



Rings of Ruin (Ravina's Legacy)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: In a house of whispers and shadows, love may be the deadliest curse of all.

Madison

I was raised to honour duty, suppress emotion, and secure my family's future through marriage.

Marrying Hugh Trent was supposed to be a simple political alliance...

Until I slipped on a cursed ring that bound far more than our hands.

Now I'm trapped in a manor where shadows move with malevolent purpose, where plants bloom at my touch, and where whispers echo the first Lady Trent's descent into madness.

The same madness that now whispers at the edge of my mind.

Hugh

I've spent years mastering both my shadow magic and my emotions.

Power was everything...

Until Madison arrived and shattered the walls I thought unbreakable.

She's the light to my darkness, but the curse that destroyed my first wife has awakened once more.

If we can't uncover the truth, our love may unravel into ruin.

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Madison

I paced along the marble floor, following the servant and counting each step.

One, two, three...

twenty-seven steps to calm my racing heart. Aunt Elizabeth's voice echoed in my mind, Control your emotions, Madison. Show only what is proper.

Indeed.

Because marrying a man rumoured to have driven his first wife to madness and death was the very height of propriety.

The security of my family's future hung on this alliance.

The Trent name carried wealth and political influence that could restore everything we'd lost.

I would not be the one to ruin it, even if it meant binding myself to a man whose very presence in court made other ladies cross themselves when they thought no one was looking.

“Lady Madison Bateman.”

The servant announced my presence while the heavy doors to the drawing room groaned open.

His voice bounced off the high ceiling and echoed around the chamber.

“Daughter of Lord Edward Bateman, here to meet Lord Hugh Trent.”

Breathe, Madison.

Just breathe.

I lifted my gaze and met the storm-grey eyes of the man who was to be my husband.

He was taller than I'd imagined, with broad shoulders and a chisel-cut jawline that was almost too perfect.

His neatly trimmed hair was dark with only a touch of silver at his temple, highlighted by the daylight streaming through the window.

My breath caught in my throat while he moved toward me, and I noticed how his tailored jacket accentuated the firm lines of his body.

I wondered what those shoulders... that chest, might feel like beneath my hands.

But quickly banished such thoughts.

I think it was his stillness that unnerved me most.

He stood tall and imposing, his posture perfectly composed beneath the vaulted ceiling and carved beams.

I resisted a shudder while imagining him as a statue come to life, cold marble that radiated heat.

“Thank you, Benjamin,”

he said.

“That will be all.”

The servant bowed and retreated with a nod, closing the heavy door behind him with a soft click that made my stomach clench.

The sound echoed through stone walls that had probably witnessed a thousand such meetings, a thousand such fates being sealed.

Hugh stepped forward and gestured toward two chairs near the fireplace.

“Lady Madison.

Welcome to Trent Manor,”

he said in a voice smooth yet utterly cold and devoid of emotion.

“Sit.

We have matters to discuss.”

Matters.

The word irked me, though perhaps irrationally.

It made me feel like a ledger to be balanced rather than a woman to be wed.

“Lord Trent,”

I replied, settling into the offered chair and arranging my skirts.

The fabric felt like armour, layers of silk and propriety designed to hide the girl underneath who wished to bolt for the nearest exit.

“I appreciate your hospitality.”

Unable to shake the feeling that beneath his controlled exterior lurked a dangerous and calculating mind, I found myself studying his face.

My family had spent months impressing upon me how important this alliance was.

But nothing they had done could have prepared me for how vulnerable I felt, or how my emotions appeared heightened in Hugh's presence.

“I trust your journey was comfortable,”

Hugh said while taking the seat opposite mine.

Even sitting, he radiated a coiled tension, like a spring wound too tight.

I forced a smile and resisted the urge to twist my fingers in my lap.

“Long carriage rides have their limitations, but it was tolerable.”

A ghost of a smile lifted the edge of his lips before vanishing.

He leaned forward, steepling his fingers.

“I want no misunderstandings between us,”

he said.

“This marriage isn’t about romance.

It is about duty. I seek only a partner who understands the responsibilities that come with the Trent name.”

A shiver rushed up my spine.

I considered his words and how to respond, while noting the rigid set of his shoulders and the tightness around his eyes.

I had always been good at reading people, at sensing their emotions. Mother had called it a woman's intuition. Aunt Elizabeth called it dangerous. Whatever it was, I had been raised to suppress it, but right now it was urging me to flee.

“Our families have arranged what they believe to be a mutually beneficial match,”

I said, surprised my voice remained steady despite the nerves building within me.

“I know what is required of me.”

To produce an heir.

To smile at the right people.

To pretend I do not exist beyond my function.

Hugh sat back in his chair.

A log shifted in the fireplace, sending sparks flying upward, but I held my gaze

steady on his.

“The Trents hold power and influence at court,”

he said.

“With that comes certain... obligations and needs.”

“Appearances to foster... alliances to forge and strengthen,”

I added, choosing not to mention how my ancient family name carried the respectability his lacked.

“This is a political marriage.”

He nodded, looking almost pleased.

“Precisely.

I am glad we agree.”

I should have agreed.

But while I understood my duty, in my heart, I had always hoped for more.

I was young when my mother died, but I'd still observed my parents' political marriage with dismay.

They were two strangers occupying the same grand house, speaking only when necessity demanded it.

I'd dreamt of a different life, but that was never to be my fate.

I should have smiled and nodded and played the part of the dutiful bride-to-be.

Instead, the words slipped out before I could stop them, "What if I want more?"

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees.

Hugh's eyes darkened while he studied my face, and, just for a moment, the shadows in the corners deepened and reached toward us like grasping fingers.

"Then I suggest you adjust your expectations,"

Hugh said before rising and making his way to the mahogany drinks table.

I stood, smoothing my skirts while silently cursing my loose tongue.

This is why Aunt Elizabeth drilled propriety into you until it became second nature, you foolish girl.

"A toast to our arrangement."

Hugh poured amber liquid into two crystal glasses, the clink of decanter against rim sounded unnaturally loud in the silence.

Our fingers brushed when he offered me a glass, sending a spark of energy through me, as hot and as sudden as lightning.

The sensation raced up my arm, making my breath hitch.

Hugh's eyes widened, darkening as they fixed on mine. His lips parted, and for a

heartbeat, I felt that there was more beneath his carefully constructed exterior.

Desire.

Sharp and needy.

But tinged with fear.

The shadows in the room deepened further.

They moved, shifting and curling like living smoke drawn to our joined hands.

The very air shivered with unspoken possibilities.

“What was that?”

I whispered, my voice surprisingly husky.

Hugh's mask snapped back into place so quickly I almost believed I'd imagined it all.
Almost.

“Static from the carpet,”

he replied far too quickly, though his eyes remained fixed on mine for a moment too long.

Liar.

The word formed clear as crystal in my mind, though I would never voice such an accusation.

But I nodded anyway and raised my glass in a silent toast, letting the whiskey burn away the taste of questions I should not ask.

Hugh watched me over the rim of his own glass, and I had the uncomfortable sensation of being catalogued, assessed.

It looked as if he might say something, but a knock on the door interrupted whatever he might have said.

“Enter,”

Hugh called, his voice perfectly controlled once more.

A woman with steel-grey hair and sharp eyes entered, her severe black dress marking her as upper household staff.

Everything about her radiated competence, from her ramrod posture to the way she assessed me with a single sweeping glance.

“My Lord, Lady Elizabeth Walker has arrived,”

she said, referring to my aunt.

“She requests that her niece be given time to refresh herself before the evening meal.”

“Thank you, Olivia.”

Hugh set down his empty glass.

“Please escort Lady Madison to her chambers.”

Olivia inclined her head, and when her gaze met mine, I was struck by an emotion so intense it nearly buckled my knees.

Satisfaction.

Deep satisfaction mixed with triumph.

The feeling crashed over me like a wave.

Her emotions, not mine, pressed against whatever barriers I had built in my mind.

“This way, my Lady,”

Olivia said, her tone perfectly proper even while the intensity of her emotions made my head spin.

I followed her from the room, acutely aware of Hugh's gaze heavy between my shoulder blades.

The sensation sent an unexpected thrill down my spine.

It didn't fade until we were well into the corridor, where ancient tapestries and paintings lined the walls. Many depicted hunting scenes, though the prey in some appeared unnatural. No doubt they helped fuel the rumours of the family's dark magic.

“The manor has been in the Trent family for twelve generations,”

Olivia said, noting my scrutiny of the artwork.

Her voice carried the pride of someone who'd watched those generations rise and fall.

“Have you worked for the family for a long time?”

I asked, still trying to process that wave of emotion that had crashed over me.

Olivia's smile was cryptic.

“Longer than most remember, my lady.

I have served three generations of Trent lords. Watched them all take their wives, raise their children.”

Her voice carried the same pride I felt in her emotions.

“I have seen much in these halls.”

Before I could question her further, we reached the end of the long corridor and stopped outside a heavy wooden door.

“Your chambers, my lady,”

she said while producing a key and opening the door.

The room beyond stole my breath.

It was gorgeous and terrible all at once.

A massive four-poster bed draped in blood-red velvet dominated the space, while a faded forest mural covered the ceiling. A fire crackled in the enormous stone hearth, casting dancing shadows across walls that felt somehow aware, as if the very stones held memories.

“Dinner will be served in one hour,”

Olivia said, moving to adjust already-perfect curtains.

“Ring if you require assistance.”

She indicated a brass pull near the fireplace; its surface worn smooth by centuries of use.

“Thank you,”

I said, but she was already closing the door behind her.

A weighty silence followed her departure.

I debated leaving the room and seeking out my aunt, but sensing I was expected to remain where I was until dinner, I sank onto the edge of the bed.

I immediately regretted the decision. The mattress was so deep I nearly disappeared, and the red velvet bed curtains closed around me like a shroud.

Control your emotions.

Show only what is proper.

The stress of the day was getting to me.

Everything felt too intense.

From the journey to meeting Hugh, and the strange energy I felt in the house. There was something... off about everything. Hugh's family had been plagued by rumours

of dark magic for generations, and yet I was strangely drawn to him. He hoped to gain some semblance of respectability from our union. Tomorrow, I would be bound to this place... to him, forever.

I took a few steadying breaths before flopping backward onto the mattress, staring up at that painted forest.

The longer I looked, the more details emerged.

Animals hiding in painted undergrowth and faces in the bark of trees.

A sound made me bolt upright.

Scratching, soft but insistent, and coming from outside.

I moved to the window and drew back the curtains. Twilight was approaching, bringing with it a heavy mist that shrouded the formal gardens. Beyond them, the forest loomed dark and forbidding. A flicker of movement caught my eye. A raven with feathers as black as midnight perched on a branch of a nearby tree.

It tilted its head and fixed me with curious eyes.

I felt unsettled... judged by its gaze, and a shiver ran down my spine.

Then it spread wings and took flight, leaving me with the certainty that I had been measured and found wanting.

Drawing the curtains, I moved to the armoire and selected a gown of deep green silk for dinner.

I changed and studied my reflection in the mirror hanging inside the armoire door,

then pinned my auburn hair into an elegant arrangement, leaving a few tendrils loose to frame my face.

My aunt would expect perfection tonight. Calm, controlled perfection.

I had never failed to give her what she wanted, so why did my skin prickle and my insides churn now, when it mattered most? I had been steady on the journey to Trent Manor, but the moment I crossed the threshold, an awareness I'd spent my life suppressing had threatened to break free.

A wave of dread washed over me.

Unable to bear looking at the composed and serene image in the mirror, knowing it to be a fabrication, I closed the armoire door with more force than necessary and gripped the bedpost to steady myself.

It was not merely the fear of marriage or even of the man I was to wed.

There was a deeper wrongness here.

I could feel it pulsing through the very stones of the manor. A sorrow so profound it made my chest ache, an anger that raged like a thunderstorm, and beneath it all, a need to be free. I wanted to dismiss these sensations, to say that my nerves were playing tricks on me, but...

The image struck without warning.

A woman with silver-white hair and a face untouched by age, although her eyes carried the weight of centuries.

She stood in this very room, smiling with lips that spoke of secrets and sorrows.

She reached toward me, her mouth forming my name...

“Madison...”

I pressed my hands to my temples, but the vision was already fading, leaving behind only the taste of winter and the certainty that I was not the first woman to stand in this room and feel the world shifting beneath her feet.

I considered documenting what I had seen, but then I thought of Hugh's first wife and the madness that had overcome her.

If anyone learned of my vision, of what I thought I had seen, would they call me mad as well? My heart raced at the thought.

I couldn't risk such a fate.

Tomorrow I would become the second Lady Trent.

And now, more than ever, I wondered what had truly happened to the first.

Unable to bear my own company for a moment longer, I straightened the silk of my dress, squared my shoulders, and headed for the door, determinedly ignoring the emotional turmoil that pressed against me.

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Hugh

Madison entered the dining room with a quiet grace that commanded attention.

My gaze was drawn to her instantly, and I found myself studying this woman who would become my wife in mere hours.

She had surprised me in the drawing room. There was an intelligence behind her eyes that I'd not expected, a careful assessment masked by diplomatic courtesy.

Her hair was swept up to reveal the elegant line of her neck, and the green silk of her gown followed every curve of her delectable body.

The candlelight caught in her eyes, making them appear almost luminous.

For one unguarded moment, I allowed myself to imagine how that same light might look reflected in her gaze under different, more intimate, circumstances, before firmly redirecting such thoughts.

“Lord Trent.”

Madison offered me a slight curtsy before turning to her aunt.

“Lady Elizabeth.

I hope I haven't kept you both waiting.”

“Not at all,”

I said, stepping forward to pull out her chair.

My father had drilled such courtesies into me from childhood.

Though I had to admit, he had never warned me how the simple act of seating a lady could become a test of self-control when that lady possessed such a magnetic presence.

The sweet scent of lavender and fresh herbs enveloped me as Madison settled into her seat.

When I pushed her chair forward, my fingers brushed against her shoulder.

Barely a whisper of contact through silk, yet that same electric current sparked between us. Her spine stiffened slightly, but not before I caught the faintest intake of breath. I stepped back as if burnt, struggling to ignore how soft her skin had felt beneath my fingertips and the way she'd leaned almost imperceptibly into the touch before catching herself.

Static from the carpet.

I told myself the same lie I had offered Madison earlier.

And found the falsehood as uncomfortable now as I had then.

Lady Elizabeth Walker observed our exchange with the intensity of a hawk studying prey.

Her sharp gaze catalogued every gesture, every pause, and every breath.

I smiled and inclined my head before taking my seat, gesturing for the servants to deliver our meal.

“I hope your journey was comfortable, Lady Elizabeth?”

Madison asked.

Her question mirrored the one I'd asked her in the drawing room.

“Quite comfortable, thank you, dear.

The weather held, though I noticed mist gathering when I arrived.”

Lady Elizabeth's response carried the practiced ease of countless social interactions.

“I understand the estate is known for such atmospheric conditions.”

“Indeed.

Trent Manor was once known as Mistfall Abbey, and the name proved itself accurate.”

“Mistfall Abbey.”

Her eyes brightened with curiosity, and I noted how her interest appeared genuine and not just polite.

“I was not aware of that connection.

I would very much like to learn more of its history.”

“The conversion to a family residence occurred several centuries ago,”

I said, keeping my tone neutral despite finding her enthusiasm unexpectedly refreshing.

“Few outside the family are familiar with its origins.”

“How fascinating,”

Lady Elizabeth said, though her voice lacked the warmth that coloured Madison's interest.

“I understand the Trent family has held these lands for ten generations.”

“Twelve,”

Madison corrected gently, then added, “Olivia mentioned it when she showed me to my chambers.”

The correction surprised me.

Most people accepted whatever number they were offered without question.

Madison, it appeared, listened with purpose and retained what she heard. I found myself reassessing my bride-to-be, wondering what other observations she had made during her brief time at the manor.

“The east wing contains the oldest stonework,”

I said, settling into the familiar rhythm of polite discourse.

“Some sections date back nearly six hundred years.”

“Would that be where the family chapel is located?”

Madison asked.

I paused with my spoon halfway to my lips.

“It is.

The library too. What led you to that conclusion?”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed her features, and she glanced toward her aunt as if gauging whether she had overstepped some invisible boundary.

“Logical deduction, I suppose,”

she said after a moment's consideration.

“If the east wing houses the oldest architecture and the manor was once an abbey, the chapel would naturally be situated in the most ancient section.”

“Madison has always possessed a keen interest in such matters.”

Lady Elizabeth's tone carried a subtle note of warning.

“Haven't you, dear?”

“Father encouraged such studies,”

Madison said, her gaze returning to mine.

“He believed that understanding a family's history and architecture provided valuable insight into their character.”

The observation was astute, perhaps uncomfortably so.

She was reading the manor as one might read a book, gathering information about the family that had shaped these stones for twelve generations.

I wondered what conclusions she was drawing.

“Speaking of family,”

I said, steering us toward more conventional territory, “how is your father? I regret that he is unable to attend tomorrow's ceremony.”

Madison's carefully maintained composure wavered.

She set down her spoon and pressed her hands against her stomach.

“He deeply regrets his absence. The diplomatic mission to Vienna concluded successfully, but the negotiations proved more... demanding than anticipated.”

“Edward's health has suffered somewhat from the strain,”

Lady Elizabeth finished smoothly, clearly accustomed to managing such conversational rescues.

“Politics rarely comes without personal cost,”

I observed, studying Madison's reaction.

“The burden often falls heaviest upon those with the least voice in the decisions being made.”

Madison lifted her chin, fire flashed in her green eyes, and I saw the passion inside that she fought to contain.

“Precisely.

Though I sometimes wonder whether those who bear the sacrifices are ever the same ones who reap the benefits.”

“Madison!”

Lady Elizabeth's rebuke was sharp and immediate.

“I apologise,”

Madison said instantly, though her posture remained defiantly straight.

“It was not my place to speak so directly about such matters.”

Her boldness surprised me.

Most women of her station would never voice such pointed observations, particularly not to a man they had known for mere hours.

The comment revealed a mind that questioned, that refused to accept comfortable assumptions without examination.

“On the contrary,”

I said, genuinely intrigued by this glimpse beneath her diplomatic facade.

“I value honesty far above empty flattery.

Meaningful discourse proves infinitely preferable to pleasant meaninglessness.”

The admission revealed more than I had intended.

Most of my conversations were carefully orchestrated performances, each word chosen for its strategic value rather than its truth.

Madison's directness was both refreshing and dangerously appealing.

Heat prickled along my collar while our gazes held across the table.

The candlelight cast dancing shadows along the walls, and I found myself wondering how those same shadows might look playing across her skin before forcing such thoughts away.

The mere idea sent fire racing through my veins.

“Lord Trent,”

Lady Elizabeth said, her voice cutting through my distraction.

“Are you quite well? You appear rather flushed.”

“Perfectly well,”

I replied, ensuring my voice betrayed nothing of my internal turbulence.

“Perhaps the wine is more potent than usual.”

Silence settled over the table, broken only by the gentle percussion of silverware against porcelain.

Madison lifted her wine glass to her lips.

The crystal caught the light as she took a delicate sip. The gesture was entirely proper, yet the way her lips touched the crystal, the delicate movement of her throat as she swallowed, made my body ache and my mouth go dry.

The shadows in the room deepened, responding to emotions I always kept under strict control.

Shadow magic had been part of my heritage for as long as I could remember.

My father had taught me discipline, restraint, and the absolute importance of never allowing emotion to dictate power.

But since my betrothal to Madison had been announced, the darkness had responded to my moods without conscious direction.

“Wedding planning can be quite overwhelming,”

Lady Elizabeth said.

“I understand the ceremony will include the traditional exchange of family rings.”

“Indeed.

Tradition dictates that each Lord Trent and his bride wear them.”

I kept my voice carefully neutral, though the thought of donning that heavy gold band again made my stomach churn.

The ring had never sat comfortably upon my finger.

Always too cold, too heavy, too much like a manacle around my soul. I'd removed it immediately following Eleanora's funeral, vowing never to wear it again.

"They must be remarkable pieces,"

Madison said.

"Do you know their history?"

"They date back centuries.

Family records indicate they were forged in the ancient realm of Emmadra, though I confess uncertainty about where that region might be located in modern geography."

"Did Lady Eleanora wear one?"

Madison asked.

Lady Elizabeth's sharp intake of breath testified to the impropriety of mentioning my first wife so directly, yet Madison's steady gaze suggested the inquiry came from compassion rather than curiosity.

"She did,"

I said, deliberately keeping my response brief while studying her face.

I saw no cruelty there, no hunger for gossip.

Instead, her expression carried the weight of genuine sympathy.

“Such a tragedy,”

Madison said softly.

“Loss carves wounds that never fully heal.”

I reached for my wine glass, using the motion to steady both my hands and my voice.

“Eleanora suffered from delusions that grew progressively worse.

In the end, they consumed her entirely.”

The words felt like shards of glass in my throat.

The official explanation was sanitised, safe.

It revealed nothing of the true horror I'd witnessed. The way Eleanora had pressed her hands to her temples while screaming about voices only she could hear... the way she'd looked at me with such terror in her final days, as if I were the monster from her nightmares.

“My mother died when I was quite young,”

Madison said, her tone gentle and understanding.

“I still carry questions about what might have been had she lived.”

She sighed and shook her head.

“Some losses echo through all our days.”

Her words caught me unprepared.

Most people offered empty platitudes about time healing all wounds, but Madison spoke from a place of genuine sorrow that resonated with my own.

Lady Elizabeth cleared her throat with pointed emphasis.

“Perhaps we might turn to more pleasant topics.

The weather, or Lord Trent's assessment of this evening's menu.”

“Of course,”

I said, though I found myself reluctant to abandon the first honest conversation I had enjoyed in months.

“The pheasant is exceptional, though I confess myself no expert in culinary evaluation.”

The corner of Madison's mouth lifted in the barest suggestion of a smile.

“The preparation is exceptionally skillful, though perhaps a touch more rosemary wouldn't go amiss.”

“I shall convey your suggestion to the cook,”

I said, surprised to find myself smiling in return.

“She will be pleased to know her efforts are so thoughtfully appreciated.”

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Madison

I smoothed the heavy silk satin of my wedding gown one final time, ensuring the pearl-embroidered bodice sat perfectly against my waist.

The full skirt pooled around my feet in careful folds that had taken my lady's maid an hour to arrange.

Despite the layers of fabric designed to make me appear the perfect bride, I felt exposed, as if the act of becoming Hugh's wife rendered my every secret thought visible to his penetrating gaze.

“I wish your father could have made the journey,”

Aunt Elizabeth said.

I frowned, noting how her voice carried an unusual tremor.

She'd been eerily composed all morning, but now her complexion appeared paler than usual. It seemed almost grey in the dim light. “It remains his greatest regret not to stand beside you today.”

She turned toward me and touched one of my teardrop moonstone earrings with delicate fingers.

The jewels had belonged to my mother.

“My sister would be immensely proud of the woman you have become. It is my honour to stand in their place.”

I smiled and reached for her hand.

“Your guidance has shaped me more than you know.

I shall miss having your counsel every day and will write often.”

Her grip tightened on mine with surprising strength.

“Madison, I need you to listen to me carefully,”

she said, the words sounding sharp and urgent.

“You are not Eleanora.

That woman was... fragile. You possess steel in your spine that she never had.”

She paused, her eyes darting toward the chapel doors as if checking for eavesdroppers.

“If the Trent legacy proves as dark as the whispers suggest, remember that your bloodline carries protections that Eleanora's lacked.

Do you understand me?”

My heart raced, but I nodded.

Aunt Elizabeth had spent my entire life insisting I suppress every trace of unusual ability, but now, if I was understanding her correctly, she spoke as if those same

abilities might preserve my sanity.

With that, the chapel doors groaned open and Lady Elizabeth gave my hand one last squeeze before moving to stand beside me again.

Shadows danced across tapestry-draped stone walls while morning light filtered through stained glass windows, painting the gathered guests in any array of colours.

The handful of attendees was made up of distant relatives and the political allies of both families.

They sat in uneven rows on ancient wooden pews that had witnessed countless unions, most of them no doubt equally strategic.

But it was Hugh who commanded my attention.

He stood at the altar wearing a deep charcoal suit, its lapels woven with intricate patterns of black silk.

The double-breasted waistcoat with its antique silver buttons emphasised his broad chest and narrow waist. My fingers curled at my sides while I imagined what it would feel like to trail them down that firm chest, to discover whether his skin would be as warm as I remembered from our brief touches.

As always, his expression revealed nothing of his thoughts, but the stiffness to his shoulders was a little more rigid than usual.

Yet when our eyes met, desire flashed in his gaze, sending heat rushing to my core.

Control your emotions.

Show only what is proper.

The familiar refrain felt hollow as I approached the altar.

It was as if Hugh's presence amplified every sensation, every stray thought I should have been able to contain.

The sweet scent of bergamot mixed with cedar wood and winter air wrapped around me like an embrace and threatened to overwhelm my composure.

The elderly priest began the ceremony in Latin.

His voice echoed off stone walls worn smooth by centuries of prayers.

It wavered slightly. Age made the ancient words difficult to form, but the ritual proceeded with comforting predictability. I made the appropriate response, acutely aware of Hugh beside me... of the way his breathing matched mine.

When the moment arrived for the exchange of rings, Hugh produced a small wooden box inlaid with tarnished silver.

His hands were steady as he opened it, revealing two gold bands nestled against dark velvet.

Both were engraved with intertwining vines and symbols that meant nothing to me, ancient script that had probably been old when the abbey was built.

The rings were undoubtedly beautiful, their craftsmanship extraordinary.

I suppressed a shudder.

For some reason, they made my skin crawl. I shook away the feeling as Hugh lifted the smaller band. His fingers brushed only the gold as he carefully slid it on my finger, avoiding any contact with my skin.

“With this ring, I thee wed,”

he said, as it settled in place, sending a shockwave of ice-cold rushing through my veins.

I gasped.

The sound echoed off the stone walls with embarrassing volume.

Several guests shifted in their seats, and I caught Lady Pemberton whispering behind her fan to her companion.

Hugh's face flickered with concern.

His jaw tightened while his eyes searched mine, darkening to nearly black.

My heart and mind raced, unsure what was happening or what to do. I thought Hugh might say something, that he might abandon the ceremony, but duty won over impulse, and he held my gaze steady while ice spread through my bloodstream like poison.

The priest paused, his eyes darting between us with obvious uncertainty.

“My Lord? Shall we continue?”

“Yes,”

Hugh said, his voice rougher than before.

“Continue.”

My hands trembled as I lifted his ring, the gold band feeling far heavier than it should have.

“With this ring, I thee wed.”

I struggled to keep my voice from shaking while I slid the band onto his finger.

But the moment our skin touched, fire replaced ice.

Heat rushed through me like lightning.

Hugh's eyes widened, his breaths quickened, and his skin felt hot enough to burn where it pressed against mine.

But his touch lingered.

Behind us, someone coughed, and Aunt Elizabeth's sharp intake of breath carried clearly in the silence.

The priest fumbled with his prayer book, his weathered hands shaking as he struggled to find his place in the ceremony.

Hugh's thumb brushed across my knuckles before he released my hand, leaving me cold from the loss of contact.

The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur, but when it was over, Hugh stepped closer, close enough that I relished the heat radiating from his body.

He lifted his hand and lightly cupped my cheek before bending his head toward mine.

“Lady Trent,”

he murmured, his voice pitched for my ears alone.

“My wife.”

With that, he closed the distance between us.

His mouth was on mine, his soft lips moving against my own.

The kiss was brief and chaste as propriety demanded, but when Hugh pulled back, I saw the passion raging in his eyes and coming in waves of heat from his body. He cleared his throat and slipped his mask back into place before offering me his arm and leading me from the chapel.

He doesn't want you here.

I stumbled as my foot caught in the heavy silk of my train.

Hugh's grip tightened on my arm, steadying me while his brow furrowed with concern.

The words echoed around the chapel, but when I glanced around, every face showed only polite attention. Even Aunt Elizabeth appeared to have heard nothing.

He doesn't love you.

He never will.

“Are you well?”

Hugh whispered as he guided me toward the chapel doors and the reception that awaited us.

His breath stirred the wisps of hair that had escaped their careful arrangement and sent shivers down my spine. “Yes,”

I said, though the lie tasted bitter on my tongue.

“Simply overwhelmed by the occasion.”

Just as she was overwhelmed.

Until the madness took her completely.

Hugh's jaw tightened, and I wondered if he had heard that whisper too.

“Weddings can be taxing,”

he said carefully.

“My father once counselled—”

He cut his words off, and wariness replaced concern in his expression.

All while the shadows in the corridor deepened, responding to whatever emotion he struggled to contain.

I wanted to ask what his father had said.

I wanted to understand the pain that flickered across his features.

But the ring on my finger pulsed again, sending another wave of dizziness through me that made Hugh's arm the only thing keeping me upright.

He'll soon tire of you.

He's incapable of loving anyone more than he loves himself.

My vision blurred while we walked.

Hugh's solid presence beside me, his arm supporting mine, was my only anchor in a world that had tilted on its axis.

The voice spoke words I refused to acknowledge, fears I had carried since accepting this union. They defied comprehension and left me unable to distinguish between what I was hearing and what I was feeling...

You feel too much.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:23 am

Hugh

As tradition demanded, Madison moved into my chamber for our wedding night.

The ancient doors groaned closed behind us, their brass hinges protesting with centuries-old complaints.

The sound reverberated through stone walls that had witnessed countless first nights, countless unions both passionate and passionless. I wondered which category ours would fall into.

Madison trailed her fingers along the crimson velvet curtains that hung from the four posts of my bed.

Her touch lingered on the rich fabric.

Candlelight transformed her hair into liquid copper, and even through the layers of her wedding gown, every graceful line of her body was outlined in the golden light from the fire.

“Would you help with my buttons?”

She pulled her hair over one shoulder, exposing the delicate nape of her neck.

I moved closer, breathing in the intoxicating scent of lavender that engulfed me.

The perfume made my head swim while I fought the urge to press my lips against the

pale column of her throat, to taste the pulse that fluttered beneath skin as soft as silk.

I found the first button.

The pearl was warm from her skin and slippery beneath my touch.

As I worked it free, the fabric parted to reveal a triangle of olive skin that glowed in the candlelight. I moved to the next button, then the next. When the last button surrendered to my fingers, I could no longer resist. I grazed my fingertips along the curve of her spine, and marvelled at the smoothness of her skin... at the way she shuddered and leaned back into my touch.

Heat coursed through my veins.

The shadows stirred, reaching toward us, drawn by the intensity of my arousal in ways I had never experienced.

I brushed one hand across the small of her back while the other trailed up to her shoulder.

Her dress slipped down her arm at my touch, pooling around her waist.

I bent my head. My lips hovered hot and close to her shoulder for a moment before I pressed a kiss to her neck, feeling her pulse quicken beneath them.

The shadows stretched across the floor like living smoke.

They had never responded to passion before, only to anger or fear.

This was uncharted territory, and the lack of control terrified me even as desire threatened to overwhelm every rational thought.

“Hugh.”

She turned to face me with a need that mirrored my own.

Our faces were only an inch apart, her lips parted... I wanted to feel them against my own, to taste them.

She was perfection itself. Intelligent, compassionate, everything I had ever dared hope for. And those cupid's bow lips... She was everything I could have ever dreamed of. I needed to claim her, to make her fully mine... to hear her cry out my name as I buried myself deep inside her.

She reached for me, her hands fisting in the fabric of my shirt while her body pressed against mine.

Before I could claim her mouth, the shadows surged forward.

They moved with predatory hunger, reaching for Madison with tendrils of darkness that responded to my basest instincts. The sight shocked me back to awareness.

I stepped back so quickly I nearly stumbled, creating distance between us while struggling to rein in the power that had slipped its leash.

“You should rest,”

I said, my voice heavy with restraint.

Madison faced me with flushed skin and quickened breathing, holding the front of her dress to her chest.

Confusion replaced desire in her green eyes, followed quickly by hurt that she tried to

mask with composure.

“Hugh, what—”

“You should rest,”

I said more firmly, though my voice cracked with the strain of denial.

The shadows continued their restless movement, and I clenched my fists, forcing them back to their proper places in the corners.

I could not risk losing control again.

The darkness hungered for her almost as much as I did.

It took everything I had not to cross the room and take her in my arms, to see that dress tumble to the floor and...

I growled, a low and guttural sound.

Madison searched my face for answers I could not give.

Her chest rose and fell with shallow breaths while disappointment flickered across her features.

I thought she might press the issue, that she might demand the explanation I owed her.

Instead, ever composed, she raised her chin and nodded.

“Of course,”

she said.

“It has been a long day.”

Her voice was neutral, but I caught the tremor beneath her composure.

Her hands shook as she clutched her dress tighter.

The sight made my stomach churn with guilt and self-loathing.

She deserved better than a husband who feared his own desires, who pushed her away when she offered herself freely.

I poured myself a generous measure of brandy while she moved behind the dressing screen.

The amber liquid burned, but not enough to numb the sound of heavy satin hitting the floor, not enough to stop me imagining her stepping out of the pooled wedding gown with nothing but candlelight caressing her skin.

I drained my tumbler and forced myself to look away when she emerged in her nightgown.

The thin cotton did little to preserve modesty.

Even as I downed a second glass, the alcohol did nothing to ease the churning in my stomach or the hunger that clawed at my restraint.

Madison climbed into bed without another word.

I listened to her breathing gradually slow and deepen, watched the gentle rise and fall

of her chest in the moonlight streaming through the windows.

She was beautiful beyond measure, and I had rejected her like a frightened boy afraid of his own shadow.

Which was precisely what I was.

I flexed my hand and looked at the ring on my finger.

It felt heavier than I remembered, and colder.

A wave of guilt washed over me.

I'd never loved Eleanor, although she'd loved me, and I'd never viewed her as an object of desire even before the madness overtook her.

But with Madison...

She's not what she seems.

I glanced around the room.

The words had been so clear and distinct that I expected to find someone standing in the shadows.

But Madison slept peacefully, her hair spread across the pillow like spilled wine, and we were alone.

I glanced out the window, peering through glass clouded with age.

The manor creaked and settled around me, timbers groaned with centuries of

memory.

Outside, mist rose from the grounds like ghostly fingers, carrying with it the damp scent of earth and rotting leaves.

Somewhere in the distance, an owl called.

Its haunting cry echoed above the forest.

It was nights like these where it was clear how Mistfall Abbey got its name.

A movement in the fog caught my attention, and a dark shape rushed towards me as if with purpose through the white veil before a raven landed on the windowsill with a soft thud.

Its feathers gleamed like polished obsidian, as its talons scraped against stone, sounding like fingernails against slate.

Its eyes held an intelligence that made my skin crawl.

For a long moment, we regarded each other through the glass.

She will destroy everything you've built.

The voice came again, clearer now, and an image flashed unbidden through my mind.

Madison stood in my study, her hands moving through my private papers.

She held up a document, and her lips curved in a smile that held no warmth, no trace of the woman who had offered herself to me tonight.

The vision vanished as quickly as it had come, leaving me shaken and uncertain.

The shadows in the room shifted as my emotions got the better of me and my magic took on a life of its own.

Steadying my breathing, I moved to the washstand and splashed cold water against my skin.

It was exhaustion, nothing more.

The stress of the wedding, the strain of maintaining control.

I glanced at Madison again.

She looked so peaceful in sleep, so innocent.

The woman in my vision bore no resemblance to the bride who had offered herself with such vulnerable trust.

Yet the whispered warnings echoed in my mind, growing stronger with each passing moment.

I wanted to wake her, to feel her skin against mine, to lose myself in her embrace.

I wanted her to make sense of what was happening.

But I feared... I didn't know what I feared.

I shook my head.

That was another lie.

I feared the madness that took Eleanor was coming for me.

Even with this weight hanging over me, there had been times through our wedding reception that she'd brought a smile to my face, and others when I'd wanted to abandon all propriety, press her up against the wall, and feel the touch of her soft skin against my own.

The memory of her skin beneath my fingers, the sound of my name on her lips... I growled at the growing need to bury myself deep inside her, to see the look on her face as I made her scream in pleasure.

Knowing that I couldn't hide from sleep forever, I moved to the bed and carefully lifted the covers, sliding in place next to Madison.

Her warmth enveloped me.

In sleep, she turned to face me, making the thin fabric of her nightgown slip from her shoulder.

I held myself still as her hand came to rest against my chest, and then stared at her face, watching again the soft parting of her lips and the rise and fall of her chest.

But even as I savoured the moment, the whispered warnings grew stronger, more insistent.

The shadows stirred restlessly in the corners, responding to my inner turmoil.

I closed my eyes and tried to find sleep, but the voice followed me into the darkness.

She sees too much.

Feels too much.

She will be your undoing.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:23 am

Hugh

It was late in the morning when I finally woke up.

Pale morning light filtered through the windows, and the bed beside me was cold and empty.

The only trace of Madison's existence was the faint scent of lavender on the pillow and the memory of her hand against my chest.

Feeling the need to apologise for my behaviour, I dressed quickly and went in search of Madison.

I'd first gone to my study, but found her in the conservatory, where morning sunlight streamed through glass panes warmed by the rising sun.

The air hung thick with the earthy scent of rich soil, tinged with the fresh fragrance of new leaves.

Somewhere above, a robin trilled its morning song while bees hummed lazily among the flowering plants.

Madison knelt beside a row of plants.

Her fingers trailed over leaves that straightened and brightened at her touch.

A dying fern unfurled healthy fronds, its brown edges fading to vibrant green.

It was as if the air itself shimmered around her fingertips.

Leaves rustled without any breeze, as if the very plants leaned toward her touch.

I stood transfixed, watching this impossible display as she rose gracefully, brushing soil from her hands.

She wore a simple morning dress of pale yellow that made her skin glow like honey in the sunshine.

When she noticed my presence, her carefully composed mask slipped into place.

“Good morning, Lord Trent,”

she said, her tone polite yet distant.

“I was admiring your greenery.”

“All the greener thanks to your attention,”

I said, moving closer despite the wariness in her eyes.

“Despite Olivia’s best efforts, that fern has been failing for weeks.”

A flush crept up her neck.

“I’ve always been fond of gardening.

My mother kept a small plot that I tended to after her passing.”

“Did the plants respond to her touch as they do to yours?”

Madison hesitated.

Her fingers twitched and twisted together before she caught herself and stilled them.

“Everyone has talents, my lord. Mine happens to involve gardening.”

I took another step forward.

“What other talents do you possess?”

The question came out sharper than I intended, edged with suspicion as I recalled a book I’d read in the library, detailing another with such power over plants who also possessed an affinity for healing and empathy.

“You sense what others feel,”

I said, the words coming out more of an accusation than a question.

She has unnatural power.

She'll use it against you.

The voice was so loud, so insistent, that I turned to check if someone stood behind me.

When I looked back at Madison, her eyes were wide and searching, darting to every corner of the conservatory.

“My lord,”

she said, but fell silent when Olivia arrived, carrying a tray.

“Your morning tea, my lord, my lady.”

Olivia set the tray on the cast-iron table.

She glanced between us and raised an eyebrow in my direction, a liberty she took only when we were alone, and then withdrew with her usual discretion.

She didn’t need to be an empath to note the tension crackling between us.

“Thank you,”

I said by way of dismissal and turned my attention back to Madison as Olivia left.

She’d already moved to pour the tea.

Her hand trembled slightly as she lifted the pot.

I remembered how those same hands had rested against my chest in sleep, how her body had sought out mine even in slumber. But then I remembered the voice and its words of warning. The memory of it added to my frustration. No doubt with her abilities Madison could sense that too.

“You may have married into the Trent name and be lady of this house,”

I said as Madison handed me a cup of tea, “but that doesn’t grant you licence to practice your... influence... on my household or my estate.”

Her cheeks flushed, but anger flashed in her green eyes.

“I have practiced nothing of the sort,”

she said, holding my gaze.

“If you find me so....

objectionable, then perhaps you should have chosen a different bride.”

“Had I known the extent of your abilities, I would have.”

The words left my mouth before I could stop them, cruel and cutting.

“Whatever ancient magic--”

Madison's slammed her teacup down hard enough to make the saucer clatter.

Her face went pale, but she did not retreat.

Instead, she stepped closer, close enough for me to catch the scent of lavender coming from her skin, to see the rise and fall of her chest with each infuriated breath.

“Ancient Magic! Is that what we're to discuss? If anyone here is wielding strange powers, my lord, I suggest you examine your own.”

“You know nothing of my powers,” I said.

“I know the rumours.

I know you command shadows, and I witnessed the proof with my own eyes last night.”

Madison stepped closer still and lifted her chin, her eyes ablaze.

“Tell me, is that how you drove your first wife to madness?”

The accusation hit like a punch to the gut.

Unable to stop the anger building inside me or the shadows that stretched across the conservatory floor, responding to my rage, I seized her arms.

That familiar jolt jumped between us, stronger than ever before.

Madison gasped, her pupils dilating as our bodies came together.

Despite her anger, despite the cruel words we had exchanged, desire still coursed between us.

A vision struck without warning.

Madison stood before a mirror; her face twisted with pain as she pressed her hands to her temples.

“Control your emotions,”

she whispered to her reflection.

“Show only what is proper.”

But beneath the practiced words, there was a desperation, and a fear that she was losing control.

“What did you do?”

I said, releasing her as if burnt, though I regretted the loss of contact.

“You grabbed me,”

Madison snapped, stepping back and rubbing her wrists.

Her breathing was rapid and shallow, her lips parted.

I couldn't tell if she was furious or... aroused. Perhaps both.

God! This woman affected me in ways I couldn't comprehend.

I growled, fearing I might abandon all restraint and surge forward again, but something flashed in her eyes...

"You're afraid."

The realisation struck me with unexpected force.

"Of course, I'm afraid."

Madison held up her left hand, displaying the gold band that bound us together.

"I married a stranger who pushes me away one moment and accuses me of witchcraft the next.

I'm already in a loveless marriage. Will it also be one I must fear?"

"I would never--"

Madison scoffed and shook her head, but stood her ground.

"Really? Then tell me, my lord, what are you afraid of?"

Her eyes blazed with hurt and anger, but beneath it all, I saw the same need that had

driven me to retreat the night before.

“You,”

I said, unsure if it was another lie or the truth.

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Madison

“You...”

The word hung heavy in the air between us.

I stepped back, unsure how to respond, but acutely aware of the fear that also built inside me.

Fear of him, fear of myself, fear of the strange energy that crackled whenever we touched.

Everything was both terrifying and overwhelming. But beneath it all, I found a hunger... a need that matched the darkening I saw in his eyes.

“Why me?”

I asked.

“Why fear me? You have all the power here.”

Hugh lifted his chin and tightened his jaw.

“Not from where I stand.”

The temperature in the conservatory climbed.

Sweat trickled down my neck while the sun beat through the glass walls that pressed closer with each passing moment.

The yellow silk of my morning dress clung to dampened skin. Hugh's intense eyes travelled down my body, lingering on places that made my skin burn under his scrutiny.

“I should go.”

Despite my words, my feet remained rooted to the spot.

Hugh's emotions crashed over me in waves I couldn't block.

Before I could process what was happening, his hands found my waist while mine clutched at the fine linen of his shirt.

His lips pressed against mine, hot and demanding as he deepened the kiss, mirroring my need and desperation.

I parted my lips, inviting him to explore.

His tongue swept against mine, making me groan.

He tasted like sweet tea and brandy. Everything about him flooded my senses, making my head swim and my body ache with need.

A flash of memory from the night before struck.

He'd rejected me, pushed me away.

I'd wanted to scream and lash out in frustration. His every act was maddening. He'd

pushed me away, left me cold and wanting while shadows danced at his command, as his eyes and every sense I had told me that he wanted me. If he did the same again...

Hugh's hands roamed from my waist to my back, pulling me tight against him until I could feel every hard line of his body through our clothes.

The solid heat of him banished my doubts.

“Madison.”

My name on his lips was a dark caress that sent need pulsing straight to my core.

He spun me around and backed me against one of the stone planters.

The rough edge bit into my bottom as he lifted me to sit on its rim.

His lips never left mine. He pushed between my thighs and unbuttoned my dress, pushing the fabric from my shoulders. Cool air kissed newly exposed skin before his mouth followed the same path, trailing kisses down my throat to the curve of my breasts.

I arched into him, threading my fingers through his dark hair, and whimpering when his lips closed around one nipple.

He stepped back, making me afraid he would leave me like this, but heat shone in his eyes, and his emotions poured out of him.

Fierce desire mingled with awe and possessiveness, yet beneath his primal need, I felt... tenderness.

“You're perfect,”

he breathed against my nipple as he returned to nip and tease, drawing sounds from me that I never knew I could make.

“I’ve wanted this since the moment I set eyes upon you.”

He slipped his hand beneath my skirts, fingertips tracing a burning line up my inner thigh.

When he found the wet heat between my legs, I gasped and clutched his shoulders, my head falling back as pleasure coursed through me.

“I need to see all of you,”

Hugh said before pulling the remains of my dress away, leaving me completely exposed in the golden sunlight.

His gaze devoured me, his eyes darkened to near black, and shadows gathered at his feet.

“I want to watch your face while I make you mine.”

His need poured into me, and his eyes never left my face as his fingers plunged between my legs again, and circled my tender bud.

My head fell back as pleasure built within me.

His fingers slipped inside before pulling out and circling that bundle of nerves that made me cry out and arch my hips into his hand. Each touch sent shockwaves of pleasure rippling through my body.

“You’re so wet for me,”

he said, his voice rough.

“So perfect.”

I felt a blush rise on my cheeks at his words, but couldn't deny their truth.

From our first meeting, my body had responded to him in ways I had never imagined possible.

Another wave of his emotions crashed over me. His urgency at needing release and the satisfaction of knowing the pleasure he gave me. The sensation of his emotions, layered with mine, pushed me towards...

“Hugh,”

I said.

“Please.

I need you. Now.”

Understanding flashed in his eyes.

He freed himself from his trousers, and when I reached out to touch him, to explore the impressive length that made my core clench with anticipation, he caught my hands and pinned them above my head against the stone wall behind me.

The rough texture scraped against my knuckles, but I barely noticed as Hugh claimed my mouth in a bruising kiss while positioning himself at my entrance, teasing it with a gentle pressure that had me gasping against his lips.

My breath hitched when he finally pushed inside.

The slight pain gave way to indescribable fullness.

He pressed his forehead against mine and began to move, slow and deliberate at first, letting me adjust to his size.

“Look at me,”

he demanded as his thrusts deepened.

His hands gripped my hips as he thrust inside, over and over, claiming me as his, while I wrapped my legs around him, drawing him deeper still.

“You’re mine,”

he said before capturing my mouth in a kiss that was almost brutal in its intensity.

“Say it.”

“I-I’m yours.”

I gasped as he growled in satisfaction and drove into me harder and faster, hitting a spot deep inside that made stars explode behind my eyelids.

With each thrust, more of Hugh's emotions bled into me.

His pleasure, his wonder... loneliness and fragile hope...

His vulnerability. I felt the real Hugh beneath the mask and realised why he might be afraid of someone with my gifts. He was a man capable of feeling deeply, despite his efforts to appear otherwise.

Hugh slipped a hand between our joined bodies, finding my most sensitive bud.

The dual sensation of him filling me deep inside while he worked magic with his fingers built a tension inside me that climbed higher and higher until it shattered in waves of pleasure that rippled through my entire being.

My eyes rolled back, and I cried out his name as my core clenched and pulsed around him.

The waves of release felt endless, and just when I thought I couldn't take any more, Hugh shifted the angle of his thrusts and hit another spot inside that triggered another, even more intense climax.

I clawed at his shoulders, my nails digging into the fine linen of his shirt.

Moments later, Hugh buried his face against my neck.

“Madison,”

he said, his voice guttural as his body shuddered and he spilled himself inside me.

The shadows in the conservatory pulsed and swirled with his release, responding to his intensity.

But instead of feeling frightened, I found myself breathless with awe at the power he commanded.

We remained locked together for several heartbeats, both of us struggling to catch our breath.

Hugh lifted his head and looked at me with wonder and tucked a strand of hair behind

my ear with a touch so tender that made my heart race anew.

He's using you.

Using his magic to seduce you.

The words cut through my haze of contentment like a knife.

I stiffened and glanced around every corner of the conservatory searching for the source of the voice, even though I knew I wouldn't find it.

“What is it? What's wrong?”

Hugh asked, his brow furrowing with concern.

He'll take what he wants and discard you.

Just as he did before.

“A-a voice,”

I whispered, but instantly regretted the admission.

Was this how it had started for Eleanora? Is this what he did to her?

Hugh's expression darkened.

He stepped back and adjusted his clothing with sharp, efficient movements.

“What are you hearing?” he asked.

I slipped from the planter and gathered my dress, pulling it on to cover my exposed skin.

My hands shook as I fumbled with the buttons.

“Whispers,”

I said while watching his face carefully.

“They say terrible things... about you.”

Hugh's eyes widened, and his gaze darted around the room.

The reaction told me everything I needed to know.

“You hear them too,” I said.

“No.”

The lie came too quickly, too forcefully.

My anger flared, hot and bright.

The intimacy we had shared moments ago felt like a distant memory, tainted by his refusal to trust me with the truth.

“I should go,”

I said again, and this time I meant it.

He never wanted you.

You're nothing to him but a vessel.

I gathered what remained of my dignity and walked toward the door, forcing myself not to look back despite the pull I felt toward Hugh.

It took far too many steps to reach the doorway, and with each one, the whispers grew louder.

“The fern,”

I paused without turning.

“It needs less water, not more.

Olivia has been drowning it.”

I wasn't sure what made me offer the advice, but perhaps one small part of me needed him to know that at least one thing I'd perceived was real.

As soon as I was out of sight, I leaned against the corridor wall and pressed my hand to my mouth to stifle a sob.

My body still hummed with the memory of pleasure, but my mind reeled with confusion and fear.

The ring on my finger pulsed cold and heavy, a reminder of the shackles that bound me to a man I might never understand.

Control your...

The familiar mantra stalled in my thoughts.

There had been nothing proper about what had just happened, and my emotions refused to be contained.

And as I made my way back to my chambers, I wondered if this was how Eleanora's madness had begun.

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Hugh

Four days of avoiding Madison had done nothing to diminish the hunger that clawed at my restraint.

If anything, the forced separation had sharpened my desire to a razor's edge that threatened to cut through every carefully constructed barrier I'd built around my emotions.

I stood at my study window, watching her move through the gardens like some figure from a painting.

Morning light transformed her auburn hair into burnished copper as she knelt beside a patch of foxgloves.

Even from this distance, I saw how the flowers straightened at her approach, how they bloomed brighter beneath her touch.

The sight should have alarmed me.

Instead, it sent heat coursing through my veins as I remembered the touch of those same magical hands trailing down my spine.

My breath fogged the window as I allowed myself to imagine crossing the gardens and lifting her in my arms before carrying her to the nearest secluded corner and claiming those lips again, tasting the sweetness of her lips, and feeling her writhe against me in pleasure.

She's enchanting them.

Bending them to her will, just as she bends you.

I growled, pressed my fingers against my temple, and willed the voice to be silent.

The whispers had grown stronger with each passing day.

Their insidious suggestions wormed deeper into my thoughts.

But they paled against the memory of Madison's body moving against mine, her lips parting in a gasp as I buried myself deep inside.

Unaware of my watching, Madison rose with fluid grace, and brushed soil from her hands with the same delicate precision she brought to every gesture.

She'd taken to spending mornings among the flowers and afternoons buried in the library's ancient texts.

But she always avoided the conservatory where we'd surrendered to desire.

Even across the distance, I felt drawn to her.

One glance, one touch.

That's all it would take to shatter my resolve and have me pressing her against the nearest wall.

Logic dictated I should send her away, create distance before this madness consumed us both.

But I found myself utterly incapable of such rational action.

I craved her presence with the desperation of a man dying of thirst, hungered for her touch despite knowing the danger it represented.

She's not what she seems.

The words slithered into my mind like a snake.

I shook my head, trying to banish them.

I hadn't believed Eleanor when she'd heard voices, but Madison... me.

I shook my head again and turned away from the window just as a knock sounded at the door.

Benjamin entered with correspondence; his weathered face creased with the sort of concern that came from decades of faithful service.

"Your morning post, my lord,"

he said, setting the tray on my desk.

"Cook was wondering...

that is, she's noticed your meals being taken here rather than the dining room these past days."

"The meals are perfectly adequate, Benjamin."

I gestured toward the correspondence.

“Has Lady Trent taken breakfast?”

“Indeed, my lord.

She requested a tray in her chambers before going to the gardens.”

Benjamin hesitated, clearly wanting to say more.

“That will be all,” I said.

He bowed and retreated, but not before I caught the worry that flickered across his features.

It would be hard for even casual servants not to notice the shadows that gathered around me without conscious summons, the way darkness pooled in corners when my emotions slipped their leash.

She avoids you.

She fears what you are.

“I avoid her.”

I clenched my fists, slammed them on the table, and felt the shadows shifting in response.

“We avoid each other,”

I added while trying to reign in my emotions.

But then I cursed for responding to the voice out loud.

The morning's correspondence lay untouched while I paced the length of my study.

There were estate matters that demanded attention, crop reports, and tenant agreements.

I kept returning to them, but every time I tried, they blurred into meaningless columns of figures.

Every scratch of pen on paper reminded me of Madison's nails digging into my shoulders, every rustling page echoed the whisper of silk sliding from her skin.

I was losing my mind.

The thought struck crystal clear as I slammed the ledgers shut and resumed my pacing.

This was how it had begun for Eleanor.

The voices, the paranoia, the inability to distinguish between reality and the poisonous suggestions that whispered through her thoughts.

Movement in the gardens caught my attention as Madison returned to the house, her arms laden with cut flowers that should have been wilting in the morning heat.

Instead, they appeared more vibrant than when she'd first gathered them, as if her very presence sustained their life force.

She will destroy you.

“Enough.”

I slammed my fist against the desk again, sending shadows fleeing to the room's

corners like startled ravens.

I needed answers.

The not-knowing was driving me toward the same precipice that had claimed Eleanor, and I refused to tumble blindly into madness without understanding what forces arrayed themselves against my sanity.

Olivia.

She'd served this family for forty years.

Longer than anyone else. She'd been present during Eleanor's decline. If anyone possessed knowledge of what I faced, it would be her.

I found her in the linen closet, folding sheets with the skilled precision she brought to all her tasks.

The small space felt suffocating as I entered.

It pressed close around us, feeling almost like a confessional.

"My lord,"

she said, looking genuinely startled to find me in the servants' quarters.

"How may I serve you?"

"You were close to Eleanor,"

I said, noting how her expression immediately softened.

“Yes, my lord.”

“The whispers she claimed to hear.

The visions that tormented her.

What did you make of them?”

Olivia's hands stilled on the white linen.

Her sharp eyes studied my face with uncomfortable intensity, no doubt cataloguing the signs of strain and worrying about my sanity.

“I'm not certain I understand your meaning, my lord.”

The careful neutrality in her voice told me she understood perfectly.

“Please, Olivia.

I need the truth of what you witnessed.”

The admission caught in my throat like barbed wire.

“The voices... I hear them now as well.”

Her face went pale, and she set down the sheet with deliberate care.

“Just like your mother, then.”

“My mother?”

The words circled my mind, but I found no comprehension in them.

“What do you mean? She died bringing me into the world—”

“No, my lord.”

Olivia's interruption was gentle but firm.

“I'm sorry, but that wasn't the truth.

Your mother lived for almost a year after your birth.”

The linen closet spun around me.

I gripped the doorframe to keep from falling.

My whole life had been a lie. “What are you saying?”

“Lady Catherine began hearing voices within days of your birth.

At first, we attributed it to exhaustion from the birthing, the strain of new motherhood.

But they grew stronger, more insistent.”

Olivia's voice dropped to barely a whisper.

“She claimed they showed her visions of betrayal, that your father plotted her destruction.”

“What happened to her?”

I asked, my mouth as dry as dust.

“Your father feared she might harm you, my lord.

Or herself.

He sent her away to a private sanatorium where he believed she would receive proper care.”

Tears glistened in Olivia's eyes.

“She died not long after.

Her heart simply... gave out. Your father didn't want to speak of it, so he told everyone that she died in childbirth.”

I shook my head.

My mind reeled with the revelation.

The pattern was there, clear as script written in blood. My mother, driven mad by voices. Eleanor, tormented by whispers until she took her own life. And now me, hearing the same accusations, the same poisonous suggestions.

“Thank you for your honesty,”

I said, though the words felt woefully inadequate.

“My lord—”

Olivia reached toward me as if to offer comfort, but I was already turning away,

fleeing the suffocating confines of truth.

Madness came for the members of this household... and now it came for me.

The corridors stretched endlessly before me as I walked without thought of my direction.

Ancient stones pressed closer with each step.

Shadows gathered in my wake like living things drawn to my despair.

Madison sees your weakness.

She uses it against you.

I found myself outside the library doors, watching Madison through the crack between door and frame.

She sat at one of the long tables, her head bent over an ancient text.

A tendril of hair had escaped its pins to curve along her cheek. Despite everything, the sight of her sent longing coursing through me. I imagined striding into the library and brushing the silken strand back before sweeping the books aside and taking her on the table. Instead, I clenched my fist and felt the weight of my ring, cold and heavy against my skin, even as my blood ran hot with need.

Madison was beautiful.

Intelligent.

Passionate. Everything I had never dared hope for in a wife. And she possessed

powers that defied natural law.

She stiffened and lifted her head as if sensing my presence.

But her eyes didn't turn toward the door.

Instead, they widened as they focused on a point across the room.

“Who are you?”

she asked as she rose to her feet.

The air shimmered like heat rising from sun-baked stones.

A woman appeared.

She had silver-white hair that caught non-existent light, and a face unmarked by age despite eyes that held centuries of sorrow.

Madison reached toward the apparition, and when their hands touched, the library filled with a pulse of energy that made the shadows writhe like living smoke.

Then the vision was gone, leaving Madison staring at her outstretched hand in bewilderment.

She's using dark magic against you.

Communing with spirits to bring you down.

Terror and fascination warred inside me.

I stepped back from the door, my heart racing.

What I had witnessed defied rational explanation, yet I could no longer dismiss such things as products of a diseased mind. I glanced back at Madison only to see her sitting at the table with her head in a book.

I shook my head and tried to clear my thoughts while returning to my study.

Had Madison communed with a spirit or was it a vision sent to taunt me? Was this the madness Eleanor and my mother faced? Am I truly mad or is my wife conspiring against me?

The rest of the day passed in a blur, but by evening, I'd reached a decision that would have horrified me mere days ago.

I would go to Madison first thing tomorrow morning.

I would demand the truth about her powers, about the voices, and about whatever dark forces swirled around us. If I was to lose my sanity as my mother and Eleanor had lost theirs, I wanted to at least understand why.

The corridors were silent and dim as I made my way toward the kitchens, drawn by the hunger that built in my belly.

Most of the staff would be abed, leaving me alone with my tormented thoughts.

But when I neared the kitchen, I heard the distinct murmur of voices, and knew with a certainty that one of them was Madison's.

“Let me see,”

she said.

“That looks painful.

How did you manage it?”

I pressed myself against the stone wall and peered around the corner.

Margaret, one of the younger kitchen maids, stood with her hand extended toward Madison.

Even from my hidden position, I saw the angry red burn that crossed her palm.

Madison took the girl's injured hand between her own.

They stood in the flickering firelight, and the impossible happened... again.

A soft glow emerged from Madison's hands, warm and golden like captured sunlight.

It pulsed with the rhythm of a heartbeat, growing brighter until both women gasped in wonder.

When the light faded, and Madison released Margaret's hand, the burn was gone. As if it had never existed.

“My lady, how...”

“I-I don't know.”

Madison stepped back, and I caught the flicker of fear that crossed her features.

“I simply wanted to help.

Please, tell no one of this.”

“Of course not, my lady.”

Margaret curtsied deeply.

“My great-grandmother possessed the healing touch.

I know to guard such secrets well.”

Madison's posture relaxed slightly at her words.

“Thank you,”

she said.

“You should rest your hand anyway, just to be safe.”

She's growing stronger.

Her powers will consume you.

Ignoring the hunger growing in my belly, I retreated back into the shadows as my mind reeled.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:23 am

Madison

I woke up with a start, my head pounding and my heart thundering.

Light filtered through a crack in the curtains, painting pale stripes across the wooden floor.

I lay perfectly still, trying to push away the fragments of my dream that clung like cobwebs to my consciousness. But flashes of Hugh's hands on my skin and his lips against mine refused to fade.

It had been five days since we'd been together in the conservatory.

Since that time, I'd refused to join him in our shared chambers and instead slept in the room I'd been allocated when I'd first arrived at Trent Manor.

But my body still hummed with the memory of our encounter. The heat of his mouth against my breasts, the delicious pressure of him moving inside me... the mingling of our emotions that had made me realise how completely I was his.

Until I wasn't.

I sat up and traced the cold band of my wedding ring.

That same hand had healed Margaret's burn the night before.

I think that the sight of her perfectly healed skin had shocked me more than it had

shocked her.

“You're blessed with the healer's gift,”

she'd said, her voice filled with wonder and gratitude.

It felt strange to think of my abilities as a gift.

Aunt Elizabeth had always made me hide them, insisting they were dangerous, shameful.

I'd believed them a curse for so long. But perhaps I'd been wrong. I'd never healed anyone before last night, but with that gift, how many people could I help? The thought gave me a flicker of purpose I'd never felt before.

It played through my mind as I rose from the bed and dressed in a simple morning gown of pale blue cotton.

Not long after, a knock sounded at the door.

“Enter,”

I said, knowing it would be Olivia with my morning tea and toast.

“Good morning, my lady.”

She set the tray on the small table near the window; her movements precise as always.

Steam rose from the teapot, carrying the familiar scent of chamomile that reminded me of home.

“Thank you.”

I smiled and poured myself a cup of tea while Olivia drifted around the room, straightening things that hardly needed straightening.

Her hands smoothed coverlets and adjusted curtains that hung in perfect folds.

Olivia was normally such a confident and strong presence.

She always took pride in her work, carrying herself with the dignity of someone who knew her worth.

But this morning, that pride was tinged with worry, and beneath that, a resignation that weighed heavy in the air.

Her subtle emotions were far more distinct than anything I'd sensed before.

Since my time with Hugh in the conservatory, I'd noticed a sharpening of my senses.

Between this and the healing of Margaret... I sipped my tea and pondered these new developments.

Had my time with Hugh, our physical bonding, heightened my abilities? Or had they started to grow the moment I'd entered the manor?

I sighed and sipped at my tea, relishing the mild floral taste with notes of pear and apple.

Perhaps I'd simply started paying attention to them, and they were naturally evolving like a flower opening to sunlight.

I ate my light breakfast while remaining conscious of Olivia's emotional state as she busied herself around me.

Her worry pressed against my awareness, like fingers probing a tender wound.

I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but felt certain she wouldn't answer. In the end, I focused on seeing if I could block out her feelings as well as let them flow in. I could. But the effort left me exhausted and caused my temples to throb.

“Will you walk in the gardens this morning, my lady?”

she asked, her voice carefully neutral.

“The weather appears rather temperamental.”

I glanced out the window and noted the darkening clouds that hung low and threatening over the estate.

The air itself felt heavy with the promise of rain.

“I think I'll head straight to the library today,”

I said, setting down my teacup with a gentle clink.

It would be a shame not to spend time outdoors, but it looked as though a storm was brewing, and I had questions that demanded answers.

The library might offer books on healers and their powers, something to help me understand what was happening to me.

After breakfast, I made my way through the empty corridors to the library.

But my steps faltered when a wave of emotion washed over me as I took a shortcut through the great hall.

I glanced around, expecting to see a member of the household staff, but I was alone beneath the soaring ceiling.

Echoes of joy and triumph crashed over me, followed immediately by waves of sorrow and despair.

They came from the room itself, from stones that had absorbed centuries of human feeling.

I steadied myself against the wall, gasping as image after image flashed through my mind like pages turning in a book.

I saw a grand ball with ladies dressed in colourful gowns, their silk skirts rustling as they moved in perfect formation across the polished floor.

A young boy's laughter echoed through the space as he raced between marble pillars, his small feet pattering on stone while his nurse called after him in fond exasperation.

Then came the sorrowful gathering of a funeral procession, mourners dressed in deepest black while rain drummed against the windows.

My heart raced at these memories, at the history embedded in the walls around me.

Feeling a more urgent need for answers, I quickened my pace and hurried from the great hall to the library.

Dark clouds circled overhead like vultures, and the first drops of rain pattered against diamond-paned windows as I entered.

The library never failed to take my breath away.

Towering shelves stretched from floor to a vaulted ceiling, painted with constellations from the night sky.

The rich scent of aged leather and parchment, mixed with the fragrant beeswax from the candles and lanterns. The rain, drumming against the window, added a magical touch that made the room feel like it was cocooned away from the outside world... a place where I could sit and lose myself for hours, and I'd spent countless numbers of them here since I'd arrived.

I turned to the shelves containing magical texts and scanned the titles with growing excitement.

Some bore titles in languages I didn't understand, others were decorated with intricate symbols.

So many displayed familiar words in elegant script, their bindings worn smooth by the touch of generation, hands seeking, just as mine did now.

The Quiet Gift: An Intuitive Guide to Power caught my attention immediately.

I was about to pull it from the shelf when I felt a pull from another part of the library.

Not the aggressive compulsion I'd felt in the great hall, more like a whisper of curiosity that drew me like a moth to flame.

The floorboards creaked softly beneath my feet as I moved instantly towards the sensation, and ran my fingers along the spines of ancient leather-bound texts, hoping I'd find whatever called to me.

Mistfall Abbey: The Complete History, Trent Family Chronicles... The Cursed King.

My hand froze on the slim volume tucked between the two larger tomes.

Its binding was old, but the book remained as perfect as the day it was printed, as if it had never been read by human eyes.

The leather was supple beneath my fingertips, unmarked by time or wear. I pulled it from the shelf, noting the gold embossing on the cover that seemed to shimmer in the grey light.

“The Cursed King,”

I read the title aloud, my voice barely above a whisper.

“By Queen Charlotte of Trimortha.”

The name was ancient but familiar.

Everyone knew the romantic fairy tale of how Queen Charlotte had married King Astor and saved him from madness through the power of true love.

But I'd never seen a book purported to have been written by the Queen herself. The story we all knew was sweet and touching, a version told to children alongside Beauty and the Beast and tales from the Pentamerone, like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. This looked different. More serious... more real.

I moved to the long table by the window where I liked to study and watch the birds as they hopped between the branches of the great oak.

Rain streaked the glass now, creating rivulets that distorted the view of the gardens

beyond.

I ran my fingers over the gleaming embossing before carefully opening the book.

The front page declared it as being written over two hundred and fifty years ago, but the ink was still dark against cream-coloured paper that should have yellowed with age.

“A True Account of the Curse Upon King Astor,”

I read aloud before continuing in my head.

When I arrived at Castle Ragmore, I believed I was marrying a man broken by grief and responsibility.

Whispers called him the Cursed King.

I thought them to be cruel gossip about his affliction. I was wrong.

I sat back in my chair, immediately entranced by Charlotte's forthright tone.

Her account was remarkable, written with the precision of a scholar rather than the flowery language I'd expected from royal correspondence.

She described the king as being trapped in 'a prison of the mind, a crumbling tower where Astor's true self was conscious and aware, watching helplessly as his body moved without his will.' She claimed it was a curse, brought on by the crown placed upon his head during his coronation.

A shiver ran down my spine as I read, my eyes glued to each word.

Charlotte recounted visions of a woman with silver-white hair, a face untouched by age, and eyes that carried the weight of the world...

The silver-haired woman.

My mind flashed back to my first day at the manor.

I'd seen her in my chambers, hadn't I? She'd smiled at me and whispered my name before vanishing like morning mist. How could I have forgotten such a vivid encounter?

I kept reading, desperate to know more.

Charlotte had researched the origins of the crown with the thoroughness of a historian, tracing it back to Ravina, a Witch-Queen who'd ruled from Castle Brennus in the ancient province of Emmadra.

Both names were lost to modern memory, forgotten by time, but Charlotte detailed them as being in the Northern Realm, which I recognised as the old name for the place we now called Noram.

Charlotte had found a legend that spoke of Ravina's downfall at the hands of a single man where armies had failed.

Through her visions, she discovered that Ravina had been murdered by Daruis, a man she loved and trusted above all others.

The curse had been born from that ultimate betrayal, designed around the expectation that love would always lead to destruction.

My hands trembled as I turned the pages, drinking in every word.

The parallels to my own situation were impossible to ignore.

A cursed ruler, whispers of madness, a wife trying to understand the supernatural forces arrayed against her marriage.

At the end of her account, Charlotte had written a warning that made my blood run cold.

I do not know if other artefacts exist or what forms they might take, but I fear some may be out there, carrying curses designed to test and corrupt those who encounter them.

To those who may face such darkness, remember that curses born from betrayal can only be broken by the opposite. Love.

I stared at the ring on my finger, always cold, always heavy against my skin.

The gold band that had felt wrong from the moment Hugh had slipped it onto my finger during our wedding ceremony.

Did it carry with it the weight of another curse? Were Hugh and I trapped in the same web that ensnared Astor and Charlotte centuries before?

Thunder crashed overhead, making me jump, as the storm had arrived in earnest.

Rain lashed against the windows with increasing fury.

But I paid no heed to the weather. My mind was too absorbed by the possibility that my marriage was doomed before it had even begun.

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Hugh

Thunder had been building all afternoon, each rumble closer than the last.

The ancient oak outside the library groaned with each gust of wind, its massive trunk swaying in a way that made my stomach churn.

I'd noticed its lean toward the manor during my morning inspection of the grounds. Centuries of storms had weakened its roots, and today's tempest might prove the final test.

Lightning split the darkening sky over the north wing.

Over the library... The library!

“Madison.”

Her name escaped my lips before conscious thought formed, and concern overrode every resolution I'd made to maintain distance between us.

I strode through corridors that flickered with each lightning flash.

Oil lamps danced in their sconces as draughts found their way through stone joints worn smooth by time.

Timbers creaked with anticipation, making the manor itself feel restless. When I reached the library doors, I spotted Madison sitting at her usual table, completely

absorbed in reading.

Her head snapped up as I entered.

“Hugh.

I didn't expect—”

Thunder cracked directly overhead, followed by a flash of lightning so brilliant it turned the world white.

Then came the sound I'd been dreading all day.

There came a deep groan of wood surrendering to wind, and a sharp crack of roots tearing free from the earth.

The massive oak tilted toward us with inexorable weight.

Madison cried out, throwing her arms over her head as the ancient tree crashed through the window.

Glass exploded inward like deadly rain.

I lunged forward, seizing her around the waist and pulling her away from the table just as a branch thick as a man's torso smashed down where she'd been sitting. Books scattered across the floor, some older than the manor itself, but my every thought was focused on the woman trembling in my arms.

“Are you hurt?”

I ran my hands over her shoulders and arms, checking for injuries.

“I’m unharmed.”

Madison’s voice shook despite her words.

She glanced toward the doorway, where fallen branches and part of the trunk blocked our exit completely.

“Though it appears we’re trapped.”

“The groundsmen will clear it once the storm passes.”

I surveyed the damage, calculating our options.

No other trees stood close enough to pose further threat, and the remaining structure looked sound.

“We should be safe enough until then, though I fear I cannot offer proper refreshments.”

A smile ghosted her lips; the first genuine expression I’d seen from her in days.

“Under the circumstances, I believe propriety allows for certain compromises.”

We worked together to salvage what we could, moving books away from the broken window and gathering scattered papers.

Rain sprayed through the gap, carrying the scent of wet earth and lightning-charged air.

Madison rescued a slim volume from the wreckage of her table, clutching it protectively despite my suggestion that she leave it.

When the immediate danger had passed and our work rescuing the books was complete, an uncomfortable silence stretched between us.

Thunder continued its relentless assault outside, punctuated by the steady drumming of rain against stone.

“I owe you an apology,”

Madison said as she smoothed down her skirts.

“I've been avoiding you these past days.”

“You've nothing to apologise for,”

I said, meaning it.

“I've been equally distant.”

“Why?”

The simple question hung heavy in the air between us.

How could I explain the voices that whispered poison in my mind? How could I admit that I feared my own desires almost as much as I craved her touch?

“I think...”

Madison stepped closer, close enough that I caught her scent of lavender beneath the storm's wild ozone.

“I think we need to discuss what's happening to us.”

She held up the book she'd rescued.

“This was written by Queen Charlotte of Trimortha.

It tells the true story of her marriage to King Astor.”

I frowned, uncertain where this conversation led.

“Romantic tales hardly address our current circumstances.”

“This isn't romance, it's history.”

Madison's eyes blazed with conviction.

“Charlotte describes a curse created by Ravina.

A Witch-Queen betrayed by someone she loved. The curse was designed to poison love itself, to turn it into an instrument of destruction.”

She reached for my left hand with hers, pulling both up between us until our wedding rings caught the lamplight.

“Astor's curse lived in his crown.

I believe our curse lives in these.”

I studied my ring, that cold, heavy band I'd always despised.

The weight of it felt more oppressive than ever.

“You truly believe we're cursed?”

“Charlotte described Ravina as having silver-white hair and an ageless face—”

“With ancient eyes,” I added.

Madison's grip tightened on my hand.

“You've seen her.”

“Once.

Yesterday, when you were speaking with her in this very room.” =

Her brow furrowed.

“I didn't see her yesterday.

The vision came on my first night here, in my chambers.”

I watched her face carefully, searching for signs of deception or madness, but found none.

“Then my own perception betrays me,”

I said, pulling my hand free, and raking fingers through my hair.

“Your healing of Margaret was likely another figment of my imagination.”

“No.”

Madison caught my hand again, her touch warm against the chill spreading through my veins.

“That was real.”

She plots against you.

I forced the whisper away, focusing instead on Madison's earnest expression.

Every instinct screamed that I should trust her, that I should believe in this impossible explanation she offered.

But accepting her theory meant abandoning the rational world I'd always inhabited.

“I want to believe you.”

The admission cost me more than I'd expected.

“A curse would at least provide hope for a solution.

But there's history you need to understand.”

I paused, taking a deep breath in the hope that it would steady my nerves.

“My mother didn't die in childbirth, as I was told.

She was sent away after my birth, driven mad by voices only she could hear. Just as Eleanor was. Just as I may be.”

Madison's arms slipped around my waist without hesitation.

“Don't you see? The rings, the curse... that's why they heard voices.

Ravina's voice. It whispers poison designed to destroy love before it can fully

bloom.”

She cupped my cheek with one hand, and her eyes flickered to the shadows building in the corner.

“Show me your magic,”

she said.

“Let me see all of you.”

I hesitated.

The darkness had always been mine to control, a private power that marked me as different, dangerous.

But sincerity shone in Madison's eyes, as fierce and unwavering as the storm outside.

I reached for the shadows, guiding them as they pooled around our feet and climbed the walls like living smoke.

They responded to my will, beautiful and terrible in their fluid grace.

Madison gasped, but a smile lit up her face.

“They're magnificent.”

She lifted her hand, and golden light bloomed from her palm, warm where my shadows were cool, bright where mine were dark.

“We've been afraid, but that's what the curse wants.

Separately, we're incomplete. Together, we're both light and dark... we're balanced."

The truth of her words resonated through me.

Unable to resist any longer, I framed her face between my hands and kissed her with a tenderness that felt like coming home.

No desperate hunger consumed my actions this time, no fear of losing control. Just the absolute certainty that this was where I belonged.

Madison melted against me, her arms winding around my neck as she deepened the kiss.

I lifted her, spinning us both in a slow circle before setting her on the nearest intact table.

My hands moved to the fastenings of her gown, slow and careful rather than hurried urgency. Each button revealed more of her olive skin, each inch a territory to be worshipped rather than conquered.

"You're extraordinary."

I traced the delicate line of her collarbone with my lips, marvelling at the way her pulse fluttered beneath my touch.

Madison trailed her hands down my bare chest, exploring the hard planes as if committing them to memory.

Her lips parted as I captured her mouth again, tasting the sweetness, I'd been craving for days.

“I want to know every part of you,”

I said.

“Every place that makes you tremble, every touch that will make you mine.”

“I already am yours.”

I grumbled, the sound as deep and low as the thunder, before lavishing her breasts with attention, sucking and nipping until her head fell back.

The soft sounds she made drove me to distraction.

Trailing my lips lower, I mapped the curve of her waist and hips. She trembled with need when I finally settled between her thighs.

“Tell me what you want.”

I settled between her thighs, breathing in her intoxicating scent before flicking my tongue across her most sensitive flesh.

She was so deliciously wet for me, and the taste... It was the sweetest nectar.

She was honey and silk and everything I'd ever craved. “Tell me what you want,”

I said again as her fingers tangled in my hair.

“Just... you.

Only you.”

I licked slowly at first, teasing her entrance and bud with my tongue.

When she pushed against me, seeking more, I held her steady, drawing out each sensation until she writhed beneath my touch.

“Please,”

she said, breathless.

“I-I can’t.”

I added my fingers to the symphony I played across her body, trailing my hand up her thighs and sucking on her delicious bud before plunging my fingers inside.

“H-Hugh!”

she gasped as I plunged them in and out.

Rubbing her bud with my thumb, I lifted my head again and sucked her tight nipple into my mouth.

Her climax broke over her like a wave, and I felt the echo of it through whatever bond had formed between us.

But before she could fully recover, I positioned myself at her entrance.

“Look at me.”

I needed to see her face, needed to witness the moment we became truly one.

“I need to see you.”

Madison's eyes locked with mine as I pushed inside her welcoming heat.

The connection between us flared like lightning.

We were one, and for the first time in my life, I understood what it meant to be complete.

“I love you.”

The words emerged as natural as breathing.

“I love you too.”

Madison wrapped her legs around me, drawing me deeper.

Shadows and light danced around us, as we moved together, steady and slow, our magic intertwining as intimately as our bodies.

Every thrust drew soft cries from her lips, every kiss she pressed to my throat sent fire racing through my veins.

Madison's name tore from my throat as pleasure crashed over me in waves, and release came, claiming us both.

I collapsed against her, pulling her close as our hearts gradually slowed to match each other's rhythm.

“That was—”

“Perfect,”

I finished, stroking her hair as contentment settled over us like a warm blanket.

She lifted her head and smiled at me.

In her gaze, there was no fear, no regret.

Only love. The storm outside still railed, but for the first time in a long time, I felt at peace. Here, in this damaged library with Madison in my arms, I'd found something worth fighting for.

She'll destroy everything you've built.

“The voice still whispers,”

I admitted, though its power had diminished considerably.

“I hear it too.

But I'm learning not to listen.”

Madison pressed a kiss to my chest, directly over my heart.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:23 am

Madison

Dawn filtered through the heavy curtains of Hugh's chamber... of our shared chamber, painting golden stripes across the mahogany floorboards.

I stirred against the warmth of his chest, breathing in the intoxicating scent of cedar and winter air that clung to his skin.

My body still hummed with the memory of our night together after the groundsmen had freed us from the library. The way Hugh had worshipped every inch of my body with reverent touches, the whispers of love he'd pressed against my throat between kisses that left me breathless and begging for more.

His arm tightened around my waist, pulling me closer against the solid heat of him.

Even in sleep, he'd trailed his fingers in patterns across the bare skin of my shoulder, sending shivers racing down my spine.

The ring on my finger pulsed cold against his warm flesh, a stark reminder that our newfound happiness existed alongside the curse that threatened to tear us apart.

I pressed my lips to the hollow of his throat, before settling back into the cocoon of his embrace.

Relaxed and sated, sleep reclaimed me with surprising ease.

But peace proved fleeting...

The vision struck without warning, dragging me from contentment into a world painted in shades of crimson and shadow.

I stood in the very chamber where Hugh and I now lay, but the walls wept blood that pooled on ancient stones.

Eleanor knelt before the fireplace, her hair matted with gore, while Hugh loomed above her, his hands stained scarlet.

“Please,”

she whispered, her voice breaking on the word.

“I love you.

I've always loved you.”

Hugh's laugh was cold, devoid of any of the warmth I'd heard in his voice.

“Love? You call your pathetic clinging love?”

His fingers closed around her throat.

“You mean nothing to me.”

Eleanor's eyes widened with terror and betrayal.

“Hugh, please.

The baby—”

“There is no baby.”

His grip tightened until her words became strangled gasps.

“There never was.

Only your delusions and my growing disgust.”

I tried to scream, to move, to do anything to stop the horror unfolding before me.

But I remained frozen, forced to watch as Eleanor's struggles grew weaker, and as the light faded from her terrified gaze.

He'll kill you.

Just as he killed her.

The vision shattered like glass, leaving me gasping and clawing at the bedsheets.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, and my heart thundered.

Hugh's arm still encircled my waist. His breaths were measured and deep with sleep, but the contrast between the tender man beside me and the monster from my dream left me reeling.

Not a dream, I realised with growing dread.

A vision.

Sent by the curse to poison my thoughts against him.

The realisation should have brought comfort, but another image crashed over me before I could steady myself.

This time I watched Hugh standing over my own prone form, his hands dripping with my blood while he smiled with satisfied cruelty.

“Too trusting,”

he murmured to my corpse.

“Too willing to believe in fairy tales.”

My stomach lurched.

I pressed my hand to my mouth to stifle the sob that threatened to escape.

The visions felt so real, so vivid. I tasted the metallic tang of blood on my tongue and felt the phantom pain of a dagger plunged through my heart.

But as the terror receded, I noticed the edges of the vision blurring.

They became less distinct.

There was a quality to the emotions in these scenes that felt... wrong. Artificial.

I closed my eyes and reached deeper, calling on my abilities.

I could read people's emotions through their carefully constructed facades.

I knew how they felt... how they worked. The emotions in the visions were too sharp. It was as if they'd been crafted to inspire fear. Real emotions possess texture,

nuance... contradictions. These felt hollow, like echoes of feelings rather than the feelings themselves.

Hugh stirred beside me.

I watched his face in the growing light and noted the peaceful expression that softened his strong features.

His lips curved in the barest suggestion of a smile, and warmth radiated from him in waves.

This was real.

This was true.

Not the manufactured horrors the curse fed into my mind.

“Madison?”

His voice carried the rough texture of sleep, intimate and warm.

“What’s wrong? You feel tense.”

“A nightmare,”

I said, though the word felt inadequate for what I’d experienced.

“The curse grows stronger.”

Hugh's eyes sharpened and he sat up in bed, immediately alert.

“What did you see?”

he asked as he shifted to face me and cupped his hand to my cheek.

“You.”

The word emerged as barely a whisper.

“Killing Eleanor.

Killing me.”

I shook my head.

“But Hugh... I could sense the falseness in it.

The emotions were wrong. They were hollow.”

He traced his thumb across my cheekbone and over my bottom lip.

“You're learning to see through the deception.”

“I think so.”

I caught his hand and pressed it more firmly against my face, drawing strength from the solid reality of his touch.

“The curse wants us to doubt each other, to let fear poison what we've found.

But I won't let it succeed.”

Despite the lingering shadows of the vision, Hugh's eyes darkened with desire.

“What did I ever do to deserve you, my brave, brilliant wife.”

He leaned in closer, his breath warm against my lips.

I kissed him, pouring all my love and determination into the connection between our lips.

He responded with hungry intensity, his hands tangling in my hair as he pulled me closer.

The taste of him banished the last traces of the vision's poison.

“I need to understand more about Ravina,”

I said, my voice husky from our kiss when we finally broke apart.

“About how the curse was created.

There must be clues in Charlotte's account that I missed.”

“We should study it together.

But first...”

His hand roamed lower, trailing a path up my inner thigh.

“I want to remind you of what's real.

What's true between us.”

I melted into his embrace, ready to lose myself.

But before our lips could meet again, a sharp knock echoed through the chamber, making me jump for the bed and straighten my nightgown.

“Lord Trent!”

Olivia's voice carried unusual urgency.

“Lady Elizabeth Walker has arrived.

She insists on seeing Lady Madison immediately.”

My blood chilled.

Aunt Elizabeth's unexpected arrival could only mean trouble.

I cursed the letter I'd sent her after my encounter with Hugh in the conservatory. At the time, I'd been filled with confused emotions. I'd mentioned the strange voices, the unsettling atmosphere of the manor, my fears about following in Eleanor's footsteps. At the time, writing had felt like a lifeline. Now I realised how my words might have sounded to someone unaware of the supernatural forces at work.

“I'll speak with her,”

Hugh said, already moving to rise from the bed.

“No.

She came for me.

I need to face this.”

We dressed quickly.

Hugh's jaw tightened as he fastened his waistcoat, and I felt waves of protective anger radiating from him.

The shadows stirred restlessly in response to his emotions, darker and more agitated than usual.

“I know she blames me for what happened to Eleanor,”

he said, his voice carefully controlled.

“Everyone does.

She'll try to convince you to leave.”

“Then I'll convince her otherwise.”

I smoothed my skirts and checked my reflection in the mirror, ensuring I looked composed despite the turmoil in my chest.

“I won't let her take me from you.”

Hugh's expression softened, and he crossed to me in three quick strides.

His hands framed my face as he kissed me.

“I won't let anyone take you from me. I love you. Remember that, no matter what she says.”

“I love you too.

Nothing will change that.”

But even as I spoke the words, doubt crept through my mind like poison in a well.

Not doubt about my feelings for Hugh, but fear about what my aunt might reveal.

What if there were aspects of Eleanor's death I didn't know? What if Hugh's control wasn't as absolute as I believed?

He's hiding the truth of what happened.

I shook my head sharply, recognising the curse's whispers for what they were.

But the seeds of uncertainty had been planted.

It was hard not to let them take root despite my best efforts to remain strong.

We made our way through the corridors to the morning room, where Aunt Elizabeth waited.

She paced before the windows like a caged predator, her grey travelling dress wrinkled from the journey and her usually perfect coiffure showing signs of haste.

When she saw us enter, relief and accusation warred across her sharp features.

“Madison.”

She crossed to me immediately and gripped my shoulders as she searched my face.

“Thank heaven you're unharmed.

When I received your letter...”

She trailed off, her gaze shifting to Hugh with unconcealed hatred.

“Aunt Elizabeth.”

I managed a smile despite the growing tension in the room.

“I wasn't expecting you so soon.”

“Your letter spoke of voices, of feeling watched and threatened.

Of course I came immediately.”

Her grip tightened on my shoulders.

“My dear, you look pale.

Thinner than when I left you.”

“I'm perfectly well,”

I insisted, though her words sent a chill through me.

Did I truly look so changed? “The adjustment to married life has been...

intense, but I'm happy.”

Elizabeth's laugh held no humour.

“Happy? Child, your letter read like the ravings of someone on the brink of madness.

Just as poor Eleanor's must have.”

The name hung heavy in the air between us.

Hugh went rigid beside me, and I felt the temperature in the room drop several degrees as shadows gathered at his feet.

“You speak as though you knew her,”

I said carefully, watching my aunt's expression.

“I knew of her fate.

The entire court does.”

Elizabeth's voice carried the weight of long-held concerns.

“A young woman, barely twenty, who went from a vibrant social butterfly to a reclusive wretch within months of marriage.

The whispers spoke of madness, of a husband who showed no patience for his wife's declining state.”

“Court gossip is rarely accurate,”

Hugh said, his voice dangerously quiet.

“Gossip, perhaps.

But consistent enough to cause alarm.”

Elizabeth stepped protectively in front of me.

“They said she claimed to hear voices, to see things that weren't there.

She begged visitors for help and spoke of feeling trapped and being watched. Does that sound familiar, Madison?”

My heart clenched at the parallels she drew, but I forced myself to remain steady.

“There are explanations for what Eleanor experienced.

What I'm experiencing.”

“Are there? Or has he convinced you to accept his version of reality, just as he must have done with her?”

Elizabeth's voice gentled as she turned back to me.

“My dear, I've watched too many women disappear into marriages that consumed them.

I won't let it happen to you. You must come away with me. Now, before it's too late. I should never have allowed your father to agree to this union.”

“I'm not going anywhere.”

The words emerged stronger than I felt.

“Hugh isn't responsible for what happened to Eleanor.

We're both victims of forces beyond our control.”

“Forces?”

Elizabeth's eyebrows rose in disbelief.

“What forces could possibly—”

“A curse.”

I lifted my left hand, displaying the ring that had grown heavier with each passing day.

“Ancient magic designed to corrupt love, to turn it into an instrument of destruction.

Hugh and I are fighting it together.”

The silence that followed my declaration stretched as taut as a wire.

Elizabeth stared at me with the expression of someone watching a loved one succumb to fever dreams, while Hugh remained statue-still beside me.

“A curse,”

Elizabeth repeated slowly.

“Madison... Please, listen to yourself.

You're speaking of fairy tales, of impossible—”

“Nothing about this is impossible.”

I pulled away from her restraining hands, moved to Hugh's side, and drew comfort from his solid presence.

“I've witnessed magic with my own eyes.

I've felt it flowing through my veins. You, of all people, should know how real it is.”

“He's poisoned your mind,”

Elizabeth said, her face losing what little colour remained.

“Just as he did Eleanor's.

My dear girl, this is how madness begins. With elaborate explanations for inexplicable events, with seeing supernatural causes behind natural phenomena.”

Hugh's control finally snapped.

The shadows erupted from their corners.

The temperature plummeted. Frost formed on the windows as darkness coiled around him.

“Enough.”

His voice carried the weight of winter storms.

“You know nothing of what Eleanor suffered.

Nothing of what Madison and I face. Your ignorance doesn't grant you the right to poison her mind against me.”

Elizabeth stumbled backward, her eyes wide with terror as she watched the shadows dance at Hugh's command.

But her fear quickly transformed into grim satisfaction, as if he'd proven her point beyond doubt.

“There,”

she said.

“Do you see, Madison? The violence barely leashed beneath his civilised façade.

This is what Eleanor lived with. This is what drove her to take her own life.”

I watched the fight drain out of Hugh.

Doubt crept into his expression, and the shadows wavered.

“Perhaps...”

he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Perhaps she's right.

Perhaps there is no curse, and I am the monster you should fear.”

“No.”

I stepped between them, facing my aunt with all the authority I could muster.

“You're wrong about him.

About everything. Hugh would never hurt me.”

“Look at him, Madison.”

Elizabeth gestured toward Hugh.

He held his head in his hand as shadows writhed chaotically around the room.

“Look at what he becomes when challenged. Is this the behaviour of a rational man? A safe man?”

I did look at Hugh, really looked.

Beneath the supernatural darkness, beneath the barely controlled power, I saw his true emotions.

Fear. Self-loathing. But there was also love for me, warring with the fear that he might be the danger everyone claimed.

The shadows weren't expressions of violence or cruelty.

They were manifestations of a man afraid of his own nature, afraid of becoming the monster others expected him to be.

“He’s not dangerous,”

I said, but as the words left my mouth, Hugh’s eyes rolled backwards, and he collapsed on the floor in a swirling mass of darkness as the shadows rushed to claim him.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:23 am

Hugh

Darkness pressed against my consciousness like black tar, thick and suffocating.

I floated in a void where up and down held no meaning, where time stretched into endless moments of nothingness.

But then Madison appeared.

She stood before an ancient mirror, but the reflection that stared back at her wasn't her own.

It showed Ravina's silver-white hair and ageless face. Her cruel lips curved into a smile I had never seen on my wife's features.

"He trusts me completely,"

she said to her reflection, her voice carrying Ravina's musical cruelty.

"Just as I once trusted completely.

But in this life, I shall be the one to strike first. In this life, as Madison, I shall have my revenge."

The scene shifted, making my head swim.

Madison knelt beside my sleeping form, her hands glowing with her golden, healing

light.

But now the light looked malevolent, It seeped into my skin. My sleeping face contorted with madness as she smiled with satisfaction.

“Sleep, my love,”

she whispered.

“Dream of your own destruction.”

Another vision crashed over me.

Madison stood in my study.

My private papers scattered across the desk while she copied sensitive information into her own journal. Political correspondences, financial records, magical texts passed down through generations of Trent lords. All of it exposed to her calculating gaze.

I have been reborn.

I have come to finish what was started centuries ago.

The voice spoke with such conviction that I felt my sanity crack under its weight.

Every tender moment we had shared, every whispered declaration of love, every touch that had made me believe in redemption... It was all a lie.

Madison was Ravina.

They were one and the same.

Pain lanced through my skull as more images flashed through my mind.

Madison standing over Eleanor's body, her hands still glowing with that golden power.

Eleanor's face frozen in an expression of absolute terror, her mouth open in a silent scream that would echo through eternity.

“I needed to have you as my own,”

Madison said, making the vision dissolve into crushing despair.

I'd been such a fool.

Such a willing victim.

Madison's abilities, her knowledge of ancient curses, her convenient appearance at precisely the moment my family needed a political alliance. None of it was coincidence. She'd orchestrated every moment, every touch, every breathless confession of love.

I tried to scream, to rage against the bonds that held me in this nightmare realm, but my voice emerged as nothing more than a whisper lost in the void.

But then came a feeling of warmth... It touched the edges of my consciousness, carrying with it emotions as strong and sure as my own heartbeat.

I felt love.

Genuine, terrified love that called my name across the darkness.

Hugh.

Come back to me.

Please. The visions are lies. Learn to see through the deception.

Madison's voice reached me not through my ears but directly into my mind.

They were carried on waves of power that made my being sing with recognition.

This was truth... This was real.

The golden light grew stronger, burning away the poisonous visions like sunlight dissolving morning mist.

Madison's consciousness merged with mine.

The curse feeds on betrayal, on the fear that love will always lead to destruction.

But feel this, Hugh.

Feel what I truly am.

Pure emotion bombarded my senses.

Madison's wonder when she first saw me, her fear of the arranged marriage transforming into genuine attraction, her growing love despite every rational reason to maintain distance.

I felt her confusion and terror when the voices began, her determination to understand the forces arrayed against us, and her absolute refusal to let the curse claim another victim.

I see you, I projected back to her, marvelling at this new connection between our minds.

I feel your truth.

The darkness cracked around me, and I saw Madison as if from above.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she pressed her hands to my temples.

Elizabeth stood behind her, face pale with shock at witnessing magic she could never have imagined.

“Come back to me,”

Madison whispered aloud, and I felt myself rising through layers of consciousness toward the surface of waking.

I opened my eyes and found Madison's face inches from my own.

Tears still streamed down her face, but her green eyes shone with fierce determination.

The scent of lavender surrounded me, grounding me in reality while the last vestiges of the visions crumbled away.

“Madison.”

A sob escaped her lips, and she collapsed against my chest when I called her name.

“I thought I’d lost you,”

she whispered.

“The shadows pulled you so deep I could barely sense your presence.”

I wrapped my arms around her, holding her against me while my body remembered how to breathe, how to exist in this world rather than the nightmare realm of Ravina's making.

The stone floor was cold beneath my back, and Elizabeth's breaths were sharp as if she struggled to process what she’d witnessed.

“How long?” I asked.

“Over an hour,”

Madison said as she lifted her head to meet my gaze.

“You collapsed, and the shadows rushed in, and then you spoke in a voice that was not your own.”

Elizabeth stepped closer.

“The things you said...

they were not the words of a sane man. But...”

I sat up slowly, keeping Madison close while the room settled back into focus.

“I think Ravina speaks through the curse.

She shows us visions designed to destroy trust, to make us reenact her tragedy.”

I looked at Elizabeth directly.

“Eleanor heard those same voices.

She saw those same lies. But I never experienced them during our marriage because...”

Madison's grip tightened on my hand.

“Because you never loved her,”

she said.

“The curse only activates when there is real love to corrupt.”

I nodded and huffed out a deep breath.

Shame burnt through my soul.

“Eleanor loved me. She deserved so much better than the cold arrangement I offered her. But I felt nothing beyond duty and respect. There was no love for Ravina to poison, no trust to betray.”

I cupped Madison's face in my hands.

“With you, everything is different.”

Elizabeth's composure finally cracked completely, and she sank into the nearest chair.

“Then Eleanor took her own life because of this curse.

The voices drove her to madness.”

“I failed her,”

I said, the words heavy with a guilt that had haunted me for two years.

“I couldn’t help her because I couldn’t understand what she experienced.

I thought her delusions were symptoms of an affliction.”

Madison pressed her forehead against mine.

“You couldn’t have known.

But we understand now, and we can use that knowledge to break the curse entirely.”

“The rings,”

I said, finally accepting the truth beyond my doubts.

“They truly are cursed by Ravina just like Astor’s crown.”

Madison nodded.

I thought of Eleanor, of my mother... Were there others who suffered mysterious ailments and early deaths? Others who had been claimed by Ravina's revenge? I shook my head.

Countless generations could have paid the price for wearing cursed gold?

“We have to destroy them,”

Madison said.

“Both rings, completely.

Only then will we be free.”

Elizabeth leaned forward in her chair.

“How do you propose to accomplish such a thing? These artifacts have survived for centuries...”

“The family chapel,”

I said, the answer coming to me with sudden certainty.

“If we are to face Ravina directly, it should be in the most sacred space on the estate.

Hallowed ground will provide some protection while we work.”

Madison's eyes lit with understanding.

“Do you think she'll manifest when we attempt to destroy the rings?”

“I'm certain of it.

She'll not relinquish her hold without a fight.”

I rose to my feet and helped Madison to hers, before offering Elizabeth my hand.

“Will you witness this?”

I asked before adding that it was sure to be dangerous.

Elizabeth studied my face for a long moment before nodding.

“I have wronged you both with my assumptions.

I owe it to my niece to help however I can.”

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Hugh

We made our way through the corridors toward the east wing, where the oldest stonework housed the family chapel.

The afternoon sun cast long shadows through diamond-paned windows.

I listened to every sound, every shift in the air. It felt almost as if the curse... or Ravina knew what we planned.

“There,”

Madison said, pointing.

“We should place the rings on the altar.”

I removed my ring first, and immediately the weight I’d carried for so long lifted.

The gold band felt warm despite its usual coldness, and I fancied I could hear whispers emanating from the metal itself.

Madison struggled more with hers, the band having tightened around her finger as if refusing to be removed.

I helped her work it free, and the moment it left her skin, she gasped in relief.

“I didn’t realise how much it affected me,”

she said, flexing her fingers.

We placed our rings on the altar stone.

In an instant, the temperature in the chapel dropped.

Shadows, made not of my magic, gathered in the corners despite the bright afternoon sun, and the whispers grew loud enough that even Elizabeth could hear them.

You think to defy me? To escape the fate, I have woven for you.

Ravina's voice echoed off the stone walls as the air shimmered above the altar.

Moments later, she appeared, exactly as she had in our visions, with silver-white hair, flowing like liquid moonlight, and an ageless face marked by centuries of pain and cold calculation.

Do you believe that true love exists? she said, her eyes studying us both with ancient wisdom.

Or is it another beautiful lie we tell ourselves as we walk willingly to our own destruction.

“I know what happened to you,”

Madison said, stepping forward with compassion rather than defiance.

“I read Queen Charlotte’s account.

You were betrayed by the one you loved. He used that love to try and steal your power. But not all hearts are treacherous.”

Ravina's expression shifted, curiosity replacing some of the hardness.

Words are easy, child.

Love speaks sweetly until the moment of choice arrives. When faced with sacrifice or salvation, what will he choose? What will you...?

“We will always choose each other.”

Ravina laughed, a bitter sound that held no joy.

Sweet child.

You sound just as I did when I believed Darius's promises. I wanted to share the world with him... my power, my secrets, my very soul. But as I prepared to speak the binding words that would join us forever, he drove a dagger through my heart.

The spectral figure raised her hands, and made visions dance in the air around us.

She showed us an image of Darius approaching her castle, his eyes filled with false love, and his honeyed words masking deadly intent.

We watched the moment of ultimate betrayal. Darius with a concealed dagger behind his back, a black raven shrieking a warning too late, Darius silencing it forever.

He could have ruled beside me as an equal, Ravina said, her voice carrying centuries of pain.

Instead, he chose to steal what I offered freely.

She gestured, and new visions formed.

I saw myself faced with a terrible choice... Madison's life or my power, her safety or my family's legacy.

In the vision, I hesitated, calculated... I chose preservation over sacrifice.

There, Ravina said with grim satisfaction.

Love is a fallacy.

A fairy-tale. It falters when the price becomes too dear.

“Not for Queen Charlotte and King Astor,”

Madison said.

Queen Charlotte and King Astor were an anomaly.

I’ve watched and waited for more than a millennium and never found a love that matched their own.

Do you truly believe that yours can?

“I do,”

I said with certainty.

Madison and I had forged a connection deeper than physical touch, deeper than whispered words of love.

I reached for that bond now, and let my shadow magic flow through it.

Madison's golden light merged with my darkness, creating perfect balance. Neither light nor shadow, but harmony that made Ravina's projections waver.

Show her, I said to Madison through our connection.

Show her what real love looks like.

Madison drew more deeply on our bond, but instead of channelling just my power, she projected the truth of our feelings directly into Ravina's consciousness.

Our genuine connection, our willingness to sacrifice for each other, our absolute trust despite the curse's attempts to corrupt it.

Impossible, Ravina whispered, but her voice carried wonder rather than denial.

You would truly choose her life over your own power?

“Without hesitation,”

I said.

“That’s not even a choice to be made.

Her life, her happiness, her freedom. All of it matters more than any power I might possess.”

Madison amplified my declaration, letting Ravina feel the absolute truth of my words....

I would sacrifice everything for the woman I loved.

Ravina studied us both, her ancient eyes searching for deception and finding none.

Perhaps...

she said. But words are still just words. The rings must be destroyed, and that will require true sacrifice from both of you.

I felt Madison draw more deeply on our connection, channelling not just my power but my absolute trust in her.

This was the moment Ravina expected me to betray that trust, to pull back when faced with potential loss of control.

Instead, I opened myself completely to Madison's influence, letting her guide our combined magic with perfect faith in her wisdom and strength.

The rings on the altar glowed brightly.

Their golden surfaces heated until they were painful to look at.

Ravina shrieked in fury, her form becoming more solid as she poured her remaining strength into maintaining the curse.

I will not be denied!

She lunged forward, her spectral hands reaching for the rings to protect them from destruction.

But Madison was ready.

Our combined power surged outward, creating a barrier of light and shadow that

Ravina could not penetrate.

“Hugh, now!”

Madison called.

I directed every ounce of shadow magic I possessed into the rings, while Madison continued to project the truth of our love directly into Ravina's consciousness.

Ravina’s expression shifted from hatred to pain, as if she remembered what it felt like to love without reservation, to trust completely before that trust was shattered by betrayal.

Then the rings shattered with a sound like thunder, and Ravina disappeared.

Her form dissolved into a mist that was swept away by winds that touched nothing else in the room.

Madison swayed on her feet, exhausted.

I caught her and held her against my chest.

“It is done,”

she whispered.

“The curse is broken.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:23 am

Madison

I stretched languidly against Hugh's warm chest, breathing in his familiar scent as the morning sun painted golden stripes across our bedchamber.

Six months had passed since we'd destroyed the cursed rings, and the transformation of Trent Manor had been nothing short of miraculous.

Where once the gardens had struggled with sickly plants and barren patches, roses now climbed the ancient stone walls in riotous abundance, and the conservatory bloomed with exotic flowers.

Even the great oak that had crashed through the library window had sprouted new growth from its fallen trunk, creating a natural archway that the children from our school delighted in racing through.

“You're thinking too loudly,”

Hugh murmured against my hair, his voice rough with sleep.

His arm tightened around my waist, pulling me closer against the solid warmth of him.

“What occupies that brilliant mind of yours this early?”

I turned in his arms, marvelling as I always did at how his stormy-grey eyes softened when they met mine.

The shadows that had once writhed chaotically around him now danced playfully with the golden light that emanated from my touch.

Our magic had learned to complement rather than compete, creating a balance that felt as natural as breathing.

“The school inspection today,”

I said, though truthfully my thoughts wandered far beyond administrative concerns.

“Lord Pemberton's committee arrives this afternoon to evaluate our ‘unconventional’ teaching methods.”

Hugh's laugh was low and rich, sending vibrations rumbling through his chest and making my pulse quicken.

“Unconventional.

Yes, I suppose teaching young empaths to shield their abilities whilst encouraging young shadow-workers to embrace their power might raise a few eyebrows amongst the traditional magical families.”

His fingers traced a lazy pattern across my bare shoulder, sending pleasant shivers down my spine with each touch.

“Margaret brought her sister from the village yesterday,”

I said, though my concentration wavered as Hugh's lips found the sensitive spot below my ear.

“Emma's abilities manifested when she turned seven.

The poor child was picking up every emotion from the marketplace crowds.”

“Hmm,”

Hugh hummed against my throat, his breath warm on my skin.

“And you worked with her for three hours straight.”

His voice carried gentle reproach.

“You must remember to rest, darling.

You're carrying precious cargo.”

I pressed my hand to the gentle swell of my belly and smiled.

Our child grew stronger each day.

Even now, I could sense the dual nature of the life within me. Shadows and light intertwined in perfect harmony, just like Hugh and I.

“I think she recognises your voice already.”

I said, having noticed how the baby kicked whenever Hugh entered a room.

Hugh's hand covered mine over our child, his palm warm and broad.

“She'll be born into a world where her abilities are celebrated rather than hidden.

She'll never need to fear what she is.”

The wonder in his voice made my chest tighten with emotion.

Gone was the man who'd once pushed me away out of fear of his own nature.

In his place sat someone who'd learned to embrace both light and darkness, who'd discovered that true strength came from balance rather than control.

A knock at the door interrupted our quiet moment, followed by Olivia's familiar voice.

“My lord and lady, breakfast is ready when you are.

Young Master Timothy from the school has already asked three times if Lord Trent will be joining the morning lessons.”

I smiled at the mention of Timothy Crowdon, a twelve-year-old shadow-worker whose abilities had frightened his family so thoroughly they'd brought him to us in tears.

Under Hugh's patient guidance, the boy had learned to craft beautiful sculptures from the darkness itself.

“Tell Timothy he'll be down shortly,”

I called through the door, before turning back to Hugh with mock sternness.

“You've created a monster, you know.

That boy follows you about like a besotted puppy.”

“Better besotted than terrified,”

Hugh said, but his expression grew serious for a moment.

“I see too much of my younger self in him.

The fear and isolation, the certainty that his nature makes him dangerous.”

I cupped his cheek, feeling the slight roughness of morning stubble beneath my palm.

“And now he creates art instead of hiding in the shadows.

You've given him that gift.”

Hugh turned his head to press a kiss to my palm, his lips warm and soft.

“We've given him that gift.”

“The committee will see the value in what we're doing,”

I said with more confidence than I felt.

“They must.”

Hugh's eyes darkened with desire that sent need racing to my core, banishing all thoughts of inspections and responsibilities.

“Whatever they decide, we'll face it together.”

His hand slipped beneath the silk of my nightgown, and up my leg, his palm hot against my skin.

“But first, I believe I owe my wife proper attention.”

“Hugh,”

I breathed as his lips found mine.

He shifted above me, careful of my growing belly, his weight supported on his forearms.

The morning light caught the silver streak at his temple, more pronounced now but somehow making him even more distinguished.

I threaded my fingers through his dark hair, marvelling at how this man could still make my pulse race with nothing more than a look.

“I love you,” he said.

Before I could respond, he deepened the kiss.

His tongue swept against mine with practised skill.

My body responded instantly, arching into his touch as his hands roamed further up my leg.

But eventually, duty called, and we parted to dress for the day.

“You look radiant,”

Hugh said as he helped me with the buttons of my yellow morning dress.

His voice carried the warmth that never failed to make me feel cherished.

“Motherhood suits you beautifully.”

I turned in his arms and adjusted his cravat.

“Just as fatherhood will suit you rather well too.

All the school children adore you.”

We made our way downstairs as the sun rose over the east wing.

I paused for a moment, noticing the raven perched on the old, toppled oak.

Its black feathers gleamed in the bright morning light. I thought of all the potential cursed artefacts out in the world, and of poor Ravina, trapped in her own misery by the weight of Darius’s betrayal.

I’d found my happiness, and I hoped with all my heart that one day, she found hers too.