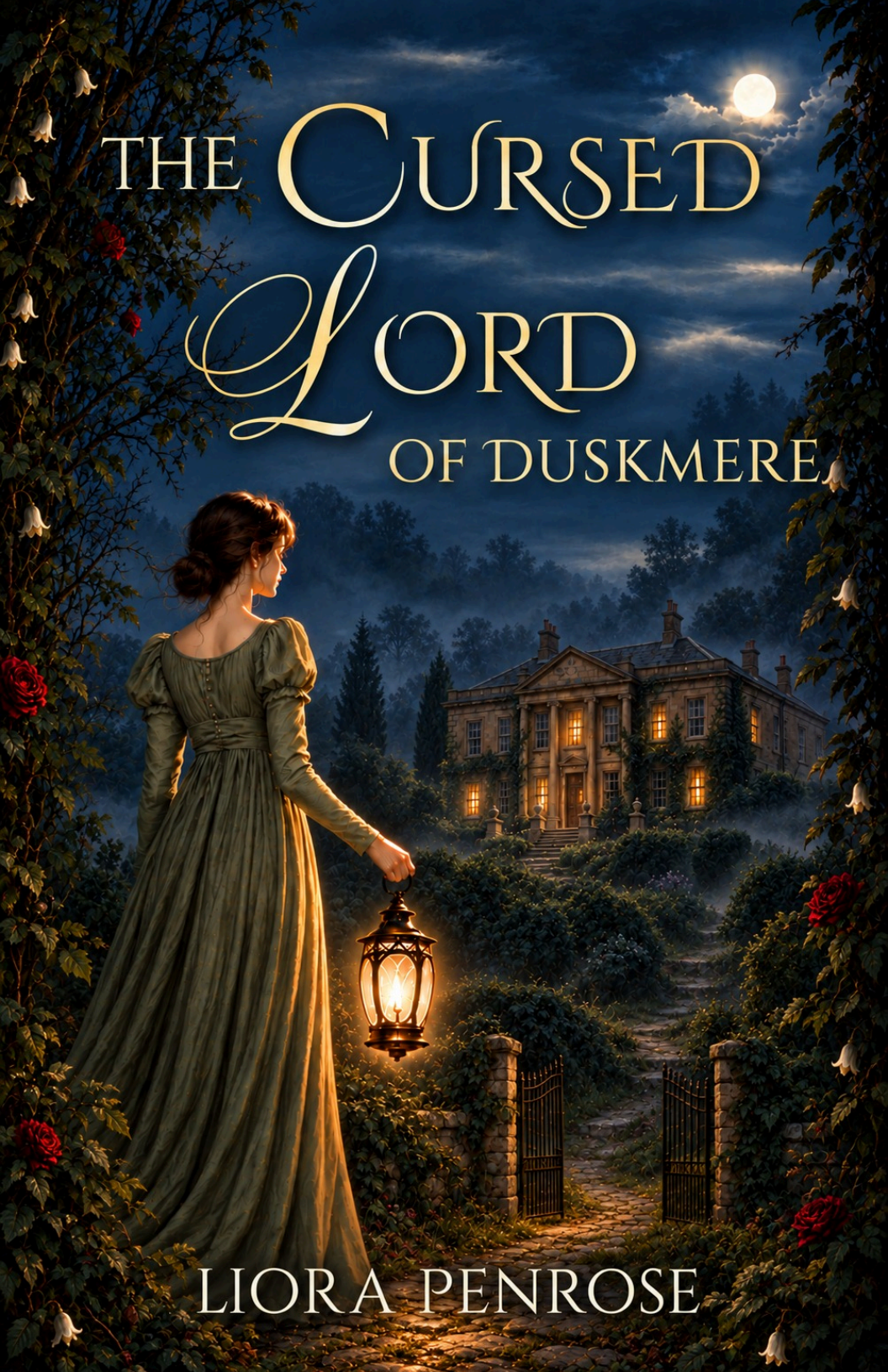




THE CURSED *LORD* OF DUSKMERE

LIORA PENROSE

The Cursed Lord of Duskmere

Liora Penrose

THE HELICAL ARCHIVES

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CHAPTER 1

Midnight Trespasser

The lock surrendered with a whisper that made me shiver. Though whether from triumph or the October wind cutting through my cloak, I couldn't say. I pressed my ear to the oak door, listening. Nothing but my own thundering pulse and the brush of autumn leaves against stone.

Madness, I told myself, easing the door open just wide enough to slip through. *Pure madness*, *Evangeline*.

But madness had served me well these past three years. Madness had driven me to climb treacherous cliffs for rare specimens while proper ladies embroidered. Madness had kept me awake at night, poring over botanical texts by candlelight. And madness had brought me here, to the abandoned library of Duskmere Manor at the stroke of midnight, armed with nothing but my father's journals, a candle, and the lockpicks that had taken me six weeks to master.

The library stretched before me like a cathedral built for knowledge. Moonlight streamed through tall windows, illuminating dust motes that danced like tiny spirits in the silver beams. The air tasted of old leather and secrets.

I pulled a candle from my satchel, struck flint to wick and nearly gasped at what the flame revealed. Books. Thousands upon thousands of them, climbing toward shadowed heights like ivy

scaling a wall. Many bore titles in languages I couldn't read. Their very presence held me where I stood.

I had imagined a library like this. My imagination had been insufficient. I would have given a great deal to see it by daylight.

And somewhere in this vast collection lay answers. Somewhere among these forgotten volumes was the key to breaking curses. If I was brave enough to steal it.

I set the candle on a reading table, dropped my satchel beside it and began examining the nearest shelf. I trailed my fingers along leather spines until one made me freeze. *A Treatise on Botanical Remedies for Supernatural Afflictions* by Dr. Reginald Hellebore.

"Impossible," I breathed, pulling the volume free with trembling hands. "This book was lost decades ago..."

A growl rumbled from the shadows, cutting off my words. Amber eyes flashed beyond my candle's reach, predatory and wild. "You shouldn't be here," a deep voice said.

I spun, clutching the book to my chest. He stepped into the light. Tall, lean, with the high cheekbones and dark coloring his grandmother had carried out of Constantinople. Aristocratic features etched with exhaustion. His white shirt hung open, revealing a strong neck. His eyes held mine and I let them.

"You're him," I said, surprising myself with how steady my voice sounded. "Adrian Blackwood, the Earl of Duskmere."

Something flickered across his features. Surprise, perhaps. Or resignation. "And you are either remarkably brave or remarkably foolish to be standing in my library at midnight, Miss...?"

"Hartwell. Evangeline Hartwell," I said, lifting my chin and refusing to let him see how his presence affected me. How the air seemed to thicken around him, heavy with danger and something wilder. "And I prefer 'determined' to either of your suggestions."

He laughed. It was not a kind sound. "Determined," he said, as if savoring the word. "How refreshing."

He moved closer. My body warned me of him before my mind had words for the warning. "Most people prefer 'terrified' when they encounter me these days," he said.

"Most people haven't spent years reading the books that ruined my father," I said, setting the book back on the shelf with perhaps more force than necessary. "Most people also don't pick locks at midnight."

"True," he replied. He watched me, unhurried. "Which raises the question of what brought you here, Miss Hartwell. What exactly do you hope to find in a madman's library?"

Madman. Was that how he saw himself? Or was he referring to how others saw him?

"Answers," I said simply. "Knowledge that the Royal Society would burn before acknowledging. Books that treat as science what most would dismiss as superstition."

"And you thought you'd simply... help yourself to my collection?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

Heat flooded my cheeks. "I tried the conventional approach first," I said. "I wrote requesting an appointment. Three times."

"I don't receive visitors," he said flatly.

"Yes, I gathered that from your silence," I said dryly, crossing my arms. I noted his gaze following the movement. "Just as I gathered from local gossip that you've been hiding in this crumbling pile of stones for seven years, emerging only to frighten away anyone foolish enough to venture near."

The transformation was instantaneous. One moment he stood relaxed, almost amused by my audacity. The next, his entire body went rigid, his expression hardening into something that made me step backward despite myself.

The candle flame guttered as if something had sucked the air from the room.

"You know nothing," he said. His voice dropped to a growl that seemed to resonate in my bones. "Nothing about what I've become

or why I remain hidden. You cannot help me, Miss Hartwell. No one can.”

But instead of fleeing, which any sensible person would have done, I found myself leaning forward and studying the harsh angles of his face in the wavering light. The way his pupils had dilated. The slight tremor in his clenched fists.

“Lycanthropy,” I said quietly.

He went still. “What?”

“Enhanced senses, unusual eye coloration, behavioral changes triggered by lunar cycles,” I said, tilting my head and noting how he’d stopped breathing. “The symptoms are quite classic, actually. Though I confess curiosity about the specifics. How complete is the transformation? Do you retain human consciousness? Are there partial changes during other phases?”

“You’re analyzing me,” he said. I couldn’t tell if he was horrified or impressed.

“Of course I am,” I said, pulling my notebook from my satchel and flipping it open with hands that barely trembled. “You’re the first lycanthrope I’ve encountered. This is remarkable. If I could document the progression of symptoms, cross-reference with lunar charts, perhaps develop a botanical intervention...”

His hand shot out, slamming my notebook closed with enough force to make me gasp. He leaned down until his face was inches from mine, until I could feel the heat radiating from his skin and see the inhuman gleam burning in his eyes.

“I am not your research subject,” he said, his voice deadly quiet. “I am not some fascinating puzzle to be solved. I am a monster who has spent seven years learning to control urges that would make you scream. And if you had any sense at all, you would run from this place and never speak of what you’ve seen.”

I stared up at him, closer than I should have let him get.

And I found myself noticing how his dark lashes cast shadows on his cheekbones. How his lips curved with what might have been pain.

“But I don’t have any sense,” I said softly. “Everyone says so. That’s why I climb impossible cliffs for specimens, why I break into abandoned estates, why I continue work that destroyed my father’s reputation.” I met his burning gaze steadily. “And that’s why I’m not running, Lord Duskmere. Because you need solving. And it might as well be me.”

For a heartbeat, we stood frozen in that circle of candlelight. The tension of predator and prey crackling in the air between us.

Something in his face opened for half a breath. Something more naked than agreement, something unguarded. Then he gathered it shut.

He stepped back abruptly, raking a hand through his already disheveled hair.

“You’re mad,” he muttered.

“Quite possibly,” I said, smoothing my skirts with hands that trembled only slightly. “But I’m also your best hope for breaking whatever curse binds you.”

He laughed, short and bitter. “You assume I want to be saved.”

“Don’t you?” I asked.

The question escaped before I could stop it.

Neither of us looked away.

Something shifted in him.

It was not the dramatic transformation I might have expected from the literature. No bones cracking, no howl torn from a human throat. It was subtler than that. And worse.

His eyes caught the candlelight. Gold flooded the amber all at once. For a breath he was looking at me with eyes that did not belong to the man I had been speaking to.

The air in the library thickened. I could not have said how. The candle flame bent toward him as if drawn. The shadows behind the shelving seemed to press closer to where we stood.

"You should stop talking," he said. His voice had dropped into a register that vibrated in my sternum.

"Is this it?" I breathed. "Is this the curse?"

His hands were at his sides. His fingers did not curl or change. But something held the rest of him very still, as if the effort of not moving was the only thing keeping the wrongness from going further.

Then he breathed out. The gold receded from his eyes like a tide pulling back. The air thinned. The candle flame straightened. He was himself again. Or what passed for himself after seven years of this.

"Yes," he said quietly. "That is the curse."

I filed the observation away. Gold eyes, not amber. A voice change that I had felt in my ribs. The air pressure shifting around him like weather. And the deliberate effort of pulling it back, as if he were hauling something heavy into a cage and latching the door shut. No anatomical change that I could see. No loss of consciousness, no loss of language.

He had control. That mattered more than any of the rest of it.

Lord Duskmere's gaze shifted past me, to something over my left shoulder. He went still in a way that had nothing to do with the curse.

I turned, but there was nothing behind me that warranted the expression. Potted ferns on a side table near the window. Bookshelves. Moonlight on the carpet.

"What?" I asked.

He did not answer immediately. His eyes stayed on the ferns, the table, or something I could not identify. When he did speak, his voice was careful in a way it had not been before.

"Nothing," he said.

It was not nothing. I knew what nothing looked like on a man's face and this was not it. But he offered no more than the word and I could not very well demand an explanation for a man staring at his own furniture.

Whatever he had seen or thought he had seen, it closed something in him. He crossed the room and put the desk between us. His gaze caught on my satchel where it sat open on the reading table. On my father's journal, its spine clearly marked with my family name.

He went very still for the second time in as many minutes. This stillness was different. Colder.

"Hartwell," he said again, slowly, as if hearing the name for the first time. "You mentioned your father's reputation... Was your father Thomas Hartwell? The botanist who published on botanical cures before the Royal Society discredited him?"

"Yes," I said, standing up straighter.

"Your father was a fraud." The contempt in his voice could have stripped paint. "Dangerous fiction dressed up as science, peddled to desperate people who should have known better."

"My father was brilliant," I said. My voice shook with the effort of not shouting. "His theories were decades ahead of anyone at the Royal Society. The fact that small minds could not comprehend his work does not make it false."

"You came here with his theories on your tongue, knowing exactly whose daughter you were," Lord Duskmere continued as if he hadn't heard me. "You let me believe, for one moment, that what you were saying might be true."

"It is true." I stepped toward him, not away. "I named your condition in under five minutes. And you are still standing here calling my father a fraud."

Something crossed his face that I could not read.

"It is past midnight," he said. "You need to leave."

"Because my father's name offends you?" I asked. "Or because I was right?"

"Because you are trespassing on private property," he said, "and I have indulged this conversation far longer than I should have."

The word *indulged* hit like a slap. As if I had been some amusement. As if the last half-hour had been entertainment he was now declining to continue.

"Then I will leave you to your curse, Lord Duskmere," I said. "You deserve each other."

His head came up.

"You have been hiding in this house for seven years and you have just been offered the first real help anyone has brought to your door, and you are too proud or too frightened to take it." I collected my satchel from the reading table and slung it over my shoulder. My hands were shaking. I did not care. "Enjoy your solitude, Lord Duskmere. I hope it keeps you very warm when the next full moon comes."

I did not wait for his answer. I walked out of the library, through the darkened corridors, and let myself out the front door.

The cold hit me like a hand across the face. Good. I needed it.

My mare was where I had left her, patient and unbothered by the disaster unfolding indoors. I mounted and pointed her toward the road. I did not look back at the house.

Six miles to Ashford House. Six miles of dark road, overhanging oaks, and the heat of my fury keeping me warm against the October wind.

He had called my father a fraud. He had looked me in the eye after I had diagnosed his deepest secret and insulted my family name. He had stood there with gold still fading from his eyes and dismissed everything I had shown him as dangerous fiction.

And the worst of it, the part that made my hands tighten on the reins until the leather bit into my palms, was that for one awful

moment the contempt in his voice had made me doubt myself. He had spoken the word *fraud* with such certainty that some treacherous part of me had wondered if he was right. If my father had been wrong all along. If I was chasing something that did not exist.

That was what I could not forgive. Not the insult. The doubt he had put in me.

The mare's hooves were steady on the road. The moon was high. I was alone and I was not afraid of the dark. I was afraid of very little, as a general rule. It was one of my less convenient qualities.

As Ashford House came into view and light blazed from Aunt Beatrice's study window, I decided that I was absolutely finished being dismissed.

Aunt Beatrice stood in the hallway before I made it three steps, wrapped in her burgundy dressing gown, her dark hair pinned severely back, her face in the lamplight showing the fine cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes she had carried out of her mother's line. Her expression could have frozen summer wine.

"Evangeline Rose Hartwell," she said. "My study. Now."

CHAPTER 2

The Reckoning

I followed her through the silent house, my heart sinking with each step. Aunt Beatrice's study was her private domain, all dark wood and leather-bound books, with a fire that never seemed to go out. She settled behind her massive desk like a judge preparing to deliver a sentence.

"Sit," she commanded. I sank into the chair across from her like a scolded child.

"How did you know I was gone?" I asked.

"I woke," she said simply. "I checked your room."

She did not explain what had woken her. Over the years, I had learned not to ask.

"Where," she said, "have you been?"

It was not a question that invited evasion. "Duskmere Manor," I said. "The library."

Aunt Beatrice closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, her expression had not improved. "Evangeline Rose Hartwell, what on earth were you thinking?"

"I can explain..." I said.

"Oh, I'm sure you can." She leaned forward, her dark eyes boring into mine. "Your reputation. Your future. Everything I have spent three years holding together for you. And you risked it for what? Your obsession with plants?"

"It's not an obsession," I said quietly. "It's my father's life work."

"Your father is dead," she said. The bluntness of it made me flinch. "His work died with him and continuing it will only drag you down with it. I am trying to keep you safe, Evangeline."

Safe. I knew what that word did to women whose work had been inconvenient. I had watched the notebooks close.

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I blinked them back. "You don't understand. Tonight, I found things. Books, evidence. Lord Duskmere's library contains texts that could vindicate everything my father believed."

Aunt Beatrice went very still. "What kind of texts?"

I hesitated. This was dangerous ground, even with her. "Botanical treatises. Supernatural remedies," I said. "Texts the Royal Society claimed were lost or fraudulent."

"And Lord Duskmere?" she asked. "What was his reaction to your research?"

"He called my father a fraud and told me to leave," I said. The words came out flat with the effort of keeping them civil.

"Mmm," she said, studying my face intently. "And yet you escaped unharmed from an encounter with a man the entire county believes is dangerously unstable."

There was something in her tone. A knowing quality that made me look at her more sharply. "You don't believe he's mad," I observed.

It wasn't a question. Aunt Beatrice didn't treat it as one. "I've known the Blackwood family for many years, child. Adrian was... different after his return from that trip abroad, yes. But mad?" She shook her head. "No. Something happened to him, something that changed him fundamentally. But it wasn't madness."

I sat forward. "Then you believe..."

"I believe," she interrupted, "that there are forces in this world that rational minds prefer to deny. And I believe that your father

may have been closer to understanding them than anyone realized." She leaned back in her chair, her expression thoughtful. "The question is, Evangeline, what do you intend to do about it?"

I waited. In the firelight, Aunt Beatrice looked less like my stern guardian and more like a conspirator.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Lord Duskmere made it quite clear that I'm not welcome at Duskmere."

"Mmm. And yet, here you are," she noted, her lips curving into what might have been a smile. "Perhaps he's not as resistant to your theories as he claims."

Before I could respond, she stood and said, "Go to bed, Evangeline. You look exhausted and we'll need our wits about us tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I asked.

"If you're determined to pursue this madness, then we'll do it properly," Aunt Beatrice declared. "No more midnight expeditions and clandestine break-ins. If Lord Duskmere has knowledge that could help your research, then we'll approach him through proper channels."

I stared at her. "You'll help me?"

"I'll help you not destroy yourself in the pursuit of answers," she corrected. "There's a difference." Her expression softened. "Your father, my brother, was a good man, Evangeline, if perhaps too idealistic for his own good. If there's a chance to vindicate his work without ruining your future, then... we'll explore it."

I nearly started crying. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," Aunt Beatrice warned. "If this goes wrong — if your reputation suffers any further damage — I'll pack you off to my cousin in Scotland so fast your head will spin. Is that understood?"

"Understood," I said.

“Good. Now go to bed. And Evangeline?” She fixed me with that penetrating stare again. “No more secrets. If we’re to do this, I need to know everything. Everything. Do I make myself clear?”

I hadn’t told her about the curse. How much could I tell her? That for one breath his eyes had changed, the air around him had shifted, and he had pulled it back by force of will alone? Even Aunt Beatrice’s open mind might have limits.

I nodded and said, “Good night, Aunt Beatrice.”

“Good night, child,” she replied softly. “Try not to dream of botanical mysteries.”

If only she knew how impossible that would be.

I climbed the stairs to my room slowly, exhaustion finally catching up with me. Molly was waiting. She had my nightgown laid out and warm water in the basin.

“Miss,” she said when I entered. “You look like you’ve been crawling through a hedgerow.”

“Close enough,” I said, sinking onto my bed. “I broke into Duskmere Manor.”

Her unsurprised reaction told me she knew me too well. She helped me out of my dirt-stained dress without comment.

“The village has been unsettled lately,” she said, as if the two subjects were connected. “Livestock found drained on the outlying farms, with wounds no one can account for. Three farms, maybe four. People are frightened.”

Drained. Strange wounds. I thought of Lord Duskmere’s amber eyes and the gold that had flooded them. Something cold settled in my stomach. I would think about that tomorrow.

I allowed Molly to brush out my hair, the steady pull of the bristles putting the night in order one tangle at a time.

“You’ll go back,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

She nodded once, as if she had expected this, and began plaiting my hair for sleep.

After Molly left, I sat alone in my room, staring into the dying fire. My skin still hummed with whatever had started in the library, a low persistent thrum like a plucked string that would not stop vibrating. I pressed my palms flat against my knees and willed it quiet.

It did not go quiet.

The lock, the library, the book. His voice in the dark. The diagnosis that had landed like a thrown stone and the silence that had followed it. His eyes going gold. The thing behind me he had stared at for no reason I could fathom. *Fraud*. The word still sat in me like a splinter.

Sleep came in fragments, when it came at all. I lay in the dark and replayed every word he had said until the words wore grooves in my mind. *Fraud. Dangerous fiction. You let me believe.* And beneath the anger, quieter but harder to ignore: *Don't you?* The question I had asked and he had not answered. The question neither of us had looked away from.

I would not want him. I pressed the thought down and sat on it.

Morning arrived gray and cold. I dressed without Molly's help and went down to breakfast with my hair pinned badly and my temper worse. Aunt Beatrice was already at the table, her tea untouched, her expression holding the calm that meant she had not finished with me.

Before she could resume, the butler appeared in the doorway. "A letter for you, ma'am," he said, presenting a tray. "Delivered by a young man from Duskmere Manor."

Aunt Beatrice took the letter. I watched her break the seal and read it, her face giving away nothing. When she looked up, her gaze found mine with an expression I could not immediately decipher.

"It seems Lord Duskmere would like to discuss a scholarly exchange," she said, her voice carefully neutral. She set the letter on the table between us.

I reached for it. The handwriting was precise and unhurried, the hand of a man who had taken some care over his words.

Mrs. Ashford,

Your niece visited my library last evening without invitation. I trust you will agree that this is best treated as a private matter.

If Miss Hartwell believes her father's theories on botanical remedies have merit, I am prepared to offer the use of my library to prove it.

One month, properly chaperoned, under conditions to be discussed at your earliest convenience.

Duskmere

I read it twice. The implicit threat in *private matter*. The cold formality of *if Miss Hartwell believes*, as though my belief were the thing in question and not his curse.

"Well," said Aunt Beatrice, watching me read. "It appears Lord Duskmere has provided the proper channels."

I set the letter down. My hands were steady, but something behind my ribs was not.

CHAPTER 3

Terms of War

I had hours to prepare for war.

By midmorning, my writing desk was covered with papers. Notes, counterarguments, along with terms and conditions written in my most precise script. I'd barely slept, but my mind was sharp with a fury that sleep would only have dulled. If Adrian Blackwood thought he could summon me with a cold letter to my aunt and a veiled threat about discretion, he was about to receive a very thorough education.

Somewhere between the third draft of my terms and the fourth, I realized my quill had stopped moving. I was staring at the words *equal partnership* and remembering the gold flooding his eyes, his voice dropping into something that was not quite human, and the effort it had cost him to pull it back. I dipped the nib again and kept writing. The terms on the page were what mattered.

"You look like you're preparing to storm a fortress," Aunt Beatrice observed, appearing in my doorway with a cup of tea.

"Something like that." I accepted the cup gratefully. "We should go today. Before he changes his mind."

"Agreed." She settled into the chair beside my desk, studying my scattered papers with interest. "Show me what you've planned."

By two, we were ready. I wore my finest day dress. Deep blue wool that brought out my eyes, with my hair pinned in an elegant chignon that took Molly twenty minutes to perfect. Aunt Beatrice looked every inch the distinguished widow in burgundy silk, her black and silver hair arranged beneath a fashionable bonnet.

"Aunt Beatrice," I said finally as our carriage rolled through the Yorkshire countryside, "there are things about last night I didn't tell you." I'd decided I'd better tell her.

Aunt Beatrice's eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

I took a steadying breath. "Lord Duskmere isn't mad. He's cursed."

She went still. "Cursed how?"

"Lycanthropy. He transforms during the full moon." The words felt strange saying them aloud in daylight, but Aunt Beatrice didn't look shocked. More like she was finally having suspicions confirmed.

"He let me see it," I continued. "The curse surfacing. For a moment he was not entirely himself and then he pulled it back and I watched him do it." My chest was tight with the memory. "And then he realized who my father was, called his work fraud, and threw me out."

"Hmm." Aunt Beatrice leaned back against the cushions. "A cursed man who's spent seven years hiding from the world, suddenly faced with a young woman who not only believes in the supernatural but names it to his face." Her lips curved slightly. "I suspect there's more to his letter than simple scholarly generosity, my dear."

Before I could ask what she meant by that, our carriage turned up the drive to Duskmere Manor.

"Remember," she murmured. "You are a Hartwell. Your father may have faced disgrace, but he was still one of the finest minds of his generation. You carry that legacy."

"And if I fail?" I asked.

“You won’t.” Her confidence was absolute. “But if you do, we’ll face the consequences together.”

Duskmere Manor looked different in daylight. Less of a ruin and more a magnificent estate fallen into disrepair. Ivy crawled up the stone walls and several windows on the upper floors were boarded shut, but the bones of the building spoke of former grandeur. In daylight, without the lock to pick and the dark pressing in, it looked less like a place I had broken into and more like a place that was waiting for someone to come back.

A young man I didn’t recognize answered our knock, his face lighting up with surprise and what might have been relief. “Mrs. Ashford! It’s been so long since I’ve seen you. You look very well, madam,” the man remarked. He turned to look at me. “And you must be Miss Hartwell.”

“Hello, Tobias,” Aunt Beatrice said warmly. “It’s good to see that Lord Duskmere still has such a loyal person serving him.”

“He’s a good man,” Tobias said fiercely. “No matter what anyone else says.” He looked a bit uncomfortable. “Lord Duskmere doesn’t see guests anymore...”

“We’re expected,” Aunt Beatrice said smoothly, sweeping past him into the entrance hall.

I followed her.

Tobias hesitated. Whatever he weighed, he weighed it quickly and stepped aside.

“This way, if you please,” Tobias said, leading us down a corridor I remembered from the previous night. We were going back to the library.

The library doors stood open, revealing Lord Duskmere seated behind a massive mahogany desk, quill in hand as he wrote in what appeared to be a leather-bound ledger. He looked up as we entered. Something tightened in my chest when our eyes met.

He rose slowly, his expression neutral. "Mrs. Ashford. Miss Hartwell." A pause, then, "I confess I wasn't certain you would come."

"Were you not?" Aunt Beatrice's tone was mildly curious. "How strange. I was under the impression this meeting was at your invitation."

Lord Duskmere's expression tightened.

"Of course," he said smoothly. "Please, be seated."

I remained standing, pulling a folded paper from my reticule. "Before we discuss anything else, Lord Duskmere, I believe we should clarify the nature of this... scholarly exchange."

Lord Duskmere's gaze sharpened on the document in my hands. "Oh?"

"You see, your note this morning contained several assumptions I feel compelled to correct." I unfolded the paper, consulting my carefully prepared notes. "First, that I am seeking your permission or charity. Second, that you hold all the advantages in any potential arrangement. Third, that you can dictate terms without hearing counterproposals."

Aunt Beatrice settled into a chair and folded her hands.

"All incorrect," I continued, meeting Lord Duskmere's increasingly intense stare. "So allow me to present the actual situation, as I see it."

"By all means," he said, his voice dangerously quiet.

"You, Lord Duskmere, are a man suffering from an affliction that grows stronger each day. You've spent seven years searching for a cure among these books," I said, gesturing at the towering shelves, "and found nothing. Meanwhile, I am a researcher whose family specialized in precisely the kind of botanical remedies you need."

"Your father's theories were—"

"Revolutionary," I interrupted. "And dismissed by small minds who couldn't conceive of certain forces working through natural

law. And you've seen evidence of what I can do, haven't you?" I held his gaze. "I diagnosed your condition from across a room. I cited texts I presume your own physicians have never read. Whatever you think of my father's name, you cannot deny what I know."

Lord Duskmere's jaw tightened, but he did not deny it.

"You assume," Lord Duskmere said, stepping around the desk to face me directly, "that I want your help."

"I assume you want to remain human." My voice was steady despite his proximity, despite his gaze burning into mine. "Am I wrong?"

He had come close enough that I could see the exhaustion under his eyes, the kind that did not come from a single bad night. For half a breath I let myself wonder what had put it there. Then I remembered what he had called my father, and I let the wondering go cold.

We stared at each other. Aunt Beatrice's attention rested sharply on us both. A clock ticked somewhere in the vast room. The weight of thousands of books surrounded us like silent witnesses.

"What are your terms?" Lord Duskmere asked finally.

I consulted my notes again, though I'd memorized every word. "Equal partnership in research. Full access to your library and any contacts you possess among those who know of such things. Complete transparency regarding your curse and its progression. And mutual respect. No more dismissing my father's work as fraud, no more threats about my reputation."

"In exchange for?" he asked.

"My expertise, my research, and my full effort to break your curse before the month is out." I folded the paper with a sharp snap. "One month, as you suggested. But if I succeed, you will publicly acknowledge my father's theories and provide a letter of recommendation to the Royal Society."

Lord Duskmere made a sound that was not quite a laugh. "You want me to stake my reputation on your botanical fantasies?"

"Your reputation?" I stepped closer. "You've been hiding here for seven years while people whisper that you're mad. What reputation?"

The insult hit home. Lord Duskmere's eyes blazed. For a moment, I saw a flash of what I had seen the night before: gold at the edges of his eyes and something predatory surfacing behind his face.

"Careful, Miss Hartwell," he said, his voice dropping to that familiar growl. "You're walking on dangerous ground."

"I've been walking on dangerous ground since the moment I met you," I shot back. "The question is whether you're brave enough to walk it with me."

Aunt Beatrice cleared her throat delicately. "Perhaps we might discuss the practical arrangements? Chaperonage, suitable hours, proper procedures?"

But neither Lord Duskmere nor I looked away from each other. The air between us seemed to crackle with tension.

"You're not what I expected," Lord Duskmere said quietly.

For less than a heartbeat, his face softened toward me. I caught it before it disappeared. Then the shutters came down.

"Neither are you." I lifted my chin. "Do we have an arrangement, Lord Duskmere?"

He studied my face for what felt like an eternity. Then, abruptly, he moved to his desk and pulled out a sheet of paper.

"Very well, Miss Hartwell. Equal partnership." He began writing in swift, sure strokes. "But I have conditions of my own."

"Such as?" I prompted.

"First," Lord Duskmere said, "you will follow my lead regarding safety. I know what I'm capable of, especially during certain lunar phases. If I tell you to leave, you leave. Immediately."

I nodded grudgingly.

"Second, complete discretion," he continued. "Whatever you discover about my condition, my family, or my circumstances remains between us."

I could respect that. "Agreed," I said.

"Third." He looked up from his writing, his gaze holding mine. "You will be honest with me about what happened last night."

"I beg your pardon?" I felt Aunt Beatrice's piercing gaze rest on me.

"The ferns," Lord Duskmere said. "On the side table near the window. When you were near them, they moved. A frond uncurled toward you. The leaves lifted as if reaching for something." He set down his quill and moved around the desk until he was close enough that I could smell sandalwood and something wilder. "You did not notice. I did."

I stared at him. "They're plants," I said. "Plants move toward light. Toward warmth. It's what they do."

"Not like that," he said quietly.

I did not know what to say to that. I had been standing in a library in the middle of the night, focused on the man in front of me and the books around me. I had not been watching the ferns. The idea that they had been watching me was absurd.

"If we are to be partners," Lord Duskmere said, "I need to know exactly what I am dealing with, Miss Hartwell. All of it."

"Then we are alike in that," I said. "Because I have no idea what you are describing."

He read my face and seemed to see the truth of my words. He nodded curtly and returned to the desk.

He finished writing and then held out the paper. "One month, Miss Hartwell. Equal partnership, shared risks, and complete honesty between us."

I took the document, our fingers brushing as I did. The contact sent warmth shooting up my arm and I saw his pupils dilate.

"One month," I agreed, my voice steadier than I felt.

Aunt Beatrice rose from her chair. "Excellent. Now, to the practical arrangements themselves. I assume you'll want Evangeline to begin immediately?" I could see from her expression that there was something else she wasn't saying.

"Tomorrow morning," Lord Duskmere said, still holding my gaze. "Ten o'clock."

"Perfect." Aunt Beatrice moved toward the door, then paused. "Oh, and Lord Duskmere? A word of advice."

"Yes?" Lord Duskmere said.

She smiled, and there was something almost predatory in it. "My niece may be reckless, but she's also brilliant. Underestimate her at your own peril."

After she left, Lord Duskmere and I stood alone in the vast library with the signed agreement on the desk between us.

"Tomorrow, then," he said.

"Tomorrow." I turned to follow Aunt Beatrice, then paused at the doorway. "And Lord Duskmere?"

"Yes?" he said.

I smiled at him and it was not a polite smile. "You're not the only one with something to prove."

As I walked away, I could feel him watching.

CHAPTER 4

The Family Gift

The silence in the carriage was different from the one I had expected.

Aunt Beatrice sat perfectly still in the seat across from me, her hands folded in her lap. I had braced for her displeasure. For another lecture about propriety, about recklessness, about the damage already done. What I had not braced for was the expression she wore now, which was not anger at all. It was something older and heavier. It frightened me more than any lecture could have.

She did not speak for the first mile. I watched the countryside roll past the window and tried to figure out what was wrong. We had signed the agreement. Lord Duskmere had accepted my terms. The negotiation had gone as well as I could have hoped. And yet Aunt Beatrice looked as though someone had told her very bad news.

“What Lord Duskmere said,” she began, and stopped. She pressed her lips together, as if the words were costing her something. “About the ferns.”

“I don’t know what he was talking about,” I said quickly. “I didn’t see anything happen.”

“No,” Aunt Beatrice said quietly. “You wouldn’t have. You never do.”

Something in her tone made me go very still.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Aunt Beatrice looked at me for a long moment. I had seen my aunt face down hostile solicitors, overbearing clergymen, and an entire dinner party that had spoken ill of my father in her hearing. I had never seen her look afraid. She looked afraid now.

"The roses at Ashford House," she said. "Have you ever wondered why they bloom three weeks longer than any rose garden in the county?"

"Good soil," I said. "Southern exposure."

Aunt Beatrice continued. "The herbs in your room. The way they perk up when you are happy and droop when you are upset. The climbing vines that lean toward you when you walk past, as if they are reaching for your hand."

"That's not—" I stopped, because I did not know how to finish the sentence. I had noticed these things. I had explained them away, the same way one explains a draft in an old house or a clock that runs fast. They were the small strangeness of daily life, nothing more.

"I have been watching for this for a long time," Aunt Beatrice said. "Praying it would not come. Explaining away every sign I saw, because the alternative was a conversation I did not want to have." She drew a breath that was not quite steady. "But Lord Duskmere is a man who lives with a curse. He knows what the supernatural looks like. And he saw it in you, in his own library, and named it in front of both of us. I cannot explain that away."

"Explain *what* away?" I asked, and my voice came out smaller than I wanted it to.

Aunt Beatrice met my eyes. "The gift, Evangeline. The botanical sensitivity that runs in your mother's blood. The Thornfield line."

The name landed differently said that way. I had been signing papers with it for three years — E.H. Thornfield, my mother's

maiden name borrowed for work I could not put my own name to — and I had thought of it as nothing more than that. I had not heard it spoken as a bloodline before.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Your mother had it too.” The words fell between us like stones into still water. “And something quieter ran in my own mother’s line. My mother — your father’s mother, also — came out of Canton as a girl, with the family that had brought her over. She carried a knowing that arrived before the evidence did. I have a thread of it. You may have a thread of it as well, though it has not yet shown itself in you the way the green has.”

She let the silence sit. Then, “But your mother. The Thornfield gift. That beautiful, dangerous connection to the living green. She could make flowers bloom out of season. She could—”

“Mother could what?” My world tilted. “But she died of consumption.”

“Your mother died of a different kind of consumption,” Aunt Beatrice said. “She died because no one taught her what to do with what she had.”

The carriage rattled over a rut. Neither of us reached for the strap.

“Your father spent his life trying to understand it,” she continued. “Every paper, every expedition, every theory the Royal Society called fraud. He was not chasing academic recognition. They were love letters. A father desperately trying to understand his wife’s gift so he could protect his daughter from the same fate.”

I thought of all the nights I’d found my father working by candlelight, all the expeditions that had cost us our fortune, all the mockery he’d endured from his peers.

“How many others?” I asked. “How many in our family have died from this gift?”

Aunt Beatrice’s silence was answer enough.

"The power grows stronger with each use," she said finally. "Without proper training, without understanding the costs and limits, it burns through the wielder like fire through dry kindling. Your mother lasted six years after it manifested. Others... haven't been so fortunate."

"How long do I have?" I asked.

"That depends." Aunt Beatrice met my eyes steadily. "On how quickly you learn control. And how willing you are to trust the one person who might be able to teach you."

"Lord Duskmere," I said, understanding her implication at once.

"He's lived with a curse for seven years, Evangeline. He understands the balance between power and restraint, the discipline required to keep darkness at bay. I've been watching him from a distance all this time. I didn't know the nature of the curse until today. But I have watched him hold the line for seven years without knowing what line it was. I will tell you plainly: whatever he has done to keep that darkness in its cage is a discipline few men possess." Her expression grew fierce. "This is why I'm supporting your work with him. To keep you alive."

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of Ashford House, but neither of us moved to get out. The weight of everything she'd revealed pressed down on me.

Aunt Beatrice stepped down from the carriage and offered me her arm. I accepted her support. My legs felt unsteady as we approached the front door. The climbing roses rustled softly as we passed. I could have sworn I heard something that sounded almost like whispered encouragement.

As we crossed the threshold, I imagined my mother in a garden, surrounded by impossible winter roses, and understood for the first time that it had been a warning, not beauty.

Tomorrow, I would have to face Lord Duskmere and admit that I'd been lying to him from the moment we met. I would have to

trust him with what Aunt Beatrice had just told me, even though I barely understood it myself.

Some private, stupid part of me still wanted that to be a simple question. Trust him. But he had called my father a fraud to my face. In the same night, he had let me see the curse surface. I did not know how to weigh the one against the other. I only knew I would have to.

“Evangeline,” Aunt Beatrice said once we were inside. “Your father would be proud of you. Because you’re brave enough to face the truth of what you are.”

I squeezed her hand. “Thank you. For telling me. For helping me.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said, echoing her words from the night before. “We still have a very long month ahead of us.”

As I climbed the stairs to my room, I thought about the signed agreement in my reticule, about the man who would be expecting me at ten o’clock tomorrow morning, about the hum under my skin that had not gone quiet since the library.

One month. I could not think further than that.

Whether it would be enough was a question I did not yet know how to answer.

Sleep eluded me again that night. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Aunt Beatrice’s face as she’d spoken of my mother’s death, heard her words about the women in our bloodline who’d been consumed by their own power.

Finally, I gave up on rest and lit a candle, padding quietly to the *escritoire* where Aunt Beatrice had set a slim leather journal. My mother’s journal she’d kept hidden all these years.

“I wasn’t ready to share this before,” she’d said as she handed it to me earlier. “But now that you know, you need to understand what happened to her.”

The journal felt warm beneath my fingertips and I could have sworn the leather binding pulsed like a heartbeat.

I opened to a random page and found my mother's delicate script, dated just months before her death:

The roses in the garden have been whispering to me again. Thomas thinks I'm becoming fanciful, but I know they're trying to warn me about something. The bloodroot in the east corner has turned black and the memory moss shows me visions I don't understand. Shadows moving through our house, reaching for something precious.

My breath caught. She'd had the same abilities, the same connection to the living green. But there was a frantic quality to her handwriting that made my chest tight with unease.

I flipped forward several pages:

The power grows stronger each day. Yesterday, I accidentally commanded an entire rose garden to bloom in the dead of winter. Thomas found me collapsed in the snow, surrounded by impossible flowers. He's started looking at me with such worry, such fear. For me. He knows something is wrong.

I can feel it burning through me like fever. Every time I use the gift, it takes something from me. Sleep, strength, pieces of myself I can't get back. The plants love me too much. They give me their energy freely, but I don't know how to stop taking it.

Tears blurred my vision as I read on.

The candle flame flickered. On the windowsill, the potted herbs I had kept since summer were doing something I had never paid attention to before. Their leaves were lifted, angled toward me, the way a cat turns its face toward a hand. They had always done this. I had always assumed it was the light.

It was not the light.

My mother's journal lay before me, filled with warnings I was only beginning to understand. She'd loved her gift and been destroyed by it. The question was whether I could learn from her mistakes in time to save myself.

And perhaps, in saving myself, save Lord Duskmere too.

I turned to the last pages. The handwriting had changed. Here the letters slanted and the ink had been pressed hard enough to score the paper:

Went to Thornfield again today. I don't know why I keep going back. The ground makes everything louder there. Thomas says I should stop but I can't stop when the bleeding hearts along the south wall won't stop giving me things. They pour and pour. I think that is the trouble, that they will always try to give more than they should and I will always take it because I don't know how not to. I pulled a whole bed of them and my hands shook for an hour afterward and still the roots reached for me through the broken soil.

I do not think I will write in this book again.

The remaining pages were blank.

CHAPTER 5

Dangerous Truths

I arrived at Duskmere Manor at precisely ten o'clock, flanked by Aunt Beatrice and Molly. Molly carried her needlework basket in both hands and studied the manor's front steps with careful attention.

Tobias answered the door. His eyes went to Molly before they went anywhere else and he covered the lapse by addressing Aunt Beatrice with a formality that fooled no one.

"His lordship is waiting in the library," he said. We followed him down the hall.

Someone had prepared the library for working. For actual use. A writing slope I had not seen in my previous visits had been set at the near end of the main reading table with a fresh blotter and a full inkstand. The lower shelves nearest the table had been cleared of their small bronze objects. The books left in their place were the kind a person might want to pull down.

Tobias's work, I supposed. Or rather, Tobias's reading of what his lord wanted.

Lord Duskmere stood near the desk where he had arranged a small stack of books. He looked up as we entered.

"Mrs. Ashford. Miss Hartwell." Lord Duskmere inclined his head with perfect courtesy. His gaze moved to Molly. "And you've brought company."

"This is Molly," I said. "She knows everything."

"How efficient," he said. "Please, be seated. We have considerable ground to cover."

I set my satchel down and did not sit.

"I've compiled the most relevant texts on transformation cycles and lunar-phase curse theory," he said, indicating the volumes he had arranged on the desk. My eyes scanned the titles. "Given the terms of our agreement, I thought a systematic approach would serve us better than—"

"I've read Carrington," I said. "And the secondary literature that misquotes him." I pulled my notebook from the satchel. "I'm not here for an introduction to curse theory, Lord Duskmere. I am here for the texts the Royal Society would have burned if they'd known you had them."

He looked at me for a long moment. Whatever he decided, he decided it without comment.

"The restricted shelves are in the east alcove," he said. "I'll show you what I have."

He led me to the far wall of the library, past the reading table and the fire, to a set of glass-fronted cases I had not reached the night I broke in. The books inside were older than anything on the open shelves. Some had no titles on their spines.

"These are the texts on supernatural afflictions that were removed from institutional collections over the past century," he said. "Confiscated, discredited, or simply lost. I've spent the past years assembling what I could find in addition to what my family held onto already."

He unlocked the case with a small key from his waistcoat. His hands were careful with the glass. Whatever else I thought of him, he handled old books the way they deserved to be handled. I could not pretend that did not matter to me.

"Your father cited several of these in his earlier papers," he added. His tone was patient. Instructional.

He was honoring our agreement. He was not calling it fraud. He did not need to. I could hear the opinion in every careful, courteous syllable, and I had been hearing it since the night we met.

I took the first volume from the shelf and carried it to the reading table without thanking him.

Aunt Beatrice had settled into a chair by the window with a small sheaf of correspondence she had brought from home. Molly sat beside her with the needlework basket open across her knees and a piece of mending already in her lap. The room arranged itself around us: the scratch of my pen, the whisper of turned pages, the steady pull of Molly's needle through cloth.

Lord Duskmere read quickly and marked his places with small slips of paper. I caught myself watching his hands move over the pages, careful and unhurried, and made myself look back at my own text. Whatever else he was, he was the man who had called my father's work dangerous fiction. I had a long memory and intended to use all of it.

He pushed a volume toward me when he found something he thought relevant. He was not wrong about any of it, which made the morning considerably more irritating than I had been prepared for.

He did not remark on the quality of my notes. But sometime before noon he began explaining a passage on transformation-phase duration and he explained it as though I might not have encountered the concept.

"I know what a phase duration is," I said.

"Then you'll know this text contradicts your father's published timeline by nearly a full cycle," he said.

"By nearly a full lunar cycle, yes. My father corrected that error in his unpublished notes three years before this text was cataloged." I met his eyes across the desk. "The notes you would

have had access to, had the Royal Society not destroyed his credibility before he could submit the revision.”

He was quiet for a moment. Aunt Beatrice turned a page of her correspondence. Molly’s needle drew through the cloth with a sound like a small, patient breath.

Lord Duskmere returned to his reading. I returned to mine.

I had not planned to say it now. I had planned to wait until the research gave me a reason, until I could present it as data, botanist to scholar. But his careful courtesy had been sitting in my chest all morning and I found I preferred the truth to pretending to be patient.

“There is something I need to tell you,” I said. “Your third condition. You asked me to be honest about what I am.”

Lord Duskmere set down his pen. Aunt Beatrice’s correspondence went still in her hands. Molly’s wide eyes fixed on my face.

“What you described during the negotiation,” I said. “The ferns that moved toward me in the library. You were right. It was not coincidence.” I met his gaze. “There is a gift that runs in my mother’s bloodline. The Thornfield line. A botanical sensitivity. A connection to the living green that goes beyond anything in my father’s published work. My mother had it.” I drew a breath that did not come easily. “It killed her.”

Lord Duskmere’s face went pale.

“The power grows stronger with each use,” I continued, because stopping would have been a different kind of lie. “Without proper training, without understanding the limits, it consumes the wielder. My mother lasted six years once it had fully woken. Others in the bloodline had less.”

“I knew what I saw,” he said quietly.

“I didn’t,” I said. “Not then. I didn’t understand what you were describing. I do now. The way plants around me behave...” The steadiness went out of my voice and I could not get it back. “I thought it was normal. I thought everyone’s gardens did that.”

Molly drew a sharp breath. The clock ticked somewhere in the room.

"You're dying," Lord Duskmere said.

"We're both dying." I lifted my chin. "The difference is that my death might serve a purpose. If I can prove my father's work, if I can find the mechanism—"

"Don't." The word came out like something that had been hit. He recovered fast. "Don't turn this into a noble sacrifice. I won't have your death on my conscience."

The line moved through me. I hated how much of me answered to it. I could not afford to let it land.

"You will not stop me," I said. "I am going to finish my father's work in this library because your collection is the only one in England that can help me. I am going to do it whether you accept his name or not." I watched his hand begin to lift and then stop. "That is the extent of what we are to one another. Do not mistake it for anything else."

The clock on the mantel ticked twice before either of us moved.

I picked up my notebook and opened it to a clean page. He picked up the text he had set down and opened it to his marked place. Neither of us spoke.

For a long time, there was no sound in the library except work.

When he pushed a volume toward me, it was open to a chapter on botanical response patterns in the cursed body.

I looked at the spine. The Hellebore treatise. *A Treatise on Botanical Remedies for Supernatural Afflictions*.

I had held this book to my chest the night I broke in. It had been lost for decades, the last known copy confiscated when the Royal Society purged its collection of texts it deemed unscientific. I had called it impossible. I had been clutching it when his voice came out of the dark.

Now I sat at his reading table and opened it properly. The Hellebore was better than I had dared to hope. Dr. Hellebore had

documented twelve cases of lycanthropic affliction over a forty-year practice and had done what no one else thought to do: he had recorded the botanical environment around each subject. How plants in sustained proximity to the cursed body responded over time. How certain species drew toward the afflicted and others retreated. How the transformation cycle appeared to affect the living systems nearest the subject, not as incidental detail but as mechanism.

I read the passage twice. I read it a third time.

"This section," I said. "The responsiveness pattern he documents around the twelfth-night transformation."

Lord Duskmere looked up.

"He's describing a botanical network forming around the cursed subject," I said. "Not just individual plant responses. A system. The species aren't reacting independently. They're organizing." I turned the book so he could see the passage I meant. "My father theorized exactly this mechanism in his final monograph. He didn't have case data because no one would give him access to a living subject. Hellebore had twelve."

He read the passage. I watched him come to what looked like the conclusion I had already reached. I did not hurry him.

"Hellebore is speculating," he said. "He has observations, not a mechanism."

"He has a pattern. The mechanism is what I'm trained to find." I pointed to the notation at the bottom of the page. "Look at the intervals. The plant responses intensify thirty-six hours before the visible transformation, not during it. They're anticipating the change. Which means the cursed body is broadcasting through the root system before any symptoms appear."

He was quiet. He read the notation again. Molly's needle had paused and then started again.

"Your ferns," I said. "The ones in this library. Do they behave differently before the full moon?"

Something shifted behind his eyes. He did not answer immediately.

"I wouldn't have known what to look for," he said finally.

"No," I said. "You wouldn't have."

I wrote the Hellebore reference into my notebook and underlined it twice. He returned to his own text. The silence that settled between us was not warm. But we had a question between us now that neither of us could answer alone and that was enough to keep us at the same table.

The afternoon wore on. The light crossed the floorboards and climbed the far wall. At some point Tobias brought tea. When Aunt Beatrice gathered her correspondence, the light had gone amber through the west-facing windows and the fire had burned to coals.

I closed my notebook. I had twelve pages of new notes. Six of them were from the Hellebore. I was going to be thinking about the twelfth-night pattern whether I wanted to or not.

"Same time tomorrow?" Lord Duskmere asked. His voice was neutral.

"Same time tomorrow," I said.

I gathered my things. Molly gathered hers. Aunt Beatrice was already at the door with her correspondence tucked under one arm.

The corridor outside the library was cold after the warm room. I walked through it without looking back. I had work to do in this house and a man to tolerate while I did it.

That was enough to be going on with.

CHAPTER 6

Marked for the Hunt

We had been at it for several days. The mornings had settled into a rhythm I had not invited and could not quite resent: the carriage to Duskmere, the library already warm, the Hellebore and half a dozen other texts open to where I had left them the evening before. Aunt Beatrice brought her correspondence. Molly brought her mending.

The work had a shape by now. He pulled the history of his own cycles from memory and I set it against the Hellebore's twelve cases, hunting for the species that answered first. Moonbell before the others. Bloodroot a day behind it. I had a list of plants that woke before each full moon and no name yet for what they were waking to.

He was still useful. He was still unforgivable.

Lord Duskmere and I had filled pages of notes between us without settling the question the twelfth-night pattern had raised. I was beginning to suspect it would take observation of an actual transformation to answer it properly. Neither of us had raised that implication aloud.

The full moon that would close our month was the Hunter's Moon, the last before the year turned. He had not said so. He had not needed to. The curse kept its own calendar, and the month he had given me ran out the night it came due.

Tobias burst through the library doors at midmorning without knocking, his face white with terror.

"My lord!" he gasped. "You need to come. Now. Something's appeared on the grounds. Something wrong."

Lord Duskmere's demeanor shifted, the predator awakening. "What kind of something?"

Tobias swallowed. "Symbols, my lord. Burned into the grass. And they're... they're moving."

My blood turned to ice. Aunt Beatrice rose from her chair, her face pale.

"Moving how?" I asked.

Tobias said, "Spreading, miss. Like they're alive. Like they're hunting."

Lord Duskmere and I looked at each other. Whatever was in the look, neither of us spoke of it.

"Show us," Aunt Beatrice commanded. "We need to see what we're dealing with. All of us."

For a moment, Lord Duskmere stared at her as if seeing her clearly for the first time. Then he nodded curtly.

"Together, then," he said, and led us outside.

The crisp morning air hit me sharply as we hurried across Duskmere's grounds, following Tobias toward the east lawn. Every plant on the estate was in distress. The intensity of it caught me off guard.

Tobias kept glancing back as if something might be pursuing us. "There," he called out, pointing with a shaking hand. "Just appeared out of nowhere. One moment the grass was normal, the next..."

The words died in my throat.

Burned into the earth were symbols that made my eyes water to look at directly. Dark lines twisted in patterns that seemed to shift when I wasn't looking straight at them. The grass around

them was already withering to black. But worse than the symbols themselves was how the estate's living flora was reacting to them.

Every plant within fifty feet of the markings had either died completely or was actively retreating, pulling its roots deeper, closing its leaves, trying to escape whatever malevolent energy the symbols carried. The bloodroot roses on the manor's eastern wall were weeping actual tears of crimson sap.

The connection hit me low in the chest, a pressure like standing too close to a fire that was not hot but wrong. Every nerve the plants had woken in me had gone taut at once.

"Dear God," Aunt Beatrice breathed.

The estate's botanical collection was cowering before whatever force had created these marks. The marks pressed against my senses with the weight of something old and hungry.

Lord Duskmere stepped forward, his entire body tense. "How long ago did you see these appear, Tobias?"

"Not ten minutes past, my lord. I was checking the morning deliveries when the ground just... erupted with them," Tobias said frantically. "Like someone had pressed a burning brand into the earth, but there was no one there."

"And they're spreading," Molly said, pointing at the edges where new lines were slowly etching themselves outward.

She was right. Even as we watched, the symbols crept steadily toward the manor house, leaving dead grass in their wake. I could feel the lack of energy as if I had been drained myself.

"Everyone stay back," Lord Duskmere commanded, but I was already stepping closer, drawn by something I couldn't name.

The surviving plants at the circle's edge seemed to sense my approach and reacted with desperate urgency. Thornvines reached out to snag my skirts, trying to hold me back. The moss beneath my feet pulsed with frantic warnings. I could hear what sounded almost like whispered pleas from the retreating flora: *Don't go closer. Turn back. Danger.*

But something stronger than their fear was pulling me forward. I couldn't describe it if I tried. I kept moving regardless.

The moment my foot crossed some invisible boundary, the symbols flared brighter.

"Miss Hartwell!" Lord Duskmere's hand shot out, catching my wrist and pulling me back. "Don't."

I twisted against the grip before I thought about it. He did not let go. The symbols' advance slowed the moment he touched me. That the thing holding them at bay was him, specifically him, was a fact I was going to have to deal with later and did not want to deal with now.

"They're reacting to her," Aunt Beatrice said, her voice tight with something that might have been fear.

"What does that mean?" Molly asked.

I studied the writhing marks, my mind racing. "I don't know."

Lord Duskmere's grip on my wrist tightened. "Tobias, has anything else unusual happened this morning? Strangers on the grounds, odd sounds, anything?"

"No one, my lord. Besides the Bracken farm sending word at dawn," Tobias said. "Three ewes dead in the fold. No wounds they could find but drained all the same. Dry as parchment."

"This is no natural phenomenon," Aunt Beatrice said quietly. There was something in her tone that made me look at her sharply. Her face had gone pale, but her eyes held something she wasn't sharing.

"Aunt Beatrice?" I prompted.

"We need to get back to the house," she said instead of answering. "Now."

But even as she spoke, the symbols pulsed with renewed energy. I felt something vast and cold turn its attention toward us. The air above the marks began to shimmer like heat waves, though the October morning was anything but warm.

“Something’s coming,” Lord Duskmere said urgently, his amber eyes scanning the distorted air.

A presence pressed against the edges of my consciousness: ancient, hungry, and far too interested in me specifically. I couldn’t see anything, couldn’t hear anything, but every instinct screamed danger.

“We need to stop this,” I said, taking a step toward the symbols again.

“Absolutely not,” Aunt Beatrice said sharply, grabbing my other arm. “Evangeline, you don’t understand what you’re dealing with.”

“Then explain it to me!” I cried.

“There’s no time.” She looked terrified now, her gaze fixed on the shimmering air above the symbols. “Lord Duskmere, can you get us back to the house? Quickly?”

But I was already pulling away from both of them, my hands pressed to the earth at the edge of the symbols. “I can fight this. The plants...”

“Miss Hartwell, no!” Lord Duskmere lunged for me, but it was too late.

I reached out with every ounce of power I’d only just learned I possessed, sending my desperation across Duskmere’s grounds in search of allies. *Help us*, I pleaded through the botanical network. *Please, we need you.*

The response was immediate but terrified. Moonbell vines erupted from their hiding places despite their fear, their silver light blazing like fallen stars. Ancient thornvines burst through soil with grinding determination, their barbs gleaming wickedly. Bloodroot roses bloomed in impossible profusion along the manor walls, their crimson petals weeping protective sap.

But I could feel what it cost them. The connection carried it as a vibration I could not unhear: a high, thin note under everything,

the way a wire sounds before it snaps. They came because I called. That was the worst of it.

For a moment, the plants formed a barrier around the spreading symbols, their combined energy pushing back against it.

Then something laughed.

The sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, rich with amusement and absolute confidence.

The vines I'd summoned withered instantly, consumed by whatever presence was trying to manifest through the symbols. But worse than seeing them die was feeling their deaths. The moonbell vines' silver light flickered out like extinguished candles. The thornvines crumbled to ash with sounds like screaming. The bloodroot roses turned black and fell like drops of spilled blood.

Each death came through the link as a specific silence. An absence where a living thing had been and was not anymore. Now they were ash, and I was the person who had asked them to come.

"Clever little thing," a voice whispered, though there was no one there to speak. "You have her hands. I remember the hands."

The symbols flared one final time, then went dormant, still etched into the earth but no longer spreading. The oppressive presence lifted, leaving us standing in a circle of dead grass where my protective barrier had been destroyed.

I swayed on my feet, drained, and Lord Duskmere caught me before I could fall. His hands set under my elbows with what felt like fury. He did not speak. I do not think he could have. I did not speak either. Being held up by him did not oblige me to it.

The entire estate's botanical network had gone quiet. Not the quiet of sleep or of evening. The quiet of a room after someone has left it. The emptiness was almost worse than the physical exhaustion. It was like losing a sense I'd only just learned to rely on.

It left room for the voice still in my skull. The words themselves faded. What they carried stayed. Something had spoken of my mother's hands as a thing it remembered. I did not say this aloud. I would not say it to Tobias, who stood a pace away, nor to Aunt Beatrice, who was already frightened past her own composure. I folded it down and set it behind my ribs for later.

"What was that?" I gasped.

"Trouble," Aunt Beatrice said grimly. "More trouble than any of us are prepared for."

She was staring at the burned symbols the way a person stares at a word written in a language they had hoped never to read again.

"Aunt Beatrice," I started, but she was already turning back toward the house.

"Inside," she commanded. "All of us. Now. We have a great deal to discuss and very little time to do it."

The entrance hall was warmer than it should have been. I felt stone under my feet and stone on every side, and near the staircase a single fern lifted one frond toward me as I passed. It was the smallest gesture I had ever been grateful for.

We went to the library. Lord Duskmere held the door. Aunt Beatrice took her window chair but did not reach for her letters. Tobias hovered near the entrance until Molly touched his arm and he followed her to the settee.

I sat at the reading table. The fire was still lit from this morning, which seemed impossible. This morning had been a different day.

"How did you know?" Lord Duskmere asked quietly. He was looking at Aunt Beatrice. "On the lawn. You recognized what was happening before the rest of us did."

Aunt Beatrice's hands were folded in her lap. She did not answer immediately.

"I have buried someone who crossed paths with this kind of work," she said. Her voice was level but the cost of keeping it level

was visible in her hands. "That is all I am prepared to discuss on the subject at present."

Her hands had not unclenched and I did not press.

She drew a breath and straightened in her chair, and when she spoke again her voice had the brisk authority I recognized from household crises and disputed invoices. "We need information. Tobias, I want you moving through the servants' networks at the neighboring estates. Anything unusual: strangers, odd questions, talk about the moors. Discreetly."

"Yes, ma'am," Tobias said.

I glanced at Lord Duskmere. He was watching Aunt Beatrice direct his household with an expression that might have been amusement if it had not also been respect.

"Molly, the village. You have contacts I do not. Use them." She looked at Molly steadily. "Ask about the symbols. Ask about the livestock. Ask about anything people are frightened of and will not say to gentry."

"There's a woman at the herb stall," Molly said. "The cook's poultice woman. She knows things about what happens on the moors. I've been meaning to speak with her."

"Then speak with her," Aunt Beatrice said.

She turned to me. "The symbols reacted to you, Evangeline. Not to Lord Duskmere. Not to any of us. To you specifically."

"I noticed," I said.

"Your mother had the same gift," she said. "If she ever encountered anything like what we saw today, she may have written about it. I think you should bring her journal here."

"Those papers are private," I said, hating the idea of Lord Duskmere reading them.

"I am not asking you to publish them," Aunt Beatrice said. "I am asking you to consider that your mother may have left you more than grief in those pages."

I did not answer. She did not push further. The question settled between us like something that would need to be picked up, but not now.

Tobias and Molly left to begin their inquiries. The library grew quieter with their going.

My hands had begun to shake.

I had not noticed when it started. The hum that had been building since the garden, since the symbols, since the plants died answering my call, had found the edge of what I could hold and was pressing past it. I looked down at my hands on the table, trembling against the wood. The voice on the lawn had known these hands. Had remembered them from a woman who was dead.

Lord Duskmere noticed. He reached across the table and pressed my palm flat against the wood. Two fingers briefly on the back of my hand and then gone.

"The wood is old," he said. "If it tries to run somewhere, let it go there instead."

I pressed my other palm flat. The hum settled into something lower, spread through the grain of the table where the old wood could carry it.

It helped. I resented that it helped.

Aunt Beatrice had watched the entire exchange from her window chair. She said nothing about it, which was its own kind of statement.

I kept my palms where they were until the trembling stopped.

CHAPTER 7

The Scholar's Secret

I brought the journal.

I had spent the night with what the voice had said. By morning I had decided that pride was not going to keep me alive and that my mother's papers might.

Aunt Beatrice came with me. Tobias met us at the door and led us to the library. Lord Duskmere was already at the desk. The fire was already lit.

He did not rise. He did not greet us. He nodded once at the chair across from his. Aunt Beatrice took the window seat and drew out her embroidery.

I sat down. I did not open my notebook. I set the journal on the table between us.

"There is something I did not say yesterday," I said. "After the plants died, the presence spoke. Through the botanical connection." I kept my voice level. "'You have her hands. I remember the hands.'"

The words had not sounded like a threat when the voice spoke them. They had sounded like recognition.

Lord Duskmere's pen went still in his hand.

"It knew my mother," I said. "It recognized me through her."

Aunt Beatrice set down her embroidery. "The exact words," she said. "You are certain."

“Yes,” I said.

Lord Duskmere looked at the journal. “Your mother’s observations may carry more than she knew. If the connection identified you through her, there may be something in her account of how the gift presented.”

“That is why I brought it,” I said.

Aunt Beatrice walked to the table and placed her hand on the journal before either of us moved to open it.

“Let me take this first,” she said. Her voice was steady but her hand pressed flat against the cover. “I knew her. I will know what is observation and what is private. You will have it when I have read it through again.”

The request was reasonable. I knew it was reasonable. Aunt Beatrice had known my mother for years before I was born, had sat with her through the worst of what the gift had done, and would read the journal with a care I could not fault.

I still felt the loss of it in my hands. I had slept with it on the pillow beside me. I had carried it against my chest the whole way here, its leather cover warm where I had been holding it, and I had set it on this table meaning to open it myself. To read my mother’s words.

“Very well,” I said.

She placed the journal in her sewing basket and returned to her needle. The basket sat at her feet for the rest of the morning. I found myself glancing at it twice before I made myself stop.

“We will leave the curse where it is for now,” he said. He had the warding texts already stacked at his elbow, which told me he had settled this before I arrived. “A thing that comes once a month is a slower problem than a thing that writes on my lawn.”

I did not argue. The symbols had reached for me and not for him. Whatever we built, I would be the one standing inside it.

I turned back to the desk and the texts that were not my mother’s and were not mine. I adjusted my chair so that the light

came over my shoulder properly. The room had already arranged itself into two territories. His side had a line of red ribbons marking places in three open texts. Mine had a clear surface and a lamp trimmed to the height that said someone had been paying attention.

I smoothed my skirts, opened my notebook, and waited for him to begin. Three volumes were open in front of him, one of them the Carrington treatise, which I would have reached for first had it not been in front of him.

"You will want the Carrington," he said eventually. "When I am finished with it."

"I will start with the de Vries." And I did.

We read for half an hour. I did not break the silence. I was not, in fact, reading. I was turning pages in the de Vries and looking at the words on them without letting my attention move past the fact that he was three feet away and that the time we'd spent together had not yet been enough to require him to retract what he had said in this room about my father.

Eventually, he spoke.

"You are approaching the de Vries wrong," he said. I hadn't spoken. I hadn't done anything, I thought, except exhale rather more emphatically than the situation strictly required.

I set the volume down with care. "I am reading it, Lord Duskmere. Which was the objective."

"You are reading it as though the argument is linear," he said.

"The chapter is titled 'The Linear Progression of Magical Influence,'" I said.

"Yes." His amber eyes lifted. "That was the editor. The original text was structured as a sequence of observations, not a chain of causes. If you read the second paragraph as an observation rather than an explanation you will find it begins to mean something."

I considered, quite seriously, throwing the book at his head. I did not. I took a breath and read the second paragraph as an

observation. Three paragraphs after that the text began to clarify in ways I had not anticipated.

“Better,” he said and returned to his own work.

I did not thank him. He had been right, which obliged me to try his method, and the method had worked, which obliged me to keep using it. Neither of those obliged me to give him anything else.

We worked through the morning. Aunt Beatrice’s needle kept time at the window. When the light began to turn, she folded her embroidery and said we had stayed long enough.

I did not say goodnight to Lord Duskmere. He did not say it to me. We had exchanged enough words for one day. The de Vries had given me more to think about than I was willing to admit.

Our days found a rhythm. I did not invite it and could not account for it, but it had grown up beside my temper without permission and I allowed it to continue. I had work to do and so did he.

Aunt Beatrice came most mornings, alternating between her embroidery and her correspondence depending on her mood and the post. She had not returned my mother’s journal. I had not asked for it. On two mornings I saw her reading something at the window seat that she closed when I looked up.

On the days tenant matters kept Aunt Beatrice, Molly came in her place with her mending and her reports from the village. Tobias moved through the servants’ networks at the neighboring estates and told us what he learned when he had news.

It never produced a name. What it produced was smaller and worse. Another fold had been found drained in the night, the beasts dry as the Bracken ewes. A stranger had been at two estates asking after old families by names the present owners had half-forgotten. One of the names, Molly said, had been my mother’s. I did not write that one down.

The herb-stall woman had not opened her stall in three market days. The village still knew more about the moors than it would say to gentry, and now there was fear beneath the silence.

Lord Duskmere had a habit of marking his place with whatever was nearest to hand. A strip of blotting paper, a ribbon, once a pressed leaf I later found was a moonbell cutting. One afternoon the slip of paper in his transmutation volume caught my eye. It bore his hand and a date five years past. I did not ask what it was.

My working materials migrated over the course of several days until everything I reached for sat within easy range of my right hand. He did not ask me to keep things tidy, which I suspected was restraint on his part. I was not a tidy worker by temperament. I spread. Notes beside primary texts, then secondary texts beside the notes, then I wanted both at once and piled them and worked from the pile. He read three feet away and said nothing about it for two days. One morning he moved the stack that had begun leaning toward his papers back to my side without comment. The next time I looked up, there was a crease between his brows that might have been thought and might have been something else.

Our days filled with sharp sparring and small courtesies I had not asked for and could not bring myself to refuse. He criticized my methodology with precision, then slid a cup of tea toward me when concentration left me with a headache. He dismissed my interpretations and then left bookmarked pages at my workspace before I arrived in the morning, with no note. I kept a ledger. His unretracted words about my father sat in one column. His quiet concessions sat in another. I had not decided which column was doing what to the other.

It was maddening. I found, to my annoyance, that I did not want him to stop.

We had been three days on the wards before I understood they would not hold. Every protective working in the texts began the same way: name the thing you mean to shield. The wards against

fire named fire. The wards against the drowned named water. When I tried to write one for myself I got as far as the naming and stopped, because I did not know what I was. A bloodline, the texts said. But a bloodline is recognized before it can be guarded, and we had no account of how the thing on the lawn had known me at all.

"You have her hands," I said. Lord Duskmere looked up. "It knew me by something. If we cannot name what, we cannot ward it."

He was quiet a moment. Then he set the shielding texts aside and reached for the older ones beneath them, the ones on what runs in blood and how it can be read. We had followed the curse into bloodline magic one footnote at a time, and this was the footnote that turned us.

Lord Duskmere had been working through a Welsh source on the subject, and he had been working through it on faulty assumptions about its date.

"You're treating that text as late thirteenth century," I said, and did not soften it.

He looked up.

"It is late thirteenth century," he said.

"Look at the colophon." I did not get up to show him. I let him come to me. After a moment he did, leaning over the table at my elbow. I put my finger on the line. "The scribe dates himself to a reign that had not begun in the thirteenth century."

He read it. He read it again.

"That is the later copyist," he said, but with less certainty than he had brought to anything that morning.

"Possibly," I said. "It is also possibly the original hand, in which case your framework is fifty years out and the passage you have been using to argue for pre-Reformation continuity is doing nothing of the sort."

He straightened. He looked at me and I could not read what was in his face and I could not look away from it. I looked down at my notes before he could see what my own face was doing.

We went back to work. The quiet that settled between us was not the quiet we had been keeping all morning. I did not look up to check whether he had noticed, because I did not trust myself.

A cup of tea arrived at my elbow without a word. I picked it up before I remembered I had meant to refuse it. He had steeped it the way I took it, which I did not recall telling him.

I watched him over the rim of the cup before I caught what I was doing. The line of his shoulder bent over the page, the small frown he wore when a text would not give up its meaning. I set the cup down harder than I needed to and reminded myself, with all the firmness I could find, that I was here for his library and not the man bent over the books in it. The reminder held. It simply did not hold as well as it had a week ago.

The Welsh text had opened a question about how bloodline magic interacted with plants growing on cursed ground. I had been turning it over for an hour, comparing it with a passage on root-level sensitivity, when I said without thinking carefully enough: "The plants were already organized around the bloodline before the curse was laid. The curse did not create the interaction. It revealed one that was already there."

Lord Duskmere set down his pen.

"Say that again," he said.

"The plants were already—" I began.

"Not the observation," he said. He was looking at me with an expression I had not seen from him before. "The framework. That is not in any of these texts. That is E.H. Thornfield's central premise. Word for word."

I had been careless. The idea had come from my own published work and I had said it in this room as though it were common knowledge.

"You've read *Thornfield*," I said, keeping my voice level.

"I have copies in my private collection," he said. "You are acquainted with those papers?"

There was nothing to be gained by lying. "I wrote them," I said. "I could not publish under my own name. The Royal Society does not read women."

He did not speak. He looked at the books between us and then at me. I watched something shift behind his expression.

"The moonbell paper," he said after a while. "On emotional resonance."

"Yes," I said.

"I read it a dozen times in one winter." He said it the way a man sets down something heavy, not carelessly, but with the relief of no longer carrying it. "I was trying to determine whether the method could be adapted for lycanthropic energy. I could not find the answer in the text. I wrote to *Thornfield*. The letters went unanswered."

He picked up his pen and set it down again.

"You answered a premise I gave up years ago," he said. "That is what I need you to understand."

"You read my father's work too," I said.

"Every paper," he said. He did not flinch from it. "I spent months convinced botanical magic might break the curse. When the Royal Society called it fraudulent, I stopped looking."

I looked at the desk. At his pen and mine. I thought of my father in his study at the end, his work stacked and his reputation already in ruins, not knowing this man had read every word of it.

"And now?" I asked.

"Now I think you have moved past his work," he said. "And I think you know it."

He had called my father a fraud in this room. He had not taken it back. He was not taking it back now. What he was giving me instead was the information that he had read every word my

father wrote and measured years of solitude against it. That he had also read every word I wrote and could not find the author. Only to discover that the author had been sitting across from him for weeks. That was not an apology. I did not know what it was. I was not ready to look at it.

I picked up my pen and turned to the Welsh text.

“We should continue,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. His hand was not steady when he picked up his own pen. I did not remark on it.

CHAPTER 8

The Widow's Account

The next morning I sat across from Lord Duskmere and could not find the war.

It had been there the day before. I had carried it into this room every morning since the first: he had called my father a fraud, he had not retracted it, and I owed him nothing beyond the terms of our agreement. That arithmetic had held for weeks. It had been simple. I had been angry, and anger was a clean place to stand.

He had not apologized. He had not retracted. What he had done was tell me he had read every word I ever published and spent years trying to answer a premise I had raised. That he had written letters to E.H. Thornfield and the letters went unanswered. That the author he could not find had been sitting across from him.

I did not know where to put it. The anger had been simple to hold. This was heavier. It had no place to go and I left it unsorted for the morning to deal with.

Molly came with me instead of Aunt Beatrice. Tenant business, Aunt Beatrice said, though her expression suggested the tenant business would involve pointed questioning alongside the ledger review. Molly settled on the library settee with her mending basket and a look of practiced innocence.

"I can see everything from here, miss," she said. "Including both of you and the door."

"Thank you, Molly," I said.

Lord Duskmere did not acknowledge her presence. He was already reading. I took my seat and opened the volume I had left marked the evening before.

By the middle of the afternoon my hands had started to shake. They did this when the hum built past what my body could carry without release. I set my pen down and pressed both palms flat against the desk the way Lord Duskmere had shown me, letting the tremor run down into the old wood.

It helped. For several minutes. Then the tremor came back deeper and the ferns by the window curled inward at their edges. I pressed harder. The desk took what it could and it was not enough.

Lord Duskmere set down his pen.

"The desk is not sufficient today," he said. He looked at the ferns. "You are pulling from the room."

I glanced at the window. The leaves closest to me had gone tight and dry. I had done that.

"It keeps coming," I said. "I push it into the wood and it keeps coming."

He was quiet. Then he rose and came around the desk.

"May I?" he asked, gesturing toward my hands.

"No," I said. "I can manage."

He did not step back. The ferns dropped another quarter inch. I thought of the moonbell vines I had called on the day of the symbols. The ones that had come when I asked and been consumed for it. I was not going to kill his ferns because I could not accept help.

I placed my hands flat on the desk.

"If you would, then," I said. "Quickly."

"Close your eyes," he said.

His hands closed around mine. They were warm and steady, and I had known they would be because he had steadied me be-

fore, in the aftermath of the symbols when I had been too shaken to refuse. That time I had filed the warmth away and moved on. This time I could not file it. Something had shifted between yesterday afternoon and this morning, and his hands around mine were no longer a fact I could set aside. I did not know what they were instead. I held still and breathed.

"The desk is a wall," he said. "When the buildup goes deeper, you need to go lower. The stone beneath your feet. Duskmere's foundations run to bedrock."

I pressed my feet against the floor.

"Breathe," he said. "In for four, hold for four, out for four. Each exhale, release some of it back into the earth. Not forced. Let go."

With each breath the frantic hum under my skin settled lower, slower. The ferns stopped curling.

"This is a door," he said. "Different tool, different depth. Practice it when the desk is not enough. You will learn the difference."

He released my hands. The tremor had stopped. The library's plants had eased back into themselves around us.

"Thank you," I said. The words were flat on purpose. "I do not think anyone else would understand what this feels like."

"No," Lord Duskmere said quietly. "I do not suppose they would."

I wished I had not said it. It had been true and he had agreed, and between those two things he had taken ground I had not meant to give. I picked up my pen and returned to my notes. I made him no further gifts that afternoon.

Molly climbed into the carriage after me and waited until we were past the gates.

"The herb-stall woman," she said, once we were clear of the house. "I described the symbols to her. Best I could from what I saw."

"And?" I asked.

"She went quiet, miss. Not confused-quiet. Knowing-quiet." Molly paused. "Then she said she had nothing left to sell me and shut up the stall an hour early."

"That is not nothing," I said.

"No, miss. I'll go again," she said. She said it with the kind of conviction that did not invite discussion.

I told her to be careful. She said she always was.

Aunt Beatrice had not returned my mother's journal.

She came the next morning with her embroidery and settled at the window as though nothing in the world required discussion. I did not ask. I had decided I would not ask, though not-asking sat in my chest like a stone I was pretending not to carry.

One morning I looked up from my notes and found her at the shelves. She was not browsing. She had taken down a volume and was reading it standing, turning three pages without hesitation. She found what she was looking for, read it carefully, and returned the book to its place.

She went back to her embroidery without a word. I did not ask what she had read. I noted that she had not needed to look for it.

Lord Duskmere arrived before me every morning. The fire was always lit. I had been telling myself Tobias lit it. Then one morning I came early enough to find the grate cold, and heard footsteps, and found Lord Duskmere crouched by the fireplace with the tinderbox. He heard me come in and did not look up.

"Cold," he said, by way of explanation that explained nothing.

I sat down and opened my notebook. The fire caught and filled the room with old oak and something resinous beneath it that I had come to associate with this library, though I had not meant to associate it with anything.

Somewhere in the last week the curse had stopped being the thing we worked on. We had not decided it. The symbols had decided it for us. I had let the cure slide under the more frightening problem and never once said so aloud. The first of the month was

gone. I had the Hellebore nearly to its margins, a journal I was not permitted to read, and was no nearer the thing under his skin than the day I named it.

None of it added up. He had insulted my father and never taken it back; for weeks that had been the whole of it. Now there was the rest: the fire lit before I arrived, the tea, the bookmarked page waiting with no note. Small things. They should not have weighed what they did. I was not falling for the man. I was losing the ability to stay angry at him, and those were not the same thing. I intended to keep believing that for as long as the distinction held.

We worked through the morning. The quiet between us had changed weight but the work found us eventually.

It was Lord Duskmere who found the passage.

“Soul anchoring,” he said. He had gone still over the text. “Binding rituals that use one bloodline to permanently fix what flows through another to a person, an object, or a place.” He looked up. “The mechanism would require a bloodline like yours.”

He said it, then stopped short of what it meant. A bloodline like mine. There was only one of those in the room, and we both knew whose hands the thing on the lawn had remembered. He turned the page as though the turning were the natural next thing and not a way to put his eyes somewhere that was not me.

“Say the rest,” I said.

“The text is fragmentary.” His voice had gone careful in the way I had learned to distrust.

“You were not reading the text just now. You were looking at me and deciding how little of it to hand me.” I kept my hands flat on the desk so they would not betray me. “I did not sign your terms to be managed, Lord Duskmere. If that ritual wants a bloodline like mine, I would rather hear it from you than work it out alone at two in the morning.”

He was quiet. Then he set the page where I could read it. It was the nearest thing to surrender he had shown me.

My mouth went dry as I read. “To what end?” I wondered aloud.

“The text does not say. It is fragmentary,” he said. “But the requirements are specific. Lunar alignments. Seasonal transitions. Proximity.”

I thought of the symbols on the east lawn. The approaching Hunter’s Moon.

“If someone wanted to perform a soul anchoring,” I said, “they would need the bloodline bearer present.”

“Willing or otherwise,” Lord Duskmere said. “Yes.”

The library door opened. Aunt Beatrice stood in the frame with her shawl still on and her gloves still buttoned, which meant she had come from the village without stopping to settle in first. Her gaze moved from Lord Duskmere to me to the open text between us.

“What have you found?” she asked. Her voice was careful.

We told her. She listened without interrupting. When Lord Duskmere said the words *soul anchoring*, her hands went to the back of the nearest chair and held on.

“I have not heard that term in a long time,” she said quietly.

“You know what it is,” Lord Duskmere said.

“I know what it costs,” she said.

She stood at the window looking out at the grounds where the symbols had appeared. When she turned back, I could see she had made a decision before she opened her mouth.

“Perhaps it is time I told you both the truth about what happened to my husband,” she said.

No one spoke. She pressed her fingers flat against the windowsill and did not look at either of us when she began.

“Twenty-two years ago,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper, “Richard received a commission from a wealthy collector. Rare texts on supernatural phenomena, bloodline magic, ancestral curses.” She paused. “He thought it was eccentric antiquarianism.

The man paid handsomely, and Richard was good at finding books most scholars dismissed as fraudulent.”

She looked at me. “Just as they dismissed your father’s work, Evangeline,” she said.

“What happened?” Lord Duskmere asked gently.

“The requests grew specific.” Her hands had found each other, clasped so tightly her knuckles went white. “Not theory. Instructions. Binding ceremonies. Soul anchoring.” She said the last two words as though she were handling something that might cut her. “When Richard tried to withdraw, he was refused. When he tried again, he was not permitted to leave.”

She stopped. I watched her jaw work. She was trying to start the next sentence and it would not come. Lord Duskmere and I sat very still. I could feel my own pulse in my throat.

“He was murdered,” she said at last. “In a soul anchoring ritual. The collector used Richard’s blood to bind power to himself.” Her voice cracked on the word *blood* and she stopped again. She pressed her hand to her mouth and held it there until the shaking passed. When she took it away her lips were white. “My husband’s life for that man’s ambition.”

She had her mother’s face when she was tired. The same fine cheekbone I had seen once in a miniature my father kept in his desk, the same soft set of the eyes. I had never been able to find my father in that miniature. I could find Aunt Beatrice in it now.

“I was there that night,” she continued. Each word was deliberate, placed like a foot on ice she did not trust. “Hidden in our carriage. Waiting for Richard to finish what I thought was a simple delivery.”

“The windows went bright,” she said. “Not candlelight. Something colder and steadier than candles, something that did not flicker. And then Richard called out. Once. And then the light did not change but the sound stopped, and I knew.”

She did not speak for a long time after that. The fire cracked once and settled. I did not look at Lord Duskmere. I looked at Aunt Beatrice's hands, which had gone still at her sides, and at her face, gone unguarded as it rarely was, as though something long expected had come at last and left her unsure whether she was lighter for it.

"I have spent every day since then learning what was done to him," she said. "So that I would know it if I saw it again."

She looked at the text open on the desk between Lord Duskmere and me. The page with *soul anchoring* at its head.

"I am seeing it again," she said.

No one answered. Aunt Beatrice stood at the window. I sat at the desk with Lord Duskmere's pen and mine between us. The silence did not ask to be broken.

CHAPTER 9

Obligations and Revelations

We hardly knew how to speak of what Aunt Beatrice had told us. We returned to the library. We worked.

The texts were open and our pens moved and the fire was lit, and beneath all of it her confession sat like something none of us had found a place to put down. I did not ask her about it. Lord Duskmere did not ask her about it. She came with her embroidery and did not volunteer more, and the silence around what she had said grew its own weight and we carried it alongside everything else.

On the second morning Aunt Beatrice returned my mother's journal. She made no occasion of it. She came in with her embroidery, and before she sat she took the journal from her basket and set it on the desk at my elbow. "I have read it through," she said. "It is yours. It always was." She had her needle out before I finished thanking her. I put my hand flat to the cover. Nothing pulsed beneath it now, only cool leather and the weight of a thing handed back.

On the third morning Molly arrived at the library ahead of us. Tobias was with her. They had been sitting on some news since the night before; it was in their faces before either of them spoke.

"A gentleman has been asking about the Blackwood family," Molly said, without preamble. "At the neighboring estates. Curses, strange incidents, family history."

My hands went still on the desk. "What did he look like?" I asked.

"Well-dressed, polite," Molly said. "Dark-skinned, pale eyes. The kitchen maids all thought him quite mysterious."

"Did anyone catch his name?" Aunt Beatrice asked.

Tobias shook his head. "He never gave one. Said he was a scholar researching local folklore." He paused. "Though one of the grooms saw him with Mr. Blackwood at the village inn two nights ago."

I had met Lord Duskmere's cousin at a few social occasions and found that something about him made my skin crawl, though I could not have said why.

Lord Duskmere went still. "Algernon was at the village inn?"

"Having drinks with this gentleman," Tobias confirmed. "Seemed quite friendly, from what the groom observed."

"There is more, miss," Molly said. She looked at me. "He was asking about gatherings. Social ones. Where the county families would be assembled."

The room changed. Aunt Beatrice set down her embroidery. She did it slowly, folding the cloth once, then twice.

"The Harvest Ball is this Saturday," she said. "Every family in the county will attend."

She was not reminding us of a social obligation. She was naming an exposure point.

"If this man is looking for where the families gather, he will have his answer Saturday night," she said. "Evangeline cannot be absent. That would be noticed. But she cannot be unguarded either."

Lord Duskmere's expression had gone carefully neutral. "You'll need to attend," he said.

"We will all need to attend," Aunt Beatrice said. "And we will need to be careful about it."

She paused. When she continued, her tone had shifted.

"There is something else. Mrs. Weatherby writes that Captain Morrison will be in attendance. Recently returned from the Peninsula, soon to be posted to India. A respectable man."

She did not say: who might overlook the disgrace attached to my father's name. She did not need to.

"You want me to meet him," I said.

"I want you to have options," Aunt Beatrice said quietly. "After what I have told you, after what we found in those texts, I want you to have a life that does not depend on what happens inside this house."

That was not the marriage lecture. That was something I could not argue with. She was not thinking of dowries and prospects. She was thinking of soul anchoring and what it had done to Richard, and she wanted me out of range. A respectable husband posted to India was not a cage. It was an exit.

We were only half through the month. I had noticed without letting myself count the days that were left. The Hunter's Moon was still weeks off; the curse would come due with it, and I was no closer to breaking it than the day I signed his terms. The old-year was turning and the county with it. How much had changed in so little time, and how much had not.

I had been choosing research over everything else. Not from lack of option. I had known since I was fifteen what happened to women's work when they married. Had watched it happen to a woman I admired: her notebooks shelved within six months. Her husband had never told her to stop. He had simply never made room, and she had simply stopped.

I had understood what I was watching. And I had spent years making sure I was the kind of woman who would be difficult to manage into the shade.

The research was mine. The E.H. Thornfield papers were mine. Marriage would not necessarily kill them. Some marriages existed where the wife kept her work, her hours, her thinking. They were rarer than not. And they depended, entirely, on the man chosen.

The ledger I had been keeping did not help me here. One column said Lord Duskmere owed me an apology he would not give. The other said he had lit the fire every morning, read every word I ever wrote, and held my hands until the tremor stopped. Neither column told me what kind of man he was. Neither told me anything at all, except that I could not stop turning back to it.

“Lord Duskmere,” I said. My voice was steady. I made sure of it. “Is there any reason I should not consider Captain Morrison’s suit?”

For a moment his amber eyes went gold at the edges, just long enough for me to see it and know I had. A sound caught in the back of his throat and did not finish. His hand had found the edge of the desk, and I could see where his fingers had pressed into the wood. Then his expression shuttered.

“You should accept any respectable offer,” he said, his voice carefully controlled. “A woman in your position can’t afford to wait for ideal circumstances.”

“Of course,” I said. I stood. My hands were steady because I made them steady. “Then I had better prepare for the Ball.”

I did not look at him again. I heard Aunt Beatrice gathering her things behind me and Molly falling into step at the door. I walked out of the library with my back straight and my face composed and my chest so tight I could not have spoken again if I had wanted to.

We rode home without speaking. As the carriage slowed at Ashford House, Aunt Beatrice said, “You gave him every opportunity to object.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And he said nothing,” she said.

"Nothing that mattered," I said. I did not look at her. "Which tells me everything I need to know."

Aunt Beatrice let it lie. By the time we reached the door she had begun composing a list of what I would need for the Ball, as if the practical work of preparing could carry both of us past the part that had nothing practical about it.

That night I went to bed early, telling her I needed to think, and she did not argue. Molly came into my room with the brush and the combs. I sat at the vanity and let her take my hair down in silence.

"You can say it," I told her when the silence had gone on long enough.

"Say what, miss?" Molly asked.

"Whatever you are holding behind your teeth," I said. "I can hear you not saying it."

Molly set the brush down and met my eyes in the mirror. "I was not going to say anything at all, miss. Only that I am sorry he did not open his mouth when you gave him the chance."

Something in me broke, quietly, the way a seam gives when it has been pulled at for too long.

"I gave him the chance," I said, and my voice was not composed anymore. "I asked him. I looked at him while I asked him. And he told me I should accept any respectable offer as though he were reading me a weather report."

"Yes, miss," Molly said.

"I will not marry Captain Morrison," I said firmly.

"No, miss," Molly said.

"And I will not let Lord Duskmere see that it mattered," I vowed. "Not tomorrow, not at the ball, not ever."

Lord Duskmere had made it simple.

He had looked straight at me and told me to take the cage. That was what I was sitting with now. The person who had read every

word I ever wrote had pointed me at the life I had spent years working not to have.

“No, miss.” Molly’s fingers moved gently through my hair. “You will not let him see. But you can let me see it tonight, if you wish. I do not mind.”

I wept then, quietly, because Molly did not mind. I was furious, I was humiliated, and under both of them there was grief for a thing I had never had.

By the time she plaited my hair for sleep I had begun to be composed again, at least on the outside.

But the line between fury and hurt had cut clean through me. I knew I would not walk into that ballroom without carrying both.

CHAPTER 10

The Harvest Ball

The Weatherby estate blazed with light against the October night, every window golden with a warmth I did not feel. As our carriage rolled up the drive, I fought the urge to ask the driver to turn around.

"You look beautiful, dear," Aunt Beatrice murmured, adjusting the emerald silk of my gown one final time. "That color brings out your eyes magnificently."

"I feel like a prize heifer being led to auction," I muttered.

"Then be the finest heifer at the fair," she replied pragmatically. "Captain Morrison is reportedly quite handsome, and more importantly, quite honorable."

The manicured topiary hedges lining the drive turned their sculpted forms toward me as I passed. We were greeted inside by portraits of stern-faced Weatherby ancestors glowering down at us in the hallway.

As we entered the ballroom, the parquet floors gleamed under dozens of candles, and swirling couples filled the floor in their finest evening wear.

The ballroom was too warm, too bright, too full. I stood at the edge of the floor while the music started and let my eyes move over the crowd.

I knew he was not there.

He did not come to these. He had not come to anything for seven years. He had not promised he would come tonight.

Anyone with sense would not have been looking for him. I looked anyway.

It took me the length of one dance to admit I had been looking. It took me the length of another to stop.

The gown itched where Molly had fastened it. My hair pulled where she had braided it tight against my scalp. I had told her last night I would not let him see it mattered and I had meant it. I would keep my vow even though he wasn't in the room.

"Miss Hartwell!" Mrs. Weatherby descended upon us with enthusiasm. "How delightful that you could attend. And Mrs. Ashford, you look magnificent as always."

Mrs. Weatherby moved through her ballroom with the complete assurance of a woman who knew where everything was because she had put it there herself. She had hosted this ball for fifteen years running, by Aunt Beatrice's account, and the management of it showed in everything she did not have to check. She knew which table held the best punch and which would need watching, which guests required active introduction and which would find their way on their own.

The warmth of the room was her doing as much as the candles were. County society at its finest: unfashionable, a little rough at the edges, and entirely sure of what it was.

Mrs. Weatherby's eyes gleamed with what could only be matchmaking fervor as she looked at me again.

"Miss Hartwell, you simply must meet Captain Morrison," Mrs. Weatherby declared in a conspiratorial tone. "Such a distinguished gentleman, and so recently returned from the Peninsula!"

She led us across the ballroom toward a group of gentlemen near the refreshment tables.

Captain Morrison was undeniably handsome, as military men often were. Tall, broad-shouldered, with sun-weathered features

and kind brown eyes. When Mrs. Weatherby made the introductions, he bowed over my hand with practiced gallantry that seemed to speak of good breeding rather than empty flattery.

"Miss Hartwell, Mrs. Weatherby tells me you have interests in botanical studies," he said. "How fascinating."

"I hope you don't find scholarly pursuits in ladies off-putting, Captain Morrison," I said, testing his reaction.

He smiled, and the expression reached his eyes. "On the contrary. My posting to India will require a companion of strong character and intellectual curiosity. The climate and isolation can be challenging, but the botanical diversity is extraordinary. I understand there are species there unknown to English science."

"You're interested in botanical research yourself?" I asked, surprised.

"An amateur's interest only, but I've made some small collections during my travels. Nothing approaching true scientific work, I'm sure, but the variety is remarkable. There is a small white orchid that grows in one valley above Porto and nowhere else I could find. I spent an afternoon trying to sketch it and failed at every turn." He paused. "I understand your research has focused on local flora?"

Before I could answer, the musicians struck up for the first country dance.

"If I may, Miss Hartwell," Captain Morrison said with a slight bow, "would you honor me?"

"I must confess," he said as we took our positions, "Mrs. Weatherby has been quite enthusiastic in her descriptions of your accomplishments."

"I hope she hasn't oversold my virtues," I replied as the music began.

"She mentioned your dedication to your research, your intelligence, and your loyalty to your friends." His brown eyes met mine

as we moved through the opening figures. "All admirable qualities in any person."

As we danced, I found myself enjoying his company. Captain Morrison was easy to talk with, well-traveled without being boastful, and he listened to my opinions with what seemed genuine interest rather than polite condescension.

"Your posting to India," I said during a brief pause in the music, "how long would you expect to be stationed there?"

"Three to five years, most likely. Long enough to establish proper trade relationships and survey the territory." He studied my face carefully. "I know it seems daunting, the distance from family, the unfamiliar climate. But I believe there are opportunities there for someone with curiosity about the natural world."

When the dance ended, he escorted me to where Aunt Beatrice was conversing with several other matrons.

"Thank you for the dance, Miss Hartwell," he said politely. "I hope we might have occasion to speak again this evening."

As he moved away to dance with Miss Weatherby, Aunt Beatrice gave me an appraising look.

"He seems quite taken with you," she observed.

"He's very pleasant," I admitted.

"Pleasant is a sound foundation for marriage," Aunt Beatrice said. "Passion fades, but respect and compatibility endure."

A floral arrangement of roses and autumn foliage nearby went still in a way that had nothing to do with being cut. They were not dead. They had simply gone absent, as if their attention had been called elsewhere.

I looked back at Aunt Beatrice and opened my mouth to respond.

A familiar voice interrupted. "Mrs. Ashford, Miss Hartwell. What a pleasure to see you both."

I turned to find Algernon Blackwood approaching with his characteristic easy smile. Tonight he looked every inch the

charming gentleman in well-tailored evening wear, his fair hair gleaming in the candlelight.

"Mr. Blackwood," I replied politely. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"The Weatherbys are old family friends," he said smoothly. "Besides, I rarely miss an opportunity for good company and fine music. I hope you're enjoying the evening?"

"Very much, thank you," I said, wondering why he'd suddenly taken an interest in talking to me.

"I do hope you'll forgive my mentioning it, but I wanted to thank you for your kindness to my cousin," Mr. Blackwood said. "I know Adrian has been... difficult company of late."

Ah, so that was it. He wanted to talk about Lord Duskmere. But why? What did he want? I honestly didn't know very much about Algernon Blackwood.

"Lord Duskmere has been perfectly courteous during my visits," I said carefully.

"How good of you to say so." Mr. Blackwood's smile seemed strained. "I worry about him, you know. These episodes of melancholia seem to be growing more severe. The isolation at Duskmere can't be helping his condition."

"Episodes?" Aunt Beatrice inquired with studied mildness.

"Violent outbursts, destructive behavior. The physicians say it's a form of inherited madness." He sighed heavily. "The family has tried everything, but I fear he's beyond help now. And now that his parents are gone, there's only so much the rest of us can do."

I bit back my instinctive defense of Lord Duskmere. In this setting, contradicting Mr. Blackwood's account would only draw unwanted attention.

"How distressing for the family," Aunt Beatrice murmured.

“Indeed. Though perhaps it’s for the best that he remains secluded,” Mr. Blackwood said. “Society can be... unkind to those afflicted with such conditions.”

Before I could deliver the retort rising to my lips, Captain Morrison appeared at my elbow.

“Miss Hartwell, I believe the musicians are preparing for a waltz,” he said conversationally. “Might I have the honor?”

I gratefully took his proffered hand and walked with him to the dance floor.

“I hope you’ll forgive the interruption,” Captain Morrison said quietly as we took position for the waltz. “You seemed to be in need of rescue.”

“Was it so obvious?” I asked.

“Algernon Blackwood has the uncanny ability to make uncomfortable conversation with the most pleasant of tones,” he said. “In my experience, strategic retreat is often the wisest course.”

As he placed his hand at my waist and we began to move to the music, I found myself grateful for his intervention.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. “I’m afraid I’m not as skilled at social warfare as some.”

“Because you speak honestly rather than using words as weapons,” he replied. “It’s a refreshing change.”

“It sounds like you need to improve the company you spend time with,” I observed.

“Very true,” he laughed. “I hope you’ll be among that company.”

“I’ve found you to be very pleasant company so far,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

“May I ask you something my hostess would consider unseemly?” Captain Morrison said.

“That depends entirely on your hostess,” I said.

“If you had a garden of your own,” he said, “and no one at all to disapprove of your choices, what would you plant?”

The question caught me across the chest. No one had ever asked me what I would grow.

"I do not know," I said, and my voice went a little thin before I could correct it. "I have not let myself consider it."

"Then consider it," Captain Morrison said gently. "It is a longer voyage to India than people say. I have found that the best passages are those on which I know what I am bringing with me."

I did not answer him at once. I was trying to decide whether the ache behind my ribs was disappointment that no one had ever asked before, or something more dangerous, which was the beginning of an answer.

"Ask me again in a year," I said at last, because I could not give him a true answer and would not give him a false one. "I will have had the time to think of something honest."

Captain Morrison did not press. The last measures of the waltz went by under his hand at my waist, and when the music ended, he did not step back as quickly as the figure required.

"Miss Hartwell, I hope you won't think me too forward, but I find myself hoping to know you better," Captain Morrison said. "I'll be in the county several times before my posting to India at the end of November. Might I call on you?"

November. Less than a month away. The timing felt significant in ways I couldn't articulate.

"I would welcome your calls, Captain Morrison," I said, surprised at how true the words were. I could do much worse than Captain Morrison.

As he escorted me back to Aunt Beatrice, I caught sight of a figure near the ballroom's entrance that made my breath catch. For one wild moment I thought Lord Duskmere had come after all. He had the same height, the same set of the shoulders, and the same dark coat falling that way against a tall frame. Then the man turned more fully into the candlelight, and the resemblance broke apart at once. A different cast of feature entirely. A differ-

ent darkness. Something sharper in him, calculating where Lord Duskmere had been only watchful.

"Who is that gentleman?" I asked Mrs. Weatherby discreetly when she approached to inquire about my evening.

She followed my gaze and frowned slightly. "I believe he's a friend of Algie's. Oh, I mean, Mr. Blackwood's. He arrived with their party. Dr. Nightingale, I think he said? Some sort of physician or scholar. Rather intense fellow."

The stranger's pale eyes found mine across the crowded ball-room, and he smiled, an expression that sent chills down my spine despite its apparent politeness. There was something measuring in his gaze, something that made me feel like a specimen being examined under a microscope.

"Aunt Beatrice," I murmured, moving closer to my guardian. "I think we should take our leave soon."

"Of course, dear," Aunt Beatrice said. "The evening has been quite eventful enough."

"Something like that," I said, glancing once more at Dr. Nightingale, who was now engaged in conversation with Mr. Blackwood near the refreshment tables.

Even at this distance, I could feel his pale eyes periodically finding me across the room.

CHAPTER 11

Shadows of the Past

I arrived at Duskmere Manor the next morning with my spine straight and my chin lifted.

Lord Duskmere did not glance at me when I came in. He was arranging pages with a formality I had not seen him use since the first week of our partnership. He kept his head bent. When I crossed the room to the window his shoulders altered for half a second and then altered again, settling. The light on the desk caught the ink on his cuff where he had written something and blotted it.

“Miss Hartwell,” he said, his voice level. “I trust you enjoyed the Harvest Ball?”

“It was pleasant enough,” I said. I set my satchel down with perhaps more force than necessary.

He reached for his notes. I opened mine. For several minutes we worked as though we had nothing else to say to each other, trading pages across the table with the politeness of strangers on a coach. He did not look at me when he spoke. He did not look at me when I spoke.

Something fell loose from between two of the later pages in my mother’s journal: a piece of paper so thin I thought at first it was the ghost of ink on the page above. My father’s hand. A note to her, not copied into the journal but kept there. Two lines.

The Westbury vine is responding to the warmer sun at last. I thought you would want to know before anyone.

I had never before had evidence that my parents had written each other notes about flowers. That they had loved each other in this small and particular way I had not been told. It was the smallest wound of my life.

It made the larger ones worse. I set the note aside and straightened the stack of pages between us.

"Captain Morrison wrote to me this morning," I said. "A thank-you for the waltz. He asked if he might call Wednesday."

"You should accept," Lord Duskmere said. He set down his pen, but his hand stayed near it, fingers curled. "James Morrison is a good man. He will give you the life you deserve. Security, respect, a future free from curses."

His words fell on me like a bucket of cold water. I opened my mouth. Nothing came. The silence held long enough for the fire to crack once in the grate.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important," Aunt Beatrice said, entering the room.

"Not at all," Lord Duskmere said. "We were just... discussing research priorities."

"Of course you were." Aunt Beatrice's tone was dry as parchment. "Though you might want to continue that discussion later. Molly and Tobias have returned from the village with news."

Molly appeared in the doorway.

"Tell us," Aunt Beatrice said immediately, her voice sharp with urgency as Molly stepped fully into the library with Tobias close behind.

"It's the attacks, ma'am," Molly said, her Irish accent thick with alarm. "Three more farms hit in the past week. Livestock drained, strange symbols carved into barn doors, and the magistrate at his wit's end."

"But that's not the strangest part," Tobias added. "Everyone's saying how odd it is that Duskmere's been so quiet. Usually, when there's trouble of this kind in the county, this estate gets blamed first."

Lord Duskmere's expression darkened. "What exactly are they saying?"

"That it's peculiar how the attacks started getting worse right around the time you began having visitors again," Tobias explained carefully. "Some folk think the mad—" He caught himself. "That is, they think your condition might be... spreading somehow."

"Spreading?" I asked.

"Like a contagion," Molly said. "To anyone who spends time near you. They're starting to whisper that Miss Evangeline and Mrs. Ashford might be... affected by prolonged exposure."

Of course. And Aunt Beatrice, by association.

"How delightful," Aunt Beatrice said dryly. "Village superstition at its finest."

"There is one more thing," Tobias said. "There's a physician arrived in the county. Says he's come to consult on a hereditary nervous condition in one of the old families. The strange thing is that the stable boy at Rosedale Farm saw a man near the barn after an attack on their livestock. Kneeling by the door, working with a leather case and little glass vials."

"He's been asking questions as well," Molly said. "About family lines. The Blackwoods. And Miss Hartwell's family, particularly."

"What kind of questions?" I asked.

"Whether the Hartwell women have unusual gifts," Tobias said, his cheeks coloring. "Whether plants respond differently around you. Whether your mother had the same abilities."

My hands went still against my skirt. Last night I had stood across a ballroom from a man that description fit: pale eyes and

a bearing too deliberate for a stranger at a county ball. Mrs. Weatherby had named him for me.

"There was a physician who came with Mr. Blackwood last night," I said. "At the ball."

Lord Duskmere's eyes found mine for a moment. "He is not here to treat a nervous disorder," he said.

"He's visited nearly every farm that's been hit," Molly said. "But never here. Not once."

I looked at Lord Duskmere, who was already looking at Aunt Beatrice.

"Since the symbols, it's almost as if someone is deliberately avoiding this estate," Aunt Beatrice said slowly. "As if they don't want to draw attention to their real target."

"Which is?" Lord Duskmere asked, though his amber eyes had flicked over to me.

"Evangeline," Aunt Beatrice confirmed grimly. "Someone is creating chaos throughout the county to mask their true interest in her."

"But why avoid Duskmere specifically?" I asked. "If they want to reach me, they know I'm here daily."

"Because they are not ready yet," Aunt Beatrice said quietly, her voice taking on a tone I'd never heard before. "Because they need you alive and unharmed for whatever they're planning."

Something in her expression made me study her more closely. "Aunt Beatrice, this is what you meant, isn't it? When you said you were seeing it again."

"I told you my husband was killed in a soul anchoring ritual," she said quietly. "What I didn't explain was how eerily similar this hunting pattern is to what happened then."

I looked at her.

"The same careful misdirection," she continued. "Creating chaos throughout the region to mask the real target. Richard thought he was simply being commissioned to collect rare books.

He had no idea he was being studied, cataloged, prepared for sacrifice.”

“And you think the same thing is happening to me?” I asked.

“I think,” Aunt Beatrice said grimly, “that whoever killed my husband had been watching and waiting for the right opportunity. And I believe whoever is hunting you now wants exactly the same thing.”

“But there’s another problem,” I said. “If people believe Lord Duskmere’s madness is spreading to his visitors, then our reputations are at stake as well as our lives.”

“Precisely why we must be more visible in society,” Aunt Beatrice said firmly. “Regular appearances at social gatherings, proper behavior, demonstration that we’re perfectly rational. We cannot afford to give credence to such rumors.”

Lord Duskmere’s expression was grim. “You’re asking Miss Hartwell to play a dangerous game. Maintaining the pretense of normalcy while being hunted by something that killed your husband.”

“I’m asking her to survive,” Aunt Beatrice replied sharply. “Both the supernatural threat and the social one. Because if society brands her as mad, she’ll have no allies left when our enemy finally makes their move.”

Not only did I have to break Lord Duskmere’s curse and avoid being murdered in a soul anchoring ritual, I also had to smile and make pleasant conversation at tea parties to prove I wasn’t insane.

I was beginning to suspect I would not have the hours in the day.

“There’s something else we should examine,” I said, gesturing at the book in front of me. “My mother’s journal.”

Aunt Beatrice set down the text she’d been studying. “You’ve kept it close,” she said. It was not a question.

“You said we needed to learn from those who walked this path before us,” I said. “This entry, from just weeks before she died. She

writes about ‘feeding the connection’ and warns about something called ‘the pulling darkness.’”

Lord Duskmere leaned forward as Aunt Beatrice peered over my shoulder, both of them reading my mother’s desperate words.

“Dear God,” Aunt Beatrice breathed. “How did I overlook that?”

Lord Duskmere’s face had gone grave. “Your mother wasn’t just documenting her own magical experiences. She was describing being hunted.” His finger traced a particular passage. “Here, where she mentions ‘the collector who knows too much about our family’s gifts.’ Evangeline, I think your mother encountered the same predator who killed Mrs. Ashford’s husband.”

Aunt Beatrice sank into the nearest chair, her face pale. “I should have seen it,” she said. “I have read these pages more times than I can count.” She pressed her hand flat to the cover, then drew it back. “But I read them as a woman reading what was left of someone she loved. I read them for her. For the days she was afraid and the days she was not, for whether she found any peace before the end. It did not occur to me there was a crime buried in them to find.” Her eyes lifted to mine, stricken. “Your mother did not die of consumption, Evangeline, or of any wearing-down of the gift. She was murdered.”

Murdered. I looked down at the journal in my hands. My mother’s handwriting, the letters she had pressed into the paper with such desperate force in those final entries. I had read them as the writings of a woman losing control of her gift. I had read them as warning. They were evidence.

Aunt Beatrice had gone very still. She was looking at the journal too, and I thought she had known this, or suspected it, longer than she had been willing to say.

CHAPTER 12

The Doctor's Visit

Nobody spoke. The fire cracked in the grate. I could feel Lord Duskmere watching me from across the desk, but I did not look up. If I looked up I would have to say something, and I did not know what to say to the fact that my mother had not died. She had been killed.

"Over twenty years apart," Lord Duskmere said quietly, looking from me to Aunt Beatrice. "The same methods, the same systematic approach. Whoever is hunting you now has been perfecting these techniques for decades."

"Which means they've been watching our family all this time," I said.

Aunt Beatrice reached for the journal with trembling hands. "May I?" When I nodded, she flipped through the final entries. "There's more here. She writes about a protective ritual, something involving 'the marriage of opposing magics.' She never finished the notes, but—"

"But it might be the key to breaking my curse and saving your life," Lord Duskmere finished, what looked like understanding flickering in his amber eyes.

Aunt Beatrice looked between us, her expression fierce despite her pallor. "Then we'd better decipher what she did write. This time, we're not facing this monster alone."

She held that a moment, as though the saying of it had cost her, and then gathered her papers and stood.

“There’s tenant correspondence I’ve let pile up,” she said, “and I find I would rather settle a dispute over a boundary hedge than think about any of this for an hour.” She looked at Lord Duskmere once, the look she gave when she had made up her mind about something and did not mean to explain it, and then at me. “I’ll be in the morning room.”

She was halfway to the door when she stopped, her hand on the frame. Not looking at us — looking past us, toward the front of the house. A small, listening stillness, like an animal catching a sound below the range of human hearing. Then she shook her head and continued down the corridor.

Her footsteps faded down the corridor. The library settled into the quiet it kept when it was only the two of us, which I had stopped pretending not to notice. Lord Duskmere was already bent over his research. The morning light caught the side of his face, and I looked away before he could find me looking.

My mother had not been able to hold it. She had written it herself, in the hand that went unsteady toward the end: the gift had grown past what she could give back, and it had taken her. I had read those pages as the record of a woman worn down by her own power. Now I knew better. Something had used what she could not control to kill her, the same as it had killed Aunt Beatrice’s husband. I did not mean to give it the same opening.

I remembered Aunt Beatrice’s words the day she revealed my gift to me: *He understands the balance between power and restraint, the discipline required to keep darkness at bay.* She thought Lord Duskmere might be able to help me control my power.

“I want to learn control,” I said, and took the chair across from him. “Properly. Not pressing it into the desk every time it spills over. I have spent long enough afraid of my own hands.”

Lord Duskmere set down his pen and looked at me, weighing what I'd said. "Show me," he said quietly, closing his book and giving me his full attention.

"Show you what?" I asked.

"How you call to the plants," he said as if it were obvious. "I need to understand what you're doing if I'm going to help you."

"What do you need me to do?" I asked.

"Call to something small. Nothing dramatic. We don't want to drain your energy." His voice had dropped to that familiar growl that sent shivers down my spine. "There are moonbell seeds in the conservatory. Try to encourage one to sprout."

I closed my eyes, reaching out with senses I barely understood toward the glass-walled space adjacent to the library. I could feel the dormant seeds waiting in their pots.

"Gently," Lord Duskmere murmured, and I felt the warmth of his body as he moved closer. "Don't force it. Let the connection build naturally."

Those words. I knew them. And yet his proximity was deeply distracting and made it hard to think. I could hear his breathing, feel the heat radiating from his skin, catch the subtle masculine scent that made me think things I shouldn't.

"I can't concentrate," I admitted, opening my eyes to find his face inches from mine.

"Why not?" he asked, his voice rough.

"Because you're..." I stopped, heat flooding my cheeks.

"Because I'm what, Miss Hartwell?" he asked, his voice dropping into something low and unhurried.

"Too close," I finished quietly.

Something flashed across his features. But instead of moving away, he stepped closer.

"Supernatural abilities often respond to emotional intensity," he said quietly. "Your power feeds on strong feelings. Fear. Anger."

He was looking at my mouth. "Anything strong enough to override the mind."

My breath caught.

"Try again," he commanded softly, his hand coming up to rest on my shoulder. "But this time, don't fight what you're feeling. Use it."

I closed my eyes again, but now I was hyperaware of his touch, of the way his fingers seemed to burn through the fabric of my dress. The connection felt different this time: stronger, more focused, charged with the tension crackling between us.

In the conservatory, I felt a moonbell seed respond to my call. Not the unconscious stirring Lord Duskmere had described from the library, but something controlled and deliberate. The seedling pushed through soil, unfurled delicate leaves, and began to glow with gentle silver light.

"Perfect," Lord Duskmere breathed. I could hear what sounded like approval in his voice. "You're learning to channel the energy instead of simply releasing it."

I opened my eyes to find him watching me with an intensity that made my pulse race. His hand was still on my shoulder, and I could feel the slight tremor in his fingers.

"That was easier than before," I said, surprised by how steady my voice sounded.

"Because you trusted me to guide you," he murmured. His thumb traced a small circle on my shoulder that sent warmth shooting down my arm. "With practice, you'll be able to use your abilities without exhausting yourself."

We stayed frozen like that for a heartbeat, his hand on my shoulder, our faces close enough that I could see the gold flecks in his amber eyes. His gaze dropped to his own hand on my shoulder. Something crossed his face that I hadn't seen before. It was different from the cold shuttering I'd learned to expect. Something

rawer. He withdrew his hand slowly, deliberately, as if any sudden movement might cost him whatever control he was still holding.

He crossed to the window and stood with his back to me.

The words were still in my ears: *Don't force it. Let the connection build naturally.* My words. From the Thornfield paper on channeling botanical energy. He had used them almost exactly.

"You cited my research," I said.

He turned. "I wondered if you would notice. It's a good paper."

"I had never tried to apply it to myself," I said.

A pause.

"No," he said. "And yet."

The silence stretched. He was still at the window. I was still at the table with my palms flat against the wood, and we had both just admitted something we hadn't meant to.

"Tell me about the curse," I said quietly. "How did it happen?"

He moved to his chair, gesturing for me to sit across from him.

"I was in Romania," he began, his voice flat and careful. "I had decided to take a grand tour."

I settled into my chair, sensing this was a story he'd never told anyone.

"I was staying at a remote castle, the guest of a local nobleman who collected rare antiquities. There was a woman there. Beautiful, mysterious, far older than she appeared." His hands clenched. "Madame Corvina. She claimed to be a scholar of local folklore, but there was something about her that set my instincts on edge."

"What kind of something?" I breathed.

"Power. Ancient, terrible power that she wore like other women wore perfume." He met my eyes briefly before looking away. "She made her interest in me quite clear. And when I declined her advances..."

"She cursed you," I finished for him.

"She said I would learn what it meant to be truly monstrous. That I would become the beast I'd always been inside." His voice

dropped to barely above a whisper. "The transformation began that very night."

The pain in his voice made my chest tight. "You're not a beast," I said softly.

"Aren't I?" he countered. "Perhaps the curse simply revealed what was already there."

I wanted to argue. But something in his voice stopped me — the roughness beneath the words, as if they'd been carried alone so long they'd worn smooth. I held still with that, not wanting to be the one who moved first.

The sound of voices in the corridor broke the silence between us. Aunt Beatrice's tone was carefully polite, but I could hear the underlying tension.

"Mr. Blackwood, what an unexpected pleasure," my aunt said. "And you've brought a guest."

Mr. Blackwood's smooth voice carried clearly through the partially open door. "I do hope you'll forgive the intrusion, Mrs. Ashford. But when Dr. Nightingale expressed such interest in Adrian's condition, I felt we should seize the opportunity."

Something cold and precise settled through me. Mr. Blackwood had brought the one man in the county who might understand exactly what he was looking at.

Lord Duskmere and I stared at each other, the moment shattered by the approach of potential danger.

The library doors opened to admit Aunt Beatrice, followed by Mr. Blackwood and a man who could only be Dr. Nightingale. In daylight he appeared less sinister than he had at the ball. A scholarly gentleman with dark skin and the pale, unsettling eyes I had felt across the ballroom the night before, well-tailored, intense in his bearing, awkward in the way of men who have spent more years with books than with people. But those pale eyes...

"Adrian," Mr. Blackwood said with apparent warmth, though I noticed he remained near the doorway. "I hope you'll forgive the

intrusion, but Dr. Nightingale has traveled far to consult about your condition.”

Lord Duskmere rose slowly, his posture carefully controlled but radiating tension.

“Lord Duskmere.” Dr. Nightingale stepped forward with a slight bow that seemed more clinical than respectful. “Your cousin has described some rather unusual symptoms. As a physician specializing in hereditary nervous disorders, I confess myself intrigued.”

“Nervous disorders?” Lord Duskmere’s voice was carefully neutral.

“Inherited melancholia with episodes of violent agitation, enhanced physical responses during periods of distress, marked sensitivity to environmental changes.” Dr. Nightingale consulted notes from his leather portfolio. “Quite fascinating from a medical perspective.”

Mr. Blackwood nodded earnestly. “I thought perhaps a specialist might offer fresh insights. The local physicians have been... less than helpful.”

“Country doctors often lack experience with complex hereditary conditions,” Dr. Nightingale agreed. “Though I must say, the symptoms Mr. Blackwood described are remarkably specific. Almost textbook examples of what some Continental physicians term ‘lunar sensitivity syndrome.’”

My breath caught. He was describing lycanthropy in medical terms, but his choice of words suggested he understood exactly what he was really discussing.

“And you are Miss Hartwell, I presume?” Dr. Nightingale’s pale eyes fixed on me with uncomfortable intensity. “Mr. Blackwood mentioned you’ve been conducting botanical research here. How fascinating that you’d choose such an isolated location for specimen collection.”

"The estate has extensive grounds with many varieties," I said carefully, noting how his gaze lingered on my hands.

"Indeed. I understand you have remarkable success encouraging difficult plants to flourish." He'd said *encouraging*. No country gossip would have handed him that word. It was too precise, too close to what I actually did. "Your family's botanical work has always been noted for its... innovative approaches to cultivation."

Mr. Blackwood shifted uncomfortably. "Dr. Nightingale," he said. "Surely Miss Hartwell's gardening interests aren't relevant to Adrian's medical condition."

"On the contrary," Dr. Nightingale replied smoothly. "Environmental factors often play crucial roles in hereditary nervous conditions. The presence of certain botanical specimens, for instance, can either exacerbate or alleviate symptoms in sensitive individuals."

He was referencing the Hellebore research. He had access to rare sources, too.

"How... scientific," Aunt Beatrice said, her voice giving nothing away.

"Modern medicine requires open minds, Mrs. Ashford. We're discovering that many conditions have environmental or even... shall we say, atmospheric components." Dr. Nightingale's smile was sharp. "Practitioners who ignore these factors often find their treatments woefully inadequate."

"What exactly are you suggesting?" Lord Duskmere asked, his amber eyes steady and hard.

"Simply that your recovery might benefit from a more complete approach. One that acknowledges the full spectrum of contributing factors," Dr. Nightingale said, closing his portfolio with a decisive snap. "I'd very much like to observe one of these episodes firsthand. For diagnostic purposes, you understand."

"Absolutely not," Lord Duskmere said immediately.

"But Adrian," Mr. Blackwood protested, "if Dr. Nightingale could witness the severity of your condition, he might be able to recommend proper treatment. Perhaps even commit—" He caught himself. "That is, perhaps he could suggest appropriate care."

"I think this consultation has been thorough enough," Aunt Beatrice said, rising from her chair in a way that closed the conversation. "Dr. Nightingale, we appreciate your professional interest, but Lord Duskmere's privacy must be respected."

"Of course, of course." Dr. Nightingale bowed again, but his pale eyes lingered on me. "Though I do hope Miss Hartwell will consider my offer of consultation as well. Hereditary nervous sensitivity often manifests in multiple family lines. Early intervention can be... crucial."

"Miss Hartwell is in perfect health," Aunt Beatrice said sharply.

"For now," Dr. Nightingale agreed. "But such conditions can develop suddenly. Particularly under stress, or when exposed to... triggering environments."

As he moved toward the door, he paused to look back at us.

"I'll be staying at the Crown Inn for several more days. Should circumstances change, should Lord Duskmere experience any particularly severe episodes, please don't hesitate to send for me." His pale eyes found mine one last time. "Some conditions, Miss Hartwell, require immediate professional intervention."

After they left, the library felt heavy with unspoken fears.

"He knows," I said quietly. "About both of us."

"The question is what he plans to do with that knowledge," Aunt Beatrice said grimly. She turned to Lord Duskmere. "That wasn't the first physician your cousin has brought to examine you, was it?"

His laugh was bitter. "The fifth, actually," he said. "Or perhaps the sixth. I've lost count. Algie has been remarkably persistent in seeking medical opinions about my condition."

"How thoughtful of him," Aunt Beatrice said dryly. "And I suppose these previous consultations have all reached similar conclusions?"

"That I'm dangerously unstable and should be committed to a private asylum for my own safety and the protection of others," he stated flatly. "Algernon always seems disappointed when I refuse to cooperate with their recommendations."

Aunt Beatrice's dark eyes sharpened. "Disappointed. How interesting."

"You suspect something," I said, reading her expression.

"I suspect," she replied carefully, "that young Mr. Blackwood's concern for his cousin's welfare might be motivated by considerations beyond simple family affection."

Lord Duskmere stopped pacing to stare at her. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

"That he stands to inherit your title and estate should you be declared legally incompetent." Aunt Beatrice's tone was matter-of-fact. "And that a man with such prospects might be more invested in your continued illness than your recovery."

Lord Duskmere said nothing and went still. Then he crossed to the window. I studied the cover of my mother's journal rather than his back.

"The question, then," he said, without turning, "is what we do about Dr. Nightingale."

Aunt Beatrice looked at his back and did not press. "Yes," she said. "It is."

"We already know he's been to the farms," I said. "Whatever reason he gave the town, it was not livestock he was studying. And it was not your condition."

Aunt Beatrice's dark eyes moved to mine. "No," she said. "It was not."

CHAPTER 13

Unexpected Callers

I was selecting which journals to take to Duskmere when Molly burst into my room with barely contained excitement.

“Miss Evangeline!” she cried. “There’s a gentleman caller downstairs. Captain Morrison, asking to see you.”

Something lifted in my chest that I did not want to examine. “Captain Morrison? At this hour?”

Twenty minutes later, I descended the stairs in my finest morning dress, my hair properly arranged and my hands free of the ink stains that usually marked my research days. Captain Morrison rose as I entered the morning room, and I was struck by how genuinely handsome he was in daylight.

“Miss Hartwell,” he said, bowing with military precision. “I hope you’ll forgive the early hour, but I wanted to apologize for not calling sooner after the ball.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Captain Morrison.” I settled into the chair Aunt Beatrice indicated, noting how the morning light caught the warmth in his brown eyes. “I understand you’ve been visiting your sister.”

“Indeed. Lady Catherine Berkshire — my sister — has been eager to hear about the charming botanist I met at the Weatherbys,” he said, his smile easy and unhurried. “She tells me you’ve

been conducting research at Lord Duskmere's estate. The county has had a good deal to say about that, most of it not well informed."

He said it lightly while watching my face. I gathered he had already heard the worst version and was choosing to set it aside.

"I brought you something," he said.

I unwrapped the package to reveal pressed flowers and leaves from exotic locations, each carefully labeled with location and date. "These are extraordinary," I said. "Is this from the Peninsula?"

"Spain and Portugal, yes. That particular orchid grows only in the mountains near Salamanca," he said, leaning closer to point out details. "The local healers claim it has remarkable properties for treating battle wounds."

"How fascinating," I said, studying the delicate petals. Even dried plants still contained their essence and shared sensations with me. "Traditional medicine often incorporates plants that formal science dismisses."

"Exactly what I thought. In my experience, dismissing local knowledge simply because it doesn't fit established theories is the height of arrogance," he said.

The comment made me look at him more sharply. "You believe in folk remedies?"

"I believe in keeping an open mind about things I don't understand," he said, eyes meeting mine steadily. "The world is far stranger and more wonderful than most people are willing to admit."

At one point he turned over a specimen I'd almost passed by, a scrap of common yarrow, barely worth pressing, its label reading only *Badajoz, field hospital, 1811*.

"That one saved more men than any surgeon's kit I carried," he said, with none of the lightness that usually filled his voice. "A village woman walked into our field hospital with an armful of weeds and started packing wounds the surgeons had given up on. The men she treated lived. The surgeons called it coincidence."

"And you?" I asked.

"I'd grown up watching my grandmother do things in her garden that no hired man could replicate," he said. "Plants that thrived under her hands and withered under everyone else's. Catherine inherited some of that, too. Perhaps not all, but enough to make the London gardeners my father hired look quite foolish. Her sick-room cuttings outlast anyone else's, and her kitchen garden gives more than it has any right to in poor summers. She calls it luck; I have not called it that in some years."

He looked up at me, and for a moment his easy warmth was replaced by something quieter and less comfortable. Over by the window, my aunt's needle had stopped moving and did not start again for a breath or two.

I didn't know what to say. Or rather, I knew exactly what to say — that I understood, that the green world had recognized *me* since I was old enough to toddle into my mother's garden, that the yarrow was still singing with the gratitude of every man it had saved. But I couldn't say any of it. So I picked up the next specimen and asked him about Lisbon.

After his carriage cleared the gate, Aunt Beatrice set her needlework into its basket and crossed to the table where the specimens lay in their papers.

"His grandmother kept a garden," she said, as though it were of no great consequence.

"So he said," I agreed.

Her hand rested briefly on the edge of the table. "And a sister who manages the same."

I nodded. "Yes."

She glanced past me toward the window. "He sails soon, I think."

"Yes," I said again.

She lifted the yarrow between two fingers, turned it against the light, and set it back down exactly where it had been. She did

not say anything further about the sister or the grandmother or the posting or the man who had kept the yarrow cutting. She went to see about the afternoon's post and left me with the specimens, which was what I would have asked for if I had known what to ask.

As I touched the Spanish orchid, warmth shot up my arm and I was flooded with powerful emotional imprints.

Desperation and hope intertwined. The frantic prayers of healers working over dying men, the profound relief when fevered patients finally slept peacefully, the satisfaction of knowledge passed from grandmother to granddaughter under starlit skies.

Each pressed specimen carried the same thing. I could feel the hands that had gathered them. A warmth and sureness and centuries of women teaching other women what the earth could do. And threading through all of it, Captain Morrison's quiet respect for traditions that modern medicine dismissed as primitive superstition.

I looked at the yarrow again. A wealthy collector would have thrown it away. A military man had pressed it alongside orchids and kept it. And then had given me this collection of specimens as a gift.

It was quite possibly the most thoughtful gift anyone had ever given me, and the most particularly suited to me. This was far more than bringing me a bouquet he purchased somewhere. He had collected and saved these himself. Brought them all the way from the Peninsula. It told me more about his intentions than anything else could have.

The realization left me staring at his carefully labeled collection with new appreciation. And new guilt.

Molly appeared in the doorway with my evening things, took one look at my face and did not leave.

"He's gone," she said.

"Twenty minutes ago," I said.

"You look like you've been hit with something large and soft," she said. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened," I said. "He brought specimens. We talked about plants. He has excellent manners and genuine warmth and he asked if he could call again. Which he may."

Molly came into the room and settled herself on the window seat without being asked. She had that look she got sometimes. The look that said she had already reached a conclusion and was giving me time to arrive at it on my own, out of courtesy.

"You're going to tell me something I don't want to hear," I said.

"Not at all, miss," she said pleasantly. "I wouldn't dream of it."

I set down the yarrow specimen. It was the Badajoz one, the field-hospital one, and even setting it down felt like a small faithlessness to the woman who had packed wounds in a field at Badajoz and the men who had lived.

"He mentioned his sister," I said. "Catherine. He says she has the same thing his grandmother had — a sort of understanding with plants. He has known about that kind of gift for years." I picked at the edge of the blotter. "He asked what I would plant. If I had a garden and no one to disapprove of my choices."

Molly was quiet a moment. "What did you say?"

"I told him to ask me again in a year," I said. "That I would have time to think of something honest."

"That's true," she said. "But it's also not an answer."

"I know," I said.

"You know what you'd plant," she said.

I did know. I had known since I was eight years old standing in my mother's garden in late summer, feeling the green world hum along my skin.

Molly regarded me with the look I'd seen many times before. "Miss Evangeline," she said, "there are two men."

"Yes," I said.

"One of them is here, and kind, and he asked about your garden," she said. "And the other one told you to go and find yourself a husband."

I looked at her. She looked back without a flicker, as though daring me to find a word in what she'd said that she had not meant.

"I'm not angry at him," I said, and was surprised to find this was at least partly true. I had been angry. I had cried about it quietly while Molly's hands moved through my hair, which was as angry as I was going to let myself be. What remained now was something duller and harder. He had looked at me, seen me, and still reached the same conclusion everyone always reached: that a woman in my position should choose security and call it a future. This was the sensible thing to do.

"I know you're not," Molly said gently. "But you should know the difference between a man who doesn't feel it and a man who's afraid of it. Those are two very different problems."

"Are they?" I said. "They come to the same outcome."

"Not always," Molly said.

Outside the window the garden was going gold in the afternoon light, the kind of light that made everything look as though it could be saved. I had always been too susceptible to that kind of light.

"Captain Morrison is a good man," I said finally. "The feeling between us is simply of the wrong temperature."

Molly nodded, once, and did not say anything about the feeling between me and Lord Duskmere. She didn't have to.

"I am going to let him call," I said, "because the alternative is... I don't know what the alternative is yet."

"Because you're not ready to tell Lord Duskmere he was wrong," she said, not unkindly.

"Because I don't know whether he was wrong," I said. "He may have been entirely right. A woman in my position, with

my family's reputation — a good man offering a good future — perhaps the right response is to take it and be grateful."

"Perhaps," said Molly.

"Stop agreeing with me," I said. "It's unsettling."

She smiled at that. It was not the careful smile she used when she was managing my feelings, but the real one, bright and unsentimental.

"Tobias says Lord Duskmere paced the library three times this morning waiting for you," she said.

I was quiet.

"Tobias says a lot of things," I said.

"Tobias says the library fern has been drooping since last Tuesday," Molly said. "Which I find mildly alarming."

I laughed. It caught me off guard and felt good in a way I hadn't expected. For a moment we just looked at each other across the afternoon light.

"He paced the library," I said.

"Three times," Molly confirmed.

"That means nothing," I said.

"Of course not, miss," she said. "Shall I lay out the green muslin for tonight?"

"Yes," I said. "And Molly — don't tell him I know about the pacing."

"Tell who, miss?" Molly said innocently and went to fetch the muslin.

CHAPTER 14

The Harvest Assembly

The town's assembly room hummed with an energy I'd never experienced at formal society events. Oil lamps cast warm light over oak-paneled walls while fiddle music drifted from the musicians' corner, creating an atmosphere of celebration rather than calculated social display. Prosperous farmers chatted with minor gentry, village merchants spun the wives of tenant families, and even the local blacksmith stood proudly beside his wife in their finest clothes.

"Miss Hartwell." Captain Morrison's warm voice drew my attention. He approached with military bearing softened by pleasure, cutting a fine figure in his dress uniform. "Mrs. Ashford. What a delight to see you both."

"Captain Morrison," I replied warmly, accepting his offered arm. His hands were the same ones I'd felt in the pressed stems. Steady and careful with years of handling fragile things without breaking them.

"Allow me to introduce my sister," he said, guiding us toward a striking woman examining the musicians with evident enjoyment. "Catherine has been eager to meet you since I mentioned your botanical interests."

"Miss Hartwell." Lady Berkshire took both my hands without asking, which should have been presumptuous and was not. She

studied me with open, unguarded attention. "James has been impossible since the Weatherbys'. And I confess, when I heard you'd been doing botanical work up at Duskmere, I told him I simply must meet the woman brave enough to walk into that library and put it to use."

The word *brave* landed with more weight than she may have intended. Or perhaps exactly the weight she intended. I could not quite tell.

"Your brother mentioned you share an interest in unusual plants," I said.

"More than an interest," she said. "I have a garden that has defeated every expert my husband has dragged down from London and a grandmother's journals that defeated me. Perhaps you and Mrs. Ashford might come and see for yourselves."

The musicians struck up for the first country dance, and Captain Morrison bowed. "Miss Hartwell, would you honor me?"

As we took our positions on the floor, his hand found mine with a steadiness I felt myself leaning into. The music started and for a few measures I stopped thinking. A life with Captain Morrison would be like this: warm rooms, easy laughter, a man who would press flowers from every country he visited and label them in his careful handwriting and never once ask me to risk myself for something I didn't fully understand. He would be kind. He would listen. He would never make me afraid of what I might become.

I let the thought stay for the length of the reel. Then the music turned and I caught myself looking past the bright windows toward the dark moors, thinking of a library with an empty chair.

"Your sister is delightful," I said as we moved through the opening figures of another tune.

"She has a talent for seeing through pretense to people's true character," Captain Morrison agreed. "A useful skill in our family."

"Given your military background?" I asked.

“Among other things.” His brown eyes held mine a moment longer than the dance required. “We’ve learned that reputation and reality often have little in common.”

He could have meant my father. He could have meant Lord Duskmere. I let the comment pass and did not ask which.

“I believe in keeping an open mind about situations I don’t fully understand,” I said instead, recalling his words from earlier today.

He nodded in acknowledgment of my — his — words. “Yes,” he said. “Though I confess the thought of you spending time with someone who might be...” He stopped. His jaw worked for a moment, as if swallowing different versions of what to say.

“Dangerous?” I supplied.

“Unpredictable,” he corrected gently. “I know you’re perfectly capable of taking care of yourself, but if Duskmere’s condition makes him volatile...”

“I’m not a foolish girl walking blindly into peril,” I assured him.

“No, you’re a woman whose loyalty and courage might lead you to overlook warnings others would heed,” he said simply as the dance ended and the crowd folded us in.

Before I could respond, Mr. Blackwood appeared beside us, easy smile in place, as though our talk of his cousin had conjured him.

“Captain Morrison, Miss Hartwell. Enjoying the evening?” Mr. Blackwood asked. His pale blue eyes held their usual warmth, though something about his expression seemed calculating.

“Quite thoroughly,” Captain Morrison replied politely. Something in his bearing stiffened.

“Wonderful. These community gatherings can be so... illuminating.” Mr. Blackwood’s gaze swept over the mixed crowd with what looked like careful assessment. “One learns so much about local concerns, local fears.”

Something in his tone snagged, though I couldn’t place what.

"Indeed," Captain Morrison said carefully. "Though I confess surprise at seeing you here. I understood you preferred more... exclusive social circles."

Mr. Blackwood laughed, but the sound felt rehearsed. "One must maintain connections with all levels of society, mustn't one? Particularly when family obligations require... local involvement."

"Family obligations?" I asked.

"My cousin's condition, of course. His episodes have been more frequent lately, more destructive. I've found it helpful to maintain relationships throughout the county in case..." He paused meaningfully. "Well, in case emergency intervention becomes necessary."

The words landed harder than he'd made them sound. *Emergency intervention*. Like having Lord Duskmere committed to an asylum.

Captain Morrison's hand shifted at my arm. A small tightening he probably did not know I could feel.

"But I mustn't keep you from the dancing," Mr. Blackwood said. His pale gaze rested on me a fraction longer than courtesy required before he excused himself with a small bow and moved toward the card tables. He did not look back, though the sense of being watched did not leave with him.

Captain Morrison's hand at my arm eased by a fraction, though he did not remark on it. Aunt Beatrice and Lady Berkshire appeared at my elbow then with the look of two women who had just finished a conversation in another corner of the room.

"Lady Berkshire has been proposing we come down to Berkshire for a few days," Aunt Beatrice said. Her hand settled briefly at the small of my back, which was how she told me that she had already decided and would like me to agree.

"Stay a week with us, if you can be spared," Lady Berkshire said. "The late gardens are still worth walking before the frost

takes them. I have a few specimens no one has yet explained to me, and I would value your opinion.”

“I would like that,” I said. They had arranged it between themselves before proposing it to me. I chose not to notice.

Over Lady Berkshire’s shoulder, where the room thinned toward the servants’ passage, a figure moved that I did not recognize. Not threatening in any visible way — a man in plain dark clothes, circulating with the ease of belonging wherever he chose to stand. By habit, I reached for the plant network the way I had grown accustomed to doing. I let my awareness run along the potted arrangements near the windows, the late flowers in the display cases.

There was a gap around him. A small, unexplained silence where he moved, the way a shadow falls across a window and the light on the other side simply stops.

I looked up. He was already gone.

When I turned back toward the room, Magistrate Whitmore was making his way through the crowd with the face of a man carrying bad news and no good way to deliver it.

Aunt Beatrice and Lady Berkshire drew closer. The conversations nearest us faltered as the magistrate reached the center of the hall.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Magistrate Whitmore announced, his voice carrying across the quiet. “I regret to inform you that there’s been another incident. Millfield Farm was attacked tonight. The family is safe, but the livestock...”

A gasp moved through the room, followed by frightened whispers.

“The same as the others?” called out one of the farmers.

“Completely drained and arranged,” Magistrate Whitmore confirmed grimly. “Every animal positioned around the barn in a pattern. The wounds were identical. Precise cuts, not the work of any beast.” He hesitated, glancing at the ladies present. “And

the same symbols carved into the door. The same as the previous sites.”

I let my awareness run along the rootlines, down through the floor and under the town and out toward the farms. Far along the green thread, at the edge of what I could feel, Millfield answered: the ground there gone corrupted, old and hungry and thorough. And under that register, a second trace.

Captain Morrison’s hand tightened on my arm. Around us the room split: the farmers nodding grimly, their wives pulling children closer, while the gentry reached for rational explanations they did not quite believe.

I looked at Mr. Blackwood. Something on his face did not match the rest of him. Not the farmers’ fear or the gentry’s discomfort, but something I could not place, as if he had been expecting this and hoping he was wrong. Then whatever I had seen was gone, smoothed away like a wrinkle pressed from linen, and Mr. Blackwood stepped forward.

“Cornelius,” Mr. Blackwood said. “Surely, we shouldn’t alarm everyone with talk of unexplainable phenomena. There must be some logical cause we haven’t considered yet.”

The magistrate’s expression shifted slightly, as if reminded of a previous conversation. “Of course, you’re quite right. We mustn’t jump to... hasty conclusions.”

“Surely there’s a rational explanation,” Mrs. Weatherby said loudly. “Wild animals, perhaps, or...”

“Ma’am,” interrupted old Tom Miller, one of Aunt Beatrice’s tenant farmers. “Begging your pardon, but this ain’t the work of any natural creature. We’ve all seen the signs.”

Dr. Nightingale stepped forward from his position by the card tables, his pale eyes bright with what looked like professional interest.

“Perhaps,” Dr. Nightingale said, in the precise, careful tone I had come to associate with him, “we shouldn’t dismiss traditional

knowledge too quickly. I've found that local folk wisdom often contains truths that modern science has not yet reached."

The farmers nearest him straightened. The gentry did not.

"What do you think, Miss Hartwell?" Mr. Blackwood asked me. "You've been studying local flora extensively. Have you observed anything... unusual during your research?"

The question felt like a trap, delivered with such casual confidence that I felt sure he was testing me somehow. Around us, the crowd had fallen quiet, waiting for my response.

"I've found the local plant life quite fascinating," I said carefully. "Though I confess I focus more on botanical properties than the theories."

"Of course," Mr. Blackwood said, but something in his pale blue eyes suggested he didn't believe my diplomatic answer. "Though you've been visiting my cousin's estate quite regularly. Surely Adrian hasn't been encouraging... fanciful research?"

The subtle implication hung in the air: that Lord Duskmere's madness might be influencing my studies, making me susceptible to delusions.

"I find Miss Hartwell's intellectual pursuits rather admirable, myself," Lady Berkshire said, stepping into the conversation and turning it, in one motion, from the topic we were on to another of her choosing. "Perhaps we might return to something lighter. I believe the fiddlers have been neglected."

The crowd resumed around us in pieces. The fiddlers first. Then the card tables. Then the cautious murmur of people deciding which version of the evening they would carry home.

Aunt Beatrice touched the inside of my wrist to let me know we were leaving. We said our farewells and made our exit.

In the doorway I looked back once. Captain Morrison was speaking quietly with his sister. Mr. Blackwood had returned to the magistrate's side. Dr. Nightingale was nowhere I could find.

Outside, the night air hit my face and I pulled my wrap tighter. The potted arrangements on the windowsills had gone still as we passed them. A deep, held stillness I had learned to recognize.

Something in the dark was paying attention.

CHAPTER 15

Jealous Hearts

As our carriage drew to a stop in front of Duskmere, Tobias emerged from the manor with his usual welcoming smile, though I noticed he looked harried.

“Mrs. Ashford, Miss Hartwell,” he greeted us before continuing. “His lordship has been... anxious for your arrival.”

Something in his tone sharpened my attention. “Anxious?”

“He heard about the incident at the Assembly last night,” Tobias said carefully. “When you didn’t come yesterday as planned, and then news of another attack...” He shrugged helplessly. “He’s been pacing the library since dawn.”

We found Lord Duskmere in the library, though “found” was perhaps the wrong word. He looked as if he hadn’t slept, his white shirt open at the throat and his dark hair disheveled in a way that suggested he’d been running his hands through it in frustration.

The strong line of his throat caught the morning light. So did a thin pale line tracking just beneath his collarbone, silvered and old, the kind of mark no accident leaves. I made myself look away before he could catch me looking.

“Miss Hartwell.” His voice was tightly reined, but I could hear the storm brewing underneath. “How good of you to finally grace us with your presence.”

"I'll remind you that these outings have proven necessary after the rumors circulating about us, Lord Duskmere," I shot back.

Aunt Beatrice gathered her gloves from the table without hurry. She had settled the matter before she came, and it showed in how little she needed to say about it. "I believe I will take you up on those rare texts, Lord Duskmere. I shall be in the morning room." She did not add *if you need me*, and she did not look at me as she went.

Tobias remembered word he was owed from the Hartledge grooms and went to collect it, which was true enough to serve and quick enough to notice.

And then we were alone, as we were left alone more and more, whatever the word *chaperoned* was meant to mean.

Lord Duskmere waited until their footsteps faded before moving closer, his amber eyes burning with something I couldn't identify. What looked like anger, but something deeper and more dangerous.

"You went to the Assembly," he said quietly.

"Yes." I lifted my chin, refusing to be cowed by whatever was building behind his eyes. "As any respectable young lady would."

"Tell me, Miss Hartwell," he continued. "Did you think of our work here at all while you were out enjoying social pleasures?"

The accusation stung because it held a grain of truth. I had enjoyed myself with Captain Morrison, had let myself imagine what a normal courtship might feel like. Yet, despite how much I'd come to admire Captain Morrison himself, all I'd wanted the whole time was to be back here with Lord Duskmere.

"I went so that no one could say I had gone mad from being near you." The anger came up fast, and under it something thinner I did not want him to hear. "You know as well as I do what they have whispered since the attacks began: that it spreads, that any woman who sits long enough in your library will start seeing the

horrors you see. Your cousin saw to it the whole room remembered last night, in front of the magistrate and half the county.”

Lord Duskmere had gone very still. The color had left his face, and the muscle in his jaw jumped as if he fought for control.

“So you went to prove your sanity,” he said at last. “And danced with Captain Morrison to show the county what a proper, rational young lady you are.”

“Yes,” I said, and did not look away. “Because if they declare me mad, I’ll be locked away somewhere safe while you face whatever’s coming alone. Is that what you want?”

“What I want—” He stopped abruptly, the heel of his hand pressed to his brow. “What I want is irrelevant.”

“Is it?” I stepped closer, close enough to see the exhaustion etched in his features. “Because you look like a man who wanted something very much and spent the night convincing himself he couldn’t have it.”

His amber eyes snapped to mine with blazing intensity. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what? Tell the truth?” I demanded, taking another step closer. “You were terrified something had happened to me at that Assembly. That’s why you’ve been pacing since dawn.”

“Of course I was terrified!” The words exploded out of him with such force that several potted plants on the windowsill trembled. “Do you have any idea what went through my mind when I heard there’d been another attack? When you didn’t come yesterday as planned, and then word reached me before dawn that Algernon had made a spectacle of you before the whole room, asking them whether my company had begun to unseat your reason?”

I stared at him. In the gray morning light, I saw something behind his face that was not entirely his.

“I imagined finding you drained of life like those livestock,” he continued, his voice breaking slightly. “I imagined being too late,

being useless, being exactly what everyone says I am. A monster who destroys everything he touches.”

His voice had roughened. Altered, as if his throat had more to do than carry speech. The window light caught his eyes when he turned and they were not their usual amber. I had seen that bronze-gold on the night I broke into his library, and I did not say so. His hands closed, opened, closed. By the time he spoke again the tremor had gone out of them; whatever he had nearly become, he had put back.

“I sat here in the library all night, reading every text I could find about soul anchoring rituals, trying to understand what we’re facing, what they might do to you,” he said. “And all the while knowing that if they came for you, I wouldn’t be there to help. That you’d chosen to be somewhere else.”

“I didn’t choose to be away from you,” I said. “I chose to protect us both by maintaining appearances.”

“By encouraging Captain Morrison’s suit,” he said bitterly.

“By doing what you told me to do!” The accusation burst out of me. “You’re the one who keeps pushing me toward him. You’re the one who says I should accept any respectable offer.”

“Because you should,” he said, but his voice lacked conviction. “Because he’s honorable and decent and human, and you deserve all of that and more.”

“And what if I don’t want honorable and decent?” I whispered, my heart hammering against my ribs. “What if I want complicated and dangerous and you?”

The confession hung between us like a lit fuse. Lord Duskmere went still, his breathing ragged, his eyes fixed on my face with an intensity that made me feel stripped bare.

“Miss Hartwell,” he said. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying.” I moved closer, close enough to smell sandalwood and that wilder scent that always unsteadied me in ways I should not allow. “I know that I spent last night

dancing with a good man who could offer me everything I'm supposed to want, and all I could think about was you."

Something shifted in his face. For a heartbeat I thought he might close the distance between us. I saw it in his shoulders, in the way his weight moved forward half an inch before he caught himself.

Instead, he stepped back. Not the sharp withdrawal I knew. Slower, more deliberate, his hands dropping to his sides with the same careful control I'd seen him use after the curse surfaced in the library. But his eyes stayed where they were, fixed on me a moment longer than the rest of him had allowed.

Then he turned and crossed to the desk. He sat and rested his hand on my mother's journal where it lay closed on the blotter.

I should have let the silence stand. Instead, I reached for the first thing that would put ground under my feet.

"Lady Berkshire asked me to her house," I said. "At the Assembly. The country, before the weather turns." I kept my eyes on his hand and not on his face. "Aunt Beatrice has all but accepted for me."

He said nothing. The clock on the mantel went on without him.

"We are into the last of our month," I said. "I did not know whether I could be spared. Whether you would want me gone from the work so long, with the moon as close as it is."

It was as near as I could come to asking him to keep me. The agreement gave him every right to. He had only to say the work needed me here and I would have unpacked my trunk before it was packed.

He looked at the journal. His thumb moved once along the worn edge of the cover and went still.

"You should go," he said.

He said it evenly, the way he might have read a line from one of his ledgers, and the two words went through me cleaner than anything sharp could have.

"Berkshire is good country," he said. "Open air. Distance from all of this. You would do well to be away from Duskmere for a while."

He had said away from Duskmere. He had not said away from him. I heard it regardless, whether or not he meant me to.

"Of course," I said, and was glad my voice held.

"Your mother's journal spoke of protective rituals." He turned to it now, as though we had settled a question of weather and might move on to graver things. "Ways to anchor such power before it consumes the one who carries it. I will keep her papers by me while you are away and make a study of them."

"Without me," I said. I crossed to the desk and lifted the journal out from under his hand.

He looked up.

"There is no sense in both of us bent over the same pages," he said.

I closed both hands around it. "It is my mother's hand on these pages." Aunt Beatrice had taken the journal from me once and I had counted every day she kept it. I had not long had it back, and I would not leave it on his desk for a week while I walked another woman's gardens.

"I want to keep you safe." He held my eyes for the length of a breath. Something moved behind them that did not match the evenness of his voice, a brightness he closed away before I could be sure of it. "Everything else can wait until we have dealt with what stands in front of us."

Everything else. The phrase took in my mother's research and the bargain that had carried me through his door. He had a way of making a thing small by what he set beside it.

"What are you proposing?" I asked.

"That we move beyond theory," he said, rising from his chair. "The conservatory has been calling to you since your first day here. It's time we answered."

Perhaps there would be time for honesty later.

“Ready?” Lord Duskmere asked, his voice smoothed over once more.

I looked at the vast collection of old flora waiting beyond those doors, then at the man who’d just said everything except the one thing that mattered and made my choice.

“Ready,” I lied.

CHAPTER 16

The Memory Moss's Warning

The conservatory doors opened with a soft creak, and immediately I was overwhelmed by the sheer density of the old power within.

The entire space hummed with interconnected power, a living network of the green that had been carefully cultivated over generations.

"My grandmother's collection," Lord Duskmere said quietly, watching my face as I took in the extraordinary sight. "She believed that surrounding herself with protective plants would keep such forces at bay."

I reached out tentatively toward the violets. They perked up at once, their petals brightening as they sensed what I was. The response was so quick, so eager, that I jerked my hand back.

"She believed it went further than that," Lord Duskmere said. "That the Blackwood line had always been closer to what runs beneath things than other families. That the land recognized us, and we had a duty to recognize it back." He was quiet for a moment. "She had her own name for what she thought we were. She had brought it with her from the Bosphorus. I never gave it the weight she wanted."

He touched one of the vine tendrils. It curled toward his fingers without hesitation.

"They want to connect with you," Lord Duskmere observed. "Are you ready to let them?"

Instead of answering, I closed my eyes and extended what senses I had throughout the conservatory. The response was immediate and overwhelming. Dozens of different plant consciousnesses reaching toward me with what felt like desperate affection. But underneath their eagerness, I sensed something else. Fear.

"They're terrified," I said, pressing my palms against a nearby planting table, using the grounding technique he'd taught me.

Danger approaching. Dark magic growing stronger. The hunters circle closer.

"They know," I whispered. "About the people hunting me, about the soul anchoring rituals."

"Can you push back?" Lord Duskmere asked. He was watching me with the same attention he had given the grounding exercise in the library. "Not call anything new. Just steady what is already here."

I tried. I found a thread of thornvine root that ran under the nearest planting bed and pressed reassurance along it the way I would press warmth into cold hands. The vine answered. It unclenched by degrees, its fear pulling back from my touch like a dog deciding not to bolt.

The cost landed in my own chest. Not in the vine. A drop of pressure behind my ribs, a faint tremor in the arm I had braced against the table. The plant was calmer. I was not.

"Good," Lord Duskmere said quietly. "Again. Further this time."

I found a second thread and followed it outward to the conservatory wall, where the ivy had gone tight. I pushed steadiness into the line and held it. The ivy loosened. My vision dimmed at the edges. When I let go, my hands were shaking.

"That is enough," Lord Duskmere said.

I wanted to argue. I did not have the breath for it.

The conservatory had felt what I did. The two threads I had steadied were still open, and through them the rest of the network came, not because I called but because I had proved I could hold without breaking what I held. It opened the way a locked room opens when someone tries the right key.

I could feel the vast network stretching beyond Duskmere's boundaries. Wild flora throughout the county all connected in an elaborate web of silent communication.

"Lord Duskmere," I said, my voice filled with wonder. "I think I know how to find them. The people who killed my mother, who murdered Uncle Richard. The plants have been tracking them all along."

His amber eyes blazed with something that might have been hope. "Then perhaps it's time we stopped running from our hunters and started hunting them instead."

But hunting them through the network would mean learning to use it, and I had only just learned to hold two threads steady. The cost of even that still sat behind my ribs. I did not have weeks to become what my mother had been. I needed answers now, and there was a faster way to reach them.

In the far corner, past the moonbells, a low patch of moss grew thick as a carpet over the flagstones and glowed a faint, sickened green, the way old things glow when they have held too much. I had felt it at the edge of my senses since the doors opened. The others had only sensed the danger coming. This one had kept it.

I went toward it before I had decided to.

"Miss Hartwell," Lord Duskmere warned as I stepped toward the corner. "Start small. Memory moss can be overwhelming even for experienced practitioners."

But I was already moving toward the carpeted corner where the moss grew thickest, drawn by the promise of answers. "I need to know what happened to my mother. What these hunters are planning."

I knelt beside the glowing patch and pressed my palms against its surface. The connection was immediate and devastating.

Screaming. A woman's voice — my mother's voice, I somehow knew — pleading for her life as dark figures circled around her. Blood dripping onto ancient symbols carved in stone.

"Stop," I gasped, but I couldn't break the connection. The memories pulled me deeper.

Another voice, a man's, from years before hers. A face I knew only from the portrait in Aunt Beatrice's study, gone rigid as he realized what was happening. Uncle Richard.

Generations of them, all with gifts, all dying the same horrible death.

The emotional weight of their final moments crashed over me like a tide. Terror, betrayal, desperate love for children they'd never see again.

Moonbells blazed like fallen stars, their silver light turning harsh and blinding. Bloodroot roses wept crimson tears that hissed where they hit the floor. Every plant in the space writhed as if in agony, reflecting the death throes I was experiencing through the moss.

"Evangeline!" Lord Duskmere's voice seemed to come from very far away. "You need to stop!"

But I couldn't. The memories had me in their grip, showing me flash after flash of people who'd died because they'd trusted the wrong person, because they'd been isolated and vulnerable and...

Strong hands grabbed my wrists, yanking them away from the moss. The sudden disconnection sent me stumbling backward, but Lord Duskmere caught me, spinning me around and pressing me against the potting bench with enough force to rattle the clay pots lined up on its surface.

"Look at me," he commanded, his amber eyes blazing as they held mine. "Feel my hands. Hear my voice. You're safe. You're at Duskmere with me."

I was shaking, I realized. Shaking so hard my teeth chattered and tears I didn't remember shedding were streaming down my cheeks. Lord Duskmere's hands on my wrists were the only solid thing in a world that had suddenly become filled with ghostly screams and phantom pain.

"I saw them die," I whispered. "All of them. I felt what they felt when —"

"I know." His voice was rough with something that might have been his own remembered suffering. "Memory moss makes you experience the past. That's why it's dangerous."

He was so close I could feel the heat radiating from his body, could see the gold flecks in his amber eyes and the effort with which he held his hands steady. His hands had moved from my wrists to my shoulders, holding me steady against the bench as the chaos around us gradually settled.

The moonbells dimmed to their normal gentle glow. The roses stopped weeping. But the air between us still crackled with residual power and something far more dangerous.

"You are white to the lips," Lord Duskmere murmured, his gaze searching my face. "Magical exhaustion. You pushed too hard, too fast."

"I needed to know," I said, my voice still shaky. "I needed to understand what we're facing."

"And what did you learn?" His thumb traced along my collarbone where my dress had shifted. The touch ran through me warmer than it should have, in a body that was already close to the end of what it could hold. "Besides the fact that you're even more reckless than I feared?"

The gentle rebuke made me want to lean into his touch rather than defend myself. "They're building to something. All these attacks, all these deaths. They're not random."

"A purpose that requires precision timing," Lord Duskmere said, his expression growing grim. "Which means they're not just

going to grab you off the street. They'll wait for the right moment, the right conditions."

"The full moon," I breathed, understanding flooding through me. "That's when they plan to complete whatever ritual they've been building toward."

Not any full moon. The Hunter's Moon approached, the old-year's full, and the villagers told tales about this moon. When the veil grew thin as the year turned.

His hands tightened on my shoulders. "Then we have until the moon turns."

The shaking had stopped. I did not know when. The weight of what was coming hung between us, but my body had quieted into something else, something that was not calm and was not fear. I was aware of him the way I was aware of the ground beneath my feet.

"Lord Duskmere," I started, not sure what I meant to say.

"You're still recovering from the memory connection," he said preemptively. He didn't step away. "Your senses are heightened. You're not thinking clearly."

"I'm thinking more clearly than I have in weeks," I countered, my hands coming up to rest against his chest. I could feel his heart hammering beneath my palms. "I'm thinking we may not have time for everything we need to say to each other."

For a heartbeat, I thought he might finally stop fighting whatever was burning between us.

Then he did.

His mouth came down on mine. His hands moved from my shoulders. One slid up my neck and into my hair. The other settled firm at my waist.

I had been held against the potting bench. Now I was held against him, and my whole body registered the change.

Some part of me was aware of clay pots scraping against the wood behind us and did not care.

The footsteps reached me a moment before her voice did.

"Miss Evangeline! Lord Duskmere! You need to come quickly!"

Molly called through the doors.

Lord Duskmere went still against my mouth for the space of one breath. Then he stepped back. His hands had to release me in pieces, one part of me at a time, as though he did not trust himself to let go of all of me at once. His pupils had gone wide, the amber burned through to gold the way it had when the symbols burned on his grounds. He turned his face toward the doors before I could name what I had seen.

For a breath between the gold and the turning, something had come through that was not the kiss. A flash of something I had no name for. It was gone before I could look at it straight.

"What is it?" he called, his voice admirably steady.

"Lord Duskmere, please," Molly said breathlessly as she appeared in the doorway with Tobias close behind her. "You must come. We've found something."

Lord Duskmere's hand went to the back of his neck, then through his hair in a single pass, as though he were readying himself to receive a caller. The gold had gone out of his eyes.

"Go on," he said to her. "I will follow directly."

Molly glanced between us with a look I did not want to read, dipped a shallow curtsy, and withdrew. Tobias followed.

I did not move. My mouth was still warm where his had been. My hand moved toward my lips and I stopped it, because I did not know what Molly had seen and I did not know what my face would do if I touched the place he had just left.

His face had gone still. He settled his coat at the shoulders, a small adjustment. His hands had been in my hair a moment ago. Now they were at his sides, quiet, as though they belonged to a man I had not met.

"You should come, if you are able," he said, still without turning.

“Yes,” I said.

My voice sounded steady enough to pass.

He moved past me toward the doors without looking back.

CHAPTER 17

The Pattern Emerges

The walk from the conservatory to the library was seven paces. I counted them because I could not think of anything else that would hold in my head. If I did not count, my hand would keep trying to find its way to my lips.

Lord Duskmere walked ahead of me and did not offer his arm. I had not expected him to.

Aunt Beatrice was at the long table when we came in, a ledger open in front of her and an ancient text, one of Lord Duskmere's, I thought, set aside on the blotter. Her eyes went to Lord Duskmere first and then to me. She did not ask anything, though I felt her looking.

Molly and Tobias had come through ahead of us. Molly's cap was crooked. Tobias had dirt on his sleeve. They looked like two people who had run.

"It's about Millfield Farm," Molly said in a rush. "What I found there. You're not going to believe what all those attacks really mean."

"Tell us what you discovered," Aunt Beatrice said, looking up from the ancient text she'd been examining.

I took a chair on the far side of Aunt Beatrice. I did not trust myself to sit nearer Lord Duskmere. Whatever was still loose in me was better contained by the width of a table. I needed to be a

woman who could listen to sentences about farms and symbols. I was not that woman yet. I folded my hands in my lap and kept them there.

Molly pulled a folded paper from her apron pocket, her Irish accent thickening with excitement. "It's the attacks, ma'am. They're not random like the magistrate thinks. When you map them out..." She unfolded what appeared to be a rough drawing of the local area with X marks scattered across it. "Look at the pattern."

Molly slid the paper across the table to me. For a moment the marks were only marks, ink shapes my eye refused to organize while my body was still elsewhere. Then I made myself look. Whatever was still humming in me would have to wait.

"It's a circle," I breathed, seeing it come together.

"Aye, miss. A great big ritual circle, with something important right in the center." Molly's finger traced the pattern. "The village folk have been talking, you see. Wondering why some farms get hit and others don't. Why the attacks follow the old boundaries from the Saxon times."

Lord Duskmere's expression had grown increasingly grim as he studied Molly's map. "And what's at the center of this pattern?"

At some point I had stood. I had not noticed standing. The width of the table I had so deliberately put between us was no longer there. We were both leaning over the same edge of paper and his sleeve was near my hand. I did not move my hand.

"That's the strangest part, my lord," Molly said, glancing between us uncertainly. "It isn't Duskmere. The attacks come close to here, but they don't point here. The center is somewhere we haven't been watching." She traced a line with her finger. "Thornfield Abbey."

Thornfield Abbey. The ancient home that had once been my mother's family seat.

My hands went cold on the table's edge. "What?"

"That's where all the attack sites point to, if you draw the lines proper," Molly said. "Mrs. Carmichael says in the old days, that's where they used to hold the harvest rituals. Back when folks still remembered the old ways."

The herb-stall woman, then. The one who had gone knowing-quiet and shut up her stall when Molly described the symbols. Molly had said she would go again. She had kept her word.

Aunt Beatrice had gone very pale. "Harvest rituals?"

"Mrs. Carmichael says the old harvest rites were worked on Thornfield land, ma'am, and that such places are easier to use again," Molly said, her voice dropping.

"They're not just hunting me," I said, the pieces falling together with horrible clarity. "They're preparing Thornfield as their ritual site. That's why they've been circling it with these attacks, charging the boundaries with blood and death."

"But there's more," Tobias said. "About those shadow creatures. The ones that have been sighted near the farms."

I felt Lord Duskmere tense beside me. "Go on," he said.

"I have been having words with the night-watch men at the other estates these past weeks," Tobias explained. "Seems like the creatures were spotted before several of the attacks. At the farms they visited, there was always someone touched by the old ways, miss. Herb lore, second sight, storm-sense. They were choosing their ground." His jaw worked. "They say they come before, miss. Not instead of. The hounds don't take anyone. They find them. Whatever comes after takes them."

The room had gone quiet around us. I could hear the clock in the hall, Aunt Beatrice's slow indrawn breath, the shift of a coal in the grate. My mouth had been kissed less than a quarter hour ago. Now my mother's family land was a circle drawn for my undoing. The two facts would not sit beside each other in my head. I made them.

"How long until they're ready?" Lord Duskmere asked.

"Mrs. Carmichael thinks they need one more ring of attacks to complete the pattern," Molly said. "But she's not sure what kind. The old woman just keeps muttering about 'the final binding' and how it needs to be different from what's come before. That the old rituals always had stages, and we've only seen the beginning."

I wasn't surprised Molly had earned Mrs. Carmichael's trust in the end. Molly always had a way.

Lord Duskmere was studying the map with focused intensity. "If they're moving to a final phase, they'll need to act before the full moon. That doesn't give them much time to prepare."

I told them, as briefly as I could, what the memory moss had shown me: generations of people with gifts like mine, hunted and killed. Uncle Richard among them. And behind all of it, a presence I had felt before. I also told them what the plants had warned me before the visions took hold. That the danger was drawing closer.

"I am still expected at Lady Berkshire's estate tomorrow," I said. "Refusing would be remarked upon."

Lord Duskmere went very still at the word *Berkshire*. His hand rested on the map. The knuckles tightened once and the breath he drew came in through his nose. One finger moved along the edge of Thornfield's name. "If you go," he said at last, and let the sentence stop there.

The unfinished sentence sat between us. Something in me dropped without sound. I made myself meet his eyes. He did not meet mine.

"No," Aunt Beatrice said, not to me. "We cannot afford to appear suspicious. I will write to Lady Berkshire that we can spare only a day after all. A cancellation would be remarked on; a shortened visit would not."

"Agreed. We can make it a day trip," I said. "I'll go with Aunt Beatrice, maintain appearances, and return in the evening."

Lord Duskmere had been studying the map. He did not look up. "Stay the week Lady Berkshire offered," he said.

I had not expected that. "The week?"

"You would be away from Duskmere." His finger had not moved from Thornfield's name. "And away from the place they are preparing. Until we know more, it is the safer ground."

He was right. His reasoning was the kind I could not have rebutted without sounding foolish. None of it made the thing in my chest stop dropping.

"We had only just agreed on a day," I said. My voice came out steadier than it was.

He still did not look up. "Reconsider."

I looked at the top of his bent head. Just moments before his hands had been in my hair. Now he could not lift his eyes from a map long enough to ask me to be gone for a week.

Whatever had been kept warm in me since the conservatory went quiet. I could not tell whether he was asking because he wanted me safe or because he wanted the distance. In a man who seldom said what he meant, the two did not always separate.

"I will think on it," I said, which was as much as I could manage.

Aunt Beatrice's hand moved once on the ledger, a small gesture I took for approval of the non-answer.

We left soon after. Lord Duskmere did not come to the door, and Tobias saw us into the carriage without saying more than was needed.

The carriage out of Duskmere lurched once at the turn of the drive and then steadied. The October light was going. The lamps swung gently inside, throwing shifting squares across our laps, and none of us spoke.

Aunt Beatrice sat opposite me with her gloved hands folded, looking through the window glass at something I could not see. Molly held her small basket in her lap.

I held my reticule in my lap because if I put it down I would have to do something else with my hands.

The road wound past the edge of Duskmere's park and into the dark between hedgerows. The quiet in the carriage was not the quiet of a settled household returning from a visit. It had a waiting in it.

"You will want to write to Lady Berkshire this evening," Aunt Beatrice said, still to the window. "Before the post goes in the morning."

"Yes, Aunt," I said.

She did not look at me. I had known her long enough to take that for a kindness.

"Captain Morrison will be there," I said. "For the week. If I stay."

"He will," she said.

"He is to sail to India," I said.

"Yes," she said, and did not try to soften it.

"He does not press," I said. "He has not."

I stopped. My voice had gone thin, and I did not want Molly to hear it across the carriage.

"You fear it," Aunt Beatrice said.

"Yes," I said.

"Which part?" she asked.

I had not expected the question. I had meant to speak about climate and distance, to have her nod, to have the fear fit inside a word I could set down. She had asked without gentleness, which was a thing only she could give me.

"The water," I said. "The length of it. Six months from anyone who knew me before."

I feared what it might look like. A woman alone with a man, no one nearby who remembered who she had been before him.

Aunt Beatrice was quiet long enough that I heard the carriage wheels count the ruts.

"I would go with you," she said.

I turned toward her. She had said it as though it were already a matter of household record.

"Aunt Beatrice," I said.

"I am a widow with a house I do not need and a ledger a steward could keep for me," she said. "If you go to India, I will go to India. I am not offering. I am telling you."

My eyes had begun to sting. I kept them on the moving square of light on my glove and did not let them do anything worse.

"And me, miss," Molly said.

She spoke without raising her voice. She was looking at the basket at her feet, and her Irish lilt had gone almost flat, which I had come to know in her as the register of a thing she would not be talked out of.

"Molly," I said.

"I would go, miss," Molly said.

"Molly, you would have to leave," I began, and did not finish.

I had looked at her, and what I had been going to say stayed in my mouth. Her chin was up. Her hands were steady on the basket. She was not looking at me and she was not looking at Aunt Beatrice. She was looking at the basket, which I took to mean anywhere else would have cost her too much.

I thought of Tobias in the library that afternoon, the dirt on his sleeve, the gravity in him when he had spoken of shadow creatures. I thought of Molly's cap crooked and Tobias close behind her at the door. I thought of a great many small things I had seen and not added together because it had not been mine to add.

It was in her face. I did not say what I read there. I did not think she would have wanted me to.

"Thank you, Molly," I said, and I set it down carefully between us, as I would have set something breakable on a shelf.

She nodded once and kept looking at the basket.

Aunt Beatrice's hand moved across the seat and closed briefly over mine. She did not say anything, and she did not squeeze. She put her hand there and then took it away.

The carriage turned out of the hedgerows into the lane before Ashford. The trees thinned. I could see the gable of the house ahead in the last thin light.

We were three women in a carriage with no man between us, and we had said what we had said. None of us looked at one another for the rest of the ride.

The coachman brought us through the Ashford gate at full dark.

The house was cold inside, October cold but not yet winter. The fire in the morning room had burned to embers while we were out, and the housemaid had not yet gone in to build it up. Aunt Beatrice told Molly she would want warm water in half an hour, and Molly went to the kitchen without looking at me, which I took for a mercy.

I took off my gloves in the hall and gave my bonnet to the housemaid. I did not go upstairs. I went through the morning room and into the small study beyond it, the one with the writing desk that had been my mother's before it had been mine, and I sat.

I did not light a second candle. One was enough.

I made myself do something I had not let myself do since Lady Berkshire had taken my hands at the door of the Assembly.

I let myself picture it.

An image of a room came first, a room I had never seen. Shutters stood half-open. The light was not English light. A writing desk under the window, my father's papers spread across the surface. On my own desk, in a house whose name was neither my father's nor my aunt's nor Duskmere's. The room was one a man could cross without incident.

Captain Morrison sat in a reading chair on the other side of the rug. He was not looking up. He did not require me to look up. A cup of tea was going cold at his elbow because he was the sort of man who forgot tea. The window stood open a little because I

had asked for it. His hand turned a page. The silence between us was the silence of two people at work.

A child stood at the edge of the room with a book turned the wrong way up. I had never let the face settle, and I did not let it settle now. The child was not asking for anything. The child was not in danger.

I did not know how to imagine the climate. I would have to learn the heat. I would see plants I had read of and never touched.

It would be a long life. A life a person could grow old inside.

The room held the picture for what felt like a long time, and the picture did not break. That was the part I had been afraid of. I had been afraid that letting myself see it would make it impossible or would make it so possible I could not leave it. It did neither.

I set the picture down carefully.

The fire in the study was nearly out. I stood at the window for a minute before going up. The night was clear, the gravel of the drive was pale under it, and somewhere out past the reach of the lamps was a road I would be on in the morning.

I had not promised myself anything. I had not taken anything back.

It was enough to go on with.

CHAPTER 18

Lady Berkshire's Garden

The Berkshire estate sprawled across rolling hills in the late October light, all honey-colored stone and climbing ivy that seemed to glow even at that hour. The carriage drive was lined with copper beeches gone nearly amber, their leaves catching what remained of the afternoon. Through the west gate I could see the kitchen garden, trim and thriving past the point that ordinary care could explain. The roses on the south wall were still in bloom, weeks past when roses had any business blooming.

Every tree, every flowering shrub, every blade of grass seemed to pulse with gentle awareness. Not the deep, intent power of Duskmere's grounds, but something subtler and older, like a house that has been kept by good hands for a very long time.

Near the gate an elm stood with a carving in its bark worn smooth by decades of someone's hand touching it in passing. A small habit. Nothing anyone would have noticed who wasn't already paying attention to what plants paid attention to.

I had been attending to the plant network since we left Ashford House. It was easier than attending to Aunt Beatrice's silence. She had decided to wait rather than press, and I had known her long enough to tell that silence from her others.

I was grateful for the silence. Molly had fallen asleep before we cleared the Ashford border, her head against the window glass. She would not have thanked me for noticing it.

I had come here on purpose. Captain Morrison was a good man who had asked to see me and I owed it to myself to look at what was actually in front of me rather than what I had left behind at Duskmere. The green voices of the county as we passed through it made that easier than it should have been.

We arrived around dusk, later than intended. Lady Berkshire came to meet us herself at the door, which told me she had been watching for the carriage. Her brown eyes — so like her brother's — were warm with welcome.

Aunt Beatrice was already apologizing for the hour before we were properly through the door.

"Please don't," Lady Berkshire said, though she was smiling as she said it. "I have been at this window since four o'clock, inventing reasons the roads might have kept you. You have spared me the worst of them simply by arriving." She stepped back to let us pass. "Come in. You must be frozen through."

Captain Morrison was in the drawing room when we were shown through. He rose from a chair he had evidently occupied for some time, a book laid open on the arm beside him.

"Miss Hartwell," he said. "Mrs. Ashford." There was an ease in the greeting that was not a formal welcome. He had been here for weeks. This was his sister's household. I was the one arriving into his ordinary evening.

We ate late in the smaller dining room, candles lit against the early dark. The dinner was good and not long. Lord Berkshire's place at the head of the table was empty. He had been called to his regiment some weeks past, Lady Berkshire said when she saw me note it, and was not expected home before the month was out, if then. She said it without complaint and passed the bread.

Captain Morrison spoke about the south-field drainage work he had been helping oversee, which told me he had been making himself useful rather than simply present. He asked Aunt Beatrice about the roads from Ashford with a specificity that suggested they had been in correspondence. She had not told me.

Later, when the plates had been cleared and the wine was all that remained, Aunt Beatrice asked him where he had learned to speak of soil as though he meant it.

Captain Morrison turned his glass a quarter and did not drink. "Spain," he said. "A woman came through the field hospital at Badajoz with her apron full of yarrow. The surgeons were short of everything and let her by mostly to be rid of her. She packed a wound of mine that had already been given up on." He set the glass down. "I kept yarrow in my kit for the rest of the war after that and used it when the surgeons had run out of everything else. I made a point of not turning a woman away out of impatience and calling it judgment. It is cheaper to listen."

"And the yarrow?" Aunt Beatrice asked.

"I am here," he said.

He turned the talk back to the roads before the table could make anything of it.

Afterward, Lady Berkshire walked Aunt Beatrice to her rooms herself. Captain Morrison said good night at the foot of the stairs.

Molly was already in my room when I came up, the traveling case unpacked and the bed turned down. She looked at my face with the brief assessing look she had, asked no questions, and left me to it.

I had expected to lie awake. I did not.

The next morning, I came down to find the morning room already lit, a fire made up against the October chill. Lady Berkshire was at the small writing desk near the window. Aunt Beatrice was at the far end of the table with her own letters, managing some correspondence she had described the previous evening as

considerably overdue. She raised her eyes when I came in, nodded once, and went back to her writing. Captain Morrison had the chair nearest the fire with a newspaper folded back to the inside pages.

They did not appear to have been speaking. The silence between them was the silence of people who did not need to fill the space with sound. Lady Berkshire finished her sentence and turned to me with alertness.

"You slept," she said. A statement, not a question.

Captain Morrison looked up from his newspaper. He asked whether I took milk and poured before I had finished answering.

A framed botanical study on the near wall caught my eye: lavender, rendered in careful detail, done by hand, with an accuracy that only comes from someone who has looked at a plant for a long time before putting pen to paper.

"Did you paint that?" I asked.

Lady Berkshire glanced at it. "I did. My grandmother taught me." She set down her pen. "She said the only way to learn a plant properly was to draw it first, because drawing forced you to slow down enough to see."

"She was right," I said. "I couldn't have explained why until I was much older."

"Neither could I." She smiled. "James thought she was simply eccentric. He revised the opinion."

Captain Morrison set his newspaper down. "I revised it," he said, "when I was eleven years old and she identified that the hedge at the eastern boundary was dying three weeks before the gardener noticed. She said it from the inside of a moving carriage."

Lady Berkshire looked at him with fondness. She picked up her pen.

Captain Morrison turned to me. "Has your research ever turned up anything like that?" he asked. "Observations that didn't fit the standard explanations."

"Yes," I said. "Companion plantings that produced effects the standard texts couldn't account for. Growth patterns without ordinary cause. I had been documenting them for years without knowing what I was documenting."

He was quiet a moment. "And has any of it been published?" he asked.

I had been asked a great many questions by a great many men over a great many dinners. I had been asked more than once whether the botanical vocabulary was not terribly dry. I had been told I must have considerable patience for this sort of work and asked whether I had considered leaving it to those with proper training. I had not often been asked if I had published. I could not remember the last time one of them had listened to my answer and then asked a second question that followed from the first.

"Some of it," I said. "Under a different name."

He did not ask the name. He only nodded.

"She would have approved of Miss Hartwell," Lady Berkshire said, which was plainly meant for me rather than her brother. I turned to find her already looking at me, with an expression I could not quite read. Something that had been waiting to be said.

The potted fern on the low table beside me unfurled a new frond with unusual energy. I had not been watching it.

We did not go to the gardens until that afternoon, when the light had turned low and amber over the east wall. Aunt Beatrice walked with us as far as the kitchen garden and then turned back toward the house, quietly, leaving us to ourselves. She had arranged it so, I suspected.

The kitchen gardens were impressive and conventional: neat rows of vegetables and herbs, all healthy and well-tended. But as we moved toward the ornamental areas, I began to sense something different.

"I built this section from my grandmother's cuttings," Lady Berkshire said as she led us through an archway into a shaded

garden unlike anything I had seen outside of Duskmere. "She taught me the combinations. I brought what I could carry when I married."

She stopped at a rose trained along the inner wall, white going to blush at the center, older in the wood than anything else in the bed. "This one I carried myself," she said. "Wrapped in wet cloth on my knees the whole way here, while my mother told me a married woman had better things to think about than a cutting. It took the first spring. I have never quite forgiven it for how easily it took, after all that worry." She touched a leaf and moved on.

The space had been arranged with such instinctive grace that it felt almost self-made, as though the plants had chosen their own companions and positions. Someone with botanical sensitivity had shaped this place, listening rather than forcing.

"It's extraordinary," I said.

"Grandmother always claimed the plants would tell her what they wanted," Lady Berkshire said, with a laugh that tried to make light of it. "Where they preferred to grow, which companions suited them, when they required special care. As a child I thought it magical. When I grew old enough to have opinions, I thought it was perhaps a pleasant way of paying attention dressed up as intuition."

"And now?" I asked.

She looked at me sidelong. "Now I have sat in the center myself a few times and found that I could sometimes tell, before I looked, which plant had a problem. The salvia that needed splitting. The rose that had gotten black spot. Something like a very strong awareness that a thing was wrong."

"Yes," I said. "That is one way to describe it."

She glanced at me then, and waited to see what I would do with what she had said.

"It began when I was very young," I said. "And it has never entirely left. I understand it rather better now than I used to."

Lady Berkshire was quiet for a moment. Then: "Grandmother's notebooks are full of planting advice that doesn't quite make sense by ordinary botanical science. Companion plants placed far outside their usual families. Protective perimeters around the kitchen garden she claims reduced pest damage. She writes as if the plants had preferences and she was simply respecting them." She paused. "I have always respected them. I did not know there was someone else who would understand what I meant by that."

The lavender, I realized, had been cultivated alongside plants with protective properties, gradually absorbing their influence under years of careful tending. Lady Berkshire had been continuing something her grandmother began, carrying it forward without fully understanding what she was carrying.

Or had she known?

The question went home with me to the house and sat at dinner and did not leave when I went to bed.

The third morning I came down early, before Lady Berkshire was up.

"Use the library while you have it," Aunt Beatrice had said the previous evening, setting down her own papers. "I'll keep Lady Berkshire company."

I had not asked how she knew I was restless. The guilt of it must have been sitting on my face for a day and a half at least. Elsewhere in the county the investigation continued. The pattern was building. I was here looking at pressed flowers and eating good dinners.

Captain Morrison was already in the breakfast room. He looked up as I came in.

"Is there a library?" I asked.

He rose and led me down the east corridor. At the library door he stopped and turned to me.

"Catherine brought Grandmother's books when she married. Lower west shelves. You'll know them by the green bindings.

Catherine understood them well enough to know she'd use them." He paused. "She and Grandmother were alike, that way."

He left without waiting to be thanked.

I found Lady Berkshire's own collection without difficulty. She organized by subject, practical, a reader's shelves. The grandmother's volumes were different. The lower west shelves were bound in a faded green that was its own shelfmark, if you knew the convention. The spines had been annotated in a small precise hand, the same hand I had seen on the botanical study in the morning room.

I pulled the first volume: a household compendium of botanical records going back four generations. Planting dates, growth notes, weather observations. Nothing unusual.

The second volume was different.

It was a botanical register, older than the first, the pages brown at the edges. The plant entries were standard enough. But the margins had been annotated in that same hand with names and dates that had nothing to do with planting schedules. Family names. Thornfield, appearing twice beside a notation about moonbell cultivation near the Abbey, the date rubbed faint. Hartwell twice, with small question marks. Blackwood in a separate entry that covered half a margin, struck through once and rewritten below the line as though the first attempt had not been accurate enough.

I turned the page. Carmichael. Miller. More names I'd heard all my life growing up in this region. I sat with the register for some time.

Captain Morrison appeared in the doorway in the early afternoon. He was carrying a tray.

"Tea," he said. "And bread."

He set the tray beside the register, where I could reach it without moving the pages. "Catherine will want to go to the cutting garden when she's finished her letters, if you'd like to come along when you're done."

He left.

I ate the bread. I drank the tea. I went back to the register.

The visit had settled into itself. Aunt Beatrice and Lady Berkshire had found a rhythm in their mornings. I had finished with the register and was carrying only the low persistent feeling of something half-understood, a question I had not yet found the right form for.

That afternoon, after the cutting garden, Captain Morrison and I walked the south path back to the house while Lady Berkshire and Aunt Beatrice followed more slowly behind.

He talked about the posting to India — not as an invitation, not pressing, just describing it. The botanical richness of the monsoon season. The length of the posting, three years at minimum, possibly five.

Whether someone doing the work I did could continue it there, with access to specimens that had not been cataloged in European collections. The research institutions in the city. He described it the way you describe a thing you have thought about carefully and are setting out for examination, not persuasion.

“You have been doing something at Duskmere,” he said. “I would not ask what. But a woman does not give a place that much of herself for the wages of it.” It came quicker than the rest of what he had said, and he looked at the south wall while he said it, not at me. Then the evenness came back. “India has gardens of its own. That is all I meant by any of it.”

I looked at the wall where he had looked, rather than at him. It was the only unguarded thing he had said in three days, and he had said it of a place that was not this one. He would not press it, and that was the difficulty: pressure I could have refused cleanly. This was not pressure.

He picked the subject back up as easily as he had set it down and did not return to the other thing.

I listened to him talk about India. I thought about my father's papers. I thought about my latest E.H. Thornfield essay I had not finished. A room with light from a direction I did not yet know. A desk that would be my own.

The picture was not wrong. Nothing in it was wrong.

I turned and looked back at Lady Berkshire and Aunt Beatrice walking together, their heads bent toward each other in the absorbed way of women who have found common ground. Captain Morrison was pointing toward the south wall to explain something about the drainage work. I watched his hands as he described it. They were the same hands that had pressed yarrow at Badajoz, that had poured my tea without being asked, and that had set a tray in a library and left without requiring anything in return.

I understood, walking back across that estate in the last of the October afternoon, that this was the man I had been waiting to find. I also understood, with the same clarity and considerably less comfort, that I was not standing in a room with Lord Duskmere.

The lavender border along the path sent a thread of warmth through the root system into the ground beneath my feet.

I kept walking.

CHAPTER 19

The Garden Holds

The morning had broken clear and cold, the first proper sun since our arrival, and Lady Berkshire proposed the ornamental garden after breakfast. Aunt Beatrice came as far as the roses and settled on the low wall with her letters.

Lady Berkshire was mid-sentence on her grandmother's rose cultivation practices when the plant network contracted.

Not the low unease I had learned to read since the marks appeared at Duskmere. A sharp flinching-back, all at once, every rooted thing within my reach pulling away from something at the estate boundary. The lavender at my elbow went rigid.

"Miss Hartwell." Captain Morrison's hand shot out to steady me as I stumbled. "What's wrong?"

Before I could answer, the temperature dropped.

Then I saw them.

They came out of the tree line low to the ground, their coats drinking the morning light where it fell on them, their red eyes fixed on us.

At first, I didn't have a name for them. Then I remembered Tobias's report of dark creatures and my own research.

Shadow hounds.

"Good God," Captain Morrison said. "What in hell are those things?"

“Run,” I said, grabbing Lady Berkshire’s arm. “We need to get to the house. Now.”

But even as we turned toward the manor, another shape slid out of the gardens to our flank, and a third came up from the orchard path. Three of them, perhaps four. A hunting party.

“The conservatory,” Lady Berkshire said, pointing toward a glass structure attached to the house’s east wing. “It’s closer, and the doors are reinforced.”

We ran, but the shadow hounds were faster. There would be no time to get the doors open behind us.

“Get behind me,” I said as we reached the conservatory doors, pulling ahead of the others. “All of you, get behind me now.”

“James, do as she says,” Lady Berkshire snapped as Captain Morrison hesitated.

The largest shadow hound launched itself toward us with inhuman speed, claws extended and mouth gaping to reveal teeth like shards of midnight. I pressed my palms against the ground and reached out through the plant network with every ounce of power I possessed.

Stand with us, I called down the root lines. *Hold what you can.*

The garden answered at once. From the near bed of the walled garden, a rose threw its canes forward in a thorned whip. Lavender burst into clouds of stinging essence. The nearest hedge closed ranks like a living wall. Aunt Beatrice rushed to my side.

“Remarkable,” Captain Morrison breathed, his eyes wide yet already steadying with military calm. “Miss Hartwell, can your... allies create a defensive perimeter while we reach better cover?”

I nodded, sweat beading on my forehead from the effort of coordinating so many plant consciousnesses at once.

“The strongest plantings,” I gasped. “The ones from your grandmother’s stock. Where are they?”

“The walled garden,” Lady Berkshire said at once. “Behind the conservatory.”

As we fought our way toward the walled garden, I realized Lady Berkshire was helping. Her hands pressed against tree trunks as we passed.

“You can hear them,” I said.

Lady Berkshire ducked a snapping jaw and caught herself against a tree. “I always have.”

She pressed her hand into the trunk. I felt the change at once. The oak I had been asking to hold the flank stopped shivering under my reach and held steady. Whatever she was doing was nothing like what I was doing. Where my commands ran through the roots like a whip-crack, her touch settled into them like a hand laid on a shying horse.

She moved with me after that, a step behind my shoulder, letting her palm brush a sapling as she passed, then an older trunk, then the rough stone of a garden wall where ivy had rooted. The plants I had lashed into violence were still fighting. They had stopped fraying. She was not making them stronger; she was holding them together while they spent themselves for me.

The walled garden was a revelation. These plants answered with a violence the ornamental gardens had lacked, thorned vines rising and pale pollen choking the air.

But it was Captain Morrison who turned the tide.

“Miss Hartwell,” he called out as he helped Aunt Beatrice navigate the chaos. “They’re avoiding the eastern corner. The area near that large oak. Can you concentrate your defenses there and funnel them into a bottleneck?”

I followed his tactical guidance, using the plant network to create the formation he described. The shadow hounds, as if accustomed to panicked victims rather than organized resistance, found themselves trapped in an increasingly narrow corridor of hostile vegetation.

“Now,” Captain Morrison shouted. “Whatever you’re planning to do, do it now!”

I reached deeper into the botanical network than ever before and drove everything I could summon into the trapped hounds. The force hit them all at once. Their bodies shuddered and came apart wrong — the dark of them running out into the soil like something unmade, leaving shapes that could not decide what to be.

Where the force had passed through, the plants that had carried it went dark. Root after root dropping out of the network, silent where they had been alive a breath before. One slipped the edge of the network and went. I felt it go, a small wrongness sliding out along the root line toward the trees, and I could not reach it back.

As the network settled, I caught what the hounds had left in the ground where they'd emerged — the same corrupted register I had felt at Duskmere and at Millfield, and under it, the same careful placing hand, unmistakable now.

Movement at the far tree line caught my eye. A woman in dark clothing, glimpsed between the trunks. Her face turned toward us for a breath: pale, drawn, framed by dark hair that had come loose of whatever held it. Something at her back pulled her from sight. I could not tell whether she was alone.

Something had shifted in the root network beneath my feet. Something older than the shadow hounds. Older than the burning symbols. It had been watching from somewhere I could not reach, and now it had decided to touch.

It came in through the moonbell vines first. A pressure along the thread I had coaxed into life, a pressure that had a shape to it. Not a hand. Not a voice. Attention, made material, pushing along the green line as though following a scent to its source.

It found me.

"The bloodline runs thin in some branches, strong in others," the voice observed clinically. It was the voice I had heard once before, but it was no longer speaking above me. It was speaking

through me, through the plants, through every rooted thing I had opened to.

I could not have moved if my life had required it.

The voice returned, colder now. "We know exactly what you are now, clever little thing. Exactly how to call you home."

The pressure receded. It was not gone. It had been withdrawn, as one withdraws a hand from a thing one intends to return for.

I wanted Lord Duskmere beside me then, for protection, and for the fact of him being there.

Captain Morrison was the first to move. His head turned slowly, his eyes cataloging the ruined beds, the scorched ground where the hounds had come apart, the breach in the hedge line they had entered through. He had not come to Berkshire Hall as a soldier. He had come as a brother and a suitor, in a clean coat, to take tea, show me pressed flowers, and perhaps make something of a morning together. Both versions of Captain Morrison were recognizably the same person.

I thought of the yarrow. Badajoz. Men who had lived because a soldier had kept his mind open at a field hospital when it would have been easier to dismiss a village woman with an armful of weeds.

Lady Berkshire looked at what was left of her garden. She did not cry. The rose she had carried on her knees from her mother's house lay torn from the inner wall, its old wood snapped white at the break. She looked at it a moment and did not go to it. She pressed her hand once to the nearest standing trunk instead, the way I had seen her do during the attack, and I felt the garden lean into her touch like something exhausted finding a shoulder.

Aunt Beatrice had seated herself on the low wall at the garden's edge, deliberately calm. She would not be the one to fall apart, and she meant us to see it. Her hands were clasped in her lap.

Molly came through the conservatory door at a half-run, a kitchen knife in one hand and her cap gone. She took in the scorched beds, the ruined hedge, the four of us standing in what was left of the walled garden and stopped.

"You're bleeding," she said to me.

"I know," I said.

She looked at the knife in her own hand as if noticing it for the first time, then put it behind her back. "The staff are in the kitchen. Two of the younger maids are crying. I told them it was dogs."

"Thank you, Molly," Aunt Beatrice said.

Molly nodded once, looked at me again with the expression that meant she had more to say and would say it later, and went back inside. Lady Berkshire followed her briskly, already turned toward the kitchen and the maids who needed her.

The walled garden was already beginning to heal around us, green tips curling over the worst of the damage, but the root network beneath my feet had not stopped shaking.

CHAPTER 20

The Circle Widens

Lady Berkshire handled the immediate aftermath with brisk authority, instructing the servants to blame the ruin on wild dogs and to say no more than necessary.

Molly appeared at my elbow with a clean handkerchief before I had realized my nose was bleeding again. I pressed it to my face and held it there. My hands had not stopped shaking since the garden. Lady Berkshire did not say anything about it, which was its own kindness.

In the library, with the doors shut, Captain Morrison turned to us at once.

“Right,” Captain Morrison said. “I think it’s time we heard the complete truth. Miss Hartwell, Mrs. Ashford, exactly what are we dealing with?”

I looked at Aunt Beatrice, who nodded encouragingly. Where to begin? How did one explain murder by old means, inherited curses, and botanical magic to people who’d just had their understanding of reality overturned?

“The attacks are not random,” I said. “Someone has been hunting bloodlines like mine for decades. People with unusual gifts, especially botanical ones. My mother was killed that way. My aunt’s husband too. We now believe the attacks across the county are building toward a ritual to be completed at the full moon.”

"Then whoever sent those creatures is organized," Captain Morrison said. "And they know exactly what they're hunting. We need to understand their resources and capabilities."

"We've encountered a Dr. Nightingale who seems to know more about these phenomena than he initially revealed," Aunt Beatrice said carefully. "Though we're not certain of his intentions."

"And there are others helping us research protective measures," I added, thinking of Lord Duskmere. "Scholars who've been studying these threats for years."

Lady Berkshire had been listening intently, and now she rose from her chair with sudden purpose. "Wait here," she said. "I need to fetch something."

In a few moments, Lady Berkshire returned with a leather-bound journal in hand.

"Grandmother's botanical notes," she explained, settling back into her seat. "I thought they were just gardening observations, but after today..." She opened the journal to a page marked with pressed flowers. "Listen to this: '*The darkling comes when the moon is full and the boundaries grow thin. Those who hear the green voices must learn to speak in return, or all shall be lost to the hungry dark.*'"

"She knew," I said quietly.

"There's more," Lady Berkshire continued, flipping through pages. "She writes that the old families scattered, that some bloodlines weakened and some endured. She names the Hartwells, Ashfords, and Thornfields among others."

"The Thornfields were my mother's family," I said quietly.

The name settled in the room like something long folded and put away. I had used it all my life without weight: signing letters E.H. Thornfield, keeping the small pile of my mother's books on a shelf I rarely dusted, hearing Aunt Beatrice say it without ever letting it lodge. Spoken from someone else's grandmother's hand, it sounded heavier than I had been ready to hold.

"There is another family we may find interesting," Lady Berkshire said. "The Blackwoods. She calls them bridge-walkers. Bloodlines that stand between the human world and what lies beyond it."

Lady Berkshire turned another page. "And here — she writes of another thread. '*A quieter gift than the green voices or the standing-between. A sensitivity that knows before it is told. I have found it in two families and lost the track of both.*'" She looked up. "That is all she says of it."

I had read those names already, in the margins of the grandmother's botanical register on the lower west shelves.

"The green bindings," I said to Lady Berkshire. "She annotated family names. Blackwood. Thornfield. Hartwell. She was recording what you have just described."

Lady Berkshire had the servants bring a cold luncheon to the library rather than lay a proper table, and we spent the afternoon with the grandmother's collection spread across every surface. Aunt Beatrice paged through the register with care.

Captain Morrison found me at the window sometime after the plates were cleared.

"The eastern hedge is already regrowing," he said, nodding toward the garden. "Whatever Catherine did to settle those plants, it held."

"She has a gift," I said. "A quieter one than mine, but real."

"I gathered that," Captain Morrison said. He was quiet for a moment. "Miss Hartwell, I should tell you plainly that I have spent the last three hours revising a great many assumptions about the world. I find I am managing tolerably well, but I would appreciate it if, should there be further revelations, you might space them out."

I almost laughed. "I cannot promise that, Captain."

"No," he said. "I did not think you could." He looked out at the garden again. "The thing I keep returning to is the yarrow woman

at Badajoz. I watched her bring men back who were done for. I told myself she was unusually skilled. Now I think she was doing what you were doing this morning. I was too comfortable in my ignorance to see it."

It was such a Captain Morrison thing to say. A quiet accounting of what he had missed and why.

"You saw it," I said. "You kept the yarrow for years. That is not the act of a man who was comfortable in his ignorance."

He considered this. "Perhaps not," he said. "Though I think there is a difference between keeping a thing and understanding it."

The light was beginning to go from the windows when hoofbeats sounded on the drive. Not the measured pace of a social call. Hard riding, and fast.

The sound of shouting erupted from the entrance hall, followed by the clatter of boots on marble floors.

"Where are they?" a familiar voice demanded, rough with barely controlled panic. "I know they're here. Their carriage is outside. Where are Miss Hartwell and Mrs. Ashford?"

"Sir, please," the butler's voice carried from the hall, professionally calm despite the obvious disruption. "If you could just provide your name, I'll inquire whether the ladies are receiving —"

"I don't have time for social niceties," Lord Duskmere snarled. "Now tell me where they are before I —"

The library door burst open and Lord Duskmere strode in, mud-splashed from hard riding and white with fury. His gaze found me at once.

I was on my feet before I knew I had moved.

His pupils had swallowed the amber, and he had not quite got his breath under him. The stillness he held across the room was of a predator that had been running. He had ridden the animal as much as the man. It was in the set of his shoulders, in the way his

mouth refused to close all the way on a word. For half a breath I was only glad he was there. I did not permit myself more than half.

Lady Berkshire's hand went to the arm of her chair. Captain Morrison's gaze went from Lord Duskmere to me and back. I had not sat down again.

Captain Morrison rose. "Blackwood?" It was the old name, from before the title, and it was out of him seemingly before he had decided to speak at all.

Lord Duskmere stopped dead. "Morrison."

For a moment neither man moved. Captain Morrison looked startled, then newly watchful, his expression shifting in a way I could not quite read.

I watched them across the width of the library and tried to read what I could. They had known each other. Whatever was between Lord Duskmere and Captain Morrison was older than tonight, and not simple.

Lord Duskmere stood across the room from him. He had ridden hard, and it showed: the mud at his hem, the hair out of order. He had arrived at a house he had not been invited to and walked past the butler to reach this room. He had found me in the room and then stopped moving.

He had told me to accept Captain Morrison. I was at Berkshire because he had all but insisted on it. He had ridden here anyway.

"You could have sent word," Captain Morrison said.

"Tobias had word from the village before midday," Lord Duskmere said. "Wild dogs, my arse. A letter seemed insufficient."

I did not ask how Tobias had gotten word so quickly. Tobias had sources in every kitchen and stable yard between here and the village. The wild dog story would have reached him before the broken glass was swept.

"No," Captain Morrison agreed, after a pause. "I suppose it would." He was quiet a moment. When he spoke again the old name was gone. "You are Duskmere now. I had heard you had

withdrawn from the world. You might have withdrawn a little less far. Some of us wrote."

Lord Duskmere's expression did not change. "I had heard you were in the Peninsula," he said. He offered nothing for the letters. Whatever had made him go silent was not a thing he would explain in this room.

It was not friendly. It seemed they had once been easy with each other and were not now. Only one of them knew the whole of why.

Lady Berkshire rose. "This is hardly the moment to stand on ceremony. Lord Duskmere has come because he was concerned for Miss Hartwell, and we have rather more urgent matters before us than old quarrels."

Lord Duskmere inclined his head, which from him was concession. Lady Berkshire rang for rooms to be aired without asking whether he meant to stay, and the look she gave me while she did it was entirely her brother's.

He crossed to me under the cover of the general stirring. "You are well," he said. It was not quite a question.

"I am now," I said, too honest by half, and watched the words land somewhere behind his composure.

The evening closed around the house with the lamps. That night, with him under the same roof, I slept.

CHAPTER 21

The Message in the Garden

Morning came gray and windless. We were not long past breakfast when the sound of a horse on the drive brought Captain Morrison out of his chair, and through the window I caught the rider's face. Dark skin, pale eyes, the deliberate bearing I had learned to distrust at the Weatherby ball.

"Dr. Nightingale," I said.

Lord Duskmere went still. "How did he know to find us here?"

"He will have an answer prepared," Aunt Beatrice said. "Doctors always do."

The butler announced him. Dr. Nightingale stepped into the morning room, took in the company at a glance, and bowed. "Lady Berkshire. Captain Morrison. Mrs. Ashford. Miss Hartwell. Lord Duskmere."

The last time I had seen him this close, he had stood at Mr. Blackwood's elbow at Duskmere, offering to examine the earl for an inherited madness. By the set of Lord Duskmere's shoulders, he remembered it too.

"Your practice covers a remarkable amount of country, Doctor," Lord Duskmere said. "And uncommonly well informed as to our whereabouts."

"I followed the attacks, my lord, not your carriage," Dr. Nightingale said. "I have been mapping them for weeks. Berkshire

was where the map pointed next. I had hoped to arrive before the hounds rather than after. The village this morning tells me I am too late for that."

"What sort of reports, Dr. Nightingale?" Lady Berkshire asked.

"The kind that suggest the attack on your estate was no ordinary one," he said. "I have heard enough to know it involved forces most people would prefer not to name."

Captain Morrison's expression hardened. "You speak as though you know more than a country physician ought," he said.

"I do," Dr. Nightingale said. His gaze settled on me. "Your father's work was remarkable, Miss Hartwell. I corresponded with him briefly, before his disgrace made such correspondence inadvisable."

"You corresponded with him?" The words left me before I could steady them.

"About botanical applications in supernatural research," Dr. Nightingale said. "A brilliant man. And I do not believe his disgrace was accidental."

Lord Duskmere stepped forward, his amber eyes catching the morning light. "You're suggesting there was a conspiracy against him?"

"A respected man does not become a pariah overnight without assistance," Dr. Nightingale said. "Nor does trouble of this kind move without design. Your families have been marked for some time, whether you knew it or not."

Lady Berkshire's hand tightened on her grandmother's journal. Dr. Nightingale glanced at it and did not look surprised.

Dr. Nightingale turned to Lord Duskmere then, and his voice lost none of its evenness. "And you, my lord, are not afflicted in the ordinary way. I said as much the first time I stood in your hall, though I was shown the door for it. You have retained more of yourself than should be possible. A man in your condition ought to be past reasoning with by now."

Lord Duskmere held very still. "You presume a great deal, Doctor."

"I observe," Dr. Nightingale said. "It is the whole of my profession."

Captain Morrison spoke at last. "To what end?"

"To hunt what your families carry," Dr. Nightingale said. "And to destroy it, use it, or twist it before it can be turned against them."

"The attacks on the livestock," Aunt Beatrice said slowly. "They weren't random." I guessed she was testing the doctor to see what he knew. We'd suspected the same.

"They were preparing the ground," Dr. Nightingale said. "And if my fears are correct, the Blood Moon is their next move."

Blood Moon. Hunter's Moon. The last full moon of the old-year. The moon when the veil thinned and what was owed came due.

His gaze settled on me.

"You are not incidental to this, Miss Hartwell," Dr. Nightingale stated.

Lord Duskmere stepped nearer at once.

"I have not come merely to warn you," Dr. Nightingale said. "I have come to offer help."

Aunt Beatrice's expression sharpened. "And your price?"

"To examine Lord Duskmere's condition," Dr. Nightingale said. "To review Miss Hartwell's father's papers. To understand what has drawn all of you into the same snare."

He said it too calmly. Too clinically.

"And if we decline?" Lord Duskmere asked.

"Then you will proceed in ignorance," Dr. Nightingale said. "And I do not think ignorance will spare you."

He set a leather portfolio on the table and opened it. Lord Duskmere took the chair nearest mine, his eyes never leaving him.

"There is one matter more," Dr. Nightingale said. "This is from a colleague in Romania. It concerns a woman using the name Madame Corvina."

Lord Duskmere went rigid. "She is dead."

"Perhaps," Dr. Nightingale said. "But the name has surfaced again, here in England, and in connection with the Blackwood line."

"I saw a woman," I said before I knew I was going to speak. "At the edge of the woods, as the hounds broke apart. Dark hair loose at her shoulders. A thin, pale face. Something at her back pulled her out of sight before I could call out to her."

Lord Duskmere's hand closed on the arm of his chair until the wood creaked. He did not look at Dr. Nightingale. He looked at me, and then past me, at a room I could not see. The doctor's pale eyes fixed on mine and I understood, too late, what I had just named.

"Perhaps you have seen her," Dr. Nightingale said. "Though I do not think she would let herself be seen by accident."

Dr. Nightingale let the silence hold. Lord Duskmere had not spoken again since the name Corvina entered the room. His hands were pressed flat against his knees.

"You're certain she is dead," Dr. Nightingale said. "Why?"

Lord Duskmere's voice was barely above a whisper. "Because I killed her."

The words fell into the room. Captain Morrison leaned forward, his military bearing sharpening with attention.

"How?" Dr. Nightingale asked gently.

"You claim to know of my affliction. Then you know I did not come by it kindly." His jaw worked. "Corvina gave it to me in Romania, seven years ago. Lycanthropy. The county calls it madness. It is not madness."

Lady Berkshire looked at me. I had nothing to offer her that would make it easier to hear. Aunt Beatrice had not moved. Her

face held still. She had learned years ago that the world contained things like this; none of it was news to her.

"The night she cursed me. After the transformation began." Lord Duskmere's hands were shaking now. Even after everything, I had to fight the urge to reach for him. "I lost control completely. When I came back to myself the next morning, there was blood. So much blood. And she was..."

He stopped, swallowing hard.

"Gone," he finished. "No body, but the blood trail led to a cliff overlooking the Danube. I assumed I'd torn her apart and the pieces had fallen into the river."

"But you never found remains," Dr. Nightingale observed.

"No. But there was so much blood, and I remembered..." Lord Duskmere's voice cracked slightly. "I remembered the taste of it. The satisfaction when my wolf-self finally brought her down."

Lady Berkshire made a soft sound of distress, but Lord Duskmere didn't seem to hear her.

"I told myself it was self-defense," he continued. "That she'd brought it on herself by cursing me. But I'd still killed someone. I was exactly the monster she'd claimed I already was."

He had been carrying this a very long time, and it was on him now that he had set it down in front of us.

Lady Berkshire had gone still. Captain Morrison was watching Lord Duskmere and seemed to be reassembling everything he thought he knew about him. As if he did not yet know what questions to ask, and something in his expression said it was costing him.

Both of them had known him before the curse. They had known him as a man who hosted dinners, rode well, and had opinions about land management. Now they were sitting across from him while he told them he had teeth, claws, and the memory of blood in his mouth.

Neither of them had left the room. I thought that said something about both of them.

"Duskmere," Captain Morrison said quietly, "if what Dr. Nightingale says is true, if she's still alive..."

"Then I've spent seven years believing I was a murderer for nothing," Lord Duskmere finished bitterly. "Though I suppose that changes very little about what I am."

Captain Morrison was quiet for a moment.

"Seven years," he said. "You stopped writing seven years ago." He said it slowly, as though the arithmetic were only now finishing itself. "I took it for pride. I thought you had put the old name away and the rest of us with it." He looked at Lord Duskmere. "I had the reason wrong."

Lord Duskmere met the look and did not try to answer it. Whatever passed between them did not need me in it.

I did not speak. I did not reach for him. I let my look rest on him across the room for the space of one long breath and then took it back, because anything I said in front of this many people would sound like less than I meant.

The silence that followed was heavy with unspoken questions. Dr. Nightingale leaned forward slightly, his pale eyes studying Lord Duskmere with what looked like sympathy rather than clinical interest.

"I am not here at my own leisure, you understand," he said. His voice had lost some of its careful evenness. "I lost a patient to this craft some years ago. A young woman with a gift the families do not speak of. I could not name what was done to her then. I can name it now." He drew a breath. "I would prefer not to be the one who is left alive after the next such woman."

Aunt Beatrice's mouth had gone thin. "My husband was not chosen for the commission," she said, and her voice was steadier than her hands. "He was chosen for what he carried. The commission was only the hook." For a heartbeat she looked at none of

us, at the window only. "I did not let myself understand that until now. I have seen this craft once before. I did not expect to see it again in my lifetime."

Dr. Nightingale inclined his head, and when he spoke again the clinical register had returned, as if the admission had been payment enough. "If she survived your attack, it would explain several things," he said. "The systematic nature of these hunts. The way they seem to target specific bloodlines with surgical precision. Someone with that kind of personal vendetta would be methodical."

Captain Morrison frowned. "So, you do not know for certain who is directing this."

"No," Dr. Nightingale said. "Only that it has been patient, deliberate, and very well concealed."

"Patient enough to ruin my father first," I said quietly.

"And clever enough to work through English society without being seen," Lady Berkshire added.

Captain Morrison was studying the doctor with focused attention. "The journal says the Blackwoods are different," he said.

"They are," Dr. Nightingale replied. "Bridge-walkers. It may explain what I observed in him earlier."

Lord Duskmere's face tightened slightly, but he said nothing.

Before anyone could respond, the plant network pulled tight. A hard contraction, the whole estate's roots flinching from something at the boundary.

Something wrong. Something burning. Something that did not belong.

"The gardens," I said. I was on my feet before I had finished the sentence. "They are burning symbols into the walled garden. Right now."

Lord Duskmere was on his feet before the sentence finished, the stillness in him gone sharp. "How many?"

"I cannot tell," I said. "The plants are too frightened to give me clear impressions."

Lady Berkshire led us quickly toward the conservatory and the walled garden beyond. Every plant we passed seemed to tremble with alarm.

Burned into Lady Berkshire's perfectly manicured lawn were symbols that hurt to look at directly. But these weren't the same writhing marks we'd encountered at Duskmere Manor. These symbols were more complex, more deliberately formed, arranged in precise geometric patterns that seemed to pulse with their own inner light.

"These are different," I said. "Not like the ones at Duskmere."

"Because these were meant to be read," Dr. Nightingale said.

Lord Duskmere stepped nearer. "Read as what?"

Dr. Nightingale studied the marks, then shut his notebook. "A declaration," he said. "They are done watching. They mean to hunt."

Lady Berkshire had planted this garden from her grandmother's stock and her grandmother's methods, layering protective herb and hardy root around the inner beds, carrying forward knowledge she did not fully understand and tending it anyway. The lavender that had guarded the outer boundary was blackened now, the stems still standing but charred through as if something had passed over them without quite catching on anything else. Years of cultivation. Used up in an instant.

Lady Berkshire knelt beside one of her grandmother's ruined protective plants, her fingers hovering over its blackened leaves. "They killed them to fuel the message," she said, her voice thick with grief. "Used their life force like ink."

I felt them through the network. Plants I had never met, gone terrified at the end, without knowing why the hands reaching for them were not the hands they had known. The cruelty of it made my hands clench into fists.

The roses at the garden's center were still alive. Their petals had curled inward. One at the near edge was not. The rose that had thrown its canes for me earlier stood blackened from the root up, leaves shed in a ring around its base. Lady Berkshire went to stand over it and did not speak. There was nothing to say.

Silence filled the ruined garden.

Lady Berkshire looked at us. "No one is riding anywhere today," she declared. "We keep to the house, and we hold it."

No one argued.

Captain Morrison straightened. "Then we set watches tonight."

"I'll take the first," Lord Duskmere said at once.

I caught myself looking at my own hands. Not the soil and sweat on them from the garden, but the hands themselves: thin fingers, pale knuckles, nothing remarkable. *Clever little thing. You have her hands. I remember the hands.* I folded them into my lap so that I could not stare any longer. The voice sounded close when I did not hold it far enough off.

As the others began to make arrangements, I looked at the ruined garden and tried to hold fast to one fragile comfort: we were no longer facing this alone.

The rest of the day went to the work of an occupied house. Captain Morrison walked the boundary twice and drew up his watch rotation at Lady Berkshire's writing desk, arguing amiably with Lord Duskmere over who would take the worst hours. Servants carried linens and lamps to rooms that had stood closed since the grandmother's time. I slept away part of the afternoon without meaning to, and woke with the light already failing, embarrassed and better for it.

By dark, the household had settled into rooms that were not theirs. Lady Berkshire directed the arrangements with the same brisk competence she had used on the servants after the attack, assigning corridors and leaving candles lit at each turning. Aunt

Beatrice took my hand briefly at the foot of the stairs and then let it go.

Molly found me on the stairs. She tilted my chin toward the lamp without asking and studied my face.

"It's stopped," I said.

"It has stopped and started twice since midday," Molly said. She handed me a fresh cloth. "Hold that and stop telling people you are fine."

I held the cloth. She watched me hold it for a moment longer than was strictly necessary, then went to check on our rooms.

I was halfway down the first-floor corridor when Lord Duskmere's voice stopped me.

"Miss Hartwell," he said.

I turned. He stood at the head of the stairs, still in his muddy coat. He had volunteered for first watch. He was not on his way to it.

His gaze went to the cloth I was still holding to my nose. "How long?" he asked.

"Since the garden," I said.

Something moved through his expression that I could not read. He reached into his coat and came back with his own handkerchief, clean, folded. He held it out without stepping closer.

"Molly has already seen to it," I said.

"I know," he said. He did not lower his hand. I took it.

I could see him reaching for something else. The right word, the right opening. He did not find it.

"I should not have told you to go," he said.

That was all.

I thought about saying it was all right. It was not all right. I thought about saying I understood. I was not certain I did.

"No," I said. "You should not have."

He nodded once. His hand found the banister and stayed there.

"Goodnight, Miss Hartwell," he said.

“Goodnight, Lord Duskmere,” I said.

He went down. I stood in the corridor until his step had reached the ground floor. I heard the front door open and close for his watch.

Then I went into my room and shut the door. I pressed my back against it and breathed until the breathing was even.

CHAPTER 22

Gathering at Duskmere

I woke before dawn with the estate's distress still echoing through the botanical network. Pressing my palms to the windowsill, I sent what comfort I could into the surviving plants until their panic softened into something quieter.

Downstairs, Aunt Beatrice and Lady Berkshire were already in the morning room, Aunt Beatrice reading aloud from the grandmother's journal while Lady Berkshire poured.

"I hope you slept a little," Lady Berkshire said to me as I joined them.

"A little, Lady Berkshire," I said. "The plants are calmer now."

"Good," she said. "And since we are far past ceremony, you must call me Catherine."

Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and Captain Morrison appeared in the doorway, already dressed for the day.

"Good morning," he said. His eyes found mine at once. "Miss Hartwell, did you rest at all?"

He was at the sideboard before I could answer. Toast, cold ham, preserves set to the side. He placed the plate in front of me and poured the tea.

"Some," I said. "Thank you."

He had not asked how I took it. He had not needed to. Heat touched my cheeks.

Catherine smiled. "The ladies have agreed to be less formal this morning. I make no promises about the gentlemen."

He took the chair nearest mine.

"There will be questions this morning," he said.

"The magistrate will come," Aunt Beatrice said. "So we need one story."

Catherine folded her hands. "We are friends gathered to support Lord Duskmere's recovery. Dr. Nightingale is attending him. The markings were vandalism meant to frighten us."

No one objected.

Lord Duskmere appeared in the doorway, hair still damp, shirt open at the throat. The pale silver line I had glimpsed once in the library was visible again in the morning light, and a second one ran beneath it that I had not seen before. His gaze went to Captain Morrison seated beside me, to the plate in front of me, then to my face.

I thought of the corridor. He held my gaze a moment longer than the room required and I did not look away.

"Good morning," he said.

Captain Morrison rose. "Duskmere. I hope you had some rest after your watch."

"Enough," Lord Duskmere said.

He took the seat opposite me.

They set about being courteous at me, which is not the same as being courteous. Captain Morrison moved the toast rack within my reach. Lord Duskmere shifted the butter toward me a moment later. Neither of them looked at the other.

Then both reached for the marmalade at once. Captain Morrison's hand closed on it first, and he set the jar by my plate on the side away from Lord Duskmere, without looking up.

"Apologies," Captain Morrison said. He did not sound apologetic.

"None required," Lord Duskmere said. He did not sound forgiven. Watching them, I understood the marmalade was the smallest of the things that lay unforgiven between them.

I took the jar myself and passed it to neither of them. From the drive came the sound of a horse at a working pace.

Catherine's butler appeared in the doorway. "Magistrate Whitmore, my lady."

"We will continue this after," Catherine said, rising from her seat. Both men found something else to look at.

Catherine received him in the morning room and he looked as though he had slept poorly. Dr. Nightingale had come down and taken the chair by the door.

The magistrate asked his questions about the previous day and received the prepared story — vandalism, crude markings, frightened young men — without visible satisfaction. But it was what he said next that mattered. Magistrate Whitmore set down his cup. "The whole county is on edge. Strange lights. Unexplained sounds. Livestock found in odd locations."

"What sort of locations?" Captain Morrison asked.

Whitmore hesitated. "The moors. The usual lonely places. And Thornfield Abbey. There are rumors of lights there these past nights, and a figure at the gate no one can account for."

A chill went through me, but I kept my face still.

"Have there been any actual crimes?" Lord Duskmere asked.

"That is what troubles me," Whitmore admitted. "No theft. Little damage. Nothing that makes ordinary sense."

Dr. Nightingale folded his hands. "Escalation often precedes a more serious incident."

Magistrate Whitmore shifted at that. He drew a breath and said, "I would advise leaving the district for a time."

"No," Catherine said at once.

"And no," Lord Duskmere said.

Aunt Beatrice added, "We are not without protection here."

Magistrate Whitmore looked unhappy, but he yielded. "Then be cautious. Send word at once if anything more occurs. I will have local patrols increased."

As soon as the magistrate left, we returned to Catherine's library.

"Thornfield Abbey," I said. "That was my mother's family."

No one spoke for a moment. Catherine stood at the window with her arms folded, watching the courtyard where Whitmore's horse had left tracks in the gravel.

"Thornfield, Duskmere, and now Berkshire," Aunt Beatrice said. "Three estates. Three families."

"It could be coincidence," Captain Morrison said, though his tone made clear he did not believe it.

"It is not coincidence." Lord Duskmere leaned against the mantel, his jaw tight. "Someone is drawing a line between our households, and we are sitting in three separate locations waiting for them to finish."

"Then we consolidate," Catherine said, turning from the window. "One household. One defense."

"Berkshire has newer walls," Captain Morrison said. "Better sight lines. I can organize the staff into a watch rotation within the day."

"Duskmere has older protections." Lord Duskmere's voice was quiet, but it cut through the room. "My grandmother built safeguards into the estate itself. The walls, the gardens, the chapel foundation. They have been dormant since her death, but they are there."

"Dormant how?" Dr. Nightingale asked, his interest sharpening.

"She was a botanist of a kind. She understood things about the land that I never fully grasped." Lord Duskmere glanced at me, and something careful passed through his expression. "I believe Miss Hartwell might."

The room's attention shifted. I felt it like a change in temperature.

"I believe it," I said. "The magic I've sensed there feels different than here. I'll need to feel it again before I can promise anything."

"That is more than I have had in seven years," Lord Duskmere said. "It is enough."

I did not answer at once. I watched him, and I counted: the shuttered library in his voice at our first meeting, Tobias's quiet habit of clearing only half a room for the master who would not cross the rest. Seven years of a house kept against the world.

Captain Morrison looked between us. His expression did not change, but I saw his fingers still on the arm of his chair, a small arrested motion, as though he had been about to speak and thought better of it.

"Berkshire's gardens were already breached twice," Aunt Beatrice said, practical as ever. "Whatever burned those symbols came through Catherine's defenses without difficulty. If Duskmere offers something stronger, we should not ignore it."

Catherine nodded. "I agree. Charles would want me to choose the safest ground, not the most familiar." She paused. "And I would rather be where we can all watch one another."

"Then Duskmere," I said.

Lord Duskmere straightened from the mantel. "Tobias can have rooms prepared by this evening. The house has not entertained guests in some time, but it is sound."

"We will need provisions, linens, and Molly," Aunt Beatrice said, already packing in her mind, brisk with it. "And Dr. Nightingale, if you are willing."

"I would not miss it," Dr. Nightingale said mildly. "Professional curiosity alone would compel me."

Catherine was already moving. "I will speak to the staff. We can be ready within two hours if we are not precious about it."

The library emptied as people scattered to their tasks. Captain Morrison paused in the doorway and turned back to me.

"Miss Hartwell," Captain Morrison said. "If you need assistance with anything before we depart, you have only to ask."

"Thank you, Captain," I said.

He held my gaze a moment longer than necessary, then inclined his head and left.

I was still at the window when Lord Duskmere came back through the doorway.

"The old garden is behind a door at the back of the east corridor," he said. "My grandmother's plantings. I will have Tobias show you when we arrive."

"You could show me yourself," I said.

He looked at me. Whatever he had expected me to say, it had not been that.

"Yes," he said. "I could do that."

He left. Through the glass, Catherine's garden looked ordinary in the morning light, the scorched places already covered by the groundskeeper's fresh soil. But when I pressed my hand flat against the sill and reached, the network told me what the eye could not. The garden's roots had drawn inward overnight, pulling away from the boundaries of the estate like a hand recoiling from a flame. Whatever had burned those symbols had left something behind in the soil that the plants would not touch.

I had felt Lord Duskmere's land before, briefly, in my visits to the estate over the weeks. A deep, sleeping presence beneath the formal gardens, old roots threaded through stone, something patient and watchful that had not stirred at my passing.

If Lord Duskmere's grandmother had built what he described, then the bones of it were still there. Sleeping, not dead.

Whether I could wake them was another question.

CHAPTER 23

Awakening the Ancient Defenses

We arrived at Duskmere late in the afternoon, two carriages and a wagon of provisions following the curve of the drive. The house looked as it always had from this approach: imposing, handsome in a severe way, the dark stone softened by ivy on the west face. But I had only ever visited here. Seeing it as a place I would live in changed the proportion of things.

Tobias met us at the door. He had received Lord Duskmere's message only hours before. In that time, he had opened the main wing, aired the bedrooms, and lit fires in every usable hearth. His face when he saw the carriages held something I had not expected: relief.

"The rose suite for Mrs. Ashford and Miss Hartwell," he said, already directing the footmen. "Lady Berkshire in the blue room, Captain Morrison in the east wing near his lordship."

Molly took one look at the rose suite and rolled up her sleeves. The wallpaper was faded silk, the furniture handsome but dusty, and the wardrobe smelled of cedar and long disuse. "Well," she said, throwing open the windows with cheerful violence, "it wants airing, but the bones are lovely. I'll have it right in an hour."

Molly shook out a pillow and paused, the linen gone still in her hands. "Miss," she said, low enough that the sound did not reach the hall. "Sarah Miller was not at market this week. Nor last." Sarah

Miller. Tom's sister, the one who sang at the Harvest Assembly last year. I watched Molly fold the pillow back into its case as if folding carefully enough could hold the thought in place.

"The connecting door leads to your aunt's chamber," Tobias added from the hallway. He paused, his composure briefly uncertain. "It is good to have the house full again, miss."

The evidence of Lord Duskmere's solitude was in the details, if you knew to look. The dining table had been polished only at one end for so long that the wood had lightened there. The library fire was laid for a single chair. In the guest corridors, the carpet showed no wear at all.

I found myself in the library without deciding to go there. It was this room I had broken into, weeks ago, in the dark.

The lamps had been lit against the early dark, and a tray had already been set at the end of the desk. Tea, still steaming, with the stronger blend I preferred.

I looked up as Lord Duskmere appeared in the doorway.

"I had not asked for tea," I observed.

"You never do until far too late," he said.

"You did not need to trouble yourself," I said.

His gaze rested on me. "I know," he said simply.

For a moment neither of us moved. The tray sat between us like something long since settled, a habit formed around my presence, so settled neither of us remarked on it.

I heard the floorboard in the corridor shift. When I glanced past Lord Duskmere's shoulder, Captain Morrison was there, not quite pausing, not quite passing through. His gaze moved from Lord Duskmere in the doorway to me at the desk, and something in his expression quieted.

He continued down the corridor without speaking. His step did not slow.

I looked back at the untouched tea and found that I could no longer tell whether the warmth in me came from the tray itself or from having my desires anticipated.

The house held more people than it had in years, and still the only corridor I could feel was the one Lord Duskmere had walked down. I did not sleep for a long while.

I owed Captain Morrison an answer. That was the whole of what kept me awake. He had been fair with me, and I had not been plain with him. The longer I let it stand, the more it looked like something I was hiding rather than something I had not yet found the courage to say.

So I lay in the dark and rehearsed it. I built the sentences one way and they came out cruel. I built them another way and they came out dishonest. I wanted a version that was both kind and true. I turned it over until the dark began to thin at the window, and I had it no better than when I started.

Morning came gray and cold.

Captain Morrison found me in the morning room before the others had come down. I was no closer to the words than I had been in the dark.

He sat opposite me. Not beside me. I noticed.

"Miss Hartwell," he said. "May I speak plainly?"

"I wish you would," I said, and meant it, because I had been trying to speak plainly to him for days and had not managed it.

"I walked past the library yesterday evening," Captain Morrison said. "Lord Duskmere had brought you tea."

I set my cup down.

"He knew how you took it," Captain Morrison said. "Without asking." He was quiet for a moment, his hands steady on the table. "I have been in the field long enough to read a room. A man does not learn how a woman takes her tea by accident. And a woman does not stand the way you stood when he came through that door at Berkshire and feel nothing."

"Captain Morrison—" I had been going to say this myself. He had found me before I was ready, and his way of asking was kinder than anything I had prepared.

"I am not accusing you," he said. "You have been fair with me." He paused. "I am asking now. Is there something between you and Lord Duskmere that means I should stop hoping?"

The question sat in the room between us. I thought of all the things Lord Duskmere had not given me. He had not told me he loved me. He had not asked me to stay. He had kissed me once in a conservatory and then carried on as though it had not happened. He had told me to accept this very man. He had managed one sentence in a dark corridor and could not finish it. He had brought me tea.

That was what I had. Tea, a sentence he could not finish, and the look on his face when he came through the door at Berkshire.

Captain Morrison was offering me a life. Lord Duskmere was offering me nothing he could name. I was about to answer a good man's honest question on the strength of something that had no promise behind it and might not survive the month.

"Yes," I said.

His face did not change. I thought he had come into this room already knowing.

"I am sorry," I said.

"You did not mislead me," he said. "I hoped, and you were uncertain. Those are different things." He looked at his hands on the table, then back at me. "I would rather know than wonder. That is all I came for."

I looked at him across the morning-room table. His steady hands. His honest face. The pressed collar he had put on to come and have this conversation, as if it deserved the same care he brought to everything. If I had met Captain Morrison before I broke into Lord Duskmere's library at midnight, before any of this, I would have said yes to this man. Not out of duty. Not out

of settling. Because he was good and I liked him, and those two things together are rarer than people pretend.

But I had broken into that library. And what I found on the other side had changed what I was able to choose.

"I should like to remain your ally," Captain Morrison said. "Through whatever is coming. If you will have me."

"I would be very glad of that," I said.

He rose. At the door he paused, and when he turned back his face was his own again, not the held expression but the plainer one underneath.

"Take care of yourself, Miss Hartwell," he said. "I mean that practically. Whatever is coming with the full moon, you are at the center of it. I should like you to come out the other side."

"I will do my best, Captain," I said.

He inclined his head and went.

I sat with my cooling tea and did not move for a long time. In my mind's eye, I could see the garden at Berkshire where he had shown me his grandmother's pressed specimens, the path where he had described India without pressing, the bench where I had let myself picture a life and found that the picture held.

It held still. That was the cruelty of it. The life Captain Morrison offered was not wrong or small. It was real and good. I was turning away from it toward something I could not name.

I finished the tea. It had gone cold, but I drank it anyway, the way you finish something out of discipline rather than desire. There was still work to be done and the ache of what I had turned away from was a thing I could carry while doing it.

By luncheon the house had settled into an uneasy rhythm of occupation: voices below stairs, doors opening and shutting in distant corridors, the unfamiliar fullness of Duskmere no longer feeling temporary. The morning-room chair where Captain Morrison had sat was empty and I did not let myself look at it twice.

Lord Duskmere found me afterward and asked if I was ready to come help him wake the defenses.

That afternoon, Lord Duskmere took me through a door at the back of the east corridor that I had never noticed in all my visits.

"My grandmother's private garden," he said as we descended a set of stone steps worn smooth by generations of feet. "She planted it when she first came to Duskmere as a bride. The plants are mostly hers. Cuttings she carried in damp paper across half a continent because she did not trust England to give her what she needed. No one has tended it since she died."

The garden was hidden behind a wall of overgrown ivy, and stepping through the gate felt like entering a room the house had forgotten it owned. Moonbell vines cascaded down the crumbling stone walls, silver-leafed and luminous even in daylight. Bloodroot roses climbed trellises that had buckled under their weight. The ground was thick with memory moss, that strange living carpet that held impressions of everyone who had walked here and of some things that had never walked here at all, if the network had carried them strongly enough.

Despite the neglect, everything was alive. Thriving with a stubborn vitality that spoke of deep roots and good soil and whatever his grandmother had planted into the bones of this place. Some of the plants I knew. Others I could only half-name from old books. Specimens I had only seen pressed between the pages of a Levantine herbarium in my father's study. They had held in this colder country. They had even spread.

"The Heart Tree," Lord Duskmere said, stopping before a gnarled oak at the garden's center. Its trunk was carved with symbols I did not recognize. Not English, not Latin. Something older. "She called it the anchor. Everything she built runs through this."

He placed his hands flat against the bark and looked at me.

"I have tried to wake the protections before," he said. "They will not answer me alone."

I placed my palms beside his on the rough bark.

What I felt first was not power but presence. The tree was aware of us in the manner of very old things: not curious, not hostile, simply attentive. Its roots ran deeper than the garden, deeper than the estate's foundations, threaded through bedrock and clay and the dark water table below.

With each new connection, the strangeness of my gift diminished. What had once felt wild and frightening now came with the certainty of something recognized. I had felt this before. My mother had felt it. The roots already knew me.

"She grafted the defenses onto the root system," I said, understanding arriving all at once. "The tree is the heart. The roots carry the protection outward through the soil to the boundary walls. The whole estate is one network."

"Can you feel where it has gone dormant?" Lord Duskmere asked.

I could. The network was there, vast and finely branched, but it had fallen silent. The connections between the Heart Tree and the outer defenses had thinned to threads over the years without a keeper. Like a system of bells with the ropes rotted through.

The deeper I reached, the more I felt myself remembering. With the older, stranger part of me that answered when the plants called.

"I need to follow the root network," I said. "The connections are still there. If I can find where they thinned and coax them awake again, I think the protections will hold."

"Tell me what to do," he said.

There it was. No argument, no posturing. His hands on the bark beside mine, his face open and steady, as if he were handing me a book.

“Keep your hands on the tree,” I said. “Whatever you feel from the wood, let it move through you. Don’t resist it and don’t try to hold it.”

He nodded. I closed my eyes and reached.

The root network opened beneath me like a map drawn in living tissue. I followed the threads outward: to the chapel, where his grandmother had planted guardian thorns in the mortar between the stones; to the garden walls, where the moonbell vines had been trained to glow at the approach of anything unwelcome; to the far boundaries of the estate, where the old ivy had been coaxed into a living fence that could tighten or loosen at need.

Each connection was frayed, weakened, close to breaking. But not dead. I fed them the way you coax a fire that has burned down to coals: carefully, steadily, asking rather than demanding. The plants responded with something slow and deep. Recognition.

Then Lord Duskmere’s presence joined mine in the network.

I had not asked him to do anything except hold steady, but something in him had opened as well. He had no botanical magic. What moved through him was something else: a resonance with the land itself, the blood-deep connection of a family that had held this ground for centuries. The tree knew him. The roots knew him. Through them, I could feel the whole estate as a single living thing: house, garden, walls, and the moors beyond, all threaded together by his grandmother’s patient work, all recognizing the grandson who had shut himself away from it for years.

The defenses woke.

It happened in sequence, rolling outward from the Heart Tree like a pulse. The ivy on the walls thickened, its leaves sharpening to dark points. The roses deepened to a watchful crimson. Beneath our feet, the guardian moss spread outward, reaching for the boundaries, covering ground it had retreated from years before.

Lord Duskmere made a sound. Not a word; something quieter, involuntary. When I opened my eyes, his were still closed, and

his hands on the bark were trembling. I thought it was not from effort. His home was waking up around him after years of silence.

"There," I said softly, and he opened his eyes. They were bright. He did not speak for a moment.

"I felt her," he said. "My grandmother. Not her ghost, just what she left behind." He was quiet a moment. "She used to say the land at Duskmere was strange to her — that it took her thirty years to feel it answer back. I think she was wrong about that. I think it answered her the day she put her hands in it. She was the one who took thirty years to trust the answer."

"She built something extraordinary," I said.

"She would have liked you," he said. "She would have liked you very much."

We stood in the garden while the last of the protections settled into place around us. The tiredness came on slowly, not the sickening drain of magic pulled too hard but the deep, even fatigue of work done well. My palms ached where they had pressed into the carvings, and the skin held faint red lines that would fade by morning.

Lord Duskmere was watching me. "Thank you," he said.

The phrase was too small for what had passed between us.

I looked at him in the fading light. The amber of his eyes had gone quiet, the way it did when the wolf was far from the surface. His hands were still at his sides. He was not reaching for me. He would not. He had proven, across weeks of proximity and silence and one unfinished sentence in a corridor, that he would not reach for me first.

I stepped toward him.

His breath caught. He did not step back.

I put my hand against his chest, where the rough linen of his shirt was warm from the work and from him. I felt his heart under my palm, steady and hard. I kissed him.

It was not like the conservatory. That had been sudden, interrupted, stolen between one breath and the next. This one I chose. I had sat across from Captain Morrison this morning and said yes, there is something here, on no evidence but a tray of tea and a sentence he could not bring himself to finish. I wanted to know if I had been right.

I stood in his grandmother's garden on my own feet and I chose it. When his hand came up to the side of my face it was careful, as though I were something he had not yet been given permission to hold. The tendons of his wrist where it lay against my cheek carried two old white lines, close to his cuff, the kind a man has learned to keep covered.

For a moment there was nothing between us. The garden was quiet. His thumb traced the line of my jaw and I felt the tremor in it.

He stepped back.

Not far. Half a pace. His hand left my face slowly.

"If I do not stop now," he said, "I will not stop."

"I know," I said.

We stood a half-pace apart in the last of the light. The guardian moss had crept to the edges of our feet. The Heart Tree held steady behind us, its roots running outward through the dark soil, carrying what we had woken to the boundary walls and beyond.

Duskmere no longer felt like a house bracing against ruin.

It felt like a house that had remembered how to live.

CHAPTER 24

The Confession

By late afternoon, the light had gone thin and colorless over Duskmere.

The library lamps had been lit early, their glow falling across the long oak table where books, journals, and loose papers lay spread in uneasy order. Dr. Nightingale had taken command of one end of it with quiet efficiency. Catherine sat with her grandmother's journal open across her lap. Aunt Beatrice read near the fire without turning a page. Captain Morrison stood at the shelves, too restless to sit still for long.

Lord Duskmere sat across from me with an old Blackwood volume open before him, though I suspected he was reading no better than I was. Something had quieted between us since the Heart Tree. The awareness was still there, but the question beneath it had been answered. I had not known how much it weighed until it lifted.

We had all been working for hours. We had made little progress.

Molly came in from the village with rain on her cloak and strain around her mouth.

"The Carmichael cottage is empty, miss," Molly said, before she had even taken her cloak off. "The constable found it yesterday. The dog had been tied up too long." She met my eyes and did

not say what she was thinking. I did not say what I was thinking either.

"The Weatherbys have been struck," she continued. "New symbols. Livestock dead. No one wants to say what it looks like, but they all know it is no ordinary vandalism."

A silence followed.

"They are pressing harder now," Catherine said quietly.

"No," Dr. Nightingale murmured, still looking at the papers before him. "Closer."

The word seemed to settle into the room and stay there.

Outside, the yews bent under a rising wind. Through the botanical network, I felt the estate's oldest plants holding themselves taut and watchful. The gardens of Duskmere did not panic easily. They had lived too long beside secrecy and sorrow for that. But something had them listening.

Lord Duskmere closed his book.

"They want the county frightened," he said. "A frightened world is easier to move."

I had just lowered my gaze to the page before me when the sound came from outside.

A horse. Fast. Uneven. Wrong.

Then Tobias shouted from the hall. "My lord!"

Lord Duskmere was on his feet at once. Captain Morrison moved with him, and the rest of us followed.

By the time I reached the front doors, Tobias had them open. Wind rushed in sharp and damp. On the drive, only a short distance from the steps, a dark horse stood lathered and shaking, reins dragging. Beside it, half fallen from the saddle and barely upright on one knee, was Mr. Blackwood.

For a moment I almost did not know him.

Mud streaked his coat and face. Blood darkened one sleeve and soaked the front of his waistcoat. More disturbing than the injuries was the ruin in him. He looked diminished, as if some-

thing had fed on more than flesh. His skin had gone gray beneath the cold. Dark marks curled up the side of his throat and disappeared beneath his collar like lines burned under the skin.

He lifted his head.

His gaze found Lord Duskmere.

"Adrian," he said hoarsely.

Then he pitched forward.

Lord Duskmere reached him first. Captain Morrison caught his other side, and between them they got him into the house while Tobias cleared the way ahead.

"The morning room," Dr. Nightingale said. "Quickly."

They laid Mr. Blackwood on the sofa by the fire. Tobias brought hot water and cloths without needing to be asked. Dr. Nightingale cut away the torn cloth at his shoulder, and the marks beneath it drew a low, involuntary breath from Catherine.

They ran over his collarbone and down his ribs in dark lines that seemed almost to move when the firelight struck them.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A ritual mark," Dr. Nightingale said grimly. "Or the remnant of one. He has been used hard."

Lord Duskmere had gone still beside the sofa. There was mud on his hands and blood drying across one knuckle, but his face had tightened into that dangerous stillness he wore when feeling became too strong to show plainly.

"Can you stop it?" Lord Duskmere asked.

"I can try," Dr. Nightingale said. His fingers hovered over the blackened lines without touching them. "If the mark is still active, it's feeding on him. If I can interrupt it, I may keep it from draining him further."

Mr. Blackwood stirred.

His eyes opened slowly, clouded at first, then sharpened with effort. He looked not at Dr. Nightingale, not at me, but at Lord Duskmere, and what showed in his face was so nakedly human

that it made him, for one instant, seem younger than I had ever seen him.

"I did not know," Mr. Blackwood said.

His voice was rough with pain and something worse.

Lord Duskmere did not answer.

The silence in the room changed shape. It had become waiting.

Mr. Blackwood swallowed with visible effort. "I did not know what it was."

A faint line appeared between Dr. Nightingale's brows.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Mr. Blackwood let out a thin, unsteady breath.

"I thought it was influence," he said. "Something I could manage. Something I might turn to advantage, if I were careful."

Another breath. The firelight struck the marks at his throat, and he shut his eyes briefly.

"She made me an offer," he said. "What I carry. What ran in my father before me, and what made him into the story this county already knows how to tell." His voice had gone very flat. "She said it was removable. A condition, like fever. That I would be free of it."

Lord Duskmere's expression did not change.

"You meddled with something you did not understand," he said.

Mr. Blackwood gave the barest, bitter shadow of a smile. "Yes."

The single word seemed to darken the room.

"When did it begin?" Dr. Nightingale asked, practical as a knife. "What kind of arrangement did you involve yourself in?"

"Arrangement," Mr. Blackwood murmured. "That makes it sound almost respectable."

His eyes closed briefly. When they opened again, they fixed on Lord Duskmere.

"I shared what I thought were small things," he said. "Rumors. Impressions. Weaknesses. I let myself believe I stood outside it. That I could make use of the deal without ever belonging to it."

No one moved.

Captain Morrison had gone still near the mantel. Catherine's face had lost all color. Aunt Beatrice watched Mr. Blackwood with a terrible steadiness.

Lord Duskmere took one step nearer.

"What did you do?" he asked.

The question was quiet.

Mr. Blackwood flinched as if it had been shouted.

"I helped it reach you," he said.

The words fell into the room like a blade.

Lord Duskmere's jaw tightened. "How?"

"Whispers where whispers mattered. Doubt where doubt could grow." Mr. Blackwood's breath caught. "I encouraged what was already easy for people to believe. That you were unstable. Dangerous. Best managed rather than trusted. Best watched rather than heeded."

I had thought I would feel rage, or revulsion, or some honest want to strike him. What I felt instead was a quieter thing, almost a recognition. He had not planted the doubt about Lord Duskmere. He had found it, already half-grown in every well-meaning acquaintance, and he had knelt down and watered it.

"And Miss Hartwell?" Lord Duskmere asked.

Mr. Blackwood's eyes flicked toward me, then away. Shame had reached him at last.

"I knew she mattered," he said. "I knew once she entered this house, everything shifted. I did not understand why at first. Only that the pressure around you changed."

I thought of every room I had walked into without knowing his eye was already on me. I had not been watched. I had been counted.

“And still you went on,” Aunt Beatrice said.

Mr. Blackwood made a broken sound that might have been agreement.

“I thought I could stop before it became this,” he said. “That is the lie of every cowardly thing, is it not? Just a little further. Just until the advantage is secured.”

Lord Duskmere had become a man easy to kill slowly — in the parlors, at the tea tables, in the soft sorrowful tones of concerned friends. He was a man who had done small quiet harms in service of a large one.

The marks at his throat darkened.

He arched suddenly against the cushions with a strangled gasp.

“Hold him,” Dr. Nightingale snapped.

Lord Duskmere caught his shoulders. Captain Morrison seized one arm while Tobias held the other. Dr. Nightingale pressed hard against one of the dark lines beneath Mr. Blackwood’s collarbone, and Mr. Blackwood swore through his teeth.

“Keep him with us,” Dr. Nightingale said.

Lord Duskmere leaned close.

“What happened?” Lord Duskmere asked.

Mr. Blackwood’s eyes opened again, fever-bright now.

“The arrangement turned on me,” he whispered. “I thought I was useful. I thought I was choosing. I was only convenient.”

The words came faster then, as though pain had burned away the last of his pride.

“When I tried to pull back, it was already too late.” His gaze found Lord Duskmere again. “I was never partner. Only meat that had not yet been finished using.”

A chill went through me. I did not forgive him. I did not want to. But I saw him, for a moment, as a distinct person rather than someone who betrayed us.

“And then?” I asked.

But Mr. Blackwood had gone white. The marks beneath his skin flared black as ink. His body convulsed.

"No more," Dr. Nightingale said sharply. "If he keeps talking, he will not survive it."

Mr. Blackwood dragged in one ragged breath. "I am sorry," he said.

Lord Duskmere looked down at him with an expression I could not fully bear to witness.

"I do not know what to do with that," he said.

It was quieter than anger, and far crueler.

Tobias brought footmen, and under Dr. Nightingale's direction they moved Mr. Blackwood upstairs to a chamber where he could be watched. Captain Morrison went with them. Catherine followed after a brief touch to Aunt Beatrice's sleeve.

I remained where I was for a moment, staring at the dark smear Mr. Blackwood's coat had left on the sofa.

He had not merely resented Lord Duskmere. He had not merely maneuvered around inheritance, influence, and old grievances. He had helped something terrible gain entry to all our lives, and only when it turned and took hold of him had he come stumbling back to the house he had helped endanger.

I looked up.

Lord Duskmere stood at the window with one hand braced against the frame, his back to me.

"He wanted power," I said softly. "That does not mean he wanted this."

Lord Duskmere's mouth tightened. "It ought to make him easier to despise than it does."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "That would make the world simpler than it is. And it is not simple. Not here. Not with this."

For a moment he did not answer.

Then he turned, and the grief in his face was worse than fury would have been.

"He sold me," he said.

"I know," I said.

Lord Duskmere stared at the fire. "He spent years feeding every suspicion already waiting in the county for me. Every lie ready to root itself. And now he arrives at my door half dead, and some part of me still—"

He broke off.

He did not finish the sentence. I could guess the direction of it, and I did not finish it for him.

"He came here," I said, "because in the end he still thought of this house as the place to reach for."

He did not answer. After a moment he crossed to the hearth and set a hand on the mantel. I moved the other way, to the window.

"He sold me," Lord Duskmere said again, as though the words needed a second hearing to become possible. I stood at the window and watched the gravel where Mr. Blackwood had fallen.

I tried, for his sake, to find in myself any grief that resembled his. I could not. The man upstairs had been a threat in elegant clothing. His betrayal had cost me sleep and not much else I would miss.

But the man standing behind me had lost something I had no way to replace. I could not yet see it clearly. I had only the fact that he had lost it.

I had not yet decided everything I was going to give him. I had decided I was not going to pretend, for his comfort, that Mr. Blackwood had been anything other than what he had been. I was going to stand in the room with him anyway.

I did not turn around. I heard him draw a breath. I heard it catch. I heard it come out again, and caught sandalwood and something wilder under it, the way it was in every room he had ever stood in.

"I am sorry," I said.

“Don’t be,” he said.

“I know,” I said, and finally turned around. “I am anyway.”

I had not meant it as comfort, but something in him seemed to steady. He looked at me for a long moment before voices in the hall broke the silence.

CHAPTER 25

The Glass Speaks

By nightfall, the rain had settled over Duskmere in earnest.

The house had gone inward around it. Lamps burned low in the corridors. The old windows whispered with weather. Somewhere above, footsteps crossed and recrossed a chamber where Tobias kept watch.

I went down to the library because my room felt too close and because every time I shut my eyes I saw Mr. Blackwood in the gravel, calling Lord Duskmere's name. He had come to the end of every excuse, and it was in his voice.

The fire had burned low. I had not been reading long when the door opened behind me.

"You should be asleep," Lord Duskmere said.

I turned. He stood just inside the room, one hand still on the door. The lamplight caught at the damp dark of his hair and the hard fatigue in his face.

"I might say the same to you," I said.

A shadow of amusement crossed his face and vanished.

"I checked on Algernon," Lord Duskmere said.

"And?" I asked.

"He lives," Lord Duskmere said.

Not relief. Only fact.

He came farther into the room. The rain tapped softly at the glass.

"I had thought you would be upstairs," Lord Duskmere said.

"I could not bear the quiet of my room," I admitted.

Lord Duskmere's gaze held mine for a moment. Something in his expression softened, though only slightly.

"No," Lord Duskmere said quietly. "I do not suppose you could."

The answer settled between us with more intimacy than the words themselves deserved. He understood too well. I understood that he understood, and that was somehow worse.

I looked down at the open book before me.

"I did try," I said. "I tried for nearly an hour and accomplished nothing except imagining the worst."

Lord Duskmere moved to the hearth. He rested one hand on the mantel, staring into the low fire as if it might give him something cleaner than thought.

"I have spent much of this evening doing the same," Lord Duskmere said.

There was no self-pity in it. That made the confession land harder.

The fire shifted softly. Rain whispered at the windows. The old house seemed to draw closer around us, listening.

"He came to you," I said, choosing my words carefully. "In the end, when every pretense was stripped from him, he still knew where to turn."

Something moved across his face then, something too raw for him to hold still. I moved nearer. The room felt smaller with every step I took.

"And what am I meant to do with that?" Lord Duskmere asked.

The question was very quiet.

I stopped a little too close to him. Close enough to see the strain in his eyes, the faint roughness in his jaw where the day had gone too far and shaving had ceased to matter.

“Nothing tonight,” I said softly. “Tonight you are only meant to endure it.”

His gaze dropped, briefly, to my mouth.

The awareness that moved through me was instant. The hot, chaotic rush of earlier moments was gone. This was lower, quieter, and somehow more dangerous for being so restrained. We were alone. The house was dark around us. The rain had not stopped. Upstairs, his treacherous cousin hovered somewhere between confession and death. Everything felt sharpened by weariness and fear and the simple fact of his nearness.

“You make endurance sound gentler than it is,” Lord Duskmere said.

“I had no intention of gentleness,” I said.

That trace of amusement touched his mouth again, but this time it carried something far less safe.

“No,” Lord Duskmere said. “I’m beginning to understand that.”

I should have stepped back then.

I did not.

His hand lifted as if by instinct alone, then stopped halfway between us. Not quite touching. Asking nothing. But the restraint in the halted gesture undid something in me far more effectively than any boldness would have done.

My breath caught.

Lord Duskmere seemed to hear it. His eyes darkened.

His hand moved the last inch and brushed a damp curl back from my temple. The touch was so slight it should have meant nothing. Instead, it sent a fine shiver through me that he could not possibly have missed.

“You should not be here with me looking at you like this,” Lord Duskmere said.

“Then perhaps,” I said, though my pulse had begun to beat much too hard, “you ought to stop looking.”

A low sound escaped him, not quite a laugh.

"That is advice I have already proven myself incapable of taking," Lord Duskmere said.

The space between us tightened. I could feel him holding himself in check with that familiar, dangerous discipline and, because I could feel it, some reckless part of me wanted to test it.

"Nor have I asked you to," I said.

The words hung there.

His fingers remained lightly against my temple for one unbearable moment, then slid to the curve just below my ear. Not possessive. But not accidental either.

"Do you know," Lord Duskmere said, his voice now little more than a murmur, "what you do to a man's reason when you say things like that to him in an empty room?"

I could not seem to find enough air.

"I know very little tonight," I admitted. "Only that I am tired of fear deciding every conversation between us."

Something in him shifted at that. Not away from me. Toward me.

I think I leaned toward him. I know he bent toward me. I know the room had narrowed to his hand against my skin and the low gold of firelight.

He kissed me.

It was not like the Heart Tree, where the kiss had come from stillness and stayed quiet. This was the opposite of quiet. His mouth found mine and there was nothing careful in it, no measured withdrawal, no gentleness held in reserve. His hands came to my waist and I was against the bookshelves before I understood I had been moving backward, the spines pressing into my shoulder blades through the thin fabric of my dress.

I did not mind. I did not mind at all.

My fingers found the front of his waistcoat and pulled. He made a sound against my mouth that I felt in my chest. His hands tightened at my waist, then moved — one sliding up along my ribs,

the other bracing against the shelf behind me. The shift brought him closer in a way that left little room for pretense.

I could feel his heartbeat through his shirt. I could feel the heat of him, the restrained strength in his arms. His breath came ragged against my jaw when his mouth left mine and found the line of my throat.

My head tipped back against the books. A volume fell. Neither of us stopped.

His mouth came back to mine. I opened to him. Whatever we had been holding back dissolved.

My hands slid up his chest to his collar, his jaw, the damp dark of his hair. His fingers pressed at my hip and my breath caught. The shelf behind me creaked.

His thigh pressed between mine. I pulled him closer instead of pulling away. The sound I made was not something I would have permitted in any lit room with witnesses.

He drew back just enough to look at me. His breathing was as wrecked as mine. His eyes had gone fully gold, the amber burned through, and his hand at my waist had begun to tremble with something I understood was not cold.

"Tell me to stop," Lord Duskmere said roughly.

"No," I said.

His forehead dropped against mine. His hand slid from my hip to the bare skin just above my collar, and the touch sent a shiver through me that had nothing to do with temperature.

The mirror above the mantel flickered.

Lord Duskmere went still.

The firelight in the glass rippled as though disturbed by a hand beneath water. Then the silvered surface darkened at the edges, and a face began to gather in the wavering reflection.

Lord Duskmere's hand dropped from my skin and in the same motion he stepped in front of me.

The face in the mirror was beautiful.

That was the first cruelty of it.

Dark eyes. Sculpted mouth. Black hair drawn back from a face too fine, too deliberate, to belong wholly to an ordinary woman. But the beauty had gone wrong. One side remained sharply composed. The other wavered, as though something beyond the glass kept dragging at it.

When she smiled, it held both mockery and strain.

"Well," the woman said, her voice seeming to come from the glass itself, "this is inconvenient timing."

Every hair on my arms rose.

"Corvina," Lord Duskmere said.

His voice had changed completely. Whatever warmth had lived in the room a heartbeat earlier was gone, driven out by something colder and much older.

Madame Corvina's eyes settled on him with terrible familiarity.

"My dear," Madame Corvina said. "You do choose your moments badly."

"You are dead," Lord Duskmere said.

Madame Corvina gave a low, bitter laugh.

"How faithfully you have clung to that story," Madame Corvina said. "That guilt has been such a useful leash. I do hope you won't abandon it now."

"I have carried your death for seven years," Lord Duskmere said. "I felt you die."

"You felt what you were meant to feel," Madame Corvina said.

I stepped slightly to one side, trying to see past Lord Duskmere's shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Madame Corvina's gaze shifted to me. Old hunger moved in her eyes, deep and assessing, not quite for me but for what I carried with me.

"I have been watching you for some time, Miss Hartwell," Madame Corvina said.

Lord Duskmere's fingers found mine.

"You arranged it," Lord Duskmere said. "The attacks. The farm. Berkshire."

"I arranged a great deal," Madame Corvina said pleasantly. "You were so determined not to see it. Both of you. What a gift that was."

A crack ran across the upper corner of the mirror.

She did not look at it.

"What do you want?" Lord Duskmere asked.

"Want." Madame Corvina let the word sit. "I want what has always been mine to take. The Thornfield gift. The Blackwood inheritance. Two threads wound together. Do you know what they become? A rope strong enough to hold anything." Her smile sharpened. "I have spent years making sure you would bring them to me yourselves."

The room had gone very cold.

I could hardly breathe.

"You will not succeed," Lord Duskmere said.

Madame Corvina looked at him then, and for one fleeting instant something moved across her face that I could not name.

"You are already inside it," Madame Corvina said quietly. "Every choice you have made for months. Every door that seemed to open. Every reason you found to stay." Her gaze came to me again, steady and terrible. "I built it to make sacrifice look like love."

Something moved behind her in the mirror.

The room pressed inward, as though the air itself had grown heavier behind the glass.

Madame Corvina's expression did not change.

"Do not try to run," she said. "You have nowhere left to go."

The mirror shattered.

CHAPTER 26

Testing the Defenses

The shattered mirror left the house altered. By morning, every corridor seemed to hold the memory of that voice.

Rain had washed the gravel clean, but it had not washed away what the house had become overnight. Footsteps moved more quietly. Doors opened with caution. Tobias kept watch near Mr. Blackwood's chamber. I nodded at him as I knocked on Mr. Blackwood's door.

The voice that answered was not his usual voice. Something had been taken out of it overnight.

"Come in," Mr. Blackwood said.

He lay propped against the pillows with a blanket drawn up over his chest. He looked diminished — not smaller, but as though something had burned off, the way wick-char is left behind by the candle. The ritual marks had faded from their freshest black to something older, like the shadow of old bruising.

He looked at me without any expression at all.

"Miss Hartwell," he said.

I sat down in the chair by the bed. I had rehearsed several things on the way up the stairs. None of them held in the room.

"I want to understand," I said. "Not what you told Lord Duskmere last night. What made it possible for you."

Mr. Blackwood watched me for a moment.

"You think it was the title," he said.

"Wasn't it?" I demanded.

"Partly." He said it without heat, as though the word had long since worn flat. "You cannot know what it is to be the spare, Miss Hartwell. You may have to trust me on that."

"I do not have to trust you on anything," I said.

Something moved across his face that might have been amusement and then died. "No," Mr. Blackwood said. "I suppose not."

The lamp shifted. Under the blanket his hand moved as though the marks had pulled.

"My father," Mr. Blackwood said.

He did not follow it with anything.

I waited.

"He had it," Mr. Blackwood said. "What Adrian has. What you have seen him carry." He looked at the ceiling rather than at me. "Not the curse. The bridge-walker part. The standing-between. We did not call it that when I was a child. We had a different name."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

Mr. Blackwood did not change expression. That was the part of it that stayed with me afterward. He described it with no feeling I could read clearly, as if the account had been worn smooth by long private keeping.

"He became evidence," Mr. Blackwood said. "Managed, reduced, and formally reassigned, by people with the proper legal means to do it. I was old enough to understand what was happening and young enough for it to leave a shape in me."

He did not say anything further. Neither did I.

I had come to Mr. Blackwood with a specific question, the grief on Lord Duskmere's face driving my feet to his cousin's room. I came down the stairs without an answer and without a name for what I returned with.

In the library, the lamps had not yet been lit, but the gray daylight did little to soften the room. It lay across the long oak

table in wan bands, touching old leather and scattered papers, silvering the edges of the open books that had multiplied around us until it seemed we were trying to fortify the house with scholarship alone.

Dr. Nightingale stood at the far end of the table with a folio open beneath one pale hand. Catherine had brought down another armful of her grandmother's journals and now sorted them with practical efficiency, though I could see the fatigue in the set of her mouth. Aunt Beatrice sat near the fire with her spectacles low on her nose and a volume in her lap that she had already annotated more sharply than any scholar I had ever known.

Captain Morrison had insisted on joining us despite the stiffness in his movements from too little sleep and too much strain. He stood near the windows, arms crossed. He looked less like a gentleman caller than a soldier waiting for orders he did not trust. He had earned every right to leave this house and everything in it behind him. He had not left. I did not know how to name what that meant to me, only that it was not small.

Lord Duskmere sat opposite me with one of his grandmother's notebooks open before him, the marginalia in a hand that ran right-to-left as often as left-to-right, switching mid-page when she had run out of patience for one alphabet. Last night, his mouth had been on my throat and my back had been against the bookshelves. He did not look at me as though he were thinking of it. I could not stop thinking of it.

The sight of him there, bent over those pages, did something unsettling to my chest. He looked like something other than the master of the house now. He was the heir to a war older than either of us had understood when I first picked the lock of his library door.

Dr. Nightingale turned a page.

"There is enough consistency across the references now that I am prepared to stop calling this conjecture," Dr. Nightingale said.

“What we are dealing with is not a regional superstition attached to one family or one line of folklore. It behaves more like an old predatory intelligence moving through different traditions under different names.”

Captain Morrison crossed his arms. “And by behaves, you mean what, exactly?”

Dr. Nightingale glanced at him. “I mean that it does not simply kill. It studies. It weakens. It takes hold where grief, ambition, guilt, or fear have already loosened the structure of a person. It feeds on bloodline power, but it rarely wastes useful material if corruption will serve it better.”

My gaze dropped unwillingly to one of the pages near my hand. My father’s script ran across it in dark, careful lines, still as neat as if he had set down the pen moments earlier rather than years ago. He had noted botanical defenses capable of obscuring such a signature, warding predatory entities, and strengthening thresholds where one realm pressed too closely against another.

“He knew,” I said quietly. “Not everything, but enough to recognize the danger.”

Lord Duskmere lifted his eyes to mine.

“He knew enough to leave you tools,” Lord Duskmere said.

The words were simple, but the respect in them struck deeper than it should have. For so much of my life, my father’s work had been treated as folly, embarrassment, or delusion. To see it here, laid among other serious materials and handled as part of the answer rather than part of the shame, still had the power to unsteady me.

Catherine pushed one of the journals toward Dr. Nightingale.

“There,” Catherine said. “That is the passage I mentioned. About the defensive plantings.”

Dr. Nightingale bent over it. Lord Duskmere rose and came around the table to look, and I stood as well, drawn less by the page than by the sudden narrowing of space between us all.

The passage was written in an older hand than the rest, the ink browned with age.

"She layered them," I said, tracing the lines without touching the page. "Not one barrier, but several. Thornvine, bloodroot, guardian moss. If one failed, the next was meant to catch what came through."

"Exactly," Lord Duskmere said. "My grandmother did the same here."

I opened my mouth to speak.

The nearest rose canes struck the library window.

Only once, but hard enough to turn every head.

Through the botanical network, I felt the bloodroot and thornvine pull tight at the southern boundary.

"Something has reached the edge," I said. "South side."

Lord Duskmere was already moving.

Captain Morrison took up the iron fire tool from beside the hearth. Aunt Beatrice rose, but Dr. Nightingale said sharply, "No one leaves this room alone until we know where the pressure is falling."

Then the temperature dropped.

Frost silvered the lower panes. Outside, shapes moved in the gray morning, too fluid to be mistaken for anything natural.

"Shadow hounds," Catherine said.

One struck the barrier. Thornvine caught it, but another slipped low beneath the outer growth.

"They're testing the barrier," I said, crossing to the window. "There's a weak seam along the south wall."

"My grandmother's old irrigation break," Lord Duskmere said grimly.

Another blow hit the stone. The guardian moss flared bright.

"Can you strengthen it?" Captain Morrison asked.

"Yes," I said.

"No," Lord Duskmere said at once.

Captain Morrison ignored us both. "Argue later," he said.

He was out the library door before Lord Duskmere could stop him, boots already striking hard for the south corridor.

Catherine made a sound under her breath and hurried to the window. Lord Duskmere was there first, one hand braced against the casement, his eyes blazing with fury.

Beyond the glass, blurred by mist and rain, Captain Morrison reached the south wall just as two shadow hounds slipped past the first layer and began circling near the thinning plantings by the drainage stones. He drove one back with the iron bar, then struck again as it lunged. The blow landed with a horrible sound that was not quite flesh and not quite smoke.

"Now," Captain Morrison shouted. "If you can do anything, do it now."

Lord Duskmere had already gone from the window. I heard the library door strike the wall behind us, then the pound of his boots through the corridor below.

I did not wait for permission.

I pressed both hands to the stone beside the window and reached down through root, moss, and wet earth to the old living lines beneath Duskmere's walls. The connection came hard and cold, then opened. Not like the wild surges of my early failures. Not like panic. This was narrower. More disciplined. I could feel the old design in it, the layered intelligence of the defense Lord Duskmere's grandmother had built with seeds, cuttings, and patience.

The bloodroot answered first. Then the thornvine. Then something deeper and stranger, a network of roots twined with mineral and old mortar that seemed to remember another climate and another hand.

The seam along the south wall thickened.

Vines erupted through the gravel in a rush, knotting over the drainage break just as the second hound lunged. Thorns drove

through shadow. The creature shrieked, convulsed, and came apart — not as clean smoke this time, but as something wetter and darker that clotted where it broke, staining the stone. The thornvine that had pinned it sagged and went black along every length the thing had touched.

The first one twisted and sprang for Captain Morrison.

He turned too late.

CHAPTER 27

Tightening the Noose

Captain Morrison caught the hound's first blow badly. Its claws tore across his shoulder and upper arm, ripping through coat and shirt in one savage rake.

Then Lord Duskmere was there, hitting it from the side with the full force of a man no longer bothering to hide what strength lived in him.

The creature slammed against the wet stone and shattered apart beneath a surge of thornvine that pinned and ripped it into nothing. Where the thorns had closed on it, they blackened and sagged at once, as though whatever had made the hound had burned the green out of everything it died against.

"Open the south door," Lord Duskmere shouted.

Tobias was already moving.

By the time Captain Morrison reached the house, blood had soaked the right side of his coat. Catherine caught his good arm as Tobias hauled the door wide and they got him inside.

The silence afterward came too abruptly.

Outside, the guardian moss dimmed to a low, watchful glow, patchier than it had been at dawn. The roses steadied, but one cane along the south wall hung scorched where the second hound had fallen. The house had held.

But not cleanly.

Captain Morrison sat down heavily in the nearest chair before anyone told him to. His face had gone pale beneath his usual steadiness. Catherine dropped to one knee beside him, already tearing open the ruined cloth at his shoulder with far more competence than drawing-room society would ever suspect in her.

"It is not mortal," Captain Morrison said through his teeth.

"No," Dr. Nightingale said, crossing swiftly to him, "but that was not your best effort at self-preservation either."

"It worked," Captain Morrison said defensively.

"It nearly did not," Dr. Nightingale said, examining the wound.

Lord Duskmere shut the last bolt with deliberate force, then turned back into the room. His breathing was controlled now, but only just.

"You should have stayed inside," Lord Duskmere said.

Captain Morrison gave him a grim look. "And let them learn your weak point undisturbed?"

The two men looked at one another across the blood-streaked carpet, and for a moment I thought the tension might sharpen into something useless and male.

Then Lord Duskmere said, "Next time, Captain, warn me before you bleed on my terrace."

Captain Morrison laughed, once, despite the pain. "If there is a next time, I'll endeavor to be more courteous."

That was as close to peace as either of them was likely to offer.

Dr. Nightingale crouched beside the chair and examined the torn flesh with quick, efficient hands.

"The claws went shallow enough," Dr. Nightingale said. "That is the good news. The less encouraging news is that wounds from these things do not behave like honest injuries."

"I am touched by your optimism," Captain Morrison said.

"You are fortunate I have any," Dr. Nightingale said.

I moved closer despite myself. Blood had soaked through the cloth Catherine held to her brother's shoulder. Not enough to

alarm me in an ordinary wound, but the edges of the slashes looked wrong — too dark, as though the flesh resented having been opened. Captain Morrison had withdrawn his suit, accepted his answer, and stayed to fight for a house that owed him nothing. The blood darkening Catherine's cloth was what that loyalty looked like when it cost something.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"Keep him still," Dr. Nightingale said.

Captain Morrison did not flinch until the tincture touched the deepest cut. Then his jaw tightened.

Dr. Nightingale tied off the bandage and sat back. "This was not an attempt to break the house," Dr. Nightingale said. "It was a test."

That shifted the air in the room.

Lord Duskmere's gaze went at once to the window, then to me. "Of what?" Lord Duskmere asked.

I understood at once.

"They found the weak seam," I said. "They learned the defenses will answer. And they learned—"

"They learned she can anchor the protections through herself," Dr. Nightingale said. "And that she will do it quickly."

Lord Duskmere said nothing.

Captain Morrison followed his gaze to me. "Then next time," Captain Morrison said, "we do not give them that seam again."

"We do not give them a next time in which she spends herself to hold this house together while the rest of us stand by," Lord Duskmere said.

I looked up at him. "Would you rather I had done nothing?"

Lord Duskmere was already looking at me.

"No," Lord Duskmere said quietly. "I would rather you had no cause."

I could not look at Lord Duskmere and could not quite look away. Dr. Nightingale cleared his throat once, not loudly.

"There is a distinction worth the name," Dr. Nightingale said. "You did not summon those vines. You held what had already been laid into the ground. A craft that calls life into a fight spends what it calls. A craft that steadies what has been anchored spends the one who holds. It is a slower magic, and a less showy one. But it does not burn the garden to save the house."

No one answered at once. Lord Duskmere's hand opened on the arm of the chair and closed again. I did not let myself look at it twice.

Tobias entered the room. He looked from the blood on the carpet to Captain Morrison's shoulder and then to Lord Duskmere's face with admirable restraint.

"My lady," Tobias said. "A groom from Berkshire has just arrived."

Catherine was on her feet at once.

"He says Lord Berkshire returned yesterday and rode for Duskmere as soon as he learned you were here," Tobias said. "The man rode with him. Their horses shied on the north road. He was thrown. By the time he got back to his feet, Lord Berkshire was gone."

Captain Morrison swore, low and heartfelt.

"Lord Berkshire never reached the house," Aunt Beatrice said.

"No," Catherine said. Her voice held, though only just. "I would like to speak to the groom myself."

Catherine turned and left at once. For a moment, no one in the room spoke.

Then Lord Duskmere said quietly, "If he was riding here, then whatever happened took place on the road."

Captain Morrison's mouth hardened. "Or near enough to it."

Tobias cleared his throat.

"There is one more matter, my lord," Tobias said. "The magistrate's man waits below. He says the invitation requires an answer tonight."

Lord Duskmere shut his eyes briefly, then opened them again. "What invitation?"

"The magistrate is still proceeding with tomorrow evening's dinner," Tobias said. "He begs the presence of the household at Duskmere and says that under present circumstances any absence will invite exactly the sort of scrutiny he wishes to avoid."

Captain Morrison gave a short, disbelieving laugh. "Excellent. The county circles the drain, and we are to attend supper."

"He is not entirely wrong," Aunt Beatrice said. "If we retreat too visibly from ordinary society, we invite another kind of danger."

"The kind with gossip and magistrates instead of claws," I said.

"Those are often more persistent," Aunt Beatrice pointed out.

Dr. Nightingale tied off the final bandage at Captain Morrison's shoulder and sat back. "He is right to preserve appearances. The question is whether the enemy will permit us the luxury," Dr. Nightingale said.

"They may not need to," Lord Duskmere said. "If word spreads that we are hiding here in numbers, fear will do their work for them."

Captain Morrison shifted and winced. "Then we attend."

Aunt Beatrice looked at him sharply. "You are not attending anything."

Captain Morrison looked as though he might argue, but one glance from Dr. Nightingale ended that ambition.

"You will remain here," Dr. Nightingale said, "and discover the restorative powers of obedience."

"I had forgotten how much I disliked physicians," Captain Morrison said.

"And yet you continue to survive us," Dr. Nightingale said.

By the time Catherine returned and the magistrate's messenger had gone, evening had drawn itself fully over the house.

The attack itself had lasted only minutes. Its consequences had settled everywhere.

The south seam had been tested. Captain Morrison had been wounded. Lord Berkshire had vanished on the road to Duskmere. And tomorrow night we were expected to leave the protection of the house and sit beneath the magistrate's roof as though the world had not already begun to shift beneath our feet.

I spent an hour in the library after the others had scattered, attempting to order my father's papers and failing to see more than half of what lay before me.

The shake had come into my hands about the time Dr. Nightingale had finished with Captain Morrison's bandage.

It had not left.

I had gone to the basin in the side passage and washed a streak of blood from my upper lip without letting myself think about what it meant.

At last, Aunt Beatrice touched my shoulder and told me I looked half-dead. I allowed myself to be sent away, though I did not go upstairs at once.

I found Lord Duskmere in the conservatory.

He stood near the long central table with his back to me, both hands flat on its edge. The glass above him had gone dark except for the wash of moon-pale rain and the reflection of a single lamp. The plants here felt wary but steadier than those near the south wall, as though they too had sensed that the attack had tested the house and found it costly.

For a moment I simply watched him.

He looked as though the day had carved something harder into him. As if each new threat only drove him more firmly into the man he had once refused to be.

"You should be resting," I said.

Lord Duskmere did not turn immediately. "I was told much the same already."

I came farther into the room. "By whom?"

"Your aunt," Lord Duskmere said.

"She says the same thing to everyone she loves," I said.

He turned then, and something in his face changed at the last word.

The conservatory seemed suddenly too close and too quiet.

"You should not say things like that carelessly," Lord Duskmere said.

"I was not speaking carelessly," I said.

He did not look away. All the things we had not said pressed into the silence and gave it weight.

"You nearly spent yourself earlier," Lord Duskmere said.

"So did Captain Morrison," I said.

"Captain Morrison made a fool's choice with his own body," Lord Duskmere said. "You made one with yours on behalf of everyone in this house."

I took another step toward him. "Then perhaps we are all behaving badly."

"Do not make light of it," he said.

"I am not." My voice had sharpened before I meant it to. "I am tired, Lord Duskmere. Tired of being told my life is precious only when I attempt to spend it usefully."

Something flashed in his eyes.

"Is that what you think I mean?" he asked.

"I do not know what you mean." I stopped before him, close enough now to feel the heat of him in the cold glass room. "That is half the difficulty between us, is it not? You say one thing and mean another."

His hand tightened against the table's edge.

"You are asking for honesty," Lord Duskmere said.

"Yes," I said.

He drew one slow breath.

"Then here is some. When I saw you using your powers today, I did not think first of strategy, or this house, or even what might happen if the defenses fell." His voice roughened. "I thought only that if that thing pulled too much of you through those roots, I might kill everything in reach before I reached sense again."

The words went through me like a blade heated in flame.

I should have stepped back. I did not.

"Lord Duskmere—" I said.

"No." He took one step toward me. "You asked."

Rain ran in silver lines down the glass above us. Somewhere among the benches a vine shifted softly against its trellis.

"I have spent weeks telling myself that wanting you was selfish," Lord Duskmere said. "That whatever this is between us must remain secondary to survival, to your safety, to every sensible argument either of us still possesses." His gaze dropped briefly to my mouth and returned to my eyes. "The other night proved how little my arguments are worth. I am done making them."

"You told me to accept Captain Morrison," I said. The old hurt came up with the words, sharper than I wanted it. "More than once. You sent me to Berkshire yourself."

"I did." He did not look away. "I thought that if you married a good man and lived a long, unremarkable life, I could count it as the one decent thing I had managed. So I handed you to him like a debt I was settling." His jaw tightened. "Then I thought of him bowing over your hand and I could not sit in my own library because you were not in it."

"And now?" I asked.

"Now I am done lying about it," he said. "I have no right to want you. I want you anyway."

The answering heat that rose through me felt frighteningly close to relief.

"I had not realized you possessed so much restraint," I said.

Something almost like a laugh escaped him, low and unsteady.

"You mistake restraint for virtue," he said.

"Then let me be plain as well." I lifted my chin. "I am tired of pretending anything other than what I want. I came here for your library. I stayed for you."

The words seemed to strike him speechless for one rare, glorious instant.

Then his hand came up, slow enough that I could have refused it, and touched the side of my face.

The tenderness of it undid me.

His thumb rested just below my cheekbone. I felt the slight roughness of his skin, the careful control in the angle of his wrist, the terrible restraint still in him even now.

"You should not say such things to a man who has spent years starving himself of them," he said softly.

"Then perhaps you should stop making me say them twice," I said.

That did it.

The look that crossed his face was half wonder, half defeat.

His mouth found mine in the next heartbeat.

It was quieter than the library. Steadier. We had said the words first this time, and the kiss that followed was sure of itself in a way none of the others had been. His hand slid from my face to the back of my neck as he drew me nearer. The response that tore through me was more than the kiss. For a held second, I felt his heartbeat as if it were running under my own ribs, relief and dread so close together I could not tell where his ended and mine began. I caught at his coat with both hands.

I tasted rain, smoke, and something darker on him that belonged to no ordinary man and yet was wholly, terribly his.

When he broke the kiss, it was only far enough to breathe.

His forehead rested briefly against mine.

"This is extraordinarily ill-timed," Lord Duskmere said.

"Yes," I whispered.

"And very likely unwise," he said.

"Yes," I agreed.

His hand tightened at my waist.

"That is not discouraging enough," he said.

"I am not trying to discourage you," I said.

A rough, shaken exhale left him that might have been a laugh in another life. Then he kissed me again, shorter this time, but no less devastating.

At last he drew back fully.

For a moment neither of us moved. The conservatory seemed altered around us, though perhaps it was only that I had altered within it.

Tomorrow awaited. The magistrate's dinner awaited. Lord Berkshire was missing. Captain Morrison lay upstairs with his shoulder bandaged and his role in the next stage of this struggle already narrowing. The house had been tested and found vulnerable.

None of that had changed.

And still, nothing felt the same.

Lord Duskmere looked at me with a kind of grim wonder, as if he could not quite believe he had permitted himself this and had not yet decided whether to thank heaven or curse it.

"We should go back inside," Lord Duskmere said.

"We should," I agreed.

Neither of us moved for another breath.

Then, together, we turned toward the house and the long night still waiting for us.

CHAPTER 28

The Magistrate's Dinner

By the time Molly finished with my hair, I scarcely recognized myself.

The gown had belonged to one of Lord Duskmere's grandmothers. It was a deep green silk that made my skin look paler and my eyes darker, and it fit with a precision that left me feeling far too visible. I looked like a lady prepared for society.

The mirror showed a lady. I felt like prey.

Molly stepped back, studying me with her hands on her hips.

"Well," Molly said, "if the county insists on staring tonight, they may as well have something worth staring at."

I tried for a smile. "That is a dangerous amount of confidence."

"It is an earned amount of confidence," Molly said. She adjusted the fall of the skirt with brisk hands. "And before you say it, yes, I know there are greater concerns in the world than whether you look handsome enough to unsettle the county. I am capable of fretting over several things at once."

My laughter came more softly than I intended.

I had walked out to the south wall earlier that day, before the house began its long preparation for the magistrate's table. The gravel was still dark where Captain Morrison had bled into it. One length of guardian moss had gone to ash along the stone. A bloodroot stem that had crowned the wall the morning of the

probe hung dry at the tip, the flower gone before it had opened. I set my palm flat where the roses should have answered and felt only a thin, cold thread where there had been warmth the week before. I did not say anything to Dr. Nightingale when he passed. He looked at the wall and then at me and went on toward the house.

Molly straightened a pin I had not felt her set. Her voice dropped a register.

"Tom Miller wasn't at market Friday, miss," Molly said. "Nor Saturday. His door was standing open when the baker's boy went round this morning. Fire cold. Boots gone. No note."

I did not say anything. Molly knew already. We both knew.

"His sister, first," Molly said, quieter still. "Now him. I thought you would want to know before the carriage came."

"Thank you," I said.

Molly reached for my cloak, then paused as a knock sounded at the door.

My heart stumbled before I could prevent it.

Molly's eyes flicked toward me with entirely too much perception.

"You may enter," Molly called.

The door opened, and Lord Duskmere stepped inside.

For one suspended moment, the room went still.

He wore evening black. Nothing ornate, nothing softening. The severity of it only made him more striking. His hair had been brushed back. His expression was under control, but not so completely that I could not see the strain beneath it. I remembered too vividly how that same face had looked the night before with restraint stripped from it.

His eyes found mine at once.

"You are ready," Lord Duskmere said.

The neutrality of the words did nothing to disguise the look.

"So are you," I said.

Molly, with admirable alacrity, moved at once to the dressing table and gathered up the scattered pins.

"I shall go below and see whether Mrs. Ashford requires anything before you leave," Molly said. "And whether Tobias has remembered that wounded men become intolerable when they are hungry."

She passed me my gloves, squeezed my fingers once, and disappeared into the corridor.

The quiet she left behind was dangerous.

Lord Duskmere remained near the threshold for a beat too long, as though he understood that as well as I did.

"That is unfairly green," Lord Duskmere said at last.

I blinked. "Unfair?"

"Yes," Lord Duskmere said. "I had intended to conduct myself with more composure than this."

Heat rose into my face before I could stop it.

"You might try again once we are in the carriage," I said.

Something shifted in his mouth, not quite a smile. "I may have exhausted my better instincts already."

I looked down at the gloves in my hands because looking directly at him felt suddenly inadvisable. "You need not have come yourself."

"I did," he said, the answer coming low and without apology.

Then, after the smallest pause, Lord Duskmere added, "If I refuse to appear now, every rumor told about this house for the last seven years will harden into fact. Whitmore knows it. So do I."

That, at least, was plain.

"Then tonight we perform sanity, gratitude, and social compliance," I said.

Something in his face eased, then was gone.

"Yes," Lord Duskmere said. "I have every confidence in your powers of deception. Mine are less polished."

I lifted my eyes. "I disagree."

His gaze held mine. "That is because you have seen the performance and mistaken it for ease," he said.

I couldn't look away from the heat in his eyes. The memory of the conservatory, of his hand at my waist and his mouth on mine, moved through me with humiliating ease. It was far too near the surface. I could not conceal it properly from myself, much less from him.

Lord Duskmere took one step closer.

"You should not look at me like that before we walk into a room full of county magistrates," Lord Duskmere said softly.

"I am doing my best not to," I said.

"That is not encouraging," he replied.

I stayed where I was.

He lifted a hand, hesitated, then touched one loose curl near my temple and set it into place. His lips followed. A light brush against my skin.

The gesture was brief and exquisitely controlled.

It ruined me.

"We should go," Lord Duskmere said.

"Yes," I said, barely managing to stand.

He offered me his arm. I took it.

Downstairs, the hall had gathered itself into a tense practicality.

Captain Morrison sat near the hearth with his wounded shoulder bandaged beneath his coat and irritation written clearly over every line of him. Catherine had helped him into the coat, I suspected. The right sleeve lay too smoothly for his own doing. He had taken a chair, which told me something about the walk down. Catherine stood beside him, dark, composed, and entirely unpersuadable.

Dr. Nightingale had stationed himself near the library door with the air of a man who intended to survive the evening by

distrusting everyone. Aunt Beatrice wore one of her darker gowns and held a ring of keys in one hand.

"This is absurd," Captain Morrison said. "I am perfectly capable of attending a dinner and offending a magistrate. The shoulder has only improved my temper." He tried for a smile and did not quite manage it.

No one laughed. Captain Morrison's mouth moved once, as though to try the joke again, then did not.

"You are also perfectly capable of reopening your shoulder and disgracing yourself into my care again," Dr. Nightingale said.

Captain Morrison muttered something I chose not to hear.

Catherine did not even glance at him. "You will remain here, James. Mr. Blackwood remains under watch upstairs. Beatrice has command of the house. Dr. Nightingale stays with her because I refuse to leave every thinking person under this roof in the hands of my brother and Tobias."

"That is a cruel assessment of Tobias," Captain Morrison said.

"It is a charitable one of you," Catherine said.

Despite everything, I nearly smiled.

Aunt Beatrice came toward me and adjusted the edge of one glove I did not think needed adjusting.

"If anything feels wrong," Aunt Beatrice said quietly, "you leave at once."

"Yes," I said.

Her eyes shifted briefly to Lord Duskmere.

"Bring her home before midnight if you can," Aunt Beatrice said.

Lord Duskmere inclined his head. "I intend to bring them all home."

That seemed to satisfy her.

When we finally stepped outside, the night air struck cold and clean after the heat of the hall. The carriage waited with lamps

already lit. The horses shifted restlessly, their breath steaming in the dark.

Lord Duskmere handed me up, then Catherine. And then we were off.

Magistrate Whitmore's house blazed against the dark like a declaration that nothing extraordinary was happening anywhere in England.

The drive was full of carriages. Servants moved briskly beneath the portico. The whole thing looked offensively normal.

Then Lord Duskmere descended from the carriage.

The reaction was immediate.

Not loud. Worse. Subtle enough to be polite and visible enough to be unmistakable. A gentleman on the steps broke off mid-sentence. One woman lowered her fan without realizing she had done so. A whisper passed behind us, then another.

Lord Duskmere might as well have arrived carrying a storm over one shoulder.

He offered me his hand as though none of it signified. I placed my fingers in his and stepped down. Catherine followed.

Inside, the magistrate himself came forward at once.

"Lord Duskmere," Magistrate Whitmore said. "We are honored."

The lie was well-bred enough to survive contact with the room.

"Your invitation was difficult to decline," Lord Duskmere said.

Magistrate Whitmore's eyes flicked over him quickly, almost against his will, as though searching for the evidence of seven years' worth of rumor. Lord Duskmere gave him none.

Dinner itself was a study in strain.

Lord Duskmere's presence distorted the room even when no one addressed him directly. Every conversation bent toward him, then away again. The county had spent seven years speaking of him as absence, scandal, or warning. To have him seated under the

magistrate's roof, entirely controlled and alive, forced everyone to remake their story while pretending not to.

Under all of it, I felt the network as one feels a room one has just stepped out of. Duskmere did not sing so clearly at this range, but it was there, a low pressure along a green thread, steady as breathing.

I answered questions, smiled when required, touched almost nothing on my plate. Across the table, Lord Duskmere did the same.

Between the fish and the pheasant, the breathing changed.

Not in the room. Along the thread. The steady pull of Duskmere's root network had developed an uneven catch, the way a rope catches when something has pulled it from the wrong end.

The bloodroot had gone taut.

I lowered my fork.

"Miss Hartwell," said the woman to my left. "You are very quiet this evening."

"I am listening," I said.

She laughed uncertainly, as though assuming wit where there was none.

Across the table, Lord Duskmere looked up.

He knew.

I reached again through the network. This time the answer came back sharper. The patched seam at the south side still held, but pressure had shifted elsewhere. The ivy along the east passage had gone tight with warning.

Then the whole system convulsed.

A shock tore through the connection so violently that my chair scraped against the floor.

Every head turned.

Lord Duskmere was already rising.

"The house," I said.

It was all I could manage.

Catherine stood at once. "Forgive us, Magistrate," Catherine said with perfect, brittle composure. "We must leave."

Magistrate Whitmore half rose from his seat, alarm and irritation struggling for precedence. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," Lord Duskmere said.

Nothing more.

The room broke into murmurs as we withdrew. I barely remember the passage to the front door. Only the speed of it, and the certainty growing in me with every step that whatever was happening at Duskmere was not another test.

It was an entry.

The ride back was worse.

The defenses were failing in points, not all at once. That was what terrified me. Not wild destruction. Precision. One living barrier after another going dark in sequence.

"It's not the outer wall," I said, gripping the carriage strap hard enough to numb my fingers. "They're inside the grounds."

Lord Duskmere's hand closed over mine.

"What do you feel?" Lord Duskmere asked.

I closed my eyes. "The south seam still holds. The outer roses are damaged. The eastern ivy is—"

A tearing shock hit the network.

I gasped.

"Gone," I said.

Lord Duskmere struck the roof of the carriage with his fist. "Faster."

By the time we reached the drive, the front gate stood open.

The carriage had scarcely stopped before Lord Duskmere was out. I followed. Gravel slid under my shoes as I jumped down. The whole front of the house looked wrong. One lamp had shattered. The guardian moss along the stones had blackened into ash. The thornvine nearest the entry hung scorched and limp.

The front door stood half open.

Tobias met us in the hall, face gray with shock. "My lord—" "Where are they?" Lord Duskmere asked.

Tobias swallowed. "They came through the east passage. Fast. Not a full assault. Shadows, then dark. By the time we reached Mrs. Ashford—"

He stopped.

"And James?" Catherine asked.

"Alive," Tobias said at once. "He tried to get up. Dr. Nightingale stopped him. Molly is with them now."

"Algernon?" Lord Duskmere asked.

Tobias's silence answered first.

"Gone," Tobias said.

We went to Aunt Beatrice's chamber at once.

Molly stood at the doorway with tears in her eyes and fury bright beneath them.

"They came like smoke," Molly said. "The corridor went black. Dr. Nightingale was with Captain Morrison. By the time we reached her—"

She stepped aside.

The room beyond looked almost untouched.

That was the worst thing of all.

A candlestick lay on its side. Aunt Beatrice's shawl had slipped half from the chair beside the hearth. The bedclothes had been dragged askew. Nothing more.

Nothing except the words on the wall above the bed, written in a dark wet stroke:

SHE CAME WILLINGLY.

I stopped cold.

"No," Molly said immediately, with raw fury. "She did not."

"No," I said.

My voice came out flat and cold.

She had not. The words were there to wound.

Lord Duskmere stepped into the room beside me. His gaze moved once over the message, then over the bed, the chair, the floor.

“This was targeted,” Catherine said quietly behind us.

“Yes,” I said.

Captain Morrison was alive. Dr. Nightingale was alive. Molly and Tobias were here. The house had been breached, not overrun.

Aunt Beatrice had been taken.

So had Mr. Blackwood.

The dinner. The room full of eyes. Lord Duskmere drawn out into society for the first time in seven years. All of us absent from the house at the exact hour the enemy required.

They had not merely struck.

They had placed us where they wanted us, then taken what they came for.

Lord Duskmere looked at the words on the wall once more.

“We go after them,” Lord Duskmere said.

Outside, the ruined defenses whispered in the wind.

Inside, Duskmere no longer felt like sanctuary. It felt like something watched, entered, and violated with care.

CHAPTER 29

The Last Cards Fall

They took Molly in daylight.

The perversity of that struck me before anything else. Not under cover of storm or midnight or some unnatural hour when shadows might plausibly thicken into other things. Daylight. A gray, strained afternoon in a house that no longer trusted its own corners.

I was in the library with Lord Duskmere and Dr. Nightingale, bent over Thornfield maps and the older survey records Tobias had unearthed from some neglected press in the steward's room. Thornfield Abbey had never truly left our thoughts since Molly mapped the attacks around it. No one lived there now. Yet with Aunt Beatrice, Mr. Blackwood, and Lord Berkshire gone, the old ruins had begun to feel less like superstition and more like concealment.

Catherine had gone to rest for an hour. Captain Morrison, under stern orders, was upstairs with his shoulder bandaged, his pistol cleaned and left on the coverlet within reach of his good hand, and his temper steadily worsening. The house had fallen into that uneasy, listening quiet that comes after too much alarm and too little sleep.

Molly had come in not ten minutes before with a tray and a line of complaint about the state of everyone's manners.

"If none of you mean to eat," Molly had said, setting down tea with unnecessary firmness, "you might at least have the grace not to look so offended by the sight of it."

"I am never offended by tea," I had said.

"No, miss," Molly had replied. "Only by reason and the natural limits of the body."

Lord Duskmere had very nearly smiled.

Now the tray sat half untouched on the side table, the tea cooling in its cups, and Tobias's shout tore through the floor below us with enough force to stop the cup halfway to my mouth.

Not a call. Not a warning. A shout.

Lord Duskmere was moving before the sound had fully died. His chair struck the carpet and went over backward. I was close behind him, with Dr. Nightingale already at my shoulder. We met Tobias in the servants' passage, kneeling on the flagstones with something clutched in his hand so tightly I could not at first make out what it was.

Then I saw the yellowed edge of cloth.

Molly's apron.

It had torn at the ties. One corner had darkened with something that might have been mud if I had not known better.

"Tobias," I said.

He looked up.

I had never seen his face so open. All the steadiness that made him Tobias had been ripped clean away, leaving something very near despair.

"She was here," Tobias said. His voice broke on the last word. He swallowed and tried again. "She had just laughed about something. She came up for linens. I heard her in the passage. Then the lamps went out for one second — just one — and when they came back she was gone."

Dr. Nightingale took the scrap of apron from his hand and examined it with swift, sharp eyes. Lord Duskmere looked once

up and down the corridor, as though sheer will might force the house to yield its thief back to us.

There was no sign of struggle.

No overturned chair. No broken sconce. No blood on the floor.

That was somehow worse.

It had happened too quickly for any true defense.

"This is my fault," I said.

The words came out low and flat.

Lord Duskmere turned at once. "No."

"It is my fault," I said. "It keeps taking the people nearest me and we keep pretending not to understand the pattern."

"That is Corvina's doing," Dr. Nightingale said. His voice had gone colder than I had ever heard it. "Do not hand her the additional satisfaction of making you speak her crimes as your own." Then, more quietly, he said, "I have been late before. I do not intend to be late again." He did not say it to any of us. He did not look up from the apron scrap in his hand. When he did, he was steady.

Tobias rose so abruptly I thought for one moment he might fall again.

"When you go," Tobias said, "I'm coming."

Lord Duskmere looked at him. "Tobias—"

"No." Tobias's face tightened, and for the first time since I had known him, his voice carried no deference at all. "No, my lord. Don't say it is too dangerous. Don't say I'm needed here. Don't say any of the things decent people say when they mean to leave someone behind."

The corridor had gone very still around us.

Tobias's hand closed over the torn scrap of apron again, though Dr. Nightingale still held the other edge of it. He did not seem to notice.

"That girl has been the only bright thing in this house since she walked through the door," Tobias said. His voice shook once

and steadied by force. "I've watched her laugh at us all and order us about as if she'd belonged here from the first hour. I've watched her make this place feel inhabited again. If she dies in that abbey, I'll not stay behind and polish silver while it happens."

No one spoke.

I felt my throat tighten unexpectedly hard. Molly would have rolled her eyes to hear herself described so solemnly. Then she would have secretly treasured every word.

Lord Duskmere's expression changed by degrees. Clarified.

"When the time comes," Lord Duskmere said, "you will come."

Tobias looked at him for a moment longer, then gave one tight nod.

The matter settled. There was too much else still standing around it for grief to hold the room.

Dr. Nightingale folded the scrap of cloth and handed it back to Tobias. "See whether anything else in the lower hall has been disturbed," Dr. Nightingale said. "Then go sit with Captain Morrison until I send for you. If you remain in this corridor staring at the walls, you will begin to imagine things that are not there."

Tobias took the order as though it were something to take.

He left without another word.

The silence he carried away with him seemed larger than the one he left behind.

I turned back toward the library on instinct more than choice. I did not know what else to do with my body. Lord Duskmere followed. Dr. Nightingale came after us, shutting the door with more care than the moment required.

For a little while none of us spoke.

The Thornfield maps still lay open beneath the gray window light. One of Molly's teacups sat by my elbow, forgotten. The domestic normalcy of it made me want to sweep the whole table clear.

"She's narrowing the screws," I said.

Lord Duskmere had gone to the window, his shoulders held too still.

"Yes," Lord Duskmere said.

"She wants you willing," Dr. Nightingale said.

He did not say it as a man offering an opinion. He drew a folded page from the folio at his elbow, opened it, and laid it on the table between us, smoothing the crease flat with two fingers.

"I began this the night the symbols were burned into Lady Berkshire's garden," Dr. Nightingale said. "I have not shown it to you before now because I do not put conjecture in front of people whose lives depend on the answer. I am no longer conjecturing."

The page was close-written in his precise hand. He had set the two workings side by side as a physician might chart two fevers. On the left, the soul anchoring we had found in the fragmentary text: power fixed by force, cut from the bearer, the bearer present willing or otherwise. I remembered the phrase. I had read it across a library table weeks ago and thought it the worst thing the books would ever show me. Uncle Richard sat unwritten behind every line of that column.

The right-hand column was shorter. I read it twice.

"An anchoring takes a fragment," Dr. Nightingale said quietly, watching me read. "The taking kills the gift along with its bearer, and what is fixed is a dead splinter of what lived. The traditions disagree on nearly everything. On this greater working they agree to the letter. The gift must be given whole, and it must be given alone, by a bearer whose choice of the altar is their own. A gift of that order cannot be seized. It is why she has spent years arranging your life rather than simply ending it."

At the bottom of the page, beneath the columns, he had written a single line and underscored it once.

A surrender born of love, or nothing at all.

I closed my eyes briefly.

Willing sacrifice. Born of love. The trap had been visible for some time now. I had simply hoped that naming it might blunt its force. Instead, she had only grown more efficient.

I opened my eyes again and found Lord Duskmere watching me.

Something had changed in him since the dinner. Since Aunt Beatrice's chamber. Since the message on the wall. His restraint had not vanished. It had hardened into a more perilous thing. He no longer looked like a man trying to deny the existence of a storm. He looked like a man who had accepted the storm and was bracing for it.

Then, without warning, he went rigid.

It happened so suddenly that I half rose from my chair.

"Lord Duskmere?" I said.

He did not answer at once. His eyes had gone distant, fixed on something I could not see. One hand lifted to his temple. The breath he drew looked painful.

Dr. Nightingale was across the room in an instant.

"What is it?" Dr. Nightingale asked.

Lord Duskmere's mouth tightened. "Algernon."

There was a tension in him I recognized at once — not the wolf, not exactly — but the other strangeness that belonged to his bloodline. The bridge-walker part.

"He's reaching," Lord Duskmere said. The words seemed difficult to drag into speech. "He is trying to reach me."

Something in the way he said it told me more. Mr. Blackwood was letting the channel open.

Dr. Nightingale's pale eyes sharpened. "Can you answer him?"

"I don't know," he said.

That was enough for me.

I came to him and caught his wrist. His pulse hammered beneath my fingers, too fast, uneven.

"Let me help," I said.

Lord Duskmere looked at me as though he meant to forbid it, but whatever he saw in my face prevented him.

“Be careful,” Lord Duskmere said.

I put my free hand flat against the center of his chest.

The botanical network answered before I had fully reached for it. This was something more disciplined now. Root to wall. Moss to stone. The repaired defenses, still holding despite the house’s injuries, fed their steadier current into me. I did not try to drive it into him. I only strengthened the line already opening.

For one suspended instant, nothing happened.

Then the library fell away.

Darkness closed around us, but not the true darkness of emptiness. This was layered, inhabited darkness. Something between a dream and a corridor. Lord Duskmere was beside me, though I saw him more as presence than form. Ahead, barely visible, knelt a figure with his hands braced against stone I could not fully make out.

Mr. Blackwood looked like a man the world had nearly finished using.

His fair hair hung in damp strands around a face that had gone sharp with suffering. Whatever remnants of careless charm had once lived there had been burned away. He looked older, smaller, and far more real than he ever had in a ballroom.

When he lifted his head, his eyes found Lord Duskmere at once.

“You came,” Mr. Blackwood said.

The words were nearly swallowed by the dark around us.

“What have you done now?” Lord Duskmere asked.

There was no heat in the question. Only grief sharpened to the edge of cruelty.

Mr. Blackwood gave a hollow laugh that died almost before it had formed. “What I always do. Reached for more than I could hold.”

The darkness around him stirred.

I could not tell whether it belonged to the place or to what held him there. Perhaps there was no meaningful difference.

"We do not have time for confession," I said. "Where are you?"

Mr. Blackwood's gaze shifted to me. Some flicker of old awareness crossed it, as if he was still not entirely accustomed to the fact of my presence in matters he had once tried to control from the edges.

"Still impossible," Mr. Blackwood murmured. "The botanist's daughter in every room where she ought not to be."

"Where?" Lord Duskmere said.

Mr. Blackwood's expression altered. Whatever poor joke he had attempted at my expense or his own failed entirely.

"Thornfield Abbey," Mr. Blackwood said.

I felt the meaning of the word before he elaborated.

"The chapel," Mr. Blackwood continued. "The altar stone moves. There's a stair beneath it. The crypts run deeper than anyone above remembers. Your people sealed them generations ago and pretended forgetting was the same as erasing."

My breath caught.

Of course. Thornfield had been there from the beginning at the center of Molly's map, in the old talk of harvest rites, in every line of dread that seemed to lead back to my mother's ruined inheritance. We had not been wrong about the place. Only incomplete.

"Who?" Lord Duskmere asked.

"All of them that matter," Mr. Blackwood said. "Mrs. Ashford. Molly. Charles Berkshire. The others."

"How do we stop it?" Lord Duskmere asked.

Mr. Blackwood looked at him with something close to despair.

"If I knew that, Cousin," Mr. Blackwood said, "I might have chosen better a year ago."

The darkness gave a low pulse around him, and he flinched hard enough that the motion seemed to tear through him.

"The ritual begins tomorrow," Mr. Blackwood said. "She knows you're coming. She expects you. That is part of the design."

That, too, I had feared.

"Then why reach for us at all?" I asked.

Mr. Blackwood's eyes came back to mine. For one moment, whatever was left of his vanity and smoothness fell aside completely.

"Because I would rather not vanish having been entirely useless in the end," he said.

Lord Duskmere made a rough, involuntary sound beside me. I could not have said what it was.

"Do not waste time in the upper chambers. That is what she wants," Mr. Blackwood said urgently.

The darkness surged.

This time there was no mistaking it. Something had noticed the breach.

Mr. Blackwood doubled over. The shape of him blurred violently at the edges.

"Go," Mr. Blackwood said.

"Not yet," Lord Duskmere said.

Mr. Blackwood laughed once, and this time it was pure ruin. "Do not make me sentimental, Adrian."

Mr. Blackwood lifted his head one final time. "I am sorry," Mr. Blackwood said.

Then the dark closed.

I came back to the library gasping.

The floorboards were beneath me. Lord Duskmere's hand was at my shoulder. Dr. Nightingale knelt nearby, one knee to the floor.

For a moment I could not seem to draw enough air.

"Miss Hartwell," Lord Duskmere said.

His voice sounded strained.

"I'm here," I said.

Lord Duskmere's hand tightened once and then loosened, as though he had only just remembered how much strength he carried in it.

Dr. Nightingale looked between us. "Tell me."

"Thornfield," I said, still breathless. "The chapel. The altar stone moves. There's a stair beneath it. The ritual space is below the ruins, in the old crypts."

Lord Duskmere had gone very still again, but in a different way this time. This was decision.

Dr. Nightingale rose to his feet. "Then at last we have a location."

"And a trap," I said.

"Yes," Dr. Nightingale said. "That as well."

No one pretended otherwise.

For a little while after that the room filled with movement but not noise. Maps were shifted. One old survey was spread over another. Dr. Nightingale marked the chapel entrance with a knife tip while I sat very still and tried not to think of Molly below ground, laughing only hours ago and now dragged into whatever waited under Thornfield stone.

Lord Duskmere moved around the table with a kind of terrible calm.

Dr. Nightingale gathered the papers into something like order and looked at us both.

"You will not be able to improvise once you are below," Dr. Nightingale said. "Decide tonight. Go tomorrow. Delay gains you nothing now."

Lord Duskmere's gaze did not leave the map. "No," Lord Duskmere said. "It gains us nothing."

Dr. Nightingale studied us for one moment longer, then collected two of the smaller folios beneath his arm.

"I will see what more can be wrung from these records before dawn," Dr. Nightingale said. "And I will also see whether Tobias has decided to patrol the corridors to death."

When he left, he closed the library door behind him.

The silence that followed was not empty.

It was full of all the things that had not yet been spoken.

I remained where I was by the table, one hand resting flat on the map as though it might otherwise drift away from me. Lord Duskmere stood opposite, the candlelight drawing long shadows into the hollows of his face. He looked tired now. Not weakened. Simply stripped of every spare reserve.

The house pressed around us in old wood and old paper and old grief.

Lord Duskmere lifted his eyes to mine. "You know what is happening."

I did.

Corvina had not merely taken people. She had arranged them like weights on a scale and meant to see what would make me step willingly into her hand.

"She wants me desperate enough to mistake surrender for rescue," I said.

Lord Duskmere's mouth tightened. "Yes."

"And you think I may do it," I said.

A long pause.

"Yes," Lord Duskmere said.

The honesty of it hurt. It was not unfair. That was the worst of it.

I looked down at the map between us. The chapel sat inked there in faded lines and measured distances. Somewhere beneath that neat old drawing, the people I loved were waiting in the dark.

"I don't know how not to go," I said.

"I know," he said.

The answer came so quietly that I nearly missed it.

I looked up.

Lord Duskmere had come around the table. He stopped close enough that I could feel the heat of him in the cool library air.

"I have spent too long trying to decide what I could forbid you," he said. "What I could protect you from by sheer force of will. It has been a profoundly stupid use of time."

Despite everything, the corner of my mouth moved.

"Yes," I said. "It has."

A rough breath escaped him that might have been a laugh in another life.

"I cannot ask you to stay behind while your aunt is below that place," he said. "Or Molly. Or any of them. I know you too well now to insult either of us with the attempt."

Something in my chest ached hard enough to feel like relief.

"Then do not," I said.

He lifted a hand, stopped, and then let it come the rest of the way to my face. His fingers brushed my cheek with extraordinary care, as though what passed between us now required more reverence than our earlier hunger had.

I leaned into it before I could think better of it.

"Listen to me," he said. "Tomorrow, we go to Thornfield. We go because there is no one else who can do what must be done. We go knowing she wants us there. We go knowing she means to force your choice and my failure in the same place and call it victory." His thumb moved once, just below my eye. "But you do not go alone."

The room seemed to narrow around the words.

"No," I said.

My voice had gone unsteady. I did not care.

His gaze searched my face with a kind of hunger made gentler only by exhaustion.

"I am done telling you to stand back from me," he said. "I am done pretending that what I feel is some passing derangement

that will burn itself out if I deny it long enough. If we go below that abbey and do not come back..." He stopped. For one terrible instant he could not go on. "Then I will not leave this unspoken."

My heart beat once, hard enough to hurt.

"Do not," I whispered.

His hand stilled against my skin.

"What?" he asked.

"Do not leave it unspoken because we may die tomorrow," I said. "Say it because it is true now."

Something changed in him then.

Not in posture. Not in expression alone. In the distance he had held ever since I first met him. It gave way. Enough.

When he spoke, his voice roughened on the name.

"Evangeline." His voice was quiet.

And then, more quietly still, "I love you."

The words landed in me like impact and homecoming all at once.

I had known. Of course I had known. But knowing was not hearing, and hearing was not the same as surviving it.

I did not realize I had begun to cry until his thumb caught the tear.

"I love you too," I said.

No hesitation. No attempt to shape it smaller than it was.

Something shifted in my chest when I said it. Further in than I had words for. I felt it begin to uncoil, slowly, as though it had been waiting for exactly this.

His eyes closed for one brief second, as though the answer had struck somewhere tender and undefended.

When he opened them again, I saw not Lord Duskmere, not the recluse, not the title that had stood between us like a carved stone threshold.

I saw Adrian.

The name rose in me with perfect, startling certainty, not like something borrowed from another person's mouth, but like something finally, unmistakably earned.

"Adrian," I said.

He went still.

I had never spoken his name to him before. Not like that. Not as choice.

Something almost painful moved across his face.

Then our lips met.

It was not the urgency of the library, or the sureness of the conservatory. This was deeper and steadier, though no less consuming. He kissed me as though he had at last stopped fighting.

My hands rose to his shoulders of their own accord. He drew me nearer with one arm around my waist, the other still cupping the back of my neck. The maps and books and old papers at our elbows might have belonged to another existence entirely.

When we broke apart, our foreheads rested together.

"Together," Adrian said.

The word was scarcely more than breath.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Tomorrow," Adrian said.

"Yes," I said.

He drew one long breath, then another, as though trying to commit both restraint and resolve to the same frail human body.

"We go below that chapel," Adrian said. "We bring them back if we can. We destroy the ritual if we cannot do both. And if she tries to force your choice—"

"She will find I have already made one," I said.

His eyes held mine.

Then, slowly, Adrian nodded.

Outside the library windows the light had gone thin and colorless, evening beginning its long descent over the wounded grounds of Duskmere. Somewhere in the house, a floorboard

creaked. Somewhere below, a servant carried on because houses do not stop being houses even on the edge of ruin.

Tomorrow we would ride to Thornfield Abbey.

Tomorrow we would go down into the crypts.

Tonight there was no more pretending that either of us stood alone.

CHAPTER 30

The Bond

I couldn't sleep.

I lay in my bed at Duskmere, staring at the canopy above me, listening to the ancient house settle and groan. Somewhere beneath the floorboards the botanical network thrummed, restless, its distress leaking into my own pulse. Tomorrow we would ride into the heart of Corvina's trap. Tomorrow we might die.

Molly. Aunt Beatrice. Hold on. We're coming.

I lay there and thought of every way I might refuse. I could wake Adrian and ride out of this house before sunrise. I could send word to Catherine and put miles between me and Thornfield. Each refusal came to me distinctly: testing, knowing better, setting it down. Aunt Beatrice was under the ground at Thornfield and so was Molly. The choice made itself, and afterward I was still afraid.

I lay there and counted the fears. I was afraid of dying. I was afraid of failing Molly, of failing my aunt, of whatever Catherine would have to do to save her husband if I did not succeed. I was afraid of going down into the Abbey and finding that the place my mother's people were buried knew me. I was afraid of Corvina with my aunt's life in her hands and of the voice that had followed me since the night the plants had burned.

Worst of all, I was afraid of the word *love* doing exactly what the ritual required of it. I could not call it cruelty. It was what my

heart did when drawn into a certain pattern, and that was harder to hate, because it was mine. Adrian down the corridor with his grandmother's lattice woken around us. Molly under the ground. My aunt. It had had me since before the first whisper had spoken my name in the garden.

I thought about my mother. I did not have much of her. A miniature with the paint flaking at the lip, a journal Aunt Beatrice had kept pressed between Bibles for twenty years and this season quietly set into my hand, a few sentences my aunt had spoken and then refused to elaborate upon. I did not know if my mother, at my age, had lain in a dark room with the network thrumming under the floorboards and tried to measure the size of what she was being asked to spend. I did not know whether the choice had come to her the way it was coming to me, or whether she had simply been taken without needing her consent at all. I did not know what she would have said if she could have sat at the edge of this bed now. I thought, stubbornly, that she would have said: not this way, not without him, not without the rest of them, not alone.

I did not know whether that was my mother's voice or only my own.

What I did know was this. The ritual wanted a woman by herself, giving herself up into its hollow. It did not want a woman who had, for the first time in her life, been seen and not looked away from. That was the thin edge I had to hold. Whatever I walked into tomorrow, I did not walk into it by myself. Whatever was asked of me would not be asked of a woman giving herself up in despair; it would be asked of a woman with her people at her back. I was afraid, and I was going anyway. The courage part I could not promise. What I could promise was that I would not go into it alone.

I turned my face toward his door and understood, with the weight of a thing that had been sitting in my chest for days, that

I did not want to spend what might be my last night alive in a different room.

I was out of bed before I could reason myself still.

I did not bother with a robe. My nightgown whispered thin against my legs as I walked, and the flagstones chilled me through the soles of my feet, and by the time I reached his door at the end of the east wing my heart had climbed into my throat.

I knocked once.

The door opened on the second breath.

He stood in a white shirt, untucked, bare feet pale against the cold stone, a candle burning behind him on the writing desk. The gold in his eyes caught the flame and turned him, for a moment, almost other. His gaze slid down my loose hair, my thin cotton, my bare feet, and the breath left him.

“Evangeline,” he said.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said.

“Neither could I,” he said.

We stood like that, separated by the threshold and by the years he had not been touched. Then he stepped back and opened the door wider, and I crossed into his room as if I were stepping off a cliff.

He closed the door behind me.

“We shouldn’t.” His voice was low, rough at its edges. “The wolf is close tonight. I do not know if I can be certain of—”

“I’m not afraid of the wolf,” I said.

“You should be,” he said.

I took another step, close enough now to feel the unnatural heat coming off his skin. His hands were fists at his sides. The muscle in his jaw worked.

“Tell me something true.” I kept my voice soft. “Something you’ve never told anyone.”

His eyes searched mine a long moment.

"Before I learned that my curse caused me to transform every full moon," he said finally, "I wasn't prepared. That first full moon, I woke in the woods covered in blood. Didn't know where I was. Didn't know what I'd done." His voice dropped. "I was certain I had killed someone. Someone from the village. I thought I had become the thing my mother used to read to me about, and the worst of it wasn't the guilt. The worst of it was that a piece of me was *satisfied*."

"Had you?" I whispered. "Killed someone."

"A deer." His laugh was short and ugly. "Only a deer. But for hours I did not know that, and for hours I was a monster, and I have never been entirely sure I stopped being one."

I lifted my hand to his chest. His heart struck my palm like something trying to break through bone.

"Your turn," he said. "Something true."

I had given him my father's disgrace already. My mother's death. The bargain I had made with him in his own library. There was only one thing I had never spoken aloud.

"Sometimes, when I'm deep in the botanical network, I lose the edges of myself." I kept my eyes on his. "I stop knowing where I end and the plants begin. It's terrifying and it is beautiful, and a part of me never wants to come back. I wonder if my mother felt it. If she didn't drain herself by accident. If she chose to stay because it was easier than coming back to a husband and a child."

His hand came up and covered mine where it rested against his chest.

"You're not your mother," he said.

"No." My voice caught. "I am not. I would never leave you."

His throat moved. In the candlelight I watched the gold in his eyes deepen.

"I see you," I said, lifting my other hand to the line of his jaw. "I have seen you this whole time. The man who reads by candlelight and remembers every plant I've ever named. The man who pushed

me away because he was afraid of hurting me.” My fingers traced his pulse. “Someone worth fighting for.”

“Don’t,” he said. The growl vibrated through my palm. “Don’t.”

“Then give me something to live for,” I said.

He kissed me.

Not gentle. Not careful. He kissed me like a man who had been refusing himself for seven years and had finished refusing. One hand caught in my loose hair. The other pressed flat at the small of my back, drawing me into him until I felt the hard line of his body through the cotton of my gown, the heat of him running through me like a fever. I made a small sound against his mouth and he answered it with a rougher one of his own.

“Evangeline.” He broke away only long enough to find my eyes. “Tell me you are certain.”

“I am certain,” I said.

His mouth came back to mine, slower now, deeper, and he walked me backward step by step until the backs of my knees met the edge of his bed. I sat. He followed me down, bracing himself over me on his forearms, and the weight of him settled against my thighs through thin cotton and the solid heat of him made me arch without meaning to.

His mouth left mine to travel the line of my jaw, the slope of my throat, the hollow where my pulse was beating itself ragged. He lingered there. A soft drag of teeth. A slower kiss. My fingers pushed into his hair and my breath came out of me raggedly, and when he eased a hand up the outside of my thigh, gathering the nightgown as he went, I felt the tips of his fingers and felt also, for just an instant, the curved shadow of claws retracting.

“Stop me,” he said against my collarbone. “Any moment. I will.”

“Don’t stop,” I said.

He drew the gown up. Cool air over my thighs, my stomach, my ribs. He sat back on his heels to pull it over my head, and I

was bare beneath him in candlelight and shadow, and the sound he made at the sight of me was not entirely human.

“God, Evangeline,” he breathed.

I reached for the buttons of his shirt. My fingers fumbled. He let me work them anyway, watching my face, not his own hands, until the last one gave and I pushed the linen from his shoulders.

Seven years of hiding laid itself bare. The long lean muscle of him. The pale scars, thin and silvered, tracked across his ribs and shoulder in the shapes of his own claws. A deeper one low on his flank that I did not ask about. And at his wrist, two old white lines close together, the ones I had felt against my cheek at the Heart Tree, with the two fainter lines beneath his collarbone. My thumb found them before I could decide whether to ask.

“Iron,” he said, watching my face. “The first year. I chained myself below the house when the moon came. The chains held better than I deserved.”

His voice stayed level; under my palm, his heart did not. I set my mouth to the worst of them and felt him shudder.

“Evangeline—” he said.

“I know,” I said.

He pressed me down into the pillows. His mouth closed over my breast and my hips lifted against him without permission; his palm slid down my belly and lower still, and when his fingers found me, he groaned against my skin as if *he* were the one being undone. He took his time. He was slow and careful and shaking with the effort of being so. When I came apart under his hand it was with his name in my mouth and the botanical network in the walls of the house responding to me like a struck bell.

“*Evangeline.*” His voice was ruined.

“Please,” I said.

He settled over me. His forehead came down to mine. The heat of him pressed where I was still trembling, and he held there a breath too long, looking at me with gold bright eyes.

"Last chance," he said.

"I want you," I said.

He pushed into me slowly.

I felt the stretch of it, the burn of it, the breath he forced out between his teeth to keep himself still. He stopped when he was fully seated and dropped his forehead back to mine and held. His arms trembled on either side of my head. I could feel the beat of his heart where our chests touched. I could feel more than that.

Something between us unlatched. What we had carried in half-glimpses for weeks opened all the way, and for a stunned moment I felt what he felt: the ache of being wanted, the terror of being loved, the wolf quieting under my hand like a dog laying its head down.

Something else opened with it. The green I had carried since childhood wound into the older register that lived in him. I felt it happen in the marrow of my spine, a heat that was not his body's heat and not mine.

The two threads twisted into one cord and would not come back unwoven. It settled at the base of my ribs like a second heartbeat and stayed.

"Adrian," I breathed.

His whole body flinched at his name. Something in his face broke open.

"Say it again," he said.

"Adrian," I said.

He began to move.

What followed was heat, and his mouth at my throat, and his hand anchoring my hip, and my own nails at his shoulder. The magic ran between us with each stroke. I felt the moonbell vines in the conservatory two floors below unfurl as if the sun had come up. I felt his wolf pace the edge of him and lie back down. I felt his pleasure as if it were my own, which it very nearly was, and

when he drove deeper and I gasped against his jaw he made a low sound against my hair and said my name. Over and over again.

I came apart first. He followed on a shudder that went through both of us.

Afterward, his weight half on me, half beside, his breath slowing on my temple, he traced a line with his thumb from my shoulder to the hollow of my throat. His heart had quieted to something almost ordinary beneath my ear.

"Promise me," he said into my hair.

"Anything," I said.

"If tomorrow the wolf takes me — if I come at you wearing my face — do not hesitate," Adrian said.

I pushed up onto my elbow to look at him. His eyes were amber again. The fear he had hidden behind desire was sitting plain in them now.

"I'll bring you back," I said.

"Evangeline—" he said.

"I'll bring you back," I said again. "The same way you'll catch me when the network pulls. That's what this is. That's what we are."

He drew me down against his chest and wrapped his arms around me like a door closing against the weather.

"Together," he said.

"Together," I said.

For a few hours, at least, I let myself believe it would be enough.

CHAPTER 31

The Trap

Morning came too soon.

I woke in Adrian's bed with his arm across my ribs and the first gray light pressing at the curtains. The house had gone quiet in a way that had nothing to do with sleep.

The bond was the first thing I felt, before the light. It had been a thread the day before, partly opened, perceptible only in moments. The night had sealed it. I could feel it now between his ribs and mine, steady, neither of us pulling on it. The way the body is aware of its own pulse.

Adrian's arm tightened, pulling me back against his chest. His mouth found my shoulder.

"Still here," I said.

"Good," he said.

For a moment we stayed like that, his breath warm against my skin and neither of us ready to give the day what it was going to take.

Then the light shifted, and we rose.

He dressed with his back to me. I watched him button his shirt, pull on his boots, reach for the dark coat on the chair. When he lifted his cloak from the hook by the door, I crossed the room and took it from his hands. He let me. I settled it over his shoulders and fastened the clasp at his throat, smoothing the wool. My hands

stayed at the collar. His came up and closed over them, held them there, and let go.

I went back to my room in bare feet and yesterday's nightgown. The corridor was cold and empty. No one saw me cross it.

Molly would have noticed. Aunt Beatrice would have heard the floorboard outside my empty room and said nothing at all.

I dressed in my sturdiest traveling clothes and went down.

The entrance hall was already full. Tobias at the door, hollow-eyed, coiled as tight as a spring. Captain Morrison against the wall, still pale from his wound, the pistol holstered now at his left hip. Catherine moved between everyone with quiet efficiency. Her hands were not quite steady on the buckles she was checking, and I doubted she had eaten. And Adrian by the horses, his dark hair catching the weak October light, amber eyes finding mine the second I appeared.

Last night.

As if I could forget.

"Catherine." Adrian's voice cut through the yard as she moved to mount. "A word."

She turned, one eyebrow raised. "If you are about to suggest I remain behind, I would advise you to save your breath."

"The road—" Adrian said.

"Contains my husband," Catherine said. Her voice was steel in silk. It stopped him where a speech would not have.

Captain Morrison pushed off the wall. "Catherine—"

"No." She did not even look at him. She looked at me. "Charles would come for me."

I thought of Tobias, who would not be left. Of Adrian, who would have ridden alone. Of myself, standing here in boots despite every sensible argument against it.

"She comes," I said. "No one who's willing to fight gets left behind."

Catherine gave me a small nod. Adrian's jaw tightened, but he stepped aside.

"Then we ride," Adrian said. "Together."

Dr. Nightingale caught me at the door. "I'm staying to hold the defenses. The network's damaged. Without tending, Duskmere won't stand another night." He pressed a small vial into my palm. Moonbell essence, concentrated, catching the light green. "For emergencies."

"Thank you," I said. "For everything."

"Thank me when you are all home," Dr. Nightingale said.

Out in the yard, Tobias was saddling Captain Morrison's horse. Captain Morrison stood to one side with his good hand hooked into his belt. Neither of them spoke. Catherine mounted without looking at anyone else. Her left hand closed on the saddle leather too hard. Her knuckles went white and then, as she gathered the reins, let go.

The road to Thornfield ran north, and the land sickened with every mile.

What should have been Yorkshire at its most splendid — the last brilliance of autumn, red and gold against gray stone — lay instead withered and gray on either side of us. Hedgerows blackened. Grass stubbled to ash. The trees had been shaped into something that looked less like trees than like hands clawing out of the earth. I pressed my palm to my chest. Through the botanical link, the land was screaming.

The hawthorn at the crossroads was dead.

I knew it. It had stood at that crossing as long as the road had run straight. I would have known it through the network even with my eyes closed. It gave nothing back now. The trunk still stood. What had lived inside had been drawn out clean.

A mile further, the stone walls along the south pasture had gone silent in the same manner. The moss between the stones was

still in place, but emptied. The lichens were dim and dry to the deeper register.

I now understood the thinning I had felt for weeks. I had not known what I was feeling. The gift was still growing in me. I had taken the dimming for the season turning. Whatever the ritual was building had been pulling from these stretches for weeks. The drawing of the power followed a path through the network that I could trace as I rode, and the path was old.

I felt Adrian beside me before I turned my head to find him. The pull of the moon came through the channel in slow waves, climbing each time.

He was holding it the way a man holds a horse that has decided to bolt, with all his weight and none of his peace.

The channel stayed open between us. I did not say anything to him through it. I only let him know I was there.

"She's drawing power for the ritual," Adrian said, bringing his horse alongside mine.

"They're in pain." My voice cracked on it. "They're terrified."

Ahead of us, Tobias rode as if he had been carved out of the saddle. He had not spoken since we'd mounted.

"Your eyes," I said quietly. "More gold than amber today."

"The moon is close," he said. "The closer we get, the harder it is to hold."

The Blood Moon. Hours yet, and it was already pulling at him.

I reached across the space between our horses and laid my fingers on his forearm. Even through wool and leather I could feel the fever-heat of him.

"Reach for me," I said. "If it pulls. I'll anchor you."

"That's not how the curse works," he said. His refusal came across before his answer did.

"It's how we work," I said.

Something moved in his face. I thought of last night, my mouth against his, his name in mine. He nodded once.

"I remember," he said.

Thornfield Abbey announced itself long before we reached its gates.

The land worsened by the mile, and above the ruins the sky had gathered into something that could not be called cloud. A bruise, more than weather, pulsing against my senses like a slow hand. Catherine reined in without needing to be told.

"There," she said.

The ruins rose from the blighted ground like broken teeth. This was meant to be my mother's seat. My blood. The Thornfield line. It looked like a wound.

"The crypts are beneath the main altar," I said. Mr. Blackwood's vision. His face gone gray when it came through him. "That's where it's keeping them."

"Then that is where we go," Tobias said. Flat. Final.

We urged the horses forward, and the shadows around the abbey began to move.

They came out of the ruins in numbers. Shadow hounds, more than I had ever seen in one place, their coats a black the setting October sun did not touch and their crimson eyes steady as lamps. The air at the gates pressed back against us, heavy as a held breath.

"She's here," Adrian said. His voice was half a growl. His claws were already sliding from his fingertips on the reins.

I waited for the attack.

It did not come.

The shadow hounds parted as though at a command we could not see. A clear path opened through their ranks toward the shattered gates.

Come, something whispered along the edge of my hearing, so close to the wind that I could have called it the wind. *Come, daughter of Thornfield. See what your bloodline has wrought.*

I let the words fall away. The wind in the ruins had a voice of its own. I would not lend it more than that.

Catherine's mouth had thinned. "Corvina wants us inside."

"It's an invitation," Captain Morrison said slowly. "Why?"

"Because it needs me willing." The words I had carried out of the library. Dr. Nightingale's handwriting in my head. *A surrender born of love, or nothing at all.* "The sacrifice has to choose."

"Then we don't go." Catherine's voice was hard. "We find another way. We circle—"

"There is no other way." I urged my horse forward. "She has Aunt Beatrice. She has Molly. The only path is through."

Adrian caught up to me. His hand, when I reached for it, was barely a hand anymore. Claw and knuckle and heat. I gripped it anyway.

"You don't have to do this alone," he said.

"I know." I did not let go. "That's why you're coming with me."

Together, we rode through the parted ranks of shadow hounds, into the waiting dark.

The gates swallowed us whole.

CHAPTER 32

Below the Altar Stone

The dark inside Thornfield Abbey had weight.

The darkness pressed against the skin like cold water. I reached for Adrian and found his clawed fingers already seeking mine.

“Stay close,” he murmured. “The wolf can see in this. I’ll guide you.”

His wolf-sight ran into me where his hand could not reach. I followed him both ways.

Behind us I heard Catherine’s sharp breath, Captain Morrison’s muttered curse, Tobias’s boots scraping old stone. We went in.

Adrian led us through corridors that seemed to writhe. I kept my palm to the wall and felt it pulse with wrongness, as if the stone remembered what it had been asked to hold. He stopped so abruptly I nearly walked into him.

“Steps,” Adrian said. “Going down.”

I could not see them. I trusted him.

We descended single file into colder air, the temperature falling with every step. Somewhere far below, light began to bloom — sickly, greenish, a color nothing living had any business giving off. Then the chamber opened beneath us.

It was vast, larger than any crypt had a right to be, as if the earth had been hollowed out to make room for what it meant to

do here. Twisted pillars rose into shadow, their surfaces carved with symbols that squirmed when I looked at them directly.

The architecture did not stop me. The people did.

They hung suspended in circles of that sickly light, limp, faces slack with enchanted sleep, their life force draining in thin visible threads down into the channels carved in the floor. Aunt Beatrice first. Her black hair, mixed with silver, tangled, her face the color of old paper. The sight of her hit me like a blow to the sternum. This was the woman who had raised me, who had faced down drawing rooms and coroners with the same unshakable mouth. She looked small.

I'm here, I wanted to scream at her. *Hold on*.

I made myself look past her. Lord Berkshire still in his riding coat, and behind me Catherine's breath caught. Others hung beside him in the sickly light, and I made myself look at each of them.

Mrs. Carmichael. The old woman who had told Molly about the harvest rituals, who had known what Thornfield was before any of us thought to ask. Her head hung forward and her white hair covered her face. The dog had been tied up too long, Molly had said. Now I knew why.

Sarah Miller. Tom Miller. Their circles dimmer than the rest. *Sarah Miller was not at market this week. Nor last*. Molly's voice in my head, low and careful over a pillowcase. Tom's door standing open. Fire cold. Boots gone. Their names in the Berkshire register beside Carmichael, beside mine. I had not understood what that page meant when I read it. I understood it now.

A young man I did not know hung near the far wall. I could not help him by learning his name. I could not help any of them by standing here.

And Molly.

Nearest the dais, in her cheerful yellow dress now stained and torn, her eyes closed and her chest rising shallowly.

Alive.

"Molly." Tobias's voice cracked on her name, and he surged forward. Captain Morrison caught him by the arm.

"Wait," Captain Morrison said. "Look."

At the chamber's center, on a raised dais of black stone, a woman knelt whom I had seen only in a shattered mirror, and once, at a distance, between the Berkshire trees.

Corvina.

She was beautiful in the way broken things can be. Dark hair streamed around a face that had been lovely once and was lovely still, more than it should have been, at her age, in this light. Her eyes were open and sharp, and she rose as we entered without haste.

At the edge of the dais, half in shadow, a thin man, barely more than a boy, stood in a black coat. His hands moved over the carved channels. Some kind of acolyte, keeping the ritual fed.

"Welcome, daughter of Thornfield," she said, her voice warm and deliberate. "I had hoped you would come."

"Let them go." My voice came out steadier than I was. "You have me. Whatever you were promised, I am worth more willing, and you know it. Name your terms to me, not to a chamber of hostages."

Corvina looked at me the way a jeweler looks at a stone she did not expect to find in mud. "You bargain like a woman who believes there is a table between us," she said. "The table was cleared before your mother was grown, little Thornfield."

Corvina's chin lifted.

"What I want is a pattern centuries in the making," she continued. "The botanical gift of Thornfield. The bridge-walker power of Blackwood. The quiet sensitivity of your aunt's line, the gift her mother brought from Canton. Three threads. One knot."

Aunt Beatrice had told me once, in a carriage, about that thread. One that I might carry as well. I had set it aside as a thing too small to matter. It did not feel small in this chamber.

Beside me, something pulled tight that was not his body. His body followed.

Adrian stiffened beside me. "You cursed me for my blood."

"The curse was cultivation," she said. "Seven years of transformation, of your humanity wearing thin. You are ripe now, Lord Duskmere."

A voice came from the shadows. "Cousin."

The word came from the shadows at the chamber's edge. It was weak, but it was unmistakable.

Adrian went rigid. "Algernon."

He was chained to one of the pillars with iron that glowed a faint red. Where the others slept, Mr. Blackwood was awake, wasted to almost nothing, skin drawn over bone, his eyes burning.

"It kept taking," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

"You said so already," Adrian told him. Not kind, not unkind. The confession had happened already and there was no time for it now.

"The bridge-walker proved useful," Corvina said. "His gift is nearly exhausted. As for the ritual—"

The symbols carved into the floor pulsed brighter. The captives in their circles began to glow. The life force visibly ran faster along the channels, feeding the dais.

Her hand moved, one unhurried gesture toward the walls. At the edge of the dais the acolyte straightened. His hands came up, the working bright across them.

Captain Morrison's pistol cracked, fired with his off hand. On the edge of the dais the acolyte staggered and dropped to one knee, the working torn across his palms. His working faltered but did not fail.

Then the chamber itself broke open. Pressure fields leapt taut around the circles holding the captives. A seam split the floor ten feet from where I stood and the draining channels shone sickly-bright up through it. The cold that had held the chamber from the first step dropped another order, and my fingers went stiff on the air.

I reached for my power.

The corrupted plants of Thornfield answered like a horse that had been taught not to. Vines came up out of the floor reaching for us, not for the dais. Reaching for Catherine. For Tobias. For my own ankles.

I forced them back. I forced them toward the channels, and they went, half-resisting the whole way. Where they reached the carved lines in the stone, black sap hissed. Roots broke up under the pattern. The channels that drained the prisoners buckled and held. Whatever fed them ran deeper than the floor.

Catherine reached her husband first. Her hands were already tearing at the light that held him. Not with force but with the knack her grandmother's line had given her. The quiet gift she had never seemed to want to claim. The pressure field around Lord Berkshire gave a hand's breadth under her fingers and closed again the moment she reached for the next seam. I felt the edge of it from where I stood, and the edge was all there was. "Charles. Charles."

Tobias reached Molly before I saw him move. The light held her as it held all of them, and it did not loosen because he had come. He got his arms around her anyway, under the pull of it, and braced her where she hung.

"I've got you," he kept saying. "I've got you."

For one breath her eyes opened. They found him. They held. Her head tipped against his coat, and I thought the light had let her go. Then it drew taut and took her back under. Her chin dropped. She was gone. Her hand had closed on the edge of his sleeve before

she went, and the light did not loosen for that either. He held a girl it had not finished with, and told her he had her.

Adrian fought toward Mr. Blackwood, shifting between shapes with every stride, claws through shadow, fangs at darkness given form. The beast and the man were moving together.

The network screamed. Corvina's hands pressed flat to the dais. She was working the Thornfield channel, turning it against me.

I held. I poured everything I had into holding.

It was older than I could hold alone.

"Evangeline." Adrian's voice cut across the chamber. He had reached Mr. Blackwood, had his cousin's wasted weight against his shoulder, and his eyes found mine. "Reach for me. Like last night. Let me anchor you."

I did not know how. I did not know if it would work. I reached anyway, not with my hands, not with my gift, but with the thing between us that had been sealed in the dark of his room with his forehead against mine.

He answered.

His energy came into mine the way a river finds the sea, wilder than my own, edged with the wolf's hunger. Where my magic reached outward to growing things, his reached inward to the thing that wore him. The two met and held.

The corrupted plants of Thornfield shuddered. Somewhere deep in the ruined network, a green note rang.

On the dais, Corvina went still.

It happened in half a breath. Something in the working stuttered, and she felt it before I saw it. Something moved through her face that was not contempt and not composure. It was there and then it was not.

"This," she said, her voice going clipped, almost to herself, "is not what was agreed."

“Agreed,” I said. The word came out of me before fear could stop it. “Agreed with whom, madame?”

Her eyes came to me, and for the first time since we had entered the chamber she did not answer at once. Something at the edge of my gift leaned closer, a pressure of attention with no weight of a body behind it, and was gone.

“With no one you will ever have the misfortune to meet,” Corvina said.

Her chin came up. She pressed both palms flat to the dais stone. The ritual channels surged back to full brightness — harder than before — and the captives gasped with the pull of it.

“It changes nothing,” she said, louder now, and the authority was back. “The Blood Moon rises.”

The chamber moved against us.

CHAPTER 33

The Blood Moon Rises

The ritual symbols flared blinding, and Adrian screamed.

It was not a human sound. It tore out of his throat as if something were being pulled free, and I watched his body begin to contort. His spine arched at an angle no back should manage. His hands, still gripping Mr. Blackwood's wasted arm, tightened, the claws lengthening past anything the curse had shown me.

"Adrian," I screamed.

Adrian dropped Mr. Blackwood and staggered. His amber eyes went pure gold. I had seen the gold rise in his eyes before. I had felt his hands change against mine on the ride to Thornfield. This was something else. This was seven years of cultivation uncoupling.

"Fight it," I called. I reached for the thread we had found, the bond that had been sealed in the dark of his room. "Adrian, I'm here. Hold onto me."

For one desperate heartbeat I felt him reach back. His consciousness brushed mine, human and afraid and fighting.

Then the forces that drove the ritual pushed down and I lost him again. Not sealed off. Held under something heavy that did not want us touching.

Adrian's scream broke into a howl partway through, and the rest of him followed.

His coat split along the back as his shoulders heaved up and outward. The shirt beneath it tore down the seam. His ribs cracked outward and inward at once, with a sound that did not belong inside a person's body. His hips reset. His jaw lengthened. The bones of his face moved beneath the skin like things searching for a different arrangement. I heard the small wet sound of teeth coming through gum. The fur came in last, in a darkening that started at the nape of his neck and ran down the length of him faster than my mind could follow.

What came through was every part of him breaking at once, and the breaking registering through him until what was on the other side of it went silent, and there was nothing there that knew me.

The floor's network bent. The corrupted plants of Thornfield doubled over like grass going flat in a sudden wind, and whatever the curse had been holding back for seven years poured out of him into the stone.

The man I loved disappeared into something enormous and savage.

The wolf that rose from the stones of Thornfield was beautiful in the way nightmares are beautiful. Larger than any natural creature, fur the color of midnight, eyes burning like molten gold. It shook itself twice and turned those burning eyes on me.

Nothing in them knew me.

"Adrian." I held my ground though every nerve in me wanted to run. "Adrian, it's me."

Its lips peeled back from fangs as long as my fingers. The growl that came from its chest was nothing I had ever heard out of him before. It was cold, predatory, and unhurried.

Around us the chamber continued to bleed noise. The crack of Captain Morrison's second pistol. The groan of root and stone. The shouted working at the dais. Catherine's cry. Tobias still

telling Molly he had her. All of it drew away from me until there was only me, and the wolf, and Corvina's eyes on us from the dais.

The wolf lunged.

I threw myself sideways. Jaws closed on empty air where my throat had been. My hip struck stone, pain flaring up my side, but I was already scrambling and already reaching. The corrupted plants of Thornfield answered slowly, twisted by what had been done to them, and they answered. Thorny vines came up between me and the beast in a clumsy snarl.

The wolf tore through them like paper.

"*Please.*" My voice cracked. "Please. You know me. Last night — everything we were — has to mean something."

It circled me, gold eyes patient. There was intelligence there. It was not Adrian's intelligence.

A flicker in the channel between us. It came through the width of a breath, and I felt him. Strain. Horror at what his body was doing. Something still fighting. Then the pressure took it under again, and the circling gold was only gold.

The second pass was faster. I felt claws rake my arm, fabric and skin opening together, and hot blood ran down to my wrist. I did not scream at the pain. I screamed at the sight of those claws on me, because those hands had traced the line of my spine the night before and had shaken when they did it.

"Adrian, please." I clutched my arm, tears blurring the chamber to a smear of green and gold. "I know you're in there. The man who lived seven years alone rather than hurt anyone. The man who pushed me away because he was afraid of exactly this. You are not this thing. You are Adrian Blackwood. *And I love you.*"

The wolf stopped.

For one heart-stopping second something flickered in those gold eyes. A shift. A hesitation. The muscle under the black fur trembled as if something smaller moved beneath it. For a moment, I saw him looking out of the gold, and I saw what it cost him to be

looking. He had heard me. He had pressed up through whatever was holding him down hard enough that his face came to the surface of those eyes. He knew what his body was doing. He was sorry. He had not stopped trying.

I had asked him last night to believe I would bring him back. He had asked something else of me, and I had refused. Now I was looking at his eyes through the wolf's. Both refusals were in the room. Neither of us could take ours back.

The power cultivated by the ritual surged and what had risen was pressed back down.

I felt it go. The flicker did not fade. It was pulled out of him as cleanly as a hand pulled away from a fire. The gold pressed him down so deep I could not feel him through the bond at all.

The wolf shook its head like a dog shaking off water. When it looked at me again, there was only the predator.

I was out of plants. The corrupted ones were shredded. The ones deeper in the stone were too soaked in wrongness to answer. My friends were fighting the chamber itself and could not reach me. Captain Morrison had gone to one knee behind the stair, blood seeping through his bandaged shoulder. I could hear him cursing to himself about it.

The wolf gathered its haunches to spring.

No.

The word rose up in me from some older place than fear. I was Evangeline Hartwell. I was my mother's daughter and my father's. I had walked into this chamber knowing what it might cost, and I had not come here to be a carcass on the floor.

I reached.

There were others at the chamber's edges. The Thornfield plants I had not called, corrupted but alive. If I summoned them they would come. They would fight for me and they would die for it. The ritual would have spent the last green things in this place for nothing.

I did not summon. I held.

Not for the twisted plants of Thornfield. Past them. Through them. All the way back along the bright green thread of the network, back across the blighted miles, back to Duskmere.

The kitchen garden registered first because it always did. The rosemary held its scent low along the south wall. The mint had worked free of the bed. The late asters were still in their row.

Past the kitchen garden, the hidden walled garden lay open in my mind from the day we woke the defenses that lived in the soil. The Heart Tree stood at its center. The moonbell vines climbed the inner wall. The moss in the long stone basin was wet.

Past the hidden garden, I sensed the conservatory, and the bloodroot roses gave me the night-warmth of the room they sat in. The memory moss along the bench, which had nearly drowned me once in deaths I did not know, gave me back this time the first time Adrian had kissed me there. The dusk coming through the conservatory glass. His hand at the back of my neck.

Dr. Nightingale was there. The protections he held around the estate felt different from mine, careful and exact. His work was structure, not green. He held the wards, the thresholds, the built framework that kept the property standing.

Inside what he held, the garden I had come to know waited. Every root I had followed in the days since we woke the Heart Tree. Every vine that had learned my voice.

Help me.

The plants of Duskmere answered.

Not in body. They were too far for that. They sent strength down the network whole and undiluted. They pushed across the blighted miles the clean green memory of sunlight, ordinary earth, and growing things. The kitchen garden gave me the warmth of stone in the morning. The hidden garden gave me the steadiness of the Heart Tree. The moonbell vines gave me their distilled silver. The bloodroot roses gave me the deep red they kept under the

green. The memory moss gave me what else it had been holding all along.

Power came into me the color of moonbell petals and the temperature of soil that had held the morning sun. It pushed the tainted magic of Thornfield out of my hands and filled the hollow behind it.

The wolf lunged.

I threw my hands down against the stone and let Duskmere's strength go through me into the floor. The corrupted vines nearest me shuddered. The blackness ran out of them like water wrung from a cloth, and what was left was green.

The first vine straightened. The second uncurled. A third broke through the stone from a place that should not have grown anything and lifted toward me woody and trembling.

They reached. They thickened. They wove. A wall came up between me and the wolf out of plants the ritual had been corrupting. What built it was Duskmere's strength sent in across the miles and going through me as fast as I could move it.

The wolf hit the wall.

The shock went up through my arms and into my shoulders. It stopped there because Duskmere held it. The vines bent inward where the great body struck them and did not break.

The wolf snarled and tore.

Where its jaws closed on the green, the vines parted and behind them more vines thickened in. Where its claws shredded, ivy poured into the gap from a place I could not have located.

The wall held. It was not pretty work. The vines bent, split, and bled green sap that ran black where the corruption from the floor had soaked the lower stones.

But it held.

"Adrian." I shouted it through the green. "I know you can hear me. Fight him."

The wolf trembled. Its massive body caught itself mid-pace, as if two commands were reaching it at once, and something in it whimpered. It was a small sound out of that enormous chest, and it undid me more than any snarl had.

But I was burning through what I had faster than the distant network could send. The vines browned at the edges. Thinned. The wolf's tremor stilled.

And then the chamber moved.

Not the walls. Not the air. The carved channels in the floor. The pattern shifted, lines reconfiguring themselves, a new path opening across the stone between me and the wolf.

Where the new channel ran, the ritual light ran sickly-bright, and the corrupted Thornfield plants at the chamber's edge turned toward it. Leaned. Bent the way a plant bends toward the sun. It felt *wrong*.

The thread between me and Adrian. The bond we had sealed in the dark of his room. The new channel would take it and cut it clean. And if it did, the thing inside the wolf that was still him, still reaching, still refusing would go quiet. He would stop fighting what his body was being made to do. It looked, laid out across the stone in sickly-bright light, like mercy.

Whatever shaped this new channel was somewhere past Corvina, somewhere I had no name for, and whatever it was holding out to me seemed like a trap.

"Not that," I said. The phrase came out small and cracked. The plants at the edge shuddered and stayed bent, and the path held open, waiting.

"I came here to bring him back," I said more strongly.

The living wall I had built was dying. The network could not feed it fast enough across the distance, and it came apart vine by vine.

The wolf's gold eyes fixed on me, and there was nothing in them but hunger.

Across the chamber, chained against his pillar, Mr. Blackwood pulled himself upright.

But I could not look away from the creature that had been Adrian.

He was gone. Not dying. Gone. The thing looking at me through those gold eyes did not know my name. It did not know that I had fallen asleep listening to his heartbeat and woken still counting it.

The man I loved was gone. The creature in front of me did not care what it was about to take. I was never going to hear him say my name again.

The wolf lowered its head. Its muscles coiled.

CHAPTER 34

The Bridge-Walker's Gift

The wolf sprang.

I closed my eyes.

I see you, I thought, sending the words toward whatever remained of Adrian under the hunger. *I see you, and I love you, and I am sorry I could not save you.*

The impact never came.

A sound like thunder split the chamber, not from outside but from within it. My eyes flew open.

Mr. Blackwood was standing.

The iron had let go of him when he began to pull. It had been part of the working, and the working was going into him now.

His wasted body caught the sickly red of the iron that had bound him. He had pulled the ritual's own power into himself, and it was killing him. I could see it killing him. His flesh was blackening at the edges, cracking like scorched parchment. He was standing anyway.

He said something under the noise of the chamber, so quietly I nearly lost it. "Not madness. A Blackwood."

Something in his face had settled while the words were still in the air. I could not have said what.

Then he lifted a hand that had already blackened to the wrist. The Blackwood gift ignited.

It did not go toward Adrian. That was what I saw first and could not at once account for. The light went outward instead, thin and clean and not the color of the ritual. The carved channels in the floor stuttered and changed direction. For a stretched breath I could not read what I was looking at. Then I felt it before I had words for it: the draining was running the wrong way. The threads of sickly light that had been feeding the channels were folding back along themselves, going deeper, traveling home.

Color moved back into Aunt Beatrice's slack face where there had been none. Her head lifted, just slightly, the way it did when she was taking stock of something.

Molly drew a breath she had not drawn freely in the hour since I had seen her hanging in the light. The light set her down into Tobias's arms, and this time he had her. I looked away before I saw his face. That much was his.

Behind them, the other circles were releasing too. Lord Berkshire's head lifted from where it had hung against his collar. His hands flexed once, finding something to grip. Mrs. Carmichael was already reaching for the white hair across her face. The Millers' circles had brightened, and color was returning to them: Sarah's small hands curling, Tom's chin coming off his chest. The young man at the far wall I did not know drew a breath that opened his eyes. He looked at the chamber and did not understand what he was seeing.

And the wolf's head came up off the angle it had been holding, as if a lead pulled tight had gone slack. Its focus broke. The coiled haunches unwound. It staggered a single step and stopped, confused as a dog pulled up short.

Mr. Blackwood was coughing blood onto the stones. His wasted arms shook with whatever he was holding.

"Mr. Blackwood," I said. I did not know what I meant by it. I only knew I wanted him to have the name spoken that way, once.

He did not look at me. He was looking at his cousin.

The wolf had not moved. I could feel Adrian's weight behind its eyes, braced against a line I could feel in my own chest now, open and bright and steady from both ends. He was holding it from his side. I had not known he could.

I stood.

Adrian's gold eyes found me.

"I'm going to bring you back," I said.

I did not know whether he heard the words. Through the channel between us I felt him register them, and the registering had grief in it. He understood what I meant before I was willing to.

I turned toward the altar.

The black dais stood at the chamber's far end, ringed in the channels the gift had reversed. On the dais Corvina had both hands pressed flat to the stone, her face gone tight. Whatever she had been holding was shaking in her hands.

I walked toward her.

It was not far. It felt far.

When I reached the base of the dais I felt the ritual reach back. Not Corvina. The altar itself. It registered me as what it had been built to catch.

I set my foot on the first step.

I took the next.

At the top I turned and found Adrian across the chamber. Amber had bled through the gold of his eyes in wide patches. He shook his huge head once, slowly.

"Yes," I said to him. My voice carried. "I know."

I laid my hand on the altar stone.

The stone was cold under my palm. And then, under my palm, it was no longer cold. It was a thing reaching. I felt it reach, fast and practiced, for the deepest part of me.

I let it.

It closed on my gift the way a trap closes on a bone. I had a moment to register the grip — how the thing on the far end knew

exactly where to find the root of my connection, knew that the network of my life ran down through me into the green — and then it pulled.

I had expected pain.

This was not pain. It was simpler. It was extraction.

But the pull did not go all the way through.

It stopped.

It tried again, harder. Something in the stone shuddered. The grip held on the root of my gift and could not close around it. Somewhere through the open channel I felt Adrian at the other end of the thing the ritual was trying to sever, holding on. The braid was one cord, not two. The machinery could not take the green without taking him. It could not take him.

The ritual had been built for a willing sacrifice, a gift given whole and alone. What I had brought to the altar was neither alone nor whole as the machinery needed it to be. It had been joined in love, not in fear, and the cord it met was not a thing that could be cut from one end.

It choked.

But the pulling did not stop.

The machinery kept reaching for what it could not have, and as it reached, something else in me began to fail. The depth of it. The long reach that had always gone down through my feet into the living green — the old place that had always answered when I called and had answered before I ever knew I was calling — was draining away into the carved channels. The ritual could not take the gift whole. It was taking whatever it could take.

I did not cry out.

I let myself go thin at the roots while the braid held.

On the dais Corvina made a sound.

I turned toward it. The motion cost me more than it should have.

She was still pressing her hands to the stone. Her hands had changed. The skin over the knuckles had gone thin and spotted, papery, as if thirty years had passed since I had looked at her last. Her face followed. Her hair went through its colors and stopped at white. The beauty she had worn into this chamber was leaving her in front of me.

Something else was leaving her too. She stood on the dais looking suddenly smaller, as if something that had been holding her up had stepped back.

Her eyes moved across the chamber. She took in Thornfield. She took in her own hands. She took, I think, some longer reckoning I could not follow. Her mouth opened and closed.

Then she looked at me.

I had hated her. Standing on the altar with my depth draining out of me into the stones, I found I could not hate her any longer. What was looking at me from the dais was a woman alone.

"Oh," she said, in her own voice. Not the voice she had spoken with in the mirror. A voice a person would use. "Oh. I see."

She looked at her hands.

Her knees gave. She did not fall. She set herself down on the stone with something like care, the way an old woman sits down who knows her body.

"Let me rest," she said.

She lay down. Her face turned toward Adrian. Whatever she found there I could not see. She closed her eyes.

I did not witness her die. I felt it instead, a small quiet weight dropping out of the chamber, and the last of the carved channels guttering out with it.

The chamber had not gone silent. The corrupted vines at the edges still writhed, slower now, the blackness going out of them as I watched. Across the dais the acolyte had folded to his knees when Corvina's weight went out of the chamber. Tobias had laid Molly down and crossed to him before I saw the decision made,

and bound the boy's hands with his own belt. The working was not going to continue.

Catherine had crossed to Aunt Beatrice's circle when Lord Berkshire was free, but by the time she reached it the field had already gone. Aunt Beatrice was sitting up on her own, one hand to the stone, looking at the chamber the way she looks at things she does not yet understand but intends to.

But under the noise there was a quieter thing, a structure coming apart. The scaffolding the ritual had been holding up was gone. What it had been holding was falling free.

I felt the curse then, not as a wall to be broken but as a thing ending. The cage of moonlight and shadow that had been wrapped around Adrian's soul for seven years had lost its keeper. It did not resist falling. It came apart the way a net comes apart when the hand that was closing it lets go.

I heard him.

Not in his voice. In the bond. A long breath, astonished, that I had been waiting to feel and had not known I was waiting to feel. The weight of seven years going off a back that had been carrying it.

Across the chamber, the wolf was changing. Not the violent reshaping of the moonrise. This was slower and stranger, the black fur receding and the enormous frame contracting and the gold going out of the eyes. He did not scream. He staggered to his knees and stayed there, bent forward, hands braced on the stone. Human hands, bloody at the knuckles, shaking. His shoulders moved. I thought for a moment it was breath. Then I saw it was grief.

He lifted his head. He found me on the altar.

"Evangeline." His voice broke on the name.

He rose. He crossed the chamber.

I felt my own body for the first time since I had set my foot on the altar's first step. I was thinned at the roots. The deep place inside me where the plants had always lived was quieter than I

had ever known it to be. The altar stone under my palm had gone inert. I could still feel the plants at the chamber's edge, faintly, like something heard through a wall. The rest of it had been taken.

Adrian reached the dais and came up the steps two at a time. His hands were on my face before I could gather the will to meet him.

"You came back," I managed.

"You stayed," he said. His voice was raw. His amber eyes held things I did not have time to read. "Evangeline. What did you do?"

"What I came to do," I said.

Somewhere across the chamber Mr. Blackwood's body was failing through its own light. I did not see it go. I felt it. A second small weight leaving the chamber, quieter than Corvina's had been.

I leaned my forehead against Adrian's.

CHAPTER 35

What Love Gives Back

The ritual symbols did not shatter. They guttered.

One by one, in no order I could read, the carved channels in the floor went inert — their glow thinning in patches, the way candles die in a draft rather than all at once. The green light feeding the captives' circles faded and was gone. Something at the far end of a very long thread had simply let go. I felt it through the smaller register of what remained of my gift: a long, cold pull-back through the stone, a disengaging, deliberate as a tide going out.

The chamber offered no voice, no silver flash, no last resistance. It uncoupled.

I was sitting on the stone floor with my back against Adrian's chest before I understood I had fallen. He had his arm around my ribs. The cold of the stone came up through my skirts. My hands lay in my lap and they were shaking, and I had not noticed until now, though it must have been going on for some time.

"Evangeline," Adrian said.

"I am here," I said.

His hand moved to my face, turning me toward him. I let him. His eyes were amber all the way through. No wolf in them, nothing but him. The set of his jaw was steady, held by choice.

"The arm—" he started.

"That is not the worst of it." The words came out before I had selected them. I flexed my fingers and studied them. The gift was still there, at the edges. I could feel the plants clinging to the chamber's cracked walls, faintly, like a conversation heard through a nearly-closed door. Shapes, not substance. But the depth was gone. The root-level connection I had carried since childhood, the one that had let me feel Duskmere's entire garden as a living chorus, the one that had let me reach across miles of root network to the Heart Tree. It had poured into the channels when the ritual tried to take me, and it had not come back.

I had felt it go. I had not known in the moment what I was losing.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The gift," I said. "Not all of it. The deep register. The root-level connection." I looked at my hands. The faint green light that sometimes lived just under my skin was dim, barely visible in the dark of the chamber. "I can feel the edges of this room. I cannot feel Duskmere."

Something moved in his expression. I could not have named what it was, and I did not try.

"I will take the edge of the room," he said quietly, "as long as you are in it."

He said it without softening or emphasis, the plain statement of where he intended to be.

I had no answer for that which was not also love.

He carried me out of Thornfield himself. The option to argue was not extended.

The next hours came in pieces. Aunt Beatrice freed from the circle and somehow the first to reach me, her hand at my face before I could see her clearly. Catherine's hand at her husband's wrist, her expression composed with a care that cost something. Molly's voice above me, sharp with relief, telling Tobias to mind the doorway. Captain Morrison's shoulder bandaged again, the

wool dark at the seam. The chamber went quiet behind us as we left it.

Outside, the blighting had already begun to lift. Not restored. Nothing so quick as that. But the grip had loosened. The trees along the road had the look of things waking after a long sleep: not yet themselves, though no longer emptied. I watched them through the interval of the ride and did not stay awake for all of it.

At Duskmere, Adrian brought me to the hidden garden.

The scent reached me before anything else: moonbell and bloodroot, the mineral undertone of memory moss. I knew the place before I opened my eyes. He laid me on the soft ground and the plants came. They did not come with power. They covered me. Vine by vine and bloom by bloom. The moonbells opened and the root network sent warmth up through the moss. I felt it through what remained of the gift: something closer to tethering than restoration. They held the threads of what I was and refused to let them loosen further.

My mother had given and given. She had not let them give back. She had given until there was nothing left, and the gift had taken everything. I had given at the altar. I had felt the depth drain into the channels when the ritual tried to take me. My life had remained. The plants could not give back what the taking had extracted; what was in the channels was gone. But the threads of what remained were still there, and they held them.

When I awoke, the quieter residual sensitivity remained. I was alive.

It was dawn and Adrian sat at my side. His hand was around mine. His face showed the weight of the night before.

"You are alive," he said, as if he had not trusted it until now. "God, Evangeline."

I lifted my hand to his face. He turned into it. His skin was warm. His eyes were amber and clear and entirely his own.

The curse was gone. I could see it in the set of his shoulders, in the way he held his head, in the absence of something I had grown so accustomed to that I had stopped seeing it. Seven years of it, lifted. He looked like a man I had never met.

He was clean-shaven. That was the detail that broke through. He had shaved at some point during the two days I had lain here, which I took to mean he had believed I would wake.

"You're here," I said.

"I'm here," he said.

I lay with my hand against his face. He sat with his over it. For now, that was enough.

"They would not let you go," he said. "I brought you here. I did not know what else to do. I felt it through the bond — power running back the other way. Not filling you. Holding what was there."

"How long?" I asked.

"Two days," he said. "You stopped fading the first night. You would not wake. Dr. Nightingale said your body needed time."

"The gift," I said. "Did he say—"

"He said what you felt in the chamber was accurate." His thumb moved across my knuckles. "The deep register is gone. What remains is yours."

I flexed the gift carefully, testing a recently healed place for what it would and would not do. The edges of the room were present and clear, the plants on the sill and the dried herbs on the shelf distinct and alive. The chorus was gone. The wide, full-register sound of all of Duskmere's root network speaking at once. In its place: something smaller and quieter and still mine.

"Mr. Blackwood," I said, after a moment.

His arm tightened around me.

"I know," he said.

"Without him—" I started.

"I know." His voice went rough. "Algernon was weak. He made terrible choices. He helped something predatory reach me and believed he would come through it intact." He swallowed. "And then he stood. He found a way to pay. We will remember him for that."

I pressed my forehead to his shoulder.

"We will," I said.

Aunt Beatrice came through the door not long after. She crossed the room in three quick strides and leaned over me. The smell of her was lavender and home.

"My brave, foolish girl." She held me without reservation, and when she pulled back, she studied my face a long moment, as if she had spent two days deciding what she thought and wanted to be sure of me before she said it. "Your mother would be proud of you."

"She gave too much," I said.

"And you came back," Aunt Beatrice said. Her eyes moved once to Adrian and held a moment, something passing between them that did not require words. Then back to me. "You saved each other."

Molly appeared in the doorway on Tobias's arm and threw herself into my arms hard enough to startle a sound out of me.

"Do not ever do that again," she said into my shoulder. Her voice had less of itself in it than I was used to. "Dying to save everyone — who was going to fuss over me?"

"You would have found someone else to torment," I managed.

She pulled back a careful inch. Her eyes were red. Her smile was enormous and entirely unrepentant. Her hand did not let go of Tobias's sleeve.

Tobias had not moved from her side. When she released me, he inclined his head, slow and deliberate, and I understood he meant it. I laid my hand on his free wrist and said thank you, and he nodded once, which was sufficient.

Later I heard her, through the door, sending Tobias for tea. Then I heard him come back with it. Then I heard her teasing him for fussing before the cups were down. I turned my face toward the wall and smiled where no one could see.

Captain Morrison, Catherine, and Lord Berkshire came in the afternoon. Lord Berkshire still leaned on her arm. Neither of them made anything of it. Catherine brought her grandmother's journal and the practical steadiness she wore like a warm coat. She had not slept. It showed at the corner of her mouth when she set the journal down.

Captain Morrison had come in his traveling coat, carrying his right arm against his side without the sling. He had left it off on purpose, I thought, and did not mean to be asked why.

"Thursday," he said. "London first — they need me there by Wednesday to settle the papers — but Thursday. They appear not to mind about the arm." He said it evenly. He would not have said it otherwise.

I opened my mouth. He got there first.

"I came back from the Peninsula once," he said. "I can do the arithmetic on this one."

It sounded like a joke. It almost carried. Catherine did not look at him. Her hand had moved to her husband's wrist and stayed there.

Adrian walked him out. I did not hear what passed between them beyond the door and did not try to. When Adrian came back, he did not tell me, and I did not ask.

Catherine and Lord Berkshire stayed a while longer. We did not speak much. Their presence was enough.

The household was home.

Adrian walked me out to the hidden garden that evening. I took his arm and did not pretend I did not need it. He sat with me where the moonbell vines overhung the bench, and he told me the rest of it.

Not a speech. A conversation with long pauses, and neither of us hurried the other through them.

"I was conscious through all of it," he said. "The wolf was not me, and I was inside it. I could feel what it felt — the hunger, the pull toward you, the drive. I could see you. I felt your fear through the bond in the moments it came through. And I could not stop the lunge."

I listened. I did not say it was all right.

"When the bond came through in bursts, when the pressure eased enough to let it, I could feel you fighting. You were so close." He was looking at his hands. "The worst moment was when I felt you refuse something. Not me. Something the machinery offered. I did not know what it was. I only knew you made a choice and it cost you, and I could not tell from my side whether you had survived the cost."

"The machinery offered a severance," I said. "Between the two of us. It read as mercy. I knew as I felt it that it was not Corvina's to offer."

"I know." His hands closed. "But inside the wolf, all I felt was your refusal and then the wall failing. I felt you trying to hold it, and there was nothing I could do with my hands that would not endanger you further."

I thought about that for a moment. The specific difficulty of it. Holding yourself back from someone you love while your own body moves against your will.

"You were making space," I said. "Every time it came through, you were holding it open from your end. I felt you holding it."

He did not deny this.

"I promised you I would not be the instrument of your death," he said. "I was trying to mean it, every second."

I told him what I had felt from my side. The bond in intermittent bursts — not a constant signal but a channel that had to be held open against the ritual pressure, available only in the brief

lulls when the machinery eased. The specific press of his strain when it came through. The moment I felt him fighting not over the wolf's body but over its will, holding back the lunge with everything he had while the wolf moved anyway.

"The hesitation was you," I said. "Before the lunge. I knew you were in there."

"I was." His voice had gone quiet. "I was fighting every second. I held the bond because I was afraid that if I lost concentration, the pressure would take the channel under and you would have no way of knowing I was still there."

"It went under when the pressure peaked," I said. "Not before that. I noticed the difference."

He was still for a moment.

"You brought me back," he said at last.

"You held the thread," I said. "From your end."

Neither of us spoke for a while after that.

The moonbells lit faintly above us as the light went. After a time, he carried me back inside.

Dr. Nightingale came the following morning.

He sat with us in the library and drank tea and was, for the first time in my acquaintance with him, something close to at rest. The clinical vigilance had not left him; it had simply, briefly, been satisfied.

"I want to tell you what I believe happened," he said. "Not what I can prove. I want to be clear about that distinction."

Adrian set down his cup.

"What you faced at Thornfield was one instance of a pattern," Dr. Nightingale said. "I have traced similar patterns across three continents and six centuries. Different entities. Different methods. The same shape of hunger, the same logic of accumulation, the same approach to bloodlines as a resource rather than as people." He folded his hands. "They are not one thing with many faces. They are a type. What ran through Corvina for years, what the

Thornfield ritual was designed to feed. That is one of them. I do not know which. I am not certain it matters, for what you specifically survived."

"And the collector?" I asked. "The man who bled my uncle. My mother's journal feared him twenty years ago."

"Never found," Dr. Nightingale said. "Neither tried nor buried, in any record I have reached. Men who collect for appetites of this type are not retained once the collecting is done." He turned his cup a quarter and did not drink. "I no longer look for him among the living. I look for what he gathered, and where it went."

"The ritual was thwarted," I said. "What does that mean for the next attempt? For another bloodline?"

He met my eyes steadily.

"I cannot say. The pattern suggests they are patient. This one waited decades to assemble what it needed. Whether what you thwarted tries again, with different conditions, different bloodlines, different ground, is not a question I can answer." His gaze moved briefly to Adrian. "What I can say is that I will be watching, and that in six centuries of records, the pattern has never stopped of its own accord."

He left after lunch.

I watched him ride out from the library window. Adrian came to stand beside me.

"The south boundary," he said. "And the east pasture. The ground reads differently than it did before."

I looked at him.

"Responsive," he said after a moment. "As though it knows me better than it did."

"Dr. Nightingale said something about that, before he left," I said.

"He said it to me too." He was looking at the grounds through the glass. "He said the bridge-walker inheritance is the gift of standing at thresholds. Between states. Between the human world

and what runs underneath it. He said the land recognizes what I am." A pause. "I don't know yet what that means in practice."

"We'll learn," I said.

Something in his expression settled.

Magistrate Whitmore came the following morning, with his clerk and his hat in his hand. Adrian received him in the library and gave him the account we had agreed on: a criminal conspiracy of trespassers at the ruined Abbey, the abduction of Mrs. Ashford and the missing villagers by persons now dead, Mr. Algernon Blackwood fallen in the rescue of his cousin's household.

All of it true, as far as it went.

Whitmore wrote it down, clearly relieved to be handed a story the county could live with. The words on Aunt Beatrice's wall had been scrubbed and painted over at his own instruction; whoever wrote them, he said, had not known the lady's character, for no one who did would believe she went willingly anywhere she had not decided to go.

The young man in the black coat went south under guard to the assizes and did not once speak. Lord Berkshire declined to press any complaint that would require explaining. By the time Whitmore's carriage cleared the gates, the situation had an official story: tragedy survived, honor intact, one Blackwood dead a hero.

That afternoon I walked the near boundary, slowly, with Dr. Nightingale's vial in my pocket. Where the south wall's roots had been scorched past my reach, I poured the essence out a drop at a time, the way he had told me. The concentrated moonbell went into the ground like light going into water. It was not my old reach. It was help of the ordinary kind, measured from a glass bottle, and the ground took it.

That evening Adrian came to the library with a sealed letter in his hand.

"I called your father a fraud," he said. "In this room, the first night. I have apologized for many things since and never plainly

for that. I was wrong. He saw the pattern before any of us and paid for the seeing, and you have carried the debt since you were a girl." He set the letter on the desk between us. "The Royal Society will have my acknowledgment of his theories by week's end, and my recommendation with it. The terms of our contract are met."

I put my hand flat over the seal. I had picked the lock of this library for exactly this. It was strange to hold it at last and find it had become the second thing I wanted most in the room.

"There is one further term I would propose," Adrian said. He had not sat down. His voice had gone careful in the way I had learned meant the words beneath it were not careful at all. "Marriage, Miss Hartwell. When the mourning for my cousin is out. I am aware the negotiation is irregular, as the other party annexed the library some time ago."

"I am considered a formidable negotiator," I said, when I could say anything at all.

"I am counting on it," he said.

"Then I accept your terms." I stood, and his arms were already open. "All of them."

The day after, in the late afternoon, I sat in the library working through my father's papers.

Dr. Nightingale had suggested it. There might be records in them of earlier encounters with what we had faced — patterns my father had identified and then concealed in private correspondence rather than publish. I had been reading carefully, my smaller gift able to tell me which pages had been held by frightened hands and which had been written in haste.

I turned a page and stopped.

A letter in my father's hand, half-written. The date fifteen years back, at least. The salutation named someone I did not recognize. The lines below were slow and careful. He was describing something he had encountered in the literature. Not naming it. Describing what it did to a bloodline over time.

I did not remember pulling this page out. I had been working through the sheaf in order. This page was not from where I had been working.

I looked up.

Near the window, the light lay wrong. Nothing specific I could have pointed to. A density in the shadows that had not been there a moment ago and, when I looked directly at it, not there. The room was quiet. The fire burned at its normal height. My gift told me what was in the room: the plants on the sill, the dried herbs on the shelf, the living things that belonged here. Nothing else.

I set the letter carefully to one side and noted the name from the salutation. I would ask Dr. Nightingale whether he recognized it.

I picked up the next page in the sheaf, in the place in order where I had been working and continued reading.

EPILOGUE

The Following Spring

The greenhouse was not finished.

Adrian had said in February it would be done by April. It was April. Three walls held their glass, the fourth was still a lattice of raw wood, and the door hung at the slight angle he had been meaning to correct for a fortnight. The seedlings on the workbench did not care. They leaned toward the last of the light, which in April came from everywhere and left all at once.

I had been at the bench since midday with my father's papers. When the light went amber I stopped reading, because amber was the hour the house began to put me out. Somewhere below, lamps were being lit. Molly would be gathering my things. At seven the carriage would come around, as it came around every evening, and I would be handed into it and driven back to Ashford House like a guest.

The letter I had found in the autumn had led me, over the winter, to three more, all in my father's hand. They were not letters he had received; they were his own drafts and fair copies, the kind a careful correspondent keeps, all to the same name I could not place. Of the answers, nothing. Someone had written back to him — the drafts replied to things, took up questions I could not see asked — yet his papers held not one line of it. My

father had not trusted the post with things that mattered. Neither, it seemed, had he trusted his desk.

He came in under the unfinished lintel without remarking on it, set the tea tray down at the bench's end, and poured without asking, mine first, then his. He set my cup where my hand would find it. Then, instead of taking the bench, he stood behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, and I let my pen go without being asked to.

"Further than yesterday?" he asked.

"No further at all," I said. "Your library has no answers in it. I have looked."

"My library brought you here," he said mildly. "I have stopped expecting more of it than that."

I tipped my head back against him and closed my eyes. His thumb found the knot at the base of my neck that the papers had put there and pressed it slowly out. Neither of us spoke. Below us the lamps went on being lit; the carriage went on being readied; seven o'clock came on at the pace it always kept.

He bent and kissed the place below my ear, unhurried, as though the hour were his to spend. I turned on the bench and caught his mouth before he could straighten, and for a moment the kiss was not the kind we had agreed upon. His hand closed in the loose hair at my nape. The tray sat forgotten. I felt, through the bond, what it cost him to do what he did next, which was stop.

"June," he said against my temple, not steadily.

"June," I said. "I have raised the matter with the calendar. It declines to be moved."

He laughed, low, and the laugh undid me worse than the kiss had. I stood and put the bench between us. He let me. We drank our tea like civilized people while the light failed.

It was not the county I minded, though the county watched us the way it watched all its weather. It was the arithmetic of the thing. We divided the days between the two houses, never so

many at one that the county could make a story of it. I knew this house's garden root by root, its accounts, its moods; I still did not have a key to it. Aunt Beatrice had ruled that the banns would wait for Algernon's mourning, once and without appeal, and she was right, which I found no help at all. The wedding frightened me still, when I looked at it straight on. The wanting did not frighten me at all. That was the trouble.

He walked me down through the old kitchen garden because I had asked to leave that way, and he had not once made me explain it. Two stones stood on the west side, where the moonbell beds were coming back. Corvina lay under the unmarked one. There had been nowhere else to put her, and Adrian had given her the ground without a word cut into it. The granite beside hers was not a grave. Algernon rested in the family plot, where the county had buried its hero with the honors the story required; but Adrian had raised him a second stone here, beside her, and let one line stand on it that no churchyard would have suffered: *He chose love in the end*. I no longer stopped there every evening. I stopped most of them.

The rose was a different matter. It had come up in February beneath the moonbell that had bloomed too early, silver running along the edges of its leaves. I had not planted it. I could not account for it. Tonight it had put out a bud. I brought my fingers near it without touching, and what was left of my gift reached on its own, the same small listening it gave everything green, and came back with something I had no name for. It felt less like warning than like recognition, as if the rose knew whose garden it had come up in. I took my hand back. A slip of it was already wrapped in damp sacking for Catherine; I had questions for her grandmother's journal that I had not yet worked out how to ask.

Molly was at the door with my wraps, wearing the expression that usually meant we were late and she had decided not to say so.

Adrian handed me in himself; the footman had long since yielded the door.

"Tomorrow," he said at the window. "Tell Aunt Beatrice my intentions will stand inspection."

"They inspected well enough five minutes ago," I said, and had the satisfaction of watching him not answer that.

"In the morning I'll walk the boundary first," he said. "The east ditch has been on my conscience since the thaw."

"Take the west path," I said. The knowing arrived as the words did, whole and sure of itself. "The culvert will have flooded the near ditch."

He looked at me a moment longer than the remark deserved. He started to say something, and did not say it. "The west path, then," he agreed, and stepped back from the wheels.

The drive ran a long way under old trees. I felt him stand on the step the whole length of it. It was not footsteps, nothing so plain. The bond carried him at the base of my ribs, where the braid had settled the night it formed, and it stretched as the horses walked on, thin and thinner, and did not break. It never broke. It only reached.

Molly asked whether I was warm enough. I told her I was, which was true, and watched Duskmere's windows through the trees until the trees kept them.

At Ashford House there would be lamps, supper, Aunt Beatrice's letters read aloud over the cheese. It was a good house. I had been happy in it all my life. And, riding away from one home toward the other, I practiced the same piece of honesty and got no better at it: I was leaving my own house as a visitor, by the front door.

Far back, the bond gave one small pull, the feeling of a hand closing over mine after it had already let go. He had gone in at last. I faced forward, folded my hands, and applied myself to the only occupation the county had left me.

I waited for June.

THANK YOU FOR READING

The Cursed Lord of Duskmere

Want more of Duskmere? Read The Starwort, the secret prologue that never made it into the book. It is free at liorapenrose.com/newsletter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liora Penrose writes love stories steeped in old houses, older magic, and the kind of heroines who open doors they were warned to leave shut. *The Cursed Lord of Duskmere* is her debut novel. She is already at work on what comes next.