all than lose her.

**Total Pages (Source):** 20

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

The Castle Calls

brIAR

" I guess this is Frostpire Keep."

The wind whips snow against my face as I step out of the taxi, my boots crunching on fresh powder. Frostpire Keep looms before me, its stone towers piercing a steel-gray sky. My heart pounds as I take in the massive structure. It's both beautiful and forbidding, like something out of a gothic novel.

The taxi pulls away too quickly, leaving me alone in the swirling snow. I pull my phone out one more time, trying to find the email that brought me here. But just like the last dozen times I've checked, it's gone. Completely vanished, as if it never existed. The screen flickers once, then goes black.

"Perfect timing," I mutter, shoving the useless device into my coat pocket.

The castle's entrance beckons—an enormous wooden door with iron fixtures that have turned green with age. Intricate carvings cover its surface, wolves and ancient symbols that seem to dance in the fading light. Before I can reach for the handle, it swings open silently.

A tall, thin man in an impeccable butler's uniform stands in the doorway. His silver hair and faded blue eyes give him an otherworldly appearance in the dim light. He stands perfectly still, as if he's been waiting there for hours.

"Miss Everly, I presume?" His voice is crisp, formal, with a slight British accent. "I am Alistair Wren, the butler of Frostspire Keep."

"Yes, that's me." I try to sound confident, professional, despite the way my heart is racing. "I received an email about doing some historical research here?"

Something flickers across Alistair's face—concern? Confusion? But it's gone so quickly I might have imagined it. His pale eyes study me with an intensity that makes me want to fidget.

"Ah yes, your... invitation." He pauses, choosing his words carefully. "Though I must admit, we weren't entirely expecting you. Not today, at least."

My stomach drops. "But the email specifically requested—" I reach for my phone again, remembering too late that it's dead. "I can explain?—"

"Please, come in out of the cold." He steps aside, gesturing me through the doorway. "We can discuss the details inside. The weather is turning quite fierce."

As if to emphasize his point, a gust of wind howls through the courtyard, driving snow against my back. I hurry inside, and Alistair closes the massive door behind me with surprising ease.

The entrance hall is vast, with a sweeping staircase and crystal chandeliers that must have once been magnificent. Now they're draped in cobwebs, casting weak light over faded holiday decorations that only emphasize the castle's air of neglect. The marble floor stretches out before me, its pattern reminiscent of waves frozen in stone.

A woman hurries toward us, her practical dress and warm expression a stark contrast to Alistair's formality. Her chestnut hair is streaked with silver, and worry lines crease the corners of her eyes.

"Welcome! I'm Giselle Hargrave, the head of household." She smiles, but there's anxiety beneath her warmth. "We weren't sure when to expect you."

"Or if to expect you at all," Alistair adds quietly, exchanging a meaningful look with Giselle.

Before I can respond, rapid footsteps echo across the marble floor. A young boy races past, his laughter bouncing off the high ceiling. His brown hair is disheveled, and his clothes look slightly too big for his slight frame.

"Nolan!" Giselle calls after him. "No running in the halls!"

The boy skids to a stop, turning back with a grin that falters when he sees me. His eyes go wide, and he darts away down a corridor, leaving only the echo of his footsteps behind.

"My apologies," Giselle says, smoothing her dress. "My son can be... excitable."

"It's fine." I force a smile, trying to ignore how the temperature seems to have dropped several degrees. "About my invitation?—"

"Perhaps we should get you settled first," Alistair interrupts smoothly. "The weather is turning, and it would be best if you were comfortable before we discuss... arrangements."

I want to protest, to demand answers about the mysterious email that led me here. But exhaustion from the long journey is setting in, and the castle's chill has worked its way into my bones.

"This way, please." Alistair leads me up the grand staircase, our footsteps echoing in the empty space. Each step feels like entering deeper into a mystery I'm not sure I'm

ready to solve.

The corridor he takes me down is lined with portraits, their eyes seeming to follow our movement. Dusty holiday garlands hang limply between them, as if someone made a halfhearted attempt at cheer and gave up. The faces in the paintings share similar features—strong jawlines, intense eyes, an air of barely contained power.

"The West Wing is strictly forbidden," Alistair says suddenly, gesturing to a darkened corridor we pass. "Mr. Wolfe's private quarters are there, and he values his privacy above all else."

My room, when we reach it, is surprisingly warm and welcoming. A fire crackles in the hearth, and the four-poster bed looks inviting after hours of travel. Rich tapestries adorn the walls, depicting scenes of wolves running through moonlit forests.

"Rest," Alistair says. "Someone will fetch you for dinner." He pauses at the door, his faded blue eyes suddenly sharp. "And Miss Everly? Please remain in your room until then. The castle can be... confusing for newcomers."

The door closes behind him with a soft click that sounds oddly final.

I should unpack. Should rest. Instead, I find myself drawn to the window, watching snow swirl against darkening sky. Something about this place feels familiar, like a half-remembered dream.

The castle seems to pulse with a strange energy. Or maybe that's just my imagination, fueled by too many gothic novels and not enough sleep. But there's something about the way shadows move in the corners, how the air itself seems charged with expectation.

I turn away from the window, intending to at least pretend to follow Alistair's advice.

But my feet carry me to the door instead. The handle turns easily under my hand.

The corridor outside is empty, silent except for the whisper of wind through ancient stones. Logic says I should stay put, but curiosity has always been my weakness. Besides, I'm here to research the castle's history—how can I do that from one room?

I tell myself I'm just going to explore a little. Get my bearings. But with each step, I'm drawn deeper into the castle's maze of hallways. The portraits watch my progress, their eyes following me through the gloom.

The temperature drops noticeably as I turn a corner. A set of double doors looms at the end of the corridor, partially ajar. Something about them sends a shiver down my spine—a warning, maybe, or an invitation. Moonlight spills through the gap, creating silver patterns on the floor.

The West Wing. It has to be. Alistair's words echo in my mind, but the pull is too strong to resist. There's something here, something calling to me.

I slip through the gap in the doors, heart pounding. The air here is different—heavy with secrets and something else I can't quite name. Moonlight streams through tall windows, illuminating a space that feels both lived-in and abandoned.

A low growl freezes me in place.

I turn slowly, every nerve screaming danger. In the shadows, something moves—something massive and definitely not human. My breath catches in my throat as the creature emerges into a shaft of moonlight.

Silver eyes gleam in the darkness. The beast steps forward, and I can't stop my sharp intake of breath. It's a wolf, but impossibly large, with dark fur that seems to absorb the moonlight. Powerful muscles ripple beneath that midnight coat as it moves



toward me with predatory grace.

I should run. Should scream. Instead, I stand transfixed as those eyes lock onto mine. There's intelligence in that gaze, and something else—recognition? The beast's head tilts slightly, studying me with an intensity that seems far too human.

The wolf's growl softens, becomes almost questioning. For a moment, we're caught in a strange tableau, neither of us moving.

Then the air seems to shimmer, like heat waves rising from summer pavement. Where the beast stood, a man appears. Tall, dark, and radiating barely contained fury. His grey eyes still hold that silver gleam, and when he speaks, his voice is rough with suppressed rage.

"What are you doing here?"

I stumble back, my voice failing me. He advances, and I catch glimpses of sharp features and barely contained power in his movements. His suit is immaculate, but there's nothing civilized about the way he stalks toward me.

"The West Wing is forbidden." His words come out as almost a growl, and I swear I see a flash of fang. "Leave. Now."

Questions crowd my throat—about the wolf, about him, about what I just witnessed. But the look in his eyes brooks no argument. I turn and flee, my heart racing for reasons I'm not ready to examine.

Back in my room, I press my back against the door, trying to make sense of what I've seen. The beast. The man. The way my pulse jumped at his proximity, despite my fear.

What was that? And what have I gotten myself into?

The castle creaks around me, as if in answer. But its secrets, like those of its master, remain hidden behind walls of stone and silence.

A knock at my door makes me jump. Alistair's voice comes through the wood, perfectly composed. "Miss Everly? Mr. Wolfe requests your presence in his study. Immediately."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

### A Flicker in the Dark

RONAN

I watch Briar enter my office, her steps measured and deliberate. The lavender scent of her skin mingles with traces of fear, but there's something else too—a spark of defiance that makes my wolf stir.

Alistair hovers behind her, his usual composure fractured by concern.

"Miss Everly, sir," he announces. His faded blue eyes dart between us, reading the tension in the air.

"Leave us." I keep my attention fixed on the papers before me, though every sense is locked on her presence. Alistair hesitates a fraction too long before bowing and closing the door with a soft click.

The fireplace behind my desk crackles, its heat doing nothing to warm the chill that's settled in my bones. Briar stands perfectly still, but her heart races.

I can hear each beat, smell the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

She's taking in everything. The ancient books lining the walls, the heavy wooden desk between us, the way shadows dance across the stone floor.

"The West Wing is forbidden." I let ice coat each word, trying to ignore how the castle's magic pulses in response to her presence. "This isn't a museum for you to

explore at your leisure."

"I apologize." Her voice stays steady despite her racing pulse. A curl of auburn hair has escaped her bun, brushing against her neck. I force my gaze away. "The castle... it's fascinating. I've never seen anything like it."

"That's because there is nothing like it." I rise slowly, using my height to intimidate. The movement brings her scent closer, making my head swim. "And there are areas that are not meant for guests. Do I make myself clear?"

The temperature drops several degrees. Frost creeps along the windowpanes though the fire still burns hot. The castle's magic swirls restlessly, responding to my agitation—or perhaps to her. She's too close. Even across the desk, I can feel the heat radiating from her skin.

"Crystal clear." She meets my gaze directly, green eyes bright with challenge. "Though I can't help but wonder what you're hiding."

My control slips. The flames surge in the hearth, casting wild shadows. My fingers itch to reach for her, to show her exactly what kind of monster lurks behind these walls. The curse writhes under my skin, demanding I claim what's mine.

But she's not mine. Can never be mine.

"That's none of your concern." I grip the edge of the desk, wood creaking under my fingers. "Return to your room. Do not let me find you in the West Wing again."

She turns to leave but pauses at the threshold. The light catches her profile, softening her features. "You have a remarkable home, Mr. Wolfe. Even if parts of it are forbidden."

The way she says my name sends electricity down my spine. I track her movements long after she's gone, listening to her footsteps fade down the corridor. Her scent lingers, mixing with the ancient magic that permeates these walls.

The castle feels different tonight—more volatile, less predictable. Like it's responding to something. Or someone. I press my palm against the cold stone wall, trying to ground myself. The magic pulses beneath my touch, almost eager.

A knock interrupts my thoughts. Fiona enters, her usual composure fractured. Her hands fidget with her apron, and she won't quite meet my eyes.

"Mr. Wolfe?" Her voice wavers. "The fireplaces in the east wing... they're acting strangely again."

I suppress a growl of frustration. "How?"

"They keep going out, sir. No matter how many times we relight them." She shifts nervously. "And there's frost forming on the inside of the windows, even near the lit hearths. The guests are beginning to notice."

More signs of the castle's instability. It's been happening more frequently since Briar arrived, though I refuse to acknowledge the connection.

"I'll handle it." I move past Fiona, ignoring how she shrinks away from my presence.

The corridors are darker than usual, holiday decorations casting strange shadows on ancient stones. Each fireplace tells a different story of unrest. In the library, flames leap unnaturally high, sending sparks toward precious texts. The dining room hearth barely smolders despite fresh logs.

The curse's grip shifts and changes, following no pattern I can trace. Even the holiday

garlands show signs of decay—pine needles brittle and gray, ribbons fading to ash. The magic pulses through the castle like a fever, hot one moment, ice-cold the next.

Claws click against stone, and Rakan emerges from the shadows. His silver-streaked black fur bristles, golden eyes meeting mine with urgent purpose. Even in wolf form, his concern is clear.

The pack grows restless, his thoughts reach mine. They sense the wrongness in the air.

How bad?

Worse than before. The magic fights itself. Even the youngest can feel it.

I study my oldest friend, noting the tension in his powerful frame. Rakan has stood beside me through countless challenges, but this unease is different. The castle's magic has never behaved quite like this.

Keep them close to the castle tonight, I direct. Watch the perimeter.

His thoughts brush mine again, tinged with curiosity. The girl's scent lingers here. The magic strengthens where she walks.

Leave her out of this, I snap, the command sharper than intended.

Rakan's ears flick back, but he doesn't challenge my tone. With a slight dip of his head, he turns and disappears into the shadows, leaving me alone with thoughts I'd rather not examine.

Music drifts up from the main hall where the holiday gathering continues. Despite the urgent problems demanding my attention, I find myself drawn there. My steps slow

as I spot Briar across the room. She's examining one of the old tapestries, her fingers hovering just above the fabric. The magic responds to her presence, threads shimmering where her hand passes over them.

She's changed into an evening dress, deep green silk that catches the light. The sight of her hits me like a physical blow. She moves with unconscious grace, unaware of how the castle bends toward her like a flower seeking sun. My wolf stirs, wanting to claim, to mark, to possess.

I force myself to look away, but my senses remain locked on her—her heartbeat, her scent, the soft sound of her breathing mixing with the holiday music. Other guests mill around, laughing, drinking, completely unaware of the magic crackling through the air. None of them notice how the candles flicker when she passes, or how the shadows seem to lean toward her.

But I notice. I notice everything.

The curse pulses through me, a warning. I can't let her get closer. Can't let her unravel everything I've built to keep this place, and myself, contained. But watching her move through my castle like she belongs here...

Back in my study, I pour a drink but don't taste it. The castle's magic swirls restlessly around me, making the lamplight dance. Every instinct warns me that Briar Everly is a threat to the careful balance I've maintained. Her presence alone seems to agitate the curse, stirring both the magic and something darker within me.

Tomorrow, I'll have Alistair arrange for her early departure. It's the sensible thing to do. The safe thing. I've spent too long containing this curse to let one curious woman unravel everything.

But even as I make the decision, the castle's magic pulses in protest. The fire in my

study gutters and dies, plunging the room into darkness. In the distance, I hear another hearth sputter out, then another. Like dominos falling in the night.

From my window, I watch snow fall in the moonlight. Below, Rakan's dark form patrols the grounds, a shadow among shadows. The pack follows his lead, their movements precise and purposeful. They'll guard the castle tonight, but I wonder what exactly they're guarding it from.

My reflection stares back at me from the frosted glass—a man haunted by his own choices. The curse thrums through my veins, a constant reminder of what I am, what I've become. And now Briar's presence threatens to upset the delicate balance I've maintained for so long.

The castle groans around me, ancient stones shifting in the cold. Magic seeps through the walls like bleeding wounds, leaving trails of frost in its wake. I press my forehead against the cold glass, closing my eyes against the evidence of decay.

Tomorrow, she leaves. She has to. Before the curse takes notice of her. Before I forget why I need to stay alone.

But as I settle behind my desk, the castle's magic pulses once more—a warning, or perhaps a promise. And somewhere in the darkness, another fire dies.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

The Enchanted Library

brIAR

My hands shake as I close Ronan's office door behind me. His words echo in my mind. "The West Wing is forbidden."

But the anger in his voice can't mask something else I noticed. Fear .

The great and powerful Ronan Wolfe is afraid of something in his own home.

The corridor stretches before me, holiday decorations casting strange shadows on stone walls. I should return to my room. Should follow his orders.

But something about this place pulls at me, a strange pressure in the air that I can't explain. Maybe it's just the old heating system, or the way sound echoes off these stone walls, but each step deeper into the hallway feels inevitable.

A door stands partially open ahead—heavy oak with brass fittings, carved with symbols I've never seen before. Beyond it, moonlight catches the spines of countless books. My heart skips. This must be the library Alistair mentioned.

Snow taps against frosted windows as I push the door wider. The hinges creak, and cold air rushes past me, carrying the scent of old paper and something else—something that makes the hair on my arms stand up. The holiday music from downstairs fades, replaced by an expectant silence.

I step into darkness that slowly resolves into towering shelves. Moonlight filters through the windows, casting strange patterns across the floor.

Dust motes swirl in the air like tiny stars, moving in ways that make me blink and look again. Must be a draft somewhere. The shelves stretch up into shadow, their tops lost in darkness.

"Hello?" My whisper echoes strangely, bouncing back distorted, as if the room is larger than it appears.

No one answers, but the air feels thick, heavy with something I can't name. My skin prickles with awareness, like the moment before a thunderstorm breaks. Books line every surface, their spines a mix of leather and cloth, some so old the titles have worn away completely. The space feels... watched. I shake my head at the ridiculous thought. Old libraries always feel this way—it's just the weight of history, nothing more.

I move deeper into the stacks, drawn by my historian's curiosity. My fingers trail along the spines, and where I touch, the dust seems to vanish.

A trick of the light makes it look like a faint glow follows my hand. The air vibrates with what must be the building's ancient heating system, though the shelves seem to lean closer, as if studying their visitor.

Too many gothic novels, Briar.

A book catches my eye—bound in dark leather with silver clasps. When I reach for it, I could swear the shelf shifts, making it easier to grasp.

The cover is unexpectedly warm to the touch, probably from sitting near a heating vent. As I open it, the pages fall open to a section about folklore and mythology. My

breath catches. The margins are filled with handwritten notes, diagrams of creatures I thought existed only in stories.

"Werewolves," I whisper, tracing the detailed illustrations. "Vampires, fae..."

The notes are precise, clinical like field observations rather than fairy tales. My fingers tingle where they touch the page, probably from the dry paper, and in this light, the words seem to shift and dance.

I really should have gotten more sleep last night.

The temperature drops suddenly, my breath visible in the air. A draft must have kicked up, it's making the shelves around me creak and groan, the old wood settling.

Books flutter open as I pass, their pages turning in the wind. Something tugs at me, urging me deeper into the stacks.

Professional curiosity, I tell myself. Just a historian's natural instincts.

Before I can press him for answers, a deep rumbling draws my attention—the building settling, surely. When I look back, Alistair has vanished. The old butler moves like a ghost; I never even heard his footsteps.

The air feels different now, heavier. A section of wall that I could have sworn was solid stone seems to shift before my eyes. Exhaustion must be making me see things, but when I blink, there's definitely a hidden compartment revealed.

Inside lies a journal bound in dark leather, its cover bearing the same strange symbol the compass pointed to. In the dim light, the symbol almost seems to pulse.

When I lift the journal, it's unexpectedly warm, as if someone had just set it down.

The first page bears an inscription in elegant script: "To those who would understand the Veil, beware the price of knowledge." The words blur and refocus as I try to read them. I really need to get more sleep.

The candles flicker violently. Another draft?

The strange vibration in the air takes on an urgent quality, like a warning. Time to go. I clutch the journal to my chest and hurry toward the door, trying not to notice how the bookshelves seem to move behind me, closing off the paths I'd discovered.

Just shadows and tricks of light, I tell myself.

In the corridor, the holiday music returns, along with the normal sounds of the gathering below. But everything feels different now.

The air tingles against my skin like static electricity, and the journal's weight against my heart feels significant. Like I've stumbled onto something bigger than my research could have prepared me for.

I hurry back to my room, mind racing. The journal, the compass, the strange phenomena in the library. None of it makes sense.

But one thing is clear: there's more to Frostspire Keep than Ronan wants me to know. More to my being here than coincidence.

As I close my bedroom door, I swear I can still feel that strange vibration in the air like the castle itself is holding its breath. The journal feels warm in my hands as I settle onto my bed, and in the darkness, I could swear the symbol on its cover gleams.

Whatever secrets this place holds, whatever I've stumbled into, I know there's no turning back now. Tomorrow, I'll return to the library. But tonight, I have reading to

do.

Even if I'm imagining half of what I experienced, my historian's instincts tell me I've found something extraordinary. Something that might explain Ronan's fear, the staff's strange behavior, and why this castle feels so much more than just an old building.

I run my fingers over the journal's cover, trying to convince myself the warmth I feel is just my imagination. But deep down, I know better. Something is happening here at Frostspire Keep.

And somehow, I'm part of it.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

Under the Mistletoe

RONAN

I step into the Grand Hall just in time to see Briar placing her hands on her hips, staring at the sorry excuse for a Christmas tree. Sunlight filters through the tall windows, not that it does much to brighten the room. The tree stands in one corner, bent under the weight of faded decorations and dust. A tango of neglect and the lingering magic that threatens to snuff out completely, soon enough.

I hate that tree.

Everyone else is gathered here already—Giselle fussing over a box of ornaments, Nolan bouncing on the balls of his feet, excitement pouring from him like he actually thinks this day will matter. And Briar—always Briar—center stage. Her head tilts slightly as if considering something truly vital, like whether she should add more tinsel, when the world is literally one cracked stone away from collapsing in on itself.

She turns toward me, her eyes catching the dim winter light. “We could use some help here, Mr. Wolfe.” That spark in her voice—hopeful, insistent—ignites something deep in my chest. I shove it down where it belongs.

Before I can get the words “Why bother?” out of my mouth, Nolan rushes over to me, his arms barely managing to carry a garland of tangled lights. “We’re making it better!” he exclaims, eyes wide, reflecting more enthusiasm than I have the energy to smother right now. His small arms shove the coils of wire at me, and I just catch them before they hit the ground.

“Better?” The word drips from my tongue, heavy with skepticism, but the kid just grins anyway, oblivious to my tone.

Giselle, endless in her serenity, straightens from wherever she’d been bent over. “Sometimes it’s worth trying,” she says carefully—as if the world hasn’t already tried to bleed me out. Whatever retort I have dies on my tongue under her quietly knowing gaze.

“Fine,” I growl, more to myself than to Nolan, who beams like he’s just moved a mountain.

Briar bites back a smile as she reaches for her box of ornaments. There’s a hint of a challenge in her eyes. She likes that she’s dragged me into this.

I hate that too.

I stand awkwardly off to the side while the others work on transforming the grand hall through sheer force of will. Giselle instructs Nolan on where to hang sparkly snowflakes, her voice soft and warm. It's almost charming, if you ignore the fact that nothing here lasts long, not in this place, not under this curse. But they don't seem to see it—the way the cold creeps in despite the fire in the hearth, the way the magic slips through the cracks the way blood seeps from a fresh wound.

Briar comes up beside me, untangling a string of lights with the casual grace of someone who shouldn't be comfortable here, in this ruin masquerading as a home. "It's not that bad, you know. Just needs a little attention," she says as if she's talking about more than the tree.

I glance down at her, my hands holding the dozen knots that once used to be a strand of lights. “Attention won’t fix what’s broken here.” Every word is delivered with just enough force to remind her that she’s not cracking through. Not today.

"Maybe." She shrugs, still working on her half of the disaster. "But we could try. Can't hurt to make things... better, even for a moment."

Her optimism grates against me like iron nails on stone. She doesn't understand. That's the poison in all this. It doesn't matter what might flicker to life for the evening; it's all rotting from the inside, same as the castle's walls. Same as me.

Yet in a moment of weakness—or insanity—I find myself kneeling next to her, methodically working through the tangles. The lights are cold to the touch. Everything is cold now.

When I've barely made a dent, Briar taps my hand lightly. The touch jolts, small as it is, but electricity snakes up my wrist all the same. For a second, her fingers linger just there. Too close.

"This kind of thing isn't usually this hard. But maybe..." She smiles, the corners of her mouth curving upwards in something far too gentle for my current mood.

I release the lights abruptly. "If you insist on fixing whatever pointless wreck this is, do it right," I mutter, passing her the bundle and rising to my feet. The odd warmth stirring within me is more unsettling than the cold that refuses to leave my soul.

Nolan's laugh echoes across the room, the boy climbing a ladder to drape tinsel on the tree's higher branches. He teeters slightly, and both Giselle and I lurch to steady him. But Briar is closer—she's there in a heartbeat, her hands ready if he needs catching. She flashes me a look, a blend of gratitude and... something else.

Damn it, I shouldn't have looked .

The tree begins to take shape—a shadow of something festive, something alive that once stood proud in this cursed hall. For the briefest moment, I catch a flicker of



warmth, a tiny pulse of light from the Christmas lights wrapped around Briar's wrist. I blink, and the magic retreats, like always. Too fleeting to matter—too false to mean anything.

But just long enough for me to notice. Longer than it should've been.

"Do you even celebrate Christmas?" Briar's voice drifts up from where she's kneeling, sorting through a box of sad ornaments, some chipped, some broken.

I take a slow breath. The innocent question feels like a dart in my back. "Not lately." I hadn't meant to sound so curt, or maybe I had. Either way, her fingers still for a split second before she continues pulling ornaments from the box.

"So, growing up, then? What was that like?" Her tone isn't pushy, and I can tell she's trying to draw me out. God knows why.

"Before the curse?" The words are surprisingly bitter, even to my own ears. I silence myself for a moment with the weight of that. Years ago... no, decades now... there was laughter, warmth. My parents' most elaborate celebrations were held right here in this hall. But what does it matter now? That boy is gone.

Gone with the part of me that could still feel joy.

"I remember," I finally answer, surprising even myself. "Once—Rurik... my brother—he... convinced the staff that decorating wasn't enough. We needed to make it perfect by cutting down our own tree." Ghosts of half-remembered scenes filter through my mind. The laughter. The cold—so much like now—but bearable then. "Rurik got stuck halfway up a tree, covered in sap." I can't help the faint smirk that forms, not when I picture my brother, back when he was still someone worth saving.

Before everything went straight to hell.

When I glance at her, Briar is smiling softly, like she can picture the whole thing. “That sounds... wonderful.”

I shrug, immediately regretting the openness. That life is dead now, burned to nothing. I remember the sounds of cracking bone, the curses on our family... the sickening wrongness that took everything. And I can never have it back.

Too much truth rests between us. Too many dangerous emotions want to claw their way past my carefully erected walls. But Briar’s still smiling, as if believing there’s more to find here, as if the smile wasn’t ripped from me along with everything good, years ago—no, ages ago.

I say nothing else, turning back to the tree, but I can feel her watching me. Waiting.

Always waiting.

The air shifts as I step toward her and place the final decoration—a small, worn star atop the tree. It’s battered now, the silver dull, but it’s been part of this damned tradition for as long as I can remember. Nolan claps, grinning like we just built the entire world out of something more than shadows and lies.

As for Briar... she’s standing closer than I should allow. She tilts her head to look up at my work, her lips parting slightly in approval. Her breath curls out in soft clouds in the cold morning air, just inches from me, and for a split second, I’m not thinking about the curse, the danger, or the looming weight of my broken life. I’m thinking about the way her auburn hair frames her face, the way her green eyes catch the sunlight, the way her body hums a strange, magnetic energy that the castle pulses in time with.

“You’re not bad at this, Mr. Wolfe.” Her voice is teasing, but there’s warmth in it too, a softness that threatens to burrow under my cold skin.

I force down the pull from her, battling the instinct screaming for me to take another step closer. It's the same part of me that wanted to claim her last night. The same part of me that's fought every moment since she arrived.

"I doubt this spectacle will last," I respond with clipped tones, breaking through whatever spell she's casting on me. "This place doesn't allow for much..." I falter on the word joy. Joy is dead here, along with everything good.

She steps closer again, her shoulder brushing mine as she hangs another ornament. But there's something else—above us, a shadow of green and silver catches my eye, hanging just overhead like a threat. No—not a threat.

I lift my hand—before I can stop them—and pluck the sprig of mistletoe from where it's wound itself to the garland. Briar looks up, briefly confused, her breath hitching as I hold it just above us.

What the hell am I doing?

She glances at the doorway, where Nolan and Giselle have disappeared into the adjoining parlor—no witnesses. Her eyes return to mine, hesitant at first, then something shifts. Her lips part, and the way she's looking at me—like I'm not already too far gone—is my undoing.

I lean in—just an inch. Then another. Enough for her breath to warm my lips.

I don't kiss people under mistletoe. I don't let anyone this close.

Yet here I am, pulling her in. And she—god, she moves with me, our lips fitting together with a deep wanting ache before I remember I'm about to end the world.

But for just a moment, it doesn't matter.

Her lips are soft but firm, pressing back in the same way I push toward her—like everything we've left unsaid just got poured into the open.

I want her. In ways I shouldn't even consider. I can feel it crackling beneath my skin, lightning grounding itself straight into her. My hands go taut against the back of her waist, not able to restrain the need to hold on to something solid. For once, something real.

It doesn't last nearly long enough. I pull away, the echo of her taste still on my tongue, looking down to see her breathless and blinking in disbelief.

I don't know whether what I've done is worse for her... or me.

I drag myself back into the cold faster than she can untangle from my shadow. Heat pools low in my gut, battling against my better judgment, threatening to spill over if I make one more slip.

I can't let her in.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

### The Journal's Secrets Briar

I run my fingers along the polished silver candlestick, and a strange vibration pulses through my skin. The sensation reminds me of touching a tuning fork—a musical hum resonating deep in my bones. My hand trembles, nearly dropping the piece before I steady myself. In all my years handling antiques and artifacts, I've never felt anything quite like this—as if the object itself is alive with some hidden energy.

"Careful with that one, Miss Everly." Alistair's voice carries across the long dining table where we're arranging place settings for tonight's dinner. The late afternoon sun casts long shadows through the frost-covered windows, making the silverware gleam like captured starlight. "It's been in the family for generations."

"Sorry, I..." The words trail off as another wave of energy ripples through me. The candlestick warms under my touch, its ornate engravings catching the light. Each spiral and curve seems to move, shifting like liquid silver beneath my fingertips. The metal feels almost molten, though it maintains its solid form. My historian's mind catalogs the impossibility even as my heart races with the thrill of discovery.

My skin prickles with awareness as I study the markings more closely. They're not the decorative flourishes I first assumed—there's a pattern here, an intentional design that makes my vision blur if I look too long. The longer I stare, the more the symbols seem to pulse with their own inner light.

"These symbols. They're unusual."

The words feel inadequate to describe what I'm seeing. How do you explain watching

static engravings dance and shift before your eyes? I've spent years studying ancient artifacts, but nothing in my experience has prepared me for this.

Alistair pauses in his methodical polishing of the silverware, his movements becoming more deliberate. The soft cloth in his hands stills as he watches me with those unnervingly pale eyes. "Many items in Frostspire Keep have... unique properties." His faded blue eyes fix on me with that unsettling intensity I'm starting to recognize. "Though most visitors don't notice."

There's something in his tone—a weight to his words that suggests layers of meaning I can't quite grasp. Most visitors don't notice. But I do. The thought sends a shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with the castle's perpetual chill.

I trace the spiral pattern etched into the silver base, following its endless loop. The metal grows warmer still, almost hot enough to burn, but I can't make myself let go. It's as if my fingers are locked in place, guided by some force I don't understand. "They're not just decoration, are they? These symbols mean something."

"Perhaps." Alistair's tone remains neutral, but something flickers across his face—a mix of concern and curiosity that vanishes as quickly as it appears.

His weathered hands still their work entirely now, focus entirely on me. "Though I wouldn't recommend dwelling on such things. Some mysteries in this castle are best left unexplored."

The candlestick pulses again, stronger this time. The sensation travels up my arm like an electric current, settling somewhere behind my breastbone.

My heart beats faster, syncing with the strange rhythm emanating from the silver. It reminds me of the way the library felt yesterday—alive, aware, waiting.

Around us, the dining room's atmosphere shifts. The shadows in the corners deepen, and the air grows thick with anticipation. Even the holiday decorations seem to hold their breath—pine garlands and red ribbons perfectly still despite the constant drafts that plague the castle. The Christmas tree we decorated stands sentinel in the corner, its lights dimming slightly as if responding to some unseen signal.

"I need to check something in the library." The words tumble out before I can stop them. An invisible force tugs at me, magnetic and impossible to resist. My feet are moving before my brain catches up. The candlestick practically hums in my grip, urging me forward.

"Miss Everly-" Alistair starts, but I'm already halfway to the door. His voice follows me, heavy with warning, but the pull is too strong to resist.

The corridors twist differently today, the familiar route to the library suddenly more complex. Shadows dance at the edges of my vision, and the walls seem to lean inward, watching my progress. The portraits' eyes follow me as I pass, their painted faces holding secrets I'm only beginning to understand. The candlestick in my hand pulses steadily, leading me forward like a compass pointing north.

The library doors stand slightly ajar, releasing a whisper of cold air that carries the scent of old books and something else—something wild and ancient that makes my blood sing. As I approach, frost patterns spread across the wood, forming shapes that echo the symbols on the candlestick. The sight should frighten me, but instead, it feels like coming home.

I slip inside, and the atmosphere changes instantly. The library—Ember, as I've started thinking of her—feels expectant, alive with possibility. Dust motes swirl in the weak sunlight, dancing in patterns too precise to be random. They form constellations I almost recognize before dissolving back into chaos. The air itself seems to hold its breath, waiting.

"What are you trying to tell me?" I whisper to the empty air. The words echo slightly, though they shouldn't in a room full of books and fabric.

The response is immediate. A book slides from its shelf with deliberate grace, landing with a soft thump on the reading table. My heart jumps, but the fear is overshadowed by a surge of excitement. The leather binding is worn smooth with age, its pages yellowed and fragile. As I reach for it, the air around me shivers like heat waves rising from summer pavement.

The journal falls open to a page covered in cramped handwriting. Symbols identical to those on the candlestick fill the margins, accompanied by notes in multiple hands. The ink seems to shift and flow as I read, letters rearranging themselves before my eyes:

"The binding requires sacrifice—willing or unwilling, the price must be paid..."

"Magic seeks balance. What is freely given cannot be stolen..."

"The curse feeds on isolation. With each passing year, the walls grow higher..."

My fingers brush the page, and images flash through my mind—moonlight on snow, a wolf's howl echoing through ancient trees, blood seeping into frozen ground. The visions feel more like memories, though I know they can't be mine. I see a younger man with Ronan's features but colder eyes, standing in a circle of strange symbols. Power crackles through the air, and something dark takes root in the castle's foundations.

I snatch my hand back, but the connection lingers, humming beneath my skin. The candlestick's warmth spreads up my arm, meeting the energy pulsing from my chest. They resonate together, creating a harmony that makes the air shimmer.



The library's magic swells around me like a rising tide. Books shift on their shelves, their spines glowing with faint blue light. The temperature plummets until I can see my breath, but I'm not cold. Instead, power thrums through my veins, electric and alive. The sensation reminds me of standing in the ocean just before a wave breaks—that moment of suspension when you know you're about to be swept away.

"Miss Everly." Alistair's voice cuts through the strange atmosphere like a knife through silk. I spin to find him standing in the doorway, his expression grave. The journal vanishes from the table, there one moment and gone the next, leaving only a whisper of old paper and ink. "Some doors are locked for a reason."

"What's happening here?" I demand, gripping the candlestick tighter as its energy continues to build. My voice shakes slightly, but not from fear. The power coursing through me feels right somehow, as if I've finally found something I didn't know I was missing. "These symbols, the magic—none of this is normal."

"No," he agrees quietly. "But neither is your ability to sense it." He steps closer, and the library's magic recoils slightly, creating a pocket of stillness around him. The movement confirms what I've suspected—he knows far more than he's letting on. "Be careful, Miss Everly. The castle's secrets have teeth, and not everyone survives uncovering them."

The warning should frighten me. Instead, determination rises, burning away the last traces of uncertainty. I've spent my life watching from the sidelines, afraid to reach for what I want. But something about this place, about these mysteries, calls to the deepest part of me—the part that's always known I was meant for more than ordinary life.

"I'm not going to stop looking," I tell him, lifting my chin. The candlestick pulses in agreement, its warmth spreading through my entire body.

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "No, I don't suppose you will." He turns to leave, then pauses. "But remember—some truths come at a cost. Are you prepared to pay it?"

The question hangs in the air after he's gone, heavy with implication. Around me, the library's magic settles into a gentle hum, like a cat purring. A faint shimmer ripples through the air—approval? Warning? Both?

I press my palm against the nearest bookshelf, feeling the pulse of energy beneath the wood. The candlestick's warmth mingles with it, creating a harmony that resonates through my entire body. For the first time in my life, I feel truly awake, truly present. As if everything before this moment was just preparation.

"We'll figure this out together, won't we, Ember?" The name feels right on my tongue, acknowledging the library's sentience.

The lights flicker once, and warmth spreads through my hand. It feels like a promise—or perhaps a challenge. Either way, I know there's no turning back now. Whatever secrets Frostspire Keep is hiding, whatever connection exists between the castle's magic and the strange energy flowing through me, I'm going to uncover the truth.

The holiday decorations in the corner catch my eye—a small wreath of holly and pine, its red berries gleaming in the fading light. Christmas is coming, and with it, perhaps, answers. I can feel time moving differently here, as if the castle exists in its own pocket of reality where past and present blur together.

As I finally set the candlestick down, its warmth lingers in my fingers. The library's shadows lengthen with the setting sun, but I'm no longer afraid of what lurks in the dark. Something has changed inside me—or perhaps it was always there, waiting to be awakened.

I gather my courage and my curiosity around me like armor. Whatever price these answers demand, I'm ready to pay it. After all, the most important stories are never free.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

### A Kiss of Magic

RONAN

The scent of her lingers in the library, mixing with old leather and parchment. I track it without meaning to, my senses heightening as I follow her trail through the stacks. She's been here recently—too recently. The curse pulses beneath my skin, a warning I choose to ignore.

Briar stands near one of the tall windows, winter light catching in her auburn hair. She's holding an ancient tome, one that should be locked away. Her fingers trace symbols on its spine that no ordinary person should be able to see. The sight sends ice through my veins.

"I told you the library was forbidden." My voice comes out rougher than intended, tension coiling in my chest. She startles but doesn't drop the book. Doesn't back away.

"Actually," she says, turning to face me with that stubborn lift of her chin, "you said the West Wing was forbidden. The library wasn't specifically mentioned."

The curse writhes under my skin, responding to her defiance—or perhaps to something else. The air grows thick with magic, making the flames in the wall sconces dance. "You shouldn't be here."

"Why?" She takes a step closer, and the magic pulses stronger. "Because I might discover what you're hiding? What this castle is hiding?"

Books shudder on their shelves, responding to my darkening mood. Or perhaps to her presence—it's becoming harder to tell the difference. "You have no idea what you're dealing with."

"Then tell me." Another step closer. The scent of lavender and old books fills my lungs. "The symbols in these books, the way the castle reacts—none of this is normal. And you know why."

I grip the edge of a nearby shelf, wood creaking under my fingers. "Knowledge has a price here. One you're not prepared to pay."

"Shouldn't that be my choice?"

The question hangs between us, heavy with implications. She's still holding that damned book, her fingers absently tracing patterns that make my wolf stir restlessly. The curse recognizes something in her—a potential I've been trying to ignore.

"No." I move to take the book, but she steps back, keeping it just out of reach. The motion brings her closer to the window, backlighting her in the fading daylight. For a moment, she looks otherworldly—as if the castle's magic has wrapped itself around her like a cloak.

"I'm not leaving until you explain." Her voice stays steady, though her heart races. I can hear each beat, smell the adrenaline mixing with her natural scent. "The symbols, the magic, the way everything feels alive?—"

"Enough." The word comes out as almost a growl. The temperature drops several degrees, and frost patterns spread across the nearest window. Above us, the chandeliers sway without a breeze.

She doesn't flinch. If anything, her eyes brighten with fascination as she watches the

magic manifest. "See? Even now, the castle is responding. Why? What's really going on here?"

I should throw her out. Should call Alistair to escort her from the premises. Instead, I find myself drawn closer, like a moth to flame. The curse hums through my blood, a warning and an enticement all at once.

"You need to leave." But even as I say it, I'm moving toward her. The library's magic swells around us, books rustling on their shelves like leaves in a storm. "Before?—"

"Before what?" She meets my gaze directly, green eyes bright with challenge. "Before I learn too much? Before I figure out why I was really invited here?"

The question hits too close to home. I reach for the book again, and this time our hands brush. Energy crackles between us, sharp and electric. The contact sends a jolt through my entire body, making the wolf surge closer to the surface.

Briar gasps, but doesn't pull away. Her fingers are warm where they touch mine, and the sensation spreads up my arm like wildfire. The book falls forgotten as we stare at each other, the air growing thick with possibility.

"This is dangerous," I manage, though I can't seem to step back. The library's magic pulses around us, stronger than I've felt it in years. Books glow faintly on their shelves, and the shadows in the corners deepen.

"Everything about this place is dangerous." Her voice has gone soft, but there's steel beneath the velvet. "That doesn't mean we should ignore it."

She's too close. The scent of her fills my lungs, making it hard to think. The curse writhes beneath my skin, demanding I either claim her or push her away. There is no safe middle ground.

"You don't understand what you're asking." My control slips further with each passing second. "What could happen if?—"

Her hand lifts to my face, fingers barely brushing my jaw. The touch sends another shock through me, and the magic in the room flares in response. "Then help me understand."

Something breaks inside me. All the careful walls I've built, all the distance I've maintained—it crumbles in an instant. I pull her closer, one hand tangling in her hair as my mouth crashes down on hers.

The kiss is fierce, desperate, filled with all the longing I've been fighting. She makes a small sound of surprise that turns into a sigh of pleasure as she melts against me. Her lips are soft but insistent, matching my intensity as though she's been waiting for this as long as I have.

Around us, the library's magic explodes. Books fly off shelves, pages rustling like wings. The chandeliers spark and flare, casting wild shadows on the walls. Even the floor seems to vibrate with power, as if the castle itself is responding to our connection.

I should stop. Should push her away before the curse takes hold completely. But then her arms wind around my neck, pulling me closer, and coherent thought becomes impossible. She tastes like sunlight and possibility—things I thought were lost to me forever.

The wolf howls inside me, wanting to mark and claim. The curse pulses through my blood, a dark counterpoint to the brightness of her touch. I deepen the kiss, drinking her in like a man dying of thirst. Her fingers tangle in my hair, nails scraping my scalp in a way that makes me growl.

In the distance, Rakan's answering howl echoes through the castle grounds. The pack feels it too—this surge of power, this shift in the very fabric of Frostspire Keep's magic. The sound breaks through my haze of desire, reminding me of exactly what I am. What I could do to her.

I tear myself away, stumbling back. The loss of contact is physical pain, but the fear of hurting her is worse. Briar stands there, lips swollen from my kiss, eyes bright with something that looks dangerous like hope.

"That shouldn't have happened." The words taste like ashes in my mouth. Around us, the library's magic settles, though books still quiver on their shelves. "You need to go. Now."

"Ronan—" She reaches for me, but I step further back. The hurt that flashes across her face is almost enough to break my resolve.

"Please." I hate the way my voice shakes. "Just go."

She hesitates, and for a moment I think she'll argue. But then she turns and walks away, her steps quick and uneven. The library doors close behind her with a soft click that sounds like finality.

I wait until her footsteps fade before letting out a ragged breath. The curse churns inside me, angry at being denied. Books continue to shift and settle, as if the very walls of Frostspire Keep are upset by her departure.

Moving to the window, I press my forehead against the cold glass. Outside, snow falls in thick curtains, and somewhere in the white wasteland, Rakan leads the pack in another mournful howl. They felt the magic surge. They know something has changed.



The taste of her lingers on my lips, a reminder of what I can never have. The curse may have weakened for a moment in her presence, but that only makes it more dangerous. I can't afford to lose control again.

No matter how right it felt to hold her. No matter how the castle's magic sang when we touched. No matter how much every fiber of my being screams to go after her.

I have to protect her. Even if it means protecting her from myself.

The library settles into uneasy silence, but the magic still hums with potential. Like the castle itself is holding its breath, waiting to see what happens next.

I already know. Nothing can happen next. Nothing will happen next.

No matter how much it kills me to ensure it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

### Whispers of the Past

brIAR

The morning fog clings to Frostspire Keep like a second skin as I make my way to the stables, my mind still reeling from yesterday's events. Every time I close my eyes, I see the library's shadows dancing, feel the surge of magic when Ronan kissed me, remember how the very air seemed to pulse with energy. The mysterious symbols from the silver candlestick keep appearing in my dreams, tangling with images from the journal's pages until I can barely separate memory from imagination.

Shadow, the black mare in the first stall, whickers softly as I enter. The stable's warmth wraps around me, carrying the familiar scents of hay and leather. After so much strangeness—magical disturbances, mysterious journals, and that kiss that seemed to make the whole castle tremble—there's comfort in such an ordinary task. At least, that's what I want everyone to think.

When I lift the brush to begin grooming Shadow, something strange happens. The usual morning restlessness of the horses settles into perfect stillness, as if they're all holding their breath. Shadow's coat feels unusually warm beneath my hands, almost vibrating with energy—the same kind I felt in the library when the books seemed to whisper their secrets.

"Curious," I murmur, watching how she leans into my touch. The brush glides through her coat with unusual ease, as if she's helping me somehow. In the next stall, a chestnut stallion stretches his neck toward me, his eyes too knowing for comfort. The sensation reminds me of how the candlestick warmed under my touch in the

dining room, how the symbols seemed to shift and dance before my eyes.

I've always been good with animals, but this feels different. The horses seem to understand why I'm really here, and instead of shying away, they're almost encouraging my presence. It's like they know I'm trying to understand the castle's secrets, trying to help Ronan break free from whatever holds him captive.

My fingers tingle where they touch Shadow's coat, similar to how they felt when I traced the symbols in the journal. Yesterday's kiss proved that something happens when Ronan and I connect—the way the magic surged, how the library seemed to come alive around us. There has to be a connection between everything I'm discovering: the curse, the castle's decay, the way certain objects seem to react to my touch.

"They've always had good instincts about people."

I turn to find Alistair in the doorway, his butler's uniform impeccable even at this early hour. He moves to the chestnut's stall, picking up another brush with practiced ease. His arrival breaks my train of thought, but I can't lose this opportunity to learn more.

"Have they been here long?" I ask, trying to keep my tone casual despite my racing heart. "The horses, I mean." Yesterday's magical surge in the library proved there's more to this place than anyone's telling me. Even the simplest question might lead to something important.

"Some bloodlines have been with the estate for generations." He begins grooming the chestnut, his movements precise and measured. Each stroke of the brush seems deliberately timed, as if he's choosing his words with equal care. "Much like the staff. Frostspire Keep has a way of... keeping what belongs to it."

The way he says it sends a shiver down my spine, reminding me of how the library—Ember—seems to know what I need before I do. "It must have seen a lot of history," I venture, watching his reaction carefully. After witnessing the castle's response to my kiss with Ronan, I know the place itself is somehow alive, aware.

"Indeed." His tone remains pleasant, but something shifts in his posture. The same kind of tension I noticed when I found the journal. "Though most of it is rather mundane. Supply ledgers, staff rotations, the usual business of running an estate."

I press a little harder, thinking of the strange symbols I've seen, the way the magic pulses stronger at certain moments. "What about the unusual business?"

His brush strokes slow slightly. "I'm not sure what you mean, Miss Everly."

"The things that make this place different. Special." I keep my eyes on Shadow's coat, though every nerve is attuned to his response. "Surely you must have noticed them, working here so long."

"Every old house has its quirks." His voice carries a note of warning now, similar to how he sounded when he found me in the library. "Best not to read too much into them."

"Even when those quirks involve magic?" The word hangs in the air between us, charged with meaning after yesterday's display.

The brush stills completely. "That's quite an imagination you have, Miss Everly."

"Like Master Rurik's imagination?" The name slips out casually, but its effect is immediate. I remember seeing it scrawled in the journal's margins, always accompanied by those strange symbols that seemed to shift and change.

Alistair's expression shutters closed, the temperature in the stable seeming to drop several degrees. Just like when the magic flared in the library, sending cold air swirling around Ronan and me. "Where did you hear that name?"

"Around."

"That's not a topic for discussion." All pretense of casualness vanishes from his voice. "Some names are better left unspoken in this place."

I return to brushing Shadow, but something feels different. The air around me tingles with awareness, like it did in the library when the magic was building. Somehow I know exactly what question to ask next, guided by the same instinct that led me to the journal. "Did something happen to him? Is that why no one talks about him?"

The words come naturally, as if whispered to me by the castle itself. The horses grow unnaturally still again, and for a moment, I swear I see faint blue sparks dance along Shadow's coat where my brush passes—the same color as the magical glow I've glimpsed in the library.

Alistair's face pales slightly. "I think that's enough questions for today, Miss Everly. Some mysteries are best left unexplored."

He turns to leave, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm onto something important. The air feels charged now, like the moment before the magic surged yesterday. Shadow nuzzles my shoulder, and warmth spreads through me, clearing my thoughts in an odd way.

As I finish grooming her, my mind races to connect the pieces. The curse affects more than just Ronan—I've seen how the castle itself seems to be failing, how certain areas are literally crumbling. The magic responds differently when Ronan and I are together, as if our connection somehow strengthens it. And now this reaction to

Rurik's name...

Movement catches my eye through the stable doors. Giselle stands by a distant wall of the castle, her hand pressed against stones that seem to be crumbling beneath her touch. Even from here, I can see her concern as she examines the decay. The sight reminds me of how the library's magic has been fading, how the books seem more desperate to communicate with each passing day.

A chill runs through me, different from the morning cold. The castle feels alive suddenly, aware in a way I can't explain. The fog outside seems to part deliberately, creating a clear path back to the building, as if inviting—or guiding—me to return. It's the same feeling I get in the library when Ember wants to show me something important.

I give Shadow a final pat, trying to ignore how the warmth of her coat seems to reach for me, trying to tell me something just beyond my understanding. The stables feel charged with potential now, like something significant has just happened. My fingers tingle with that same energy I felt when touching the candlestick, when the symbols first began to make sense.

The walk back to the castle seems different today. Yesterday's kiss changed something—not just between Ronan and me, but in how I experience the castle itself. The fog parts before me like a curtain, and I could swear the stones brighten slightly as I approach, the way the library's lights strengthen when I enter. More than ever, I feel like the castle—like Ember—is trying to communicate.

In the library, I settle at my usual table, pulling out the journal I've been studying. After yesterday's magical surge, the book feels different in my hands, almost eager. The text shimmers slightly in the dim light, making my eyes blur just like the symbols did on the candlestick. But instead of setting it aside, I feel drawn to keep reading, as if the castle itself wants me to discover something.

My fingers trace the margins where those strange markings cluster most densely. The same warmth from the stables returns, settling somewhere behind my breastbone. It reminds me of how the magic felt when Ronan kissed me—wild and alive, but somehow right. Like two pieces of a puzzle finally connecting.

The curse is killing this place. I've seen it in the crumbling walls, felt it in the way the magic keeps fading. But yesterday proved something else—when Ronan and I connected, the magic grew stronger. Those moments in the library weren't just about attraction; something deeper was happening. The castle itself seemed to respond to us, as if our kiss somehow fed its power.

New passages seem to reveal themselves on the journal's pages, or maybe I'm just seeing them differently now. Words about binding magic, about sacrifice and balance. About how curses can twist and change over time, growing beyond their original purpose. The more I read, the more certain I become that I'm meant to help break this curse. Not just for Ronan's sake, but for everyone bound to this place.

The library shadows deepen around me as I bend over the journal, but I'm no longer afraid of the dark. There's comfort in it now, like being wrapped in a familiar blanket. Ember's presence feels stronger here, more focused, as if the library itself is helping me study. The magic pulses gently through the room, reminding me of how it surged yesterday when Ronan was here.

Something catches my attention—a passage I must have skimmed before about how curses can be anchored to places as well as people. The words seem to float off the page, making connections in my mind. The curse isn't just affecting Ronan; it's bound to Frostspire Keep itself. That's why the castle is dying, why certain objects seem charged with magical energy, why even the horses can sense something's wrong.

But there's hope too. Yesterday proved that the curse isn't unbreakable. When Ronan kissed me, the magic didn't just flare—it transformed. For a moment, it felt pure,

alive, free from whatever darkness usually taints it. The castle itself seemed to reach for that energy, like a flower turning toward the sun.

I close the journal, but keep my hand pressed to its cover, feeling the subtle warmth beneath my palm. Everything is connected—the curse, the castle, the strange way objects react to my touch, how the magic strengthens when Ronan and I are together. I may not understand it all yet, but I'm starting to see patterns, to trust these instincts that feel less like guesses and more like remembering something I've always known.

Outside, the fog has thickened, turning the world beyond the windows into a blank canvas. But inside, everything feels clearer than ever. Whatever secrets Frostspire Keep is hiding, whatever darkness taints its magic, I'm meant to help uncover the truth. The castle itself seems to be choosing me, guiding me, teaching me to understand its language of symbols and sensations.

I may not know exactly what I'm looking for yet, but I know this: something is wrong with this curse, something that goes beyond Ronan's transformation or the castle's decay. And somehow, whether by fate or design, I'm becoming part of the story—part of the magic itself.

The library lights dim slightly, as if in agreement. A book shifts on a nearby shelf, and I smile, recognizing Ember's way of communicating. "We'll figure this out," I whisper to the watching shadows. "I promise."

The warmth in my chest pulses once, like a heartbeat, and I know my promise has been heard. Whatever price these answers demand, whatever risks lie ahead, I'm ready to face them. After all, some mysteries are worth solving, no matter the cost.

And Frostspire Keep's mysteries seem to be choosing me.



### The Tale of Tam Lin

brIAR

The sleek computer in the library hums to life, one of the few pieces of modern technology still functioning within Frostspire Keep's walls. My own phone died the day I arrived, another victim of the curse's strange effect on electronics. I settle into the ergonomic chair—a jarring contrast to the ancient wooden tables and centuries-old books surrounding me—and try to find the words to explain everything to Sara Ann.

The high-end monitor casts a soft glow across the polished desk, illuminating the leather-bound books stacked nearby. It's strange how this corner of the library represents the collision of Ronan's worlds—his modern wealth meeting the castle's ancient magic. Most of his cutting-edge devices fail here, but somehow this computer survives, as if the castle permits this one tenuous connection to the outside world.

Dear Sara Ann,

I know this email will sound crazy, but I need your folklore expertise. Remember all those fairy tales and myths we used to research together? I'm living in one. Or maybe trapped in one—I'm not entirely sure anymore.

Something's wrong with this castle. The magic here (yes, actual magic) keeps getting stronger, then fading, like it's fighting against something. Books move on their own, symbols appear and disappear, and yesterday... yesterday I kissed someone who might be cursed. The whole library erupted with power when it happened.

I know how this sounds. But you're the only person I can talk to about this. The owner, Ronan—he's pushing me away now, but when we touched, the entire castle seemed to come alive. There's this curse, and I think I'm supposed to help break it somehow, but I don't even know where to begin.

Does any of this remind you of something from your research? Any folklore about cursed castles or magical transformations? I feel like I'm missing something obvious, some pattern I should recognize.

Please don't think I've lost my mind.

- Briar

I hit send before I can second-guess myself. The study feels different tonight—more alive, more aware. Books shift slightly on their shelves as I stand to stretch, and I swear the shadows deepen in response to my movement. Even the air feels charged, like the moment before lightning strikes.

Trying to restore some normalcy, I begin tidying the desk. But every time I move a book, it somehow finds its way back to its original position. The third time this happens, I notice something odd—one particular volume keeps appearing more prominently than the others, as if deliberately catching my attention.

"Alright," I murmur to the empty room. "I can take a hint."

The computer chimes suddenly, making me jump. Sara Ann's response already? She must have been online. My heart pounds as I open her email:

Briar,

First, I don't think you're crazy. Second, have you ever heard of "The Tale of Tam

Lin"? Because everything you've described—the curse, the transformations, the way you have to hold on despite impossible odds—it reminds me of Janet and how she had to fight to save her love from the Queen of Faeries.

Janet found Tam Lin in an enchanted wood. He warned her away, but she kept coming back. When she learned he was cursed to be sacrificed to Hell, she waited for him on Halloween night. The Faerie Queen transformed him into terrible shapes—lion, snake, burning coal—but Janet held on through every change. Her love and determination broke the curse and saved him.

The key was that she had to hold on no matter what form he took, no matter how frightening things became. Her unwavering faith and love were stronger than the Queen's magic.

Maybe this isn't just about breaking a curse. Maybe it's about having the courage to hold on when everything and everyone tells you to let go.

Be careful, but trust your instincts. They've never led you wrong before.

Love,

Sara Ann

P.S. Send more details when you can. And if you need me to come there, just say the word.

I read the email twice more, my mind racing. The book that kept drawing my attention earlier seems to vibrate on the shelf now, its spine glowing faintly in the dim light. When I pull it down, it falls open to a collection of transformation myths. The pages rustle on their own, settling on an illustration of a woman clutching a man as he changes from human to beast to flame.

"Janet held on through every change," I whisper to myself. The words seem to hang in the air, making the shadows dance. Yesterday's kiss flashes through my memory—the way the library's magic surged around us, how Ronan pulled away as if burned. He's trying to protect me, but what if that's exactly the wrong thing to do?

The study feels different now, more intimate somehow. Books continue shifting on their shelves, but the movement feels less random, more deliberate. It reminds me of how Ember—the library—responds to my presence. I trail my fingers along the spines, feeling that now-familiar warmth pulse beneath my touch.

"The curse feeds on isolation," I remember reading in the journal. "With each passing year, the walls grow higher." But what if that's not just metaphorical? I've seen how the castle responds when Ronan and I are together, how the magic strengthens instead of fades.

Another book slides from its shelf, landing open on the desk. This one shows various magical symbols, including some that match those I saw on the silver candlestick. The text seems to shimmer as I lean closer:

"True transformation requires willing sacrifice. The price must be paid in faith and fear alike."

The temperature drops suddenly, and frost patterns spread across the study's windows. They form shapes that echo the symbols in the book, as if the castle itself is trying to communicate. I think of how Ronan looked after our kiss—torn between desire and terror, wanting to pull me closer even as he pushed me away.

"Like living in a fairytale gone wrong," I'd written to Sara Ann. But maybe that's not quite right. Maybe it's more like living in a fairytale that hasn't reached its ending yet. Janet had to trust her heart even when everything seemed impossible. She had to hold on despite her fear.

The computer screen flickers, drawing my attention back to Sara Ann's words: "Maybe this isn't just about breaking a curse. Maybe it's about having the courage to hold on when everything and everyone tells you to let go."

"It won't be that simple, I'm afraid."

I whirl to find Alistair in the doorway, his silver hair gleaming in the dim light. He glances at the open books on the desk, then at the frost patterns on the windows. Something flickers across his face—recognition? Concern?

"The story of Tam Lin," he says quietly, moving to examine the illustration. "An interesting choice."

"The book chose me," I reply, watching his reaction carefully. "They seem to do that a lot here."

"Indeed." His faded blue eyes meet mine. "Though I've noticed they choose differently for different people. The castle has its own way of... guiding those who need guidance."

"Like it guided me here in the first place? That email invitation I can never find anymore?"

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Some stories write themselves, Miss Everly. We merely play our parts."

"And what part am I supposed to play?" The question comes out sharper than intended. "Everyone keeps warning me away, but the castle—the magic—it keeps pulling me closer."

"Perhaps that's your answer right there." He runs one finger along the edge of the

book, tracing the outline of Janet holding her transformed love. "Not everyone has the strength to hold on through the darkness. But then, not everyone is meant to."

The air feels charged again, heavy with meaning I can't quite grasp. "You know more than you're telling me."

"I know many things, Miss Everly. But knowledge isn't always the key." He moves toward the door, then pauses. "Sometimes the right question isn't 'what do I need to know?' but rather 'what am I willing to risk?'"

He disappears into the corridor before I can respond, leaving me alone with the shifting books and dancing shadows. But his words linger, mixing with Sara Ann's email and the tale of Tam Lin until everything seems to blur together like watercolors in the rain.

I look down at the illustration again—Janet holding on despite impossible odds, her love stronger than any magic. The frost patterns on the windows seem to pulse in time with my heartbeat, and somewhere in the castle, I swear I hear wolves howling.

"I'm willing to risk everything," I whisper to the watching shadows. To Ember, to the castle, to whatever force keeps drawing me deeper into this mystery. "I'm not letting go."

The words feel like a vow, heavy with promise and possibility. The study's magic swells around me, books trembling on their shelves as if in response. Even the old computer's screen brightens for a moment, Sara Ann's email still glowing with truth:

"Be careful, but trust your instincts. They've never led you wrong before."

Outside, snow begins to fall, thick flakes swirling past the frosted windows. But inside, I feel warmer than I have in days, certain of my path for the first time since

arriving at Frostspire Keep. Let Ronan push me away. Let the curse fight back. Like Janet, I'll hold on through every transformation, every test.

Some stories write themselves, Alistair said. Looking around the study, at the books that seem to brighten under my gaze, at the magical symbols that dance across frost-covered glass, I realize something: I'm not just reading this story anymore.

I'm living it.

And I intend to see it through to the end, no matter what it costs.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

### The Warning

RONAN

I stalk the castle's perimeter, staying inside but close to the windows where I can monitor the grounds. My wolf senses stretch outward, scanning for any hint of magical disturbance. The wards are weakening—I can feel it in the way the air shivers, how the boundaries between inside and outside blur like watercolors in rain.

The curse's chains pull tighter when I try to step onto the grounds in human form. Even after all these years, the sensation makes my skin crawl. Through the frosted glass, I watch Rakan lead the pack on their patrol, their dark forms moving like shadows through the deepening afternoon gloom. They sense it too—something's changing.

A flicker of movement catches my attention. Briar walks through the garden below, her auburn hair bright against the grey day. The sight of her makes my chest ache. After our kiss in the library, the magic surged stronger than ever, but that only makes her more dangerous. To herself. To everything.

The temperature drops suddenly, turning my breath to mist. I don't need to turn around to know who's arrived.

"Getting sentimental, Ronan?" Angelic's voice cuts through the silence like ice. "That's unlike you."

When I face her, she's exactly as I remember—tall, otherworldly, with platinum hair



and those unnaturally green eyes that seem to glow. Her presence makes the castle's magic recoil, creating pockets of cold air that follow her movement.

"What do you want, Angelic?"

Her lips curve in that cryptic smile I've come to distrust. "Love can be a powerful force," she says, moving to stand beside me at the window. "But it often comes at a price. Especially here."

My wolf stirs restlessly, responding to the threat in her tone. "Speak plainly or leave."

"Very well." She turns those glowing eyes on me. "Your little librarian is changing things. The curse responds to her in ways it shouldn't. Ways that could be... problematic."

"She has nothing to do with this." But even as I say it, I remember how the library's magic surged when we kissed, how books seem to find their way into her hands, how the very walls of Frostspire Keep lean toward her like flowers seeking sun.

"Doesn't she?" Angelic traces a pattern on the frosted glass. "The castle's magic weakens by the day, yet strengthens in her presence. The Nexus stirs, sensing the shift. And darker forces are taking notice."

A growl builds in my throat. "Is that a threat?"

"A warning." She steps closer, and the air crystallizes between us. "Your curse was meant to contain a specific threat. But love has a way of complicating such bindings. Of changing their nature."

"Get to the point."

"The point, dear Ronan, is that your feelings for her could accelerate everything. The castle's decay. The staff's deterioration. Your own transformation." Her voice softens to something almost like sympathy. "Can you really protect her when you can't even protect yourself?"

The truth in her words stings worse than the cold. Below, Briar has stopped to examine one of the crumbling walls, her hand reaching out as if she can sense the failing magic. She doesn't understand the danger she's in—the danger she might be causing.

"The curse was never meant to be broken," Angelic continues. "It was meant to contain. To protect. Your brother's actions required... specific measures."

"Leave Rurik out of this." My hands clench at my sides, claws threatening to emerge.

"But that's just it—he was never truly out of it." She moves away from the window, her presence leaving trails of frost in her wake. "The curse is part of a delicate balance. Your librarian's influence could upset everything. And there are those who would take advantage of such... instability."

A memory flashes—Rurik standing in a circle of dark magic, power crackling through the air as something vital broke inside the castle's foundations. I push it away. "What do you expect me to do?"

"What you must." Her eyes hold mine. "Unless you want her blood on your hands when everything falls apart."

The words hit like physical blows. Through the window, I watch Briar disappear back into the castle. Every instinct screams to go to her, to hold her close and never let go. But Angelic's warning echoes in my mind, mixing with my own fears.

Movement in a side corridor catches my attention—Fiona ducking into an alcove, phone pressed to her ear. The sight is wrong on multiple levels. Electronics barely function here, and Fiona knows better than to take private calls in the castle.

"...understand, but it's not that simple," her whispered words reach my enhanced hearing. "The magic is different when she's around. Yes, I'll keep watching, but—" She spots me and quickly ends the call, hurrying away before I can question her.

I file the suspicion away for later. Right now, I have a more immediate problem. Briar's scent grows stronger—she's heading this way. Angelic's lips curve knowingly.

"Remember, Ronan. Sometimes the kindest cut is the cleanest." She melts into the shadows, leaving me alone with the weight of her warning.

Briar rounds the corner, and the sight of her hits me like a physical blow. Her cheeks are flushed from the cold, her green eyes bright with that determination that makes my wolf want to howl. The curse writhes beneath my skin, demanding I either claim her or push her away.

"Ronan?" She steps closer, concern creasing her brow. "Is everything alright? I thought I heard voices?—"

"You need to leave." The words come out harsh, deliberately cold. "Pack your things. I'll have Alistair arrange transportation."

She stiffens, hurt flashing across her face before determination takes its place. "No."

"This isn't a request, Miss Everly." I let ice coat each syllable, though it kills something inside me to do it. "Your presence here is no longer welcome."

"Because of what happened in the library?" She takes another step forward, and the

air between us charges with possibility. "We both felt it, Ronan. The magic responded to us. It grew stronger?—"

"It grew unstable," I cut her off. "Dangerous. Like everything else in this cursed place." I force myself to meet her eyes, to let her see nothing but cold authority. "Go home, Miss Everly. Before you get hurt."

"You're lying." Her voice shakes slightly, but her gaze never wavers. "Something's frightened you. Someone's threatened?—"

"The only threat here is your continued presence." I turn away before she can see the truth in my eyes. "Leave. Today."

The castle's magic dims noticeably, the air growing colder as hope bleeds from the stones. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Briar reach for me, then let her hand fall.

"Fine," she says quietly. "But we both know this isn't over."

Her footsteps fade down the corridor, taking every bit of warmth with them. The curse pulses through my blood, angry at being denied. Even the walls seem to shudder, shadows deepening in the corners as if the castle itself protests my choice.

Through the window, I watch darkness gather over the grounds. Rakan's howl echoes in the distance—a sound of mourning that tears at something deep in my chest. The wolf inside me rages, wanting to chase after Briar, to explain, to beg her to understand.

But Angelic's warning rings in my ears: "Can you really protect her when you can't even protect yourself?"

The lights flicker and dim throughout the castle, responding to the pain I can't allow

myself to feel. In the deepening gloom, I catch another glimpse of Fiona, moving furtively through the shadows. Her earlier phone call nags at my instincts, but I can't focus on that mystery now.

Not when every fiber of my being screams to run after Briar, to take back the lies, to pull her close and damn the consequences.

Instead, I press my forehead against the cold glass, watching frost patterns spread from my touch. The curse coils tighter, as if punishing me for pushing away the one person who might have helped break it. But better this pain than her blood on my hands.

Better a clean break than watching her die because I was too selfish to let her go.

The castle groans around me, ancient stones shifting in the cold. Magic seeps through the walls like bleeding wounds, leaving trails of frost in its wake. I close my eyes against the evidence of decay, but I can't shut out the truth.

I'm losing her. Losing everything.

But at least she'll be alive to hate me for it.

A wolf's howl cuts through the gathering dark—Rakan again, but this time there's warning in the sound. Something's changed. Something's coming. And for the first time since taking on this curse, I'm truly afraid of what tomorrow might bring.

Because tomorrow, she'll be gone. And with her, any hope of warmth in this frozen hell I've made for myself.

The curse pulses once more, a dark satisfaction in its grip. After all, isn't this what I deserve? To be alone? To watch everything I touch crumble to dust?

In the distance, thunder rolls across lead-grey skies. A storm is coming.

And I've just sent away the only light that might have helped me weather it.

### The Darkest Night

brIAR

The lantern's flame flickers violently in my hands, struggling against the unnatural darkness that seems to press in from every corner of Frostspire Keep. It's been like this all evening—each light we place growing dimmer faster than the last, as if the Winter Solstice is determined to drown us all in shadows.

"Here's another one, Miss Everly." Nolan passes me a heavy brass lantern, its ornate metalwork warm against my fingers in that strange way I've come to associate with magic. Like everything else in this castle, it feels alive, aware. Even now, after Ronan's harsh dismissal yesterday, objects still react to my touch as if they're trying to tell me something.

"Thank you, Nolan." I place the lantern carefully on a carved stone shelf, trying not to remember how Ronan looked when he ordered me to leave—the silver gleam in his eyes, the way the temperature dropped with each cold word.

"Mother says the castle always gets like this on the longest night," Nolan says, retrieving another lantern from his basket. His young face is serious in the wavering light, making him seem older than his years. "But it feels different this year. Like the darkness is hungry."

I pause in adjusting a crooked candle, struck by his choice of words. "Hungry how?"

He shrugs, but his movements are careful as he lights another wick. "Just... hungry."

Like it's trying to eat all the light. Even the magic feels different." His eyes widen slightly, as if realizing he's said too much. "I mean?—"

"It's alright," I assure him, keeping my voice gentle. "I know about the magic. About the curse."

"That's why you're still here, isn't it?" He looks up at me with surprising insight. "You want to help break it."

The lantern in my hands pulses once, then dims dramatically. Like the castle itself is responding to his words. We've been at this for hours—placing lights throughout the corridors—but the darkness keeps pressing in, hungry and insistent, just as Nolan said.

"What do you know about the Winter Solstice?" I ask, partly to distract us both from the oppressive gloom. The brass feels unusually warm under my fingers, almost vibrating with that same energy I felt in the library when Ronan kissed me.

"Old stories, mostly." Nolan sets another lantern carefully on a window ledge. "About how the veil between worlds grows thin on the longest night. How magic bleeds through more easily." He glances around before lowering his voice. "Mother says that's why we need more light tonight than ever before. Because of what happened with Master Rurik?—"

He stops abruptly, face paling as he realizes what he's said. The nearest lantern flickers wildly, casting strange shadows on the wall.

"It's alright," I say again, though my heart races at the mention of Ronan's brother. "You can tell me."

"No, he can't."



Ronan's voice cuts through the darkness like a blade of ice. He stands at the end of the corridor, his tall frame backlit by dying lamplight, radiating a cold fury that makes the air itself seem to freeze. Even from here, I can feel the curse writhing beneath his skin, responding to his anger.

"Nolan," he says, not taking his eyes off me. "Your mother needs you in the kitchen."

The boy hesitates, looking between us with obvious concern. His fingers tighten on the basket of lanterns. "But Miss Everly and I haven't finished?—"

"Now, please."

Something in Ronan's tone makes Nolan shrink slightly. He squeezes my hand quickly before hurrying away, the sound of his footsteps fading into the oppressive silence. Each lantern seems to dim further as Ronan approaches, as if the darkness follows in his wake.

"You shouldn't be here." His voice is controlled, measured, but there's something beneath the surface—a strain that makes my heart ache. "I told you to leave."

"And I told you I won't." I lift my chin, refusing to back down despite the way the temperature continues to drop. "Not until I understand what's really happening here."

"What's happening is that you're making everything worse." He moves closer, and the nearest lantern flickers violently. In this light, his grey eyes seem to glow with an inner fire. "Your presence here, your interference with the castle's magic—it's destabilizing everything."

"That's not true." The memory of our kiss floods back—how the magic had surged around us, pure and alive. How for one moment, everything had felt right. "You know it's not. The magic responds differently when we're together. It gets

stronger?—"

"Exactly!" His control slips for a moment, raw emotion bleeding through. "The curse feeds on that strength. Uses it. Every time you interact with the castle's magic, every time you —" He cuts himself off, jaw clenching. "You need to go. Before it's too late."

Something snaps inside me. All the hurt, all the confusion of the past days rises up like a wave. Without thinking, I turn and stride toward the library—toward Ember. Ronan's sharp intake of breath tells me he knows exactly where I'm heading.

"Miss Everly—" His voice carries a warning now. "The Arcanum is forbidden. Especially tonight."

"Everything is forbidden!" I push through the heavy doors, anger giving me strength. "Every time I get close to understanding something, you push me away. But I'm not letting you?—"

The words die in my throat as I enter the library. The air feels different tonight—charged with an energy that makes my skin prickle. Books tremble on their shelves, and the shadows seem to move with purpose, gathering in the corners like living things. The magic pulses around us, stronger than I've ever felt it.

"You have no idea what you're dealing with." Ronan follows me in, his voice tight with barely controlled emotion. "The magic here is dangerous tonight. Unstable."

"Then help me understand!" I turn to face him, ignoring how the room's energy seems to build around us. "Stop shutting me out and just tell me the truth!"

The air shimmers suddenly, like heat waves rising from summer pavement. The sensation I've come to associate with Ember intensifies, and then?—

Everything changes.

The library dissolves around me in a swirl of magic and memory. I'm still standing in the same space, but the room I see is different—younger somehow, filled with a light that seems to come from the walls themselves. Two men argue near the great windows, their voices echoing strangely in my head.

Ronan, years younger, his face less haunted. And beside him, a mirror image with colder eyes—Rurik. The resemblance is startling, but there's something off about Rurik's presence, like oil floating on water. Dark energy seems to pulse around him as he gestures angrily.

"You don't understand what this power could do," Rurik's voice echoes as if underwater. "The Nexus is just the beginning. With the right sacrifice?—"

The scene shifts violently. Now I'm seeing the library floor covered in strange symbols that burn with an inner light. Rurik stands in their center, blood dripping from his palms onto the ancient stones. The castle—Ember—screams in my mind, a sound of fundamental wrongness as magic bleeds from the walls.

"You'll destroy everything!" Ronan's voice, thick with horror. But it's too late.

Another flash: Ronan on his knees, agony written across his features as darkness writhes around him. I feel Ember's pain as something vital breaks, as the curse takes root in the castle's foundations. The walls shudder, and magic seeps out like blood from a mortal wound.

"Stop this!" Present-day Ronan's hands grip my shoulders, the contact sending electricity through my whole body. The library's magic surges violently in response, books flying from their shelves as pages rustle like startled birds. "You have to stop!"

"I'm not doing anything!" But even as I say it, I know it's not entirely true. Something in me is pulling these memories from the castle itself, from Ember. The magic swirls around us like a storm, responding to emotions I can barely contain. "The castle is trying to show me?—"

"This is exactly why you have to leave." His fingers tighten on my shoulders, and I can feel him trembling. The nearest bookshelf groans as shadows writhe around it. "The curse—it's using you somehow. Using our connection to grow stronger."

"No." I shake my head, still reeling from the visions. My heart pounds with certainty even as tears burn my eyes. "That's not what's happening. The magic responds differently when we're together. It gets stronger, yes, but not darker. Not cursed. Can't you feel it?"

"You don't understand what's at stake!" His voice cracks with desperation. A particularly violent surge of magic extinguishes every lantern in the room, leaving us in darkness broken only by the faint glow of magical energy. "If anything happened to you?—"

I grab his wrists where he's still holding my shoulders, refusing to let him pull away. "Then help me understand! Stop protecting me and just tell me the truth!"

For a moment, something raw and vulnerable flashes across his features. The magic pulses between us, warm and alive, so different from the cold darkness of the curse. Books continue to swirl through the air, and the shadows in the corners seem to breathe with our shared tension.

But then his expression hardens, and he steps back, breaking our connection. The temperature plummets instantly, frost spreading across the windows in delicate, deadly patterns.

"The truth is that you're making everything worse." Each word falls like ice between us. "Your presence here is accelerating the curse. The castle is dying faster because of you. Because I was weak enough to let you stay."

"You're lying." My voice shakes, but I hold his gaze. The magical energy in the room pulses with my words, making the shadows dance. "I can feel it, Ronan. The magic is different when we're together. It's trying to tell us something?—"

"It's trying to destroy us!" He sweeps his arm out, gesturing at the chaos around us. Books hover in the air, their pages fluttering with supernatural wind. Frost creeps across every surface, beautiful and deadly. "Look at what's happening! The curse is feeding on our connection, using it to grow stronger. And when it finally breaks?—"

He cuts himself off, jaw clenching. A wolf's howl echoes from somewhere outside, lonely and desperate in the darkness.

"When it breaks what?"

"Everyone dies." The words come out as barely more than a whisper, but they hit me like physical blows. "The staff, the wolves, everyone bound to this place. Their lives are tied to the curse now. And you—" His voice breaks, and the nearest window pane cracks with a sound like shattering hope. "You'll die too, if you stay. I won't let that happen."

The temperature plummets further, ice crystals forming in the air between us. The magic that usually fills the library feels hollow now, wounded. Even the books settle back onto their shelves as if they've lost the will to fight.

"So pushing me away is your solution?" I take a step toward him, even as he backs away. "After everything we've seen? Everything we've felt?"

"It's the only solution." All emotion drains from his voice, leaving it as cold as the frost-covered windows. "Pack your things and go. Tonight. Before the curse takes root in you too."

"Ronan—"

"That's an order." He turns away, his shoulders rigid with tension. In the magical half-light, his silhouette looks carved from shadow and pain. "Alistair will arrange transportation. Don't make me force you out."

The last traces of warmth flee the room, leaving only darkness and the soft sound of settling books. Everything that made the library feel alive—feel like Ember—seems to withdraw, as if the castle itself is mourning.

I want to argue. Want to make him see that pushing me away isn't the answer. But the look in his eyes when he finally turns back—that mixture of fear and grim determination—tells me it would be useless. Tonight, at least, the darkness has won.

The walk back to my room passes in a blur of shadows and dying lamplight. My hands shake as I pack a small bag, though I leave most of my things behind. It feels wrong, like I'm abandoning something vital. Someone vital.

The castle groans around me, ancient stones shifting in the cold. Or maybe they're crying. Tonight, on the longest, darkest night of the year, it's hard to tell the difference.

When I step outside, the winter air bites at my skin with supernatural sharpness. The darkness feels absolute, broken only by the distant glow of wolves' eyes watching from the tree line. Their howls have turned mournful, as if they know what's happening. What's being lost.

I look back at Frostspire Keep one last time. In the highest window, a figure stands watching—Ronan's silhouette black against the grey night. The sight makes my heart constrict painfully in my chest. Even from here, I can feel the curse's cold grip on everything I'm leaving behind.

"I'm not giving up," I whisper to the watching darkness. To Ember, to the castle, to Ronan himself. The words hang in the frozen air like a promise. "This isn't over."

The wolves howl again as I walk away, their voices echoing through the longest night of the year. Behind me, Frostspire Keep fades into the darkness like a dream slipping away at dawn. Snow begins to fall, thick flakes that seem to glow with their own faint light.

But I know the truth now. I've seen it in those visions, felt it in the magic that pulses between Ronan and me. Whatever he says, whatever he believes, pushing me away isn't the answer. The curse may feed on isolation, but love—real, fierce, unshakeable love—that's something else entirely.

And tomorrow, when the sun rises, I'll start figuring out how to prove it.

The curse wants us apart. Wants us isolated and cold and afraid.

But I'm done letting the darkness win.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

### A Heart Laid Bare

RONAN

R akan's howl cuts through the night like a blade, raw with warning and fear. I'm moving before the sound fades, my body shifting even as I run.

The transformation comes easier now, fueled by desperation. Bone and sinew crack and reform as I burst through the castle doors, my wolf form taking over with practiced speed.

The curse pulses through my blood, stronger on this moonlit night. But for once, I welcome its power. Because somewhere in the darkness, Briar is in danger. I can smell her fear on the wind, mixed with the unfamiliar scent of strange wolves.

He's near the eastern boundary, Rakan's thoughts reach mine. Gage's pack has her surrounded.

My growl echoes across the snow-covered grounds. Gage. The name alone sends rage coursing through my veins. The rogue alpha has been testing our borders for months, but this—targeting Briar—this is a declaration of war.

I race through the trees, snow flying beneath my paws. The forest blurs around me, but my enhanced senses paint a clear picture of the threat ahead. Six wolves, their scents marked by darkness and something else—something wrong. The curse recognizes it, writhing beneath my skin in response.



Then I hear her voice, steady despite her fear: "Stay back."

The scene that greets me makes my blood run cold. Briar stands with her back against an ancient oak, facing down Gage's wolves. They circle her slowly, their eyes gleaming with unnatural hunger in the moonlight. But it's their leader who draws my attention.

Gage's wolf form looms larger than any creature I've ever faced, his thick black fur rippling with streaks of silver that glimmer like starlight against the darkness. It's as if the moonlight itself bends toward him, seemingly absorbed into his being, enhancing the terrifying aura he emanates.

Power radiates from him in waves, feeling corrupted and wrong, like a tempest that has grown too vast to control. When he turns to face me, his eyes blaze with an unnatural glow, illuminating an intelligence that feels far more sinister than the instincts of a normal shifter.

Well, well, his thoughts pierce through the night, dripping with mockery. The cursed prince emerges from his castle. How fitting...

Fueled by rage and a protective instinct, I launch myself into the air, soaring overhead like a shadow. I land firmly and squarely between Gage and Briar, who presses her back against the ancient oak tree, her posture tense but unwavering. I can hear her heartbeat pounding behind me, a rapid rhythm infused with both fear and determination, but her voice remains surprisingly steady as she calls out, "Ronan?"

I can sense the weight of her gaze, the trust and worry mingling in her eyes, but I can't let myself think about that now. Gage's taunts echo in my mind, but all that matters is protecting Briar.

Get back to the castle, I project the thought, hoping somehow she'll understand. Now

.

Gage's laugh ripples through our connected minds. She can't hear you, prince. She's just a human—fragile, breakable. Like all your other weaknesses.

One of his pack members lunges forward, testing my defenses. I meet him with fangs and fury, sending him tumbling back with a yelp. But it's just a distraction. Two more wolves circle around, trying to get to Briar.

That's when Rakan bursts through the trees like an avenging shadow, taking one of the wolves down in a spray of snow and snarls. My second-in-command fights with the fluid grace that comes from years of protecting the pack, his movements precise and lethal.

The castle's defenses are failing, Gage's thoughts cut through the chaos of battle. Just like you. We can smell it—the decay, the weakening magic. How long before it all crumbles, I wonder?

I lunge for his throat, but he dances away with unnatural speed. Behind me, Briar gasps as another wolf gets too close. I spin, catching the attacker's haunches with my teeth, using my larger size to throw him into a tree. The impact shakes snow from the branches above.

Your brother sends his regards , Gage's thoughts slice through my concentration. The words make me falter just long enough for one of his wolves to score a hit, claws raking across my shoulder. The pain is nothing compared to the ice that grips my heart.

Rurik. Of course this is about Rurik.

He said you might be vulnerable tonight, Gage continues, circling closer. Something

about the solstice weakening your defenses. Though he didn't mention the girl.

Another wolf lunges toward Briar, teeth bared and eyes gleaming with unnatural hunger. Rakan springs into action, intercepting the attack with savage grace, his movements a blend of instinct and skill honed through years of protecting the pack.

But even as he drives the wolf back, I can sense his fatigue. Each clash with these rogue wolves drains him further, a weariness that weighs heavy in the air.

We're outnumbered, and these wolves—there's a disturbing quality to their movements, a dissonance in their growls. They flow like shadows, but there's an unsettling rigidity to their instincts, as if they're being directed by a force that twists their natural wildness. It feels as though something darker has seeped into their essence.

Is this the threat the Council fears? Dark magic at work?

Tell me, Ronan, Gage's thoughts carry a cruel amusement, does she know what you really are? What you let happen to save your precious brother?

"Don't listen to him, Ronan." Briar's voice slices through the chaos of Gage's taunts, anchoring me amidst the mental turmoil. She seems inexplicably aware of the psychological battle swirling around us. "Whatever he's saying—whatever this is about—it doesn't matter."

But it does matter.

Because Gage's words confirm my worst fears. Rurik isn't just out there somewhere—he's actively working against us. Against me. The brother I sacrificed everything to save is still orchestrating my destruction.

Wait... You can hear me? The thought slips past my mental shields, a glimmer of hope amidst the darkness.

"Yes," she replies, her eyes locked on mine. "I might not have understood it at first, but I do now."

This unspoken bond reveals itself with each moment we share, underscoring the sacred link between us. She's my mate.

A howl splits the night—reinforcements from Gage's pack approaching from the west. The sound snaps me back to the immediate danger.

Briar. I have to protect Briar.

Rakan, get her out of here.

Not without you , my second replies, even as he fights off another attacker. His loyalty burns bright in my mind, so different from the twisted bond I shared with Rurik.

Gage chooses that moment to strike, his massive form hurtling toward me with supernatural speed. We collide in a fury of fangs and claws, snow flying around us.

His strength is wrong—enhanced by something that makes my curse recoil. Each bite feels like ice in my veins.

Did you really think you could keep her safe? His thoughts rip through my mind as we grapple. The curse will take everything, Ronan. Just like it was meant to. Just like Rurik planned.

The words ignite something in me—rage, yes, but also a desperate need to prove him

wrong. To prove myself wrong. Because I sent Briar away to protect her, and look where that got us. My noble sacrifice accomplished nothing except leaving her vulnerable.

A blast of pure cold energy suddenly cuts through the battle. The rogue wolves scatter as Angelic materializes between the trees, her platinum hair glowing in the moonlight. The temperature plummets further, frost spreading across the ground in intricate patterns.

"Enough." Angelic's voice carries supernatural authority. Even Gage takes a step back, his massive form radiating wariness.

I stay crouched protectively in front of Briar, blood from my wounds staining the snow crimson. Every instinct screams to get her to safety, but moving means taking my eyes off Gage. His thoughts still press against my mind, taunting with hints about Rurik's plans.

This isn't over, Ronan, Gage projects before backing away. The curse will break you. All of you. And then your castle will be ours. His pack melts into the shadows, leaving only their wrong-scented trail in the snow.

The moment they're gone, I shift back to my human form, my body protesting against the sudden change. An ache spreads through my muscles, and I brace myself against the pain.

Briar stumbles forward as I turn to face her, instinctively reaching for my wounded shoulder, concern etched across her features.

"Don't," I growl, stepping back to create distance between us. The curse writhes beneath my skin, making it hard to think through the pain and the lingering rage that pulses through me. "This is exactly why I told you to leave."

Her voice trembles slightly, yet her eyes remain locked onto mine with a fierce determination. "If I had left, they would have attacked anyway. And you would have faced them alone."

"Better alone than watching you die!" The words tear from my throat, raw and desperate, laden with feelings I can no longer contain. "The curse is killing everything it touches. The castle, the staff, the very magic in these walls. And now Rurik—" I break off, the realization of his betrayal burning like poison in my chest.

"The curse isn't killing everything," Angelic interjects, her otherworldly presence a sharp reminder of the larger threats at play. "It's dying itself. And taking you all with it."

Rakan moves closer to us, his human form a stark contrast to the intense emotions swirling around. I can feel his loyalty pulsing through our pack bond, stronger than ever after the fight. But beneath that loyalty lies a current of concern—he senses it too, the way the magic is failing around us at an alarming rate.

"What do you mean, dying?" Briar asks, and something in her voice makes my wolf stir restlessly. She sounds too interested, too invested. Even now, she's trying to understand rather than run.

"The curse was never meant to be permanent." Angelic's green eyes fix on me with uncomfortable intensity. "It was meant to contain a specific threat. To protect the supernatural world from Rurik's experiments. But you, Ronan—you've turned it into a prison. Not just for yourself, but for everyone connected to this place."

"I didn't have a choice," I snarl, but the words taste like lies.

"You always had a choice." Her voice softens with something like pity. "Taking on the curse for Rurik didn't make you a better man. It just gave you an excuse to stop

trying to be one at all."

Her words struck me like tangible blows. Behind me, I hear Briar's sharp intake of breath, feel her take a step closer despite everything I've done to push her away. The curse pulses between us, responding to her proximity even now.

"The magic is failing because you've stopped fighting," Angelic continues, frost spreading from her feet as she moves closer. "You accepted the curse as punishment, wrapped yourself in isolation and called it noble sacrifice. But that's not what breaks curses, Ronan. That's what feeds them."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" The question comes out more desperate than I intend. "Let everyone I care about die when it breaks?"

"They're dying anyway." She gestures toward the castle, its dark silhouette barely visible through the trees. "Look at your home, Ronan. Really look. The magic isn't just fading—it's being corrupted. And not just by the curse."

I follow her gaze, really seeing Frostspire Keep through enhanced senses for the first time in years. The magical decay is obvious now—darkness eating away at the foundations, shadows moving where they shouldn't. But there's something else too, something that makes my curse recoil in recognition.

"Rurik," I whisper, the betrayal cutting deep. "He's still... experimenting?"

"The rogue wolves weren't just here to taunt you." Angelic's eyes gleam with otherworldly knowledge. "They're changed. Enhanced. Your brother's work continues, using power he shouldn't have access to. Power that's somehow connected to this place."

Beside me, Briar shivers—from cold or fear or both, I'm not sure. Without thinking, I

move closer to her, my body responding to an instinct deeper than the curse. The magic surges between us, and for a moment, the darkness around the castle seems to retreat.

Angelic notices. Of course she notices. "Interesting, isn't it? How the magic strengthens when you stop fighting your heart?"

"It also makes the curse stronger," I argue, but even I can hear the uncertainty in my voice.

"Does it?" She looks pointedly at where Briar stands next to me, unharmed despite the magical energy swirling around us. "Or does it just feel stronger because you're finally feeling something real?"

Rakan's thoughts brush against mine, carrying images from the fight—how my power had grown when protecting Briar, how the curse had seemed to work with me rather than against me.

She's right, brother. The magic is different when she's near.

"The curse feeds on isolation," Angelic says softly. "On fear and guilt and noble suffering. But love?" She smiles, and for once it holds no mockery. "Love transforms. Even the darkest magic can't stand against it forever."

"Unless it kills her first."

"I'm not afraid of dying." Briar's voice is quiet but resolute. When I turn to look at her, her green eyes reflect the same unwavering determination I saw in the library. "What scares me is seeing you quit."

Something breaks inside my chest—a wall I've built so carefully over the years. The



curse surges, but it feels different now. Less like chains and more like... hope .

"The choice is yours, Ronan." Angelic begins to fade, her form dissolving into the winter air. "But remember—curses aren't broken by suffering. They're broken by having something worth fighting for."

She disappears, leaving us alone with the silence and the snow and too many dangerous truths. Briar sways slightly, the night's events finally catching up with her. Without hesitation, I scoop her into my arms.

"I can walk," she protests weakly.

"I know." But I don't put her down. Can't put her down. The wolf in me needs to know she's safe, and the man... the man needs something else entirely.

As we walk back to the castle, Rakan and my pack flanking us protectively, I feel the weight of Angelic's words settling into my bones. The curse thrums through my blood, as heavy as ever, but somehow different. Or maybe I'm the one who's different.

Because for the first time since taking on this burden, I'm not just enduring it. I'm not just accepting my fate as punishment.

I'm starting to wonder if there might be another way. A better way.

And it starts with the woman in my arms, who refuses to let the darkness win.

Who refuses to let me face it alone.

The curse may feed on isolation, but tonight has proven one thing: I'm not alone anymore. Not unless I choose to be.

### The Return and Confrontation

brIAR

Ronan's arms tighten around me briefly before he sets me on my feet in Frostspire Keep's entrance hall. The warmth of his touch lingers even as he steps back, his expression guarded once more. Blood from his wounds stains the snow we've tracked in, a stark reminder of the fight with Gage's wolves.

"You should rest," he says gruffly, though his eyes never leave my face. The silver gleam from his wolf form hasn't fully faded, making his gaze more intense than ever. "It's been a long night."

"No." The word comes out stronger than I expect, strengthened perhaps by the castle's magic that swirls around us, responding to our proximity. "We need to talk about what happened out there. About what Angelic said?—"

"There's nothing to discuss." He turns away, but I catch a flash of pain in his expression. "The curse is getting stronger. You saw what happened out there, what Rurik's influence—" He breaks off, jaw tightening. "You need to leave. It's too risky."

"I'm not leaving." I step closer, and the magic pulses between us like a living thing. "The curse isn't getting stronger because of me. It's getting stronger because you keep fighting this—fighting us."

The nearest candles flare suddenly, casting wild shadows across the walls. Ronan's hands clench at his sides, and I can feel the curse writhing beneath his skin, reaching

for the magic that pulses between us.

"You don't understand what you're risking." His voice drops lower, dangerous. "What happened in the forest—that was just the beginning. And you..." He breaks off, turning away. "I won't watch you die because of my mistakes."

"Look at me." When he doesn't move, I close the distance between us, my heart racing as I reach for his arm.

The second we touch, a surge of energy sparks within me, firing every sensory thread to life. The atmosphere seems to vibrate with unmet tension, our inexplicable bond exerting a gravitational force that inevitably pulls me deeper into him.

Each moment stretches, thickening the air around us until it feels charged with fate.

"Ronan, please. Just look at me." My voice is softer now, almost breathless. I can feel the intensity of his gaze even when he refuses to meet it directly, but there's acknowledgement in his stance—an awareness that shifts the very atmosphere between us.

I stand here, caught between fear and longing, a thought tugs at the back of my mind.

I drove across the country to a castle in the middle of nowhere, answering a mysterious email invitation that vanished like smoke.

I'm living in a magical castle that's dying, its very essence tied to a curse, and yet... I've never felt more alive, more present, than I do in this moment. I've never felt like I belonged with anyone or anywhere more than here, with him.

And like the magic that has us bound together, all the worries and doubts that swirl around me recede. In the depths of uncertainty, I find my purpose rising like a flame,

illuminating the path I'm determined to take.

I'm willing to fight for this—the Keep, for the magic that connects us, and for Ronan's heart.

Then everything we've kept buried rises to the surface.

The encounter in the forest flashes through my mind—the raw edges of danger and desire colliding. Our kisses, filled with urgency and longing, had hinted at something deeper, something powerful that neither of us dared to fully acknowledge.

Right here, in this enchanting yet perilous castle, my heart beats in sync with the pulsing magic that surrounds us, telling me this is where I belong.

But Ronan still tries to distance himself, a barrier I refuse to accept any longer. I step closer, invading the space between us, my resolve hardening. I won't let him push me away again.

Ronan stands before me, naked and magnificent in the flickering firelight. His broad shoulders and chiseled torso are sculpted with lean muscle, each sinew and ridge casting intricate shadows that dance across his skin.

My gaze traces the hard planes of his abdomen, my breath catching at the sight of the defined V that points to his.... And I jerk my gaze higher as heat blooms in my cheeks. My eyes travel upward, taking in the smattering of dark hair across his chest that narrows into a trail leading down from his navel.

His powerful thighs flex as he shifts his weight, and I can't help but admire the way his body moves with an almost feral grace. The raw power emanating from him. My pulse quickens when our eyes meet, his stormy gaze holding me captive with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine. I feel exposed, as if he can see straight

through to the deepest parts of my soul—and the longing I fight to contain.

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry as desire coils low in my belly. I've never seen a man so ruggedly beautiful, his raw masculinity both intimidating and intoxicating. The urge to reach out and trace the hard lines of his body with my fingertips is nearly overwhelming, and I clench my fists at my sides to keep from giving in to the temptation.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I struggle to maintain my composure, even as every nerve ending in my body screams for me to close the distance between us.

He turns slowly, and the raw emotion in his eyes steals my breath. Pain, fear, longing—it's all there, burning beneath the silver. The curse pulses visibly now, making the air shimmer around us like heat waves rising from summer pavement.

"The magic responds to us," I tell him softly. "You must feel it. Every time we're together, every time we touch—the castle comes alive. Even Angelic saw it."

"That's what makes it dangerous." His hand comes up to cup my face, the touch so gentle it makes my heart ache. "The curse feeds on that connection. Uses it. And when it finally breaks?—"

"Then we'll deal with it together." I lean into his touch, sensing the tension that ripples through him. "I need you to stop resisting. Stop pushing us away."

The magic surges between us, warm and alive. Unlike the cold grip of the curse, this energy feels right—like coming home after a long journey. Ronan's thumb traces my cheekbone, and I watch his control slip further with each passing second.

"Briar..." My name falls from his lips like a prayer. "If anything happened to you?—"

I silence him with a kiss.

For a heartbeat, he remains frozen. Then something breaks inside him, and he's pulling me closer, kissing me back with desperate intensity. The castle's magic explodes around us— books flying from their shelves, candles flaring like miniature suns, the very air humming with power.

His hands tangle in my hair as he deepens the kiss, and I can feel the wolf stirring beneath his skin, demanding more. The curse fights against our connection, trying to force him away, but this time he doesn't let it win. Instead, he pulls me impossibly closer, as if he could absorb me into himself.

"Tell me to stop," he growls against my lips. "Tell me this isn't worth the risk."

"I can't...." I wind my arms around his neck, feeling the magic pulse between us like a living thing.

A groan tears from his throat, and suddenly he's lifting me, pressing me back against the nearest wall. The stone should be cold, but it feels warm, almost alive.

Everything feels alive—the magic, the castle, my own skin where it touches his.

His mouth trails down my neck, and I gasp at the sensation of fangs grazing sensitive flesh. The wolf is closer to the surface now, but I'm not afraid. Even as the curse writhes around us, trying to taint this moment, I can feel something else building—something pure and powerful and right.

"The magic," I manage between kisses. "Can you feel it?"

He pulls back just enough to meet my eyes, and the silver in his gaze is brighter than ever. "It's stronger with you. Everything is stronger with you."

The admission seems to cost him something, but before he can retreat behind his walls again, I pull him back to me. This kiss is deeper, slower, filled with all the things we haven't said. His hands slide down my sides, leaving trails of fire in their wake, and I arch into his touch.

The castle trembles around us, magic surging through ancient stones like blood through veins. Books continue to swirl through the air, their pages rustling like wings. Even the shadows seem to dance, responding to the energy that builds between us.

Ronan's hands skim higher, pushing the fabric of my shirt up to my breasts. My breath catches in my throat as his fingers brush the sensitive undersides, thumbs brushing the edges of my lace bra.

"I dreamed of having you....," he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that sends shivers down my spine. His lips follow the path of his fingers, placing soft kisses along my collarbone, down to the valley between my breasts.

My head falls back against the wall, eyes fluttering closed as his mouth closes over my pulse point. His tongue teases the sensitive skin, and I can feel the magic in the air around us responding, a tangible energy that pulls us closer together.

He cups my breasts in his palms, thumbs stroking over the delicate fabric. I can feel his wolf within him, the animalistic nature that demands more. My body arches instinctively into his touch, a silent plea for more.

Ronan's mouth trails lower, his lips and tongue leaving a trail of fire across my skin. His thumbs hook into the straps of my bra, tugging them down slowly until the lace slides off my shoulders, baring me to him.

The air in the room seems to shimmer, thick with magic and desire. I can feel the connection between us, a force that goes beyond the physical, beyond even the

supernatural. It's a soul-deep bond that pulls us inexorably closer, as if we're two magnets unable to resist.

He takes one tight peak into his mouth, sucking gently, and I cry out, my fingers tangling in his hair. The sensation shoots straight between my legs, and I'm suddenly aware of how wet I am, how much I need him.

He shifts his attention to my other breast, lavishing it with the same attention, and the coil of tension inside me tightens further. My hips rock against his, seeking friction, but he holds me firmly in place with one hand on my lower back, his body pressing me against the wall.

"Ronan, please," I whisper, not sure what I'm asking for, but knowing I need something more.

He chuckles darkly, his breath hot against my skin. "Not yet, moya lyubov. I want to hear you come undone first."

"Moya—"

"My love..."

His mouth closes over my peak again, his tongue flicking and teasing, and his hand slides down to the waist of my jeans. With one smooth motion, he unbuttons and unzips my pants, slipping his hand inside to find me already wet and ready for him.

His fingers delve deeper, stroking and circling, and I can feel the pleasure building, tightening like a spring inside me. The castle's magic swirls around us, alive with our desire, feeding off it, and strengthening the bond between us.

Ronan's thumb presses against my clit, circling slowly, and I can't hold back the



moan that escapes my lips. "That's it, Briar. Let go."

And I do. My body shudders as the pleasure explodes through me, waves of sensation pulsing through every nerve ending. I cry out his name, the sound raw and desperate, echoing in the air around us. My fingers tighten in his hair, anchoring myself to him as I lose myself in the overwhelming bliss.

With each stroke, the intensity builds, sending me spiraling further into ecstasy. I feel my hips pressing against his hand, instinctively seeking more, craving the exquisite friction that keeps me teetering on the edge.

Suddenly, a deep growl rumbles from his chest, resonating against my skin. It's a sound filled with raw desire, a reflection of his wolf rising to the surface, as if he too is caught in the magic of the moment. His hands never relent, guiding me through the aftershocks, their strength grounding me even as I float higher.

It's as if our breaths merge, a dance of shared pleasure that transcends all boundaries, melding the human and the beast within him. My world narrows to just us—his growl, my cries, and the pulsing energy that's severing our souls together.

When I finally come down, I'm breathless and boneless, leaning heavily against him. Ronan catches me, lifting me easily into his arms, and I bury my face in his neck, my heart still pounding.

Then, abruptly, Ronan tears himself away. The loss of contact is physical pain, and I reach for him automatically, but he's already across the room. The temperature plummets instantly, frost spreading across the windows in delicate, deadly patterns.

"Return to your room," he says roughly, though his body visibly strains toward mine. "The curse—it's too strong. If I lose control?—"

"That's not what's happening here." I straighten from the wall, noting how the magic follows my movement like a loyal pet. "The curse fights against this because it knows we're stronger together. Look around, Ronan. Really look."

He does, taking in the evidence of our connection. The books settling back onto their shelves, glowing faintly. The candles burning brighter than they have in days. The very air seems clearer, as if our kiss has temporarily lifted some of the darkness that usually clings to these walls.

"It's destroying you," he whispers, and I'm not sure if he's talking to me or himself. "My touch, my curse—it's poison."

"No." I take a step toward him, and the magic surges hopefully. "Your brother's darkness is poison. This—us—this is something else entirely."

For a moment, something vulnerable flashes across his features. The wolf peers out through his eyes, and I can sense its longing—not just for my body, but for the connection I'm offering.

The curse pulses once, violently, making him flinch.

"I can't." The words sound like they're being torn from his throat. "I won't be the one who destroys you."

He turns and strides from the room, leaving me alone with the swirling magic and the echo of his pain. But this time, I don't feel rejected. I feel more certain than ever that I'm right where I need to be.

The library doors swing open silently, inviting me in. Ember—the castle's spirit—seems to understand what I need. As I step inside, the magic flows around me in warm waves, stronger than I've ever felt it. Books shift on their shelves, their

spines glowing with an inner light that pulses in time with my heartbeat.

Ancient symbols appear on the walls, shimmering like starlight. They remind me of the markings I saw in my vision of Rurik's ritual, but these feel different—purer somehow. As I watch, they begin to change, forming new patterns that speak of binding magic and breaking curses.

The message is clear: the castle itself is trying to show me the way. Our love isn't weakening the magic—it's transforming it, breaking through the darkness of Rurik's curse with something more powerful.

"I understand," I whisper to the watching shadows. To Ember, to the castle, to whatever force keeps drawing me deeper into this mystery. "And I'm not giving up."

When Secrets Speak

RONAN

The stone crumbles beneath my touch, ancient magic seeping from the cracks like blood from a wound. Another section of Frostspire Keep failing, another piece of my home dying. I press my palm against the wall, channeling what power I can into the weakening enchantments.

"That won't help for long." Angelic's voice cuts through my concentration. She stands in the shadows of the damaged hallway, her platinum hair gleaming despite the dim light. "The castle's magic grows more unstable by the hour."

"I'm aware." My words come out as a growl. The wall beneath my hand pulses weakly, like a fading heartbeat. "Unless you have actual solutions to offer?—"

"Solutions require understanding." She moves closer, frost spreading where her feet touch the floor. "And you, Ronan Wolfe, have been willfully blind to much."

Thunder rumbles outside, and the ancient chandelier above us sways ominously. Dark clouds gather beyond the windows, mirroring the tension building in my chest. The curse writhes beneath my skin, responding to my frustration.

"Speak plainly or leave."

"Very well." Her otherworldly green eyes fix on mine. "Your brother's experiments continue. Each one pulls at the fabric of this place, corrupting what remains of its

original magic. But that's not the real problem, is it?"

I turn back to the damaged wall, focusing on channeling energy into the failing stones. But her next words freeze me in place.

"The real problem is that you've been fighting the wrong battle all along. The curse doesn't feed on power, Ronan. It feeds on isolation."

The temperature drops several degrees. Frost patterns spread across the nearest window, forming shapes that remind me uncomfortably of the symbols from Rurik's dark rituals. "What do you know about the curse?"

"More than you've allowed yourself to learn." She traces a finger along the crumbling stonework, leaving trails of ice in her wake. "The Council sent me to observe, to determine if your... situation posed a threat to the Veil. But what I've seen is something else entirely."

A crash echoes from somewhere deeper in the castle, followed by the sound of running footsteps. Fiona appears at the end of the hall, phone clutched to her ear. She freezes when she spots us, quickly ending her call and hurrying away before I can question her.

"Your staff grows restless," Angelic observes. "They sense the change coming. Some more than others."

"What change?"

Her smile carries centuries of secrets. "The one you've been fighting since she arrived. Since Briar started awakening things you thought were safely buried."

The curse pulses at the mention of Briar's name. Even now, I can sense her presence

somewhere in the castle, like a warm light calling to something deep inside me. The magic in the walls seems to strengthen wherever she walks, as if reaching for her.

"Briar has nothing to do with this."

"She has everything to do with this." Angelic's voice sharpens. "Why do you think the castle called to her? Why do you think the magic responds so strongly to your connection?"

"There is no connection." The lie tastes bitter on my tongue.

"No?" She arches an eyebrow. "Then why does your curse grow stronger when you push her away, yet weaken when you allow yourself to feel? Why does the castle itself seem to breathe easier when you're together?"

Before I can respond, Briar's scent reaches me—lavender and old books, mixed with something uniquely her. She appears around the corner, concern creasing her brow as she takes in the damaged hallway.

"I heard the crash," she says, moving closer. "Is everything alright?"

The magic surges instantly, responding to her presence. The dying enchantments in the wall flare to life, stones knitting themselves together where moments ago they were crumbling. Even the air feels different—warmer, more alive.

It's her. Beautiful, curious, her .

As Briar's presence lingers in the air, I can't help but feel the weight of my own culpability. Each moment I allow myself to care for her, I invite danger—not just for myself, but for her as well.

Rurik's twisted ambitions loom like a storm cloud above us, darkening everything we touch. My instincts scream for me to shield her, to push her away before the chaos he creates can ensnare her too. But every time I think of pushing her away, the pulse of the curse thrums louder, reminding me that isolation isn't a sanctuary.

It's a prison built of my own fear.

I press my palm against the newly repaired stones, feeling the magic surge beneath my fingertips, powerful yet fragile—a whisper to what might be. Briar's warmth in the castle feels like hope that this could end, yet my brother's shadow casts long and foreboding.

Guilt gnaws at me, twisting my gut as I recall the choices I've made, the burdens I've shouldered. It was my sacrifice intended to protect Rurik and keep our family intact, but all I've done is create a rift, allowing his darkness to flourish unchecked.

"Ronan."

The sound of Angelic's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts. She steps from the shadows, her presence both chilling and commanding, as if the cold follows in her wake. Her knowing smile widens.

"Fascinating, isn't it? How the very fabric of this place reaches for her?"

I can feel the tension crackling between us, her observation hitting closer to home than I'd like to admit. The castle seems to resonate, a silent witness to my internal struggle.

"Your brother's experiments grow bolder," Angelic continues, her fingers trailing frost across the newly repaired stones, crystallizing evidence of the magic associated with Briar. "The Council watches with... interest."

The gravity of her words sinks in, heavy and real. My brother's meddling has consequences I can no longer ignore, and their roots stretch deep into both my past decisions and the perilous future we now face.

My hands clench at my sides. The mention of Rurik sends ice through my veins, colder than Angelic's magic.

"The Council has watched for years. What makes this different?"

"The balance shifts." Her otherworldly green eyes fix on mine. "Your curse was meant to contain his darkness, yet here you stand, letting it fester while you play at noble suffering."

A growl builds in my throat. The temperature drops further, and the shadows in the corners deepen. "I took this curse to protect?—"

"To protect what?" She interrupts with a sharp laugh that echoes through the hall. "Your brother experiments on wolves, twisting them into beings beyond the Veil's power to conceal. The castle's magic bleeds away while you remain locked in your own self-imposed isolation. You think you're protecting your own heart, but your refusal to let anyone in endangers everyone tied to this place. You might see yourself as a guardian, yet you're the one keeping the darkness alive."

Her gaze shifts toward the direction where Briar just disappeared, the urgency in her voice cutting through the tension. "And now... love threatens to unravel everything."

After tonight, I'm certain that Angelic isn't my enemy. She's charged with safeguarding the secrets of the Nexus that supernatural exists on Earth, in this realm. And the curse makes me one of them, a hybrid, even if I feel like an intruder in it.

Her insistence that I ought to have seen this coming stings, a stark reminder of my



past choices. I took the curse to shield Ronan, to protect my brother from the consequences of his folly, but instead, I allowed the darkness to fester unchecked. I may not fully belong to this world, but I can't stand by while it unravels.

But my decisions shouldn't affect Briar.

"Leave her out of this."

"I cannot. None of us can." Angelic moves closer, her presence making frost spread across the floor. "The girl changes things. The magic responds to her in ways it never should. Ways that make the Council... nervous."

My wolf stirs restlessly, wanting to defend Briar from even the suggestion of threat. "The Council has no authority here."

"No?" Her smile carries centuries of secrets. "The Veil grows thin where your brother works his corruption. If his experiments continue, if the balance tips too far..." She spreads her hands, and ice crystals dance between her fingers. "The Council will act. With or without your cooperation."

The implications hit me like physical blows. The Council's intervention would mean more than exposure—it would mean the death of everyone connected to this place. To the curse.

To Briar.

"What do you want from me?"

"Want?" Angelic's laugh echoes off the stone walls. "I want you to wake up, Ronan Wolfe. Your curse feeds on isolation, yet you cling to it like armor. The girl's presence strengthens the castle's magic, but you push her away. You've managed to

thrive financially in your frozen prison, raking in wealth while the darkness around you grows. Meanwhile, your brother twists the very fabric of our world, and you hide behind your riches."

"I'm not hiding?—"

"No?" She gestures at the crumbling walls. "Then explain why your home dies around you. Why the pack grows restless. Why every time you let yourself care for her, the magic surges stronger than it has in years."

The truth in her words burns. I press my palm against the wall, channeling power into the failing enchantments. But this time, I notice something different. The magic responds more readily, as if awakening from a long sleep.

"The curse was never meant to be permanent," Angelic says softly. "It was meant to contain a specific threat. But you turned it into a prison, not for Rurik's darkness, but for your own heart."

Outside, wolves howl—a sound of warning and recognition. Through our pack bond, I sense Rakan's unease. Something approaches. Something wrong.

"Time grows short." Angelic begins to fade, her form dissolving into the winter air. "Choose wisely, Ronan. The Council's patience is not endless."

### Whispers in the Dark

RONAN

Angelica disappears, leaving me alone with too many dangerous truths. The castle groans around me, ancient stones shifting in the cold. Each creak and crack feels like a reminder of the weight pressing down on my shoulders, a chorus of echoes reflecting my inner turmoil. But now I hear something else in the sound—not decay, but awakening.

It's as if the very walls of Frostspire Keep resonate with a newfound energy, responding to the chaos that looms just out of reach. A shift in the air stirs hope within me, fleeting and fragile, yet insistent. As I take a deep breath, the chill lingers, but there is warmth beneath it, a flicker of magic beckoning to be harnessed.

Suddenly, that flicker intensifies as I sense Briar before I see her, her scent mingling with the lingering frost left by Angelica's presence. She rounds the corner, concern etched on her face, eyes searching for any sign of distress. The castle's magic surges in response, stones warming beneath my palm where moments ago they crumbled, as if recognizing her presence and welcoming her home.

"I heard voices." Her green eyes scan the damaged hallway, taking in the fresh cracks spider-webbing across the walls. "Is everything alright?"

The curse pulses through my blood, demanding I either claim her or push her away. No safe middle ground exists anymore. Not with the Council watching. Not with Rurik's experiments threatening everything.

"You shouldn't be here." The words come out harsher than intended, but I can't soften them. Not with Angelic's warning still ringing in my ears.

Briar steps closer, and the magic responds instantly. The dying enchantments in the wall flare to life, stones knitting themselves together where moments ago they were failing. Even the air changes—warmer, more alive.

"The castle's getting worse, isn't it?" She reaches toward the wall, but I catch her wrist before she can touch it. Her pulse jumps under my fingers.

"Don't." I release her quickly, though everything in me screams to pull her closer. "The magic is unstable."

Movement catches my eye as Fiona ducks into an alcove, her phone pressed to her ear. The sight sends warning signals through my enhanced senses. Cell phones barely function in this place due to the curse, and Fiona knows better than to take private calls within these walls.

"...understand, but it's not that simple," Fiona's whispered words reach my ears, distinctly clear despite the distance. "The magic shifts when she's around. Yes, I'll keep watching, but?—"

As she spots me, she abruptly ends the call and hurries away before I can question her. The curse writhes under my skin, recognizing something in her retreat that sets my wolf on edge, a raw urge demanding my attention.

"Ronan?" Briar's voice pulls me back to the moment. She stands closer now, warmth radiating from her, cutting through the perpetual chill of the curse. "What's wrong?"

Everything . Nothing.

The castle dies around us while my brother's corruption spreads. The Council is watching, waiting for an excuse to intervene. And here Briar stands, somehow making the magic stronger while putting herself in more danger with every passing moment.

“Go back to your room.” I turn away, unable to let her see the struggle in my eyes. “Please.”

I hear the soft intake of her breath, the way her heartbeat quickens, and I know she caught the plea in my voice. The magic pulses between us, stronger than ever, making the shadows retreat and the stones sing with possibility—a possibility I know I can’t afford to explore right now.

“Ronan,” Briar says softly, stepping closer, her concern palpable. “I can help.”

Her words tug at something deep within me, igniting a flicker of hope before I harden my resolve.

“I can’t risk it. You have to trust me on this.” The castle's spirits sigh as if echoing my thoughts, but the truth is I’m far too invested in her safety to invite danger into her life.

“Please...” I add, my voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll come to you shortly and explain everything. Just... stay in your room for now.”

The magic hums with tension as she processes my words. I catch a glimpse of uncertainty in her expressive eyes, yet there’s also a spark of understanding—she knows there’s more at stake than what lies between us. I can see her desire to help me, to unravel the complexities of my world, and it simultaneously soothes and terrifies me.

I can feel how much I've come to need her—not just for my sanity, but like the castle's magic itself, she becomes a vital part of my being. There's a connection that grows stronger with each passing moment, promising warmth and light even in the darkest corners of Frostspire Keep.

But possibility is dangerous. Hope is dangerous. And Briar Everly is the most dangerous of all.

“Trust me,” I urge, my own voice cracking, betraying the turmoil within. “I'll find you soon.”

As I walk away, I can't shake the feeling that pushing her away is becoming increasingly impossible. I take one last glance back at her, my heart heavy with the weight of what I'm trying to protect.

Each moment spent with Briar weaves her deeper into the fabric of my life, and the thought of severing that connection weighs on me more than I want to admit.

I listen to her footsteps fade, each step taking a piece of warmth with it, leaving the air around me colder and more sterile.

The castle's ancient stones seem to sigh in sorrow as I turn my focus away from her, directing my attention back toward the alcove where Fiona disappeared. As I do, I notice frost creeping across the stones again.

The curse tightens its grip, punishing me for even these brief moments of connection. It seems to sense my turmoil, my indecision, and it revels in the chaos I cannot fully control.

Something is coming. I can feel it thrumming beneath the surface, echoing in Fiona's furtive calls and Angelic's subtle warnings.

The atmosphere is tense and strained, as if the very magic of the castle is fighting against its own decay. And somehow, strangely enough, Briar stands at the center of it all, like a beacon amidst the encroaching dark.

The question is whether I can protect her from what's coming—or if I'll be the thing she needs protection from most.

I watch Fiona slip around the corner, her phone still clutched to her chest. The sight raises a new wave of suspicion in me. I focus my senses, straining to catch even a fragment of her conversation as the urgency in her tone piques my interest.

"Rurik... I need your guidance," she breathes out, her voice laced with desperation. "The magic shifts when she's around. Yes, I'll keep watching, but—"

She cuts off abruptly as I round the corner. Her eyes widen, and she shoves the phone into her pocket. "Mr. Wolfe! I was about to?—"

"About to what?" The temperature drops with my words. "Making calls in the castle?"

Color drains from her face. "It's nothing, sir. Personal matter."

But her heart races, betraying the lie. The curse pulses beneath my skin, recognizing something in her fear that sets my wolf on edge. Behind me, frost spreads across the windows.

"Who were you talking to?"

"No one important." She smooths her uniform, an old nervous habit. "If you'll excuse me, the dining room needs?—"

"Stay." The word comes out as a growl. "You mentioned magic shifting. What exactly are you watching?"

Her fingers twist in her apron. "I only meant... the castle seems different lately. With Miss Everly here."

Briar. Of course this is about Briar.

"Who asked you to watch her?"

Fiona's silence speaks volumes. The curse writhes under my skin as pieces click into place— her recent absences, the way she hovers near Briar's room, those furtive phone calls.

"Rurik." The name tastes like acid. "You're reporting to my brother."

She doesn't deny it. Doesn't run. But her eyes dart toward the exit, calculating.

"How long?"

"Mr. Wolfe, please understand?"

"How. Long?"

"Since the beginning." Her voice wavers, a tremor slicing through the tension.

A growl erupts from my throat, primal and raw, echoing off the stone walls. My beast stirs, furious at the implications of her words.

"You foolishly allowed Rurik to pull you into his dangerous game," I hiss, my voice low and laced with menace. The air crackles with my anger as I step closer, forcing



her to meet my gaze. “And I won’t let him—or you—use Briar.”

I can feel the walls closing in as I realize that this is the final strike. Fiona's deception has sealed her fate. It’s time to end this once and for all—I need to protect what’s mine, and that means kicking her out of the castle.

“He said... he said he could help me. That when the curse breaks?—”

Ice spreads from my feet, crackling across the floor. "The curse isn't breaking. It's killing us all."

"That's not what he says." A hint of defiance enters her tone. "He has plans. Ways to fix everything, if we help him study the magic's response to her."

The walls groan around us, ancient stones protesting as my anger feeds into the curse. Help him study the magic. Study Briar. My brother's "experiments" have found a new target.

"Get out." My voice drops to a dangerous whisper. "Pack your things and leave. Now."

"But—"

"Before I forget you're human."

"But...the curse."

"You should have thought about that before you fed my brother information." The words erupt from me, laced with fury. "Go!"

My command reverberates through the castle, shaking the very foundations.

Dust and plaster fall from the ceiling, the air thickening with tension as the walls seem to groan in response. My anger fills the space, and Fiona's expression shifts to fear.

She runs. The sound of her footsteps fades, leaving me alone with too many dangerous truths. The curse pounds through my blood, demanding action. My brother's reach extends further than I imagined, his corruption seeping into my home, threatening what's mine.

What's mine. The thought brings Briar's face to mind, and with it, a surge of protective fury I can no longer deny. The castle's magic responds, shadows deepening as my resolve hardens.

Time to end this. Time to face my brother and the darkness he's unleashed.

I pull out my phone, ignoring how it flickers in the castle's unstable magic. Rurik's number waits like a coiled snake, ready to strike.

My finger hovers over the screen, heart racing. "You've gone too far this time, brother," I mutter under my breath, the weight of my words heavy in the dim air.

With a determined breath, I hit call, preparing to lure him in.

"Rurik," I growl when the line connects, each syllable filled with intensity. "I'm here. Come and face me."

Silence stretches, thick with tension. I can almost feel his presence lurking beyond the walls of the castle. "You've been hiding for too long," I add, my voice a low challenge. "I'm offering you a chance to finish this."

His chilling laughter echoes in my ear, the sound twisting my gut. "You think you

can draw me out? How quaint.”

“Meet me at The Keep.”

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

Shadows of Frostspire

brIAR

The bundle of dried herbs crackles in my hands as I weave them into a protective charm. Each twist of the stems feels instinctive now, as if the magic coursing through the room is guiding my fingers.

Giselle watches nearby, an approving smile gracing her features as she nods with satisfaction once I tie off the last knot.

"Your instincts are good," she says, her voice warm and encouraging as she adds the charm to a growing pile on the table. "The magic responds naturally to your touch."

"I never thought I'd be doing this," I admit. "A few weeks ago, I didn't even believe in magic."

Alistair appears in the doorway, his arms full of fresh herbs from the greenhouse. "And now you're weaving protection spells like you were born to it." He sets his burden on the table. "The castle chose well when it called you here."

A warm pulse of energy ripples through the room, as if the castle itself is agreeing.

I look around the room as we work together to fill sashes with herbs, cords, and half-finished charms gathered to fortify Frostspire Keep against the impending threat. The atmosphere is charged with purpose, each item we handle imbued with our collective drive to end the curse.

Ronan made the call to Rurik. His words echo in my mind... He's coming, and we need to prepare .

This fight is no longer an abstract concern; it's a vivid looming challenge demanding my full attention.

Reaching for another bundle, I let my fingers trace the rough stems—mint, thyme, and lavender this time. The familiar scents fill the air, mingling with the deeper, more ancient aroma of the castle's magic, growing stronger by the hour. It envelops me, a comforting presence, urging me onward. I can almost feel Ember's energy interwoven with the herbs, an ancient pulse guiding my actions and decisions.

Giselle stands at my side, deftly arranging the charms we've created together. "Remember, Briar," she continues, her focus unwavering as she leads me in this intricate dance of magic and intention. "Each charm carries a part of your essence. It's not just about the ingredients. It's the heart you put into it that determines its power."

"How'd you learn so much?" I ask, genuinely curious as I watch Giselle expertly tie the last charm.

Giselle pauses, her hands steadying as she looks over at me with a glimmer in her eye. "It wasn't easy. When the curse first took hold of Frostspire Keep, the magic here was unstable. I spent years learning from the remnants of what once was, piecing together knowledge from ancient tomes and the whispers of the castle itself. I had to adapt quickly, or risk losing everything."

Her words resonate within me, igniting a flicker of curiosity. The way she describes her journey mirrors my own experiences, yet it feels like a distant echo—a past I wish to understand more deeply.

"What was it like?" I ask, drawn into her story. "Living here as the magic faded? Did you ever lose hope?"

Giselle smiles softly, her gaze drifting as if she's seeing the echoes of her memories. "At times, yes. But I always felt an underlying energy, a bond with the castle that kept me going. It was as if Frostspire itself was calling for help, urging me to keep trying, to fight back against the darkness. The energy pulsed in the walls, even when it dimmed. I learned to listen—to feel the rhythm of the castle's heart, and that gave me strength."

As I absorb her words, another thought flickers in my mind—a conversation I had with Ember in the library. The memory rushes back to me, vivid and clear, and I can't help but share it.

"I spoke with Ember once," I say, my voice barely above a whisper, as if voicing this truth out loud makes it more real. "In the library, when I was investigating the magic and history of the Keep. It felt surreal... almost like she was guiding me."

Giselle leans closer, intrigued. "What did she tell you?"

I take a breath, grounding myself in the memory. "She revealed that I'm not fully human. I... I'm a hybrid. An arcanist. It's strange to say it out loud, but it feels true." The revelation hangs in the air, heavy with implications.

Giselle's eyes widen, then soften with understanding. "That makes sense. Arcanists possess a unique connection to the fabric of magic that flows through our worlds. Your lineage might be why you feel the castle's presence more than others."

"I felt this surge of energy when I learned it," I explain. "A part of me clicked into place. The magic here, the history—it all resonates with who I am. But I can't help but wonder how it all intertwines with my search for my birth mother. If I'm an

arcanist, does that mean she was too? Could understanding my powers help me uncover more about her?"

Giselle nods thoughtfully, her expression both encouraging and contemplative. "If you dig deeper into your abilities, you may just find the answers you seek. But remember, knowledge isn't just about the facts. It's also about understanding who you are within that knowledge."

I lean forward, intrigued. "What about you? Are you an arcanist too?"

She shakes her head with a gentle smile. "No, human. But I've learned a lot over the years to keep this place thriving."

"And once the curse is gone?" I ask, a hint of hope threading through my voice.

A soft smile touches her lips, but a shadow of longing lingers in her gaze. "I'll get to go home. Hopefully, my husband and other children haven't moved on without us."

I reach over, placing a hand over hers—a small gesture of solidarity. "It will work out."

"I hope so," she replies, her voice steady yet filled with emotion.

I nod, returning to my task, but her words resonate within me, echoing deep thoughts I've been wrestling with. There's more mystery than concrete facts surrounding us. We're all holding on to the hope that this curse will lift before Frostspire Keep dies, taking everyone with it.

And then there's the realization that my magical journey is just beginning. The path ahead is still shrouded in mystery despite the groundwork we've laid. Though I've begun to understand the basics of magic, I can feel there's far more waiting to be

revealed.

A deeper mystery lingers, just outside of reach. I can almost sense Ember's presence, guiding me toward this knowledge, urging me to trust in the magic that flows within and around me.

I plan to dive into learning more with Ember's help after this all is over. Because I don't fully grasp what being an arcanist means or how it connects to the whirlwind of emotions tearing through me.

What does it mean to belong to this lineage? What power does it hold?

As I ponder these questions, I can't shake the feeling that every revelation is tied to my search for my birth mother. With each layer of magic peeled back, I wonder if the connections will lead me closer to her.

I'm certain that in time, I will know more—more about myself, about the Nexus, and about the intricate web of magic that binds us all. It's a journey I'm ready to embark on, but first thing's first.

Rurik's arrival.

I watch as the herbs come alive in my hands, their colors sharpening, the scents bursting forth more vividly. There's a sense of urgency in our work, each charm a shield against the darkness that Rurik brings. I can't ignore the flicker of fear that accompanies that awareness, but I force it down, channeling it into my hands instead.

"We'll need more than charms," I say, reaching for the fresh herbs. "Rurik won't be stopped by sage and string."

"No," Alistair agrees. "But every layer of protection helps." He picks up one of my



finished charms, examining it closely. "These will strengthen the castle's natural defenses. Combined with your magic and Ronan's..."

He trails off, but I understand. Everything we do now is preparation for what's coming. The air thrums with anticipation, like the moment before lightning strikes.

I work faster, letting instinct guide my hands. Each charm feels stronger than the last, infused with my determination to protect this place—to protect everyone I've come to care about.

"The west tower still needs attention," Giselle says, gathering up an armful of completed charms. "I'll start hanging these while you finish the rest."

I nod, already reaching for more herbs. The afternoon light slants through the windows, painting everything in shades of amber and gold. Time is slipping away too quickly.

As I begin another charm, I can't help but glance toward the tall windows, where the fading light washes the castle in hues of deep gold and crimson. Each minute passes, building toward the inevitable night, where every charm hung will serve as our first line of defense. The air buzzes with the excitement of magic being woven into the very fabric of Frostspire Keep.

The energy is palpable as I feel the pulse of Ember surrounding me, guiding my every weave and knot as I work beside Giselle and Alistair. It's not just the herbs we're preparing; it's the very essence of the castle, and by extension, the lives that dwell within its walls. I let the knowledge settle over me like a warmth, letting it sustain me as I push through the urgency of our preparations.

A shadow passes the window—one of the wolves on patrol. Their presence is constant now, circling the castle grounds in an endless vigil. I catch glimpses of them

between tasks: dark shapes moving through the snow, alert and watchful. Their silent strength offers a comforting reminder that we're not alone in this fight.

Looking out at the snowy expanse, I realize how the Christmas season feels almost forgotten amidst the chaos of our preparations. The twinkling lights hanging along the eaves of Frostspire Keep shimmer like stars against the darkening sky, a stark contrast to the weight of the curse that looms over us.

But our lives have become entwined with the spirit of the season, providing some relief from the oppressive energy that holds us captive.

Once we emerge from this darkness, I swear I will celebrate Christmas with more vigor—after all, it was this season that brought me to Ronan.

The warmth of those memories stirs something deep within me, reminding me that love can bloom even in the coldest of winters. That's something I'll never forget.

Each flicker of light and the promise of joy give me hope, that this will be over soon.

The next charm comes together almost on its own, my fingers working while my mind drifts to Ronan. He's been coordinating with the pack all day, strengthening our outer defenses. Every time I sense him nearby, the castle's magic pulses stronger.

"Miss Everly." Alistair's voice pulls me back to the present. "Perhaps you should take a break. Check the grounds, ensure the charms are properly placed."

There's something in his tone that makes me look up. His expression is carefully neutral, but I catch a flicker of... something. Understanding? Concern?

"You're right," I say, setting aside my work. "Fresh air would help."

The corridors feel different as I make my way through the castle. Warmer, somehow. More alive. Magic shimmers in the corners of my vision, like dust motes caught in sunlight.

Outside, the late afternoon air is crisp and clean. My boots crunch in the snow as I follow the path around the castle's perimeter. The charms we've already hung flutter in the breeze, each one a small beacon of protective energy.

A low whine draws my attention. Rakan emerges from the treeline, his black fur stark against the snow. In wolf form, he's massive—all muscle and grace.

"Everything quiet?" I ask.

He pads closer, bumping his head against my hand in greeting. His fur is surprisingly soft under my fingers.

"I'll take that as a yes." I scratch behind his ears, earning another whine of contentment. "Though I doubt it will stay that way for long."

Rakan pulls back, fixing me with a knowing look. He's been Ronan's most loyal defender through all of this. Now that loyalty extends to me, something I never expected but deeply appreciate.

"We'll be ready," I tell him. "Whatever comes."

He huffs what sounds suspiciously like agreement, then turns his head sharply toward the castle. A moment later, I feel it too—a surge of magic, stronger than before.

Ronan.

"Go," I say. "Keep watching."

Rakan touches his nose to my hand once more, then melts back into the shadows of the forest. I watch him go, grateful for his silent support.

The pull of magic leads me back inside, up staircases and through corridors that seem to arrange themselves to guide my path. I find Ronan in the library, standing at one of the tall windows. The setting sun catches his profile, turning his eyes to molten silver.

He turns as I enter, and something in his expression makes my heart skip. "Briar."

"I felt you," I say, moving closer.

"It's getting stronger." He reaches for me, his hand warm against my cheek. "Because of you."

"Because of us," I correct him.

His thumb traces my cheekbone, sending shivers down my spine. "I fought it for so long. Tried to keep you at a distance, thinking I was protecting you."

"And now?"

"Now I know better." His voice drops lower, rougher. "I can't fight this anymore. Don't want to."

I lean into his touch, letting my own magic rise to meet his. The air around us crackles with energy. "Then don't."

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

Brave, Beautiful Mate

brIAR

Ronan's kiss starts gentle, almost hesitant. But as I press closer, threading my fingers through his hair, something inside him snaps. The kiss deepens—desperate, hungry. His arms wrap around me, pulling me flush against him.

The library responds to our passion. Books flutter on their shelves, and the magical symbols carved into the walls begin to glow. I barely notice, lost in the feel of him—his mouth on mine, his hands sliding under my sweater to find bare skin.

"Briar," he groans against my lips. "We should stop..."

"No." I kiss him harder, pouring everything I feel into this moment. "No more holding back. No more fear."

His control shatters. In one fluid motion, he lifts me onto the nearest table, scattering papers and books. I don't care. All that matters is his touch, his taste, the way our magic intertwines, blurring the lines between us.

Clothes fall away, each new inch of skin revealed drawing gasps and moans. His mouth traces patterns down my throat, across my collarbone. When he takes my breast in his mouth, I arch off the table with a cry.

The castle's magic surges around us, responding to our desire. Light blooms in dark corners, and the air pulses with energy. But I barely notice, consumed by the feel of

Ronan's hands, his mouth, his skin against mine.

When he slides into me, I sense our connection on a soul-deep level. It's as if we're merging, our magic binding us together.

We pause, breathless, staring into each other's eyes as the reality of our actions washes over us. Then he moves, and my thoughts scatter.

His mouth crushes mine, tongues tangling with urgency. My hands grip his shoulders, feeling the play of muscles under his skin as he moves above me. His hips thrust, sending shockwaves of pleasure through me, and I meet his rhythm, moving in perfect sync.

The table creaks beneath us, the ancient wood groaning in protest, yet neither of us cares. Our clothes are a tangle on the floor, forgotten as we surrender to our desires. His mouth trails down my body, branding every inch of my skin with kisses and bites that make me arch and moan.

"Ronan," I gasp as his mouth closes around my nipple, sucking gently.

His hand slides between my thighs, fingers finding my core and stroking my clit with firm, relentless circles. My back arches off the table, my hips lifting to meet his touch as pleasure coils tightly within me.

His hands grip my hips, tugging me closer to the edge, and then he's kneeling before me.

"I need to taste you," he growls, his voice hoarse with need.

"Ronan," I whisper, not sure what I'm trying to say.

He pushes me gently onto my back, his mouth trailing lower. Then his tongue delving between my folds, all words flee my mind.

He's savoring me with long, slow licks. I cry out, twisting my hands in his hair as he feasts on me with a desperation that matches my own.

I grip the edges of the table, knuckles white, as pleasure rolls through me.

My hips bucking against his mouth. My fingers tighten in his hair, holding him close as he pushes me closer to the edge. My head tips back, eyes closing as I surrender to the pleasure.

"Ronan," I gasp, "please!"

"Not yet," he says, his voice low and dangerous. He slides two fingers inside me, curling them in a way that has me seeing stars.

His mouth never relents, licking and sucking at my most sensitive places. The pleasure is nearly unbearable, but I can't stop myself from grinding against his face, seeking more.

He pulls away suddenly, and I whimper in protest. But then he's kissing his way back up my body, and the feel of his bare skin against mine sends a new wave of desire coursing through me.

He's lifting me, fitting my legs around his waist. I wrap my arms around his neck as he thrusts into me again.

The pace is slower now, but no less intense. He kisses me deeply, swallowing my moans. Our bodies move together in a timeless rhythm, and the magic that connects us surges higher.

"Ronan," I murmur.

My lips brush his ear, and he shudders, his grip tightening. Then our mouths fuse in a kiss that's hungry and demanding, tongues dueling as our bodies move in perfect rhythm.

I feel him stretching and filling me, the sensation so intense that my magic responds, sparking and crackling around us. We're connected, our bodies and souls entwined, and the ecstasy is nearly overwhelming.

The Keep reacts. The air shimmers with magic, books fly off shelves, and the chandelier shakes overhead, sending dust motes dancing. But I barely notice, lost in the sensations flooding my body.

"More," I gasp against his lips. "Don't stop."

He groans, his pace quickening, and I know he's as close as I am. Our eyes lock, the connection between us blazing like an inferno. The table groans beneath us, the wood threatening to splinter, but we don't stop.

Our kisses turn desperate as we move together, our skin slick with sweat, our hearts pounding in unison. I can feel the magic building, coalescing into a force that surrounds us, binds us, until it explodes outward in a wave of power that rocks the castle's foundations.

"You're mine, Briar."

Our climax hits like thunder, magic erupting outward, shaking the entire castle. Books fly off shelves, windows rattle, and somewhere in the distance, I hear wolves howling.



My back arches as I cry out his name, nails digging into his shoulders. His teeth pierce my neck, marking me, his breath hot against my skin as he claims me as his mate.

My inner walls clench around him, drawing him deeper as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me. His mark burns on my skin, a brand that proclaims me as his and his alone.

It seems to last forever, the world reduced to pure sensation. The air around us crackles with energy, and I can feel the bond between us growing stronger, binding us together. And I know I would follow him anywhere.

We collapse together, breathless. Ronan's weight pins me to the table, but I welcome it. I never want him to move.

Gradually, I become aware of our surroundings again. The library has transformed. Every magical symbol glows, casting rainbow light across the walls. Books hover in mid-air, their pages fluttering like birds' wings. The very air sparkles with magic.

“Look,” I whisper, awed.

Ronan lifts his head, taking in the changes. His eyes widen. “I’ve never seen it like this.”

He gathers me in his arms and carries me to his master suite, both of us forgetting to put our clothes back on. He lowers me onto his bed.

He presses a kiss to my temple. “Everything is alive because of you. Because of what we share.”

The sheets whisper against my skin as Ronan draws me closer, his warmth

enveloping me like a shield against the castle's chill. When our eyes meet, the silver in his gaze seems to flicker, like moonlight on troubled waters.

A muscle ticks in his jaw as he watches me, his fingers tracing patterns on my skin that leave trails of fire. The slight tremor in his touch betrays the control he's fighting to maintain, even as his body curves toward mine like a bow drawn taut.

Each breath between us feels charged with possibility, with words we haven't dared speak aloud.

The world outside fades away, leaving us. I can still feel the echoes of our connection, the way our magic intertwined in the library, igniting something ancient and powerful. It's as if we've awakened a force that binds us deeper than I ever imagined possible.

I lean in, brushing my lips softly against his. The kiss begins gently, a tender exploration that sends shivers down my spine. It deepens as Ronan responds, his lips moving with a slow, deliberate hunger that makes my heart swell. I thread my fingers through his dark hair, pulling him closer.

"Briar," he murmurs against my lips, drawing back just enough to meet my gaze. His voice is thick with longing, and the sound of my name on his tongue sends a thrill coursing through me, igniting the fire that simmers beneath the surface. "I should have asked you first before marking you. The choice should have been yours."

"I was always yours," I whisper, tracing my fingers along his jaw. The truth resonates in my bones, in the magic that pulses between us. "From the moment I stepped into this castle, my soul knew. The mark just made it visible to everyone else."

The tension in his shoulders eases slightly, and when his lips find mine again, the kiss feels different—deeper, as if the last barrier between us has finally crumbled.

I lean into Ronan's warmth, savoring the gentle brush of his fingers along my neck where his mark pulses with our shared connection. The sheets whisper against my skin as he draws me closer, his heartbeat steady beneath my palm.

"Tell me about the email," he murmurs, his voice rough with tenderness. "What made you come here?"

I trace patterns on his chest, watching how his muscles tense and relax under my touch. "Something in the words called to me. Like the castle was reaching out." My fingers find a small scar near his collarbone. "I couldn't ignore it."

His hand covers mine, pressing it flat against his heart. "And now? Knowing everything?"

"Now I understand why." I lift my head to meet his gaze, silver-bright in the dim light. "This is where I belong."

The magic pulses between us, warm and alive. Ronan's other hand slides into my hair, cradling my head as if I'm something precious. "The library—you spend so much time there. Why?"

"Books hold stories, but also truth." I press a kiss to his palm. "Each one is a window into someone else's world. Their hopes, their fears..." I pause, vulnerability making my voice soft. "For someone who grew up feeling like an outsider, books were my first real home."

His arms tighten around me. "You're not an outsider here."

"No," I agree, snuggling closer. "Here I'm yours."

The mark on my neck warms at the words. Ronan's breath catches, and his fingers

trail down my spine, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

"Stay," he whispers against my hair. "Not because of the curse or the castle. Stay for me."

My heart swells. I push up on my elbow, needing to see his face. The walls behind his eyes have crumbled completely, leaving raw honesty in their wake.

"I'm not going anywhere."

His kiss is achingly gentle, a contrast to the desperate passion we shared earlier. This is about connection, about two souls finally finding their home in each other. When he pulls back, his thumb traces my lower lip.

"I never thought..." He swallows hard. "After taking on the curse, I convinced myself I didn't deserve this. Didn't deserve you."

"You deserve everything." I cup his face in my hands, pouring all my certainty into the words. "And I'm going to spend however long it takes proving it to you."

The smile that breaks across his face is like sunrise after endless night. He rolls us so I'm beneath him, his weight grounding me as his forehead touches mine. The castle's magic swirls around us, responding to our joy.

"My brave, beautiful mate," he breathes. "How did I find you?"

"You didn't." I wind my arms around his neck, drawing him closer. "We found each other."

His answering kiss tastes of promise and possibility. Of walls finally broken and hearts finally whole. Of a future worth fighting for, no matter what comes next.

The mark on my neck pulses with shared emotion, binding us together in ways that transcend mere words. In his arms, in this moment, I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

Home at last.

Ronan's kiss deepens, igniting a spark that travels through me, setting my soul alight. I can feel my heart racing, matching the rhythm of his lips against mine, each movement ebbing and flowing like a tide. Our breaths mingle, filling the space between us with the sweet taste of desire.

As we break apart, breathless, I gaze into his eyes, seeing the reflection of everything we've built together. The reality of our love washes over me, and I know that this moment is just the beginning.

"You've changed everything," I whisper, my voice trembling with emotion.

Ronan smiles, the corners of his mouth lifting in a way that makes my heart flutter. "And you've made me believe in something more," he replies, his voice steady.

In this sacred space, beneath the weight of the universe, I realize that together, we can face whatever darkness lies ahead. Our love has transformed us, awakened a power that binds our souls together.

"Forever," I promise, pressing my lips to his once more, sealing the vow with a kiss.

A knock at the door interrupts us. Alistair enters, his usual composure slightly ruffled. "My apologies, but..." He holds out an envelope, his hand trembling slightly. "This just arrived."

The envelope pulses with dark magic. Ronan takes it, his expression hardening as he

breaks the seal. I read over his shoulder, my heart pounding.

Brother,

Did you think I wouldn't notice the change in the Keep? Your little witch has accomplished what I thought impossible—she's awakened the Arcanum. How convenient for me.

Prepare yourself. I'm coming to claim what should have been mine all along.

Rurik

The letter bursts into black flame, crumbling to ash in Ronan's hands. But neither of us flinch. We're beyond fear now.

"Let him come."

### The Final Battle

RONAN

The midnight air crackles with tension as I stand at Frostspire Keep's highest window, watching fog roll across the grounds like a ghostly tide. Beside me, Briar's hand finds mine, her touch sending warmth through our mate bond that fights against the curse's perpetual chill.

"He's coming," she whispers, her green eyes fixed on the darkness beyond our protective wards. The protection charms she crafted flutter in an unfelt wind, their magic pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

"I know." My fingers tighten around hers as I sense Rurik's approach through the pack bond that even the curse couldn't fully sever. My brother's presence feels wrong now—twisted and dark in ways that make my wolf bristle.

Rakan's howl splits the night—a warning that echoes through the castle's ancient stones. Through our connection, I feel his urgency. They're breaching the outer wards.

Briar turns to me, determination blazing in her eyes. The mark on her neck—my mark—glows faintly, responding to the surge of protective magic that flows through me. "Whatever happens," she says, "we face it together."

Before I can respond, the castle's magic flares violently. Windows rattle in their frames as dark energy slams against our defenses. The protection charms burst into

brilliant light, fighting back against the corruption that seeks to enter.

"He's stronger than before." The words taste like ashes in my mouth. "The experiments—they've changed him."

"But he's not stronger than us." Briar's voice carries absolute conviction. She presses her free hand against the nearest wall, and I watch in awe as the castle's magic responds, flowing toward her like water finding its natural course. "The curse feeds on isolation, remember? We're not alone anymore."

As if in answer, Ember—the castle's spirit—pulses with renewed energy. Books fly from their shelves in the library below, their pages rustling like wings as ancient magic awakens. The very stones beneath our feet seem to hum with power.

Another blast rocks the castle, and this time I hear glass shatter somewhere below. Rakan's thoughts pierce through the chaos: The wards are failing. They're inside.

"Go," Briar urges, pushing me toward the door. "Lead the pack. I'll coordinate with Ember and the staff."

For a moment, I hesitate. Every instinct screams to keep her close, to protect what's mine. But she's not just my mate—she's an arcanist coming into her power, and the castle responds to her in ways I'm only beginning to understand.

"Be careful," I growl, pulling her in for a fierce kiss. Her lips meet mine with equal intensity, and for a precious second, the world narrows to just us—to the taste of her mouth and the way our magic intertwines.

Then another explosion rocks the foundation, and we break apart. Without another word, I race toward the sound of fighting, my body already beginning to shift. Bones crack and reform as I take my wolf shape, power surging through enhanced muscles.



The scene in the grand hall is chaos. Dark shapes pour through shattered windows—twisted wolves larger than any natural beast, their fur rippling with unnatural shadows. My pack meets them head-on, teeth and claws flashing in the magical light that still pulses from Briar's charms.

I launch myself into the fray, taking down one of the corrupted wolves with a savage bite to the throat. Its blood tastes wrong—tainted with whatever dark magic Rurik has been experimenting with. Through the pack bond, I feel Rakan coordinating our defense, directing wolves to weak points while keeping the enemy contained.

But for every attacker we drive back, two more seem to take its place. The curse writhes beneath my skin, trying to use my rage to gain control. I fight it back, focusing instead on the warmth of Briar's mark—a reminder that I'm not alone in this battle.

Above the snarls and crashes of combat, I hear Briar's voice ring out. She stands on the grand staircase, her hands raised as she channels magic through the castle's ancient stones. The protective symbols carved into the walls begin to glow, their light pushing back the shadows that cling to our enemies.

"The library!" she shouts. "Get them away from the Arcanum!"

I turn to see several of the twisted wolves breaking away from the main fight, heading toward the west wing where the library's magic pulses strongest. Understanding hits like lightning—they're not just here to attack. They're here to corrupt the source of the castle's power.

Rakan, hold the line here, I project through our bond. I'm going after the others.

His acknowledgment comes with a flash of fierce loyalty as he coordinates the pack's defense. I race after the escaping wolves, my claws finding purchase on ancient stone

as I take the stairs three at a time.

The scene I find in the library corridor makes my blood run cold. Fiona stands before the heavy doors, her hands pressed against wood that's now stained with dark symbols. Her eyes are completely black, and the air around her crackles with corrupted magic.

"I'm sorry," she whispers as I skid to a stop. "He promised to free us from the curse. He said?—"

A blast of dark energy cuts off her words as Rurik steps out of the shadows. My brother looks both familiar and alien—his features sharper, his eyes gleaming with an unnatural light. Power rolls off him in waves that make the curse stir restlessly beneath my skin.

"Hello, brother." His smile holds no warmth. "Miss me?"

I shift back to human form, my voice rough with emotion. "What have you done to yourself?"

"What you were too weak to do." He gestures at the twisted wolves that flank him. "I found a way to harness the curse's power instead of fighting it. To transcend the limitations the Council tried to place on us."

"By corrupting everything you touch?" The words tear from my throat. "Look at what you've become, Rurik. This isn't power—it's poison."

His laugh sends chills down my spine. "Always so righteous, Ronan. Always trying to protect everyone but yourself." His gaze shifts to something behind me. "Speaking of protection..."

I spin to see Briar at the end of the corridor, her hands already moving in patterns that make the air shimmer. The castle's magic responds instantly, stones grinding as they try to seal off the library entrance.

But Rurik is faster. Dark energy explodes from his hands, slamming into the walls with enough force to crack ancient stone. Fiona screams as she's thrown aside, her body crumpling against a pillar.

"The arcanist." Rurik's voice drips with false sweetness. "I've been so looking forward to meeting you properly. Your effect on the castle's magic is... fascinating."

"Stay away from her." The growl builds in my chest as I move to place myself between them.

"Or what?" His power lashes out again, this time wrapping around my throat like burning ice. "You'll take another curse for me? Sacrifice more of yourself to protect someone who doesn't want saving?"

The pressure increases, and spots dance at the edges of my vision. Through our mate bond, I feel Briar's fury building like a storm. The castle trembles as she draws on Ember's power, channeling it through the very foundations.

"Enough!" Her voice carries otherworldly authority. Light explodes from her hands, shattering Rurik's hold on me. The twisted wolves yelp and retreat as the castle's magic surges, responding to her call.

I gasp for air as Briar steps forward, her power radiating in visible waves. Books fly from the library shelves, their pages glowing with ancient symbols as they swirl around her like a protective shield.

"You're not welcome here," she declares, and the castle's magic amplifies her words

until they seem to shake the very air. "This place, these people—they're not yours to corrupt."

Rurik's eyes narrow as he studies her with new interest. "Impressive. The castle's magic has bonded with you completely." His smile turns cruel. "I wonder what would happen if that bond were... severed."

He moves faster than thought, dark energy coalescing into a spear that shoots straight at Briar's heart. Time seems to slow as I lunge forward, desperate to reach her.

But I needn't have worried. The moment Rurik's attack touches the swirling barrier of books, it shatters. Light explodes outward as Briar's power combines with Ember's, creating a shockwave that sends everyone staggering.

I recover first, shifting back to wolf form as I charge at my brother. This time, I don't hold back. My teeth find his shoulder as we crash through the library doors together, rolling across ancient floors now crackling with competing magics.

The fight becomes a blur of snapping teeth and dark energy. Rurik's power burns where it touches me, but I push through the pain, driven by the need to end this—to protect my mate, my home, my pack.

The curse fights me every step of the way, trying to drag me under, but Briar's presence in my mind keeps me anchored.

Through our bond, I feel her gathering power for something big. The library's magic coalesces around her, books flying faster as ancient knowledge flows into her consciousness. She may be new to her abilities, but her connection to Ember makes her formidable.

"You can't win this, brother," Rurik pants as we break apart. Blood drips from his

wounds, but his eyes still burn with maniacal intensity. "The curse is part of you now. Part of all of us. Fighting it only makes it stronger."

"You're wrong." I shift back to human form, standing tall despite the pain. "The curse feeds on isolation, but I'm not alone anymore. None of us are."

As if to prove my point, Briar's power explodes outward. The library's magic responds to her call, centuries of knowledge and power flowing through her into the castle's very foundations. Light blazes from every surface as she taps into something deeper than mere spells—she's accessing the very heart of Frostspire Keep.

"The castle remembers," she says, her voice echoing with Ember's power. "It remembers what you did, Rurik. How you twisted its magic, corrupted its purpose. No more."

The floor beneath our feet begins to pulse with light, ancient symbols appearing in patterns I've never seen before. The twisted wolves whimper and retreat as pure magic fills the air, burning away their corruption like mist in sunlight.

Rurik's face contorts with rage as his creatures abandon him. "You think love can save you?" he snarls, gathering darkness around himself like a cloak. "Love is weakness. Power is the only truth that matters."

He launches himself at Briar, dark magic streaming from his hands. But this time, I'm ready. I meet him halfway, my own power—fueled by love and pack bonds and everything he rejected—rising to match his attack.

The resulting explosion rocks the entire castle. Through the chaos, I catch a glimpse of Rurik's face—twisted with rage and something else. Fear. For the first time since this began, my brother looks afraid.

Then I hear it—Briar's sharp gasp of pain. Through our bond, I feel her magic surge beyond her control, the raw power too much for her untrained abilities. She's drawing too deeply from Ember, channeling more energy than she can safely handle.

"Too much," she whispers, her voice tight with strain. "I can't?—"

Her knees buckle as the magic overwhelms her. Books crash to the floor as her concentration shatters, and I feel her consciousness flickering through our bond. My heart nearly stops when I see blood trickling from her nose.

Rurik seizes his chance, but instead of fleeing immediately, his eyes lock onto Briar with calculated interest.

I lunge to catch Briar. She goes limp in my arms, her skin pale and cold where the magic has drained her. Through our bond, I feel her life force flickering faint but still present.

"Fascinating," he murmurs, dark energy crackling around him. "She's not just connected to the castle—she's bonded with the Arcanum itself. All that knowledge, all those secrets about the Nexus, flowing right into her consciousness."

"Stay back," I snarl, pulling Briar's limp form closer as blood trickles from her nose.

His laugh echoes through the chamber. "Oh brother, you don't even realize what you have, do you? The Council's archives, the secrets of the supernatural world—she can access it all through the library's magic. That's worth more than any curse or currency."

He throws something into the air—a small object that explodes in a burst of absolute darkness. Through the chaos, his voice carries a promise that chills me to my core.

"We'll meet again, dear brother. And next time, I'll take more than just books from your precious library. Your mate's connection to the Arcanum—now that's real power."

The magical backlash rocks the room as he disappears through the breach in the wall, his twisted wolves following like shadows. But his words echo in my mind as I hold Briar's failing form.

"I've got you," I murmur, pulling her close as Rurik's darkness eats through the library wall. My brother's twisted wolves melt into the shadows after him, but I barely notice. All my focus is on Briar's shallow breathing, on the weak pulse of our bond.

"Let me go after him," Rakan growls, appearing in the doorway. But I shake my head.

"Run the boundaries of the property. They could return." I gather Briar more securely in my arms, my heart clenching at how fragile she feels. "I need to take care of her."

"Yes, Alpha."

Angelic steps forward, frost spreading from her feet. "The power overwhelmed her. She's untrained, unprepared for this level of magic." Her green eyes hold both warning and sympathy. "Get her somewhere safe. I'll help stabilize the grounds and put up a shield. Rurik has officially escalated his classification on the threat list. The Council won't stop until he's neutralized."

I don't wait to hear more. Carrying Briar, I race toward the castle, feeling her life force flutter against mine. The curse writhes beneath my skin, but our bond is stronger.

"Stay with me," I whisper against her hair. "Please, moya lyubov. Stay with me."

Around us, the castle's magic pulses with concern. Books lie scattered across the floor, many of their pages scorched by dark magic. The walls show cracks where Rurik's power ate into ancient stone. But none of that matters compared to the precious weight in my arms.

Rurik escaped, but I made the right choice. The only choice. Because while the battle for Frostspire Keep may not be over, I know exactly what—and who—I'm fighting for.

And nothing, not even my brother's darkness, will take her from me.



*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

Stay

RONAN

"N o." My voice breaks. "Stay with me, moya lyubov."

The magic pulses weakly through Briar's body as I cradle her in my arms. Her skin grows colder with each passing second, the curse's darkness spreading through her veins like poison.

I press my forehead to hers, my tears falling onto her pale cheeks. The castle's magic swirls around us in chaotic waves, responding to my desperation. Books fly from their shelves, pages rustling like frightened birds.

"Please." I lift my face to the vaulted ceiling, addressing any power that might listen—the ancient magic of the Nexus, the Council, even the curse itself. "Take me instead. I'll give you anything."

Briar's heartbeat flutters, growing fainter. The mark on her neck—my mark—pulses with a dying light. Our bond stretches thin, threatening to snap.

"I'll bring you Rurik." The words tear from my throat. "I'll deliver my brother to the Council myself. His experiments, his corruption—all of it ends. Just save her."

The castle groans around us, stones shifting as if considering my offer. Through our pack bond, I sense Rakan and the others circling the grounds, their howls carrying notes of mourning.

"She's innocent." My fingers brush her cold cheek. "She came here to help, to save this place. To save me." Another sob wracks my body. "Don't let my curse take her too."

Arcanum surges suddenly, books glowing with an inner light. Ember shifts responding to my plea. Warmth spreads from the stones beneath us, fighting against the curse's chill.

Fire radiates through my veins not longer afraid of the curse. I'd rather die than live without her.

"I'll pay any price." I gather Briar closer, willing my own strength into her failing body. "Break me, chain me, take everything. But let her live."

The curse lashes beneath my skin, as if recognizing the weight of my vow. Dark energy crackles through the air, meeting the castle's ancient magic in a battle of wills. And caught between these forces, Briar grows still in my arms.

"Come back to me." I press my lips to her forehead, her cheeks, her cold mouth. "You promised you wouldn't let go. Now I'm asking you to hold on."

The magic builds around us, reaching a fever pitch. Light and shadow war above our heads as my desperate bargain hangs in the balance. And through it all, I hold Briar, my tears falling like prayers on her silent face.

"I love you." The words come naturally now, when it might be too late. "Stay with me, brave, beautiful mate. Stay."

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 4:43 am*

### Tethered Souls

brIAR

Darkness swallows me whole, but Ronan's voice cuts through like a beacon. His words reach across the void, each one laced with such raw anguish it makes my soul ache. The space between life and death feels vast and empty, yet somehow suffocating. Cold seeps into my essence, not just physical cold but something deeper—the kind that threatens to freeze my very soul.

"Stay with me, moya lyubov."

His voice breaks on the words, and the pain in it pierces me like a physical wound. I try to respond, to tell him I'm fighting my way back, but my voice is lost in the endless dark. His grief washes over me in waves—tears falling on my face, desperate pleas echoing in my mind. Each drop feels like fire against my skin, a stark contrast to the curse's poison spreading through my veins like ice, pulling me further from him with each passing second.

The darkness pulses around me, alive with malevolent intent. Shadows whisper with Rurik's voice, taunting me with promises of eternal separation. The curse's magic tries to convince me to let go, to drift away into peaceful oblivion. But Ronan's presence anchors me, his love a tether I refuse to release.

"Please." His broken whisper tears at my heart, the sound so unlike his usual strength. "Take me instead. I'll give you anything."

No , I want to scream, the word burning in my throat. Don't sacrifice yourself. Not for me. But the darkness is too thick, too heavy. I can't break free. My attempts to reach him feel like swimming through tar, each movement draining what little strength I have left.

Light blooms suddenly in the void—soft at first, like the first rays of dawn, then blazing bright enough to pierce the shadows. It brings warmth with it, ancient and powerful, pushing back the curse's chill. A figure emerges, tall and radiant, her presence filling the space with magic so pure it makes my soul sing in recognition. The Goddess. I know her immediately, though I've never seen her before. She emanates the kind of power that birthed the Nexus itself, that shaped worlds and bound realms together.

Her form shifts constantly, sometimes appearing as a woman of impossible beauty, other times as pure light given consciousness. The air around her sparkles with possibilities—all the paths a life might take, all the choices that lead to destiny.

"Child." Her voice resonates through my very being, each syllable carrying echoes of ancient power. The sound ripples through the void, making the darkness retreat further. "You hover between worlds."

"I need to get back to him." The words finally break free, urgent and raw. My entire being strains toward where I can feel Ronan's presence. "Please. He's suffering." Through our bond, I feel his pain like physical wounds—each sob, each plea cutting deeper than any blade.

"The wolf who bears my curse?" There's something in her tone I can't quite read—curiosity, perhaps, or judgment. Golden light swirls around her form as she studies me. "He offers his soul for yours. Such a price, freely given."

"Because he loves me." I push against the darkness holding me in place, feeling it

resist like thick chains. Memories flash through my mind—Ronan's silver eyes softening when he looks at me, his gentle touch despite his strength, the way he says my name like a prayer. "And I love him. Please, I'll do anything?—"

"Anything?" She steps closer, her form shifting like starlight on water. The air crackles with power around her, making my skin tingle. "You would bind yourself to a cursed man? Take on his darkness, his pain? Share his battles?"

"He's not dark." The words burst from me with surprising force, carrying all my conviction. "He's good and loyal and brave. The curse doesn't define him." I think of how he protects his pack, how he fought against his own brother to save us all. "It never has."

Another figure materializes beside the Goddess—a woman with features that seem to flicker between human and something else entirely. Magic radiates from her in familiar pulses, warming me like the library's hearth on a cold night. Her presence feels like home, like all the quiet moments I've spent in Frostspire Keep's halls.

"Arcanum," I breathe, recognizing the spirit of Frostspire Keep. The castle's magic sings through my blood, recognizing its source.

She smiles, and in that expression I see centuries of watching, waiting, hoping. Her form shimmers with the same magic that flows through the castle's stones, that drew me to the library time and time again. "You know me."

"Of course I do." Tears spill down my cheeks, warm against the void's chill. "You've been trying to help us all along, haven't you? Leading me to the right books, showing me the way..." All those moments when I felt guided, when doors opened or closed, when exactly the right tome fell into my hands—it was her, watching over us, hoping we'd find our way to each other.

Arcanum steps forward, taking my hands in hers. Her touch feels like coming home—warm and familiar, yet crackling with ancient power. Magic surges between us, and I see flashes of the castle through her eyes—centuries of watching over its inhabitants, the pain of seeing it cursed, and then the hope that sparked when I first crossed the threshold.

"I knew from the moment you crossed the threshold. You were meant to be here, Briar. Meant for him." Her voice carries the weight of ages, of countless stories witnessed and kept safe within the castle's walls.

Through our joined hands, I feel the castle's magic pulse. Memories flood my mind—every moment I've spent with Ronan, every touch, every look. The way his silver eyes soften when he thinks I'm not watching. The gentle way he holds me, as if I'm something precious he fears might break. The strength in his arms when he pulls me close, contrasting with the tenderness in his touch.

His voice reaches me again, thick with tears. "I'll bring you Rurik. I'll deliver my brother to the Council myself. His experiments, his corruption—all of it ends. Just save her."

The raw desperation in his words makes my heart clench. I feel his agony through our bond, the way he's willing to tear his own heart out to save me.

"He would give up his own brother?" The Goddess's light flares, filling the void with golden radiance. Power ripples through the air, testing, measuring. "For you?"

"Because it's right," I say firmly, standing straighter despite the darkness still trying to pull me down. "Rurik's darkness threatens everything—the castle, the pack, the balance itself. Ronan sees that now. He's chosen love over blind loyalty." Pride fills my voice. "He's chosen to protect what matters most."

The Goddess circles me, her presence both terrifying and beautiful. Each step leaves trails of starlight in the void, and the air thrums with power. "And you, child? What would you choose?"

"I choose him." The words come without hesitation, ringing with truth. "In any form, under any curse. I choose us." Magic surges through me with the declaration, warming my blood, fighting back the curse's poison.

"Even knowing the price?" Her voice sharpens like winter wind. "The darkness that follows him? The enemies he's made? The battles yet to come?"

"Especially then." I lift my chin, meeting her ethereal gaze. Golden light reflects in her eyes like distant galaxies. "He's carried these burdens alone for too long. Let me help him bear them." Through our bond, I feel another wave of Ronan's anguish, and my resolve strengthens. "Let me be his strength, as he's been mine."

A sound like distant thunder rolls through the void. The Goddess's form brightens until she's almost painful to look at, her power filling every corner of this between-space. "You speak of love so easily. But do you understand what it means to love a man like Ronan Wolfe? A beast who walks in two worlds?"

"I understand that he's not a beast." My voice rises with conviction, carrying all the love and certainty in my heart. "He's a protector. A leader. A man who would sacrifice everything to keep others safe." I take a shaky breath, feeling the truth of my words resonate through my very being. "And yes, he's a wolf too. Fierce and loyal and beautiful. But that's not a curse—it's part of who he is. Who we are together."

Arcanum's grip on my hands tightens as the Goddess's power surges around us. Through our connection, I feel Ronan's anguish more clearly—his tears falling on my physical form, his desperate bargaining with forces he doesn't fully understand. Each sob feels like a knife in my heart.

"He needs me," I whisper, my voice breaking. "Please. I can feel him slipping into darkness." The bond between us pulses with his pain, his fear, his desperate love.

"As you slip into death?" The Goddess's words cut like ice. Magic swirls around us, making visible the curse's poison flowing through my veins. "You took on his burden willingly."

"And I'd do it again." The truth of it burns in my chest like a star. "A thousand times over."

"Why?" She demands, her light pulsing with each word. The void itself seems to lean in, waiting for my answer. "What makes this cursed wolf worth such sacrifice?"

"Because he would do the same for me. Because he has done the same." My voice grows stronger as memories flood through me—every sacrifice he's made, every moment he's put others before himself. "He took on the original curse to protect his brother. He's spent years isolating himself to keep others safe. And now..." I swallow hard, feeling his tears on my skin even in this spiritual realm. "Now he's offering his soul for mine."

The Goddess moves closer, her presence overwhelming. The air crackles with ancient magic, making my skin tingle. "And what of your own destiny? The powers awakening within you? Would you sacrifice all that for love?"

"My destiny is with him." The certainty of it fills me with warmth, pushing back the void's chill. Magic rises in me, responding to my conviction. "Whatever powers I have, whatever I'm meant to become—it's all connected to Ronan. To Frostspire Keep. To this life we're building together."

Arcanum steps forward, her form solidifying until she looks almost human, though magic still shimmers beneath her skin like starlight. "She speaks truth, my Lady.



Their souls were paired long before they found each other. I felt it the moment she entered the Keep." Her voice carries the weight of centuries, of countless stories witnessed within Frostspire's walls.

The Goddess turns her radiant gaze to Arcanum, power crackling between them like lightning. "You would stake your existence on their love? After what Rurik did to corrupt your magic?"

"Without hesitation." Arcanum's voice rings with conviction, and the void itself seems to resonate with her words. "Ronan is nothing like his brother. And Briar..." She squeezes my hands, sending warmth through our connection. "She's brought light back to places I thought would stay dark forever. She's awakened magic that lay dormant for centuries."

Tears stream down my face as I pull Arcanum into a tight embrace. Her form feels solid yet ethereal, like hugging sunlight given shape. "Thank you," I whisper against her shoulder, my voice thick with emotion. "For everything. For helping us find each other. For believing in us."

Through our bond, I feel another wave of Ronan's grief wash over me. His voice reaches across the void, heavy with tears: "I love you. Stay with me, brave, beautiful mate. Stay."

The raw anguish in his words tears at my soul. I can feel him slipping deeper into darkness with each passing moment, his hope failing as he holds my lifeless body.

"Please," I turn back to the Goddess, not bothering to hide my desperation. Magic surges through me, making the air shimmer. "He's given everything for others. Let me give this to him. Let me go back."

The Goddess's light flickers, then stabilizes into a blinding radiance. Her power fills

the void, testing, measuring, judging. "Very well." Her voice echoes with finality. "But he must make good on his vow, or we'll release you both to the Darkness."

"We will," I promise fervently, pouring all my conviction into the words. "We'll find Rurik. We'll bring him to justice. Whatever it takes."

She nods, then turns to Arcanum. Power crackles between them like northern lights. "Notify the Council. They have a new hunter on their roster. I want the man who dares to harm my creation."

As the Goddess begins to fade, her form dissolving into motes of light, I call out, "Wait!" When she pauses, I gather my courage. "Will I ever find my mother?"

Her expression softens slightly, becoming almost gentle. "That's a journey for another time. For now, know that you and Ronan will share a lifetime of love." Her voice carries both warning and promise. "But first, you must keep your promise. Bring Rurik to the Council."

"One more thing," I ask as Arcanum prepares to send me back. Magic swirls around us, reality pressing at the edges of the void. "Why me? Why us?"

Arcanum smiles, her form beginning to blur like a painting in rain. "In the Nexus, souls are paired before they connect with their bodies. He was always yours, and you were always his. You just had to find each other." Her eyes twinkle with ancient wisdom. "The Keep simply helped things along."

The void begins to brighten, reality pressing in from all sides. Arcanum's voice follows me as I feel myself being pulled back: "We'll be here when you return. Now go. He's waiting."

The darkness shatters like glass, and sensation floods back in a rush of pain and

awareness—the weight of my body, the burn of the curse's poison in my veins, Ronan's tears falling hot on my skin. I fight through layers of pain and exhaustion, clawing my way back to consciousness.

My eyes flutter open to find Ronan's face above mine, his expression raw with grief and hope. Silver eyes wide with disbelief meet mine, and I feel our bond surge with renewed strength.

"Moya lyubov," he breathes, the words carrying all his love and fear and desperate relief.

I lift a shaking hand to his cheek, feeling the wetness of his tears beneath my fingers. "I promised I wouldn't let go," I whisper hoarsely, my voice rough from disuse. "And I keep my promises."

His arms tighten around me as he presses his forehead to mine. Through our bond, I feel everything—his relief, his love, his lingering fear. But underneath it all is something new—a fierce determination that matches my own.

We have promises to keep, after all. A brother to find. A council to face.

But for now, I simply hold him close, breathing in his familiar scent as the castle's magic pulses around us. Each breath feels like a gift, each heartbeat a victory against the darkness that tried to separate us.

We're together. We're alive.

And nothing—not curses, not darkness, not even death itself—will tear us apart again.

The Goddess's words echo in my mind as Ronan's lips find mine in a desperate kiss:

souls paired before they connect with their bodies . No wonder finding him felt like coming home.

He was always mine.

I was always his.

And now, with the blessing of powers beyond our understanding, we'll face whatever comes next—together.

RONAN

The soft light of Christmas morning filters through the tall windows of Frostspire Keep, illuminating the grand hall with a gentle glow that seems to dance with its own magic.

The air feels fresh and invigorating, humming with renewed energy that courses through the castle's very stones. Gone is the heavy stillness that marked our cursed existence—replaced by a vibrancy that makes every corner of the Keep feel alive.

I awaken in the warmth of my bed, and for the first time in years, I feel completely at peace. No weight presses on my chest. No darkness lingers just out of sight.

The curse's shadows have lifted, leaving behind a lightness I'd almost forgotten could exist. Through our bond, I can feel the castle's magic singing—a joyous melody that echoes the happiness in my heart.

The air carries the rich scents of pine and fresh-baked pastries—a Christmas feast being lovingly prepared by my staff. But there's something else too—a subtle fragrance of magic, clean and pure, like fresh snow and starlight. The castle itself seems to be celebrating, its restored magic manifesting in gentle pulses of warmth and light that make the holiday decorations glow with supernatural radiance.

My heart races as I turn to see Briar lying beside me, her face serene and peaceful in the morning light. The mark on her neck glows with a soft, steady luminescence—no longer the desperate flare of a curse-bound connection, but the warm, constant reminder of our soul-deep bond. Her magic mingles with the castle's now, creating an

atmosphere of such profound rightness that it nearly takes my breath away.

I reach out, brushing my fingers against her cheek. Her skin is warm, alive with the magic that now flows freely through her veins. My touch elicits a small sigh, and her lips curve into a soft smile—even in sleep, she responds to me, our connection humming between us like a perfectly tuned chord.

"Briar," I whisper, emotion threatening to overwhelm me as I watch the woman who saved not just me, but all of Frostspire Keep. "Wake up, love."

Her eyelids flutter open, revealing those beautiful green depths that have become my anchor. They shine with newfound power now, hints of gold threading through the emerald—a visible sign of her awakened abilities as an arcanist. In that moment, gratitude floods through me so intensely it's almost painful. This remarkable woman fought through death itself to return to me, faced down a goddess for our love.

"Merry Christmas," I murmur, my voice thick with emotion. "You're my gift today."

She blinks, awareness dawning in her eyes as she takes in the transformed room around us. The darkness that once clung to every corner has been replaced by warm, golden light. The air itself seems to shimmer with possibility.

"Ronan," she breathes, and the warmth of her smile ignites a fire in my chest. Her hand comes up to cup my cheek, and I feel her magic brush against mine—a gentle caress that makes my wolf stir contentedly. "It's Christmas."

"Yes," I say, a laugh of pure joy bursting free. "And we are free."

The word 'free' rings through the air like a bell, and the castle's magic surges in response. The curtains flutter without wind, and the crystal chandelier above us chimes softly, as if Frostspire Keep itself is celebrating our liberation.

At that, her smile widens, and the light in her eyes brightens with joy. She sits up slowly, and I watch in awe as her magic unfurls around her like invisible wings. The transformation within her is breathtaking—no longer just my brave, beautiful Briar, but a powerful arcanist coming into her own. The shadows of the past seem to melt away under her gaze, and I can't help but marvel at how fortunate I am to have her by my side.

Briar stretches, a soft laugh escaping her lips as she takes in the grandeur of our transformed bedroom. The once-oppressive space now feels warm and welcoming, with morning light streaming through frost-free windows. Delicate ice crystals dance in the air, catching the light and throwing rainbow prisms across the walls—a playful display of the castle's restored magic.

"Look," she whispers, pointing to where the crystals are forming intricate patterns. "The castle is showing off."

I chuckle, recognizing Arcanum's touch in the display. "She's happy. We all are."

Through our bond, I feel Briar's wonder and delight mixing with my own contentment. The connection between us feels stronger than ever, refined by our trials and tempered by our love. When she turns those brilliant eyes to me, I see everything I've ever wanted reflected in their depths—love, acceptance, understanding, and a fierce determination to face whatever comes next together.

"We did it," she whispers, the wonder in her voice echoing my own thoughts. Her hand finds mine, our fingers intertwining naturally. Where our skin touches, tiny sparks of magic dance between us.

I nod, feeling my heart swell with pride for what we've accomplished together. "Together. Always." The words carry the weight of a vow, and I feel the castle's magic surge in response, as if recording our promise in its very foundations.

We share a moment of silence, just holding each other's gaze, and for a fleeting instant, I allow myself to dream of all that lies ahead. The thought of building a future together—of truly living—fills me with hope. No more curse, no more isolation. Just us, our family, and the endless possibilities stretching out before us.

As if sensing my thoughts, Briar's expression shifts with intent, her magic swirling around us like a warm breeze. "What should we do first?" she asks, her voice bubbling with excitement. The joy in her tone makes the nearby candles flare brighter, responding to her heightened emotions.

"Let's help prepare breakfast." I swing my legs over the side of the bed and plant my feet on the floor, feeling grounded in this new reality. The castle's magic pulses up through the stones, welcoming and alive in a way I've never felt before. "It feels right to start this day with family."

We make our way through the transformed halls of Frostspire Keep. Gone are the oppressive shadows and lingering chill. Instead, every corridor glows with warmth, the ancient stones themselves seeming to radiate contentment. Christmas decorations sparkle with more than mere reflection—tiny motes of magical light dance around the garlands and ornaments, creating an ethereal display.

The kitchen buzzes with activity, Alistair, Giselle, and Nolan's voices carrying through the doorway along with the rich aromas of cinnamon, sugar, and fresh fruit. The scents mingle with the clean magic now flowing freely through the castle, creating an atmosphere that feels like pure joy made tangible.

"Good morning, you two!" Giselle beams as we enter, her eyes sparkling brighter than I've ever seen them. She wipes her hands on her apron, her cheeks flushed with happiness and the kitchen's warmth. The curse's weight has lifted from her as well—she moves with a lightness that makes her seem years younger. "We're just about ready, but we could always use an extra pair of hands."



Alistair nods, a serene smile resting on his lips as he pulls fresh pastries from the oven. The kitchen glows with more than just firelight—magic dances in every corner, making the copper pots gleam and the crystal glasses sing with soft chimes. "It's a pleasure to have you both up and about, especially today. The castle feels different, doesn't it?"

"Like a weight has lifted," I agree, exchanging glances with Briar. Her magic reaches out to touch the castle's renewed energy, creating ripples of warmth that make the nearby candles flicker in response. "Can you feel it?"

"Absolutely," Alistair responds, his eyes glimmering with understanding. "The magic returned with you both. The air hums with vitality. It's as if Frostspire Keep is breathing anew." He pauses, running his hand along a nearby counter. "Even the stones feel warm now, alive in a way they haven't been for years."

As I help set the table with Briar, I catch glimpses of the joy in their expressions. It's the kind of warmth that lies beyond mere celebration—it's a sense of family, of belonging that I've been craving for so long. The castle is no longer just brick and stone; it embodies the people who inhabit it, the magic we share. Every surface gleams with renewed purpose, and the morning light streaming through the windows creates halos around us all.

Briar leans in closer, her shoulders brushing against mine as we work side by side. The simple contact sends waves of warmth through our bond, and I feel her magic intertwining with mine—gold and silver threads of power dancing together in perfect harmony. "Thank you for being there for me," she whispers, her voice pitched low enough that only I can hear. "I didn't doubt our connection, but seeing you again lit a fire in my heart."

Her honesty pulls at something deep within me, making my wolf rumble with contentment. "You've always been the light, Briar. Saving me from the shadows," I reply, a smile breaking over my face as I watch her arrange flowers that seem to

bloom brighter at her touch. The castle's magic responds to her presence now, as if it recognizes her as its own.

Together, we bring dishes of fresh eggs, pastries, and an array of fruits to the table. Each plate seems to glow with its own inner light, the food looking almost too perfect to be real. Nolan skips around excitedly, his laughter causing tiny sparks of magic to dance in the air—a child's pure joy made visible in this newly awakened space.

"Do you think we can decorate the tree later?" he asks, his big brown eyes looking to Briar for confirmation. "Alistair promised we could!"

"Absolutely!" she replies, her enthusiasm infectious. As she speaks, a gentle shower of golden sparkles falls from the ceiling, as if the castle itself is applauding the idea. The smile on Nolan's face lights up the entire room, and I watch in amazement as his happiness makes the nearby ornaments chime like tiny bells.

We sit down to eat, the conversation flowing easily among us. The dining room, once a place of shadows and whispered fears, now glows with warmth and life. Sunlight streams through the tall windows, catching on the crystal glasses and creating prisms that dance across the white tablecloth. Each laugh, each shared smile seems to make the castle's magic pulse stronger, as if Frostspire Keep itself is joining in our celebration.

I look around at my chosen family—each of them a reminder of the love and loyalty that helped break the curse. Briar's laughter rings through the hall like music, harmonizing with the peaceful ambience. The sound makes my heart swell, and I notice small flowers blooming in the centerpiece vase, responding to her joy.

But even in this perfect moment, I can't shake the feeling that all isn't fully settled. The curse may be lifted, but the weight of our promise to the Goddess sits heavy in my thoughts. The weight of Rurik's actions still casts a long shadow over us. I watch Briar, noticing the way she occasionally glances toward the windows, as if sensing

the same pull I do.

"What's on your mind?" Briar asks, catching my contemplative frown. She reaches over, placing her hand atop mine—a gentle grounding touch that sends waves of warmth through our bond. Her magic brushes against mine, soothing and strengthening all at once.

I look into her eyes, filled with love and understanding, and somehow find the courage to voice the unspoken concern sitting heavy in my chest. The castle's magic seems to still around us, listening.

"Rurik is still out there," I say softly, watching as her expression shifts from contentment to quiet determination. "And we made a promise to the Goddess."

Her fingers tighten around mine, and I feel her magic surge—not with fear, but with resolve. "We'll find him, Ronan. Together. But today..." She glances around at our family, at the joy radiating from every corner of our restored home. "Today we celebrate what we've won."

She's right, of course. The morning light streams through the windows, catching on the frost patterns that dance across the glass—delicate designs that shift and change as we watch, the castle's magic playing with the sunlight. Every surface seems to glow with renewed life, as if Frostspire Keep itself is determined to make this Christmas morning perfect.

After breakfast, I lead Briar to the library—once a place of darkness and hidden secrets, now transformed into a sanctuary of knowledge and light. The books seem to hum with contentment, their spines gleaming with restored magic. Ancient texts that once held curses now radiate wisdom, waiting to be discovered.

"Look," I whisper, drawing her attention to the ceiling. Above us, constellations of magical light swirl and dance, casting gentle illumination over the reading areas.

"The castle remembers how you saved it. How you brought life back to these walls."

Briar's breath catches as she watches the display. Her own magic rises to join the light show, gold and silver threads weaving together in an intricate dance. "It's beautiful," she murmurs, leaning back against my chest.

I wrap my arms around her waist, breathing in her scent—now tinged with the fresh magic that flows through her veins. "You're beautiful," I reply, pressing a kiss to her temple. "My brave, brilliant mate."

She turns in my arms, her eyes shimmering with both joy and power. The library responds to her movement, the magical lights above us swirling into new patterns. Books shift on their shelves, their ancient magic recognizing her as both protector and friend.

"I never imagined this," she says, running her fingers along my jaw. "When I first came here, I was so lost. Searching for something I couldn't name." Her touch sends waves of warmth through our bond. "But it was you. It was always you."

I catch her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. Through our connection, I feel everything—her love, her strength, the depth of her commitment to our shared future. The castle's magic swells around us, responding to the intensity of our emotions.

"The Goddess was right," I murmur against her skin. "Our souls were paired long before we met. I feel it in every breath, every heartbeat."

Briar's free hand comes up to rest over my heart, and I feel her magic reach for mine—gold meeting silver in a dance as old as time itself. "Show me," she whispers, her eyes holding mine. "Show me your wolf. Not because of any curse, but because it's part of who you are. Who we are."

The request sends a thrill through me. For the first time, I can choose this

transformation—not forced by the curse, but embraced as part of my nature. I step back, letting the change flow through me naturally. It feels different now, smoother, more like sliding into another aspect of myself than being torn between two forms.

When I open my eyes as the wolf, I see Briar watching me with such love it makes my heart ache. She steps forward without hesitation, burying her fingers in my fur. The touch sends sparks of pleasure through our bond.

"Beautiful," she breathes, and I feel her magic wrap around us both like a warm blanket. "My fierce, loyal mate."

I press my muzzle against her hand, letting her feel my contentment through our connection. The library's magic pulses in response, creating a cocoon of warmth and light around us. This is what freedom feels like—the ability to be all of myself, wolf and man, and be loved completely for both.

A knock at the door breaks our reverie. Alistair stands in the doorway, his eyes twinkling. "Pardon the interruption, but young Nolan is quite insistent about decorating that tree."

Briar laughs, the sound making the magical lights dance overhead. "We shouldn't keep him waiting then."

I shift back smoothly, taking her hand in mine. "Lead the way, love."

The rest of the morning passes in a blur of joy and celebration. We decorate the massive Christmas tree in the grand hall, Briar's magic making the ornaments float and dance through the air while Nolan watches in wonder. Giselle brings hot chocolate that steams with more than just heat, and Alistair tells stories of Christmases long past.

Through it all, I watch Briar—the way she moves with newfound grace, her magic

flowing freely now. Every gesture carries an innate power that makes the castle sing. When she laughs, flowers bloom in the nearby vases. When she touches the ornaments, they glow with inner light. She's come into her own as an arcanist, and Frostspire Keep celebrates her every move.

The grand hall, once a testament to our isolation, has become the heart of our celebration. Garlands wind up the columns, twinkling with magical lights that respond to our moods. The massive fireplace crackles with flames that cast no shadows—only warm, golden light that seems to chase away any lingering darkness.

"Look what I found!" Nolan calls out, holding up an ancient-looking ornament. It's a crystal wolf, its eyes seeming to gleam with their own inner fire. As Briar takes it from him, the ornament begins to glow, responding to her touch.

"This is special," she says, looking at me with knowing eyes. "It belongs at the top of the tree."

I watch as she raises her hand, magic swirling around her fingers. The crystal wolf floats upward, coming to rest at the very peak of the tree. As it settles into place, a wave of magic pulses outward, making all the decorations shine brighter.

"Perfect," I murmur, pulling her close. Through our bond, I feel her contentment mixing with my own. The castle's magic hums around us, a melody of joy and belonging that makes my heart full.

Later, as the sun begins to set, casting long golden rays through the windows, I lead Briar to the balcony overlooking the grounds. The snow-covered landscape glitters like diamonds, and the air is crisp with winter's bite. But we feel only warmth, wrapped in the castle's protective magic.

"Look," I say, gesturing to where the pack roams freely below. The wolves move with new purpose, no longer bound by the curse but choosing to stay, to protect, to

belong. "They're part of us now. Part of this place."

Briar leans against the railing, her magic reaching out to touch the barriers that once trapped us. But those walls have transformed into something else—not a prison, but a sanctuary. "Everything's changed," she says softly. "And yet, it feels more right than ever."

I wrap my arms around her from behind, resting my chin on her shoulder. "Because this is who we were always meant to be. Together, protecting what matters most."

She turns in my embrace, her eyes reflecting the sunset's gold. "I love you," she says simply, the words carrying all the power of a spell. "Man and wolf, darkness and light. All of you."

The kiss we share is gentle but full of promise. Above us, the first stars begin to appear in the darkening sky, and I feel the weight of our promise to the Goddess—not as a burden, but as a purpose. We'll find Rurik, bring him to justice. But not today. Today is for us, for this perfect moment of peace we've earned.

"Merry Christmas, moya lyubov," I whisper against her lips.

She smiles, and the castle's magic swells around us like a symphony. "Merry Christmas, my love."

As night falls fully, Frostspire Keep glows like a beacon in the darkness. Every window shimmers with warm light, every room pulses with renewed life.

This is our home, our sanctuary, our future. And whatever challenges lie ahead, we'll face them together—werewolf and arcanist, bound by love stronger than any curse.