

FATED TO THE FORBIDDEN BILLIONAIRE ENEMY

A MAGIC PARANORMAL ROMANCE

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INTRODUCTION

I was sent to spy on my enemy—not to wake a dragon or burn for him.

Orion Blackthorn is everything I was raised to hate: rich, ruthless, descended from the House that destroyed mine. I was meant to expose his secrets... not fall into his cursed fire magic—or his bed.

Now we're soul-bound, forced to hunt forbidden relics as shadows gather over Pendragon Academy.

We clash. We betray. We ignite.

His fire wraps around me—wild, consuming. He kisses me, and I forget we're at war. But my spirit magic—raw and volatile—is now tied to his in ways I never saw coming.

And the real enemy? He's planning to resurrect a chaos dragon—through me.

My power swells—burning, biting, aching to be unleashed. If I lose control, I'll lose him... and unleash a darkness that could destroy us all.

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ELEANORA

The midday sun filters through the high, arching stained-glass windows of Pendragon's upper library, painstakingly repaired months after Saralak's fall. Dust motes dance in the golden shafts, catching fragments of light, but the illumination fails to penetrate the persistent chill clinging deep in my bones. Arcadia is rebuilding, stone by tedious stone, spell by meticulous spell, but the very magic humming through these ancient walls feels thin, wary. Scarred. Like listening to a beautiful symphony played on instruments slightly out of tune—the melody is there, but underscored by a dissonant hum of past trauma.

I sigh, pushing a stray lock of fiery red hair behind my ear, the motion automatic, weary. I glare at the shimmering practice rune hovering stubbornly before me. *Fourth circle stasis field*. So damned basic. A spell I should be able to weave effortlessly, especially after... everything. After channeling power that could unravel a Chaos Dragon alongside *him*. Yet my own magic feels sluggish today, thick and resistant, like wading through half-congealed mud. It sputters where it should flow, hesitates where it should snap into place. It's infuriating. I'm stuck, plateaued precisely when advancement feels most critical, when

mastering the fifth circle feels less like ambition and more like a desperate necessity for survival in this changed world.

Focus, Eleanora. The pressure is a physical weight crushing down on my chest, making it hard to draw a full breath. Not just the academic expectation, but the crushing burden of my name. Cortana. Once revered, now whispered with pity or outright disdain since my family's fall. A fall I now know, thanks to Narlock's devastating, stone-cold revelations and Valerius Blackthorn's subsequent, self-serving confession, wasn't mere misfortune but calculated destruction. Generations of Blackthorn deceit, fueled by the very Master we barely managed to banish, systematically dismantling my heritage. How they achieved such thorough ruin, twisting laws and loyalties so completely, still feels incomprehensible, like a missing piece of a much darker puzzle. Reclaiming that legacy isn't just ambition anymore; it's a burning obligation to prove my family isn't defined by the ruin they orchestrated, built on lies and theft.

My thoughts inevitably snag, like a thread caught on a sharp thorn, on him. Orion Blackthorn. Heir to the House that destroyed mine. Arrogant, infuriatingly magnetic, devastatingly powerful... and the person whose magic somehow resonates with mine on a level that terrifies me, whose presence anchored me even as we wielded the terrifying power of the Soul Stone together. That moment... it wasn't just raw power; it felt different, impossibly harmonious despite the chaos, our disparate magics blending through the Stone into something terrifyingly potent and complete.

The memory of that kiss after the Draconia trials—a desperate collision of relief, fear, and undeniable heat under the Dragon

King's cold, ancient gaze—still burns, sending an unwelcome flush creeping up my neck. And the Soul Stone tether, that volatile link forged between us in the chaos of the Dragonlands, hums faintly beneath my awareness whenever he's near—sometimes a frustrating static, other times a strange, almost clarifying resonance—a constant, infuriating reminder of a bond I never wanted, yet cannot deny. He's been... distant since the final battle, consumed by the public fallout of his father's disgrace and the labyrinthine restitution efforts—a performance of atonement? Or genuine remorse? I can't tell. But whenever our paths cross in these echoing halls, the air crackles with unresolved energy—volatile, dangerous.

Enemy. Ally. The man whose family ruined mine. The man whose touch sets my skin on fire. Gods, it's exhausting.

"Are we contemplating the vast mysteries of the fourth circle, Ms. Cortana? Or merely napping with our eyes open?"

I jump, the practice rune dissolving into harmless, mocking sparks that glitter briefly before fading. Professor Hightower stands before me, materialized from the library shadows with her usual unsettling silence. Her ancient violet eyes miss nothing, her incisive gaze cutting straight through my attempt at studious composure like honed steel through silk. Even amidst the Academy's slow recovery, Hightower remains an unwavering pillar of formidable, often terrifying, expectation.

"Apologies, Professor," I murmur, gathering my scattered notes, annoyed at the faint tremor in my hands that betrays my inner turmoil. "Just... wrestling with the stasis matrix harmonics. My energy flow feels... resistant today."

"Wrestling? Or resisting?" Hightower counters, tapping a long, elegant finger against my textbook on advanced spell matrices. The leather cover seems to sigh under her touch. "Your power plateaus because you hold back, Cortana. You possess immense innate talent, amplified by your Sight, yet you throttle it. Why? Such affinities often create internal 'limiters'—subconscious blocks born of fear, inadequate training, or perhaps," her gaze focuses, "unresolved trauma. Fear of your own potential, perhaps? Given your lineage, and recent events, it's considerable."

I stiffen, hating the way her words about trauma land uncomfortably close to the bone, the way she seems to see the fear I try so hard to bury.

"I assure you, Professor, I am applying myself diligently."

"Hm." Hightower's expression remains skeptical, etched with centuries of assessing students. "Your affinity for sensing magical resonance, however, the core of your Sight, is... unique. Untapped potential there." She pauses, assessing me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle, as if she can see the very currents of magic swirling, blocked, within me. "Potential the Academy has perhaps overlooked for too long. It might prove beneficial to certain lines of inquiry I am pursuing regarding historical magical artifacts."

"Perhaps a change of focus is needed. Report to my office after your Practical Thaumaturgy lecture. I have a new assignment for you. Consider yourself my research assistant, effective immediately."

Before I can fully process the implications—staggering access to restricted knowledge versus an impossible demand on my already frayed time—Hightower sweeps away towards the restricted archives, her violet robes whispering over the ancient stone floor.

"Don't be late."

Hours later, heart pounding a nervous rhythm against my ribs—a familiar mix of apprehension and undeniable curiosity—I stand outside Hightower's familiar oak door. The wood itself feels ancient, imbued with the faint hum of protective wards. I smooth down my slightly worn Academy robes, take a steadying breath, and knock twice, the sound echoing slightly in the quiet corridor.

"Come in," the clipped reply sounds instantly.

Hightower is immersed in ancient scrolls spread across her massive desk like maps of forgotten worlds, the air in the office thick with the familiar scent of old parchment, ozone, and the underlying tang of complex, recently cast spell work.

"Ah, Cortana. Prompt. Good." She doesn't look up immediately, her focus absolute. "I require an acquisition. Professor Gallant holds certain... historical items for me. Sensitive materials, unrelated to standard Academy holdings."

She scribbles furiously on a heavy vellum note, her quill scratching urgently, then seals it with a complex wax sigil depicting a serpent coiled tightly around a shadowed key—a symbol I've never seen before, radiating a faint, almost undetectable magical hum that makes my Sight tingle.

"Take this to him immediately. Use the codeword *Aeon*. He will understand the urgency."

She finally looks up, her gaze direct, pinning me in place, leaving no room for questions. "You are not to examine the contents yourself. Return directly here. Understood?"

The secrecy chills me more than the drafty corridors. The unfamiliar sigil feels cold beneath my fingertips.

"Understood, Professor."

I hurry through the corridors, the note feeling heavier than mere vellum should. Reaching Gallant's classroom, I hesitate only a moment before slipping inside during a lull in his lecture on spectral ward theory. I catch his eye, navigate between desks occupied by intimidatingly advanced seniors, lean in close, and whisper the codeword.

"Aeon."

The old Dwarven mage's normally placid expression instantly turns serious, his bushy eyebrows rising fractionally. He murmurs a quick excuse to his surprised students ("Minor resonance query, continue analyzing the harmonic decay sequence") and leads me wordlessly into his cluttered back office, the scent of pipe weed and old books clinging to his robes.

From a heavily warded shelf concealed behind an ancient tapestry depicting the Binding of Fenrir—a relic I recognize from advanced mythology texts—he retrieves a small, age-darkened wooden box. Inside, nestled on faded black velvet that seems to

absorb the light, lie two objects: a pouch made of some supple, night-dark leather, and a tightly rolled scroll tied with glistening black sinew.

He hands them over, his expression carefully neutral, but his eyes hold a weight of unspoken significance, a silent warning.

"Professor Hightower instructed me not to examine them," I reiterate, feeling the need to acknowledge the implicit secrecy, the palpable tension surrounding these items. Gallant merely grunts, a deep dwarven sound of acknowledgment that offers no comfort, and gestures me out.

Back in Hightower's office, the silence presses in, heavy and expectant. She's absent again, likely dealing with the endless council restructuring meetings or perhaps deliberately leaving me alone with temptation. I place the items carefully on the polished surface of the desk. The leather pouch feels unnaturally cold, emanating a faint, unsettling energy that makes my Sight buzz unpleasantly against my senses. Dark. Ancient. Definitely Shifter magic, but steeped in something forbidden, something that makes the back of my neck prickle with instinctive alarm.

Do not examine the contents.

Hightower's command echoes in my mind, warring with a desperate, gnawing curiosity. *Aeon*. The urgency. The secrecy. What artifacts linked to dark Shifter magic does Hightower need retrieved outside official channels, especially now, with the

Academy supposedly focused on transparency after the Master's fall?

Secrets connected to Saralak? To the Dark Eye remnants represented by Magana, the agent defeated months ago? To the very darkness that cost my friend Valeria her life in the final battle?

The need to know, to understand the potential danger, claws at me. What if this is another threat? What if waiting puts others at risk?

Glancing nervously at the firmly closed door, heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs, I give in.

Just a quick look. For context. For safety. The justification feels thin, even to me.

My fingers tremble slightly as I loosen the drawstring on the cold leather pouch.

2



ORION

The weight of the Blackthorn name settles on my shoulders the moment I step onto Pendragon's grounds—a mantle woven from gold and shadow, heavy with expectation. Power. Privilege. Dominance. It's the air I breathe, the magic humming in my bloodline, a birthright earned through centuries of strategic supremacy. My father, Lord Valerius, demands nothing less than absolute control, unwavering strength—the consolidation of power that defines our family. He views the Cortanas as insignificant remnants of a bygone era, obstacles already crushed beneath our ascendancy, their past glory merely a cautionary tale. He fails to grasp the... complications their lingering presence creates. He certainly doesn't understand *her*.

I stride through the hallowed, echoing halls of the Academy, ignoring the deferential nods and hastily averted gazes of lesser students. Let them whisper. Let them fear the Blackthorn name. It changes nothing. My focus narrows as I approach Professor Hightower's office. There's a task I need to handle for her—a tedious but necessary political maneuver involving the upcoming council meeting—yet another, less logical impulse pulls me here first. *Cortana*.

The memory of her defiance flashes—that galling stunt with the Pegasus statue months ago, zapping me with lightning right under Carlos Darkbane’s nose. Audacious. Infuriatingly effective. And, damn it all, undeniably memorable. She gets under my skin like frostbite, a persistent irritant, a spark of chaotic light disrupting the ordered, controlled world I inhabit.

Then there was Draconia—that volatile kiss after the trials, a moment born of shared peril, raw energy arcing between us that tasted like fire and ozone and something dangerously addictive. It left me reeling, off-balance, wanting... *more*. An unacceptable weakness, a dangerous distraction given our families’ history, the centuries of animosity bred into our bones. *Blackthorns do not consort with Cortanas*. It is the first rule I learned. Yet, the magnetic pull persists, a discordant note in the symphony of control I fight daily to maintain.

I reach Hightower’s door and push it open without knocking.
And freeze.

There she stands. Eleanora Cortana. Beside Hightower’s desk, face flushed, looking utterly, incandescently guilty, strands of fiery hair escaping her usually severe bun. And on the desk between them lie the artifacts—dark leather pouch, ancient scroll—radiating that faint but distinctly unpleasant Shifter magic Hightower hinted she was investigating. More than just unpleasant; there’s an underlying taint to it, a resonance that reminds me of diagrams in forbidden texts, something deliberately obscured. Forbidden magic. What in the seven hells is Cortana doing tangled in this? And why does the sight of her, caught in the act, send a sharp, possessive jolt straight through my core?

Her green eyes fly wide, locking with mine. Shock flares first, then that familiar spark of defiance I know too well, quickly masked by a thin veil of forced composure. She knows she's trapped.

"Blackthorn," she says, her voice tight, clipped. A challenge.

"Cortana," I reply, deliberately cool, stepping fully into the room, letting the heavy door click shut behind me with satisfying finality. I let my gaze linger pointedly on the artifacts, then sweep back to her, sharp and assessing. "An unexpected discovery. Playing with forces above your station again?"

Her chin lifts, color flooding her cheeks—anger, or perhaps embarrassment. "Professor Hightower requested these."

"Did she?" I raise a skeptical eyebrow, moving closer, deliberately crowding her space. The air crackles between us, thick with our history, the unresolved charge from that kiss, the immediate conflict of this moment. She smells faintly of ozone and rain-dampened flowers—an intoxicating, maddening combination that frays my control. "Or did Cortana curiosity prove too tempting once more?"

Her eyes flash emerald fire. "My actions are none of your concern."

"When they involve potentially dangerous artifacts in Professor Hightower's private office, they become very much my concern," I counter smoothly, stopping barely a foot away. I can feel the heat radiating from her, see the rapid pulse fluttering at the base of her throat like a trapped bird. The urge to close the remaining distance, to shatter that fragile composure, to taste that fire again, is a sudden, sharp ache low in my gut. A primal need to dominate the chaos she represents.

"Get out of my way, Blackthorn," she bites out, attempting to step around me.

I shift, blocking her path easily. "Not until you explain what you're doing meddling with forbidden Shifter magic."

"I told you—"

"You told me nothing," I interrupt, leaning in closer, lowering my voice, enjoying the way she has to tilt her head back slightly to meet my gaze. "You looked. Hightower explicitly warned you not to."

Her breath hitches. Caught. Cornered. That flicker of vulnerability beneath the defiant glare calls to something primal, possessive within me. The tension snaps. Before I can analyze the impulse, before centuries of ingrained animosity and Blackthorn discipline can reassert control, I act.

My hand comes up, cupping her jaw, my thumb brushing the soft skin just below her cheekbone, fingers tangling slightly in the silky strands of hair near her ear. She gasps, eyes widening further, a mixture of shock and something else—awareness? Fear? Her skin is soft beneath my touch, warm, electric. I tilt her head back slightly, my gaze dropping to her lips—full, slightly parted, impossibly tempting.

"Orion, don't—" she whispers, the sound barely audible, her voice trembling slightly.

But it's too late. The proximity, the charged air, the memory of that kiss—it ignites like dry tinder. I close the distance, my mouth capturing hers in a kiss that's less tenderness, more claiming. It's rough, demanding, fueled by weeks of simmering frustration, by the confusing pull she exerts, by the raw need to assert dominance over a situation—over *feelings*—that feel dangerously chaotic.

For a heart-stopping moment, she resists, her hands coming up to push against my chest, her body tense. Then, a small sound, almost a whimper, escapes her throat, and she melts against me, her lips parting undermines, answering my kiss with a surprising, desperate fervor that sends fire searing through my veins. Her hands fist in my robes, clinging, pulling me closer as if she's drowning and I'm the only solid thing in the storm. Gods, the taste of her... forbidden, addictive, utterly consuming.

The distinct *click* of the office door latch snaps us apart like a physical blow. We spring back, breathing heavily, chests heaving. Eleanora's face is flushed crimson, her lips slightly swollen and kiss-bitten, her eyes wide and dazed, pupils dilated. A savage satisfaction wars with sharp self-recrimination within me. *What in the blazes am I doing? Kissing a Cortana? Here?* What would my father say?

Professor Hightower stands in the doorway, her ancient violet eyes sweeping over the scene—the artifacts on the desk, our disheveled state, the palpable tension humming between us—with unnerving perception. Her expression is an unreadable mask of neutrality, but I sense a flicker of calculation behind her gaze. She sees too much. Does she know? Does she suspect the volatile current between us?

"Interrupting something, it seems," she says dryly, closing the door behind her with quiet finality. She walks calmly to her desk,

pointedly ignoring the artifacts for the moment. "Blackthorn. I assume Ms. Cortana explained her errand?"

"She was... unclear on the details," I manage, forcing my voice steady, wrestling my composure back into place like ill-fitting armor.

Hightower picks up the pouch, then the scroll, her gaze incisive as she glances at Eleanora's still-flushed face, then back at me. "These artifacts," she begins, her tone turning serious, all traces of dryness gone, "were recovered from Backford Keep. An old Cortana property, recently acquired by an alchemist named Elias." She lets the significance of that sink in, watching our reactions. "Given the nature of these items and recent... disturbances... I require further investigation."

She looks directly at Eleanora. "Cortana, your family connection makes you the logical choice to investigate the Keep itself. Find out what this Elias is truly up to. Be discreet. Report only to me."

Then, her piercing gaze shifts to me. "Blackthorn, your political acumen is needed elsewhere. The Council convenes shortly on urgent security matters following the dragon murder. I require you to attend in my stead. Observe carefully. Report back anything... unusual."

Forced apart again. Sent on separate, dangerous paths. Just like that. Divide and conquer? Or merely efficient delegation? With Hightower, it's impossible to be certain. My assignment feels like a deliberate distraction, sending me into the viper's nest of council politics while Eleanora is sent towards the potential source of this darkness. A flicker of suspicion towards Hightower herself sparks, quickly suppressed. She has her own games, always.

I glance at Eleanora. She looks stunned, processing the connection to her family home, the name Elias clearly ringing alarm bells for her too. Sending her there alone, knowing these dark artifacts originated there, knowing her history makes her vulnerable... a cold knot forms deep in my gut. This Elias sounds dangerous. The thought of Eleanora walking into a potential trap tied directly to her family's painful past, armed only with her stubborn pride and volatile magic... it sparks an unwelcome, fiercely protective instinct. An instinct that wars directly with centuries of ingrained Blackthorn doctrine, with everything my father taught me about Cortanas being the enemy, obstacles to be overcome or removed.

Damn it all. This changes nothing. And yet, it changes everything.

ELEANORA

My cheeks still burn from Orion's kiss—or perhaps just from the sheer audacity of him—as I hurry away from Hightower's office, clutching the assignment note. Separate tasks. Him schmoozing the council, me investigating Backford Keep. My family's ancestral home, now occupied by some unknown alchemist named Elias, the apparent source of those dark Shifter artifacts Hightower is so secretly interested in. My stomach churns, twisting with a volatile mix of dread and grim determination. I *have* to know what's happening there. It's Cortana land, tainted or not.

Before heading out, I make a quick detour to my dorm tower. I need supplies—a sturdy traveling cloak, basic healing and energy potions, my emergency communication crystal—and frankly, a moment to shove the memory of Orion's infuriatingly possessive kiss into a tightly sealed mental box.

As I'm stuffing essentials into my worn leather satchel, my door bursts open without warning. "Nora! You will *not* believe the ridiculous counter-hex matrix Meadowlight assigned—" Dana, my giant-blooded friend, stops short, her usual whirlwind energy

faltering as she takes in my travel cloak and focused expression. Her bright, usually cheerful face clouds slightly. "Going somewhere?"

Dana towers over me, nearly seven feet tall, her metallic skin carrying the unique pinkish undertone inherited from her human mother. She's usually a chaotic storm of complaints about coursework or annoying classmates, but beneath the drama, she's fiercely loyal.

"Hightower assignment," I say, keeping my voice deliberately vague. The fewer people who know about this clandestine trip, the better. "Investigating an old property out near the Versai mountains."

"Ooh, spooky! Need backup?" Her eyes gleam with the immediate possibility of adventure, a welcome distraction from counter-hex matrices.

I manage a small, appreciative smile. "Thanks, Dana, but this one requires... discretion." I deftly change the subject, asking about her impossible assignment, letting her familiar dramatic flair fill the small room. It's a brief, welcome dose of normalcy before I have to leave, before I step back into the shadows my family name seems determined to drag me into.

My next stop is far less pleasant: the imposing marble halls of the Arcadian Central Bank. Juggling this demanding part-time job with my Academy studies is a constant, exhausting necessity since my family's... financial restructuring. Today, I need to formally

request leave for Hightower's assignment, which means navigating the glacial disapproval of Scepter Morgana.

Morgana, the sharp-featured, crimson-lipped woman who took over after Carlos Darkbane's exposure and subsequent demise, rules her domain with the ruthless efficiency of a predator guarding its territory. Scepters, I remind myself, are the magical world's regulators, overseeing sensitive contracts and artifacts, and Morgana wields her authority like a finely honed weapon, especially against someone like me whose family name carries whispers of past glory and present decline.

"Ms. Cortana," she greets me without looking up from a complex ledger, her voice as clipped and sharp as her spectacles. "Requesting leave during peak audit season? Highly irregular."

"It's an urgent academic directive, Scepter," I explain, keeping my tone carefully neutral, placing the official request bearing Hightower's formidable seal on her desk. "Professor Hightower requires my immediate assistance off-campus."

Morgana finally looks up, her gaze sharp and assessing. She picks up the request, examining the seal, her thin lips pursed. "Hightower..." she murmurs, a flicker of something—calculation? respect? annoyance? —in her eyes. With visible reluctance, she stamps the approval form. "Do not permit your... *academic pursuits*," the slight sneer isn't lost on me, "to interfere with your duties here upon your return. The quarterly reconciliation reports are due promptly." Her tone leaves no room for negotiation.

"Understood, Scepter," I reply, retrieving the form and escaping her frigid office with palpable relief. The weight of my double life feels particularly heavy today.

Hours later, the ferry ride across Arcadia's shimmering bay and the subsequent rattling cab journey up winding mountain roads feel like transitioning between worlds. Backford Keep looms before me, emerging from the swirling mountain mists like a stone beast. Perched high in the Versai range, built of grim grey granite hewn from the peaks themselves, it looks less like a home and more like a fortress brooding against the turbulent sky. My family's ancestral seat. Seeing it again fills me with a complex, hollow ache—flickering memories of childhood summers warring with the bitter knowledge of our fall, amplified now by the unsettling wrongness emanating from its ancient stones. The air here feels colder than it should, heavier, tainted with a subtle decay that makes my Sight prickle unpleasantly. Neglect is palpable, but there's something else... a faint, cloying scent beneath the sharp pine and damp earth, like harsh chemicals and something vaguely, sickeningly, rotten.

A familiar figure approaches from the massive, iron-studded main doors—Balam, the old groundskeeper, his face a roadmap of wrinkles but his eyes still kind. He served my family faithfully for decades before... well, before everything changed.

"Miss Eleanora," he greets me with a deep, formal bow that feels achingly out of place now, though genuine warmth crinkles the corners of his eyes. "It has been too long."

"Balam," I return the greeting, offering Hightower's Academy crest as explanation. "I'm here on official Academy business. I need to speak with the current master of the Keep."

Balam's expression clouds instantly. "The Baron Elias is... particular, miss. Reclusive. But I will announce you." He leads me through the groaning doors into the grand foyer. It's just as I remember from my brief, disastrous visit months ago—vast, cold, imposing, but utterly stripped of life. Tapestries are gone, alcoves empty, furniture draped in dusty shrouds like corpses awaiting burial. The air hangs thick with silence and the smell of disuse, overlaid with that faint, unpleasant chemical tang I noticed outside. It feels like a mausoleum, haunted by echoes of lost grandeur.

Heavy, deliberate footsteps echo on the stone floor, distinctly different from Balam's lighter tread. A dwarf appears from the shadowed archway leading deeper into the Keep—stocky, powerfully built, with a magnificent, intricately braided reddish-brown beard cascading nearly to his waist. His clear blue eyes hold an unnerving combination of ancient wisdom and sharp, assessing awareness. *Igor*. The name surfaces from Gondor's warnings about Elias's assistant, the one potentially wielding a Dwarven axe. A sudden, visceral shiver traces its way down my spine as I meet his gaze; my gut screams *danger* in a way that has nothing to do with his imposing stature. His eyes seem to linger on me a fraction too long, his gaze sweeping over me not just with assessment, but with a flicker of something colder—recognition? Calculation? As if he's weighing my magical signature against some internal measure—before his expression becomes utterly impassive.

"State your business," Igor booms, his voice surprisingly resonant, echoing slightly in the cavernous space.

I present the crest again, keeping my voice steady despite the sudden, specific unease prickling my senses. "Eleanora Cortana. Sent by Professor Hightower of Pendragon Academy to inquire about historical artifacts."

Igor studies the crest, then me, his stony expression unreadable. "Wait here. I will fetch the Baron." He turns with surprising quickness and disappears back into the Keep's shadowed depths.

I wait, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, the silence pressing in, the wrongness of this place intensifying with every passing second. Finally, Elias appears, preceded by Igor. He's unnervingly thin, almost skeletal, dressed impeccably in dark, severe clothing that seems to hang on his sharp frame. His skin possesses a greyish, unhealthy pallor that mirrors the Keep's cold stones. His small, colorless eyes rake over me with undisguised disapproval, his large, hooked nose wrinkling as if he smells something offensive—which, ironically, is precisely the faint chemical, rotten undertone clinging subtly to *him*.

"Miss Cortana," he says, his voice thin and sharp as chipped flint, devoid of any warmth or welcome. He doesn't offer a hand, doesn't invite me further in. "Balam informed me you represent the Academy. State your purpose quickly. I am... occupied with delicate work."

"Baron Elias," I reply, forcing politeness, meeting his cold gaze directly. "Professor Hightower tasked me with retrieving any remaining historical artifacts pertinent to the Cortana family history that might still be on the premises. Specifically," I choose my words carefully, "items potentially related to unique

magical signatures or undocumented Shifter history." I keep my explanation deliberately vague, omitting any mention of the artifacts Hightower already possesses.

Elias clicks his tongue, a dry, reptilian sound that grates on my nerves. "Artifacts? Preposterous. This Keep was thoroughly cleared upon my acquisition. Anything of perceived value was liquidated to cover outstanding debts." His eyes narrow, glittering faintly. "There is nothing here for you or your meddling professor. The vaults are empty. You may ask your groundskeeper." He gestures dismissively towards Balam, who hovers anxiously near the entrance, clearly uncomfortable.

His denial is too quick, too absolute. He's lying. The faint scent clinging to him screams of alchemy, perhaps necromancy. But confronting him directly feels incredibly dangerous.

"Perhaps items deemed insignificant were overlooked during the liquidation?" I press gently, testing his reaction. "Old storage areas? Outbuildings? Sheds?"

Elias waves a dismissive, impatient hand. "Check the grounds if you must satisfy your academic curiosity, but do not disturb my work further." He turns abruptly, sweeping back into the Keep's shadows like a wraith, Igor trailing silently behind him, a stout, bearded gargoyle guarding his master's secrets.

Balam meets my eyes as the inner door clicks shut, his expression a mixture of sympathy and apology. Elias's dismissal is insulting, his lie palpable. But Balam's hopeful look, his mention of the sealed

shed... it's a chance, however slim. I won't leave without checking every possibility. "This way, miss," Balam murmurs, leading me out a side door and away from the oppressive chill of the main Keep, towards the overgrown, neglected back gardens. "The Baron... he cleared out the main house thoroughly, yes. But he cared little for the outbuildings. I managed to move some chests, some old furniture, to the old groundskeeper's shed before he ordered it sealed. Perhaps..." His voice trails off, hopeful but uncertain.

He leads me to a dilapidated wooden shed almost swallowed by overgrown ivy, its door sagging precariously on rusty hinges. The air inside is thick with the cloying scent of dust, mildew, and decaying wood. Boxes overflow with broken tools, moth-eaten fabrics, and tarnished silver pieces. Old furniture pieces, draped in thick cobwebs, loom like skeletal ghosts in the dim light filtering through grimy, cracked windowpanes. My heart sinks. It looks like nothing but forgotten junk.

"I am sorry, miss," Balam says sadly, his shoulders slumping slightly. "It is not much, I fear."

"Thank you, Balam. For saving what you could," I say sincerely, touched by his quiet loyalty despite the Keep's grim new master.

He gives a small, formal bow and leaves me to my search, respecting my privacy. I start methodically, carefully lifting dusty lids, sifting through the forgotten remnants of Cortana history. Old portraits with faded eyes, cracked porcelain teacups, bundles of brittle letters tied with faded ribbon... nothing of magical significance, just the melancholic debris of a fallen house. Among the letters, however, one draft catches my eye—a scathing rejection letter from the Pendragon Academy Admissions Council, addressed to Elias decades ago, dismissing his

'unconventional theories' on life-force transference as 'dangerously close to forbidden practices.' A flicker of understanding, cold and sharp, pierces through me. Was his path to darkness paved with academic rejection, a festering resentment against the very institution that now employs him?

Deeper in the shed, half-hidden behind a large, overturned wardrobe draped in cobwebs, I find it. A plain wooden chest, starkly different from the others, unadorned except for heavy metal reinforcing bands. No visible lock, but as my fingers brush the wood, a faint tingle dances across my skin. *Magic*. A ward. Not overly powerful, but definitely present, humming faintly beneath the surface. I close my eyes, extending my senses, focusing my will, pushing a gentle thread of my own magic against the ward—not forcing, but seeking resonance, permission. It resists for a tense moment, the wood seeming to vibrate slightly under my touch, pushing back with surprising stubbornness, then yields abruptly with a soft internal *click*.

Heart pounding, I lift the heavy lid. Inside, nestled on surprisingly intact dark velvet lining, lie another platinum ring and a tightly rolled scroll, startlingly similar to the ones Hightower sent me for earlier. *Confirmation*. Elias *is* connected to these dark artifacts. He lied. I carefully lift the entire wooden box, its weight feeling significant, intending to take it with me.

My hand brushes against something else within the larger, junk-filled chest I pulled the first box from. Another box, smaller this time. Made of a dull, grey, seamless metal I don't recognize, intricately etched with complex geometric patterns that look distinctly Dwarven. No keyhole, no visible hinges, just the cold metal and a strange, complex pattern on the bottom that feels like

some kind of intricate puzzle lock, perhaps involving interlocking gears or runes. It radiates no magic, feeling cold and inert to my senses, yet it hums with an undeniable sense of importance. I tuck this second, mysterious box under my arm alongside the first.

Emerging into the grey, oppressive afternoon light, I find Balam waiting patiently near the path. "You found something, miss?" he asks, a flicker of hope in his tired eyes.

"Yes, Balam. Thank you," I manage a grateful smile. "A few things."

He walks me towards the main gate, his quiet loyalty a small warmth against the Keep's pervasive chill. As I arrange for the same slightly unnerved cab driver to take me back towards the ferry landing, my Academy pager buzzes violently, insistently, at my hip. A priority alert. My fingers tremble slightly as I activate it, my blood running cold at the curt, urgent message flashing across the small, illuminated screen:

CORTANA - URGENT. RETURN ACADEMY IMMEDIATELY. HIGHTOWER.

Followed by three chilling words that steal the breath from my lungs:

DRAGON MURDERED. CONFIRMED.

My knees nearly buckle. The investigation isn't just historical anymore. It's active. Lethal. And somehow, this cold, shadowed Keep, the sinister Elias, Igor, and these dark artifacts are right in the center of it all.

4

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ORION

The air in the Academy Council chamber feels stale, thick with self-importance and the cloying scent of expensive robes mingling with old, stagnant magic. I take my designated seat—a privilege afforded by the Blackthorn name, not Hightower’s specific request—and force myself to endure the tedious proceedings. Representing Hightower here is a necessary evil, a strategic necessity while she navigates the political minefield created by my father and his allies, but gods, I detest these gatherings. Pointless debates about garden maintenance budgets and arcane library acquisitions while real threats gather like storm clouds just beyond the wards. Threats they seem determined to ignore.

Professor Marjorie, her nose practically aimed at the vaulted ceiling as if sniffing out lesser bloodlines, is currently haranguing Professor Gallant about subpar student performance in advanced warding. Her disdain for his Dwarven heritage is barely veiled beneath layers of academic jargon about ‘inherent aptitude limitations’. It’s pathetic. The blatant prejudice, the petty power plays, the willful blindness—this is the body meant to safeguard Pendragon? No wonder my father finds manipulating

them so effortless. I stifle a cynical scoff, tuning out their self-congratulatory drivel, my thoughts drifting unwillingly, dangerously, back to Eleanora heading towards Backford Keep. Towards Elias. Towards artifacts steeped in forbidden magic. A cold knot tightens low in my gut, an unwelcome protective urge warring fiercely with ingrained animosity.

"Lord Blackthorn, perhaps you have insights on the proposed revisions to the elemental resonance curriculum?" Professor Namin, one of the few council members possessing a modicum of actual intellect and integrity, directs his question towards me, pulling me abruptly from my thoughts.

I offer a noncommittal shrug, projecting an aristocratic boredom I don't entirely feel. "Professor Hightower merely conveyed her standard quarterly report regarding current student progress," I lie smoothly, placing the innocuous parchment she provided earlier onto the polished Round Table. Let them drown in mundane paperwork and curriculum debates. It keeps their attention diverted.

The meeting drones on interminably. Funding for new scrying pools (likely lining someone's pockets), complaints about dormitory noise levels (a perennial favorite), endless political maneuvering disguised as academic debate. My patience wears thin, stretching taut like an overwound watch spring. This is a monumental waste of time while Eleanora is potentially walking into danger, while a dragon lies murdered somewhere nearby, while something dark clearly festers within these very walls, ignored or perhaps even cultivated by some of those sitting at this table.

Finally released from the suffocating chamber, I head straight for Hightower's office, my strides long and purposeful. She needs to know the council is useless, actively burying their heads in administrative sand. More importantly, I need answers about why she sent Eleanora—*Cortana*—to that Keep alone. It feels like sending a specific type of bait into a known predator's den.

I find her pacing her office, the air crackling faintly with her contained power, like static before a lightning strike. She looks weary, the lines around her ancient eyes deeper than usual, but her gaze is sharp as fractured obsidian when she turns to face me.

"The council is preoccupied with trivialities and internal squabbles," I state bluntly, dispensing with the usual pleasantries. "They offer no useful intelligence and seem determined to ignore any real threats."

Hightower stops pacing, fixing me with that unnervingly perceptive violet gaze. "Predictable. Easier to debate garden gnomes than face uncomfortable truths."

"Truths like sending Eleanora alone into a potentially lethal situation linked to forbidden artifacts?" I challenge, letting controlled anger sharpen my tone, stepping further into the room. "What game are you playing, Professor? You know the risks associated with her family's history, with that Keep. You know her Sight makes her uniquely sensitive, potentially a beacon for whatever darkness resides there. Pushing her magic now, like this..."

Her expression remains infuriatingly unreadable. "Ms. Cortana possesses unique skills suited to this investigation. Her Sight—"

"Her Sight makes her a target!" I interrupt, refusing to be placated. "And your training methods... pushing her towards advanced techniques before she's mastered the fundamentals... it's reckless. Especially for someone with her volatile lineage. I know the dangers, Professor." The phantom ache of my own brutal advancement under her tutelage surfaces—power gained at the price of control I still fight daily to maintain. "I remember the cost of pushing too hard, too fast. Whatever happened during my training, the price I paid, I won't see it happen to her."

Hightower's eyes narrow almost imperceptibly. "Your circumstances were different, Blackthorn. Your inherent magic required forceful shaping to prevent it from consuming you. Cortana's potential flows differently, like a river seeking its course. It requires careful nurturing... and sometimes, a necessary push to break through dams, whether internal or external." She pauses, her gaze intensifying, probing. "Do you doubt her capabilities? Or merely fear your own... burgeoning attachment?"

The question hangs between us, sharp and unwelcome as a shard of ice. *Attachment*. The word itself feels dangerous, foreign. Before I can formulate a suitably cutting retort, dismantle her accusation with cold logic, the office door bursts open without ceremony.

Instructor Frost stands there, his usual icy composure completely shattered. The powerful frost giant looks pale beneath his bluish skin, his expression grim, almost haunted. "Professor. Lord Blackthorn. You must come. Immediately."

Frost leads us not towards the main Academy levels, but down, deep into the sprawling basement complex—a seldom-visited labyrinth of dusty storage rooms, forgotten archives, and the sealed laboratories used for potentially hazardous research. The air grows colder here, damper, carrying the faint, unpleasant tang of volatile reagents and contained, sometimes unstable, magical experiments. As we approach a secluded section, the metallic scent of old blood, sharp and wrong, hits me subtly, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. A cold, oppressive feeling settles in the air, different from the usual dormant magic of the lower levels.

Frost stops before the reinforced door of a specific alchemy lab, one rarely used according to the access logs he quickly checked before fetching us. "I was conducting routine atmospheric magic integrity checks," Frost explains, his deep voice tight with controlled urgency. "Detected residual traces... something potent. Corrupted. Forbidden. Behind these wards."

He pushes the heavy door open. The lab inside is dark, lit only by the flickering emergency rune light near the door. Standard equipment lies scattered, coated in thick dust, but the center of the room is disturbingly clear. And on the cold stone floor... my breath catches in my throat, my own magic recoiling instinctively.

A complex magic circle, drawn with stark, deliberate precision. Not in chalk or paint, but in something dark, viscous, still faintly glistening wetly under the weak rune light. Blood. Dragon blood, judging by the sheer, sickening potency radiating from it—a powerful, corrupted echo that makes the air feel heavy,

charged with violation. The pattern itself is chillingly familiar from the most forbidden texts in the Blackthorn archives—a five-pointed star inverted within a hexagon, symbols intrinsically linked to the darkest forms of summoning, necromancy, and soul-manipulation.

"This is forbidden magic," Hightower breathes beside me, her voice low, tight with horrified recognition. "Summoning demons... or worse, attempting to raise the dead by force. Necromancy." Her gaze sweeps the circle, sharp and analytical despite the shock. "It requires immense power, volatile components... and a significant blood sacrifice to anchor the ritual." She gestures towards the circle's center, where a darker, thicker stain marks the cold stone floor, the epicenter of the foul energy signature. "Dragon blood provides that power. Enough, perhaps, depending on the dragon's age and type, to tear a soul back from the void, or call forth something truly monstrous from the spaces between worlds."

Necromancy. The word hangs heavy and foul in the cold, sterile air, tasting like grave dust. It's one of the oldest, most universally reviled branches of magic—a perversion, meddling with the fundamental laws of life and death, often requiring horrific sacrifices to fuel its unstable power. Raising the dead isn't resurrection; it's violation, often resulting in corrupted, soulless husks or binding powerful, unwilling spirits into decaying flesh, slaves to the necromancer's will. To practice it here, within Pendragon's supposedly secure walls... it's unthinkable. A catastrophic breach of security and ethics.

Frost points towards the edge of the circle with a trembling, ice-blue finger. "There was more blood here. Drag marks leading

towards the service tunnels access panel over there. The body... the source of the blood... it's gone."

My mind races, connecting the chilling dots with sickening, absolute speed. The murdered dragon Hightower paged Eleanora about. The forbidden Shifter artifacts Eleanora found at Backford Keep, retrieved from an alchemist named Elias. This dark magic circle drawn in fresh dragon blood, hidden deep within the Academy's underbelly.

It's not separate incidents. It's a coordinated conspiracy. Someone within, or with privileged access to, Pendragon Academy murdered a dragon, harvested its blood, and performed forbidden necromancy—a ritual almost certainly linked to Elias and the dark artifacts Eleanora now possesses. The threat isn't just external; it's already inside the gates, operating unseen, possibly shielded by the Council's willful blindness or, worse, active complicity.

And Eleanora Cortana is walking right towards its source. The protective urge I felt earlier surges again, sharp and undeniable, overriding everything else.

ELEANORA

My blood runs cold as Orion recounts the discovery in the basement lab—the desecrated circle, the unmistakable stench of forbidden magic, the confirmation of dragon blood used as fuel for a horrific ritual. Hightower listens intently, her face a grim mask, her earlier weariness burned away by sharp, focused intensity. She stands before us now, Orion and I flanking her imposing desk, the forbidden Shifter artifacts I retrieved from Backford Keep laid bare between us like dark accusations. The silvery ring seems to pulse faintly with a darkness that makes my teeth ache.

"Necromancy," Hightower confirms, her voice low and taut, vibrating with controlled fury. Her gaze flicks between the sinister ring and scroll, then to Orion. "Performed within Academy walls, fueled by dragon blood. This confirms our worst fears. Elias is not merely an alchemist dabbling in dark arts; he is actively practicing forbidden magic of the highest, most dangerous order, likely shielded by someone powerful within the Council." Her eyes, sharp as violet shards, meet mine. "And these artifacts," she gestures towards the ring and scroll, the air around them seeming to curdle slightly, "are almost certainly

components—keys, perhaps—for whatever abominable ritual he prepares."

"What ritual?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper, dread coiling tight and cold in my stomach. "What could possibly require such power? Such desecration?"

"Resurrection," Hightower states bluntly, the word landing like a physical blow. "Or summoning on a scale rarely contemplated. Given the specific Shifter nature of these artifacts, and the darkest legends surrounding chaos magic..." She pauses, letting the terrifying implication settle in the suddenly colder air of the office. "There are ancient tales, usually dismissed as myth by complacent fools, of a being called Saralak. The Chaos Drake."

Sarak. The name hits me with the force of remembered nightmare. Whispers on the wind before the Master's fall, fragmented lore from forbidden texts I'd skimmed out of morbid curiosity—an entity of pure destructive force, entropy incarnate, imprisoned millennia ago during the First Wars. A being capable of unraveling the very fabric of reality. I always assumed it was just that—a myth, a boogeyman. But Hightower speaks the name with chilling certainty.

"Some forbidden texts theorize that artifacts like these," she taps the dark ring, and I swear I see shadows deepen around it, "could be keys to weakening his primeval prison, or even," her voice drops further, heavy with grim certainty, "calling forth his chaotic essence, binding it to a new form."

The room seems to tilt. Binding Saralak? Resurrecting him? The idea is sickening, almost inconceivable. "You truly think Elias intends to resurrect Saralak?" My voice trembles slightly.

"It seems the most likely, horrifying objective," Hightower concedes, her expression grim. "Using the potent life force in dragon blood as fuel, these ancient artifacts as a focus... It explains the secrecy, the need for powerful protection, the sheer audacity of it all." She looks between Orion and me, her expression hardening into resolve. "The Council is compromised or willfully blind. We cannot rely on them. The answers we need—the *truth*—lie with those who remember the old ways, who understand ancient magic and history unfiltered by Academy dogma. The Shifters."

Her gaze sharpens, pinning us both. "The dragon murder, these artifacts... you two must investigate this *together*. Go to the Shifter territories immediately. Seek out the ancient dragon Gondor—he aided you before against Carlos Darkbane. He may recognize these specific artifacts, understand the nature of the threat Elias poses, perhaps even know the ritual involved."

Together? My stomach clenches violently. Working closely with Orion? Relying on him, after everything? After that kiss that still burns in my memory? After learning the devastating truth about his family's crimes against mine? The thought is deeply unsettling, a volatile mix of necessity and repulsion. I risk a glance at him. His handsome face is a mask of controlled neutrality, but I see the tension tightening his jaw, the almost imperceptible flicker in his azure eyes as he processes Hightower's command. He clearly detests this forced partnership as much as I do. *Reluctant reliance*. Wonderful.

"Gondor resides deep within their territory," Hightower continues, either oblivious or indifferent to the crackling undercurrents between us. "It will be dangerous. Shifters hold little love for mages, and Gondor himself is notoriously

temperamental. But this is necessary. Find out what he knows about these artifacts, about Elias, about any rituals involving Saralak. Go now. Be discreet. Assume you are being watched."

The process of gathering supplies feels strained, punctuated by an awkward, charged silence. We move around each other in Hightower's outer supply room, the air thick with unspoken history and the immediate tension of our forced partnership. Every accidental brush of hands as we reach for identical healing potions, every shared glance across a checklist of essential reagents, feels like a static shock, igniting memories I'd rather keep buried. He's the Blackthorn heir, inheritor of a legacy built on my family's ruin. He's also the one whose magic resonates disturbingly with mine, the one who kissed me with possessive fire, the one whose gaze now holds a confusing mixture of irritation and grudging concern. It's a tangled, dangerous mess I don't have the time or energy to unravel right now.

Before we leave for the hostile Shifter territories, one loose end nags at me—that second box I found at the Keep. The metal Dwarven puzzle box. It felt significant then, inert but important. Now, knowing Elias operates from my family's old home, knowing these other artifacts originated there... perhaps that box isn't unrelated after all. While Orion arranges untraceable transport outside monitored Academy channels—a task his Blackthorn resources undoubtedly make easier, a fact that rankles—I make a quick, necessary detour back to the city.

The bank archives feel colder, quieter than when I last searched them. My family's vault, accessed by bloodline wards only I now possess, remains a chaotic testament to generations of Cortanas who apparently never discarded anything. The scent of old parchment, dust, and fading preservation charms feels melancholic today, heavy with the weight of stolen history, of lives and fortunes built and then deliberately dismantled. I search frantically through ledgers detailing forgotten businesses, dusty deed boxes for properties long lost, pushing aside the sharp pang of grief and injustice that rises with the dust motes. Hours seem to vanish into the dusty silence, marked only by the rustle of brittle paper. Just as I'm about to give up, convinced it was a dead end, my fingers close around it—tucked deep inside a heavy chest filled with centuries-old, irrelevant diplomatic communiques—a small, unassuming wooden box. Not magically sealed.

My breath catches. Lifting the simple lid reveals, nestled on faded velvet lining that crumbles slightly at my touch, a small, ornate metal key. Its shape is bizarre, intricate, non-human—clearly Dwarven, and matching the complex pattern I remember etched onto the bottom of the puzzle box from the Keep. *Could it be?* Hope, sharp and unexpected, wars with skepticism. A Dwarven box found at the Keep, opened by a key hidden deep within *my* family's vault? What impossible connection could there be between Dwarven craft, my Cortana ancestors, and whatever Elias is doing at Backford Keep?

Back in the relative privacy of my dorm room—Dana blessedly preoccupied with her own studies—I retrieve the metal puzzle box from its hiding place beneath a loose floorboard. It sits heavy and cold on my worn wooden desk, emanating nothing but the chill of old metal. Turning it over, I examine the intricate pattern etched into the bottom again. It *is* a mechanism, tiny seams suggesting parts designed to shift or slide, interlocking gears and runes forming a complex lock. And there, almost invisible unless you know precisely where to look, is a tiny indentation perfectly matching the shape of the Dwarven key.

My hands tremble slightly as I fit the key into the hidden slot. It slides in smoothly, perfectly, like it was forged for this exact purpose millennia ago. With a soft, satisfying *click*, a section of the intricate pattern recesses, and the lid springs open silently, releasing a puff of stale, ancient air that smells faintly of dust and something indescribably old.

No jewels glitter within. No gold gleams. My initial flicker of disappointment vanishes instantly, replaced by a creeping, icy dread that starts deep in my stomach and spreads outwards. Inside lies only what appears to be a folded bundle of old, yellowed paper, looking impossibly fragile. Cautiously, heart pounding a heavy rhythm against my ribs, I lift it out.

It's not just any paper—it's impossibly ancient, brittle parchment, covered edge-to-edge with the same dense, complex Shifter script found on the scrolls Hightower possesses. It feels dry, fragile, radiating an unnerving coldness that has nothing to do with temperature but sinks deep into my bones, making my teeth chatter despite the room's warmth. The paper is wrapped tightly

around something long, tubular, completely concealed within its many folds.

Hesitantly, my fingers shaking, I try to unwrap the object, but the ancient parchment resists, fused together by millennia or perhaps a forgotten binding enchantment designed to protect its contents. I close my eyes, extending my Sight, trying to sense any magical aura from the object within, but there's nothing—just that profound, inert, unnatural coldness, like a void where magic should be. Frustrated, driven by a desperate need to know what could possibly warrant such elaborate protection—Dwarven box, Cortana key, Shifter spells—I begin to work more carefully, using a fingernail to gently pry at the fused edges where the parchment overlaps, terrified the ancient script will crumble into dust beneath my touch. Each loosened fiber feels like disturbing a tomb.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity of painstaking, nerve-racking work, the wrapping loosens. The parchment unfurls, revealing itself to be astonishingly long, covered in endless lines of the complex Shifter language—spells, warnings, prophecies? My eyes scan frantically, catching fragments about bindings, chaos, *unmaking*, and *bone*. And nestled in the final layer, lying starkly against the aged parchment, is the object it concealed.

My breath catches in my throat, sharp and painful. My mouth falls open. Bile rises, hot and acrid.

It's a piece of bone. Smooth, yellowish-white, wickedly curved, terminating in a sharp, almost translucent point that seems to *devour* the light in my room, casting strange, small shadows. Is it a massive talon? A fang from some unimaginable primordial beast? A shard of horn? It seems nightmarishly like all three

fused together into something utterly alien and fundamentally wrong. Longer than my outstretched palm, thick enough to fill my grip, it radiates that profound, ancient coldness—the chill of primordial extinction, the absolute negation of life, a terrifying *emptiness* that screams of pure chaos. As I hold it, my Sight flares uncontrollably for a split second, giving me a nauseating flash of swirling, unmaking darkness, a vision of stars collapsing, and a sense of ravenous, ancient hunger that echoes deep within my own soul.

A Chaos Dragon fragment. *Saralak's*. Wrapped in ancient Shifter spells, hidden in a Dwarven puzzle box opened by a key from my family's vault. The horrifying connections slam into place with sickening certainty. This isn't just a component; it's a focal point. A physical anchor. A piece of the very entity Elias seeks to resurrect, hidden away for millennia, somehow tied to *my* family, now lying cold and malevolent in my hand.

The weight of the discovery presses down, heavier than any exhaustion, heavier than my family's stolen legacy. I sink onto my bed, the bone feeling alien, actively dangerous, pulsing with a silent, contained wrongness that makes my spirit ache and my magic recoil. The whispers at the edge of my Sight surge, no longer subtle, but a chaotic, fearful clamor, screaming warnings I can barely comprehend.

I need Orion. *Now*. Not the rival, not the complicated entanglement that makes my head spin, but the powerful mage, the reluctant ally who understands the terrifying stakes, the only other person who knows the true depth of the darkness we face. My fingers tremble violently as I grab my Academy pager from my satchel, fumbling with the activation rune, the smooth plastic

feeling alien and insignificant against the horrifying reality of the bone. I need his strength, his perspective, his infuriatingly steady presence. I need him to comprehend the true horror we've just unearthed.

I force my shaking thumb to tap out the urgent, coded message, dropping the pager onto my lap as reaction finally hits, my body starting to shake uncontrollably, the cold of the bone seeming to seep into my very marrow:

ORION. FOUND IT. THE BOX. KEY WORKED. IT'S...
GODS. BONE FRAGMENT. SARALAK'S. WORSE THAN
WE THOUGHT. NEED YOU. NOW.

6

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ORION

My Academy pager vibrates violently against my hip, the sharp, coded pulse reserved for priority-one alerts cutting through the tense silence of the transport arrangements I was making. *Eleanora*. My gut clenches with a cold premonition I instantly try to suppress. Blackthorns deal in facts, power, control—not vague anxieties.

I snatch it up, thumb activating the screen. Her message flashes, stark and frantic against the dim light:

ORION. FOUND IT. THE BOX. KEY WORKED. IT'S...
GODS. BONE FRAGMENT. SARALAK'S. WORSE THAN
WE THOUGHT. NEED YOU. NOW.

Saralak's bone. The words hit me like a physical blow, stealing the air from my lungs. A fragment of the Chaos Drake. *Gods*. The legends Hightower mentioned, the terrifying potential... it's real. And Eleanora—*Cortana*—found it. Hidden away, tangled somehow in the wreckage of her ruined family legacy. The implications are staggering. Elias isn't just dabbling; he's playing with world-ending fire, and Eleanora is holding a piece of the inferno.

My first instinct is pure, cold dread—for the world, for the Academy, for the catastrophic power unleashed. My second, overriding the first with infuriating, undeniable speed, is an immediate, visceral need to get to *her*. Not logic. Not strategy. Just a raw impulse to ensure she's safe, despite the name she carries, despite the centuries of ingrained animosity, despite the volatile memory of that kiss in Hightower's office still burning behind my eyelids. Damn her.

I find her back in her cramped, utilitarian dorm room. She looks pale, almost translucent in the dim light, and visibly shaken. The small, innocuous Dwarven puzzle box sits open on her cluttered desk. Beside it lies the unfurled sheet of impossibly ancient parchment, covered in disturbing Shifter script that seems to writhe at the edge of my vision. And resting starkly against that aged surface is the object itself.

Even from the doorway, I feel it. A profound coldness radiating outwards, a palpable *wrongness* that has nothing to do with temperature, an unnatural emptiness that seems to suck the warmth and ambient magic from the air around it. It's yellowish-white, wickedly curved, longer than my hand, terminating in a point so sharp it seems to pierce reality itself. It looks like something dredged from a nightmare, radiating dormant chaos, a silent promise of unmaking. Saralak's essence, trapped but undeniably, terrifyingly potent.

Eleanora looks up as I stride into the room, her green eyes wide, reflecting the object's horrifying significance. She's trembling slightly, clutching her arms around herself as if physically cold. Seeing her fear, her raw vulnerability stripped bare, ignites that unwelcome protective instinct again, sharp and fierce.

"You touched it?" I demand, my voice harsher than intended, stopping short of the desk, unwilling to get too close to the bone fragment myself.

She flinches slightly at my tone but nods, swallowing hard. "Just to unwrap it. It feels... wrong. Cold. Like death, but older, emptier." Her Sight must be screaming bloody murder at her.

"It *is* wrong," I say grimly. "A fragment of a Chaos Drake... Gods know what residual power it holds, what connection it might still have to..." I cut the thought off. To Saralak's imprisoned consciousness? To the Master Elias serves? The possibilities are chilling. "We need answers. Now. From someone who understands magic this old, this dangerous."

"Gondor," she whispers, her voice thin, echoing my own immediate conclusion.

"Gondor," I agree, my gaze sweeping the room, assessing. "Secure that thing—carefully. Use containment runes if you have them. We leave immediately." I fix her with a hard stare. "And don't," I repeat, emphasizing each word, "touch that bone again."

The journey to the Shifter territories is suffocating. I procured untraceable transport—a beat-up but magically shielded vehicle

acquired through contacts far removed from my father's meticulous oversight. Eleanora sits rigidly beside me in the passenger seat, staring out at the blurring Arcadian landscape, the horrifying bone fragment presumably secured within whatever spatial magic she employs.

The close confines amplify the volatile awareness between us. I can smell the faint scent of ozone clinging to her magic, mixed with the subtle floral scent she always wears, even now. I can feel the heat radiating from her, despite the fact she keeps pressed against the passenger door as if proximity might actually ignite her. Every jarring bump in the road that jostles her fractionally closer sends an unwanted jolt through my system.

"Are you alright?" I ask finally, the silence stretching too thin, too charged with unspoken fears and unresolved tension.

She jumps slightly, startled out of whatever dark thoughts held her captive. "Fine," she clips out, her gaze fixed firmly out the window.

"You don't look fine," I press, a familiar irritation rising. Why must she always erect these damned walls? "Discovering a piece of a world-ending Chaos Dragon isn't exactly a typical afternoon, even for a Cortana."

Her head snaps around, green eyes flashing with familiar fire. "And dealing with an arrogant, overbearing Blackthorn isn't exactly my preferred method of stress relief, but here we are. I'm handling it."

"Handling it by looking like you're about to shatter into a million pieces?" I retort, unable to stop the words. "Your control is slipping, Cortana. I can feel it from here. Your magic is practically vibrating with barely contained panic."

"My magic is *fine*," she bites back, her hands clenching into fists in her lap. "Unlike some people, I don't need to project condescending arrogance to mask my own issues."

"Is that what you think this is?" I demand, turning slightly towards her, the vehicle momentarily forgotten as the old antagonism flares. "Arrogance? Or perhaps it's the crushing weight of knowing my family is likely tangled in this darkness up to their gilded necks, while yours just happens to possess the key—or in this case, the *bone*—to potentially ending the damned world?"

Her face pales, the fight draining out of her, replaced by a shared, sickening dread. "I... we don't know for certain your family is involved," she says, but her voice lacks conviction. Narlock's revelations about the feud's true, ugly origins hang heavy and unspoken between us.

"Don't we?" I ask quietly, the bitterness sharp on my tongue. I force my attention back to the road, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. The silence descends again, heavier this time, filled not just with centuries of animosity, but with the crushing weight of manipulated history and the terrifying uncertainty of what lies ahead. We are enemies bound by circumstance, forced together against a threat neither of us truly comprehends, carrying secrets that could utterly destroy us both.

We reach the edge of the Shifter territories—a stark, dusty contrast to Arcadia's polished magic and gothic spires. The air here feels wilder, older, tasting of sunbaked earth and primal energy. We

navigate towards the familiar entrance to Gondor's cave, the silence between us stretching, taut and brittle.

The cave mouth looms, dark and imposing. Inside, the air is cool, smelling of damp earth and something ancient, fundamentally draconic. Gondor awaits us, not in his terrifyingly massive dragon form today, but his preferred human guise—tall, powerfully built, regal even in simple robes, with eyes like chips of ancient amber holding millennia of knowledge and weariness. He regards us impassively as we approach, his gaze missing nothing.

"Blackthorn. Cortana," he greets, his voice a low rumble that seems to vibrate in the stone itself. "Your presence suggests the shadows lengthen and stir."

"They have," I state grimly, stepping aside. Eleanora moves forward, retrieving the Dwarven puzzle box. With hands that tremble almost imperceptibly, she opens it, revealing the wickedly curved bone fragment nestled within.

Gondor leans closer, his amber eyes narrowing, focusing intently on the bone with an intensity that makes the air crackle. A low growl vibrates deep in his chest, a sound both ancient and dangerous. "Sarakak," he breathes, the name heavy with primordial dread. "So. It truly begins."

He confirms our worst fears, his words painting a chilling picture. The bone is indeed a fragment of the Chaos Drake, a potent anchor for his destructive essence. Elias, he explains, serves a far older, more insidious power—the Master—an entity that thrives on discord and seeks to use Saralak's chaotic power to unravel the very fabric of reality, likely exploiting the seals weakened during the last conflict with the Dark Eye. Gondor confirms the legends Narlock hinted at—the terrifying balance

between Chaos and Void, the catastrophic consequences if Saralak is fully unleashed upon a weakened world. The dragon blood ritual was likely a preliminary step, perhaps to empower Elias or summon lesser entities as servants. The true ritual, the one capable of world-ending devastation, requires the bone fragment.

"This Master," Gondor continues, his gaze distant, troubled, "pulls strings reaching back centuries, perhaps millennia. He thrives on conflict, manipulation. He likely fanned the flames of your families' bitter feud for his own inscrutable ends." The confirmation lands like another physical blow, reinforcing Narlock's words, twisting the knife of my family's shame deeper within me. I risk a glance at Eleanora; her face is pale as death, her expression shuttered, unreadable.

Overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the conspiracy, the weight of the bone fragment's terrifying potential, Eleanora sways slightly on her feet. Instinctively, automatically, I reach out, my hand closing firmly around her elbow, steadying her. She doesn't pull away this time, leaning into the contact for a fraction of a second before straightening, though her shoulder remains pressed lightly but undeniably against mine. A small concession, perhaps, or maybe just exhaustion.

"There is more," Gondor says gravely, his gaze sweeping over us. "Knowledge hidden even from most dragons, buried by time and deliberate obfuscation. Follow me."

He leads us deeper into the cave, towards a section of solid rock wall that shimmers at his approach, revealing a hidden passage swirling with faint light. We step through into breathtaking impossibility—Gondor's pocket reality. An endless library stretching beyond sight under a constantly shifting,

color-drenched sky, filled with the scent of ancient magic and millennia of forgotten lore. The sheer scale of it, the raw power humming in the very air, is overwhelming, dwarfing even the vast Blackthorn archives.

"My hoard," Gondor says simply, a hint of pride in his rumbling voice. "Truths your Academy deliberately buried reside on these shelves."

He retrieves ancient, crackling scrolls, confirms the Shifter script on Eleanora's parchment details parts of the binding and potential resurrection ritual for Saralak, speaks of powerful countermeasures lost to time or deliberately erased from history. The weight of it all presses down—the ancient conspiracy, the world-ending threat, our own families' tangled, corrupted history used as a weapon against us. We are isolated, facing forces beyond comprehension, armed with nothing but fragmented knowledge and a terrifying piece of bone.

I look at Eleanora. She stands amidst the towering shelves of forgotten knowledge, looking small, impossibly vulnerable against the backdrop of cosmic stakes, yet with that familiar fire of stubborn determination burning fiercely in her eyes. The tension between us, the feud, the recent kiss, the devastating revelations—it all feels simultaneously monumental and utterly insignificant in the face of annihilation. We are trapped here, in this surreal space between realities, burdened with horrifying truths and an uncertain, deadly path forward. The pressure, the fear, the enforced proximity, the undeniable current that always flows between us, hot and cold, push and pull... it reaches a breaking point. The weight of my family's lies, the raw danger she represents

simply by existing, the terrifying possibility of losing her to this darkness... it coalesces into a singular, desperate need.

I don't know who moves first. Maybe I turn towards her, drawn by the defiant light in her eyes, needing that spark against the overwhelming darkness. Maybe she leans towards me, seeking an anchor in the storm of revelations. All I know is suddenly she's in my arms, her hands gripping the front of my robes, her face buried against my chest, her body trembling almost uncontrollably. I hold her tightly, my own carefully constructed control shattering under the immense strain of the past few days, under the weight of Gondor's words. The scent of her—ozone, rain, that faint floral note—fills my senses, grounding me even as the world spins into chaos.

My hand finds her hair, fingers tangling in the fiery silk. I tilt her face up towards mine. Her eyes are wide, luminous with unshed tears, raw fear, and something else—something that mirrors the desperate, frantic need clawing inside my own chest.

"Orion," she breathes, her voice shaky, broken.

"Eleanora," I murmur, lowering my head, all thoughts of propriety, history, and consequences incinerated in the sudden inferno.

This kiss isn't like the angry claiming in Hightower's office. This is different. Desperate. A raw seeking of solace, of connection, of a single solid point of warmth in a world dissolving into cold darkness. It's fueled by terror, by the overwhelming weight of the revelations, by the undeniable truth that, right now, in this moment suspended outside time, we only have each other. Her lips are soft, yielding, meeting mine with an urgency that steals the breath from my lungs. Heat flares between us, sharp and

consuming, burning away the last vestiges of animosity, leaving only this raw, undeniable need. My hands slide down her back, pulling her impossibly closer, molding her body against mine until I can feel the frantic beating of her heart against my own ribs. She makes a small sound deep in her throat, her fingers digging into my shoulders as the kiss deepens, becomes frantic, searching, demanding. We stumble back against a towering bookshelf laden with scrolls detailing forgotten wars and fallen empires, the irony lost in the consuming fire between us. This is madness. We are enemies, born of betrayal and ruin. But right now, nothing else matters but this consuming heat, this desperate affirmation of life against the encroaching darkness of oblivion.

We break apart eventually, breathless, foreheads resting against each other, the silence of the vast library echoing with the frantic pounding of our hearts. The air hums, charged with the aftermath, thick with unspoken emotions. Looking into her flushed face, her kiss-swollen lips, her dazed green eyes still shimmering with tears and lingering passion, I feel a terrifying mix of raw possessiveness and profound vulnerability. This changes everything. Again. Irrevocably.

Before either of us can find words, can process the shift, Gondor clears his throat from across the vast library, the sound deliberately loud, pulling us jarringly back to the grim reality we momentarily escaped.

"Touching," he rumbles, though his ancient amber eyes hold a surprising depth of understanding rather than judgment. "But sentiment offers little defense against Chaos itself." He gestures towards the scrolls he laid out while we were... occupied. "The ritual Elias prepares requires specific celestial alignments, immense power drawn during moments when the veil between worlds thins. The Master likely plans to act soon. Very soon." His expression turns grim, urgent. "You must return to Pendragon immediately. Warn Hightower, if you can reach her. Protect that bone fragment with your lives. It is the key the Master needs to unlock devastation."

His words are a douse of icy water over the lingering heat between us. The fragile moment shatters, replaced instantly by the cold, hard reality of the imminent threat. *Protect the bone. Warn Hightower. Survive.* I look at Eleanora, seeing the same grim resolve settle over her features, extinguishing the soft vulnerability of moments ago. The fire between us is banked, not extinguished, forced down by the chilling urgency of Gondor's warning. We have to go back. Now.

ELEANORA

The return journey from Gondor's cave is thick with a silence heavier than stone, heavier even than the ancient dust in his library hoard. The aftermath of that kiss hangs between Orion and me, an unspoken acknowledgment crackling beneath the surface of Gondor's dire warnings about celestial alignments and imminent rituals. We sit side-by-side in the cramped, shielded vehicle, acutely aware of each other, yet separated by centuries of bloodshed and the raw, devastating truths the dragons laid bare. He grips the steering wheel, knuckles white, gaze fixed grimly ahead, the muscle ticking in his jaw the only outward sign of the turmoil I know must mirror my own. I stare out at the blurring landscape, the image of Saralak's bone fragment seared behind my eyelids, the weight of its potential devastation settling cold and heavy in my gut. *Protect the bone. Warn Hightower. Survive.* Easy words, impossible tasks. The memory of his lips on mine, the desperate heat, feels like a brand beneath the layers of fear and duty.

We slip back into Pendragon via the hidden tunnels Orion navigates with an unsettling familiarity that speaks of past rebellions I can only guess at. The Academy feels different now, even more so than before we left. The ambient magic, usually a

comforting hum beneath the surface, feels strained, watchful, like a wounded animal holding its breath. Hightower's warning about being monitored echoes in my mind, louder now. We are isolated, carrying knowledge that could shatter this world, hunted by forces ancient and insidious.

Our first stop isn't Hightower's office – too risky, likely watched – but the basement lab complex. Orion insists, correctly, that we need to see the site of the necromancy ourselves, understand the specific magic used, feel its residue. He leads the way down spiraling stone steps into the Academy's underbelly, a place I've actively avoided. The air grows colder with each step, damper, carrying the faint metallic tang of old blood and volatile reagents that I now recognize with an involuntary shiver. It smells like secrets and decay.

We find the lab Instructor Frost discovered easily enough; the residual taint of dark magic hangs heavy around the reinforced door like a physical shroud, making my Sight ache and the whispers at the edge of my awareness stir restlessly, agitatedly. Orion pushes the heavy door open, revealing the scene within.

Dust motes dance listlessly in the single, flickering emergency rune light near the door, illuminating scattered alchemical equipment shrouded in neglect. But the center of the room draws my gaze, holding it captive with morbid fascination. The necromantic circle, drawn in dried dragon blood that looks black in the weak light, still stains the cold stone floor. It pulses faintly to my Sight, a dark, corrupted heartbeat echoing with violation, like a festering wound on the Academy's soul. The sheer wrongness of it, the deliberate desecration performed *here*, makes bile rise in my throat.

"The energy signature is fading," Orion murmurs, already kneeling near the edge of the circle, his own magic—a controlled thread of fire—probing cautiously at the residual energies. "But it feels... incomplete. Twisted. Like the summoning wasn't fully successful, or perhaps wasn't the final goal."

"What do you mean?" I ask, forcing myself closer, trying to read the lingering magical residue with my Sight despite the nausea it induces. The air here feels thick, viscous, tasting of grave dust and ozone.

"The power drawn, the blood used... it feels potent enough for a significant summoning," he continues, frowning, his azure eyes narrowed in concentration, scanning the air as if he can see the lingering threads of dark magic. "But the residual echo feels... shallow. Almost like a test run. Or maybe..." He trails off, standing abruptly, his body suddenly tense. "Something feels active. Now."

As the words leave his mouth, the air chills dramatically, dropping degrees in an instant. The faint whispers in my mind surge into a discordant clamor of pure malice. A wet, slithering sound echoes from the shadowed recesses at the back of the lab, accompanied by a low, guttural hiss that raises gooseflesh on my arms and makes my heart seize. The dark magic in the room intensifies, coalescing, swirling into a visible distortion in the dim light—a focal point of pure, malevolent energy gathering itself.

A large, clawed hand emerges into the runelight's weak glow. Black talons, sharp as obsidian shards, scrape harshly against the stone floor, leaving faint grooves. Dark purple, leathery skin, stretched taut over bones that look wrong, moves with unnatural twitches. A second hand follows, then scaly, hunched shoulders, and finally, a narrow, reptilian head unlike any dragon I've ever seen

depicted. Smaller, leaner, emaciated, with fewer prominent spikes along its spine, it moves with an unnatural, jerky gait that screams *undead*. Its nose is flat, reptilian slits flaring slightly. A long, forked tongue, dripping viscous white foam like venom, flicks from a half-open mouth lined with rows of sharp, yellowed, needle-like teeth. Its eyes are milky white orbs, vacant yet somehow radiating pure malevolence. Utterly dead. Utterly terrifying.

Four small, pointed ears twitch atop its head where horns might have been on a true dragon. *A Wyvern*. The name surfaces from fragmented lore – ancient draconic cousins, perhaps devolved or corrupted millennia ago by dark magic. This one smells faintly of the grave, a deep, cloying stench overlaid with the sharp, sickening tang of the necromantic magic animating its decaying flesh. It moves with a disturbing wrongness, muscles contracting unnaturally beneath its leathery hide, bones clicking softly.

It hisses again, a dry, rattling sound like bones scraping together, unable to roar past its lolling tongue, and steps fully into view. Leathery wings, torn and membrane-thin, attached awkwardly to its forelimbs, twitch spasmodically. Its body slopes down from powerful shoulders to shorter hind legs, ending in a long, wickedly spiked tail that thrashes against the stone floor like a cornered snake. It fixes its dead, white eyes on us, an unholy intelligence flickering briefly within their milky depths.

Orion reacts instantly, shoving me bodily behind him, a blazing orb of controlled, incandescent fire erupting in his hand. "Get back, Eleanora!"

But I'm frozen. Not just by fear this time, though terror claws cold, sharp fingers up my spine. As my gaze locks with the Wyvern's dead, white eye, the world dissolves. My Sight rips control away

from me with brutal force, plunging me into darkness, then exploding into chaotic, terrifyingly clear images:

Backford Keep, colder, grayer than I remembered, smelling of chemicals and decay. Elias's thin, cruel face, illuminated by the unholy light of the ritual circle, chanting guttural words over the still-pulsating dragon heart on his bloodstained altar. A vast, dark, storm-tossed sea, waves crashing against jagged black cliffs under a perpetually bruised sky. Miles away, across that churning abyss, on a rocky, desolate shore, stands a solitary, forbidding castle of black, non-reflective stone, radiating ancient malice, seeming almost alive, drinking the dim light. Inside its highest tower, filling my vision, consuming my senses, staring out directly at me, is an immense, ancient, lidless Yellow Eye. Slitted like a cat's, burning with cold, calculating intelligence older than mountains, radiating absolute power and soul-crushing despair.

It *knows* me. It *sees* me. The connection, the awareness, slams into my mind like a physical battering ram, stealing my breath, fracturing my thoughts, threatening to shatter my sanity against the sheer weight of its ancient, malevolent consciousness. Pain explodes behind my eyes, white-hot and blinding. Nausea churns violently. The whispers become a deafening roar of pure void.

"Nora! Wake up! Eleanora!" Orion's voice cuts through the horrifying delirium, a lifeline thrown into the abyss. Distant at first, then sharp, urgent, laced with panic. His hands are shaking

my shoulders, not gently now, trying to pull me back from the brink.

The jarring transition back to reality leaves me gasping on the cold lab floor, the acrid smell of ozone and burnt Wyvern flesh stinging my nostrils. The undead creature is gone—a pile of smoldering ash and charred bone fragments near the far wall, incinerated by Orion's focused fire while I was lost in the vision's terrifying grip. He's kneeling beside me, his face etched with deep concern, his hand warm and steady on my arm, pulling me upright.

"Are you alright?" he asks, his voice rough, searching my face. "Gods, Eleanora, what did you see?"

There's no time to fully process it here, the lingering dark magic of the lab pressing in, the echo of the Eye's awareness still making my skin crawl. He helps me shakily to my feet, my legs barely supporting me. "The Master," I manage, my voice trembling, tasting blood where I bit my lip. "I saw him. His fortress. He knows I saw him."

He nods grimly, understanding instantly, the implications clear in his suddenly hard eyes. Supporting most of my weight, his arm strong and solid around my waist, he guides me back through the labyrinthine basement corridors, the oppressive magical aura slowly receding as we ascend towards the main Academy levels, towards Hightower.

The next thing I know, I'm slumped in a familiar, overstuffed chair back in Hightower's thankfully secure, heavily warded office. The

scent of her usual calming herbal infusion does little to soothe my frayed nerves. Orion kneels beside me again, pressing a cup of cool water into my hand while I recount everything shakily to a grim-faced Hightower – the undead Wyvern summoned in the lab, the horrifyingly clear vision connecting Elias at the Keep to the Yellow Eye in the dark tower across the sea. The Master. The feeling of being *seen*.

Hightower paces, drumming her long fingers on her ancient oak desk, her expression thunderous. "A Wyvern," she murmurs finally, rubbing her temples as if staving off a migraine. "Summoned with dragon blood, animated by necromancy... Just how powerful *is* this necromancer Elias?" She stops pacing, her sharp gaze fixing first on me, her eyes filled with a new, alarming level of concern, then shifting to Orion. "With slightly more potent blood—like Gondor's would have been—and a larger sacrifice, perhaps even the bone fragment... whoever this madman serves could indeed resurrect a true dragon. Possibly even Saralak himself."

She sighs, the sound heavy with weariness and grim understanding. "As it stands, there *is* a practicing necromancer somewhere within this Academy, or with direct access to its labs and resources. He or she has remained unknown, shielded." Her eyes narrow, glittering with cold fury. "And I strongly suspect such a person is being backed, or at least deliberately ignored, by a member—or members—of the Council."

The confirmation of a conspiracy deep within Pendragon lands heavily in the quiet office. But it's the image of the Yellow Eye, the feeling of its ancient, malevolent awareness fixed directly on *me*, knowing I pierced its veil, that makes my blood run cold. The Master knows I exist. And now, he knows I can see him.

My head spins violently, the edges of my vision blurring, darkening. The psychic backlash from the vision, combined with the magical drain and sheer, soul-deep terror, finally overwhelms me. The room tilts, darkness rushing in like an unstoppable tide. The last thing I register before consciousness fades completely is Orion catching me as I slump forward, his alarmed voice calling my name as the shadows claim me.

ORION

The world narrows to the frantic pounding of my own heart against my ribs and the terrifying stillness of Eleanora slumped against me. Her weight is unnervingly slight, fragile. Panic, cold and sharp and utterly foreign, claws its way past decades of ingrained Blackthorn control, seizing my throat. I catch her easily as she collapses, lowering her into the chair she just vacated, my hands automatically, almost desperately, checking the pulse at her throat. Faint. Thready. Too slow. The life force I always sense humming beneath her skin feels dangerously muted, like a flame threatening to gutter out.

"Hightower!" My voice sounds rough, unfamiliar, stripped bare of its usual command.

The professor is instantly beside us, her usual sharp features etched with grim concern that mirrors the ice flooding my own veins. Her long fingers hover over Eleanora's forehead, violet eyes glowing faintly with diagnostic magic as she assesses the damage. "Psychic backlash," Hightower diagnoses, her voice tight, clipped with urgency. "Combined with severe magical exhaustion. The vision... connecting directly with the Master... it nearly tore her spirit anchor loose."

Nearly tore her spirit anchor loose. The clinical words convey a danger far worse than simple fainting, a potential severing I don't fully comprehend but instinctively know is catastrophic. I feel a cold dread seep into my bones, colder than the lab basement, colder than Saralak's bone. The thought of her light being extinguished... it's physically painful.

"Will she be alright?" The question feels inadequate, pathetic, ripped from a place of fear I refuse to acknowledge.

"She needs rest. Deep magical stabilization," Hightower says, already weaving intricate threads of calming, grounding energy around Eleanora like a protective cocoon. The ambient magic in the office responds instantly, flowing towards Eleanora under Hightower's precise, powerful command. "Her Sight makes her uniquely vulnerable to entities like the Master. He likely sensed her probe, felt the unique signature of her magic, perhaps even retaliated directly against her spirit." She looks up at me then, her gaze piercing, analytical even now, taking in my proximity, my hand still resting protectively on the back of Eleanora's chair. "Your concern for her is... notable, Blackthorn."

I ignore the implicit question, the subtle probe into my uncharacteristic reaction. My priority isn't dissecting my own confusing impulses; it's understanding the threat. "That vision," I say, forcing my voice level, focusing on facts. "The Yellow Eye. The dark tower. She saw the Master's stronghold?"

"It seems likely," Hightower agrees grimly. "And more importantly, *he* likely knows *she* saw it. She's directly on his radar now, not just as a Cortana heir potentially tied to artifacts, but as someone whose magic can potentially perceive or even interfere with him." She straightens, the immediate stabilization complete,

though Eleanora remains deeply unconscious, her breathing shallow, face pale as parchment. "This changes the nature of the threat against her exponentially."

Hightower continues, her voice low, intense, confirming the suspicions Narlock and Gondor hinted at, suspicions buried deep in forbidden lore. "Spirit magic, the kind intrinsically linked to the Cortana Sight, has been deliberately suppressed, misrepresented for centuries. Texts were altered, knowledge buried, practitioners often ostracized or worse. Why?" Her eyes hold a flicker of ancient anger. "Because it's powerful, unpredictable, and difficult to control by conventional means. It deals in truth, balance, connection—concepts antithetical to beings like the Master, or those like," she pauses, her gaze holding mine meaningfully, "certain families who seek absolute power through rigid structure and control. Her awakening potential," she gestures towards Eleanora's still form, "makes her not just a target, but possibly a weapon the Master might seek to control or," her voice drops, chillingly soft, "extinguish."

Extinguish. The word echoes in the sudden, heavy silence of the room, landing like a physical blow. The thought of that vibrant, infuriating fire within Eleanora—the spark that challenges me, infuriates me, draws me—being snuffed out by that ancient, malevolent Eye... it's utterly, violently intolerable.

"She needs protection," I state, the words flat, absolute, torn from a place deeper than conscious thought. "Constant protection."

"Indeed," Hightower agrees. "Which is why she cannot remain in her dormitory. Too exposed, too easily accessed. I have secure,

heavily warded chambers nearby, shielded from most forms of scrying. Help me move her."

Hours pass in the dim silence of the warded room. I sit beside the narrow bed, watching Eleanora sleep. The stabilization spells did their work; her breathing is deeper now, even, color slowly returning to her face, though she remains lost in magically induced rest. Hightower left some time ago, called away by urgent security matters related to the necromancy discovery, leaving me with strict instructions not to disturb Eleanora's recovery.

Disturb her? I can barely breathe myself. Seeing her collapse, feeling that fragile pulse flutter beneath my fingers like a trapped bird's wing... it shattered something fundamental within me. The carefully constructed walls of Blackthorn control, the ingrained animosity towards her name, the lifetime of discipline—they crumbled, leaving behind a raw, terrifying vulnerability I haven't felt since... perhaps ever.

The memory of her face, pale and unconscious, is overlaid with the chilling implications of Hightower's words. *A target. Extinguish.* The Master wants her gone, or worse, controlled. And my family... my ancestors... Narlock's words echo, cold and damning. They likely made pacts with this same darkness, fanned the flames that led to her family's ruin, making her vulnerable in the first place. The guilt is a physical weight, crushing, nauseating. My legacy isn't just power; it's poison, complicit in the very danger she now faces.

What if Hightower hadn't been there? What if Eleanora's spirit anchor *had* torn loose? The thought sends another wave of cold dread washing over me, so intense it makes my hands tremble. And darker thoughts follow, insidious whispers from the most forbidden corners of magic I studied purely academically, concepts I never imagined entertaining. If she had died... if her spirit had frayed beyond recall... would I have...?

The consideration itself feels like a violation, a contamination of everything I thought I was, everything I strive *not* to be. *Necromancy*. The word tastes like ash and decay in my mind. The sheer, monstrous arrogance of thinking I could defy death itself, tear her back from the void simply because *I* couldn't bear her loss... It's the kind of hubris my father embodies, the kind of darkness Blackthorns are rumored to court, the very legacy I despise yet feel pulling at me in my weakest moments when *she* is threatened. A wave of self-loathing washes over me, cold and sharp. The thought terrified me not just because it was forbidden, but because it felt like succumbing to the worst parts of my bloodline, proving them right. And because, in that moment of raw panic watching her fade, it felt horrifyingly *possible*. Necessary, even. Just to keep her fire from being extinguished.

Gods, what is she doing to me? Turning me into the very thing I fight against in my own bloodline?

Her eyelids flutter. Green eyes, hazy at first, slowly focus on me. Confusion clouds her features, then clears, replaced by wary

awareness. She pushes herself up slightly against the pillows, wincing.

"Orion?" Her voice is raspy, weak, but it's *her*. Relief floods me, so potent it's almost painful.

"You collapsed," I say, keeping my voice carefully neutral, fighting to keep the storm inside from showing on my face.

"Psychic backlash from the vision. Hightower stabilized you."

She touches her temples gingerly. "The Eye... it saw me."

"I know." I lean forward slightly, unable to help myself, needing to bridge the small distance between us. "Hightower thinks you're a specific target now. Because of your Sight, your spirit magic."

Fear flickers in her eyes, quickly masked by that familiar stubborn pride. "I can handle myself."

"Can you?" The question is sharper than I intend, fueled by the lingering terror. "Against an ancient entity that manipulates entire bloodlines for millennia? Against necromancers using dragon blood inside the Academy? Against council members who might be actively shielding them?" My control snaps. The fear, the guilt, the horrifying memory of considering forbidden magic—it spills out, raw and unfiltered. "Gods, Eleanora, when you collapsed... when I felt your pulse fading... I thought..." I stop, running a hand through my hair, the gesture jerky, uncontrolled. I can't articulate the abyss I stared into, the monstrous thought that had surfaced, the self-disgust it engendered. "The thought of losing you... I actually considered... forbidden options. Things I shouldn't have. Things that make me sick to even recall."

The confession hangs heavy in the air between us. A truth I never intended to speak, revealing a darkness within myself I hadn't known existed until she was threatened.

She stares at me, her expression unreadable for a long moment. I see shock register, maybe a flicker of fear, but beneath it, surprisingly, no immediate disgust or condemnation. I brace myself for the inevitable recoil, the reminder of who I am, who *we* are. Enemies tainted by darkness, his and hers intertwined.

But she doesn't pull away. Instead, after a long, searching moment where I feel stripped bare under her intense gaze, her expression softens almost imperceptibly. I see surprise, yes, and perhaps wariness, but beneath it... is that understanding? Or pity? "Orion," she says, her voice quiet but steady, startlingly calm. "We are... in this together. Whether we like it or not." She takes a shaky breath, her gaze unwavering. "But not... not like that. Not with forbidden magic. Promise me."

Her gaze holds mine, demanding, vulnerable. The intensity of it, the unexpected plea for restraint from *me*, the implicit trust offered even after my horrifying admission... it cuts deeper than any accusation could have. She saw the potential darkness in my confession, the echo of my Blackthorn heritage, and asks me to choose differently. To be better.

"I promise," I manage, the words feeling like tearing something vital from my own core, but also like forging an anchor in the storm.

A fragile truce settles between us, shifting the very foundations of our dynamic. The air still hums with unspoken tension, with the memory of kisses fueled by anger and desperation, but something fundamental has shifted. Cracked open. Exposed.

I want to reach for her, to close the distance, to act on the raw need that seeing her vulnerable ignited, the need that drove those dark thoughts. My hand lifts slightly, drawn towards her.

She sees the movement, her eyes widening almost imperceptibly, a flicker of alarm mixing with something else I can't decipher. "Orion," she whispers, shaking her head slightly, a silent plea. "Wait." Her gaze is imploring now, vulnerable but firm. "Please. When this is over... when we're safe... *then*."

Then. The word hangs, a fragile promise suspended over the abyss of danger we face. It's not a rejection. It's a postponement. An acknowledgment of the impossible current flowing between us, tempered by the terrifying reality of our situation. It's agony to accept. And it's a sliver of hope I cling to desperately.

I force myself to nod, pulling back physically, though every instinct screams to bridge the gap, to claim the promise now. "Alright, Cortana," I say, my voice rough, the use of her surname a deliberate attempt to regain distance, control. "*Then*." The word feels heavy, significant. Because *then* implies we survive this. It implies a future. A future I now realize, with startling clarity, I want *with her*. The strategic part of my mind latches onto that realization, needing a focus beyond the turmoil she creates within me.

"We need a plan," I say, forcing myself back to safer ground, the urgency of our situation a necessary shield against the emotional precipice we just skirted. "The Master knows about you. Elias has the artifacts, likely including the bone's counterpart. The Council is compromised. Hightower is watched." My mind races back to Gondor's advice, now reinforced by Narlock's revelations about ancient history. "We need knowledge Hightower doesn't have, power the Council can't control." My gaze meets hers, finding a flicker of agreement, of shared strategic thinking returning. "We need Narlock. The earth dragon. He knows the old ways, the deep

magic. He might know how to counter the Master, how to deal with Saralak's bone. Protecting you, stopping this... it leads there."

Eleanora pushes herself up further against the pillows, determination replacing the exhaustion in her eyes, latching onto the plan like a lifeline. "Narlock," she agrees, nodding slowly. "Gondor gave us the favor chest. It's our best chance. *Our* only chance."

Our path is clear, fraught with peril. Seek out an ancient, notoriously difficult earth dragon, armed with fragmented knowledge, a terrifying artifact somewhere out there, and this volatile, newly acknowledged connection humming dangerously between us. It feels like walking willingly into the dragon's maw. But facing it together, with the fragile promise of *then* hanging in the balance... it's the only path left. And for the first time, the thought of facing impossible odds doesn't feel quite so isolating.

ELEANORA

I drifted awake slowly, surfacing from the depths of magically enforced rest like a diver returning too quickly from the deep. My head pounded with a dull, residual ache—an echo of the psychic violation from the Master's Eye. My body felt heavy, leaden, every muscle protesting even the slightest movement. But the terrifying psychic static, the feeling of that ancient, malevolent awareness pressing against my mind, had blessedly receded. The quiet hum of Hightower's protective wards surrounding this small, anonymous room was a low, soothing thrum against my frayed senses, a stark contrast to the oppressive dread of the Master's fortress.

Orion sat in a simple wooden chair across the room, watching me, his posture alert, almost predatory in its stillness. His expression was unreadable in the dim light filtering through the single shuttered window, but the intensity in his azure eyes was palpable. For once, the usual mask of aristocratic control seemed absent, replaced by a quiet intensity that made my breath catch for entirely different reasons.

The memory of our conversation before I drifted off—before the exhaustion finally claimed me—returned with startling clarity.

His raw confession—the dark, forbidden thoughts he entertained *for me*. My desperate plea that he wait. His quiet agreement. *Then*. The single word hung between us, a fragile promise suspended over the abyss of everything else: the feud, the betrayal, the looming darkness. It changed things, shifting the very ground beneath our feet in ways I didn't fully understand yet. He was still a Blackthorn, heir to the legacy that systematically destroyed my family, but he was also... Orion. Complicated, dangerous, infuriatingly protective, and now, terrifyingly vulnerable in a way I never anticipated.

I pushed myself up carefully, swinging my legs over the side of the narrow bed. My head spun slightly, protesting the movement, but the debilitating exhaustion had lessened to a manageable deep ache. "How long was I out?" My voice sounded raspy, unfamiliar even to my own ears.

"About twelve hours," Orion replied, his voice low, carefully neutral, though his eyes tracked my movements intently. He stood as I did, offering a hand instinctively to steady me, then seemed to think better of it, letting it drop back to his side with a subtle tension in his shoulders. That small, aborted gesture spoke volumes about the new, uncertain territory we were navigating. "Hightower checked in periodically. Said your magical core is stable, but you need to conserve energy. The vision took a significant toll."

"Easy for her to say," I muttered, pushing myself fully upright, ignoring the protesting twinges in my muscles. Conserve energy when an ancient, malevolent Master knew I exist and his pet necromancer is trying to resurrect a Chaos Dragon using pieces of my family's past? Right. "We need to contact Gondor. Now. He needs to know about the bone fragment."

Orion nodded, already retrieving the small, smooth obsidian disc from an inner pocket of his robes—the communication crystal keyed specifically to the ancient dragon. He placed it carefully on the small table between us, channeling a thread of his controlled fire magic into it. The obsidian warmed rapidly, glowing faintly from within like a captured ember.

"Gondor," Orion spoke into the disc, his voice clear and resonant, carrying the weight of his Blackthorn authority despite the circumstances. "It's Orion Blackthorn. Eleanora Cortana is with me. We have urgent news regarding Saralak... and Elias."

We waited, the silence stretching, thick with anticipation, broken only by the faint hum of the wards protecting this room. After a long moment that felt like an eternity, a familiar, deep voice rumbled from the disc, but it sounds... wrong. Terribly wrong. Weary. Strained. Lacking the profound, almost subterranean resonance it held when he possessed his dragon form. It sounded... diminished. Human. "Blackthorn. Cortana. Your timing is... unfortunate."

"Gondor? Are you alright?" I leaned closer instinctively, the altered quality of his voice sending a jolt of pure alarm through me. "What happened?"

A heavy sigh, like shifting rock giving way to dust, echoed from the disc. "I was attacked. Here, within my own sanctum. My hoard."

Ice flooded my veins. "Attacked? By whom?"

"The necromancer's servants," Gondor replied, his voice laced with a cold, ancient fury that vibrated through the crystal, though lacking its former overwhelming power. "The dwarf, Igor, wielding an axe imbued with foul magic specifically designed to wound dragons, to bypass our natural healing. And behind him... I felt the necromancer's power, Elias, directing the assault, shielding the dwarf from my immediate retaliation."

"Igor," I whispered, the name tasting like ash. The stout, bearded dwarf from the Keep. The sudden, visceral sense of danger I felt upon meeting him... my gut instinct screaming truth. "Did they... did they get anything?" The bone fragment was safe with me, hidden within the puzzle box in my satchel, but what else might Elias have sought from an ancient dragon? What horrors did they inflict?

"They sought my essence. My heart. My flame," Gondor confirmed grimly, his voice flat now, devoid of its usual draconic power, heavy with loss. "They tore apart my physical form, believing me slain. A painful, humiliating ordeal." A pause, filled with a weariness that feels millennia old. "But they underestimated the resilience of old dragons. I retreated here, to my hoard, my pocket reality, severing the connection just before they could claim my core. My physical form is lost, destroyed... but my spirit endures, housed within this human guise for now. I am weakened, trapped here, unable to directly intervene in the physical realm beyond this place."

Relief that he was alive warred violently with horror at the image his words conjured. Trapped. His magnificent dragon form gone, ripped apart by Elias and his dwarf servant. The sheer brutality... "They butchered you," I choked out, the words thick with revulsion and a surprising surge of grief for the ancient being. Orion remained silent beside me, but I saw his jaw tighten almost imperceptibly; Gondor, despite their friction, had been a powerful, if begrudging, ally, and this news clearly struck him hard as well.

"They tried," Gondor corrected, a faint spark of his old fire returning, defiant even in weakness. "And they failed to claim my core essence. But they likely believe they succeeded. Elias will be emboldened, likely accelerating his plans for the ritual, thinking a major obstacle has been removed."

"The bone fragment," Orion said urgently into the disc, his voice regaining its sharp focus. "Eleanora found it. Hidden in a puzzle box from her family's Keep."

Gondor's voice sharpened instantly with alarm. "She has it? Gods. That is... perilous beyond measure. It must be protected at all costs. It is the primary key, the anchor Elias needs for the full resurrection."

"We know," I said, my hand instinctively going to the satchel at my side, feeling the cold, inert weight of the puzzle box within. "But we don't know how to stop him, how to counter the ritual,

or even destroy the bone. Narlock hinted the answers might lie in lost knowledge, perhaps tied to my family or yours."

"Narlock speaks truth," Gondor agreed, his voice regaining some strength, fueled perhaps by strategic necessity. "The earth dragon remembers what others have forgotten, what the Master sought to erase over millennia. He is your best hope for understanding the deep magic involved, the ancient history the Master corrupted to fuel feuds like the one between your houses."

"But he's ancient, powerful... notoriously distrustful of mages," Orion pointed out the formidable obstacle. "Will he even speak to us?"

"He owes me," Gondor stated, a note of grim satisfaction entering his voice. "A significant debt, incurred centuries ago during the Shadow Wars when I saved his clutch from the Void Hounds. He is honor-bound to repay it, however grudgingly he might complain." The obsidian disc glowed brighter, pulsing with faint light. "This crystal links directly to my hoard's essence; communication remains possible, though taxing. And while my power beyond this realm is negligible now, manifesting small items *within* its influence is still achievable, if draining." The air beside the table shimmered violently for a moment, coalescing like heat haze made solid. A small, intricately carved wooden chest, identical to the one Narlock mentioned holding Gondor's favor, materialized with a soft thud on the tabletop. It was crafted from a dark, petrified-looking wood, etched with deep, earthy runes that seemed to absorb the light. It radiated a faint, grounding magic, smelling faintly of deep stone and ancient roots. As I reached out to take it, the wood felt cool and incredibly dense, humming faintly

with Gondor's residual power and the slow, deep pulse of earth magic.

"Take this chest to Narlock," Gondor instructed, his voice fading slightly now, clearly taxed by the effort of manifestation across dimensions. *"Present it as proof of my claim. Remind him of the debt sworn beneath the Silent Peaks after the Hound War. He will understand. He must help you find answers, though convincing him to fight..."* Gondor chuckled darkly, a dry, rattling sound. *"That old worm prefers his slumber. But knowledge... that he possesses in abundance."*

"Be warned," Gondor's voice echoed one last time, grave now, barely a whisper from the fading disc. "Narlock's territory is perilous, guarded by more than just stone and scale. And the Master will sense your purpose, sense the bone fragment's movement, even contained. He will try to stop you. Trust no one beyond yourselves."

The light in the obsidian disc flickered and died, leaving only the heavy silence and the small wooden chest humming faintly in my hands. Trapped. Gondor, one of the most ancient and powerful beings we knew, crippled and unable to intervene directly. Elias and his dwarven servant Igor had butchered him, emboldened now, likely believing him dead.

And Elias was still out there. With his knowledge. His artifacts. And the foul tome that likely held the secrets to his necromancy,

perhaps even clues to the Master's plans or the ritual involving Saralak's bone.

Narlock was our best hope for understanding the deep magic, but Gondor's words echoed – *Elias will be emboldened, likely accelerating his plans*. We couldn't just go to Narlock. We couldn't leave Elias free to act, potentially completing his ritual while we sought answers elsewhere. We needed his tome. We needed to stop *him* first. The realization settled with cold certainty.

"Trust no one beyond yourselves," I repeated Gondor's warning softly, the words heavy with implication. I looked at Orion, the weight of our isolation settling upon us. He met my gaze, the usual Blackthorn control overlaying a grim understanding that mirrored my own sudden conviction. The path forward wasn't just to Narlock. It had to go through Elias first.

"Backford Keep," I said, the name tasting like ash but feeling like grim necessity. "We need his tome. Now. Before he uses whatever knowledge he gained from... from Gondor."

Orion nodded slowly, the strategic implications clear in his sharp azure eyes. He retrieved the puzzle box containing the bone fragment, securing it with containment runes within his own heavily warded satchel. The favor chest—Gondor's key to Narlock—felt secondary now, set aside but not forgotten, its purpose waiting until this immediate threat was neutralized.

"Agreed," he said, his voice quiet but resolute. "Neutralizing Elias, securing his research... it's the immediate priority. Narlock

can wait." He paused, his gaze intense. "But it will be dangerous. He knows we're aware of him now. He'll be prepared."

I took a deep breath, pushing down the swirling mix of fear, grief for Gondor, and the lingering complexity of my connection to Orion. "We faced his undead creature," I countered, forcing strength into my voice. "We know what we're up against."

Together, we slipped out of the relative safety of the warded room, heading back towards the hidden tunnels, the air outside feeling instantly colder, charged with impending conflict. The journey to Narlock was postponed. First, we had a necromancer to hunt.

ORION

Backford Keep loomed out of the oppressive Versai mountain mists like a festering wound on the landscape. Returning here felt fundamentally wrong, dangerous—walking deliberately into the lair of the necromancer who had butchered Gondor and served the ancient Master manipulating our families' histories. But Eleanora was right. Leaving Elias unchecked, allowing him to potentially complete his ritual while we sought Narlock's wisdom, was unthinkable. We needed his tome. We needed to stop him.

We approached cautiously under the cloak of a magically induced pre-dawn gloom, circumventing the main entrance guarded by Balam, whom we couldn't risk involving. The faint, sickly sweet chemical tang overlaid with the smell of decay was stronger now, clinging to the damp air like a shroud. The Keep felt... awake. Wards, subtle but potent, thrummed just beneath the surface, different from the dormant neglect Eleanora had sensed before. Elias knew he was exposed. He was prepared.

"The wards are necromantic," Eleanora whispered beside me, her Sight clearly picking up the foul energy signature. "Designed to drain life force, animate dead things if breached improperly."

"Can you bypass them?" I murmured, scanning the Keep's shadowed walls for weaknesses.

She nodded slowly, concentrating. Faint silver light gathered around her hands as she wove a complex counter-spell, not forcing entry, but subtly neutralizing the trigger mechanisms, creating a narrow corridor of safe passage towards a less guarded section—the dilapidated outbuildings where she had first found the hidden chests.

We slipped through the gap in the wards, moving like shadows towards the old groundskeeper's shed. It stood hunched and dark, swallowed by ivy, yet a faint pulse of dark magic emanated from within now. He was using it.

The door groaned open under my carefully applied pressure. Inside, the clutter Eleanora described had been shoved aside. In the center of the cramped space, a smaller, hastily drawn ritual circle glowed faintly on the dirt floor, pulsing with the same foul energy as the one in the Academy basement. Scraps of parchment covered in Elias's spidery script lay scattered nearby. He was working, experimenting.

"He's not here," Eleanora breathed, her Sight scanning the shed, then widening. "But... there's something else."

A low growl echoed from the darkest corner, behind the overturned wardrobe. Two pairs of red eyes ignited in the gloom. Not undead. Something worse. Shadow Hounds—creatures of solidified darkness, often used as guardians by practitioners of

forbidden arts. They emerged, low-slung, powerfully built, teeth bared in silent snarls, radiating a chilling cold.

Before they could lunge, fire erupted from my hand, engulfing the nearest hound in searing flame. It dissolved with a choked-off yelp, leaving only greasy smoke. The second hound, however, veered sharply, dodging the main blast, its shadowy form blurring as it lunged towards Eleanora. Reacting instantly, she threw up a shield of pure light, the hound slamming into it with enough force to make the shield visibly buckle and crackle, its claws leaving trails of corrosive shadow even as the light burned it, sending it tumbling back with a pained hiss. The near-miss left Eleanora momentarily breathless, the hound recovering quickly, poised to strike again.

"Impressive," a thin, sharp voice cut through the air from the shed's doorway, just as the second hound gathered itself. Elias stood there, skeletal thin, clad in severe black robes, his colorless eyes glittering with cold amusement. He held a gnarled staff tipped with a shard of obsidian that pulsed faintly with dark energy. "But predictable." With a dismissive flick of his wrist, the injured Shadow Hound dissolved into wisps of smoke.

Behind him loomed the stout, red-bearded form of Igor, Gondor's butcher. He hefted a massive Dwarven axe, its surface etched with runes that glowed with a sickening, anti-draconic energy. His blue eyes held no wisdom now, only cold, murderous intent.

"The Cortana Wyrd and the Blackthorn heir," Elias clicked his tongue, the sound reptilian. "Come to meddle again? You should have stayed away. The Master is close to achieving his goals. Your interference ends now."

He raised his staff. Igor raised his axe.

There was no room for maneuvering in the cramped shed. I shoved Eleanora behind me towards the relative safety of the doorway, meeting Igor's charge head-on. Axe met sword in a shower of green and gold sparks, the impact vibrating up my arm. The sheer Dwarven strength behind the blow was immense, but it was the chilling magic radiating from the axe, specifically attuned to harm powerful beings, that sent a wave of nausea through me.

Eleanora didn't cower. Threads of light lanced past me, striking at Elias, forcing him to raise a shimmering shield of dark energy. He sneered, staff flaring as he unleashed bolts of pure necromantic force—crackling black energy that sizzled where it struck, smelling of the grave. One bolt, wickedly aimed, slipped past her primary defense, forcing her to twist aside as it scorched the wall where her head had been.

The fight was brutal, close-quarters chaos. I focused on Igor, parrying the heavy, rune-etched axe, dodging his surprisingly quick movements, searching for an opening. His Dwarven resilience made him hard to damage directly. Meanwhile, Eleanora held Elias at bay, her light shields straining visibly now against his relentless assault, the air thick with the clash of pure spirit and utter corruption.

"You cannot win!" Elias hissed, his voice rising. "The Master's power flows through me! Soon Saralak will rise, and this world will be remade!"

He gestured, and shadows deepened in the shed, coalescing into grasping tendrils that lashed towards Eleanora. She cried out as one wrapped around her ankle, tripping her.

Seeing her fall, seeing Elias raise his staff for a killing blow, snapped something within me. The cold control shattered. Raw, protective fury surged, demanding release. No.

I roared, pouring Blackthorn fire not into a controlled blast, but into the very steel of my sword. It ignited, runes blazing white-hot, the blade becoming a conduit for pure, untamed elemental power.

With a desperate surge, I broke through Igor's guard, ignoring the jarring pain as the axe scored a glancing blow against my armored vambrace. My blazing sword found its mark, plunging deep into the gap between Igor's shoulder and neck.

He bellowed, stumbling back, the Dwarven axe clattering to the floor as the sheer heat cauterized and incapacitated. He wouldn't be helping Elias anymore.

I pivoted, sword still blazing, towards Elias just as Eleanora scrambled back, blasting the shadow tendril apart with a pulse of light.

Elias stared at my ignited blade, a flicker of genuine fear finally entering his cold eyes. He turned to flee, but Eleanora was faster. A complex web of binding light erupted from her hands, ensnaring him, holding him fast.

He struggled, hissing curses, necromantic energy flaring uselessly against the pure spirit magic pinning him.

I advanced, sword point leveled at his throat. "The tome, Elias. Where is it?"

He glared, defiant even now. "Never! The Master will reward—"

"The Master is using you," Eleanora cut in, her voice ringing with conviction, stepping forward. "He uses everyone. Look at yourself, Elias. Is this power? Or decay?"

I pressed the burning tip of my sword closer, silencing his retort. "The tome. Or your connection to your Master becomes considerably more permanent."

Fear warred with fanaticism in his eyes. Finally, defeated, he nodded jerkily towards a concealed compartment beneath a loose floorboard near the failed ritual circle.

Eleanora retrieved it—a thick, leather-bound volume radiating palpable malice, its cover embossed with the same serpent-and-key sigil she saw on Hightower's note. Elias's necromantic tome.

With the tome secured, Eleanora reinforced the binding light around Elias, leaving him immobilized, his power dampened. We couldn't risk killing him—not yet, not until we understood more about the Master's network—but we couldn't leave him free.

We retrieved Igor's fallen axe, its foul magic quiescent for now. Leaving the shed, Eleanora sealed it with powerful wards, trapping the necromancer and his incapacitated servant within. It was a temporary solution, but the best we could manage.

Emerging back into the pre-dawn gloom, the tome heavy in Eleanora's satchel, the weight of our next task settled. We had

stopped Elias, secured his knowledge. Now, for Narlock. Now, for the truths hidden in deep stone.

ORION

The journey into Narlock's territory feels like descending into the planet's ancient, slumbering heart, deeper and deeper into primal earth. The air grows heavy, thick with the thrum of raw geomantic power, a deep, resonant energy that vibrates not just in the stone around us, but in the marrow of my bones, unsettling my innate fire magic. We follow the faint magical trail left by Gondor's favor chest, navigating winding, oppressive tunnels lit only by the cool, steady sphere of Eleanora's light magic—a stark, almost accusing contrast to my own contained flame. She walks beside me, silent, tense, the weight of the newly acquired tome and the knowledge of Elias's defeat adding another layer to the grim purpose that drives us. The charged awareness between us, amplified by the close confines, is a constant hum beneath the surface, a dangerous resonance I try desperately to ignore.

Finally, the narrow passage opens into a vast cavern, so immense its ceiling is lost in absolute darkness high above, swallowing Eleanora's light completely. Below us stretches a seemingly bottomless gorge, emanating palpable waves of raw earth power that make my teeth ache and the air feel thick as water. This is the

heart of the earth dragon's domain, a place untouched by surface concerns for millennia.

"State your purpose, surface dwellers," a voice booms, not echoing off the distant walls, but resonating directly inside my skull, deep and slow as shifting continents, ancient beyond measure. The ground trembles faintly beneath my feet with each syllable, a low, powerful vibration.

I step forward, forcing down the instinctual awe and apprehension that rises in the face of such primordial power. I hold aloft the small wooden chest Gondor entrusted to Eleanora, feeling its faint earthy magic pulse in response to the cavern's overwhelming energy. "We seek Narlock!" I project my voice, laced with carefully controlled magical resonance to carry across the chasm, hoping my Blackthorn command carries weight even here. "We come on behalf of Gondor of the Fire Peaks! He invokes the debt sworn beneath the Silent Peaks!"

There's a deep, grinding rumble from the gorge, the sound of mountains stirring from an eon's sleep. Slowly, massively, a head emerges from the chasm below, rising until it fills the cavern entrance before us, blotting out even the memory of the tunnel behind. Scales like granite plates, cracked and weathered by geological time, shift with the sound of grating rockslides. Eyes the color of rich, fertile loam, vast and depthless as the earth itself, fix upon us, their pupils like chips of glowing emerald radiating immense, impassive age. Narlock. He doesn't just look ancient; he *feels* like the bedrock of the world given consciousness.

"Gondor?" the deep voice rumbles again, closer now, the air itself vibrating with his power. "That old fire-heart invokes the Hound War debt? After centuries of silence?" Narlock's massive head tilts

slightly, regarding us with an unnerving lack of expression, like a mountain observing mayflies. "The trouble must be grave indeed."

I quickly, concisely lay out the situation—the necromancy within Pendragon, Elias's capture and his dark tome, the recovered Shifter artifacts, Eleanora's discovery of Saralak's bone fragment, Gondor's incapacitation, and his plea for Narlock's ancient knowledge regarding the Master Elias serves. I keep my voice steady, respectful but firm, acutely aware that we stand before power far older and potentially far more dangerous than anything my father schemes over in council chambers. Eleanora stands silently beside me, clutching the satchel containing the bone box and Elias's tome, her posture rigid but resolute, her chin held high despite the overwhelming presence before us.

Narlock listens, utterly still, his ancient eyes seeming to absorb the information without reaction, like stone absorbing rain. When I finish, the silence stretches, thick and heavy as bedrock, amplifying the distant drip of water somewhere in the vast darkness. Finally, he lets out a huff like a distant avalanche. "Saralak," he grunts, the sound echoing through the vast cavern, tasting of dust and ages. "Chaos stirs again. Predictable. Mortals meddling with forces they cannot comprehend." His gaze drifts towards me. "And Gondor... lost his hide to a necromancer's pawn? Pathetic." He pauses, his gaze sweeping over us again, lingering on the chest I still hold, then shifting to Eleanora, perhaps sensing the volatile magic clinging to her, the echo of the bone fragment she carries. "But," his gaze returns to the chest, "a debt sworn in the shadow of the Void Hounds is absolute. The earth does not forget." He lowers his massive head slightly, emerald

pupils dilating almost imperceptibly. "What knowledge do you seek from the deep stone, Blackthorn heir, Cortana Wyrd?"

Cortana Wyrd? The archaic term for those with Sight, laced with ancient superstition and distrust—a distrust likely rooted in fear of magic that operates outside established hierarchies, magic tied to spirit and intuition rather than rigid control—sends a flicker of unease through me, but I push it aside. "We need to know about the Master Elias serves," I state clearly. "The power behind this plot to resurrect Saralak. Eleanora has seen visions—a dark castle across the sea, a malevolent Yellow Eye."

"And we need to know about this bone," Eleanora adds, her voice surprisingly steady, holding Narlock's ancient gaze despite the intimidating pressure. "Can it still be used to raise Saralak? Can it be destroyed? Contained?"

Narlock is silent again for a long moment, his gaze seeming to turn inward, consulting memories etched in stone and time itself. When he speaks, his voice resonates with the weight of millennia, each word deliberate, heavy as granite falling into place. "The Master you speak of... the Eye..." he begins slowly, "...predates Saralak. Predates the First Wars your petty histories record. An older power. Insidious. A creeping vine of shadow, thriving on discord, manipulation, feeding on the chaos it creates like a parasite on a dying world."

He focuses his immense gaze on me, and I feel the weight of geological time pressing down. "Your Blackthorn ancestors knew

of it. Long ago, blinded by ambition, seeking advantage over rivals, seeking power forbidden even then, they made... pacts."

Pacts? The word slams into me, cold and sharp. Preposterous. Blackthorns command power; we don't bargain for it from shadows. "My ancestors were powerful mages," I counter, unable to stop the reflexive defense, the ingrained Blackthorn pride bristling. "They wouldn't need to make pacts."

"Wouldn't they?" Narlock rumbles, a sound like deep earth shifting, laced with something akin to ancient pity. "They believed themselves clever, Blackthorn heir. Believed they could control the darkness they courted, use its influence for their own ends. Fools. Such shadows rarely yield to mortal will. This entity subtly fanned the flames of their feud with the Cortanas, nurturing resentment, amplifying misunderstandings, twisting ambition into betrayal—using your houses like unwitting pawns in its long game across centuries."

My breath catches. The feud... amplified? Manipulated? A tool used by this Master? I risk a glance at Eleanora. Her face is pale, her knuckles white where she grips the strap of her satchel. Her sharp intake of breath is almost inaudible, but I feel the shock ripple from her. She heard it too. The foundation of our entire history cracking beneath us.

"Indeed," Narlock continues, his voice a low grind of stone on stone, relentless. "The 'truths' your Academy suppresses, the deep-seated divisions between Mage and Shifter, the very foundation of your political structures—many were not organic but sown or warped by the Master's insidious whispers over millennia. Using families like yours, Blackthorn, blinded by pride and ambition, as instruments. Even the techniques you prize, the

raw power you wield—some may trace their darkest roots back to those forbidden bargains."

Nausea churns low in my gut. My family's rise, our power, our *legacy*... all potentially built on lies, manipulated by the very entity we now must fight? It feels like the ground is dissolving beneath my feet. I try to find a flaw in his logic, some historical discrepancy, but his words resonate with a terrifying, ancient authority.

"This entity seeks Saralak," Narlock goes on, ignoring my internal turmoil, "not just for his raw destructive power, but because Saralak *is* Chaos incarnate. Unleashing him disrupts the fundamental fabric of magic, weakens reality's defenses, making your world susceptible to the Master's pervasive, corrupting influence. Its goal is not mere conquest, but unraveling. Remaking existence in its own image of eternal shadow and discord."

"The castle..." I force the words out, needing practical information, anything to anchor myself against the tide of devastating revelation washing over me. "The one Eleanora saw. Where is it?"

"It does not reside solely within your physical realm," Narlock replies. "It anchors itself in the liminal spaces between worlds, where the veils grow thin—places of potent, often unstable magic. Your visions, Cortana Wyrld," his gaze flickers briefly to Eleanora, acknowledging her unique power, "pierce those weakened boundaries. Trust them. They will guide you more accurately than any map forged by mortal hands."

"And the bone?" Eleanora asks again, her voice tight, desperate now.

Narlock's gaze turns heavy, ancient sorrow briefly shadowing his emerald eyes. "The fragment of Saralak? It cannot be destroyed by

conventional magic. It holds his core essence, a potent focal point. The Master *can* still use it, given the right ritual, the right sacrifice... perhaps even without the other artifacts Elias gathered. It must be contained. Or," he pauses, considering, the silence in the cavern amplifying the weight of his words, "purified."

"Purified? How?" I demand, latching onto the sliver of hope.

"The methods are lost to most," Narlock rumbles. "Perhaps intentionally erased by the Master's influence over centuries. Even dragon memory fades or is... pruned." He looks thoughtful, his gaze lingering on Eleanora again, then shifting pointedly back to me, his next words delivered with the weight of falling mountains. "Unless... unless the counter-magic resides within the very legacy the Master sought to corrupt. Within the knowledge held by those who suffered most from the lies." His meaning is oblique but chillingly clear. Cortana knowledge. Or perhaps... truths hidden within the dark history of the Blackthorns themselves.

He fixes his gaze on me again, heavy with judgment and undeniable, ancient truth. "Your great-grandfather, Orion Blackthorn—the one whose name you bear—did not merely outmaneuver House Cortana politically. He orchestrated their ruin."

The words hit me like a physical blow. No. It wasn't like that. It was rivalry, political maneuvering, the natural rise and fall of power...

"Fabricated charges of treason," Narlock continues, his voice relentless, stripping away every comforting lie I was raised on. "Manipulated evidence. Used dark pacts brokered by the Master to seize their wealth, their properties, their standing—leaving them destitute, their name dishonored, their history rewritten to serve his narrative. All while whispering fealty to the Master who likely aided his deception, consolidating Blackthorn power on a foundation of theft and betrayal."

The final blow lands. Not just rivalry. Not just political maneuvering amplified by darkness. *Systematic destruction. Theft. Lies.* Built on the ruin of her family. My family. My name. My legacy. It's all poison, rotten to the core. The floor seems to drop out from beneath me. I feel physically ill, the air leaving my lungs in a rush, the cavern seeming to spin slightly around me, Narlock's ancient face blurring. The opulent history I was raised in, the power I wield—it's all revealed as a grotesque, blood-soaked charade. How can I even look at her? How can she bear to stand beside me, knowing this truth hangs between us like a freshly drawn blade?

"The reckoning is upon you, children," Narlock states, his voice echoing with the finality of ages, offering no comfort, only consequence. "The path forward requires confronting the truths your families, your Academy, your entire world have long denied. Be prepared for what you uncover. Be prepared for the cost." His words hang in the vast cavern, heavy as the stone around us. I feel Eleanora stiffen beside me, though she makes no sound. The truth is a chasm ripped open between us, wider and deeper than any physical gorge. How can I even stand beside her, bearing the weight

of my name, the poison of my legacy revealed? The thought of meeting her eyes is unbearable.

ELEANORA

The return journey from Narlock's cavern is a silent torment. Each league we travel back towards the compromised safety of Pendragon feels heavier than the last, weighed down by the crushing truth the earth dragon unearthed. *Orchestrated ruin. Fabricated charges. Systematic destruction.* My family. The Cortanas. Not just faded rivals, but victims of a centuries-long deception, their downfall meticulously engineered by Orion's ancestors, likely aided by the very Master we now fight.

The knowledge sits like poison in my veins, cold and bitter. Every glance at Orion beside me is fraught. He drives the shielded vehicle with a tense, white-knuckled grip, his gaze fixed rigidly ahead, profile sharp as carved stone against the passing landscape. I see the muscle jumping convulsively in his jaw, the haunted, self-loathing shadow lurking deep in his usually arrogant azure eyes. Once, I saw his hand tremble slightly as he reached for the navigation controls, a tremor he quickly hid by clenching his fist. He's reeling, his entire world, his identity, fractured by the revelation. A part of me, the part forged in generations of bitterness, wants to lash out, to scream accusations, to demand

impossible reparations for crimes committed long before he was born.

But another part... another part sees the raw agony etched onto his face, the genuine horror that mirrored my own when Narlock spoke the final, damning truth. He didn't know. I see that now. He's as much a victim of his ancestors' lies as I am of their crimes, trapped by a legacy he never chose. And beneath the anger, beneath the grief for my lost heritage, beneath the sickening sense of violation, stirs an unwelcome flicker of empathy. And something more—the undeniable memory of his hand steadying me, his magic shielding me, the desperate heat of his kiss in Gondor's library. How do I reconcile the heir of the house that destroyed mine with the man who makes my heart race, the ally I now implicitly trust with my life?

We return to the Academy under the cover of darkness, slipping back through the hidden tunnels to the cold sanctuary of the Blackthorn Obelisk apartment. The air outside feels heavy, watchful. Hightower remains unreachable, the Academy network still choked by surveillance wards. We are utterly isolated, armed only with Narlock's grim truths, Gondor's favor chest, the terrifying potential of Saralak's bone fragment (still secured in its puzzle box), and the dark, ancient tome recovered from Elias's ritual room at the Keep.

Days blur into a draining cycle of intense, whispered research. We spread Elias's tome open on the obsidian table, its pages filled

with guttural, complex script and horrifying diagrams depicting necromantic rituals and chaotic energy flows. Side-by-side, we pore over the text, the silence between us thick with unspoken tension and the raw, bleeding wound of Narlock's revelations. It's an awkward truce, born of necessity. Hours pass where the only sounds are the rustle of ancient parchment and our own breathing, the air charged with things unsaid. Yet, beneath the strain, a strange reliance forms. When my Sight flares under the Master's pressure, his hand instinctively steadies my shoulder, his magic a brief, grounding shield before he pulls back as if burned. When he curses under his breath at a particularly obscure dialect, I find myself offering a translation gleaned from old Cortana linguistic texts without thinking, the shared goal momentarily overriding the animosity. We function as a unit, driven by the urgent need for answers, the looming threat. We share stale nutrient bars, brew potent cups of caffeine-laced tea, fall into exhausted sleep on opposite ends of the long leather sofa, waking hours later to find the other still hunched over the tome. A strange intimacy develops in the shared pressure cooker environment—a reliance born of necessity, underscored by the volatile awareness that simmers constantly beneath the surface.

The work is exhausting, mentally and magically taxing. The tome itself radiates a faint malice, a cold intelligence that seems to resist our scrutiny. And the whispers at the edge of my awareness intensify—no longer just background static, but insistent, probing tendrils of darkness I now recognize as the Master's distant attention, drawn perhaps by our focus on the tome, or the proximity of the bone fragment. Several times, I feel a sharp psychic pressure, a cold probe against my mental shields,

forcing me to break concentration, gasping, sweat beading on my forehead. Each time, Orion is instantly alert, his own magic flaring protectively around me, a silent shield against the unseen assault, his eyes dark with worry.

We barely speak of Narlock's revelations. The truth lies between us, raw and bleeding, too vast, too painful to dissect yet. We function as a unit, driven by the urgent need for answers, the looming threat.

One evening, after hours spent deciphering a particularly complex passage detailing energy transference linked to celestial alignments, frustration gnaws at me. "It's useless," I sigh, pushing away from the table, rubbing my aching temples. "These are just fragments. Activation sequences are missing, key components unnamed. It's like trying to assemble a catastrophic weapon with half the instructions deliberately erased."

Orion looks up, running a hand through his perpetually perfect dark hair, mussing it slightly. He looks exhausted, the shadows under his eyes stark against his pale skin. "The Master wouldn't leave a complete instruction manual lying around," he says grimly. "But there must be something. A pattern. A weakness."

"A weakness?" I echo bitterly, the weight of Narlock's words suddenly overwhelming. "The weakness seems to be ingrained in the very foundations of this city, in the lies our families built their power on!" The accusation hangs in the air, unintended but unavoidable.

Orion flinches as if struck. He looks away, his jaw tightening, the raw pain flashing in his eyes before he masks it. "I know," he says, his voice low, strained. "I know what my family did, Eleanora. Narlock... he confirmed horrors I never allowed myself to suspect." He finally meets my gaze, his own filled with a self-loathing that mirrors the sickness in my own gut. "There are no excuses. No justifications. Only the truth. My legacy is built on the ashes of yours."

The raw honesty, the lack of defense, disarms me. He isn't denying it. He isn't minimizing it. He owns it. The centuries of ingrained hatred I carried, the righteous fury—it feels complicated now, tangled with the undeniable reality of the man sitting across from me, sharing this impossible burden.

"Orion," I begin hesitantly, needing to bridge this chasm before it swallows us both. "What your ancestors did... the pacts they made, the ruin they caused... it was monstrous. Unforgivable." I see him brace himself, expecting deserved condemnation. "But," I continue, forcing myself to meet his tortured gaze, "that legacy isn't *you*. I've seen you fight beside me against Carlos, against the Wyvern. I've seen you protect Hightower, protect *me*, even when every instinct should have told you otherwise. I saw you defy your father. I see the man sitting here now, using his knowledge, his power, trying to stop the darkness his family may have invited in." It feels like treason to my own history to say it, but the evidence is undeniable, sitting right across from me, looking utterly broken by the truth. I take a deep breath, the words feeling momentous, terrifyingly fragile, but true. "The Master manipulated your ancestors, used their flaws, just as he tries to use

our fear now. The history is poison, yes. But *you*... the man you are choosing to be right now... I choose to trust *you*."

Silence stretches, thick and profound. Orion stares at me, his expression stripped bare—shock, disbelief, and then a flicker of something so raw, so vulnerable, it steals my breath. Relief, so profound it looks like physical pain, washes over his features before the familiar mask of aristocratic control begins to reassert itself, though the cracks remain visible.

He reaches across the table, his fingers closing gently over mine where they rest on the ancient tome. His touch is warm, solid, sending a jolt straight through me, bypassing anger, bypassing history, connecting directly to the undeniable current between us. "Eleanora," he says, his voice rough with emotion I can't quite decipher. "Thank you." Just two words, but they hold the weight of centuries acknowledged, a future chosen.

In that moment, something fundamental shifts between us. The label 'enemy', poisoned by history, feels inadequate, inaccurate. The label 'lover', born of desperate moments, feels premature, terrifying. But 'partner'? 'Ally'? Yes. That feels true. Solid. Something real forged in the heart of lies and chaos.

As if responding to this shift, this fragile moment of unified purpose, my Sight suddenly flares—not with the Master's cold pressure, but with a sharp, intuitive clarity. My gaze snaps back to the open page before us, to the complex diagram we'd

been struggling with. The swirling lines depicting energy flows suddenly resolve into a recognizable pattern in my mind's eye.

"Orion, look!" I gasp, pointing, my voice sharp with excitement. "This diagram... it's not just energy transference. It mirrors the ley line convergence map of the old Academy foundations! The nexus point beneath the original prison structure—the place where the Master's power surged when Saralak broke free!"

Orion leans forward instantly, his eyes sharp with focus, the earlier emotional turmoil momentarily forgotten, replaced by the strategist. He traces the lines, comparing them mentally to Academy schematics only someone of his lineage would have access to. "You're right," he breathes, excitement replacing the grim set of his jaw. "It's a focus point. And this archaic rune sequence here," he points to a cluster of symbols we'd dismissed as decorative, "it's not part of the ritual itself. It looks like... like coordinates. Or an activation key for something *at* that location."

A hidden chamber? A failsafe? A final component Elias needs? We don't know. But it's the first concrete lead we've found in days. A direction. A target.

Hope, fragile but fierce, sparks between us, momentarily pushing back the shadows of the past and the fear of the future. We have a lead. And we face it together.

ORION

The coordinates. The activation key. Etched onto ancient parchment in Elias's dark tome, revealed by Eleanora's Sight connecting patterns I'd dismissed. A hidden path, tied to the Academy's deepest foundations, the ley line nexus beneath the old prisons—the very place Saralak's chaotic energy had erupted from. It's our only lead. Our only way to potentially confront the Master before he initiates whatever final ritual the bone fragment enables.

There's no time for hesitation, no room for doubt. The fragile hope sparked by the discovery hardens into cold resolve within me. Narlock's words about reckoning, about confronting the truths our families denied, echo in my mind. My father's choices, my ancestors' crimes—they are part of me, a poisoned legacy. But they do not have to define me. Looking across the table at Eleanora—her face pale but resolute, green eyes blazing with fierce intelligence and the undeniable strength that drew me even when I fought it—I make my choice. My path lies beside her, against the darkness my lineage may have helped unleash.

"We go now," I state, the decision settling with absolute finality. "While the Master's attention is likely focused on consolidating

Saralak's chaotic energy, before he realizes we have deciphered the tome."

Eleanora nods, her expression mirroring my own grim determination. The fear is still there, lurking beneath the surface—I see it in the slight tremor of her hand as she gathers the tome pages—but it's overshadowed by resolve. We gather the few essential supplies we have left: healing potions, energy replenishers, the favor chest from Gondor (a tangible link to the crippled dragon, carrying it feels like honoring his sacrifice, even if its purpose is unclear now), and the Dwarven puzzle box containing Saralak's bone fragment, now secured with every containment rune I know. The weight of that fragment feels immense, a cold promise of annihilation we carry with us.

We stand near the apartment's shielded exit, the silence thick with unspoken words, the impending danger a palpable presence. This might be it. The final confrontation. No guarantee of survival, let alone victory. Eleanora's words from before—"I choose to trust *you*"—echo in my mind, a fragile bridge across the abyss of our history. But trust doesn't negate the danger. It doesn't guarantee we survive. The thought of losing her, especially now, after that moment of raw honesty, after acknowledging the impossible connection simmering beneath the surface... it's a physical ache, a cold fist clenching around my heart.

That promise we made, the postponement forced by circumstance... "*When this is over... then.*" What if there is no *then*?

What if this fragile truce, this nascent understanding, is all we get? The thought is unbearable, galvanizing.

I turn to face her, needing to see her, to anchor myself before we step into the unknown. The dim light catches the fiery strands of her hair, the determined set of her jaw, the lingering vulnerability in her eyes that now holds a flicker of the trust she offered. "Eleanora," I murmur, my voice rough, stepping closer. "Narlock spoke of reckoning. Of costs. There might not be an 'after this' for us."

Understanding dawns in her eyes, followed by a flicker of fear, quickly replaced by a fierce resolve that mirrors my own sudden, desperate need. "I know," she whispers, her hand coming up almost involuntarily towards my chest, hovering for a moment before letting it fall. The small, aborted gesture speaks volumes.

The air crackles between us, charged with more than just magic. It's the culmination of months of antagonism, reluctant alliance, undeniable attraction, devastating revelations, and that fragile, terrifying trust. It's the fear of imminent death colliding with the desperate, incandescent need to truly *live*, if only for this moment, to claim something real before stepping into the void.

I lean down, capturing her lips with mine. This kiss isn't the angry claiming from Hightower's office, nor the desperate solace in Gondor's library. This is different. A conscious choice. An acceptance of the impossible feelings laid bare between us, fueled by the terrifying awareness that this moment might be all we have. She meets me with equal intensity, her arms winding around my neck, pulling me down, her body molding against mine.

We stumble towards the nearest solid surface—the cold, sterile wall of the Obelisk apartment—the kiss deepening, becoming

consuming. Clothes become an intolerable barrier. My hands find the fastenings of her practical tunic, fumbling slightly in my haste. Her fingers work at the clasps of my robes, skin meeting skin, cool air hitting heated flesh. A gasp escapes her as my lips trail down the curve of her throat, tasting the salt and ozone clinging to her skin. She arches against me, a low sound vibrating in her chest, her hands tangling possessively in my hair.

This is madness. Utter recklessness before facing an ancient entity. But it's also necessary. Vital. An affirmation against the void. Every touch, every kiss, every shared breath is a defiance of the darkness, a declaration of the life we are fighting for, the connection that somehow bloomed amidst the ruins of our families' legacies. Passion crests, hot and overwhelming, a desperate, frantic claiming, erasing thought, erasing fear, leaving only sensation, only *us*, tangled together against the encroaching night. It's raw, honest, stripped bare of pretense—two souls clinging together on the precipice, finding strength, finding solace, finding this fierce, undeniable connection in the heart of the storm.

Later, lying tangled together on the plush rug, the frantic energy subsides, leaving behind a profound, almost aching intimacy. Her head rests on my chest, her breathing evening out, the fiery hair spilling across my skin. My arm is wrapped protectively around her, holding her close, feeling the steady beat of her heart against mine. The silence isn't empty; it's filled with the weight of what

just happened, the promises made and fulfilled, the terrifying reality waiting just outside these wards.

I gently brush a stray curl from her forehead. She stirs, looking up at me, her green eyes soft, luminous, unguarded in a way I've rarely seen. A small, almost shy smile touches her lips. The connection feels profound, terrifyingly deep. I force the feeling down, compartmentalizing. Now is not the time. Now is for survival. The reckoning, the future, *then...* it all depends on what happens next.

"Ready?" I ask softly, the word encompassing more than just the coming battle, pushing myself into strategist mode.

She nods, her smile widening slightly, reaching up to trace the line of my jaw. "Together."

That single word settles something deep within me. The lingering shame of my legacy, the fear of the Master, the uncertainty of the fight ahead—they don't vanish, but they shift, balanced now by this undeniable connection, this shared resolve. Together.

We dress quickly, the earlier urgency returning, but overlaid now with a quiet sense of purpose, a shared strength. I retrieve the bone fragment, its cold presence a stark reminder of the stakes. Eleanora consults the tome one last time, focusing on the activation sequence and the ley line map.

"It's tied to the nexus," she confirms. "The runes act as a key, but it needs... resonance. Both our signatures, I think, focused through the ley lines themselves."

It makes sense. A hidden access point, keyed to specific magical frequencies, likely requiring significant power or a unique

combination to activate—perhaps intended by whoever created it long ago as a failsafe, now co-opted or discovered by the Master.

We make our way back down into the hidden tunnels beneath Pendragon, the path feeling different now, charged with grim purpose and the lingering heat between us. We reach the area beneath the old prison foundations, the air thick with dormant magic and the faint, lingering taint of Saralak's chaotic eruption. Eleanora finds the nexus point described in the tome—a convergence of barely visible lines etched into the ancient stone floor.

Following the tome's instructions, we stand on opposite sides of the nexus. Eleanora begins chanting the archaic rune sequence, her voice clear and steady, her Sight focusing the intricate patterns, drawing power from the air. I raise my hands, pouring controlled Blackthorn fire into the ley lines, feeling the earth magic respond, thrumming beneath my feet, feeding the activation. Our magic meets at the nexus, intertwining—her focused light and spirit weaving seamlessly with my directed fire and will. The air crackles violently. The stone beneath us vibrates, humming with immense power. The coordinates from the tome flare like brands on the nexus point.

Reality twists. Not the chaotic wrenching of the Draconia gate, but a deliberate, focused *tearing*. A shimmering distortion appears before us, a doorway ripping open into swirling mist

and non-Euclidean angles—the liminal space Narlock described. Through the swirling vortex, I catch my first glimpse of it.

Impossible architecture. Towers of black, obsidian-like stone that pierce a sky boiling with perpetual twilight storms. Walls that seem to shift and writhe, defying perspective. A fortress built not of stone and mortar, but of pure shadow, malice, and ancient, corrupted power, radiating waves of cold dread that seep even through the portal, raising the hairs on my arms.

The Master's stronghold.

I meet Eleanora's gaze across the swirling portal. Fear is there, yes, reflected in her wide green eyes, but overshadowed by fierce determination that mirrors my own. We take a final, steadying breath, clasp hands tightly—a solid anchor against the chaos—and step through the tear in reality together.

ELEANORA

Stepping through the shimmering tear in reality is like plunging into the absolute zero between stars. The air in the Master's stronghold hits me first—cold, thin, utterly devoid of the familiar hum of Arcadia's ambient magic, or even the raw earth power of Narlock's domain. It feels dead, sterile, yet simultaneously thick with an ancient, oppressive dread that presses down on my spirit, making each breath a conscious effort. My hand instinctively tightens its grip on Orion's as we stumble onto shifting ground that feels disturbingly like packed ash over unseen voids.

The portal snaps shut behind us with a sound like tearing fabric, leaving us stranded in a realm of perpetual twilight beneath a sky boiling with slow-motion storms of bruised purple and sickly green lightning that illuminates nothing below. Before us stretches the impossible architecture Orion glimpsed—a fortress built of shadow and malice made manifest. This must be one of the liminal spaces Narlock spoke of, a parasitic reality anchored between worlds, feeding on the chaos it creates. Towers of black, obsidian-like stone pierce the turbulent sky at angles that defy geometry, seeming to twist and writhe just at the edge of my

vision, inducing a subtle nausea. Walls flow like solidified darkness, absorbing what little ambient light exists, their surfaces seeming to ripple as if alive. Walkways of solidified shadow connect structures across impossible voids, shimmering like heat haze or solidified despair. There's no sound—no wind, no distant city hum, no life—only a profound, unnerving silence that presses against my eardrums, amplifying the frantic pounding of my own heart. My Sight struggles to process the wrongness, the sheer *otherness* of this place; it feels like standing inside a predator's nightmare, a landscape designed by madness itself. The air tastes metallic, sterile, like licking frozen metal.

"Stay alert," Orion murmurs beside me, his voice low, hushed, almost swallowed by the oppressive silence. His free hand already holds a contained sphere of bright, warm fire, pushing back the immediate shadows but seeming pitifully small against the overwhelming scale of the encroaching darkness. His grip on my hand is grounding, a point of familiar warmth and solid reality in this alien landscape.

"Where do we even start?" I whisper, scanning the disorienting panorama. There are no clear paths, no obvious entrances, just shifting perspectives and architecture designed to confuse, intimidate, and break the spirit. Even the ground feels unstable, subtly shifting like cooling lava beneath the ash.

"The tome mentioned a central nexus," Orion recalls, his eyes narrowed, scanning the impossible structures, his tactical mind clearly working past the disorientation. "A convergence point where the Master likely anchors his power to this plane, where the ritual would be performed."

"I can try to sense it," I say, closing my eyes briefly, forcing myself to push past the oppressive dread blanketing this realm, the feeling of being watched by the very stones around us. I reach out with my Sight, not looking for familiar ley lines, but for concentrations of power, for the discordant, sickening hum of the Master's specific energy signature—the one I felt probing my mind, the one that resonated from Elias's foul magic, the one that felt like absolute cold.

It takes effort, like trying to hear a specific whisper in a hurricane of psychic static. The very air resists magical perception, thick and cloying. But then... *there*. A faint, sickening pulse deep within the central, most massive spire—a structure that seems to absorb even the twilight, radiating waves of cold malice that make my teeth chatter. "That way," I say, pointing, opening my eyes, the direction feeling nauseatingly clear in my mind. "Deep inside the main citadel. It feels... strong. And hungry. Like a wound in reality."

We move cautiously, Orion's firelight casting long, dancing shadows that seem to twist into menacing shapes in my peripheral vision. The ground shifts subtly beneath our feet, sometimes solid ash over unyielding stone, sometimes disconcertingly yielding like crusted snow over emptiness. Doorways appear in solid walls as we approach, only to vanish like afterthoughts once we pass. Stairs spiral upwards into absolute darkness or downwards into unseen depths. My Sight becomes our primary compass, straining against the oppressive atmosphere, anticipating shifting paths, sensing

residual magical traps left like psychic tripwires—wards designed not just to harm, but to drain hope, induce despair, or ensnare the unwary mind.

Several times, I pull Orion back just as the ground before him dissolves into a swirling vortex of shadow that whispers promises of oblivion. Once, he shoves me aside as a previously unseen glyph on a wall flares with corrosive green energy that eats into the stone where I stood a moment before. We navigate a corridor that seems to loop back on itself endlessly, the same grotesque carving appearing again and again, until I focus my Sight past the illusion, perceiving the faint 'seam' in the magical construct. "There!" I point. Orion doesn't hesitate, unleashing a concentrated blast of fire that shatters the illusion, revealing the true path forward—a narrow bridge of shadow spanning a chasm filled with whispering darkness.

He moves with lethal grace, his fire ready, deflecting shadowy tendrils that lash out from unexpected corners, incinerating grotesque, half-formed things that scuttle just beyond the light's edge—at one point, a creature like a flayed hound made of solidified shadow and too many joints lunged, only to dissolve into greasy smoke under his focused flame—creatures born of nightmare and corrupted magic, all claws and teeth and too many eyes. We fight back-to-back instinctively, his power a shield and sword, my Sight the early warning system, our magic weaving together out of sheer necessity. The animosity, the history—it's still there, an undeniable chasm, but in this hostile realm, survival depends entirely on the fragile trust we forged, on the connection that hums between us, stronger than any feud. Every shared

glance, every coordinated defense, feels like rewriting history, one desperate moment at a time.

Deeper into the citadel we press, the architecture growing more oppressive, the silence somehow heavier, pressing in. We navigate corridors that twist impossibly, stairs that spiral into nothingness, chambers filled with whispering shadows that promise power or oblivion, feeding on doubt and fear. My Sight strains against the constant pressure, the whispers at the edge of my awareness growing louder now, tinged with a cold, calculating malice, trying to find purchase in my fear, in my grief for Valeria, whispering her name in distorted echoes. I grit my teeth, focusing fiercely on Orion's steady presence beside me, on the mission, refusing to let the Master break me with ghosts.

We reach a vast, circular chamber near the spire's core. Unlike the shifting chaos outside, this space feels unnervingly still, deliberate, like the eye of the storm. In the center, a raised platform of polished black stone, easily fifty feet across, hums with palpable dark energy, making the air vibrate. Runes, similar to those in Elias's tome but infinitely more complex and malevolent, glow with a sickly green light across its surface, pulsing slowly like a diseased heart. This feels like the place. The nexus. The heart of the Master's power in this realm.

But we are not alone.

Standing before the platform, seemingly waiting for us, radiating an aura of corrupted power that makes my Sight recoil,

is a figure I recognize with a sickening lurch of my stomach, a gasp tearing from my throat. Dana.

But not the Dana I knew. Not my cheerful, complaining, giant-blooded friend. The transformation I glimpsed before, hinted at in her interactions, is complete now, horrifyingly magnified by the dark power of this realm. She's taller, leaner, her frame elongated, radiating an unnatural predatory grace that sets every nerve on edge. Her skin still holds a metallic sheen, but it's darker now, obsidian-dark, streaked with veins of pulsing shadow that seem to writhe beneath the surface. Horns, thick and wickedly curved like a corrupted ram's, sprout from her forehead, framing a face twisted into a mask of cold malice. Her eyes glow with that same sickly green light as the runes on the platform, devoid of any warmth or recognition I ever knew, filled only with ancient hatred and the Master's chilling influence. Her teeth, glimpsed as her lips curl back, are elongated into vicious fangs, and her hands end in razor-sharp claws that look capable of tearing through enchanted steel. She smiles as we enter, a grotesque distortion of the bright expression I remember, revealing rows of needle-sharp teeth.

"Eleanora," she purrs, her voice distorted, layered with sibilant echoes that scrape raw against my nerves. "And the noble Blackthorn heir. Took you long enough. The Master grows impatient for the final component." Her glowing eyes flick towards the satchel at my side, where the bone fragment rests within its box.

Grief and betrayal slam into me with physical force, stealing the air from my lungs. Memories flash—Dana laughing in the dorm, complaining about classes, her bright enthusiasm. How could this happen? "Dana... why?" The name feels like ash and poison in my

mouth. "What happened to you? The Master... he twisted you. This isn't you!"

She laughs, a harsh, grating sound that echoes unnervingly in the vast, silent chamber, devoid of any real mirth. "Twisted? No, little mage. *Perfected*. Awakened." Her voice drips with venomous certainty. "The Master showed me my true potential, the power my giant kin scorned for my 'diluted' blood, the strength my pathetic Shifter father denied me." Her glowing eyes fix on me, filled with centuries of resentment I never truly saw beneath her forced cheerfulness back at the Academy—the bitterness of the outcast, never truly belonging anywhere, festering until the Master offered a different path. "He offered purpose. Power. Revenge against a world that mocked my very existence for being neither one thing nor the other. And now," she gestures possessively towards the pulsing platform, "I serve him. I guard the nexus. And you," her smile widens, becoming utterly terrifying, radiating pure, destructive intent, "will not interfere with his ascension."

She lunges. Unbelievably fast, a blur of shadow, corrupted strength, and razor claws aimed.

ORION

Dana lunges—a blur of corrupted giant strength and shadow magic, claws like obsidian daggers aimed straight for Eleanora’s throat. Instinct, raw and immediate, takes over. I shove Eleanora back, hard, putting myself between them, simultaneously erupting a concave wall of pure Blackthorn fire—a controlled, searing shield meant to intercept and incinerate.

The fire slams into Dana, the impact echoing oddly in this warped reality. It momentarily halts her charge with a guttural roar that’s a horrifying blend of fury, pain, and something utterly inhuman. But the flames, usually enough to melt steel or vaporize lesser magical constructs, seem to *sizzle* and *corrode* against her shadow-infused hide. Dark, greasy smoke rises where fire meets corrupted flesh, but the core of the attack is absorbed, twisted, nullified by the dark energy radiating from her—power clearly being channeled directly from the pulsing nexus platform nearby, a sickening umbilical cord feeding her strength. She *is* the nexus guardian, empowered by its foul, unmaking energy.

"Impressive, Blackthorn!" Dana—or the thing wearing her face, twisting her features into a monstrous parody—sneers, her voice a discordant chorus of overlapping whispers and malice. Sickly

green fire flares in her eyes, reflecting the runes on the platform. "But your family's fire cannot burn away the Master's true gifts!"

She bats aside the remnants of my fire wall with contemptuous ease, the motion blurringly fast, and comes at me again. Claws slash through the dead air where my head was a fraction of a second before, leaving trails of corrosive shadow that hiss against the stone floor. I sidestep, pivoting on my heel, my sword—runes blazing with contained heat—a silver blur meeting her attack. Enchanted steel grates against magically hardened claws with a shriek of protesting metal. Sparks fly—gold from my runes, sickly green from her corrupted energy. The impact jars my arm to the shoulder socket, a testament to the unnatural strength fueling her. She's impossibly strong, impossibly fast.

"Fight me, Blackthorn!" she shrieks, lunging again, a whirlwind of shadow-wreathed limbs and razor claws. "Show me the power your family *stole*! The power you hoard while others suffer!"

Her words, laced with the Master's insidious poison and amplified by her own twisted resentment—the bitterness of the outcast given monstrous teeth—strike a raw nerve deep within me. The familiar, cold rage begins to build, an echo of the overwhelming power I unleashed before, the power that terrified Eleanora, the power that still terrifies *me*. The urge to let it loose, to simply *incinerate* this mockery of Eleanora's friend, is almost overwhelming. *Control it*. The thought is a sharp command, a mental bulwark thrown up against the rising tide of fury. *I will not become my ancestors. I will not become the monster my father feared*. Not now. Not with Eleanora watching, relying on me.

I meet Dana's relentless onslaught not with overwhelming force, but with cold, hard precision. Every parry is economical,

every dodge calculated. Every contained blast of fire is aimed deliberately—not to destroy, but to disrupt, to create space, to force her back. I force myself to breathe evenly, anchoring my magic in the discipline hammered into me since childhood, refusing to let the rage dictate my actions. It's like wrestling lightning made of spite and shadow, trying desperately not to get electrocuted or burn down the whole damned fortress. I focus on defense, on containment, constantly scanning for an opening, acutely aware of Eleanora a few yards behind me. I sense her magic gathering again—faint threads of that unique, clear light reaching tentatively towards the nexus platform, trying to disrupt Dana's power source even as she likely weaves protective wards around us both.

"Hiding behind control?" Dana mocks, her voice dripping venom, sensing my restraint, perhaps even feeding on my internal conflict. She slams a shadowy fist, heavy as stone, into my sword guard, the sheer force staggering me back a step, my boots skidding on the shifting floor. "Afraid to unleash the true Blackthorn power? The power that *crushes* lesser beings? Is the little Cortana worth such cowardice?"

"There is no 'lesser being' here, Dana," I grit out, shoving her back with a focused kinetic blast that ripples the air and makes her snarl, momentarily disrupting her connection to the nexus. "Only you, twisted into a puppet by a power you don't understand, a power that will consume you."

"I understand power!" she roars, and green-black energy explodes outwards from her in a shockwave, forcing me to throw up a hasty, multi-layered fire shield. The impact feels like hitting solid rock, the outer layers cracking instantly. "The Master offers

true power! Not the pathetic, controlled scraps your kind hoards behind walls of privilege!"

She presses the attack relentlessly, her corrupted strength seemingly endless, fueled directly by the nexus, her movements blurring faster now. I block, parry, counter with controlled bursts of fire, forcing her back step by agonizing step, trying desperately to draw her away from Eleanora, away from the pulsing platform that radiates palpable malice. It's a brutal, draining dance on shifting, treacherous ground. My muscles burn with the strain, my core aches with the constant effort of maintaining control, of *not* simply unleashing the inferno coiling within me.

I risk a glance back, needing to see Eleanora, needing to ensure she's still focused, still safe. She has her hands raised, palms facing the nexus, eyes closed tight in concentration. Faint threads of silvery light snake out from her fingertips, struggling against the overwhelming dark energy radiating from the platform like fragile vines trying to bind a raging beast. She's making progress, I think, but she's utterly exposed. Utterly vulnerable.

Dana sees my glance, sees my attention momentarily divided. Her glowing green eyes narrow with predatory cunning. With a terrifying burst of speed that tears the air, she disengages from me, ignoring my defense, launching herself not at me, but directly at Eleanora.

"NO!" The roar tears from my throat, raw, primal, fueled by pure terror.

There's no time for calculation, no time for precision. Only instinct. Only the absolute, overriding need to protect her. I throw myself forward, abandoning my guard, intercepting Dana's deadly trajectory, putting my body directly between her razor claws and Eleanora.

Agony explodes through my left shoulder as Dana's shadow-infused claws tear through my reinforced robes, through muscle, grating horribly against bone. The impact slams me back against Eleanora, the force sending us both sprawling onto the cold, shifting floor. Pain, white-hot and searing, radiates down my arm, instantly followed by the chilling, corrosive touch of the Master's magic trying to invade the wound, to fester, to corrupt. I grit my teeth against a wave of blackness, forcing myself up onto one knee, raising my sword defensively with my good arm, shielding Eleanora who scrambles up behind me, her eyes wide with horror.

"Orion! Your shoulder! You're bleeding—"

"Fine," I lie through clenched teeth, the world swimming slightly, the edges of my vision tinged with grey. The wound burns with dark, cold energy.

Dana stands over us, panting slightly now, exertion showing faintly beneath the corruption. A triumphant, vicious grin splits her distorted face. Blood—my blood—drips slowly from her claws onto the obsidian floor. "Touching," she sneers, her layered voice dripping sarcasm. "Protecting the little Cortana. How... predictable. How *weak*."

She raises her claws for a final strike, green energy gathering around her, drawn visibly now in thick, pulsing streams from the nexus platform, coalescing into something far more potent,

far more destructive than before. The air crackles with raw, unmaking power. This isn't just Dana channeling anymore. I feel it—the cold, ancient pressure of the Master's will focusing directly through her, preparing to unleash devastating force, aimed at ending us both.

We're cornered. I'm injured, fighting the encroaching darkness in my own wound. Eleanora is still trying desperately to disrupt the nexus. This final attack... I don't know if I can block it, not without unleashing the very destructive power I've fought so hard, for her sake, to contain.

ELEANORA

A gony rips through the air—Orion’s choked gasp as Dana’s claws tear into his shoulder. He slams back against me, the force stealing my breath, sending us both sprawling onto the cold, shifting floor of the nexus chamber. Pain radiates from where I hit the unforgiving stone, but it’s nothing compared to the terror seizing me as I see the dark blood blooming across Orion’s robes, the way his face contorts in agony.

He forces himself up instantly, putting himself between me and Dana, sword raised defensively, but I see the tremor in his good arm, the grey pallor beneath his skin, the cold sweat beading on his brow. The wound isn’t just physical; it burns with the Master’s corrosive shadow magic, actively fighting Orion’s innate healing.

Dana—no, the *thing* that was Dana—stands poised, claws dripping Orion’s blood, green energy coalescing around her, crackling with the Master’s raw, malevolent power drawn directly from the nexus. This is it. The final blow.

My magic feels frayed, depleted. My body aches with exhaustion. Fear, cold and primal, threatens to paralyze me. We can’t block this. Not with conventional shields. Not with Orion injured.

But then, something shifts within me. Looking at Orion—his fierce protectiveness even now, the pain he's enduring *for me*, the undeniable connection humming between us despite the abyss of our families' history—ignites a different kind of fire. Not anger. Not desperation. *Resolve*. Cold, clear, and absolute as diamond.

The whispers at the edge of my Sight, usually chaotic or menacing, suddenly coalesce, sharpening into a single, resonant echo of the Dragon Queen's words from the trial: *True strength isn't only sealing darkness, but sometimes wielding the light that balances it... A vessel exists... A focus for spirit, a counterweight to chaos...*

The Soul Stone.

My hand flies to the satchel at my side, fingers closing around the smooth, cool crystal within. It pulses faintly against my palm, humming with latent power, seemingly waiting, resonating with the sudden clarity crystallizing in my mind. Narlock's words echo next: *Purification... counter-magic resides within the very legacy the Master sought to corrupt*. My legacy. Not the stolen wealth or tarnished name, but the Sight, the spirit magic, the connection to balance the Master abhors. And Orion's legacy—not the darkness, but the fierce, protective fire he wields when anchored by something true.

"Orion," I say, my voice surprisingly steady, cutting through the charged silence before Dana strikes. He glances down at me, pain etched deep in his eyes, but also unwavering trust. "The Soul Stone. It amplifies intent. *Our* intent."

Understanding dawns in his eyes, immediate and absolute. He nods sharply, his uninjured hand finding mine, gripping it tightly

over the satchel containing the stone. His touch is searing hot, his fire magic flaring instinctively, protectively.

"Together," he grits out through clenched teeth, pain momentarily forgotten in shared purpose.

I pull the Soul Stone free. It sits heavy in my palm, milky-white depths swirling with veins of gold and violet light. It feels ancient, potent, humming with raw potential. I close my eyes, shutting out the monstrous form of Dana preparing to strike, shutting out the overwhelming pressure from the nexus. I reach inward, not just to my own frayed magic, but deeper—to the core of my Cortana heritage, the Sight, the whispers of spirit that are not external, but part of *me*. I don't try to force control; I *listen*.

Guidance comes, not in words, but in pure intuition, an understanding flowing directly from the Stone itself, resonating with my spirit magic like a tuning fork struck against crystal. *Balance. Intent. Union.* It needs both sides of the equation. My light, his fire. Our connection, forged through animosity and attraction, betrayal and trust, amplified, focused. The Stone is the conduit, the amplifier, but *we* are the source.

"Don't just shield," I gasp, opening my eyes, locking my gaze with Orion's intense blue stare, pouring all my conviction into the connection between us. "Channel *with* me. Through the Stone. Our magic combined. Our intent unified." I think of Valeria's sacrifice, the brilliant light she represented, a light the Master sought to corrupt and extinguish. I think of Hightower's fierce hope, Gondor's ancient weariness, Narlock's grim truths. I think of Orion, his pain, his protection, the impossible love blooming amidst the ruins. *Protect. Heal. Balance. Live.* "Focus on *us*, Orion. On what's between us. Let the Stone amplify *that*." The fragile,

powerful emotion arcing between us—it isn't a weakness; it's our anchor, our weapon.

He searches my face for a long, breathless moment, seeing the conviction there, the desperate hope, the shared resolve that transcends history. Then, he gives a single, sharp nod, surrendering his control, trusting me completely. He places his uninjured hand firmly over mine, encasing the Soul Stone between our palms. His skin is searing against mine. His fire magic surges—not wild, but controlled, focused, pouring willingly into the unified stream alongside my own nascent spirit light, which rises to meet it like a river flowing to the sea. His strength anchors mine, providing the raw power my spirit magic needs to shape and direct through the Stone.

The Soul Stone ignites.

Not a flare, but a *nova*. A blinding, incandescent sphere of white-gold light erupts from between our joined hands, shot through with spiraling, incandescent ribbons of pure sunfire. The power is immense, staggering, a physical pressure pushing against us, threatening to consume us both in its sheer intensity, but anchored by our desperate grip, by our unwavering focus on each other, by the impossible, perfect harmony resonating between our combined magics flowing *through* the Stone, it holds. This isn't just Cortana light or Blackthorn fire. It's something new. Something *whole*. Born of balance, union, shared desperate intent—fueled by the undeniable, incandescent power of our connection, amplified into reality by the ancient artifact.

The pure light surges outwards in a wave, pushing back the oppressive darkness of the stronghold, silencing the Master's psychic pressure with its sheer, unbearable purity. It washes over the corrupted form of Dana as she brings her claws down. She shrieks, a sound utterly inhuman, dissolving into agony as the Master's influence is violently seared away. The green fire in her eyes extinguishes, replaced for one horrifying, lucid moment by the familiar brown eyes of my friend, wide with shock and pain, before she collapses, the shadow leaving her, leaving only the broken shell behind. Grief threatens to shatter my focus, but I hold on, anchoring myself to Orion's unwavering support, to our purpose.

The light doesn't stop. It continues, flowing past her still form, striking the nexus platform. The malevolent green runes sputter, crackle, hiss like water on hot coals, and fade under the onslaught of pure, balanced energy.

But the Master isn't finished. The energy Dana was gathering, now unbound, coalesces above the platform—no longer channeled through a vessel, but manifesting directly. A swirling vortex of pure shadow, deeper and colder than the void between stars, forms rapidly, tendrils of absolute darkness lashing out, converging into a focused beam of utter negation aimed directly at the Soul Stone, at the heart of the light—at us. It recognizes the true threat, the source of the power disrupting its hold.

"Now, Eleanora!" Orion yells beside me, his voice strained, veins standing out on his neck, the sheer effort of channeling, of maintaining this impossible balance while injured, clearly immense. His grip tightens on mine, pouring more of his fire, his

will, into the Stone, feeding the light, holding steady against the Master's focused assault.

Together, we focus our combined will, pouring everything we are—every ounce of strength, every memory of loss (Valeria's bright, trusting face flashes in my mind, fueling my resolve), every spark of hope, every facet of our impossible, undeniable connection—into the incandescent heart of the Soul Stone. Not just wielding power. Making a statement. Rejecting chaos. Affirming unity. Affirming *us*.

Lux Aeternum! Cor Invictus! Anima Coniuncta!

Ancient words, resonant with power I don't understand but feel echo through my very soul, spring to my lips—instinct, memory, the Stone itself speaking through me? *Eternal Light! Unconquered Heart! Joined Soul!*

With a shared cry that tears from our throats, raw and unified, we thrust our joined hands forward. The white-gold fire doesn't explode; it focuses. Coalesces into a searing beam, impossibly bright, unbelievably pure, a lance of creation aimed directly into the heart of the swirling shadow, the Master's manifested will.

It strikes. No sound. No concussive force. Just overwhelming purity meeting absolute negation. The light doesn't just hit the shadow; it *unravels* it. It penetrates, sinks deep, dissolves the darkness from within, turning the Master's own ancient, corrupting power against itself like light burning away a festering infection.

A soundless scream echoes not in the air, but directly in my mind, tearing through my psychic defenses—a shriek of disbelief, agony, and the chilling resonance of utter dissolution. Cracks of pure white-gold light spiderweb through the vortex of shadow.

Tendrils flail wildly, fraying like rotten cloth, dissolving into nothingness. The oppressive presence, the ancient malice that has haunted my Sight, fractures, shatters, collapses inward upon itself.

Then, with a final, silent pulse of blinding, cleansing light that seems to sear away centuries of shadow and manipulation, the vortex vanishes utterly. Leaving only fading motes of gold and violet light drifting on the suddenly still, quiet air of the chamber and a profound, echoing emptiness where the Master's presence had been.

The oppressive weight crushing this realm, crushing *me*, lifts instantaneously. The chaotic static overloading my Sight vanishes completely. The air clears—sharp, almost painfully clean, carrying only the faint scent of ozone and the lingering warmth from Orion's hand still clasped tightly, desperately, around mine over the now softly glowing Soul Stone.

Silence. Absolute, ringing—broken only by the distant, fading rumble of the collapsing stronghold around us as its anchor dissolves, and the ragged, disbelieving, exhausted gasps of the man holding my hand.

We did it. It's over.

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EPILOGUE

One year. Sometimes it feels like a lifetime ago, sometimes like only yesterday, that the sky above Arcadia bled chaos and the very stones of Pendragon screamed under Saralak's impossible weight. Now, I stand on the Raven's Perch, the highest overlook at the Academy, the place where this final, terrifying chapter of my life truly began under a storm-wracked sky. Tonight, the sky is clear, blessedly clear, awash with the soft, gentle hues of a peaceful sunset—streaks of orange, soft pink, fading into a deep violet brushed with the first shyly emerging stars. The air is crisp and clean, carrying the familiar scent of salt from the sea and the faint, earthy aroma of new growth from the meticulously restored Academy gardens below. A gentle breeze whispers over the parapet, carrying not warnings, but the distant, cheerful sounds of the city settling into evening.

Arcadia is healing. Pendragon is rebuilding, scarred but enduring. The sharp edges of trauma are softening, replaced by a cautious, determined hope that feels more real, more grounded, than the brittle optimism that preceded the Master's fall. The Great Hall's shattered windows now gleam with newly enchanted glass, depicting not just ancient battles of Mage against Shifter, but vibrant scenes of cooperation—Lizardmen elders consulting with

Academy scholars, Phoenix diplomats negotiating trade routes with city officials, Dwarven artisans helping reconstruct magical conduits alongside human mages. It's a testament to the fragile peace we fought so hard for, a peace nurtured daily by the interim council where figures like the stoic Lizardman elder Kael and the pragmatic Phoenix diplomat Lyra now sit alongside established Mage representatives, their voices finally heard, their wisdom finally valued. It isn't perfect, of course. Centuries of prejudice, deliberately fanned by the Master's insidious manipulations, don't vanish overnight. There are still whispers in shadowed corners of old families clinging to outdated notions of purity and power. But the dialogue has begun, open and ongoing. Truths, once buried deep in forbidden archives or erased entirely, are being unearthed daily in the library under Professor Hightower's fiercely meticulous, almost obsessive guidance. She seems determined to single-handedly rewrite centuries of deliberate obfuscation.

My own magic feels different now, settled. The frantic struggle against internal limiters, the feeling of being perpetually stuck, has eased, replaced by a quiet confidence. My Sight, once a source of fear and uncontrollable, terrifying visions, feels clearer, calmer—less a curse, more a tool. The whispers are still there sometimes, faint echoes on the edge of awareness, but they are quieter now, more like guidance than assault, subtle harmonies reflecting the world's magical balance, a balance I'm slowly learning to perceive, sometimes even gently influence. I work alongside Hightower occasionally, researching not just my Cortana legacy—reclaiming its true history of guardianship and balance, not just fallen power—but also exploring the deep spirit

magic Narlock spoke of, the magic needed to maintain harmony, to perhaps even eventually purify artifacts like the bone fragment.

Saralak's bone. It remains contained deep below in the Academy's most secure vault, shielded by complex wards woven from ancient Cortana knowledge found in recovered texts, reinforced by Narlock's deep earth magic, and secured by Blackthorn ingenuity—Orion's ingenuity. Destroying it remains impossible for now, perhaps forever, but it serves as a silent, chilling reminder of the darkness we faced, the price paid (Valeria's bright face flashes, an ache that never fully fades but now carries gratitude alongside the grief), and the vigilance required. Dana, tragically, did not survive the severing of the Master's overwhelming influence; her body, already twisted beyond recovery, simply gave out once the corrupting power was gone. Another casualty claimed by the Master's insidious reach.

A familiar warmth envelops me from behind, strong arms sliding around my waist, pulling me back against a solid, welcome chest. I lean into the embrace instantly, naturally, a soft smile touching my lips even before I turn. The scent of sandalwood, ozone, and something uniquely *Orion* surrounds me, a scent that now means safety, partnership... home.

"Thinking deep thoughts again, Cortana?" His voice murmurs against my hair, the teasing note familiar, comfortable now, devoid of its old mocking edge, replaced by genuine affection.

"Just reflecting," I admit, turning slightly in his arms to look up at him. The harsh lines of stress that seemed permanently etched around his eyes after the final battle, after his father's public fall and sequestered sentencing, have softened significantly over the past year. He looks younger, more at peace than I

ever thought possible for a Blackthorn, the weight of his name carried differently now. He's poured his energy, his formidable intellect, and significant Blackthorn resources into the restitution efforts—not just for my family, but for others wronged by his ancestors' manipulations—quietly ensuring historical injustices are acknowledged and, where possible, rectified. He carries his name not as a shield or a weapon, but as a responsibility he's actively reshaping, day by painful, deliberate day.

"Reflecting on how far we've come?" he asks, his azure eyes searching mine, filled with a warmth that still makes my heart perform a ridiculous little skip.

"Among other things," I concede. "On legacies. Yours. Mine. What they mean now. How different things are."

He nods, understanding passing between us without needing more words. He takes my hand, lacing our fingers together, the simple gesture conveying everything—shared history, shared trauma, shared future.

Standing here with Eleanora on the Raven's Perch, looking out over the healing city as twilight deepens, feels... right. Peaceful. A state I never anticipated achieving, certainly not alongside a Cortana. A year ago, this view was smoke, ruin, despair echoing Saralak's chaotic roar. Now, lights twinkle across Arcadia, steady and bright, reflecting off the newly repaired Academy spires below. The air hums with the magic of rebuilding, of tentative hope.

The Academy itself is transformed. Students of all backgrounds—Mage, Shifter clans previously relegated to the fringes, even the first few integrated Mageless apprentices officially admitted under new inclusionary statutes—cross the restored courtyard together, arguing over spell theorems, sharing jokes. A sight my father, serving his long sentence overseeing magically reinforced infrastructure projects (a sentence he accepted with quiet dignity, much to my surprise), likely never imagined possible. A sight my ancestors would have actively fought to prevent.

The weight of their legacy is still there, a shadow I carry every day, but it no longer defines me. Narlock's revelations, my father's confession, the horrifying truth of the Blackthorn crimes against the Cortanas—facing that darkness, owning it publicly, was the hardest thing I've ever done. But necessary. Working on the restitution, using the power and wealth I inherited not for dominance but for repair, for fostering the cooperation the Master sought to destroy... it feels like the only path forward, the only way to forge a different legacy, one worthy of... well, worthy of her.

And Eleanora... she is the anchor in that process. Her choosing to trust *me*, separating the man standing before her from the monstrous history of his name, was a leap of faith I never expected, a gift I strive daily to honor. Our journey from bitter enemies defined by lies, through forced alliance and volatile passion, to this... this quiet, steady partnership... it feels like the most potent, most real magic I've ever known.

I pull her closer, resting my chin atop her fiery hair, inhaling her familiar scent—ozone from her magic, the faint floral hint she always wears, the smell of old books from her research. Home. "Hightower mentioned your progress with the spirit resonance

training," I murmur, changing the subject slightly, though my thoughts remain on us. "Said you're stabilizing ley lines faster than anyone she's ever seen. Apparently, Cortana 'intuition' is more potent than the old texts ever admitted."

She leans back against me, a soft sigh escaping her, a sound of contentment that settles something deep within me. "It feels... right," she admits. "Like understanding the world's heartbeat instead of just imposing will upon it. Less fighting against the current, more guiding it." She turns her head, her green eyes meeting mine in the deepening twilight, clear and bright with a newfound confidence that suits her far better than the shadows of her past. "And you? How goes the delicate dance with the new inter-species trade council? Still charming grumpy old dragon lords and suspicious Phoenix matriarchs?"

I chuckle softly, the sound less cynical than it once would have been. "Challenging," I admit. "Convincing families who have distrusted each other for centuries—thanks in no small part to the Master's manipulations and my ancestors' greed—to agree on fair resource allocation requires... patience." Patience is not a traditional Blackthorn virtue, but one Eleanor, perhaps unknowingly, has taught me. "But progress is being made. Slowly. Kael the Lizardman actually agreed to review our proposal for shared geothermal access last week."

We stand in comfortable silence for a long moment, simply watching the first true stars prick the darkening violet canvas above. The future remains uncertain. Remnants of the Dark Eye, followers of the Master, may still lurk in forgotten corners, waiting for an opportunity. Rebuilding trust between communities takes generations, not months. But looking down at the resilient

city, feeling Eleanora's hand warm and steady in mine, the overwhelming feeling isn't fear, but hope. Quiet, resilient, hard-won hope.

Later, back in the spacious, comfortable apartment within the Obelisk tower that has somehow, improbably, become *our* home—filled now not with cold Blackthorn luxury, but with stacks of research scrolls beside comfortable armchairs piled with shared blankets, the aroma of the spicy stew Orion surprisingly excels at making lingering in the air, evidence of a life being built together, piece by piece—Orion finds me curled up on the sofa, sketching in my notebook. I'm trying to map the intricate energy flows described in an old Cortana text on purification harmonics, still searching for a permanent solution for the contained bone fragment.

He comes up behind me quietly, leaning down to look over my shoulder, his breath warm against my neck, sending a familiar shiver down my spine. His hand rests lightly, possessively, on my waist, a familiar, comforting gesture that no longer sparks irritation or defensiveness, only a pleasant, bone-deep warmth.

"More ancient secrets?" he asks softly, his voice a low rumble near my ear.

"Trying to understand the purification techniques Narlock mentioned," I reply, leaning back against his solid frame slightly. "Maybe find a permanent solution for the bone fragment, something beyond just containment wards."

He nods, pressing a soft kiss to my temple. "We'll figure it out. Together."

Together. The word resonates between us, simple and profound, holding the weight of everything we've survived, everything we're building. He turns me gently on the sofa cushion to face him, his azure eyes dark with emotion in the soft lamplight, reflecting the quiet contentment I feel settling within me. He cups my face, his touch gentle but firm, possessive in a way that now feels like belonging.

"You know," he murmurs, his gaze intense, searching mine, "a year ago, standing on that perch, facing Saralak's whispers, convinced we were enemies destined to destroy each other... the last thing I ever expected, ever *allowed* myself to imagine, was... this." His thumb brushes softly across my cheekbone.

"Me neither," I whisper back, my heart swelling with a love that feels vast and steady, a quiet harbor after a lifetime of storms. The feud, the history, the pain—it's part of our story, etched into our bones, but it doesn't define our ending. We chose differently. We chose *us*.

He smiles then, a genuine, unguarded smile that reaches his eyes, chasing away the last lingering shadows of the Blackthorn legacy, revealing the honorable man he has fought so hard to become. "I believe you were right, Eleanora Cortana," he says, his voice low and certain, filled with conviction. "About the strongest magic."

He leans down, and his lips meet mine. It's not the desperate, consuming passion born of chaos and fear, nor the angry claiming fueled by rivalry and misunderstanding. This is deeper, steadier—a kiss filled with shared history acknowledged and overcome, hard-won trust, quiet joy, and the unwavering promise

of countless shared mornings, peaceful evenings, and the enduring strength to face whatever comes next, anchored always by the resilient, undeniable magic of our love.

The whispers at the edge of my awareness seem to hum their approval, a harmonious chord finally struck, echoing the quiet peace settling over Arcadia, settling deep within my own unconquered heart as the city lights twinkle below, promising a new, brighter dawn. Our dawn. Together. Always.

The End