

Blood Brother

Episode One: Blood On The Ash

I.

No one looked up from their drinks as Alex bolted past the corner coffee shop. Her speed rattled the windows next to the heads of the oblivious coffee patrons, and everyone remained just as indifferent as a herd of 5 decomposing Ghouls shambled past the window after her. Brother Edgar, Alex's Head Hunting mentor, had said that humans – those without Magic – were blind to Ghouls. He described it as willful ignorance. They did not see because they did not want to see. Alex wished she could un-see these disgusting beasts that haunted her every waking moment. For now, seeking sanctuary on the grounds of the city center Cathedral would have to suffice.

Ghouls couldn't cross onto consecrated ground, but that didn't stop them from following. Once Alex stepped into the cathedral yard, she immediately halted her run. Rain pelted her head, which was only covered by the thin layer of black cotton knit her hoodie provided. The ice cold rain water soaked her black hair while it poured, cold and refreshing down her neck. She scrunched her reddened face up tight and rode out the shiver that ran through her body from the wet chill. Next she reached over her shoulder and grasped the hilt of her silver long sword. The slippery, metallic ring of the sharp blade sang through the cold air as she pulled it from her back in one deft movement. She turned back to cathedral gate that separated the yard from the city street beyond. Her stance was wide and strong as she waited for the Ghouls to meet her.

Each and every one of the five rotted messes that had been chasing her eventually shambled up and stopped at the grass line. Those with intact vocal cords let loose low, gurgling groans and whistling shrieks. Their green slackened jaws sagged and any eyes that were still intact rolled around freely in their sockets. Alex watched the disgusting things. They pursued her mercilessly. Since she was a Head Hunter – a reformed Ankhsenti Blood Cult member trained by The Brotherhood of Souls – these creatures’ only purpose was to kill her. They were sent by the Blood Cults to collect her soul – the one promised to the Blood Cult’s God Set – when she fled and sought reform. They would never relent. Alex’s only respite was that she hunted them back, and she reveled in that vocation.

One side of Alex’s upper lip pulled back at the vile scent of the rotted Ghouls. Their bodies were cloaked in the scent of decay. They would not die even when their bodies fell to pieces and turned to sludge. They were animated by Ankhsenti Blood Magic. Nothing but empty shells filled with corruption. They would keep walking and searching for Brotherhood Reforms – ex-Cultists like her – until their bodies could no longer function. She pulled her sword back in a high swing, aiming for the rotters’ necks. It was in that moment that her spine began to itch and squirm with the feeling of being watched. She consciously refrained from any show of awareness.

Alex’s pale ears twitched at the distinct dribble sound of blood on concrete. That sound was like a melody to her, forever unmistakable even amid the din of heavy rain fall. Her nose twitched and she smelled the air. Not even the freshness of rain could lessen the heavy stench of rot from the decaying Ghouls. Their rancid scent burrowed itself in her throat first. Soon after, the sweet, metallic scent of blood snuck in at the edges. Her mouth began to water and

she felt a tingle in her veins like an addict's craving. Beneath the smell of blood was the dry scent of ash and bite of sulfur. She immediately knew then what she was sensing. Alex spun on her heel to face what was behind her. She saw a tiny white flash as a man in a black robe tucked a small silver blade away inside his sleeve. The long midnight fabric of his robes trimmed in crimson was visible to Alex even through the pitch black shadow of the oak tree under which the man stood. She felt a nagging burn inside her chest at the sight of thick black blood crawling slowly down the man's fingertips from his wrist. In the back of her mind a whisper scratched – razors down a wooden wall – at the sight of the blood. He raised his hand above his head, exposing a wound cut 3 inches agape. The tar-like blood began to crawl upward into his claw shaped hand.

“Ankhsenti...” Alex's voice was a strained mumble.

The black blood took on a life of its own as it formed into a hardened, sharp black crystal in the Priest's grip. It began to pulse with a dim reddish glow. The blood sword was long and thin, sharp on both edges, and it glinted wet under the moonlight. The Brother stepped out of the jet black shadow of the oak and into the heavy rain. He began to arc his sword gracefully from left to right with practiced skill, almost like a dance. He took slow deliberate steps toward Alex all the time.

“Oh great...” Alex said. She could feel a strain in her vocal chords as she tried to keep her voice steady. She tightened her grip on her sword, keenly aware that she was positioned between the Brother and the Ghouls. She had only a moment to decide what to do. She shoulder rolled to the side and tucked her legs in so she could land on her feet. At least she was no longer flanked. Once on her feet, she pulled herself up to her full height and stood strong,

feet apart. Both hands squeezed the hilt of her sword until her knuckles were white. She pointed it directly at the Brother. She could feel warmth emanating from the Spirit runes that swirled and danced in delicate carvings all over the sharp silver of her blade.

The Brother stopped only a few feet away from Alex. He twirled his blood weapon at his side as he watched her. She could feel her heart knock against her rib cage - it wanted to remind her how much danger she was in.

"Okay..." Alex said, "...nice and easy now," she said to the man. "No need to make this into a thing." She cracked a tight lipped smile.

The Brother's black eyes glistened in the bright light of the full moon. His thin mouth twitched into a sharp smirk.

"I am Gandriel of the Blood Cult Ankh senti Senefsa ret. A Priest and Child of the God Set." Gandriel's blood sword reflected a slippery light that reminded Alex of moonlight reflected off the surface of slime. "I offer that you, estranged Daughter of Set, may return to us now and join in our success as we make this city our own."

"Can't we just settle this over a nice game of cards?"

Gandriel took another calm step toward Alex.

"I mean, really," Alex said, her voice tight in her throat, "neither one of us need to die tonight."

Then another.

"Okay."

Faster now – another step.

"I can see you're not interested in settling this without violence."

Alex backed away quickly and drew her sword over her shoulder. The blade began to reflect the moonlight more sharply. It shone brightly enough to push back some of the shadow Gandriel brought with him.

"If you will not join us, you won't live long." Gandriel's voice was a sing song. His eyes were wide and round, his pupils like unpredictable voids mashed into tiny pin prick spots. His smile was sharp and hungry. He was an osprey, she was a fish.

"Shit..." Alex hissed. Her jaw tightened, flexed, her knuckles white as she gripped her shining sword.

Gandriel lunged. His razor sharp crystalline blood was drawn directly back at his waist. He thrust it toward Alex. She dodged nimbly, then knocked his blade aside with her own. A sizzle lifted into the air and Gandriel's Blood blade bounced away from hers. A wide nick was left steaming at the side of his blade from making contact with her Spirit sword. She used her momentum to swing her sword back toward Gandriel's shoulder. She cut a thin slice into his skin, and black, viscous fluid began to bead and fall from the wound.

"Foolish Hunter." The blood on Gandriel's shoulder hardened. "Have you forgotten so quickly what it means to be one of us?"

Alex felt her stomach quiver, but she forced a smile.

Gandriel's black blood began to form into a sharp point. A moment later steam started to rise from his wound. Gandriel sucked air sharply between his teeth, his jaw clenched in what seemed like pain.

"Spoke too soon." Alex's mouth flickered with the hint of a grin.

Gandriel reached up and grasped the black blood, which was slowly turning red from purification. He ripped it from his skin. In one swift movement he launched the needle-like blade he had created toward Alex.

Alex shifted backward on her feet. The blade shaved the side of her neck. She could feel her blood seep from the wound. Her chest and throat quivered at the sensation. An echo of a whisper swam past her consciousness like the voice of a lost lover. She could feel her knees weakening as the scent of pure blood reached her nose.

Gandriel's dangerous grin gave way to sly amusement.

"Feeling the itch, Hunter?" He held his hand over his wound. Smoke still escaped from between his fingers as he clutched the slim cut. The Spirit magic was burning away the corruption inside his blood and Alex knew it pained him.

Alex rubbed her shoulder against her neck, smearing the blood away. He wanted her to use Blood Magic and allow the corruption back into her body. He knew she was strongest when she was manipulating corrupted blood, just like any Ankh senti, and that the strength and power was like a drug. He counted on her thirst for strength and lust for blood to bend her to his will.

"I'm not as weak willed as some of us. I won't mention names." Alex allowed her disdain to seep into her words freely. She could feel her mind waver as another hiss and whisper – the sound of corruption – rippled through her mind. It begged her to give in. Her sword began to tremble in her grip. Her breath felt short. Her lungs felt tight. She couldn't beat this man without Blood magic. Her body began to shiver. Suddenly the wet cold bit into every inch of her skin.

“You hear it? That sound that makes your nerves buzz and your insides quake?”

Gandriel took steps toward her again. Now his eyes were shut, his features relaxed, it almost made his wrinkled face look youthful. He seemed lost in a blissful memory. He breathed in sharply through his nose. “I can smell your blood...” He sounded like a starving man who’d caught of a whiff of a gourmet meal.

Alex’s gut shifted. She could sense her own weakness. She turned and ran. She headed for the sky high wrought iron fence surrounding the cathedral. When she reached it she jolted sideways and slid her thin, wiry body right through the bars.

“See you soon, Hunter!” Gandriel’s melodious taunt echoed down the street after her.

Alex continued to run for miles and did not stop until she reached the Sanctuary she called home.

II.

The whole Sanctuary smelled of ashes and sulfur. The honeyed metallic tang of blood drifted somewhere underneath. Alex dropped her head and pulled up the grey cowl that she wore around her neck so it covered her face as she pushed closed the heavy wooden double doors that separated the Soul Sanctuary from the outside world. When she turned to look at the foyer of the old stone church the Victoria Brotherhood had made their home, she saw that everything in sight was covered in a layer of purple-grey ash. Fine motes of the stuff floated on the air. The stone walls, the wooden tables and chairs. Everything was covered. All around the room, magic books that had once proudly stood on the shelves had been ripped and tossed

about. Drawers had been emptied, desks overturned. Everything was broken into pieces. Even the photographs and paintings that lined the long, wide hallways of the small stone cathedral had been shattered. Alex looked back at the prints her feet made in the ashes as she walked down the hall toward her mentor's chambers. Behind her, other footprints and smears of blood wove back and forth through the ash. The patterns of footprints and blood were interrupted every so often by a spattering of tar-black fluid. The Hunters and Brotherhood who lived here had fought for their lives. Alex felt a deep pang of sorrow and guilt. She should have been here to help spill Ankhsenti guts right beside them. Alex turned her gaze back in front of herself and continued toward Edgar's chambers. Her stomach clawed against the inside of her belly as she went over the possibilities of what had become of Edgar—the who man had rehabilitated her and taught her everything she knew. Perhaps he escaped. Maybe he had survived whatever scuffle seemed to have bloodied the rest. She heart yanked down into her stomach. What if he was dead? She had not seen a single person since she had stepped on Sanctuary grounds. The back of her throat tightened, her stomach soured, and she felt she might be sick. She stopped at the end of the hallway and looked back the way she'd come. The candlelit sconces that lined the long stone hallway lit the scene with a sickly yellow light. It glinted off the spatters of blood that painted the walls and floors in patches and streaks. If there had been a battle large enough to spread so much blood, where were all the bodies?

III.

The door to Edgar's office groaned as Alex pushed it open. As the room beyond the door was revealed, Alex watched specks of ash swing through the air. An apparently fresh pair of

foot prints led into a corner behind a large maple dresser. Alex could feel her heart beat pick up as adrenaline flooded into her body. She immediately began to whisper a silence spell under her breath. It would allow her to step as light as a feather while she investigated.

Alex did not allow herself to breathe as she moved slowly toward the potential threat. Her fingers twitched as she put her hand at her shoulder to hover near the leather wrapped handle of her sword. As she approached the dresser, she slowed down and began to look carefully. A dark shadow was all that greeted her when she finally peered behind the dresser. For a moment there was not a sound, then Alex heard a quick and heavy sigh. An instant later, the shadow cleared and a white streak bolted into the open and slammed itself into her.

Luca wrapped his long arms around her in a rough hug. His strong arms forced a grunt to escape from between Alex's smiling lips. Alex lifted her arms and put them around her fellow Hunter. She relaxed into the soft feeling of Luca's plush white sweater, and she pulled him into her and squeezed as tight as she could.

"You're here. You're not dead. I was positive you were dead," Luca said as he buried his face into the top of Alex's head. She could feel the damp of his tears on her scalp.

"I'm not dead," said Alex. "But it seems like we might be the only ones." Alex's stiff attempt at humor hung heavy in the air. She pushed her face into Luca's warm, dry body and shut her eyes against the sting that formed behind her lids.

"Everyone else—" Luca began. A strained hiccup prevented him from being able to finish his sentence.

"What happened?" Alex opened her arms and stood back. Luca towered over her, tall as he was, and for a moment Alex felt safe in his presence.

“They came...the Ankhsenti. Somehow they got in and then everything was just—” Tears glinted along the waterline of Luca’s round blue eyes. He wiped his red, blotchy cheek and then hid his eyes behind his hand.

“How can that be possible? There are measures in place—”

“I barely know what happened...To be honest...” Luca rubbed his eyes hard for a moment and then dropped his hand. His face, usually soft and cherub-like, seemed sunken. The light in his eyes was dim. “I hid. I just hid. Kilten told me to hide.” He hiccupped again.

“Your Mentor? Where is he? Where are the bodies?”

“They took him—all of them...”

“Where? Did you hear anything? Any clues?” Alex’s eyes scanned Edgar’s chambers. “Wait...what is that?” Alex crossed the room. On the wall was a blackened swirl. It was like a charred vortex on the stone. She reached out and touched the ash. She smelled it. It smelled like gun powder and clay.

“What? What is it?” Luca asked. He stepped to Alex’s side.

“Where’s Edgar?” Alex’s face vibrated with heat and her temples throbbed with tension.

“I don’t know...I’m sorry, Alex. I don’t know,” Luca said. He began to cry openly.

“Okay. It’s okay. We’re going to find all of them.”

“How?” said Luca.

“We’re going to track them.”

“But—”

“We’re finding Edgar.”

IV.

Alex and Luca trudged through the wet forest as rain pattered on the canopy of trees above. Alex took a deep breath and savored the clean smell of the forest air and the deep, wet scent of the foliage. On her face she had painted, in her own vital fluid, sharp angular runes in chaotic tilted patterns. She could feel the Blood runes drying on her skin. It caused an itch, but she did not touch it. To destroy the symbols would end the spell. She walked with her arms wide open, head back, eyes closed. She could feel metaphysical threads bound to her chest, arms, legs, and head. They tugged her where she needed to go. The threads would help lead her to the Ankh senti Temple where Alex hoped she'd find Edgar alive.

Against the back of her mind Alex felt something wiggle. It wanted to crawl inside of her as she followed the spell blindly. Something sticky, black and oily wanted to take hold of her organs and twist them around. It was familiar. It was corruption. Her eyes fluttered. Her head ticked minutely to the side as her guts bunched inside her. A stab of pain bit at her chest. She continued to walk. The sound of corruption, a quick, harsh whisper and a *click-click-click* resounded distantly beyond the forest. Alex shivered but she did not feel cold.

V.

"There *is* another way," Luca said. "We can find some other plan. Together." His voice weighed heavily on the air.

Alex took slow, heavy steps. Her body felt like a puppet on strings as she moved over and past any obstruction in her path without a thought.

"Please?" Luca begged. The sound of his plea was distant and undefined. Fuzzy around the edges like a memory.

Alex could barely hear him, it was as if she was listening through a fishbowl. Yet Luca's nagging voice had never been so grating - so incredibly unwelcome.

"I just want to help..." Luca reached over and touched Alex's shoulder lightly.

"No!" Alex said. The aggressive exit of the word cut her throat. She could feel strain in her eyes and nostrils. A heady, foggy rage had entered her vision. She jerked and shook Luca's outstretched hand away. Luca stepped back. The rage began to dissipate as quickly as it had come. Alex breathed heavily for a moment as her body began to relax.

"Alex, please." Luca's light blue eyes looked dark.

"I'm sorry..." Alex said. "Sorry." Her head spun and buzzed. She couldn't seem to straighten her thoughts long enough to cling to one. She turned away, back in the direction she knew they had to go, and lurched forward a step or two.

"I'm trying to help you," Luca said, "let me help." He stopped somewhere behind her. "We're a family. We can take care of this together."

Alex wobbled a bit on her feet. She did not turn around.

"I said no," Alex replied. She put her hand out and steadied herself on the thick trunk of a Sitka spruce, then disappeared between the towering trees that tightened around the path ahead.

VI.

Alex felt a cold, sticky black sludge crawling around within her. It pressed against every inch of her skin from the inside. Her mind was on fire with questions and whispers that did not make sense. Through the roar of her thoughts, Alex heard a chime. The darkness that pervaded her vision broke. She felt a warm hand on her arm.

“We’re here,” Luca’s voice chimed again. He took hold of Alex’s arm and urged her to a stand-still.

Alex pulled her eyes open slowly. How long had they been walking? Her eyelids felt dry and sticky. It was effort to blink. She was at the top of a downward slope that dropped off at the forest edge. The trees ended abruptly at the crest of the hill where she stood. At the bottom of the drop-off was a small expanse of field. A tall stone temple towered in the center, a large spire at the head. In the air around the temple, ash floated without falling to the ground. The ash was perpetually suspended and it swayed in the wind without ever settling.

“We’re here.” Alex pulled her arm away from Luca and turned to face him. “I want you to stay right here where you can remain in the shadows.”

“Go in there using Blood magic and you are no better than one of them.” Luca’s voice hosted a stalwart strength.

“Our bodies were made for this. The Cult made sure of that.” Alex put her hands against her upper chest and dug her fingertips into the fabric — into her skin. “When they stole this body from my parents, when they drained its blood and carved their mark into my skin...” She pointed her thumb over her shoulder, toward her back. She could almost feel the outline of the giant Ankh that the Ankhsenti had carved into her young flesh. “...I became a vessel for

immense power. Like it or not, Luca, I'm at my most powerful when I use Blood magic. I can't beat—I can't save the others without it..." Alex's voice trailed off. Blood magic was her only real skill. She hadn't been with the Brotherhood as long as Luca. Spirit magic was still such a mystery to her, despite her full-time training.

"That's not true, and you know it. Edgar always told you that you were a gifted student. Right?" His voice was so painfully full of hope.

Alex paused and focused on Luca's gaze. How could someone so young be so much stronger than she could ever dream of becoming? Luca had been with the Brotherhood since he was 9 years old. He was different. He was better.

"I can Hunt Ghouls, even put up a good fight against a dark Witch or two, but you should have seen my pathetic attempt at taking on an Ankh senti without using Blood magic. And that's all I'm going to face down there." She pointed down the hill to the stone temple as it sat far off in eternal shadow.

"It is not what Edgar would want. This is not what you have been fighting for or training for. Do not let this destroy you. You are stronger than this."

For a moment Alex wavered. Luca offered his hand to her once again. Alex felt her fingers itch, they begged to be allowed to meet Luca's own. She wanted to take his hand, maybe find another way. Maybe it would be easy.

Or maybe it would be harder, more dangerous, and more time consuming. It would consume time they did not have to spare.

But she had fought a long time to escape dark magic. For years Edgar dedicated his life to rehabilitating her and teaching her how to get better.

“Okay.” Alex grasped Luca’s warm hand.

He smiled. Alex did not.

VII.

Spruce trees towered all around. Alex pointed to the trunk of one significantly large and sturdy specimen. She used her finger to guide Luca’s gaze down to the enormous roots that bumped and wound around the base of the giant spruce.

“Maybe we can plant the Spirit rune right there on the side of this tree.” The teleportation spell needed to be planted on the side of a living thing in order to create a spirit magic connection. The tree’s life energy would fuel the spell.

Luca nodded and knelt down, then he took out his small silver knife and began to carve a looping, asymmetric rune into the bark of the tree.

“So, we place the rune here on the side of the tree—” Alex began.

“The other half of the rune on your dominant hand,” Luca finished. “Then when you say the incantation, you’ll teleport right to this spot.” A small silver flash sparked as Luca tucked his tiny blade inside the sleeve of his over-sized white sweater. “Okay. Done.” Luca stood up.

“I’ll go inside, find Edgar, immediately bring him back here. While I’m inside, you cast a Spirit rune circle around the temple to make sure that no Ankhsenti or corruption can escape. We won’t even have to fight them...I’ll be in and out so fast your head will spin.” Alex forced a small smile. A moment later she shuddered suddenly. Her vision began to darken as if black smoke had gathered around her.

“My eyes.” Alex put her face in her hands. She rubbed her eyes and cheeks, squeezing her face muscles and blinking to clear her sight. Her head began to swim and she felt the ground tip beneath her.

“What’s wrong?” Luca said. “What’s going on?”

Alex could feel Luca’s hands brace against her shoulders. After a moment, Alex’s vision cleared. She shook away the murky, unsteady sensation inside her mind.

“I felt dizzy, it was like...drunk.”

“Here.” Luca took Alex’s left hand and pressed his finger into her palm. The same looping Spirit rune he had carved on the tree lit up in the center of Alex’s hand. It flashed for a moment in a pale yellow before it faded into her skin.

“And a healing rune...Maybe you feel dizzy from using that Blood spell.” He pressed his forefinger between Alex’s brows. Alex saw a small flash between her eyes and felt a gooey warmth pass through her, rich and sweet like honey and flowers. “Hopefully it will keep you safe until we can take you to a Sanctuary. Purify your body properly. Meditation, chanting...The whole shebang,” Luca said warmly.

VIII.

Alex stepped into the ash that floated around the stone temple. It was dense and her lungs felt heavy. She found it hard to take a full breath. Alex pulled the grey cowl she wore around her neck up over her mouth and nose. The closer she drew to the temple, the darker the shadows which shrouded it became. When she approached the door, she was shrouded in almost complete darkness. Alex reached for the metal handle of the carved stone door to the temple. On the surface of the stone Alex could see the faint outline of Blood runes in the

darkness. The jagged, chaotic shapes and patterns stirred something inside of Alex's belly and her back began to itch. She breathed deeply into her cowl and tugged on the door.

"Oh, excellent, you got our invitation." Gandriel's voice was light and airy. He was just greeting a guest that had dropped by for supper.

Alex spun to face Gandriel. Her heart stopped, then kick-started in overdrive. She could feel her body quake.

"Now you'll have to excuse the place," Gandriel said, "I haven't dusted in ages."

He stood several feet away, draped in the dark red robes of an Ankhsenti Priest. Behind him were 3 figures, all covered head to toe in long black cloaks. Alex could not see their faces. Their hoods obscured their appearances in pitch black shadow. She knew from their energy signature that they were Neophytes. New Ankhsenti recruits.

Alex immediately drew her sword. She could feel the pressure of her tight tendons as fear squeezed her muscles against her bones. She held her sword out in front of her, both hands on the hilt. Even in the shadow of the temple, Alex's silver blade glinted white.

"Now now, is that any way to greet your host?" Gandriel's pitiless lips stretched grotesquely wide over his teeth. His grin was sharp like a knife. His black eyes were like pits in his skull.

"Where is he?" Alex said.

"Who, my dear? You'll have to be more specific." Gandriel brought his hands to meet in front of his chest and clasped them together.

"You already know who!" Tiny droplets of spit flew from Alex's lips with the force of her words.

“Oh, of course. Allow me to escort you inside.” Gandriel’s disgusting smile softened to an almost jovial expression. His eyes remained cold and empty.

Alex relaxed for a split second.

Suddenly rock hard hands clamped down around her upper arms. Before she could call out, a stony palm closed over her mouth and her vision went black.

IX.

Alex felt the throb of her brain against her skull before she even opened her eyes. The smell of sulfur bit into her nose. All she wanted was to cover her face. She tried to move her arms. They were bound tight behind her back. Alex’s eyes shot open and she scanned the room wildly. She tried to get a sense of her surroundings. More importantly, she was assessing the threat level.

“Ah, sleeping beauty finally awakens.” Gandriel’s voice was like bitter sweet syrup. Cloying, with an acidic aftertaste.

“Spare me,” Alex said as she wiggled her hands behind her back. Rough rope bound her wrists and ankles. She was secured upright to a support beam in the center of a stone hall. The large, open room was cold as an icebox. Alex could see white clouds of her breath forming in the air in front of her face. She stared straight through the vapor clouds and kept her eyes on Gandriel.

“You had been napping so long we had become concerned you may never wake up.” Gandriel moved close to Alex. Close enough to touch her face with his frigid finger tips. He reached out toward her. She snapped her face away to escape his venomous touch. It was no

use. Gandriel's fingers felt frosty against her adrenaline hot skin. Her stomach churned as the cold of his touch seemed to blister her cheek. Finally she knew she had to say something as Gandriel moved his body close to hers. She could feel his chilled breath. He was so close.

"Where's Edgar?" Alex said.

Alex became aware that the Neophytes were beginning to leak out of the shadows. She counted three...Four. She hoped no more would come.

Gandriel stroked Alex's cheek again. His eyes were glazed and distant with a perverse glimmer.

Alex clenched her teeth and her face trembled with strain. She restrained the urge to sink her jaws into his flesh.

"Where...is he," she said between gritted teeth. Her stomach began twist like the gnarled branches of a petrified tree.

"You're so beautiful when you're shaking with fear..." When Gandriel smiled this time, his grin was one of grotesque fervor. Alex's intestines began to acidify. They felt as though they might turn to liquid and fall right out of her body. She had to find Edgar. She had to escape.

"It is not polite to infringe on the personal space of a lady without permission," said a hauntingly familiar voice. "Why don't you allow the poor dear to take a breath before you strangle her with your proximity?"

Only one man could sound so respectful and yet so bitterly inconvenienced.

"Edgar...?" Alex's voice was an almost inaudible whisper.

Gandriel stepped away from Alex reluctantly. Edgar's face replaced Gandriel's in Alex's line of sight. She couldn't see anything else but him. His round, lined face seemed different. His

thin brown hair was darker. His light brown eyes, once the color of honey, were now a smoky amber. The kindly way Edgar smiled as he watched Alex gaze into his eyes was familiar and intimate. Alex could feel tears threatening to fall. She breathed in sharply to keep them at bay.

“My darling girl...” Edgar said.

As Edgar stepped forward, his face so full of warmth and affection, all Alex wanted was to feel his arms around her. Though he was not her father by birth, he had been like a father in her reform. When she left the Ankh senti, he had been the one to welcome her into the Brotherhood with open arms, he had been the one who never gave up on her, and he had been the one to love and care for her when no one else wanted to. It never mattered how difficult she was, he always believed in her. When he touched her face, she could feel herself trembling with nervous joy. Rooted in her gut, she felt that at any moment the happiness and relief building inside her would be brutally stamped out.

“I’ve been looking—” Alex’s voice caught in her throat and she closed her mouth tight.

“I’m here now.” Edgar brushed Alex’s hair away from her forehead and the cool touch of his palm slowed her rapidly beating heart.

Alex had become sharply aware of Edgar’s deep red robe, the sleeves and neckline rimmed in coal black.

“You...” Alex could no more easily gather her thoughts or words than she could move her arms or legs. Her mind and tongue seemed tightly bound.

“My dearest, I am back home, just where you should be. This is where you have always belonged. Now you are home, and I am here with you, and there is nothing in the world that

can separate us.” Edgar leaned forward and put his arms around Alex. Then he placed a hand on her head and pushed her cheek to his shoulder.

As Edgar rested his chin on the top of Alex’s head, she could feel her stomach begin to boil aggressively. Her skin tingled and her face was hot. Alex stiffened every muscle as if she’d been struck with rigor mortis. As her body began to tremble with tension, Edgar pulled her closer.

“You’re a traitor...” Alex whispered into Edgar’s neck.

Edgar slowly pulled away and peered down at her as he held her in his arms like a swaddled child. His soft gaze seemed to ask what the trouble was.

“You’re a backstabbing...” Alex’s voice began to rise. “...Traitor!” She screamed this last word. It was a roar that came up from deep inside her guts.

Edgar immediately flew away from Alex.

“You said she was close to breaking,” Edgar said as he turned on Gandriel. “You said she was weak and afraid.”

“She is. Look at her.” Gandriel held out his hand toward Alex. “You should have seen how quickly she succumbed to our advance. It was as if we were capturing a mentally impaired infant, or some kind of ailing sloth. She poses no threat.”

“It is not her threat I am concerned with. The orders were to prepare her to be reintroduced into the Cult. Instead you wasted time with your own foolish agenda.” Edgar grasped at the length of his robes and tossed the fabric to the side as he swept away from Alex.

Alex's mind felt submerged in murky water. She watched Edgar walk away, and though she had heard every word he said, she could not seem to grasp hold of their meaning. She was in a dream. This was only a dream.

"It is in your best interest to ensure your orders are fulfilled, Gandriel." Edgar's voice sounded distant and muffled beyond the bog of her mind. "I do not think you want me to come back here before the girl is sufficiently ready to be welcomed back into the fold." With that he was a gaping black void ripped through the shadows of the far wall. Edgar blended with the void at the edge of the room and all at once he disappeared.

X.

Alex's chest was in a vice. Needles of despair pricked at her and forced tears to well in her eyes. She scrunched them closed. Tears rolled down her cheeks and time seemed to slow way down. Something inside of her cracked - the hard coating that had formed around her darkest desires shattered and fell away inch by inch. Faintly she heard that familiar click, a warm whisper - her name. She felt herself smile. The inviting voice of sweet sanguine liquid was like a lover's breath on her neck. The blood begged Alex to use it, to make it hers, to push and pull and manipulate it. Alex dug her fingernails deep into her palm. She drew blood. It began to pool in her waiting hand as it trickled from small, deep wounds. Alex felt a shiver travel seductively up her spine. She took control. Sinuous strands of dark red blood began to congeal into gelatinous ropes as they rose from Alex's skin. Around her like a web, long, thick tentacles of dark red fluid began to spread. For a moment everything was still. The blood stretched out around her body like a spider rearing back to tower over its victims.

“Oh dear...” Gandriel said. His voice faded away into the back of Alex’s mind.

All movement in the room had ceased for a millisecond. She opened her eyes. Gandriel was calling out something to the cloaked figures around him, but Alex could not hear it. In an instant Alex’s bloody tentacles sharpened into shiny red points; crystalline and razor sharp. Alex’s body heaved as she forced them forward. The feeling of her blood sliding out of her veins felt like the soft graze of velvet on bare skin. She allowed her eyelids to droop. She could feel corruption emanating from everybody in the room and it only served to fuel her. She did not need to see them to know where they stood. Many did not escape as Alex’s sharp red limbs dug deep inside of every torso they could reach. Through vital organs and out the other side. Alex delighted in the warmth of the tar black, viscous blood that gushed from the center of every corrupt body she skewered. The rivulets of blood that ran down her sharp appendages tickled her senses.

Wails echoed through the room. A few thin shrieks cut through the air and Alex became alert. As the many sounds of death warbled around her, Alex watched a horde of Ghouls shuffle into the room with Gandriel in the lead. Alex felt as though she was made of stone. The Ghouls wore the faces of her loved ones. The abducted Brotherhood members, her fellow Hunters, they had all been drained of blood and resurrected by the Ankhsenti. They would fight for them now. Each moment that ticked passed seemed to drag through time as Alex watched Gandriel lead his new army into battle toward her. She couldn’t kill them. She could not kill them. She would not kill them.

The faces of her family were deathly green and slackened. Their eyes were cloudy and their limbs dragged. Alex held her breath.

They were not her family anymore, were they? Her family was dead. They were dead.

In a flash of anguish, Alex launched her keen limbs toward the horde. Gandriel swung his black Blood blade and it sliced through one of Alex's dark red limbs. Then it sliced through another. He whirled and cut through the air. Her limbs fell to the floor with a sickening smacks as Gandriel pushed himself to his limit of speed and precision. Before Gandriel could recover from his last slice, Alex skewered him from behind.

Gandriel hung limp on her spear-like limb. His body was gored straight through center mass. His black blood spilled onto the temple floor. She reveled in the sulfuric iron scent that surrounded her.

Alex could feel fat beads of liquid soak her face. They fell heavily from her eyes. Alex continued to gore every single body in the room. Her mind was empty. Her insides as hollow as her victims as they lay scattered on the floor.

XI.

There was blood everywhere. Alex felt her arms and legs spasm as they began to cramp. Her brain in a fog, she had finally come to only minutes before. At some point, still bound to the support beam at her back, she had passed out. Bodies littered the floor and the room was covered in what looked like a lake of crude oil. All Alex wanted was to feel something as she looked at all the carnage, but her body wouldn't let her. She had nothing left. Her emotions and energy were long since spent.

Alex hung on the beam for quite some time, ignoring the pain in her muscles, bones and joints. After what seemed like an hour, Alex used her what little energy she had recouped to

form a miniscule Blood blade. She cut through the rope on her wrists, then she cut the rope on her legs. When she was done she collapsed to her hands and knees. She could feel the blood from the floor as it soaked into her pants and bathed her palms. Alex's whole body ached. For a moment she felt only pain, and then slowly a mild warmth seeped into the center of her forehead. She reached up to her face with a bloodied hand. The tips of her fingers lightly touched the space between her brows and Alex could feel heat. The Spirit rune Luca had placed was beginning to awaken. In that moment, Alex saw a bright light in her mind's eye. In her memory, Luca appeared. His kind face looked on her with love as he placed Spirit runes on her skin. Alex's heart tore. She had promised him she wouldn't use Blood magic. She looked up at the blood that surrounded her. Her eyes stung. She clenched them shut and lowered her head. Another memory opened up in her mind. *"You are stronger than this,"* Luca had said. *"Don't let this break you."*

Alex hissed at the pain as she stood up. She wobbled on her feet. After a moment she made her way toward the temple doors.

XII.

Alex tugged on the large metal handle of the towering stone door. It did not open.

She would find Luca and he would help her purify her body.

She tugged the handle again.

He would help her get better.

She tugged once more.

“What the hell?” Alex said. She tugged over and over in rapid succession, but the door would not budge. “Shit.” She had told Luca to create a Spirit rune circle around the building. Of course he’d done just that, and he’d done it well. That meant Alex could not leave. She had become too corrupt. *“You’re stronger than this,”* her memory reminded her. Alex sighed deeply and her shoulders relaxed downward. She would do it on her own. She turned and made her way to the center of the room and sat down in the center of the lake of black blood. She knew this spot in the temple would be coursing with the most concentrated energy. She crossed her legs and placed her hands on her knees. Then she closed her eyes and started to moderate her breathing.

Alex held her breath for long periods between each inhale. She cleared her mind. The spot between her eyebrows began to heat up. Soon it was fire hot. Alex did not flinch at the crackling burn. She stayed still and the room around her became like a silent echo chamber. The energy in the room was light but dense, like fog. She allowed herself to breathe the energy into her lungs, and as it shifted and traveled around inside her body, it began to fuel a change. Alex’s mind felt full. Her own Spirit energy mixed with the energy of her surroundings and began to expand inside her body. The sticky, black corruption that had pressed against her insides was being pushed out through her every pore by the light, fresh energy of her Spirit. With every bit of corruption that left her body, Alex felt lighter. Her insides felt boundless, and it was as if she could move inside of herself again. The feeling of Spirit energy, nourishing and resonant like sunlight, soothed Alex to her core. She sat in meditation for many outstretched minutes beyond the point of purification. Her mind still and her body silent.

XIII.

When Alex finally emerged from her purifying mediation, she felt as though she had come out of a deep sleep. She slowly blinked her eyes open, and as the world around her came into view, her heart tugged. Upon seeing the blood around her she was reminded of the violence that had occurred. But as she looked at the floor directly below her, she saw that a perfect circle of red purity had formed around her body. The black blood which had surrounded her on the stone ground had changed with her. Alex relaxed into a smile, then she stood up nice and slow.

Alex looked at her left hand where Luca had planted the teleportation rune. If she had not been feeling so placid from her long meditation, she would have jumped with joy at the thought of seeing Luca again. All of this would be over. They could start over. She flexed her hand lightly and muttered the spell which would teleport her back to Luca.

“Kinisi...” She waited. Nothing happened. She said the spell more loudly. “Kinisi.” She flexed her hand more purposely now. “Kinisi!” Alex said again. She shook her hand out and grumbled. Why wasn’t it working? Alex’s chest splintered and her eyes shot wide.

“Luca.” She dropped her hand and raced for the temple doors.

XIV.

Alex stood at the crest of the hill where she and Luca had been together only hours before. She stared at the Spirit rune he had planted on the side of the tall spruce tree they had chosen. The rune was marred. Scratched out violently by a sharp blade. Embedded in the center stood a long, curved dagger. The hilt was ebony stone and the fine folded steel of the

blade was etched with Blood runes. Inside the grooves of the jagged runes, red paint delicately traced the narrow engravings. It was an Ankh senti weapon — she would know one anywhere.

If Luca was gone, if Edgar had taken him, she knew it was her fault. She wouldn't displace the blame or pretend she hadn't had a choice. Her actions caused this. She had put Luca in harm's way by giving in to corruption, just as Gandriel — just as Edgar — had wanted.

Alex knew the only thing to do now was to look for him. She reached forward and grasped the black hilt of the Ankh senti blade and she yanked out of the tree. She brought the blade up to look at the finely honed edge. It flashed a warm yellow light as she tilted it left and right. Alex glanced up at the horizon, and there she saw the rising sun stretching out below a gathering of grey and purple clouds. Alex gripped the end of the knife right between her thumb and forefinger. She drew it over her shoulder, and with all her strength she threw it far away down the hill. The knife spun end over end and buried itself point down in the ash covered grass many meters away. Alex fixed her gaze on the Ankh senti temple. All the ash had settled to the ground. She would find Luca. And she would do it without Blood magic.