



Witchful Thinking (Grimm Mawr #6)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Some sparks are magical. Some are destiny. Theirs are both.

Diana Maelstrom, Head Nurse at Grimm Mawr Academy for Witches and Warlocks, has treated everything from reciting boils to tap-dancing earwax. But nothing in her fifteen years of magical medical experience prepared her for the return of Alarick Blackthorn—the infuriatingly handsome contractor whose singing medicine cabinets once announced a professors hemorrhoid cream needs to the entire faculty.

Now hes back to renovate her infirmary, with his sleeves perpetually rolled up and a fan club of swooning students inventing injuries just to glimpse his warding techniques. Diana is determined to maintain professional boundaries, especially since hes TEN YEARS her junior. But when their hands accidentally touch, golden threads of magic connect them in a rare fusion that has the garden gnomes building a wedding altar and faculty members not-so-subtly booking dinner reservations for two.

As if accidental magical matchmaking werent enough, theres a sinister plot brewing involving corrupted dueling dummies, energy-siphoning crystals, and one suspiciously well-dressed trustee. Diana and Alarick will need to harness their extraordinary connection to save the school—even if it means risking their hearts and their magic in the process.

Between thwarting teenage matchmakers, decoding gnome courtship rituals, and trying not to glow like a magical nightlight whenever Alarick touches her, Diana is learning that sometimes the most powerful spell of all is the one you never meant to cast.

Witchful Thinking: Where magical mayhem meets midlife romance, and happily ever after comes with a side of combustible magical chemistry!

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Diana Maelstrom had treated every magical malady imaginable in her fifteen years as head nurse at Grimm Mawr Academy for Witches and Warlocks. Boils that recited Shakespeare. Fevers that turned students into human thermometers. Even that memorable incident with the tap-dancing earwax. But nothing—absolutely nothing—had prepared her for Alarick Blackthorn strolling back into her infirmary as if he hadn't spent the last two months installing singing medicine cabinets and self-refilling potion dispensers before disappearing.

"Good morning, Diana," he said with that infuriating half-smile that did absolutely nothing to her pulse rate. Nothing at all. Certainly not making it skip like a freshman attempting a levitation charm. "Ready for your upgrade?"

Diana straightened to her full height, which still left her looking up at him—a fact that irritated her almost as much as the way his dark hair curled slightly at the collar of his shirt. When had he gotten so... tall? And why did the universe insist on making her notice?

"Mr. Blackthorn. What an unexpected intrusion." She emphasized his surname like it was a particularly nasty potion ingredient. "I wasn't aware we'd scheduled an apocalypse today."

"Not an apocalypse. Just a renovation." He unrolled blueprints across her treatment counter, his sleeves already rolled up to reveal forearms that should have required a warning label. "Principal Starcatcher signed off on it last week."

Diana made a mental note to hex Malachai at the earliest opportunity. Perhaps something involving spontaneous hair loss in embarrassing patterns. "There must be

some mistake. We have forty students currently practicing experimental defensive magic this summer. This is literally the worst possible time—"

"Actually, it's perfect," Alarick countered, tapping the blueprints with a finger that should not have been so distracting. "With all that experimental magic, you need updated protective wards. The current system was designed when the most dangerous thing students practiced was tickling charms."

A whimper from the corner interrupted their standoff. Diana glanced over to see Eliza Camembert clutching her arm with the dramatic flair only a fourteen-year-old can muster.

"Excuse me. I have a patient." Diana turned her back on him and focused on the girl's minor deflection burn. "Almost done, Eliza. Just one more cooling charm."

She waved her wand in a precise figure-eight pattern, blue light settling over the reddened skin. The burn faded instantly.

"Thank you, Nurse Maelstrom." Eliza's attention immediately pivoted to Alarick with the radar-like precision teenagers reserve for attractive people within a fifty-foot radius. "Um, is there going to be construction? Because I could totally help. I'm very good at, um, holding things."

Diana resisted the urge to roll her eyes into another dimension. Perfect. Another teenage girl succumbing to the Blackthorn Effect.

"That won't be necessary," Diana said firmly. "Because there isn't going to be any construction. Not during summer program."

"I don't need help, but thanks for the offer," Alarick told the girl with a smile that made her blush furiously. Then, catching Diana's death glare, he added, "The

construction zone will be strictly off-limits to students for safety reasons."

"Okay, but if you need anything—anything at all—I'm in the east dormitory. Room 304. For emergencies. Medical emergencies. Or construction emergencies. Or whatever." Eliza backed toward the door, nearly tripping over her own feet.

"Don't forget to reapply the cooling salve tonight," Diana called after her, wondering when exactly her infirmary had become a venue for teenage flirtation.

She turned back to face Alarick, arms crossed. "I cannot have construction in my medical facility during the busiest training session of the year. And I cannot have you distracting my patients with your..." she waved a hand vaguely toward his entire person, "...contractor presence."

"My contractor presence?" Alarick's eyebrows rose. "Is that a medical term?"

"It's somewhere between a workplace hazard and a public nuisance," she retorted.

A sharp knock interrupted them, and Headmistress Raven swept into the infirmary, midnight robes billowing despite the complete absence of wind. Edgar, her raven familiar, surveyed the room from her shoulder with unnervingly intelligent eyes.

"Nurse Maelstrom. Mr. Blackthorn." Raven nodded to each of them, her expression suggesting she'd rather be dealing with a troll rebellion than staff disagreements.

"Headmistress," Diana began, "there seems to be a misunderstanding—"

"The board approved these renovations six months ago," Raven cut in with the finality of someone who'd already won the argument before it started. "They were specifically scheduled to coincide with Mr. Blackthorn's availability. A temporary medical station in the west corridor has been arranged."

Diana opened her mouth, then closed it. Arguing with Raven was like trying to convince water to flow uphill—technically possible with magic, but exhausting and ultimately pointless.

"Oh, and you'll need to work directly with Mr. Blackthorn to ensure proper calibration of the wards," Raven added, a glint in her eye that suggested she found this arrangement amusing.

"Work directly with—"

"Is that a problem?" Raven's arched eyebrow dared her to object.

"No, Headmistress." Diana forced her expression to remain neutral, though she could have sworn she saw Edgar wink at her. Ridiculous bird.

"Good. I expect your cooperation will make this project proceed smoothly." With that, Raven swept out, Edgar giving one last knowing look over his feathered shoulder.

The moment the door closed, Diana rounded on Alarick. "This is your doing, isn't it?"

"My doing?" He placed a hand over his heart in mock innocence. "I just bid on a contract. The school accepted."

"After you spent two months installing those ridiculous cabinets that sing 'A Spoonful of Magic' every time I open them and then disappeared without a word." She hadn't meant to let that slip. It sounded too much like she'd noticed his absence, which she absolutely hadn't. Much.

"I was offered a job at Frog's Hollow High," he said, expression softening. "And you made it pretty clear my 'magical improvements' weren't welcome."

"You installed those enchanted cabinets that diagnose patients by announcing their symptoms to the entire room!" Diana couldn't keep the indignation from her voice.

She recalled the disastrous demonstration day when Alarick had proudly unveiled his enchanted cabinets. Headmistress Raven and the entire board had been present when the cabinet cheerfully announced Brin d'Amour's embarrassing mermaid scale condition to everyone. The poor girl had transferred schools the following week, and Diana had spent months rebuilding trust with her teenage patients. No wonder she was wary of Alarick's "improvements," no matter how attractive he might be.

"It cut response time by thirty percent in my simulations," he pointed out, eyes lighting with enthusiasm. "That could be the difference between—"

"Fine. We're stuck with each other." Diana took a deep breath. "But I have conditions."

"I'm listening." He leaned against the counter, arms crossed, which was completely unfair to her concentration.

"One, patient care comes first. If I need to treat someone, your work stops immediately."

Alarick nodded. "Reasonable."

"Two, nothing gets moved without my approval. Some of these healing arrangements took years to calibrate."

"That's why we're setting up the temporary station first," he said, already one step ahead as usual.

"And three," Diana continued, determined to maintain some control, "you follow my

lead on anything related to healing magic. I don't care how innovative your warding techniques are."

"Agreed, as long as you follow my lead on structural elements." He held out his hand. "Partners?"

Diana hesitated before shaking it briefly. His palm was warm and callused, sending an unwelcome tingle up her arm that she immediately filed under 'static electricity' and 'things we're never thinking about again.' "Professional colleagues," she corrected.

"Of course." His expression contained something that looked almost like... No. Ridiculous. He was ten years her junior and incapable of looking at anyone with genuine admiration.

Before she could respond, the infirmary door burst open and three giggling teenage girls tumbled in, all wearing distinctive blue robes.

"Nurse Maelstrom," The tallest one clutched her perfectly intact finger. "I got a splinter. A terrible, painful splinter."

Diana examined the finger, which showed all the trauma of a gentle breeze. "Really, Miss Abernathy?"

"It's very deep," the girl insisted, eyes fixed on Alarick like he was the last sweet treat at the magical bakery. "I might need extensive treatment. Possibly surgery. Are you the new medical assistant?"

"Construction contractor," he told them, eyes twinkling with amusement. "Alarick Blackthorn."

"I'm Malta," the shortest girl said, twirling her hair with the subtlety of a foghorn. "That's Agatha and Polly. We're in the advanced shield and sword group."

"Ladies," Diana interrupted firmly, "unless you're actually injured, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Oh, we don't mind waiting," Malta said, perching on an examination table. "We could even help with the planning. I'm very good at... planning things."

"I bet you are," Diana muttered.

"What was that, Nurse Maelstrom?"

"I said out. Now. All of you." Diana pointed to the door with her imperious finger usually reserved for faculty members who thought headache potions cured hangovers.

The girls reluctantly shuffled out, promising to return at the first sign of any imaginary injury.

"I should stock up on phantom splinter spells and nonexistent allergy anti-hexes," Diana sighed.

Alarick's chuckle was surprisingly deep. "Happens a lot?"

"Only since you arrived," she said pointedly. "Though I suppose teenage infatuation is better than the garden gnomes who followed you around last year. At least these girls don't make obscene gestures."

"The gnomes were misunderstood," he said with mock seriousness. "They were providing valuable architectural feedback."

"Is that what you call it when they arranged stones in the shape of a—"

"Specialized warding configuration," Alarick cut in smoothly, though his ears had turned slightly pink. "Very advanced. Possibly ancient."

Despite herself, Diana almost smiled. Almost. "Show me these plans so I can explain why half of them won't work."

He spread the blueprints across her desk again, pointing out features with confident precision. Diana leaned in, professional interest overcoming her irritation. The design was... actually quite good.

"This might not be completely terrible," she admitted reluctantly.

"High praise indeed," he said, that half-smile returning. "Coming from you, that's practically a standing ovation."

"Don't push your luck."

A crash from the corridor interrupted them, followed by shouts and the distinctive whoosh of misfired defensive magic. They ran toward the commotion, finding two students sprawled on the floor surrounded by swirling magical residue.

"Everyone back," Diana ordered, wand already weaving diagnostic patterns.

Alarick moved without hesitation, creating a containment field around the magical discharge. "Broken wand core," he said. "The magic is destabilizing."

Diana knelt beside the students, magic flowing from her hands. "Minor magical shock. They'll be disoriented for about an hour."

"The field won't hold long," Alarick warned as the sparks intensified.

"I need two more minutes to stabilize them," Diana said, not looking up.

Alarick expanded his containment field, sweat beading on his forehead from the effort. They moved quickly, neither needing to explain their actions.

Two minutes later, Diana transported the stabilized students back to the infirmary. Ten minutes after that, Alarick appeared in the doorway, looking slightly singed but otherwise unharmed.

"Contained and neutralized," he reported.

"Thank you for your assistance."

"Just doing my job." He surveyed the infirmary. "Though this does highlight why the renovations are necessary. A proper containment field built into the walls would have made treatment safer."

Diana wanted to argue out of habit, but he was right. "Yes," she admitted. "That would be useful." She eyed him as he adjusted a complex protection spell. "St. Morgana's Warding Institute has been trying to recruit you for years. I'm surprised you chose school renovations over research."

Alarick's hands paused mid-gesture. "Research is theoretical. Here, I see the direct impact of my work. When that shield prevented magical backfire from hitting those students yesterday? That matters more than any journal publication."

Diana felt her professional respect reluctantly deepening. This wasn't the attitude of someone just passing through on his way to bigger things. She was struck by the intensity in his eyes—a depth she hadn't allowed herself to notice before.

"This doesn't change anything," she said, turning back to her patients. "I still expect full consultation on every aspect of the renovation."

"Wouldn't dream of proceeding without it," The formal title was undermined by the warmth in his voice.

"The temporary space needs to be ready before you start demolition."

"I'm on it." He moved toward the door, then paused. "You know, I've always admired your healing abilities. Even when you were giving me that look that could curdle a transformation potion."

After he left, she allowed herself a moment of weakness, leaning against the counter and exhaling slowly. Six weeks. She had to endure six weeks of working closely with Alarick Blackthorn—with his competence and his forearms and his irritating half-smile.

One of the recovering students stirred, looking around blearily. "Was that the hot contractor?" she mumbled.

Diana closed her eyes briefly. "Rest, Miss Troudecru. The confusion spell is still affecting you."

"Not confused 'bout him being hot," the girl muttered before drifting back to sleep. "Even Nurse Maelstrom was checking him out."

"I was not—" Diana began indignantly, then stopped herself.

Six weeks of Alarick Blackthorn invading her space. Six weeks of teenage girls inventing injuries. Six weeks of trying not to notice the way his magic complemented hers so effortlessly.

And perhaps most worryingly, six weeks of pretending she didn't see the way he looked at her when he thought she wasn't paying attention—a look that suggested his interest might extend beyond the proper calibration of healing wards.

Grimm Mawr's summer program had just become significantly more complicated.

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Diana arrived at the temporary medical station at precisely seven o'clock, determined to get a head start before Alarick appeared. She needed time to assess the space without his distracting presence—and by distracting, she meant irritating. Obviously.

The makeshift infirmary was smaller than her regular space, but workable. Alarick had already installed cabinets and a treatment counter. The walls were painted in the same soothing pale blue as her regular infirmary, which she grudgingly admitted showed attention to detail. For someone who once accidentally turned himself purple with an experimental ward, he occasionally demonstrated surprising thoughtfulness.

She began unpacking healing supplies, arranging everything according to her system that made perfect sense to her and absolutely no one else.

"You're here early."

Diana nearly dropped a vial of hiccuping solution, which would have been a disaster of epic proportions. The last time someone broke one, the entire east wing couldn't stop hiccuping for three days. Professor Shadowfyre's lecture on "The Subtle Art of Silencing Spells" had been particularly ironic.

Alarick stood in the doorway, carrying a toolbox and wearing a faded t-shirt that hugged his shoulders in a way that would have been distracting if she were the type to notice such things. Which she wasn't. At all. Not even slightly.

"So are you," she replied, not looking up—a heroic feat of willpower.

"Thought I'd get the major warding in place before students start arriving." He rolled

up his sleeves—the man apparently had a pathological aversion to proper sleeve length. "Need help with those supplies?"

"I'm perfectly capable of arranging my own healing station." Diana placed a jar of burn salve with unnecessary force.

"Never suggested otherwise." He began tracing ward patterns along the walls, his magic leaving faint blue outlines that pulsed like heartbeats. "Just offering an extra pair of hands."

"Your hands have their own job to do."

His chuckle made her spine tingle in a way she resolutely ignored. "Fair enough. By the way, I added stabilizing fields for your sensitive healing arrangements." He gestured to barely visible runes etched into the counter edges.

Diana paused, genuinely surprised. Those fields were complex magic, typically used in high-end hospitals. "That's... actually useful."

"Try not to sound so shocked," he said with that half-smile that did absolutely nothing to her pulse rate. "I do occasionally have good ideas. Even at my tender young age."

"Yes, well, the elderly often underestimate youth," she shot back, immediately regretting the admission that she'd noticed their age gap.

Before Alarick could respond, Professor Frostwind burst in, her rose-gold hair practically sparkling with excitement and zero subtlety. Ceries was one of the co-heads of the Herbalism department.

"Just checking on the setup." Ceries glanced between them with all the subtlety of a

unicorn in a china shop. "How's the collaboration going?"

"Professionally adequate," Diana said primly, just as Alarick answered, "Delightful."

Ceries's smile widened like a cat who'd found an unattended bowl of cream. "Wonderful. Oh, Diana, we need to discuss the new batch of healing herbs I'm cultivating for your potions. Why don't we review them over dinner tonight? We could go to the Grumble and Brew." She turned to leave, then stopped with theatrical timing. "Oh, and Alarick, you should join us. Your input would be valuable."

"The Grumble and Brew?" Diana raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that a bit rowdy for a professional discussion?" It was a gastro pub headed up by a troll, after all.

"They have the most amazing Volcanic Rock Steak special tonight," Ceries said with suspicious enthusiasm. "The troll chef literally serves it still sizzling on enchanted lava stones. And their Bubbling Cauldron Cocktails are to die for! Two people can share one with these adorable paired straws..." She trailed off at Diana's look. "For, um, efficiency of consumption. Purely professional."

Diana froze mid-arrangement of potions. "That's hardly necessary—"

"Actually, that would be helpful," Alarick cut in, the traitor. "I'd like to coordinate the infirmary wards with whatever protection the students are practicing."

"Excellent! It's settled then." Ceries beamed like someone who'd just successfully arranged a first date for her socially awkward friend. "Seven o'clock at The Grumble and Brew. Just a professional discussion over food. Nothing matchmaking-like whatsoever."

She didn't actually say that last part, but her expression screamed it.

After she left, Diana rounded on Alarick. "You didn't have to agree to that."

"Afraid of being social with me?"

"I'm afraid of nothing." Diana straightened to her full height, which still left her looking up at him like a disgruntled cat facing a particularly amused tree. "Least of all an informal dinner with colleagues."

"Good. Because I make excellent dinner conversation. I've been told my anecdotes about magical plumbing disasters are riveting."

Diana's lips twitched. "I'm sure they're as fascinating as my tales of treating magical acne gone wrong."

"See? We'll have a delightful time." His smile softened to something genuine. "Has anyone ever told you that you're intimidating?"

"Am I?" The question caught her off guard.

"Absolutely. The brilliant, beautiful, head nurse who can heal a shattered bone with a flick of her wand? It's rather impressive."

Diana blinked, uncertain how to respond to both the compliment and the revelation that he'd noticed her years ago. She was saved by the arrival of Pecorina Havarti, clutching her wrist with all the dramatic flair of a theater student auditioning for the role of "Tragically Wounded Heroine."

"Nurse Maelstrom, I think I sprained my wrist during practice." Pecorina's pained expression transformed instantly when she spotted Alarick. "Oh, you're here too." She batted her eyelashes furiously.

Diana suppressed a sigh. "Let me see, Miss Havarti."

The girl extended her perfectly healthy wrist, though her eyes remained fixed on Alarick as if he might disappear if she blinked.

"No swelling, no discoloration," Diana noted dryly. "Can you rotate your wrist?"

Pecorina demonstrated perfect mobility while asking loudly, "Will Mr. Blackthorn be working here every day?"

"Your wrist is fine," Diana pronounced. "Return to class."

"But what if it starts hurting again?" Pecorina protested, with the commitment of someone who deserved an award for persistence.

"I'll risk it," Diana said firmly. "Off you go."

After Pecorina left, Alarick turned to Diana with undisguised amusement. "Do you want to hear about the stabilizing fields I set up?"

"More than my next breath," she said sarcastically.

To her relief for nearly an hour, they worked alongside each other in something approaching harmony. His knowledge was impressive, his approach innovative. She even caught herself suggesting modifications and—most alarming of all—enjoying herself.

Their peaceful productivity was shattered by the arrival of Principal Starcatcher, looking far too pleased with himself for someone who was supposedly just checking on a renovation.

"Diana, Alarick. How's the temporary station coming along?" Malachai glanced between them with barely concealed interest.

"Adequately," Diana answered. "We should be operational by afternoon."

"Excellent. By the way, Alarick, we've assigned you quarters in the east wing, faculty section."

Diana's head snapped up. "The faculty section?"

"It made the most sense," Malachai explained with fake innocence that wouldn't fool a freshmen. "The room happens to be just across from Diana's quarters. Convenient if any medical emergencies arise during the night."

Diana narrowed her eyes. "Well, I'm sure he will be far too busy to spend much time in his quarters."

"Actually, I'm a big believer in proper rest," Alarick countered. "Early to bed, early to rise, and all that."

Diana shot him a look. Was he in on the matchmaking plot too?

"Perfect," Malachai said. "Diana's typically up with the sun as well. Perhaps you two could develop a morning routine. Coffee, breakfast, professional discussion..."

"Principal Starcatcher," Diana interrupted, "don't you have administrator duties to attend to? Anything?"

After he left, Diana rounded on Alarick. "You knew about this, didn't you?"

"About what? The room assignment?" He looked genuinely surprised. "This is the

first I've heard of it."

"Right." Diana turned back to her supplies, annoyed with herself for feeling annoyed.

"If it makes you uncomfortable, I can decline," Alarick offered, his voice more serious. "Stay in the contractor quarters instead."

The sincerity in his tone made her look up. "No, that's... It's fine. The faculty wing makes more sense logistically." She returned to arranging potions, determinedly professional. "Just don't expect me to be neighborly. I keep odd hours."

"Noted," he said, resuming his warding work. "Though I should warn you, I sometimes practice advanced techniques in the evening. Nothing dangerous, but there might be occasional flashes of light."

"I'm sure I can manage." Diana focused on her task, trying not to imagine what Alarick might look like practicing advanced magic in the evening, shirt off maybe, face concentrated in that way that was absolutely not attractive.

At noon, Alarick set down his tools. "I'm heading to the dining hall for lunch. Care to join me?"

"I need to finish this," Diana said, though her stomach chose that moment to growl with the volume of a small dragon.

"You need to eat," he said, his tone concerned.

"I brought something," she lied.

"No, you didn't."

Diana sighed. "Fine. Lunch. But only because I need to ask you more about these healing wards."

"Of course. Purely professional." But his smile suggested he saw right through her excuse.

The dining hall was crowded when they arrived. Diana felt uncomfortably conspicuous walking in with Alarick, especially when Ceris and Malachai wore identical expressions of delight usually reserved for successful matchmakers.

"Our matchmaking friends aren't being remotely subtle," Diana murmured as they found a table.

"Does that bother you?" Alarick asked.

Diana considered while arranging her napkin with unnecessary precision. "It's complicated by our age difference."

To her surprise, he nodded. "Ten years. Though I'm not sure why that matters."

"It doesn't," she said quickly. "But they probably think you need a maternal figure to supervise your work."

Alarick nearly choked on his water. "Maternal is not the word that comes to mind when I think of you, Diana."

The way he said her name, combined with the unmistakable appreciation in his gaze, sent heat rushing to her face. "My point is that their efforts are misguided."

Agreed." He took a bite of his lunch. "So, what's the most bizarre magical injury you've treated?"

Diana considered for a moment, grateful for the shift to neutral territory. "A junior who tried to enchant her hair to change colors with her mood. Unfortunately, the spell affected her internal organs instead."

"Oh no," Alarick winced. "What happened?"

"Let's just say we could tell exactly how terrified she was by the glow emanating from her stomach." Diana's lips quirked. "She lit up like a festival lantern every time someone mentioned exams."

Alarick laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "And here I thought my story about accidentally making all the door handles melt was embarrassing."

"Door handles?" Diana raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued despite herself.

"An experiment gone wrong at Frog's Hollow High. Let's just say the strengthening spell backfired." His eyes crinkled at the corners. "The maintenance staff threatened to hex me if I ever touched the hardware again."

Diana surprised herself with a genuine laugh. "Your magical modifications do have a certain creative flair. Even if they're occasionally disastrous."

"High praise indeed," he teased. "Next you'll be admitting you don't actually hate having me renovate your infirmary."

"Let's not get carried away."

His laugh drew more attention from the students. Diana focused on her food, determined to maintain professional distance despite the unwelcome warmth spreading through her.

As they walked back after lunch, Diana was uncomfortably aware of the whispers following them. She maintained a professional distance, though part of her—a part she refused to acknowledge—noticed how easily they fell into step together.

"So," Alarick said as they approached the west corridor, "dinner tonight. Should we coordinate our arrival to avoid the appearance of coming together?"

Diana gave him a sidelong look. "Are you mocking me?"

"Not at all. Just trying to accommodate your obvious discomfort with being seen with me."

"I'm not uncomfortable being seen with you," she protested. "I'm uncomfortable with the assumptions people make."

"Fair enough." They reached the temporary infirmary, and he held the door for her. "Seven o'clock, then. I'll try to contain my youthful exuberance to avoid embarrassing you."

"Your what?" Diana turned to face him, finally catching the teasing glint in his eye. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"A little," he admitted. "You're rather magnificent when you're flustered."

Before she could formulate a response, he moved past her to resume his warding work, leaving Diana torn between irritation and a treacherous flutter that had no place in a professional relationship.

Six weeks, she reminded herself firmly. Six weeks of maintaining proper boundaries despite matchmaking colleagues, lovesick students, and a man whose rare genuine smile was becoming dangerously difficult to resist.

She'd survived magical emergencies far worse than Alarick Blackthorn.

Probably.

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Diana stood in front of her wardrobe, scowling at her clothes as if they had personally offended her. This was ridiculous. She was a professional healer attending a professional dinner to discuss professional matters. There was absolutely no reason to care what she wore.

"It's not a date," she told her reflection firmly. "It's a consultation about plants with colleagues. At a troll restaurant. Where people go on dates. But this is definitely not that."

Her reflection looked unconvinced. Traitor.

With an exasperated sigh, Diana pulled out a simple blue dress she typically wore for faculty functions. Professional but not stuffy. Attractive without being obvious about it. Not that she cared whether Alarick found her attractive.

As she applied a touch of lip color—purely out of respect for the social occasion and absolutely not because Alarick might notice—a knock at her door made her jump.

Diana opened the door to find Alarick standing there, dressed in dark trousers and a charcoal button-down that made his eyes look more intensely blue than usual. His sleeves were, for once, actually at his wrists, though the top button of his shirt was casually undone. He'd clearly showered recently, his dark hair still slightly damp, smelling faintly of sandalwood instead of his usual bouquet of sawdust and magical sealant.

"I thought we might walk over together," he said, then added with a hint of amusement, "unless you'd prefer to maintain plausible deniability by arriving

separately."

Diana rolled her eyes, trying to ignore how good he looked. "Don't be dramatic. It's dinner, not a clandestine affair."

"Affair," he repeated, eyes twinkling. "Interesting choice of words."

"Professional collaboration," she corrected, locking her door with perhaps more force than necessary. "I meant professional collaboration."

"Of course. My mistake."

"How's the lumber order coming for the infirmary?" Diana decided to start the evening as she meant to go on: professionally.

"Finally arrived this morning. Magical oak that won't interfere with your healing spells." He glanced at her. "I got the self-leveling nails too."

"The ones that adjust if the building shifts?"

"Exactly. Only the best for your infirmary."

"It's not my infirmary," she corrected automatically.

"No? Then why did I find 'Property of Diana Maelstrom: Touch At Your Peril' burned into the old reception desk?"

"That was there when I arrived," she lied, fighting a smile. "Probably from the previous nurse."

"Uh-huh. And I suppose the tiny magical trap that turned my measuring tape into a

snake was also pre-existing?"

Diana couldn't quite hide her smirk. "You did say you wanted to get more comfortable with the local wildlife."

Alarick laughed, a rich sound that did absolutely nothing to her pulse rate. Nothing at all.

The Grumble and Brew loomed ahead, a rustic stone building with windows that glowed an alarming shade of orange. Smoke puffed from the chimney in perfect rings that occasionally transformed into miniature dragons before dissolving.

"Ever been here before?" Alarick asked as they approached.

"Once. The napkins tried to fold me into origami."

"Sounds like fun," he teased, opening the heavy wooden door for her.

Diana didn't bother dignifying that with an answer, especially since that conjured up all sorts of naughty images in her head. The Grumble and Brew was aptly named—a low, constant rumble pervaded the space, punctuated by occasional bubbling sounds from various corners. Enormous copper cauldrons hung from the ceiling, some actively brewing mysterious concoctions that emitted sparks in rainbow hues.

Ceries waved enthusiastically from a corner booth, where she sat with her husband Thaddeus. Diana noticed the table was set with what appeared to be two oversized bubbling cauldron cocktail, each with two straws. Subtle.

"Diana, Alarick, you made it." Ceries beamed as they approached. "And you came together. That's intriguing."

"We live in the same corridor," Diana said flatly

"We understand completely," Thaddeus said.

An enormous troll wearing a stained apron and a chef's hat that had clearly seen better decades lumbered over to their table.

"Welcome to Grumble and Brew." His voice matched the restaurant's ambient rumble perfectly. "I Chef Grimcrack. You try special tonight?" He slammed down four menus that appeared to be carved from thin slabs of petrified wood.

"What's the special?" Diana asked suspiciously.

Grimcrack grinned, revealing teeth that could generously be described as "mostly present."

"Volcanic Rock Steak. Cook on enchanted lava stone at table. Very romantic for couples." He looked meaningfully at the four of them. "Stone heated by thousand-year-old volcano. Legend say couples who share meal—"

"I'll take one," Diana interrupted hastily. "Just one. For me."

Grimcrack looked disappointed. "Less romantic that way. But still delicious."

"Can't have that," Alarick said. "I'll have that as well."

Grimcrack brightened considerably. "More Bubbling Cauldron Cocktails? Very good. Make conversational inhibitions dissolve. Perfect for romantic first date."

"It's not a date," Diana corrected automatically.

"Second date?" Grimcrack asked hopefully.

"It's not a date at all," she insisted. "We're colleagues discussing herbs."

"Herbs," Grimcrack repeated skeptically, looking between them. "Sure. Grimcrack add extra aphrodisiac herbs to steak rub then."

"That won't be necessary—" Diana began, but the troll was already lumbering away.

"Well," Ceries said cheerfully, "shall we discuss those healing herbs I'm growing for the infirmary? I've been experimenting with a new variety of calming mint that changes color based on the patient's level of anxiety."

"That could be useful," Diana admitted, relaxing into the professional conversation. "If we could visually gauge anxiety levels..."

"The only problem is that it sometimes makes patients temporarily change color too," Ceries added. "I had a student turn bright purple during testing."

"Better than what happened with the singing medicine cabinets," Diana said, shooting Alarick a pointed look.

"Those cabinets were a masterpiece of magical craftsmanship," he protested with a grin. "Not my fault the enchantment had a few quirks."

"My favorite," Thaddeus chimed in, "was when Principal Starcatcher came in for his hemorrhoid cream and the cabinet started singing 'Ring of Fire.'"

Ceries nearly choked on her water while Alarick dissolved into laughter.

Grimcrack returned, placing slabs of glowing stone before them. "Volcanic rocks

ready. Put raw meat on top." He slammed down plates of thinly sliced steak. "Meat cooks while you eat."

The rocks emanated intense heat.

"Oh, and steak knife charmed to cut perfectly every time," Grimcrack added proudly, handing Alarick an enormous, slightly rusty knife. "Just like Grimcrack's heart when see beautiful love story beginning at table seven."

"Table seven would be us," Thaddeus explained helpfully, raising his glass toward Diana and Alarick.

Diana pointedly ignored this and placed a slice of steak on her volcanic rock, watching it sizzle. "So, about those herbs..."

The conversation flowed more easily as they ate, the excellent food and Bubbling Cauldron Cocktail (which tasted like jalapeno spiced mango juice with an absinthe kick) creating a relaxed atmosphere. Diana laughed at Alarick's story about accidentally turning a door into plaid instead of plywood.

"It's not my fault," he insisted. "The magical hardware store gave me enchanted wood stain instead of sealer."

"Is that why the east wing bathrooms still lock and unlock based on people's zodiac signs?" Thaddeus asked.

Alarick looked momentarily embarrassed. "I'm still working on a fix for that."

"Capricorns have been holding it for days," Ceries added with mock seriousness.

Their laughter was interrupted by a crash from the kitchen, followed by Grimcrack's

booming voice: "NO EXPLOSION! EVERYTHING FINE! SMOKE PART OF AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE!"

Diana caught Alarick's eye across the table and found herself unable to look away. The warm light from the volcanic rocks cast a glow across his features, highlighting the humor in his eyes and his sexy smile.

"You've got sauce," he said softly, gesturing to the corner of his own mouth.

"Oh." Diana quickly dabbed her napkin against her lips, only to have the napkin fold itself into a tiny heart. She crumpled it immediately.

As dinner progressed, Diana found it increasingly difficult to maintain emotional distance. Alarick was intelligent, charming, and frustratingly easy to talk to. Worse, he seemed genuinely interested in her perspectives, asking thoughtful questions and actually listening to her answers.

By the time they were finishing dessert—a confection that occasionally levitated above the plate and had to be caught quickly before it floated away—Diana had consumed just enough of the Bubbling Cauldron Cocktail to feel pleasantly warm and dangerously relaxed.

"We should probably head back," she suggested, noticing how Ceries and Thaddeus kept exchanging steamy glances. The cocktail and the volcanic rock steak seemed to be working on that side of the table.

"Good idea," Alarick agreed. "I've got an early lumber delivery tomorrow."

Thaddeus and Ceries barely noticed they had left. Outside, the night air was cool and refreshing after the warmth of the restaurant. Stars twinkled overhead in formations that occasionally rearranged themselves into new constellations.

"That was... not terrible," Diana admitted as they walked back toward the academy.

"Such enthusiasm," Alarick laughed. "But I'll take it."

As they walked back from The Grumble and Brew, Diana noticed a small group of garden gnomes following at a distance, carrying what appeared to be a miniature collection of medical supplies and warding tools arranged in a peculiar pattern.

"Is that... are they making some sort of shrine?" she asked, bewildered.

Alarick glanced back and chuckled. "Garden gnomes are sensitive to magical harmonies. Professor Winterbloom says they can detect compatible magical signatures before humans notice anything."

"Compatible magical signatures?" Diana repeated, suddenly remembering the strange warmth she'd felt when their hands touched. "That's ridiculous. Garden gnomes collect shiny objects, not... relationship predictions."

"Of course," Alarick agreed too quickly, but Diana didn't miss how he watched the gnomes with curious interest before they ducked behind a bush, whispering among themselves.

As they got closer to the school, a thunderous crash from made them pick up the pace. Hurrying onto school grounds, they saw the practice hall doorway billowing purplish smoke. A student staggered out, coughing violently.

"What happened?" Diana demanded, already casting diagnostic spells.

"Shield charm experiment," the student gasped. "Fontina tried to modify it. It backfired."

Diana followed Alarick into the haze. They found a girl slumped against the far wall. Diana immediately began assessment spells while Alarick created a protective bubble around them.

"Magical shock and smoke inhalation," Diana reported. "We need to get her to the temporary infirmary."

Alarick nodded, carefully lifting the student. His protective bubble maintained itself around them as they moved. The temporary infirmary was dark when they arrived, but lights immediately flickered on as they entered—one of Alarick's innovations that Diana had secretly appreciated.

He stood by, silently offering support and being there to hand her a potion or salve. When magical residue threatened to interfere with the healing process, Diana instinctively adjusted her approach to work within his protective field.

Finally, the student's condition stabilized.

"She'll need to stay overnight for observation," Diana said, adjusting the final healing charm. "But she should make a full recovery."

"That was impressive work," Alarick said quietly, his eyes on Diana rather than the patient.

She looked up, suddenly aware of how closely they stood, the adrenaline of the emergency still coursing through her veins. "We work well together," she admitted.

"Yes," he agreed. "We do."

Something in his voice made her pulse quicken. Diana turned away, busying herself with monitoring charms. "You should report this to Principal Starcatcher. I'll stay

with the patient."

"I'm not leaving you alone," he said simply.

"I'm perfectly capable—"

"I know you are," he interrupted gently. "That's not why I'm staying."

Diana met his eyes again, the unspoken tension between them almost palpable. "Why are you staying, then?"

Before he could answer, the student stirred, groaning softly. Diana shifted her attention to her patient, grateful for the interruption yet somehow disappointed by it.

After checking the student's vitals and helping her take a sip of healing potion, Diana settled back into her chair. The girl had drifted off to sleep again, her breathing steady and even.

"You know," Alarick said quietly, pulling up a chair on the opposite side of the bed, "I've been wondering something."

"What's that?" Diana asked, adjusting the monitoring charm hovering above the patient.

"Is the thought of us—you and me—really so terrible?" His direct gaze made evasion impossible.

Diana looked down at her hands. "It's complicated."

"Because of our age difference?"

"Partly," she admitted. "But also because of our professional relationship."

"You think people would question your judgment. Your professionalism."

"Wouldn't they? The younger man, the older woman... you know how people talk."

"Anyone who's seen you work would never question your expertise," he said with quiet conviction. "Besides, I've always had a thing for accomplished women who know what they're doing."

Diana's eyes widened. "You're not helping your case."

His laugh was soft but genuine. "My point is, I know what I want. And what I want is you, Diana. Not because you're older or despite it. Just because you're you."

The directness of his words left her momentarily speechless. Before she could formulate a response, the patient stirred again, murmuring something in her sleep.

Something shifted between them in that moment, a subtle but unmistakable change that made Diana's heart race. Alarick saw her not just as a healer but as a woman, and for the first time in years, Diana wasn't sure which frightened her more—the possibility that he might stop looking at her that way, or the possibility that he wouldn't.

"You should get some rest," she told him. "Tomorrow will be busy with the lumber delivery."

"What about you?"

"I'll stay with my patient."

He studied her for a moment, then nodded. "I'll come back in the morning. With breakfast." His smile turned mischievous. "Not that I'm trying to impress you with my responsible adult qualities like punctuality and food provision."

Despite everything, Diana found herself smiling. "That's not necessary—"

"I know." The warmth in his expression made something flutter inside her. "Good night, Diana."

After he left, Diana settled deeper into her chair, trying to make sense of the confusing emotions swirling within her. Whatever was happening between them shouldn't be allowed to develop further. She had her career to consider. Her professional reputation.

Fontina suddenly murmured, "Mr. Blackthorn is dreamy," despite being soundly asleep, "but he only has eyes for Nurse Maelstrom."

Diana nearly fell out of her chair. "That's the magical shock talking," she told the sleeping student firmly. "Go back to sleep."

But as she settled back to wait for morning—and the man who would arrive bearing breakfast—Diana wondered if perhaps the patient's magical shock had simply revealed what everyone else already seemed to know.

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Diana jerked awake, her neck screaming in protest from a night spent in the world's most vindictive chair. Sunlight flooded the temporary infirmary, and she squinted at it accusingly. Her patient, Miss Holloway, slept peacefully, monitoring charms pulsing with reassuring stability.

She stretched, several vertebrae popping in quick succession like tiny magical firecrackers.

"I'm pretty sure spines aren't supposed to make that sound."

Diana whirled around to see Alarick in the doorway, holding a tray that smelled divine enough to make her stomach growl with embarrassing volume. His hair was damp, shirt sleeves already rolled up as if proper sleeve length was against his religion.

"You actually brought breakfast," she said, eyeing the pastries and coffee with naked longing.

"I'm a man of my word." He placed the tray on a nearby table. "Though I'm not above bribery when it comes to peace negotiations."

"Smart strategy." Diana moved to check her patient, hyperaware of Alarick tracking her movements. "She's stable. The healing charms did their job."

"Unlike that torture device you call a chair." He poured tea, adding a splash of milk. "Here. Medicinal purposes."

"How did you know how I take my tea?" She accepted the cup, trying to ignore the tiny spark when their fingers brushed.

"I pay attention," he said simply, handing her a pastry that leaked cinnamon and possibly magic. "Perks of being the young, observant one."

Diana rolled her eyes but couldn't stop her smile. "Age jokes. Very mature."

"I save my maturity for important things. Like bringing breakfast to stubborn healers who forget to eat."

They ate by the window, morning sun turning the room golden. Diana sipped her perfectly prepared tea, watching Alarick review the monitoring charms with competent efficiency. When had he gotten so good at healing-adjacent magic?

"About last night," he began, voice low to avoid waking their patient.

"Mr. Blackthorn. Nurse Maelstrom."

Headmistress Raven materialized in the doorway, Edgar surveying them with beady, judgmental eyes.

Diana straightened reflexively. "Good morning, Headmistress. Fontina Rebloch is recovering well."

"So I've been informed." Raven's expression revealed nothing as she glanced between them. "The infirmary transfer must be completed by nightfall. Construction begins tomorrow."

"We've moved the essentials," Diana assured her. "The remaining items are ready for transport."

"Good. Given the delicate nature of healing instruments, I expect you both to supervise personally." Raven's gaze could have cut glass. "I trust you can work together effectively? Despite any personal considerations?"

Diana's cheeks flamed. "Of course, Headmistress. We're professionals."

"Excellent." Raven turned to leave, then paused. "Oh, and the faculty wing reported unusual magical fluctuations last night. Mr. Blackthorn, perhaps you could inspect the warding there after the infirmary transfer?"

"Yes, Headmistress."

After Raven departed, Diana exhaled dramatically. "Does she have surveillance spells or something?"

"The walls themselves probably file daily reports." Alarick glanced at Edgar, who had stayed behind. "Should we get to work before the feathered spy memorizes our conversation?"

The raven gave an affronted caw before flying after his mistress.

"Creepy bird," Diana muttered.

"He likes you."

"And you know this how?"

"He didn't try to steal your shiny things." Alarick grinned. "That's practically a marriage proposal from Edgar."

A groan from the bed saved Diana from responding. Fontina blinked awake,

grimacing.

"Easy," Diana said, moving to her side. "You're in the infirmary. How do you feel?"

"Like I tried to high-five lightning," Fontina croaked. "Did I really turn the practice hall purple?"

"Among other things," Alarick confirmed. "Though the color's fading. Mostly."

After examining her and prescribing rest, Diana turned to Alarick. "We should start the transfer. Some equipment needs precise magical calibration."

They worked through the morning, settling into a rhythm that felt dangerously natural. Their magic twined together effortlessly—his protective spells automatically adjusting to her healing charms, her arrangements intuitively aligning with his wards. They moved around each other like they'd been partners for years instead of days.

"That's the last of the sensitive equipment," Diana said as they levitated an ancient diagnostic mirror that hated being touched. "Regular staff can handle the rest."

"Perfect timing," Alarick replied, securing the mirror. "We've been at this for hours."

Diana blinked, surprised to see the sun high overhead. "Time flies when you're having fun," she said sarcastically, though it wasn't entirely untrue.

"Speaking of which, lunch?" Alarick revealed a basket hidden behind a cabinet. "I may have anticipated us forgetting to eat. Again."

"You're getting predictable," she said, though her stomach betrayed her with another embarrassing growl.

They settled by the window, unpacking sandwiches and drinks. Diana studied Alarick when he wasn't looking.

"I've been thinking about your idea," he said, biting into a sandwich. "Integrating healing spells into protective wards."

"Oh?" Diana tried to recall mentioning this.

"With the right magical buffer, we could create emergency wards that begin preliminary healing while medical help arrives." His eyes lit with enthusiasm, making him unfairly attractive. "The spell architecture would be complex, but if anyone could design the healing component, it would be you."

"You seem very confident in my abilities," she said, caught off guard by his matter-of-fact praise.

"I've seen you work," he shrugged.

Diana felt pleasure at his words—not flattery but genuine professional respect.

"Well," she managed, "your warding techniques are impressive too. I've never seen protective spells adapt so naturally to changing conditions."

His smile warmed her from the inside out. "Are we actually exchanging compliments? Should I check for magical influence?"

"Very funny." But she was smiling too. "Professional recognition isn't personal flattery."

"Isn't it?" His eyes held hers. "Because right now, it feels very personal."

The air between them crackled with something more potent than leftover magic. Diana's heart raced with a rhythm that had nothing to do with professional admiration.

"Alarick—" she began, then faltered.

"We never finished our conversation from last night," he said quietly. "About us."

"There is no 'us,'" she replied automatically, the words ringing hollow.

"Isn't there?" He set down his drink, eyes serious. "We can keep pretending this is just magical compatibility or professional respect. But we both know it's more."

Diana wanted to retreat behind her professional walls, but the events of the past days—working seamlessly during emergencies, their easy conversation at dinner, the perfect synchronization of their magic—made denial feel dishonest.

"It's complicated," she said lamely.

"It doesn't have to be." He moved closer, his warmth radiating toward her. "Unless you're genuinely not interested. If that's the case, I'll never mention it again."

Diana really looked at him—not just his obvious appeal, but the intelligence in his eyes, the confidence in his hands, the way he'd proven himself both skilled and considerate. Ten years younger, yes, but her equal in every way that mattered.

"That's not it," she admitted softly. "I am interested. More than I should be."

The naked desire that flashed in his eyes at her confession sent heat rushing through her.

"Then what's stopping you?" he asked, voice dropping. "Really?"

Diana swallowed. "Professional boundaries. Working together. The age thing. What people will say."

"And if none of that mattered?" His gaze intensified. "If it was just you and me, no complications. What would you want then?"

The question hung between them, demanding honesty she'd been avoiding since his return. Diana thought of all her careful arguments for maintaining distance.

None of them seemed important when he looked at her like that.

"I'd want this," she whispered, and kissed him.

The first brush of their lips was tentative, questioning. Then Alarick's hand came up to cradle her face, fingers threading into her hair, and any hesitation vanished. The kiss deepened, igniting something that had been building between them for days. Her hands rested on his shoulders, feeling the solid strength beneath her fingers as his arms encircled her, drawing her closer.

Magic sparked around them, literal sparks of blue and gold dancing in the air as their inherent magical energies responded to the connection. Diana had heard of such phenomenon but never experienced it—the rare magical resonance that occurred when two practitioners with highly compatible cores connected on an intimate level.

They broke apart, both breathless, staring at the shimmering magical display surrounding them.

"Well," Alarick said, his voice rougher than usual. "That answers a few questions."

Diana couldn't help the small laugh that escaped her. "About magical resonance?"

"Among other things." His smile was dazzling. "Like whether you're as magnificent at kissing as you are at healing spells."

"And the verdict?" She couldn't believe her own boldness.

"Exceeds expectations," he murmured, leaning in again. "Though further testing may be required."

This time, the kiss was deeper from the start, his mouth moving over hers with confident desire that made her head spin. Diana found herself pressed against the edge of the table, Alarick's body tantalizingly close as his hands slid down her back, pulling her firmly against him. The heat of him against her sent waves of awareness through her body, every nerve ending suddenly, acutely alive.

The sensation of being held, of being wanted so obviously, sent heat coursing through her. How long had it been since she'd allowed herself this kind of connection? Too long, clearly, given how rapidly her body was responding to his touch.

His lips traveled down her neck, finding a sensitive spot that made her gasp. Diana's hands clutched at his shoulders, her head tilting back to give him better access. The magical sparks intensified around them, responding to their mutual desire, casting the infirmary in a soft, shimmering glow.

"We should stop," she managed between kisses, even as her hands betrayed her by slipping beneath his shirt to feel the warm skin of his back, the play of muscles as he moved against her. "Anyone could walk in on us."

"Completely," he agreed, trailing kisses along her collarbone that sent shivers cascading through her. His voice was a low rumble against her skin. "Want me to

stop?"

"No," she admitted, her fingers threading through his hair to keep him close. "That's the problem."

His chuckle against her skin sent new waves of sensation through her. "Not seeing the problem, personally."

His hands found their way under her blouse, warm against her ribs, his thumbs tracing maddening patterns just beneath the edge of her bra. Diana arched into his touch without conscious thought, her body responding with a mind of its own. She could feel his arousal pressed against her hip, the evidence of his desire sending a fresh surge of heat through her lower belly.

One of his hands slid up to cup her breast through the thin fabric of her bra, his thumb brushing over the center in a way that drew a soft moan from her lips. The sound seemed to affect him deeply; his kiss became more urgent, his body pressing hers more firmly against the table.

Diana's logical mind made one last attempt at responsible behavior. "We don't want to be caught in a compromising position."

Alarick pulled back slightly, keeping his arms around her. His eyes were dark with desire, pupils dilated, but there was genuine consideration in them as well. "You're right. This isn't the place."

The fact that he would stop, that he respected her enough to acknowledge the legitimate concern, only made her want him more. Diana found herself caught between professional responsibility and increasingly insistent desire.

"The wards," she remembered suddenly. "You're supposed to check the faculty wing

wards this afternoon."

"The faculty wing," he repeated, understanding dawning. "Where our quarters are."

"Yes," she said, nodding.

"Which I should inspect. Thoroughly. Starting with yours."

"Yes. My quarters might require extensive examination."

The walk back to the faculty wing was an exercise in restraint, their conversation deliberately professional while the tension between them built with every step. They passed several students and faculty members, exchanging polite greetings while carefully maintaining proper distance from each other.

But the moment Diana's door closed behind them, that carefully maintained professionalism shattered. Alarick's mouth found hers, hungry and insistent, as her hands pulled him closer, all pretense of restraint abandoned. The magical resonance that had begun in the infirmary returned instantly, blue-gold sparks shimmering around them as their magic responded to their heightened emotions.

They moved through her sitting room in a tangle of increasingly urgent touches, bumping into furniture and laughing breathlessly before finding themselves at the threshold of her bedroom.

Alarick paused there, his hands cradling her face, his eyes searching hers. "Are you sure? We can slow down."

The consideration in his voice, the genuine care beneath the obvious desire, convinced Diana more than any passionate declaration could have. This wasn't just physical attraction or magical resonance. This was something deeper, a connection

that had been building since his return.

"I'm sure," she said, pulling him to her. "Though I reserve the right to blame temporary insanity later."

His smile was wicked as he backed her toward the bed. "Nothing temporary about what I'm feeling, Diana."

The sound of her name on his lips sent a thrill through her. He said it with such reverence, as if her name itself was a spell worth savoring. His hands were at her waist, then sliding up beneath her blouse, warm against her skin. Diana fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, eager to feel more of him, to explore the body she'd been pretending not to notice.

When his shirt finally fell open, revealing a chest defined by years of physical work rather than vanity, she ran her hands across his warm skin, feeling the solid strength beneath. She traced the contours of his shoulders, down the planes of his chest, following a thin trail of dark hair that disappeared beneath his waistband.

"Your turn," he murmured, his voice a low rumble that she could feel against her palms. His fingers found the hem of her blouse, tugging gently in question.

Diana hesitated only briefly before lifting her arms, allowing him to pull the garment over her head. It left her in a simple lace bra that suddenly felt both too revealing and not revealing enough. The way Alarick looked at her, with unconcealed appreciation and hunger, made her feel desirable in a way she hadn't in far too long.

"You're beautiful," he said, his voice rough with desire. His hands skimmed her sides, tracing the curve of her waist, the flare of her hips. "I've thought about this since the moment I saw you again."

Before she could respond, his lips were on her neck, trailing down to her collarbone, the junction of her shoulder. Each kiss left a trail of heat in its wake, her skin tingling with magical energy where his mouth had been. His hands slid up her back, finding the clasp of her bra with practiced ease. Diana arched into his touch as he caressed newly exposed skin, his mouth continuing its exploration down to the swell of her breast.

When his lips closed around her nipple, a gasp escaped her, pleasure spiraling outward from the point of contact. He lavished attention on one breast and then the other, his tongue and teeth creating sensations that sent tremors through her body. The magical shimmer around them intensified, responding to her pleasure, casting dancing patterns of light across their skin.

Alarick's attention was thorough, alternating between gentle and demanding in a way that suggested he was noting every response, adapting to what made her breath catch and her body arch. His hands traveled down her sides to her hips, thumbs hooking in the waistband of her skirt.

"You're overdressed," she managed to say, reaching for the fastening of his trousers.

He helped her, shedding the remainder of his clothing before assisting with hers. When they were finally skin to skin, Diana couldn't help the soft sound that escaped her at the exquisite sensation. Alarick's body was warm and solid against hers, his arousal evident as he pressed her back onto the bed.

Their magical resonance intensified with direct contact, a subtle glow emanating from where their skin touched. Diana had read about such phenomenon but always assumed the accounts were exaggerated for romantic effect. Now, experiencing the heightened sensitivity, the way her magic seemed to reach for his, she understood those descriptions had, if anything, understated the reality.

His hands moved over her with reverent exploration, as if mapping territory he intended to memorize. Every touch sent ripples of both physical pleasure and magical response through her body. When his lips followed the path of his hands, trailing down her stomach, Diana's breathing quickened in anticipation.

Alarick's hands explored her body with the same precision and care he brought to his work, finding places she hadn't realized were sensitive. When his fingers trailed up her inner thigh, she trembled with anticipation. The first touch against her center drew a gasp from her lips, pleasure sharp and immediate.

"Tell me what you like," he murmured against her hip, his fingers exploring with deliberate gentleness.

Diana couldn't remember the last time someone had asked that question—had cared enough about her pleasure to seek explicit guidance. The consideration behind the question was almost as arousing as his touch.

"This," she breathed as his fingers found a particularly sensitive spot, circling with perfect pressure. "Just like that."

He followed her guidance, his touch becoming more confident as he learned her responses. When he slid one finger inside her, then another, Diana's hips rose to meet his hand, seeking more of the exquisite sensation. The magical resonance between them amplified every touch, creating a feedback loop of physical and magical pleasure that was quickly overwhelming her senses.

But she wanted more than just his touch. Needed more. Her hand found him, wrapping around his length, feeling him pulse against her palm. Alarick's rhythm faltered momentarily at her touch, a groan escaping him that sent a thrill of feminine power through her.

"Diana," he said, her name half-warning, half-plea. "I won't last if you keep that up."

"Then don't wait," she replied, surprising herself with her boldness. "I want you. Now."

He reached for his discarded trousers, extracting protection from a pocket. Diana appreciated his preparation even as impatience coursed through her. When he finally settled between her thighs, the anticipation was almost unbearable.

The first push of him entering her drew matching gasps from them both. Alarick stilled, giving her time to adjust, his control evident in the tension of his muscles beneath her hands. Their magical resonance peaked at the moment of joining, casting the room in a soft blue-gold glow that pulsed in rhythm with their heartbeats.

When he began to move, it was with careful restraint that rapidly gave way to more urgent rhythm as Diana's responses made it clear what she wanted. She wrapped her legs around him, drawing him deeper, her hands tracing the flex of muscles in his back as he moved within her.

Their magic continued to entwine, amplifying every sensation, creating a connection that went beyond physical. Diana felt herself climbing toward release faster than expected, the combination of physical pleasure and magical resonance overwhelming her usual control.

Alarick shifted slightly, changing the angle of his thrusts to hit a spot inside her that sent lightning through her veins. Diana's nails dug into his shoulders, her head falling back as pleasure built toward an almost unbearable peak.

"Let go," Alarick whispered, sensing her closeness. His voice was strained with his own effort at control. "I've got you."

The simple reassurance, combined with a particularly perfect thrust, sent her over the edge. Diana's release washed through her in waves of pleasure, intensified by the magical connection between them. The room itself seemed to respond, the magical shimmer around them pulsing brightly with each wave of her climax.

Alarick followed soon after, his rhythm faltering as he groaned her name against her neck, his body tensing and then shuddering above her. Their magic flared one final time, a brief, brilliant flash that illuminated the room before slowly fading to a gentle glow.

They lay tangled together afterward, breathing gradually returning to normal, the magical glow slowly fading from their skin. Diana waited for regret or embarrassment to set in, for her practical mind to reassert itself with all the reasons this had been a mistake.

Instead, she felt a surprising contentment, a rightness she hadn't expected. Her body hummed with lingering pleasure, her magic settling into a quieter harmony with his that remained even after the visible manifestation had faded.

Alarick propped himself up on one elbow, studying her face. His hair was tousled, his expression soft in a way that made something in her chest tighten. "Having second thoughts yet?"

"Trying to," she admitted honestly. "But not succeeding particularly well."

His smile was both relieved and delighted. "Good. Because I'm having none whatsoever." He traced the curve of her cheek with gentle fingers. "That was..."

"Magical?" Diana supplied with a small smile.

"Quite literally." He laughed softly. "Though I think that's the first time I've ever seen

actual sparks fly."

Diana reached up to brush a lock of hair from his forehead. "The magical resonance is rare. I've read about it, but never experienced it before."

Ancient texts called it *amoris veneficium* —love magic—a term Diana stubbornly refused to think too deeply on right now.

"Never?" His expression turned curious. "Not with anyone?"

She shook her head. "Magic responds to emotional and physical connection, but this level of resonance is exceptionally uncommon. It suggests an unusual compatibility between our magical cores."

"So what you're saying," he said, a mischievous glint in his eye, "is that we're exceptional together."

Diana couldn't help but laugh. "That's a rather simplified interpretation of a complex magical phenomenon."

"But not incorrect." He leaned down to kiss her softly. "I prefer the simple truth. We're extraordinary together, Diana. In every way."

Diana traced idle patterns on his chest, marveling at the ease she felt with him despite the newness of this intimacy. "This complicates things."

"Does it?" He caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Or does it simply acknowledge what was already there?"

Before she could answer, a familiar silvery shape manifested in the center of the room—Headmistress Raven's messenger apparition, taking the form of an elegantly

austere raven.

"Nurse Maelstrom," it spoke in Raven's crisp tones. "Your presence is requested in the east practice hall immediately. A magical demonstration has had unexpected results."

The apparition dissolved, leaving them staring at the space it had occupied.

"Does she know?" Diana whispered, mortified at the thought.

"It's just a standard message apparition," Alarick assured her, though he looked less certain than his words suggested. "They find the recipient wherever they are. It doesn't mean she knows you're otherwise occupied."

Diana was already scrambling for her clothes, professionalism reasserting itself in the face of a medical emergency. "I need to go."

"I'll come with you." Alarick dressed with equal speed. "If it's a magical accident, you might need containment support."

She paused in the middle of buttoning her blouse, struck by the simple practicality of his offer. No pretense, no attempt to separate their professional and personal relationships—just a straightforward desire to help.

"Thank you," she said, meaning it for more than just the offer of assistance.

They were back to being Nurse Maelstrom and Mr. Blackthorn by the time they reached the practice hall, all evidence of their interlude concealed beneath professional demeanors. Only the lingering awareness between them, the subtle ways their magic continued to reach for each other, betrayed what had transpired.

One thing was certain—she could no longer pretend that Alarick Blackthorn was just another colleague. And she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to try.

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Diana woke to sunlight streaming through unfamiliar curtains and froze at the weight across her waist—Alarick's arm. Their skin still glowed with faint golden shimmer where they touched, their magical connection persisting even in sleep.

Last night's "professional debriefing" after the magical emergency had evolved into something distinctly unprofessional, resulting in her bedroom literally glowing with magical resonance.

She carefully extracted herself, sparing a glance at his peaceful face before reality crashed in. Monday morning. Patients. Responsibilities. A ten-years-younger colleague in her bed.

Great job maintaining boundaries, Maelstrom .

By the time she emerged from the bathroom, freshly showered and wrapped in a robe, she'd compiled a mental list of reasons why this was a terrible mistake. A spectacular, mind-blowing mistake—but a mistake nonetheless.

Alarick sat up in her bed with the sheet pooled around his waist, looking irritatingly comfortable. "Morning," he said, voice still rough with sleep. "You're thinking very loudly."

"I'm not thinking loudly. I'm not thinking at all," Diana replied, grabbing work robes with unnecessary focus. "Which was apparently my problem yesterday."

"Ah." His tone cooled. "We've reached the regret phase."

Diana turned to face him. "Not regret, exactly. More like delayed recognition of complications."

"Complications," he repeated flatly.

"We work together, Alarick. On a project Raven herself is monitoring." She clutched her robes like armor. "Yesterday was wonderful, but possibly a professional disaster."

To her surprise, he just nodded thoughtfully. "I understand. What do you propose?"

"Professional discretion," Diana said, relieved he wasn't dismissing her concerns. "Work during work hours. Keep personal interactions private."

"Reasonable." He rose from bed, apparently unbothered by his nudity as he gathered scattered clothing. He had a fine, muscular ass that her fingers itched to squeeze again.

So much for professionalism.

The golden shimmer traced his movements, visible evidence of their magical connection. "Though discretion doesn't mean pretending nothing happened."

"Of course not," she agreed quickly. "Just compartmentalizing."

He approached, now wearing trousers but still appealingly bare-chested. "I can compartmentalize," he said, voice dropping to that rumble that made her shiver. "But fair warning—I won't pretend I don't want you just because we're in the infirmary."

Diana swallowed hard. "That seems workable."

His kissed her lightly. Golden light sparked between them at the contact. "Good. Now

I should probably sneak back to my room before the student rumor mill goes into overdrive."

After he left, Diana finished dressing with unsteady hands. She could do this. She could focus despite memories of his hands, his mouth, their beautifully fused magic.

Absolutely. No problem whatsoever.

DIANA'S CONFIDENT RESOLUTION lasted exactly four hours and twenty-three minutes.

The temporary infirmary had been busy all morning with defensive and offensive injuries, but that was par for the course in the summer training camps. Diana had just finished treating a freshman with a deflection burn when Alarick arrived to work on the far wall. He'd greeted her professionally, maintained appropriate distance, and focused entirely on his task.

It was infuriating how sexy he looked when concentrating on complex warding spells.

"Nurse Maelstrom?" Malta interrupted Diana's inappropriate thoughts, flanked by Polly and Irideane. "We need help with... um... a medical situation."

Diana raised an eyebrow, noting their conspicuous lack of injuries. "What kind of medical situation, Miss Kenobrie?"

"It's... private." Malta's eyes darted to where Alarick worked, making her true motive painfully obvious.

With a sigh, Diana led them to the examination area, closing the privacy curtain. "What seems to be the problem?"

The girls exchanged glances before Malta blurted, "We were wondering if you could tell us more about Mr. Blackthorn? For our... health class project."

"Your health class project," Diana repeated flatly.

"About... healing ward integration," Polly added quickly. "Since he's working on the infirmary."

"And how old is he?" Irideane asked with zero subtlety. "Just for research."

Diana pinched the bridge of her nose. "Ladies, Mr. Blackthorn is not part of any curriculum, and his age is entirely irrelevant to any legitimate school project."

"But he's, like, super young to be so good at warding magic, right?" Malta pressed. "My sister says most ward specialists are practically ancient."

"Mr. Blackthorn is twenty-five, has extensive training, and is not a subject for teenage speculation," Diana said sharply, ignoring the twinge at acknowledging their age gap. "Unless you have actual medical concerns, I suggest you return to class."

"Twenty-five," Irideane breathed, impressed. "So he's totally available."

"He's a professional contractor working on a school project," Diana corrected, her voice too sharp. "He is not available as it would be inappropriate, not to mention illegal to be involved with students."

Something in her tone made the girls exchange looks. "Sorry, Nurse Maelstrom," Malta said, not looking sorry at all. "We had no idea you were already, you know..."

"I'm not upset," Diana said automatically.

"Right." Malta nodded with exaggerated understanding. "Got it. We'll respect your... territory."

“There is no...territory.”

After they left, Diana leaned against the examination table, embarrassed by her defensive reaction. She'd practically announced her interest with that response.

"Everything okay?" Alarick appeared at the curtain, looking concerned. "Those girls seemed upset when they left."

"They'll survive the crushing disappointment of not getting details about your personal life," Diana replied dryly. "Apparently you're the subject of their 'health class project.'"

His lips twitched. "Let me guess—they wanted to know if I'm single and have no morals about corrupting young witches?"

"Something like that." Diana busied herself rearranging supplies. "I informed them professional contractors aren't appropriate subjects for teenage infatuation."

"Ah." Alarick leaned against the doorframe, studying her with those too-perceptive eyes. "And did you also tell them that I'm currently occupied with an inappropriate infatuation of my own?"

Before Diana could respond, the infirmary door burst open and the potions professor, Minerva Runeheart came in.

"I'm glad I caught you in between patients." She paused, noting their proximity and

the tension between them. Her eyes widened before a knowing smile spread across her face. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Not at all," Diana said quickly, stepping away from Alarick. "Did you need healing assistance?"

"Actually, yes." Minerva's gaze kept darting between them. "We're planning an advanced demonstration of combat spells tomorrow. Given the potential for accidents, I wanted to coordinate you for safety measures."

"What type of demonstration?" Minerva asked.

"Professor Guillet from Frog's Hollow is coming in to show several dueling options."

"We're going to need specialized containment wards," Alarick said. "I've seen Xena Guillet in action."

I bet you had , Diana thought sourly.

Xena showed up last term offering Alarick a career-making opportunity with significant advancement potential and young, innovative colleagues. Xena had barely concealed her surprise when Alarick mentioned at the time that his current project lead was "Nurse Maelstrom." Her "Oh, I remember her from when I was a student" had been the conversational equivalent of a slap.

"I'll need to modify the standard containment spells," Alarick said thoughtfully. "Dueling magic could produce chaotic magical signatures that typical wards can't fully contain."

"And I'll prepare specialized counterspells and other medicinal needs. Especially for magical concussions," Diana added.

Minerva nodded. "I knew I came to the right place."

"When and where is this demonstration scheduled?"

"Tomorrow morning, east practice field. I need to get back to the potion lab. These kids are going through healing potions like Gatorade. In fact, Archie has me working on a formula that acts both like an electrolyte fresher and a healing potion. I'll see you two tomorrow." Minerva hustled out, not knowing or caring the amount of extra work she had just dumped on them.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Professor Everflame burst into the infirmary, practically dragging a lanky sophomore boy who was floating several inches above the ground, spinning in slow, uncontrollable circles.

"It's Bartholomew Taleggio" she said. "His shield went haywire during practice."

Bartholomew revolved like a human compass needle, gangly limbs flailing as he tried to grab onto anything stable. His tie floated up to smack him in the face with each rotation, and his uniform robe billowed out dramatically.

"This is SO not cool," he groaned, voice cracking mid-sentence. "Dude, make it stop. Seriously. Mimmolette saw me like this."

Diana bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Let me see what we're dealing with." Her diagnostic spell revealed the problem instantly. "Your shield has inverted and created a personal anti-gravity field."

"Whatever. Please, just fix it." Bartholomew's face a mix of teenage mortification and nausea. "If this ends up on someone's crystal ball social feed, my life is over."

OVER!"

"I'll need help," Diana said, turning to Alarick. "The spell's warped into his magical aura."

Alarick joined them, maintaining a straight face despite Bartholomew's dramatic declarations of impending social death. "Never seen a shield turn into orbital magic before."

"I need a containment field," Diana explained. "Otherwise, when I break the spell—"

"Everyone in a ten-foot radius starts orbiting too," Alarick finished. "On it."

He quickly spun a magical barrier around them while Diana prepared her counter-spell. As they worked together, golden threads appeared where their magic met, weaving an intricate web around the spinning student.

"So unfair," Bartholomew mumbled as he rotated past. "Chaumes tries the same spell and gets extra credit. I try it and become a human satellite."

"Oh my," Professor Guillet gasped, watching Diana and Alarick work. "That's not normal, is it? The gold webbing between you two?"

Diana and Alarick exchanged panicked glances.

"Standard procedure," Diana lied, focusing on Bartholomew's predicament. "Magical stabilization technique."

"Completely routine," Alarick agreed, though the golden threads multiplied when their eyes met.

"Hello?" Bartholomew interrupted with peak teenage indignation. "I'm missing lunch and Taco Tuesday waits for no man."

Working together, they managed to break the rogue spell. Bartholomew dropped to the floor with a thud, then immediately scrambled to check his hair in the reflection of a nearby metal cabinet.

"Is my hair messed up? It's messed up, isn't it? Great, just great." He frantically tried to fix his disheveled appearance. "Can I get a note saying this was a medical emergency and not me trying some stupid spell to impress Mimmolette?"

"Patient confidentiality," Diana assured him, handing him an anti-nausea potion. "Though you might want to avoid Taco Tuesday for lunch."

"Whatever," Bartholomew muttered, though he looked relieved. "Um, thanks and stuff." He bolted for the door with Professor Guillet lecturing after him.

After they left, Alarick turned to Diana with a grin. "So that happened."

"Teenagers," Diana said. "Everything is either the best thing ever or the literal end of the world."

"I'm adding 'Human Gyroscope Containment' to my resume," Alarick said with a straight face.

Diana snorted despite herself. "Very professional."

"Speaking of professional..." He gestured to the golden threads still connecting them where their magic had interacted. "Do you think Guillet bought our 'standard procedure' explanation?"

"About as much as I believe Bartholomew was just doing his classwork instead of trying to impress a girl," Diana said.

THAT EVENING AT FACULTY dinner, Diana sat beside Alarick at the high table, increasingly aware of their magical fusion still humming between them. Occasionally their hands would brush as they reached for dishes, each casual contact sending a ripple of golden light that Diana prayed wasn't visible to their colleagues.

Halfway through the meal, she felt something brush against her foot. Glancing down, she discovered a garden gnome sitting under the table.

"What the—" she hissed, nudging Alarick.

He looked down, eyes widening before his lips curved in amusement. "We have company."

The gnome made a series of gestures that seemed to be encouraging them to sit closer together, then pointed at their hands with enthusiastic approval—right where the faint golden shimmer was most visible.

"Shoo," Diana whispered, trying to nudge it away with her foot. The gnome dodged, looking offended, then scurried out from under the table.

She thought that was the end of it until a commotion erupted at the Newttown High School's table. A bunch of kids were pointing and giggling as the garden gnome climbed onto their table, pantomiming some kind of romantic scenario using salt and pepper shakers.

"Is that gnome... proposing?" Alarick asked incredulously.

Diana watched in horror as the gnome arranged the salt and pepper shakers side by side, then used a napkin to craft a tiny bridal veil for the salt shaker. It placed a miniature ring made from a bread twist-tie on the pepper shaker, then began conducting an elaborate wedding ceremony, complete with dramatic pantomime of tearful vows.

"It's marrying us off," Diana hissed as the gnome made the shakers kiss. "Via condiment proxy."

The girls were beside themselves with delight, while faculty members began craning their necks to watch the bizarre performance.

"This is ridiculous," Diana muttered, resisting the urge to slide under the table.

"They sense magical fusion," Alarick whispered, amusement evident. "Garden gnomes are attuned to it. It's why they've been following me around since we started working together."

"You mean they knew before we did?" Diana hissed, mortified.

"Magical creatures often do," he replied softly. "They recognize compatible magic before humans notice it."

The gnome, satisfied with its performance, took a theatrical bow before hopping down and scurrying toward the exit. As it passed the head table, it paused to make a gesture toward Diana and Alarick that could only be described as obscene.

"I need to get out of here." Diana stood abruptly, ignoring curious glances. She fled back to her room, both relieved and disappointed that Alarick didn't follow her.

She needed to know more about what was going on with the golden threads. She

waited for Professor Everflame to head back to the library before ambushing her with questions.

"Magical fusion is incredibly rare," Professor Everflame explained when Diana cautiously inquired about the golden threads. "It happens when two magical cores are so compatible they naturally reach for each other. The ancient texts call it 'amoris veneficium' - love magic - though that's a bit romantic for academic purposes."

"And these... connections are visible?" Diana asked, trying to sound merely professionally curious.

"Only in advanced cases, and typically only to those experiencing it. Though magical creatures can often sense it." Everflame gave her a knowing look. "Have the garden gnomes been acting strangely around you lately?"

Diana felt her face warm. "I wouldn't know. I don't make a habit of observing garden gnome behavior."

"Mmm," Everflame smiled. "Well, if golden light appears when you touch someone, I'd suggest having a very honest conversation with that person. Magical fusion doesn't create feelings, Diana, but it does amplify what's already there."

That was helpful. And terrifying.

"Here, read this." She handed her a thick tome, "Magical Fusion: Extraordinary Connection and its Risks" by Archmage Burrata Morbier. The yellowed pages contained detailed accounts of fused magical pairs achieving feats impossible for individual mages.

Diana took it back to her room to read. It was boring as heck and she skipped a great deal of it. But as she turned to the final chapter, "Dangers of Dependence," her

stomach tightened. Morbier warned that prolonged fusion could eventually make separated magic unstable, like muscles atrophying without use. In rare cases, forced separation had resulted in permanent magical impairment.

Diana closed the book slowly. Her healing magic had improved based on their connection. It was beginning to worry her how her spells seemed to instinctively reach for his energy to complete themselves. The thought of losing that connection was increasingly terrifying—not just emotionally, but professionally. Was she risking her lifelong healing abilities for love? And was that a price she was willing to pay? She'd have to do more research. But for now, they had Adelweiss to deal with.

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"Everyone back. Maintain the safety perimeter." Malachai's voice boomed across the east practice field, his usual jovial tone replaced by urgent authority.

Diana gripped her healing satchel—the one with the temperamental zipper that bit anyone else who tried to open it—and mentally ran through her emergency protocols. Across the field, Alarick stood with his feet planted firmly, hands weaving patterns as he maintained their protective circle. The same hands that had been weaving patterns of an entirely different nature across her skin the other night. Even from this distance, she saw golden threads dancing around his fingertips—evidence of their magical fusion that grew stronger with each kiss they'd shared.

Professor Xena Guillet strutted around the dueling circle like a runway model with a teaching certificate still warm from the printer. At twenty-five—a full decade younger than Diana—her elaborate robes were strategically tailored to highlight curves that had no business being part of academic attire. The same Xena Guillet who just five years ago had been whining in Diana's infirmary about magical acne treatments was now a "rising star in theoretical dueling."

"She's planning something flashy," Diana muttered to Minerva, who was leaning against a cart full of healing potions. "Those aren't teaching robes. They're 'watch-me-show-off' garb."

"Raven's watching." Minerva nodded toward where the Headmistress stood beneath an oak, her familiar Edgar preening importantly on her shoulder. "Not even Guillet would try something ridiculous with Raven here."

Diana wasn't convinced. Xena had that unmistakable gleam of a witch with

something to prove—the same look Diana had seen on far too many recent graduates who thought six months of field experience qualified them as experts. It didn't help that this morning she'd overheard Guillet telling Alarick how "refreshing" it was to work with someone who "appreciates innovative approaches without being stuck in outdated methodologies"—while looking directly at Diana.

Alarick caught her eye. The golden thread between them allowed her to sense his wariness. She sent back reassurance, watching as he subtly strengthened the northwestern corner in response.

"For today's advanced demonstration," Xena announced, her voice magically amplified to theater-level drama, "I'll be showcasing revolutionary dueling techniques I've rediscovered from the ancient masters."

She flourished her wand like a conductor on too much pepper-up potion. "Traditional dueling relies on direct opposition—spell versus counterspell. But what if..." she paused for dramatic effect, "we could turn an opponent's magic against them?"

Diana rolled her eyes so hard she nearly saw her own brain. "That's not revolutionary. That's basic reflection, taught to Juniors."

"Observe," Guillet twirled elaborately, casting a spell that created a swirling violet bubble around her. "This is an absorptive redirection field. When hostile magic encounters this shield, I can capture and repurpose it."

Diana froze. That wasn't reflection. That was a modified reflective void, forbidden after the Lisbon Disaster when half the city's witches ended up casting spells that worked backward forever.

Before Diana could shout a warning, Xena's assistant—a nervous witch who clearly wanted to update her resume—sent a simple stunning spell toward the bubble. The

red bolt hit the surface and disappeared with a soft pfft sound.

Students applauded. Diana didn't. She'd seen what happened when magic disappeared into places it shouldn't go.

"Again," Xena commanded, flashing a smile and a bit of cleavage in Alarick's direction. "Something stronger this time."

The assistant cast a more powerful hex. When it hit the bubble, the surface rippled like water about to boil. A discordant hum filled the air.

"That's not right," Diana said, already moving. "Alarick!"

He'd seen it too. "Xena, your field is destabilizing. Dissolve it now."

Either Xena couldn't hear over the increasingly loud humming, or her ego had stuffed cotton in her ears. "Now for the most impressive part," she continued, raising her hands dramatically. "The absorbed magic can be—"

The bubble collapsed inward with a sound like tearing silk, then exploded outward in a wave of chaotic magic. Xena flew backward like she'd personally offended gravity.

Diana sprinted forward, weaving protective charms around the nearest students. The golden shimmer of her magic—enhanced by her connection to Alarick—spread wider than she'd ever managed before.

"Is this the demonstration or did something go wrong?" a confused freshman asked as Diana shielded him.

"If it was the demonstration, Professor Guillet wouldn't be doing her impression of a rag doll thrown by a toddler," Irideane Kallus snickered.

Students stumbled around like they'd sampled too much enchanted cider, their faces twisted in confusion as magical aftershocks rippled through the air. One senior's hair became a snapping wad of serpents. A pair of sophomores spun in slow circles, unable to stop, while a Newtown student hiccupped tiny storm clouds.

"I feel like my brain is floating three feet above my head," complained Polly O'Chetter, whose skin had switched over to scales.

"That's the magical disorientation," Diana explained, quickly casting a stabilizing spell that returned the girl's skin to normal. "The void disrupts reality."

All the while, she sensed Alarick fighting to contain the wild magic still whipping around the demonstration area, their golden threads of their fusion occasionally visible as he corralled rogue spell fragments before they could cause more chaos.

Xena had taken the worst of it. She lay unconscious, faint bolts of lightning crackling over her skin. Diana knelt beside her, diagnostic charms revealing the damage.

"Magical contamination," she reported to Headmistress Raven, who had appeared silently beside her. "The field collapsed and left fragments embedded in her core. She needs specialized treatment."

"Already summoned," Raven replied, her expression grave as Edgar circled anxiously overhead. "How severe?"

"She'll live," Diana said after a deeper examination. "But whether she'll cast again without turning teacups into tadpoles depends on how quickly help arrives."

As they waited for the specialists, Diana and Alarick worked together to stabilize the area. Their fusion made them extraordinarily effective. His protective magic reinforced her healing spells. Her healing energy strengthened his wards.

"Your barriers saved lives today," Diana said. "If your circle hadn't held..."

"It nearly didn't," he admitted, his voice strained. "That collapse was stronger than anything I've ever contained."

"But you adjusted. I felt you drawing on our fusion. Quick thinking."

A tired smile touched his lips. "High praise from the woman who once told me my ward designs had all the stability of a drunken unicyclist."

Their eyes met, a moment of connection amid the chaos. The golden threads of their fusion brightened between them.

"The Magical Education Board should never have approved these demonstrations," Diana muttered as they helped another injured student. "Experimental defensive magic requires proper safety protocols."

"That's what's strange," Alarick replied, his voice low. "I reviewed Xena's proposal. It was full of safety precautions that weren't implemented today. And the equipment she used? It had Adelweiss markings."

"Trustee Adelweiss? The one funding the summer training program?"

Alarick nodded grimly. "The very same. His company has been pushing schools to adopt their 'enhanced' equipment despite multiple safety concerns raised by the Warding Council."

Diana frowned. "Why would Grimm Mawr agree to that?"

"Money," Alarick said simply. "Academies are competing for students, and cutting-edge training programs attract applicants. But I'm beginning to wonder if there's more

to it than just profit."

"Mr. Blackthorn. Nurse Maelstrom, you can drop your protective shieldings." Headmistress Raven said, interrupting their conversation. "The specialists have arrived."

BY THE TIME SHE'D HANDED over Xena's care and tended to the remaining students, Diana was swaying with exhaustion. Her fingertips tingled unpleasantly, and black spots danced at the edges of her vision.

She was trying to focus on a final healing spell when Alarick appeared at her side, his hand steadying her elbow. "That's enough," he said gently but firmly. "You're running on empty."

"I'm fine," she lied automatically, though the tremor in her hands betrayed her.

"You're about three spells away from magical burnout," he countered. "And I'd rather not have to explain to Raven why her head nurse collapsed face-first into a cauldron."

Before Diana could respond, Minerva bustled over with a tray of bubbling potions.

"Revitalization draught," she announced, handing them each a vial. "And don't give me that look, Diana—these aren't from Malta's experimental batch. The last time someone drank those, Professor Everflame couldn't stop speaking in limericks for a week."

Alarick chuckled. "I remember. 'There once was a teacher of runes, whose classes ended too soon...'"

"Because magical marks kept transforming to sharks, and swimming around the classroom," Diana finished with a reluctant smile.

"Everflame still can't look at a shark without breaking into verse." Minerva grinned. "Now drink up, both of you. Headmistress's orders—you're relieved of duty for the day."

The potion tasted of summer herbs and crackling energy, refreshing Diana from the inside out as it replenished some of her depleted magic.

"Better?" Alarick asked, his own color improving.

"Getting there," she admitted. "Though I should check on the students in the infirmary—"

"Already handled," Minerva interrupted. "Malachai and Ceries have it covered. You two look like you've been used as troll chew toys. Go rest."

THE FACULTY WING WAS quiet, most professors still dealing with the aftermath. At her door, Diana hesitated.

"Would you like company?" Alarick asked softly. "Just to rest," he added, reading her hesitation. "Magical depletion is easier when you're not alone."

The genuine concern in his voice touched her. "I'd like that."

Inside, Diana collapsed onto her sofa, too tired even to remove her boots. Alarick settled beside her, his arm coming naturally around her shoulders. She leaned into him, her head finding the perfect spot against his shoulder. Golden threads appeared

where their bodies touched, gentle and soothing.

"You were brilliant today," he murmured against her hair. "I've never seen healing magic extended so far."

"Your protective circle was impressive too," she replied, eyes drifting closed. "Most warders would have lost control when the bubble burst."

They sat in silence, their breathing gradually synchronizing. Diana felt herself sinking toward sleep, lulled by Alarick's steady heartbeat.

When Diana woke, she was still on the sofa, but now lying down with her grandmother's quilt tucked around her. Alarick sat in a nearby armchair, snoring lightly. He must have sensed her looking at him because his eyes fluttered open.

"How long was I out?" she asked, voice husky with sleep.

"A few hours. You needed it."

"You didn't have to stay."

"I wanted to."

"How are you feeling?"

"Better." Diana sat up, running a hand through her tousled hair. "My magic's still depleted, but at least the room has stopped spinning. What about you?"

"I've had worse," he shrugged. "The advantage of youth, I suppose," he added, a teasing glint in his eye.

The casual reference to his age made Diana tense, reality intruding. Young indeed—a brilliant career ahead of him, while she was established, settled in her ways. Like Xena had implied, with her talk of "fresh perspectives" and "cutting-edge innovations" while eyeing Alarick like he was a prize to be poached.

Alarick caught her change in mood. "Diana? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said automatically, then sighed. "Just... reality setting in. Xena was showing off for you."

"Huh?"

"She wants you to go back to Frog's Hollow with her."

He looked surprised. "She didn't mention it."

"That's because she's currently unconscious."

Understanding dawned on his face. "You think I'm going to leave."

"You did before," Diana said quietly. "After you installed the singing cabinets."

"That was different," he protested. "We weren't... there wasn't..." he gestured between them, golden threads shimmering briefly where his hand passed near hers.

"We're at different stages, Alarick," she continued. "You're building your career, while I'm—"

"While you're what? Past your prime at thirty-five?" He ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. "That's ridiculous, Diana. Magical careers span centuries."

"It's not just about lifespan," she tried to explain. "It's about expectations. Experience. Where we each are in life."

"Have you asked me where I want to be?" His direct gaze challenged her. "Or are you making assumptions that I've got the hots for Xena?"

The question caught her off guard. "I—"

"Because if you asked," he continued, voice softening, "I'd tell you that I want someone who challenges me magically and intellectually. Someone who's passionate about their work. Someone who sees me as an equal, not as some young wizard passing through."

The intensity in his eyes made her heart race. "Alarick—"

"I'd tell you that I've never felt a magical connection like ours with anyone," he said, taking her hand. The golden threads flared between their palms, bright enough to cast shadows. "This fusion isn't just rare, Diana—it's once in a lifetime. Some witches and wizards search their entire lives and never find it."

Diana felt something shift inside her, a warmth spreading through her chest. "It's happening very fast."

"Magic doesn't follow bureaucratic timelines," he replied with a smile. "Our magic recognized something our conscious minds are still figuring out."

"I care about you," she admitted softly.

His lifted her hand to his lips. "I'll take that as progress."

A sharp knock interrupted whatever might have happened next. Diana reluctantly

pulled away, smoothing her rumpled robes before answering.

Headmistress Raven stood in the hallway, Edgar perched on her shoulder with his unnervingly intelligent gaze. "Nurse Maelstrom. I trust you've rested?"

"Yes, Headmistress," Diana replied, acutely aware of Alarick still sitting on her sofa with her grandmother's quilt pooled around him. "I'm feeling much better."

Raven's sharp eyes took in the situation with one glance. "Good. I need to speak with you both about today's incident. May I come in?"

Raven informed them that Professor Guillet had mentioned receiving a "rare grimoire of ancient dueling techniques" from someone connected to Trustee Adelweiss.

"You think a trustee is deliberately spreading dangerous magic?" Diana asked, the implications chilling. "But why would someone on the school board want to endanger students?"

"That," Raven said grimly, "is what we need to discover. After what happened with Trustee Thorncraft, I'm not taking any more chances. If a trustee approaches either of you, I want to know about it immediately."

They both nodded.

"One more thing. The magical fusion between you two is both rare and valuable. Whatever personal entanglement facilitates that connection is, frankly, none of my concern—provided it doesn't interfere with your duties."

With that surprisingly direct acknowledgment, she swept out, leaving them staring after her in stunned silence.

"Did the Headmistress just give us her blessing?" Alarick asked finally.

"I think she did," Diana replied, unsure whether to be relieved or mortified. "In her own particular way."

"Well," he said, a smile spreading across his face, "that's one complication addressed."

Diana laughed. "One down, several to go."

"What would you prefer we call this?" His eyes held that warmth that made her pulse quicken. "Mystical partnership? Arcane liaison? Enchanted affair?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," she cautioned, though her tone had softened. "We still have other considerations."

"Of course," he agreed, moving closer. "Very serious magical considerations that require extensive exploration."

"Exactly," she nodded, fighting a smile as he reached for her. "Scholarly, thorough exploration."

"Absolutely," he murmured, his lips now inches from hers. "Starting right now."

Their kiss was gentle, the day's shared danger lending it a depth that transcended mere passion. The golden threads of their fusion enveloped them, creating a cocoon of light where only they existed.

Later, as they lay together, Alarick traced patterns on her bare shoulder, each touch leaving trails of shimmering gold on her skin. "I meant what I said earlier. About never having felt this kind of connection before."

Diana looked up at him, seeing the vulnerability beneath his confidence. "I believe you."

"But you're still uncertain."

"I'm trying not to be," she admitted. "It's just... you have your whole career ahead of you. I don't want to be something you regret or outgrow."

"Is that what you're worried about?" He propped himself up, expression incredulous. "That I'll somehow regret being with you?"

"It happens," she said simply. "Young wizard, older witch... it's a familiar pattern. Exciting until a better opportunity comes along."

"That's not what this is," he said firmly. "This isn't some cliché, Diana. This is real—for me, at least."

The raw honesty in his voice made her throat tighten. She reached up to touch his face, golden light following her fingertips. "For me too. That's what scares me."

Suddenly, a ghostly silver raven materialized with a thunderous flap of spectral wings, hovering imperiously above the bed. The bird opened its beak and spoke in Headmistress Raven's crisp, no-nonsense tone:

"Diana! Multiple students in the girls' dormitory showing signs of magical contamination from this morning's incident. Your expertise required immediately!"

The apparition dissolved into wisps of silver mist, leaving them both already reaching for clothes, the intimate conversation abandoned.

"I'll come with you," Alarick said. "If it's contamination, you'll need protection

support."

Diana nodded, grateful for both his assistance and the reprieve from emotional vulnerability. Because the truth she wasn't ready to admit was that she was falling for him. Falling hard, despite all her practical concerns and logical objections. And that realization was more terrifying than any magical explosion she'd ever faced.

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"Are the affected students contained?" Diana asked as she hurried into the girls' dormitory, Alarick close behind. Golden threads spun between them like magical spiderwebs, brightening whenever they moved in sync.

Ceries stood outside a room cordoned off with shimmering barriers. "More or less. Five students showing signs of void contamination. Nothing life-threatening, but they're exhibiting some... unusual effects."

"Define unusual," Alarick said, eyeing the barrier.

As if on cue, a burst of maniacal giggling erupted from the room, followed by what sounded distinctly like someone mooing.

"That would be Irideane Kallus," Ceries explained with remarkable calm. "She's convinced she's a dairy cow. The others are either hysterical from the contamination or from watching Irideane try to graze on her bedsheets."

Diana bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Void contamination affecting the perception centers. Classic symptom."

"I'll strengthen the containment while you work," Alarick said, his magic immediately weaving into Ceries's barrier. The golden threads between him and Diana pulsed brighter, creating a bridge between their powers.

Inside, they found exactly the scene Ceries had described. Irideane Kallus, normally the most serious student in her year, was on all fours, chewing a corner of her bedspread while making impressive bovine sounds. Her roommates were in varying

states of magical distress—one floating above her bed, another speaking backwards, and two collapsed in giggles with hair cycling through rainbow hues.

"Oh thank gods you're here," said the floating student, slowly rotating like a human mobile. "We were practicing those shield variants when things got... weird."

"Residual void energy," Diana confirmed, meeting Alarick's eyes. "Delayed reaction from this morning's disaster."

"Magical indigestion," Alarick nodded sagely. "Always hits hours after consuming questionable spellwork."

For the next hour, they worked in perfect tandem to treat each student. Diana extracted the foreign magic while Alarick contained it, their connection creating a golden-hued bubble around each patient. The girls gradually returned to normal—though Irideane would definitely be hearing cow jokes until graduation.

"Remarkable teamwork," Ceries said when they emerged, the students safely resting. "Almost as if you two share some kind of... intimate connection."

Diana felt heat rise to her face. "Professional synchronicity," she said firmly.

"Very professional," Ceries replied with a knowing smirk. "Which explains why the garden gnomes have formed a 'Diana and Alarick Appreciation Society' that meets nightly under your window."

"The gnomes need hobbies," Diana said, refusing to meet Alarick's eyes despite feeling his amused gaze. "I need to check on the infirmary patients before turning in."

She walked away with dignity, knowing Alarick would follow. His footsteps caught up moments later.

"Garden gnome appreciation society?" he asked, eyes twinkling. "I'm flattered. Though slightly concerned about what exactly they're appreciating."

"We should be concerned about maintaining a professional distance," Diana replied without conviction. "Especially with this new committee assignment from Raven."

"Speaking of which," Alarick said, his tone shifting, "every curriculum change being marketed to magical academies promotes high-risk techniques with inadequate safety."

"All fitting perfectly with Adelweiss's profit scheme," Diana nodded grimly.

They reached the infirmary, where Diana spent the next half hour checking on patients. All were recovering well, with only minor lingering effects like occasionally speaking in rhyme or temporarily transparent earlobes.

As she finished her final examination, magical exhaustion hit her like a troll with a grudge. Despite the restorative potion and rest earlier, the intensive healing had depleted her reserves.

"You're dead on your feet," Alarick observed. "Let me walk you back."

The journey to the faculty wing passed in companionable quiet, both too magically drained for unnecessary words. At her door, Diana hesitated only briefly before inviting him in.

"Just to be clear," she said as the door closed, "I'm too exhausted for anything but actual sleep tonight."

"I assumed as much," he replied with a gentle smile. "I'm not exactly brimming with magical energy myself. But I'd rather be tired with you than anywhere else."

The simple honesty of his words touched something deep inside her. Diana reached for him, not with passion but with a tenderness that felt almost more intimate.

"Stay, then," she said softly. "Just to sleep."

Later, lying in the darkness with Alarick's arm around her waist, golden threads illuminating their skin where they touched, Diana reflected on how quickly this had become natural—his presence in her bed, her space, her life. It should have been terrifying, this rapid evolution from colleagues to whatever they were now. Instead, it felt strangely inevitable, as if they'd been moving toward this connection from the moment he'd returned.

"I can hear you thinking," Alarick murmured, his voice rough with approaching sleep.

"Just processing," she replied quietly. "It's been an eventful few days."

His arm tightened slightly around her. "Any regrets?"

"Not about this," she said, surprising herself with her certainty. "Just concern about what comes next."

"Sleep comes next," he said, pressing a kiss to her hair. "Everything else can wait until morning."

Diana smiled in the darkness, relaxing into his embrace. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, but for now, this was enough.

M ORNING ARRIVED WITH impatient rapping at her door. Diana bolted upright,

momentarily disoriented before remembering Alarick's presence. He was already awake, watching her with an expression that made her heart flutter.

"Someone's persistent," he murmured, glancing toward the door.

The knocking continued as Diana scrambled for her robe, tying it hastily before answering. Headmistress Raven stood in the hallway, Edgar fixing her with his unnervingly intelligent stare.

"Nurse Maelstrom," Raven nodded. "My apologies for the early hour, but there's been a development regarding our investigation."

"Of course, Headmistress," Diana said, suddenly aware of her disheveled appearance and the fact that Alarick was still in her bed. "If you'll give me a moment to dress—"

"No need for formality," Raven interrupted, stepping inside without waiting. "This won't take long, and Mr. Blackthorn should hear it as well."

Diana's face warmed as Alarick emerged from the bedroom, hastily dressed in yesterday's clothes. To his credit, he maintained perfect composure, greeting Raven with a respectful nod.

"Headmistress. You mentioned a development?"

"Indeed." Raven settled into an armchair, Edgar hopping down to perch on the back. "The demonstration tournament has been moved up to this weekend. Adelweiss Magical Arms is introducing their new line of 'enhanced' dueling equipment at academies across the continent next week."

Diana and Alarick exchanged concerned glances. "That's accelerated from the original timeline," Alarick noted. "What changed?"

"Yesterday's incident may have alerted them that we're investigating," Raven replied. "Professor Guillet was their test subject, presumably reporting on the 'extraordinary effectiveness' of their amplified wands and defensive accessories."

"And when she was injured..." Diana began.

"Their star demonstrator was sidelined," Raven nodded. "They're rushing to showcase before we can prove the dangers."

"Moving forward while we're still dealing with the fallout," Diana concluded. "Classic."

"Precisely. I need you both at the pre-tournament inspection at ten in the east practice hall. We must ensure no dangerous equipment reaches our students' hands."

After Raven departed, Diana leaned against the closed door, mortification finally catching up. "Well, that eliminates any remaining pretense of professional discretion."

"At least she's practical about it," Alarick said, unable to suppress a smile. "No awkward conversations about propriety."

"Just the Headmistress finding us in bed together," Diana groaned. "Nothing concerning at all."

"If it helps," he offered, moving closer, golden threads appearing between them, "she clearly wasn't surprised and doesn't seem bothered. She's been remarkably supportive of our... situation."

"Our 'situation' appears to be common knowledge," Diana sighed. "Between the gnomes' gossip network, Ceries and Malachai's matchmaking, and now Raven's

matter-of-fact acknowledgment..."

"Does it bother you that much?" Alarick asked, his expression growing serious. "That people know about us?"

Diana considered honestly. A week ago, she would have been mortified. Now, though...

"Not as much as I expected," she admitted. "I'm more concerned about stopping potentially deadly dueling equipment from reaching our students."

THE EQUIPMENT INSPECTION in the east practice hall was already underway when they arrived. Principal Malachai Starcatcher was there, along with a bunch of teachers and two representatives from the Magical Sports Federation.

Dozens of gleaming wands, shields, and protective gear lined the tables, all bearing the Adelweiss logo—a silver "A" surrounded by what looked suspiciously like modified void runes.

"These aren't standard dueling wands," Alarick murmured, his fingers hovering over one without touching it. "They've been magically augmented to draw power from the user's core at a dangerous rate."

"And these shields," Diana added, performing a diagnostic spell on a particularly ornate one, "they're designed to absorb and redirect spells, but there's no safety threshold. They'd keep absorbing until they catastrophically overloaded."

For the next two hours, they analyzed equipment and compiled evidence against Adelweiss Magical Arms.

"The tournament equipment from Adelweiss failed three basic safety inspections," Alarick said. "And look at these diagnostic readings. The magical signature matches the disruption pattern from Guillet's demonstration."

"It's not just faulty equipment," Diana said grimly. "These are deliberately designed to create magical dependencies. Each use makes the wielder's magic more attuned to Adelweiss products and less compatible with standard equipment."

"That's dangerously close to magical manipulation."

"Which is forbidden under International Magical Law."

Their case was building strongly when a wisp of a raven appeared. "Something's wrong with the dueling arena. The practice dummies have activated on their own and are attacking students. And they're getting stronger with each spell cast against them. Mr. Blackthorn, Nurse Maelstrom—your expertise may be needed. The rest of you, secure this equipment."

As Diana and Alarick hurried through corridors, she felt a growing magical disturbance—a discordant vibration that made her teeth ache.

"The practice dummies have been tampered with," Alarick said, expression tense. "Someone's introduced void absorption enchantments."

"Can you counter it?" Diana asked, already preparing protective spells.

"Yes, but I need to find the control node," he replied, following the magical signature. "It's coming from the arena master stone."

In the dueling arena, a dozen enchanted practice dummies—normally programmed to provide moderate resistance for students—were now glowing with sickly green light

and unleashing devastatingly powerful spells. Students cowered behind hastily erected shields as faculty tried to contain the chaos.

At the center of the arena, a figure stood before the master control stone, hands pressed against its surface, feeding corrupt magic into the school's training system.

"Professor Ellwood," Raven's voice cracked like a whip. "Step away from the control stone immediately."

Ellwood turned, his eyes glowing with the same unhealthy green light. "Too late, Headmistress. The enhancement is already integrated. Adelweiss will be pleased."

"What exactly is he doing?" Diana demanded, her diagnostic magic already assessing the damage.

"Ensuring Grimm Mawr will be forced to purchase Adelweiss's 'safety equipment' after this unfortunate incident," Ellwood smiled coldly. "The practice dummies will keep absorbing spell energy and growing stronger. By the time you realize the full extent, every school will be clamoring for our protective gear."

Alarick was already moving, his hands tracing complex patterns. "He's introduced an absorption enhancement," he reported. "The dummies are designed to feed on offensive magic—the more spells cast against them, the stronger they become."

Diana looked to Raven. "Can it be reversed?"

"That depends," Raven replied, her gaze shifting to Alarick. "Mr. Blackthorn?"

"Yes, but it won't be easy," he said, beginning a counter-spell. "I need to sever the connection between the dummies and the control stone without triggering their defense mechanisms. Like disarming multiple explosive devices simultaneously."

"I can help with that," Diana stepped forward.

Their eyes met, understanding passing between them. This would require their connection at its strongest—a complete merging of their complementary abilities.

As Raven secured Ellwood with binding spells, Diana and Alarick approached the control stone together. Their hands joined, golden light immediately flaring between their palms, growing brighter as they focused.

"I'll target the individual connections," Diana murmured. "You neutralize the master control."

Alarick nodded, and together they reached toward the corrupted stone. The moment they touched it, Diana felt the malevolent magic trying to latch onto them, to draw their power just as it was drawing from the students' spells.

But their fusion created a barrier it couldn't penetrate. The golden light of their combined power surrounded the corruption, containing it, systematically severing the connections between the master stone and each practice dummy.

For what seemed like hours but might have been minutes, they worked in perfect harmony, Diana's precise magical surgery cutting the energy tendrils while Alarick's protective spells prevented the backlash that would have triggered catastrophic detonation. The golden threads of their fusion grew so bright that Raven shielded her eyes, watching in amazement as the sickly green light gradually faded from each practice dummy.

With a final surge of combined power, they neutralized the master control stone. The last dummy shuddered and fell inert, the green glow dissipating like smoke in wind.

"It's done," Alarick said, voice ragged with exhaustion. "The system is clean, though

the dummies are fried. They'll need complete replacement."

Diana swayed slightly, magical exertion catching up with her. Alarick caught her arm, his own face pale with fatigue but his eyes shining with something that made her heart race despite her exhaustion.

"That was..." she began, unable to find words for what they'd just experienced.

"I know," he said softly. "For me too."

Raven cleared her throat, reminding them of her presence. "Excellent work, both of you. I believe this concludes any debate about the value of your... magical collaboration."

Diana felt herself blush, but couldn't find it in herself to be truly embarrassed. What they'd just accomplished went beyond professional achievement or personal relationship—it was a perfect fusion of both.

"Nurse Maelstrom, Mr. Blackthorn," Raven continued, "you're both relieved of duties for the remainder of the day to recover your magical strength. I suggest you make good use of that time." The slight arch of her eyebrow made it clear she wasn't just talking about rest.

As they made their way back to Diana's quarters, leaning on each other for support, Alarick's arm around her waist, Diana thought this was what she wanted. Not the magical disasters and being overworked to the point of exhaustion, but being next to Alarick.

"Alarick," she said as her door closed behind them. "I have to tell you something."

"Me first."

“Okay, go ahead.” She laughed.

“I’m falling in love with you.

“The golden threads of their fusion, though dimmed by fatigue, still connected them, responding to the truth of his words. Diana felt the last of her reservations dissolving in its warm light.

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

His smile was like sunrise after the longest night, and when he kissed her, Diana knew with absolute certainty that some things—like magical fusions and unexpected love—were rare enough to be worth every risk they entailed.

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Diana's magical reserves still depleted from their battle with the corrupted ward stone. Beside her, Alarick slept peacefully, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. They had both collapsed into her bed after their confession, too exhausted to do more than exchange gentle kisses before sleep claimed them.

Now, watching him in repose, Diana allowed herself to fully embrace the truth she'd finally spoken aloud. She was falling in love with him—age difference, professional complications, and all.

The golden shimmer of their fusion still connected them even in sleep, a delicate tracery of light where their skin touched. Diana had read about such phenomena in ancient texts, but experiencing it firsthand was something else entirely. The magic responded to their emotions, strengthening with their connection, creating something greater than either could achieve alone.

As if sensing her gaze, Alarick's eyes opened, finding hers immediately. His smile, sleepy and unguarded, made her heart flutter like a freshmen attempting a levitation charm.

"How long have you been watching me sleep?" he asked, voice still rough with rest.

"Not long," she replied, reaching out to brush a lock of dark hair from his forehead. Gold shimmered in the wake of her touch. "How are your magical reserves?"

Instead of answering, he captured her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm that sent sparks of gold dancing across her skin. "Improving by the second," he murmured against her skin. "Especially with you so close."

The intensity in his gaze made her breath catch. "Alarick..."

"I meant what I said before," he said softly, twining his fingers with hers. "I'm in love with you. Not just because of this." He gestured to the golden light connecting them. "Though I won't deny it's extraordinary."

Diana felt a smile tugging at her lips. "It is rather impressive, isn't it?"

"The fusion? Absolutely." His thumb traced circles on her wrist, each movement leaving trails of shimmering light. "Though I suspect I'd have fallen for you anyway. Magical compatibility or not."

"Would you?" she asked, genuine curiosity in her voice. "Even with all the obstacles?"

Alarick shifted closer, his free hand coming up to cup her cheek. "Age is just a number, Diana. Ten years means nothing when we're magically compatible enough to clean a corrupted ward stone together. As for the professional concerns..." He shrugged slightly. "The Headmistress herself seems to approve."

Diana laughed softly. "I'm not entirely convinced that's a point in our favor. Raven has always had unusual priorities."

"Nevertheless," he said, his expression growing serious again. "What we have is rare. Precious. Worth fighting for." His gaze held hers, unwavering. "The question is—do you agree?"

The vulnerability in his question touched something deep inside her. This brilliant, capable man who could create protective wards that left senior mages in awe was laying his heart bare before her, all his usual confidence set aside in favor of honest emotion.

"I do," she said softly, the simple words carrying the weight of decision. "And it terrifies me how much I mean that."

"Being terrified is perfectly reasonable," he replied with a hint of his usual humor. "We did just battle corrupted ward magic this morning."

"That's not what scares me, and you know it." Diana traced the line of his jaw with her fingertips, watching golden light follow her touch. "This—us—happened so quickly. A week ago, you were just the irritating young contractor invading my infirmary. And now..."

"And now?" he prompted when she trailed off.

"Now I can't imagine not having you here," she admitted, the honesty making her feel strangely vulnerable. "It's like discovering a part of myself I didn't know was missing."

The golden shimmer brightened at her words, responding to the truth of her feelings. Alarick's eyes darkened as he leaned in, his lips capturing hers in a kiss that started gentle but quickly deepened, kindling a familiar heat between them.

Diana responded eagerly, her fingers threading through his hair as his arms encircled her, pulling her flush against him. Unlike their previous encounters, fueled by urgency and new discovery, this had a different quality—a slow-burning intensity built on acknowledged feeling rather than just desire.

"I want to see all of you," Alarick murmured against her lips. "In proper light, not just hurried moments between emergencies."

Diana felt a momentary flicker of self-consciousness—she was thirty-five, not twenty-five, with the subtle marks of time that entailed—but the open admiration in

his gaze banished such thoughts. She sat up, reaching for the hem of her sleep shirt.

"Allow me," he said, his voice dropping to that low register that sent shivers down her spine.

His hands replaced hers, sliding beneath the fabric to caress her sides as he slowly lifted the garment upward. Diana raised her arms, allowing him to pull it over her head, leaving her bare from the waist up in the golden afternoon light.

Alarick's breath caught audibly. "You're beautiful," he said, his voice reverent. "Even more so than I imagined."

"You imagined this?" she asked, a teasing lilt in her voice despite the heat rising to her cheeks.

"Constantly," he admitted, his eyes traveling over her with obvious appreciation. "From the moment I saw you again in the infirmary. Probably before that, if I'm being completely honest."

The confession, delivered with such straightforward sincerity, sent a wave of warmth through her that had nothing to do with embarrassment and everything to do with desire. "Your turn," she said, reaching for the buttons of his shirt.

Diana took her time, revealing him inch by inch as she undid each button. The ward work that had once puzzled her—how a former apprentice had developed such impressive musculature—now made perfect sense as she exposed his chest and shoulders. Physical magic required physical strength, and Alarick's body reflected years of demanding work.

When she pushed the shirt from his shoulders, her hands lingered, tracing the contours of muscle with appreciative fingers. The golden shimmer followed her

touch, growing brighter where skin met skin, their magic responding to their growing desire.

"I think," she said, deliberately echoing his earlier words, "you're even more beautiful than I imagined."

His laugh was warm and genuine as he caught her hands in his. "Now I know you're exaggerating. Though I appreciate the sentiment."

"Not at all," she replied, leaning in to press her lips to his chest, directly over his heart. "I find you quite..." her mouth moved lower, tracing a path down his sternum, "...magnificent."

Alarick's breath hitched as her lips traveled across his skin, leaving trails of golden light in their wake. His hands came up to tangle in her hair, neither directing nor restraining, simply connecting as she explored.

"Diana," he breathed when her mouth reached the waistband of his pants. "If you continue that particular exploration, this will be over embarrassingly quickly."

She glanced up at him, enjoying the flush spreading across his cheeks and the intensity in his gaze. "We have all afternoon," she reminded him with a mischievous smile that made his eyes darken further.

"True," he conceded, his voice rough with desire. "But at the moment, I'm more interested in returning the favor."

Before she could respond, he had shifted their positions, gently pressing her back against the pillows as he hovered above her. The golden shimmer of their fusion surrounded them like a cocoon of light, responding to their shared desire as his lips found the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder.

Diana gasped, arching into his touch as he continued his path downward, his mouth hot against her collarbone, the curve of her breast. When his lips closed around her nipple, a moan escaped her, pleasure spiraling outward from the point of contact. The magical shimmer intensified, making her skin hypersensitive to every touch as he lavished attention first on one breast, then the other.

"You're incredibly responsive," he murmured against her skin, satisfaction evident in his voice. "I can feel your magic reaching for mine with every sound you make."

"It's the fusion," she managed, her voice breathier than she'd intended. "It amplifies everything."

"Not just the fusion," he said, his hand sliding down to trace the waistband of her sleep pants. "Though I won't deny it adds an extraordinary dimension."

As if to demonstrate, he let his magic deliberately reach for hers, sending a pulse of energy that made her gasp as pleasure coursed through her entire body. The golden shimmer brightened dramatically, casting the entire room in warm light.

"That's..." Diana struggled to find words as the sensation faded, leaving her trembling. "How did you do that?"

Alarick's smile was both proud and a little awed. "I simply focused my magic on our connection. The rest happened naturally." His fingers slipped just beneath her waistband, teasing the sensitive skin of her lower abdomen. "May I?"

Diana nodded, lifting her hips to allow him to slide the pants down her legs, leaving her completely bare before him. His gaze traveled over her with such open appreciation that any lingering self-consciousness evaporated like morning mist.

"Perfect," he breathed, his hands caressing her thighs as he settled between them.

"Absolutely perfect."

Diana started to protest—she was thirty-five, not perfect by any standard—but the words died in her throat as his mouth pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, then moved higher with clear intent. All thoughts of age and imperfection vanished as his lips found her center, drawing a gasp from deep in her chest.

Alarick took his time, exploring with the same thorough attention he brought to complicated ward structures. His tongue traced patterns that made her tremble, her hands fisting in the sheets as pleasure built with each deliberate stroke. When he added his fingers, curling inside her in perfect counterpoint to the movements of his mouth, Diana felt herself rapidly approaching the edge.

"Alarick," she gasped, one hand tangling in his hair. "I'm going to—"

"Let go," he murmured against her, the vibration of his voice adding another layer of sensation. "Let me feel your magic respond."

The combination of his skilled touch, the commanding tone in his voice, and the deliberate pulse of magic he sent through their connection was too much. Diana's release crashed through her like a wave, her body arching off the bed as pleasure radiated outward from her core. The golden shimmer of their fusion flared brilliant, momentarily illuminating the room like midday sun as her magic responded to her climax.

As the intensity gradually subsided, Diana became aware of Alarick moving up her body, pressing gentle kisses to her stomach, the undersides of her breasts, her collarbone. When he reached her mouth, she tasted herself on his lips, the intimacy of it sending a fresh pulse of desire through her still-sensitive body.

"That was..." she began, breathless.

"Magical?" he supplied with a smile that managed to be both smug and tender. "Quite literally."

Diana laughed, the joy of the moment bubbling up irrepressibly. "I was going to say 'impressive,' but magical works too."

"I aim to please," he replied, his expression warming at her laughter. "Especially when the results are so spectacular."

She reached between them, her hand finding the evidence of his own desire still constrained by his pants. "Speaking of pleasing," she said, her fingers tracing his length through the fabric, "you're still overdressed."

Alarick's breath hitched, his hips instinctively pressing into her touch. "An oversight I'm happy to correct," he said, shifting to remove the last barrier between them.

When he returned to her, Diana took a moment to simply appreciate him—the broad shoulders, the lean strength of his body, the visible evidence of how much he wanted her. The golden shimmer of their fusion highlighted the planes of his chest, the tension in his thighs as he hovered above her, waiting.

"Come here," she said softly, reaching for him.

He settled between her thighs, his body a welcome weight above her, but made no move to join them fully. Instead, he brushed a strand of hair from her face, his expression suddenly serious.

"I love you, Diana," he said, the simple declaration hanging in the air between them. "Not just because of this extraordinary magic we share. Not because of how incredible you look right now, though that's certainly not hurting your case." His smile flashed briefly before his expression grew earnest again. "I love your brilliant

mind. Your dedication. The way you care for your patients. Your sarcastic notes in ancient grimoires. All of it."

Diana felt her throat tighten with emotion, the golden shimmer brightening around them as her feelings responded to his words. "I love you too," she whispered, the truth of it resonating through her entire being. "Despite all my logical objections and practical concerns. Perhaps even because of them." Her hand came up to cup his cheek. "I never expected you, Alarick Blackthorn. But I'm incredibly grateful you came along anyway."

The kiss that followed was different from any they'd shared before—deeper, more tender, filled with acknowledged love rather than just desire. As their lips moved together, Diana felt the golden shimmer of their fusion enveloping them completely, creating a private world where only they existed.

When Alarick finally joined their bodies, sliding into her with a groan that she felt to her core, the fusion responded with a brilliant flare that cast dancing shadows across the walls. Diana wrapped her legs around his waist, drawing him deeper, her hands mapping the muscles of his back as he began to move within her.

Unlike their previous encounters, fueled by urgent passion and new discovery, they found a slower rhythm that built steadily, each movement deliberate and deep. Diana could feel her magic mingling with his on a level she'd never experienced before, creating feedback loops of pleasure that intensified every sensation.

"Open your eyes," Alarick murmured, his voice strained with the effort of control. "I want to see you."

Diana complied, meeting his gaze as he moved above her, within her. The connection was almost overwhelming—physical, magical, emotional, all intertwined until she couldn't tell where one ended and another began. The golden light of their fusion

pulsed with each beat of their hearts, growing brighter as pleasure built between them.

Alarick shifted slightly, changing the angle of his thrusts to hit a spot inside her that sent lightning through her veins. Diana gasped, her nails digging into his shoulders as her body responded instantly to the new sensation.

"There?" he asked, repeating the movement with deliberate precision.

"Yes," she breathed, arching to meet him. "Just like that."

He maintained the perfect angle, his rhythm steady despite the tension evident in every line of his body. Diana could tell he was holding back, waiting for her, and the knowledge sent another wave of emotion through her that had nothing to do with physical pleasure and everything to do with the man himself.

"Let go," she whispered, echoing his earlier words. "I want to feel you."

The permission in her words seemed to break something in his control. Alarick's rhythm faltered, then intensified, his movements becoming more urgent as he chased his release. Diana met him thrust for thrust, her own pleasure building rapidly toward a second peak.

When it hit, it was more powerful than anything she'd experienced before—a fusion of physical ecstasy and magical resonance that swept through her entire being. She cried out his name, her body clenching around him as waves of pleasure radiated outward from her core. The golden shimmer erupted into brilliant light, illuminating the room like captured sunlight.

Alarick followed moments later, his release triggering another pulse of magical energy as he called her name, his body tensing and then shuddering above her. For an

instant, Diana could have sworn she felt his pleasure as clearly as her own—an echo through their magical connection that doubled the intensity of the moment.

They remained joined as the aftershocks gradually subsided, foreheads pressed together, breathing in tandem as the golden light slowly faded to a gentle shimmer once more. The connection hummed between them, physical, magical, and emotional all at once.

Eventually, Alarick shifted to lie beside her, drawing her against his chest as they both caught their breath. Diana rested her head in the curve of his shoulder, feeling utterly content in a way she couldn't remember experiencing before.

"That was..." Alarick began, then laughed softly. "I don't think I have words for what that was."

"Extraordinary?" Diana suggested, tracing idle patterns on his chest. The golden shimmer followed her fingertips, leaving temporary designs that slowly faded. "Transcendent? Magical beyond all rational explanation?"

"All of the above," he agreed, pressing a kiss to her temple. "Though I'm particularly fond of 'transcendent.' It has a nice scholarly ring to it. We could write a paper—"Transcendent Magical Fusion: A Case Study in Advanced Practical Applications."

Diana laughed, the sound bright and genuine. "I can just imagine the Magical Research Society's reaction to that submission."

"They'd be fools to reject it," he said with mock seriousness. "The practical applications alone are worth consideration."

"Mmm," she agreed, deliberately trailing her fingers lower across his abdomen. "Very

practical applications."

Alarick caught her wandering hand, bringing it to his lips. "If you continue that particular line of research, I'll need a recovery potion," he warned, though the rising interest in his eyes belied his protest.

Diana propped herself up on one elbow, studying his face with newfound freedom. "I love you," she said, the words coming easier now that they'd been spoken once. "And I'm no longer afraid to admit it."

His expression softened, the teasing light in his eyes replaced by something deeper. "That might be the most magical thing that's happened today," he said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

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Diana woke to the gentle sensation of Alarick tracing patterns on her bare shoulder, his touch leaving trails of golden light against her skin. Morning sunlight painted her bedroom in honey tones that matched the contentment humming through her magical core. Their fusion pulsed between them like a living thing, connecting their essences even in repose.

"Good morning," she murmured, turning to face him.

Alarick's smile set off butterflies in her chest. "Good morning, beautiful." He kissed her forehead, a burst of gold blooming where his lips touched. "Sleep well?"

"Better than I have in years," she admitted, snuggling closer. Since their confession of love and the deepening of their fusion, her sleep had been dreamless—as though some restless part of her had finally found home.

They dressed reluctantly, stealing glances and touches that sent shimmers of gold dancing between them. Two days had passed since their confrontation with Professor Ellwood and the corrupted practice dummies, and life had settled into a sweet rhythm—working together during the day, returning to her quarters in the evenings.

"The tournament starts at ten," Alarick reminded her, rolling up his sleeves in that maddeningly attractive way. "I need to do one final inspection of the replacement equipment."

Diana groaned dramatically. "I still don't understand why I need to be there for equipment checks."

"Because," he replied, cupping her face and stealing a quick kiss, "I managed to convince the Magical Sports Federation to require a medical expert to certify all tournament gear after the Ellwood incident. You're the best there is."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she sighed despite the smile tugging at her lips.

The walk to the dueling arena was filled with playful banter and casual touches, each sending ripples of golden light between them. Diana couldn't remember feeling this complete—as though her magic had found its perfect dance partner.

Griggs, a stocky wizard with perpetual worry lines, was already inspecting a collection of gleaming wands and shields when they arrived. Their fusion hummed with mutual professional pride as they joined him, creating a soft glow where their hands brushed over the equipment.

"These replacement wands are first-rate," Griggs commented. "After that disaster with the Adelweiss gear, I wasn't sure we'd find alternatives in time."

"The Federation came through," Alarick said, checking the safety charms on a shield. "Though I'm still examining every piece myself."

Diana was testing a wand's magical feedback limits when Ceries burst into the room, her usually perfect rose-gold hair disheveled, eyes wide with alarm.

"There you are! Raven needs you both immediately." She glanced nervously at the equipment. "Adelweiss has been spotted on campus."

The playful mood evaporated instantly. Diana felt Alarick's magic pulse with shock through their fusion.

"What? How?" Alarick demanded. "After what his agent did—"

"Diplomatic immunity," Ceries explained grimly. "His position on the International Confederation of Wizards grants him sanctuary until formal charges are filed. And the Magical Justice Department is still 'reviewing evidence.'"

"Politics," Diana spat, already heading for the door. "Where is he?"

"That's the problem," Ceries said, hurrying to keep up. "He requested a meeting with Raven, but never showed. Campus security can't locate him."

They rushed to Headmistress Raven's office, their fusion humming with shared tension. Raven looked up as they entered, Edgar fixing them with his unsettling stare.

"We have a situation," Raven stated flatly. "Adelweiss requested a meeting, claiming he wanted to 'clear up misunderstandings' about Professor Ellwood's actions. He then vanished from his escort near the east wing."

"The tournament arena," Alarick realized, face paling. "The equipment—"

"Is secured," Raven assured him. "But there are other vulnerabilities. The tournament draws magical energy from Grimm Mawr's ley line nexus to power the protective barriers."

A terrible suspicion formed in Diana's mind. "If someone wanted to siphon magical energy on a massive scale..."

"The control room during tournament initialization would be ideal," Alarick finished. "When hundreds of young mages begin casting simultaneously."

They split up to search, Diana and Alarick taking the arena's underground levels while Raven and Malachai checked the upper sections. Their fusion allowed them to sense magical disturbances more acutely, guiding them through the labyrinthine

maintenance tunnels.

"There," Diana whispered, pointing to a faint green glow emanating from beneath a heavy oak door. "The ley line access chamber."

They approached cautiously, their fusion dampened to avoid detection. Through the partially open door, they could see Adelweiss hunched over an ancient control stone, murmuring incantations as he placed small crystalline devices at specific points.

"Energy siphons," Alarick breathed, recognition dawning. "Like the ones in the practice dummies, but more sophisticated."

"What's he doing?" Diana asked, watching as Adelweiss connected the crystals with threads of sickly green magic.

"Creating a bypass," Alarick explained, tension evident in his voice. "When the tournament begins and the ley lines activate to power the arena's protections, his devices will redirect a portion of that energy."

"For what purpose?"

"Nothing good," he replied grimly. "That much raw power could fuel rituals that have been forbidden for centuries."

Diana's medical training immediately supplied horrifying possibilities. "Sacrificial magic. Soul binding. Forced transformations."

"We need to stop him before he completes the bypass," Alarick said, already planning a counter-spell. "If we disrupt the crystal network—"

Before they could act, Edgar swooped silently into the chamber through a high

window, circled once, and flew back out—clearly reporting to Raven. Seconds later, the temperature in the corridor dropped dramatically as Headmistress Raven materialized from the shadows.

"Adelweiss," her voice sliced through the air like a blade. "Step away from the control stone immediately."

Adelweiss straightened slowly, turning to face them with a smile that never reached his cold eyes. "Headmistress. How kind of you to join us." His gaze flicked to Diana and Alarick. "And you've brought your pet lovebirds. How charming."

"Your diplomatic immunity doesn't extend to sabotage and illegal magic," Raven stated, power resonating in her voice. "The Federation has been notified."

Adelweiss laughed, the sound echoing unnaturally in the chamber. "Do you really think I came here without precautions?" He gestured to the crystal network, now pulsing with green light. "The siphon system is already active, drawing ambient magic. Touch it, and the backlash will devastate this entire wing."

Diana felt Alarick's magic tense through their fusion, assessing, calculating. His thoughts brushed hers: If we combine our power, we might be able to contain the backlash while Raven neutralizes him.

She sent back agreement, their fusion brightening slightly as they prepared to act. But Adelweiss noticed the golden shimmer between them, his expression changing from smug to calculating.

"Fascinating," he said, studying them intently. "A natural magical fusion. How rare and... useful." Without warning, he slammed his hand against the central crystal. "Let's see how it handles disruption."

The crystal network flared with sickly green light, sending a wave of corrupted magic directly at Diana and Alarick. Acting on instinct, they raised their joined hands, their fusion creating a golden shield that intercepted the blast.

For a moment, it held—their combined power forming a perfect barrier against the corruption. Then the green energy began to warp, tendrils of it slithering around the edges of their shield, seeking weaknesses.

"It's targeting our fusion specifically," Alarick gritted out, sweat beading on his forehead as he strengthened their shield. "The corruption is drawn to natural magical bonds."

Diana felt it too—the malevolent energy probing their connection, searching for a way in. Through their fusion, she sensed Alarick channeling more power into their defense, drawing deeply from his magical core.

"Raven!" Diana called, seeing the Headmistress locked in magical combat with Adelweiss. "The crystals are attuned to magical fusion!"

Understanding flashed across Raven's face. With a complex gesture, she sent Edgar diving toward the crystal network, the raven's talons grazing the central stone.

The momentary distraction was enough. Adelweiss's concentration broke, and Raven seized the opportunity to blast him with a binding spell that wrapped him in bands of midnight blue energy.

But the crystal network, now destabilized by Edgar's interference, began to pulse erratically. The green energy attacking Diana and Alarick's shield intensified, pressing harder against their fusion.

"It's going to overload," Alarick warned, his face pale with strain. "When it does, the

corrupted energy will explode outward."

"What can we do?" Diana asked, adding her own healing magic to their shield, trying to counteract the corruption's effects.

"Create a containment field," he said, his eyes meeting hers with grim determination. "If we redirect our fusion to surround the network instead of shielding ourselves—"

"We'd be exposed to the corruption directly," she realized, horror dawning. "It would hit our fusion with nothing in between."

"Yes," he confirmed, his voice steady despite the fear she felt through their connection. "But it might save everyone in the arena above."

The tournament. Hundreds of students and faculty. The choice was no choice at all.

"Together, then," Diana said, reaching for his free hand.

Their fingers interlaced, golden light flaring between them as they redirected their fusion, extending it outward to envelop the crystal network. The shield protecting them thinned, then vanished entirely as they poured all their power into containment.

The moment their protective barrier dropped, Diana felt the corruption slam into their fusion like acid on bare skin. Pain lanced through her magical core as the malevolent energy sought to dissolve the golden threads connecting her to Alarick.

Through watering eyes, she saw Raven dragging a bound Adelweiss from the chamber while Edgar circled the corrupted crystals, searching for a way to disable them. But Diana's focus quickly narrowed to the fusion itself, fighting desperately to maintain the containment field even as their connection frayed under the assault.

"It's working," Alarick gasped, his face contorted with the same pain she felt. "The field is holding."

Indeed, the crystal network was now completely encased in a golden bubble of their fused magic, preventing the corruption from spreading outward. But the cost was devastating—their fusion was deteriorating rapidly, the malevolent energy eating away at the magical bonds between them.

Diana could feel it happening—threads of connection dissolving one by one, each severed strand sending fresh agony through her magical core. Through their increasingly fragmented fusion, she sensed Alarick experiencing the same torment, yet neither of them faltered in maintaining the containment field.

Edgar finally found what he was seeking, diving to peck at a small rune carved into the base of the central crystal. The network shuddered, green light flickering, then began to dim as the raven's interference disrupted the power flow.

"Almost there," Diana encouraged, though speaking sent fresh waves of pain through her. "Just a little longer."

With a sound like shattering glass, the corrupted crystals finally went dark. The immediate danger passed, but the damage to their fusion was already done. The golden light connecting them flickered weakly, riddled with gaps and distortions where the corruption had eaten away at their bond.

"Diana," Alarick's voice sounded distant despite him standing right beside her. "Our fusion—it's critically damaged."

She felt it too—the once-vibrant connection now hanging by the thinnest threads, barely maintaining cohesion. Worse, each remaining strand pulsed with a sickly green tinge where the corruption had infected it.

"Can we heal it?" she asked, medical training automatically assessing the damage. "If we focus our remaining energy—"

Alarick shook his head, his expression reflecting the despair she felt. "The corruption is spreading along the fusion pathways. If we don't sever the connection cleanly, it will reach our magical cores."

Horror bloomed in Diana's chest as she understood the implications. "You mean..."

"We have to break our fusion," he confirmed, anguish plain in his voice. "Completely. Or the corruption will permanently damage both of us."

"There has to be another way," she protested, even as her diagnostic senses confirmed his assessment. The corruption was indeed traveling along their bond, approaching their magical cores with each pulse.

"I'm sorry, Diana." His eyes held hers, grief and love mingled in equal measure. "We have to end it now, while we still can."

She knew he was right—could feel the truth of it in the increasing pain as the corruption advanced. With a heart that felt like it was physically tearing, Diana nodded.

"How?" she asked, voice breaking.

"Focus on your individual magic," he instructed, taking both her hands in his. "Visualize pulling your energy back into yourself, separating it completely from mine."

Diana closed her eyes, concentrating on the core of her magical self, the essence that had existed before their fusion. She began to draw that energy inward, feeling each

golden thread connecting her to Alarick strain and protest as she pulled away.

The pain was excruciating—not physical but deeper, as though her soul itself was being torn. Through the rapidly diminishing connection, she felt Alarick experiencing the same agony as he withdrew his magic from hers.

With each severed thread, the empty space within her grew colder, a hollow void where wonderful completeness had been. The golden light between them flickered, dimmed, contracted to a thin line.

When the final thread broke, Diana gasped as though physically struck. The constant presence of Alarick's magic, the awareness that had become as natural as breathing, simply vanished. She was alone in her magic again, isolated within the boundaries of her own being.

"It's done," Alarick whispered, his voice reflecting the same emptiness she felt. "We're... separate."

Diana reached for him physically, desperate for some connection to replace what they had lost. His arms went around her, but the embrace felt hollow—a mere shadow of the profound union they had shared.

Later, as Professor Everflame examined her magical core, Diana learned the full extent of their sacrifice.

"The fusion dissolution has left scars," Everflame explained gently. "Your magic has been altered—shaped to work with Mr. Blackthorn's specifically."

"Could we ever reconnect?" Diana asked, her voice barely audible.

Everflame's hesitation was answer enough. "Broken fusions rarely reform naturally.

And artificial attempts are..." she trailed off, shaking her head.

Diana watched Alarick receive similar news across the room, his face tight with controlled pain as Professor Frost spoke in low tones. Without warning, he stood and strode from the room, not meeting her eyes.

When she moved to follow, Ceries caught her arm. "Give him time, honey."

Diana reluctantly nodded.

After a few hours, she couldn't bear it any longer and found him in the east garden, staring at the reflecting pool as twilight painted the sky in shades of ember and ash.

"My warding abilities are damaged," he said without turning, his voice empty of emotion. "The control needed for protective work is gone. My magic is unstable in exactly the patterns needed for dueling shields."

Diana reached for his hand, her heart breaking anew when he shifted subtly away from her touch.

"I've requested reassignment," he continued flatly. "Someone else will need to finish the safety protocols for the tournament."

"We'll adjust," Diana insisted, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Your magic will stabilize with time, and mine too. We can rebuild what we had before the fusion."

"Can we?" Alarick finally turned to face her, his eyes haunted. "How much of what we felt was real, Diana? How much was just magical compatibility enhancing ordinary attraction?"

The question pierced her heart because it echoed her own unspoken fears. Had their

feelings been genuine, or merely a reaction to extraordinary magical resonance?

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he said, softening at her stricken expression. "Everflame thinks specialists at St. Candlebrook's might help with my core instability."

"And if we discover it was real?" Diana asked, desperate for some hope to cling to. "If what we felt wasn't just magical influence?"

"Then we'll find each other again." His smile didn't reach his eyes. "But what if it wasn't?"

He brushed his lips against her forehead—the same spot he had kissed that morning, though no golden light appeared now. Without another word, he walked away, silhouetted against the darkening sky.

Diana remained by the reflecting pool as night fell, cold seeping into her bones. The garden gnomes, usually so fascinated by their golden fusion, peered at her from behind ornamental shrubs, their wrinkled faces confused by the absence of magical light.

One brave gnome approached cautiously, offering a slightly wilted flower and a pat on her hand before scurrying back to its companions, all watching her with mournful eyes.

Even the gnomes mourned what she had lost.

The walk back to her quarters—now aching empty without Alarick's presence—felt endless. Diana moved through the silent hallways, each step taking her further from the happiness she had briefly known.

For the first time in her life, Diana had experienced magic in its most transcendent

form—not just spells and healing charms, but the profound connection of souls recognizing their perfect complement. Now it was gone, leaving her forever changed, forever aware of what was possible and what she might never have again.

As she entered her dark quarters, Diana caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror—a stranger with hollow eyes and tear-stained cheeks. She raised one hand, remembering how golden light had once danced between her fingers and Alarick's, binding them together in ways more profound than mere touch.

But her fingers remained just fingers now—ordinary, magically inert, incapable of creating the golden bridge that had joined her to the man she loved.

And in the morning, he would be gone.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:41 am

Diana stood in her infirmary—her properly renovated, professionally completed infirmary—and felt nothing. Which was, perhaps, the problem. After weeks of feeling everything so intensely through her magical fusion with Alarick, ordinary existence seemed muted, like a painting where all colors had faded.

Six weeks had passed since Alarick's departure. Six weeks of throwing herself into work while steadfastly ignoring the Alarick-shaped hole in both her professional and personal life.

"It looks magnificent," Malachai said. He and Ceries strolled in to survey the completed renovation. "Warding Specialist Okafor did an excellent job finishing the project."

"She did," Diana agreed, trying to sound appreciative. Specialist Okafor was undeniably talented, but her work lacked the intuitive harmony that had characterized Alarick's designs—the subtle ways his magic had anticipated how Diana's healing spells would interact with protective elements.

"Have you heard from Alarick?" Ceries asked.

Diana busied herself reorganizing a tray of healing potions. "Nothing since he left. Not a letter, not a message, nothing."

"Well, I have," Malachai said, perching on the edge of the examination table. "Apparently his treatment at St. Candlebrook's has shown promising results. The specialists developed a stabilization protocol that's restored significant functionality to his magical core."

Despite her best efforts at professional detachment, Diana felt a surge of relief. "That's... good news."

"Professionally speaking," Ceries mimicked, then softened. "Diana, it's been six weeks. You're miserable. He's probably miserable too."

"I need to focus on adapting to my new magical baseline," Diana said, avoiding the emotional question. "Professor Everflame says the changes to my healing capabilities might actually offer new approaches, if I can adjust my techniques properly."

"Avoid all you want, but you should know that Alarick will be returning to Grimm Mawr next week."

Diana nearly dropped the potion she was holding. "What? Why wasn't I informed?"

"I'm informing you now," Malachai pointed out. "He's coming to provide specialized warding consultation for the Forbidden Archives. Apparently, the disruption of Adelweiss's energy siphoning revealed some vulnerabilities in our oldest protective systems."

"I see." Diana set the potion down carefully. "Well, I'm sure our paths won't cross much."

Ceries just looked at her. "For a brilliant healer, you can be remarkably dense sometimes."

Before Diana could respond, the infirmary door burst open and three familiar faces tumbled in—Malta, Irideane, and Polly, the trio who had spent half the summer inventing injuries for Alarick's benefit.

"Nurse Maelstrom," Malta exclaimed, clutching her wrist dramatically. "I think I sprained my wrist during practice."

"Again? That must be the sixth sprain this summer."

"It's very delicate," Malta insisted, her attention clearly focused on scanning the infirmary. Her disappointment upon not finding Alarick was almost comical.

"Mr. Blackthorn isn't here," Diana said dryly.

The girls exchanged glances before Irideane said, "We thought he'd be here by now."

"News travels fast," Diana muttered, shooting Ceries an accusatory look.

"Don't blame me," Ceries protested. "The garden gnomes have been celebrating since dawn. They've constructed some kind of welcome arch out of pebbles and stolen hair ribbons."

Despite everything, Diana felt her lips twitch. Those ridiculous gnomes and their inexplicable attachment to Alarick.

After examining Malta's perfectly healthy wrist and sending the disappointed trio on their way, Diana turned back to Ceries.

"The garden gnomes built him a welcome arch?"

"With a banner," Ceries confirmed, grinning. "Though since gnomes can't actually write, it's just a series of enthusiastic symbols that I think are supposed to represent warding patterns."

"He always did have an unusual rapport with them."

"If what you had with Alarick was just magical influence, would you still be thinking about him every day six weeks later?"

Ceries had a point. The question lingered long after Ceries and Malachai had left. It followed Diana through her evening routine and into her quarters, which still felt too empty despite the time that had passed.

Was that her answer?

THE DAY OF ALARICK'S scheduled return, Diana deliberately arrived at breakfast early, hoping to avoid an awkward public reunion. She was halfway through her meal when Headmistress Raven appeared beside her table, Edgar perched on her shoulder with his usual inscrutable stare.

"Nurse Maelstrom," Raven said without preamble. "I require your assistance with a matter in the archives this morning."

Diana nearly choked on her tea. "The archives? Surely Madam Astrablaze—"

"Is currently occupied with other matters," Raven finished. "The issue involves potential magical contamination affecting some of our older healing texts. Your expertise is needed."

It was a transparent pretext, but refusing a direct request from the Headmistress wasn't an option.

"Of course," Diana said, resigned to the inevitable. "When would you like me to examine these texts?"

"Immediately," Raven replied, already turning toward the door. "Mr. Blackthorn is already there waiting."

Mr. Blackthorn. So formal, as if Alarick were just another colleague, not someone

who had shared her bed, her magic, her heart.

Diana followed Raven through the castle corridors, her anxiety mounting with each step. She had imagined their eventual reunion countless times, but now that the moment was imminent, all her careful preparation evaporated.

The Forbidden Archives occupied the oldest part of Grimm Mawr, its entrance guarded by intimidating gargoyles. Inside, towering shelves held some of the most dangerous magical knowledge in existence.

Raven led her to a secluded alcove deep within the archives. And there, examining an ancient ward configuration with intense concentration, was Alarick.

Diana's breath caught. He looked both familiar and different—the same broad shoulders and strong hands that she remembered so vividly, but a new seriousness in his expression. His sleeves were rolled up as always, revealing forearms that she had once traced with reverent fingers.

He looked up, his expression shifting through several emotions before settling into careful professionalism.

"Headmistress. Diana." His voice was steady, betraying nothing. "Thank you for coming."

"I'll leave you to your examination," Raven said, with a pointed look between them that made her matchmaking intentions painfully obvious. "Edgar and I have other matters to attend to."

After she departed, an awkward silence descended, both of them clearly uncertain how to navigate this reunion.

"You look well," Alarick said finally.

"As do you," she replied, defaulting to professional courtesy. "I understand the treatments at St. Candlebrook's were successful."

He nodded, a shadow crossing his expression. "Partially. My magic is stable now, though some of the changes are permanent. I've had to adapt my warding approach."

"I've experienced something similar," Diana admitted. "My healing magic works differently now. Not necessarily worse, just different."

Another silence fell, heavy with unasked questions. Diana focused on the ancient texts, desperate for some professional task to ground her.

"You said there was potential contamination?"

"Yes." Alarick seemed equally relieved to focus on work. "These texts contain some of the oldest healing magic records. When Adelweiss's energy siphoning was disrupted, it affected them too."

He gestured to a page where magical diagrams shifted subtly. "The illustrations are destabilizing, which might compromise both the knowledge they contain and the archive's defensive systems."

Diana examined the text, her diagnostic magic revealing complex patterns of deterioration. "You're right. The magical matrix is unwinding. I've seen similar degradation in very old healing artifacts."

"Can it be stabilized?"

"Yes, but it will require specialized restoration magic." Diana traced the pattern carefully. "The difficulty is maintaining the original magical signature while reinforcing the deteriorating elements."

"Like my ward work on the infirmary renovation," Alarick observed. "Integrating new protective elements without disrupting the existing magical framework."

"Exactly." Their eyes met briefly in shared professional understanding before both looked away, the parallel to their personal situation too pointed to ignore.

They worked together for the next hour, maintaining careful professional distance while developing a restoration approach. Without their magical fusion, the process required explicit communication rather than intuitive understanding. Yet Diana found they still collaborated effectively, their professional expertise complementing each other even without magical enhancement.

"I think this approach should work," Diana said finally, outlining a specialized healing sequence. "Though it will need to be synchronized with your warding adjustments."

"Agreed." Alarick reviewed her notes. "We should test it on a small section first."

They selected a corner of one illustration and began the delicate restoration process. Diana applied the specialized healing magic while Alarick maintained a protective field, their magic interacting but separate, like dancers performing complementary but independent routines.

"It's working," Diana observed as the illustration stabilized. "The pattern is holding."

"Yes," Alarick agreed, his concentration fixed on maintaining perfect balance. "Though it requires much more conscious control than before."

The unspoken comparison hung between them—before, when their magic had flowed together effortlessly through their fusion.

When they had successfully stabilized the test section, they stepped back to assess the

results. The restored illustration glowed with renewed magical vitality, its energy contained and protected by the adjusted warding.

"Good work," Alarick said, genuine approval in his tone. "Your adaptation to the changes in your magic is impressive."

"As is yours," Diana replied, noticing the subtle differences in his warding approach.

He smiled slightly, the first real smile she'd seen from him since his return. "Necessity is a powerful motivator. The specialists at St. Candlebrook's were fascinated by my case—apparently magical fusion disruption is extremely rare."

"I'm glad they could help," Diana said sincerely.

Another silence fell, but less strained than before. They had established a professional rapport again, found a way to work together effectively despite the profound changes in their magic.

"Diana," Alarick began, then hesitated. "I—"

Whatever he intended was interrupted by a commotion from the main archive room—raised voices and the distinct sound of something heavy toppling over.

They hurried toward the disturbance. In the central reading area, they found Malta, Irideane, and Polly standing amid a pile of fallen books, looking simultaneously guilty and terrified.

"It wasn't our fault," Malta said. "The bookshelf just moved."

"After you tried to climb it," Diana observed dryly. "Seeking a better view, I presume?"

The girls' expressions confirmed the accusation. They had clearly been attempting to spy on them.

"We just wanted to see Mr. Blackthorn's ward work," Irideane insisted unconvincingly. "For our independent study project."

"Your independent study project," Alarick repeated, amusement flickering in his eyes. "On advanced warding techniques that happen to be conducted in the most restricted section of the archives?"

"Well, your 'independent study' has disturbed some very old and potentially dangerous texts," Diana said with concern. She broke off as one of the books began to glow with an ominous purple light, its pages fluttering open seemingly of their own accord.

"Everyone back," Alarick ordered, already casting a containment ward around the activated book. "Now."

The girls stumbled backward as Diana joined Alarick.

"Sympathetic resonance with the restoration magic we were just using," she reported quickly. "The book contains similar healing diagrams, but with much more volatile properties."

Alarick nodded, adjusting his containment field as the book rose into the air, purple light pulsing intensely. "The magical signature is degrading rapidly. If it destabilizes completely—"

"It could trigger a cascade effect through other sensitive texts," Diana finished. "We need to neutralize it before that happens."

Without discussing it, they fell into a coordinated response pattern, Alarick

maintaining the containment field while Diana worked to stabilize the volatile magical content. It wasn't their former seamless synchronization, but years of professional training allowed them to work effectively together nonetheless.

The book pulsed again, more violently, and Diana felt the strain of trying to stabilize such volatile magic without their fusion's support.

"It's fighting the stabilization," she reported, sweat beading on her forehead. "The degradation is accelerating faster than I can counteract it."

Alarick's expression was grim as he reinforced the containment field. "We need a different approach. Standard stabilization isn't working."

Diana stared at the levitating book, then an idea struck her—drawing on what they had just discovered in their restoration work.

"What if we don't try to stabilize it?" she suggested. "What if we guide the degradation instead? Create a controlled unwinding rather than fighting against it?"

Alarick caught on immediately. "Like our fusion dissolution. Controlled separation rather than chaotic fracturing."

"Exactly." Their eyes met in perfect understanding, professional minds aligned even without magical enhancement.

Together, they shifted their approach, Diana using her healing magic to guide the degradation along specific pathways while Alarick modified his containment field to allow for controlled energy dissipation.

Gradually, the violent pulsing subsided, the purple glow fading as the wild magic dissipated safely. When the last of the erratic energy had discharged, the book settled gently back to the table, its pages now inert but undamaged.

"That was brilliant," Alarick said with genuine admiration. "Using the degradation pattern itself as the solution rather than fighting against it."

"It was your containment field that made it possible," Diana replied. "The precision of your control, even with your altered magic—it's remarkable."

They stood there, gazing at each other with professional respect and something deeper. In that moment of shared success, Diana recognized a truth she had been avoiding: their connection hadn't been merely magical resonance. It had been built on mutual respect, shared values, complementary approaches—things that existed independent of their fusion.

The spell was broken by Malta's breathless voice: "That was amazing. Are you two getting back together now?"

Diana turned to find all three girls watching them with rapt attention, completely oblivious to the seriousness of the magical incident they had just caused.

"That," Diana said firmly, "is none of your business, Miss Kenobrie. And you three are in serious trouble for disturbing restricted texts without permission."

LATER THAT EVENING, Diana raised her hand to knock at Alarick's door. Their success in the archives had sparked something she couldn't ignore—hope that maybe, just maybe, what they had shared hadn't been solely dependent on their magical fusion.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she knocked.

Alarick opened the door, surprise evident on his face. "Diana. I wasn't expecting you."

"May I come in?" she asked, noting his casual attire—a simple shirt with, yes, the sleeves rolled up.

He stepped aside, gesturing her in. "Of course."

His quarters were much as she remembered—books and magical instruments arranged with the same organized chaos that characterized his approach to warding. A half-eaten dinner sat on his desk, surrounded by notes.

"I'm interrupting your work," she observed.

"Nothing that can't wait," he assured her. "Is this about the archive incident?"

"No. Yes. Sort of." Diana took a deep breath. "It's about what happened today. How we worked together."

"Effectively," Alarick nodded, a cautious light in his eyes. "Despite the changes to our magic."

"More than effectively," Diana corrected. "We solved a problem that neither of us could have handled alone, even before our fusion was damaged."

He studied her face. "What are you saying, Diana?"

"I'm saying that today made me realize something." She met his gaze directly. "What we had—what we shared—it wasn't just magical compatibility. It was something more fundamental."

Alarick took a step toward her, hope and wariness warring in his expression. "I've been thinking the same thing. Every day at St. Candlebrook's, actually."

"You have?"

"Why do you think I came back?" he asked softly. "The archives project is important, but I could have sent recommendations. I came back because I needed to know if what I still feel for you is real or just echoes of a magical connection."

Diana's heart pounded in her chest. "And? What's your conclusion?"

"That I'm still in love with you," Alarick said simply. "Without magical fusion, without extraordinary resonance. Just me, loving you for who you are—brilliant, dedicated, occasionally infuriating."

A laugh escaped her, half joy and half disbelief. "Infuriating?"

"Completely," he confirmed with a smile that made her heart race. "Especially when you take six weeks to figure out what I realized after three."

"Which is?"

"That magic may have brought us together, but it isn't what kept us together." His voice dropped lower. "The fusion enhanced what was already there, Diana. It didn't create it."

"The garden gnomes told me you'd say that," she said, a smile breaking through despite her attempt at seriousness.

"Garden gnomes," Alarick laughed, "are surprisingly insightful for creatures that collect shiny buttons."

"More insightful than me, apparently," Diana admitted. "It took seeing you again, working with you again, to understand what I've been missing wasn't the fusion—it was you."

Alarick closed the distance between them, his hands coming up to frame her face.

"I've missed you too. Every day."

"Even though I'm stubborn and ten years older and occasionally berate you for rearranging my healing supplies?" she asked, only half joking.

"Especially because of those things," he assured her. "They're part of who you are. The person I love."

When he kissed her, there was no magical glow, no extraordinary resonance between their cores—just the very human connection of two people who had found their way back to each other through loss and adaptation, through professional respect and personal longing.

It was different from before, yes, but no less powerful for being purely human rather than magically amplified.

"I've been offered a permanent position at Grimm Mawr," Alarick said softly when they finally parted. "Heading a new department focusing on integrated magical security."

"You have?" Diana pulled back slightly to study his face.

"Headmistress Raven seems to think my adapted warding approach has significant educational value. Especially after today's incident." He smiled. "The fact that it keeps me near you is just a very fortunate coincidence, I'm sure."

"Raven does love her matchmaking," Diana laughed. "Almost as much as the garden gnomes."

"So," Alarick said, his thumbs tracing gentle patterns on her cheeks, "what do you think? About me staying?"

"I think," Diana said deliberately, "that I've spent six weeks trying to convince myself that what we had was just magical compatibility. And I've failed spectacularly."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's an 'I love you,'" she corrected. "Even without the fusion. Even with your constant sleeve-rolling and your garden gnome fan club. I love you, Alarick Blackthorn."

His smile was radiant. "Even with my tendency to reorganize your perfectly arranged supplies?"

"Let's not push it," she warned, though she was smiling too. "I reserve the right to be occasionally irritated by your organizational improvements."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Alarick assured her, pulling her close again. "After all, we established long ago that you're magnificent when flustered."

As his lips met hers again, Diana reflected that some things hadn't changed, fusion or no fusion. Alarick still had an uncanny ability to see through her professional facade, to challenge her precisely where she needed challenging, to support her in ways that made her stronger rather than dependent.

Their magic might have changed, their professional approaches adapted, but the fundamental connection between them remained—stronger, perhaps, for having been tested and consciously reclaimed rather than facilitated by extraordinary magical compatibility.

And that, Diana decided as she wrapped her arms around Alarick's neck, was a different kind of magic altogether—one that no broken fusion could ever take away.