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Dreams and Lessons

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“Run!” the voice whispered next to my ear.

I sat up with a jolt. The dreams were getting worse. My throat ached, and my eyes stung as if the smoke billowing from the fire of my dream still surrounded me. Sinking back into the plush of my feather pillows, I sighed. I needed to write down the details before I forgot them. It was important that I remember everything. At least that’s what Grandmother told me every morning. I didn’t quite see it. But it’s better than the alternative: Grandmother’s Recollect potion. If I feel exhausted after these dreams, it’s nothing compared to how I feel after a dose of Recollect.

For a while, I just stared out my window at the forest behind the house. Grandmother raised me there, next to the forest. There was a stream back there, and I could feel it rushing through the woods. It called to me. A drop of water formed in my open palm before I realized it.

Wiping my hand across my bedspread, I got rid of the water before Grandmother came in and saw. Unsupervised magic isn't allowed. Focusing back on my dream journal, I noted every detail of this latest version of my nightly dream.

The door to my attic room creaked open as I finished writing the last details.

“Good morning, darling,” Grandmother said as she walked into the room, carrying a breakfast tray. She brought with her the herbal scent that always surrounded her. She spent almost all of her time in the garden with her plants, harvesting and drying her potion ingredients. Well, at least when she wasn't training me to strengthen my magic.

“Good morning, Grandmother,” I said with a yawn.

“Any dreams last night?” The same question every morning.

“Yes, the usual.”

“Have you written it all down?”

“Yes, Grandmother,” I said, sipping at my tea. Mmmmm, my favorite. Grandmother's special blend chased the last bits of smoke burn from my throat. I drank that tea every morning and every evening before bed. Something about the peppermint soothed me, which was weird since I was always taught that peppermint is a stimulating herb.

“Good girl. Anything different this time?”

“Not really. Except—”

“Yes?” Grandmother asked, leaning slightly closer to me.

“There was a dog barking at the end. I've never heard the dog before. The voice telling me to run, that's the same. I hear it every night and it's familiar. I know who it is when I'm dreaming, but when I wake, I can't place it. But the dog barking, that's new.”

Grandmother's eyes widened slightly.

“What’s the meaning of the dog?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Grandmother said, but her hand shook just enough that her teacup clinked quietly on the saucer.

“Grandmother, I know it’s not nothing. Nothing in my dreams is nothing.”

“That’s enough, Bridget,” Grandmother said, composure returning. She nodded and stood, holding her hand out to me for my teacup. “Time for lessons.”

I sighed as I handed over the china cup. Lessons. My whole world was dreams and lessons. Dreams and lessons, every day.

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“Again,” Grandmother said.

“Can’t we do water? I love water,” I said.

“That’s exactly why we can’t do water, you know that. Water is too easy for you. You need to practice your other elements. Now, again.”

I held my hands out in front of me, palms up, and closed my eyes. A light breeze blew, pulling a few tendrils of hair loose from my ponytail. I lost concentration as they tickled my nose, and the breeze stopped.

“Bridget, you can’t lose concentration so easily.” Grandmother raised her hands, closed her eyes, and the breeze started up again. Its strength grew as it blew around us, pulling dried leaves up from the ground. The leaves swirled until we were surrounded by an impenetrable wall of leaves, the crackle of the leaves breaking apart filling my ears. She opened her eyes, gave me a pointed look and the breeze stopped, the leaves falling to the forest floor once again.

“I’m too tired, Grandmother. We’ve been at it for hours. I can’t concentrate after so long.”

“What will you do when he shows up? Do you think he’s going to care that you can’t hold your magic for long? Don’t you think he’ll take advantage of that? He’ll attack with everything he has. You must be able to master the elements as he does.”

“Oh, come on, he’s not going to find us. He hasn’t found me in twenty years, what makes you think he’ll actually find me now?” I flopped to the ground, exhausted. Drawing my knees to my chest, I groaned as the muscles in my back stretched.

As Grandmother loomed over me, a look of disgust flashed on her face. It was quickly replaced with a compassionate gaze I had never seen before. She sat gingerly on a fallen log next to me. “Bridget, that’s what the dog barking means.”

“What?”

Grandmother nodded slowly. “The dog barking means he’s getting close. Closer than he’s ever been.”

My heartbeat sped up so fast I thought it would burst out of my chest. My eyes darted around the forest as if he was behind every tree.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

“I have been trying everything I can think of to keep him from us, and I didn’t want to scare you. It’s time you know the truth, so you are prepared and understand what you need to do.”

“I understand I need to keep him from taking my magic and killing us. Isn’t that enough to understand?”

“No! It isn’t! Your magic must be strong enough to keep him from us. To keep him from you. He cannot get to you before your powers have strengthened.” Grandmother’s voice shook as she spoke.

I nodded with new resolve and stood. “Ok, back to wind.”

Grandmother nodded, satisfied. “Good.”

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Lessons increased after that day. Morning, noon, and night Grandmother put me through my paces. Water, earth, air, fire. Light this candle with a thought. Help that plant to grow twice its size in moments. Blow out the blazing fire in the immense kitchen hearth with my own breath. Turn the babbling brook behind the house into a raging river and back again. Each night I fell into bed, exhausted. My dream repeated itself night after night, and the dog never stopped barking.

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The barking was louder than anything else. It was louder than the screams, louder than the roar of the fire. I pressed my hands tightly over my ears and ran. No one told me to run this time, I just did.

I woke with a start, heart pounding. It was still dark outside. I grabbed for my dream journal and scribbled down all the details, everything that was different. It was all different, and it scared me. I never woke up in the middle of the night. I never got to the point of actually running away. The dog was getting closer, and there was something about him that didn't feel right. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was very, very wrong.

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“But, Grandmother, I remember everything,” I said the next morning, sitting at the kitchen table, hands warming around my cup of peppermint tea. “I don't need Recollect.”

“Yes, you do. You said so yourself this morning. Something wasn't right in the dream,” Grandmother said, holding out the small glass cup with the vile pink liquid.

"I know, but I didn't forget anything. I wrote it all down in the middle of the night."

Grandmother's head shot up to peer closely at me. "In the middle of the night?"

"Yes. I got back to sleep fairly easily after and didn't dream anything the rest of the night.

It was all very strange. I slept so well for the rest of the night, too."

Grandmother paced the worn tile floor from the sink to the modern stove, over to the large ancient hearth, and back to the sink. She paced for so long I swore she forgot I was even there.

"Grandmother?" I asked quietly. She jumped as I startled her out of her thoughts.

"Who? What? Oh, oh! Bridget, you're right, you don't need Recollect."

"Whew," I said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"You need Relax," Grandmother said, moving to the cabinet that held her potion ingredients. She pulled out bottle after bottle and placed them on the counter.

"Relax? Um, ok, yeah, that sounds good." I'd never had Relax before. I'd never even heard of Relax, but it had to be better than Recollect. Anything was better than Recollect. I stood. "Let me help you, Grandmother."

She whirled around, one of the bottles falling to the floor. It rolled across the room, stopping against the leg of the table next to me. I bent down to pick it up, and Grandmother was there in an instant, grabbing the bottle before I could reach it.

"No, no. No need. I've got it. You just sit and, and, practice. Practice, yes, practice lighting the candle."

I looked skeptically at the candle sitting in the middle of the worn wooden table. I'd lit the same candle at least a thousand times now.

"Lighting the candle? I'm pretty sure I've mastered that, Grandmother," I said, laughing.

"Bridget, do not question me," Grandmother said, turning back to the bottles of herbs.

"Um, ok." Think of fire, the candle lights. Think of wind, the candle blows out. Think of fire, the candle burns bright. Think of wind, the candle snuffs out. A tiny stream of smoke wafts from the snuffed wick. With another thought, the smoke spins and spins until a mini tornado dances across the table. I lose myself in little party trick magicks while Grandmother pattered at the counter. Soon enough, she set another teacup in front of me. A reddish-purple liquid swirled in the cup. I glanced up at Grandmother, and she watched expectantly. I lifted the cup to my lips and my nose stung at the peppery, spicy scent. My eyes watered as I took the first sip.

"Grandmother, how is this possibly called 'Relax?' It's so spicy!"

"Just drink it, Bridget. You know potion's taste does not always match its purpose."

"I still don't understand why I can't learn how to make potions. Especially since you're such a master at it."

"Enough!" Grandmother slammed her fist on the table. She took a breath and calmly said, "Just drink it."

Sighing, I did as I was told. The potion burned its way down my throat. I closed my eyes to wait for the potion's effects to take hold. A moment later, warmth flooded my limbs. The warmth continued from my center out to my fingertips and continued to heat my body until it was almost unbearable. Then, suddenly, it was gone. My arms were the first to go limp, then my legs. My pulse raced as I tried to look at Grandmother, but my neck could barely hold up my head. Finally, my torso slumped forward, head all but slamming on to the table. Everything went black.

I woke in the middle of the forest, feeling completely normal. Unsure how that could be after the sudden collapse of my entire body, I sat up, looking around. I was in the middle of a

small patch of grass, in an area of the forest I had never before seen. Birds sang loudly in the trees and the bright sun filtered through the canopy, speckling the forest floor.

Grandmother stood against a tall birch tree, watching me.

"What happened?" I asked, standing.

"Exactly what was supposed to happen," Grandmother said. She pushed away from the tree and threw her hand out toward me. A rush of fire slammed me back to the ground, but it didn't burn me. More training. I pulled from the ground and felt nothing. What happened? Where is the ground water? Squaring my shoulders, I pushed against the fire with hard air surrounding my hands. I stood and pushed the air toward the fire, forcing the stream of fire back at Grandmother. The fire sputtered out when it returned to her hands. Grandmother nodded.

"Good."

Grandmother looked up to the sky. Tree branches above me cracked and twigs fell around me. I jumped to the side as a large branch fell where I was standing. The next branch came at me and with a wave of my hand, it turned around and flew back toward Grandmother. She held up her hand and the branch broke apart into a million splinters. The splinters hovered in the air for a moment before they came at me. I threw a wall of fire out as a shield, and the splinters burst into flame, turning to ash.

Suddenly, a distant bark broke my concentration. My blood ran cold at the sound. It was the bark from my dreams. In an instant, Grandmother appeared at my side. The barking became louder and louder until a large black wolfdog stood between two trees across the clearing. It stood growling for a moment, its gaze moving from me to Grandmother and back to me again. The air around the wolfdog shimmered and a tall, muscular, brown-haired man stood in the

animal's place. All air left my lungs. He was a shifter, one of the strongest magickal species I knew of. Was I really ready to face him?

"Serena," the man said, glaring at Grandmother.

"Alaric," Grandmother responded, coolly. "So, you finally found us."

"Well, I'll give you credit, Serena. You kept her hidden from me for a long time. Finding you was a challenge. Give her to me, and we'll be done. No need to make more trouble."

"Now, Alaric, you know I cannot do that. She is mine," Grandmother said.

"She is not yours," Alaric said, his voice gruff. An emotion I couldn't place crossed his face. Why wasn't he just attacking? Why bother talking to us in the first place?

"She is staying with me," Grandmother said.

"So be it," Alaric said with a sigh. He flicked his fingers at me, and I slid across the forest floor away from Grandmother.

"No! Grandmother!" I reached for her, but I couldn't stop myself from moving away. I watched in horror as they shot flames and ice at each other. Grandmother's dress caught fire and I gasped, but she put out the fire with a glance.

Alec shifted into his wolfdog form and ran at Grandmother, teeth bared and growling. Grandmother's magic bounced off his fur without so much as causing one hair to move out of place. His magic was strong. He leapt at her and knocked her down, teeth going for her throat.

I couldn't watch anymore; I had to act. Grandmother needed my help. I pulled all of my magic from the depths of my core and threw it at the Alaric wolfdog. His body flew into the air and fell to the forest floor in a heap. Grandmother's head spun to me as she struggled to stand.

"Your magic has strengthened!" she said in awe.

"Yes, I guess so," I replied, looking at my hands. I grabbed Grandmother's hand and helped her to stand. I pulled her, trying to get her to run with me. "Come on, Grandmother, we have to go while he's knocked out."

"No, dear, that is not necessary," she said with a smug glance at Alaric. He had shifted back to human form. She shrugged off my hand and walked toward him. Blasts of light flew from her hands as she shot at Alaric over and over. His body twitched with each blast. As I watched, I could almost feel each blast as it hit.

"Grandmother! He's down and passed out. Why keep attacking?"

"Oh, dear, because I need him to remain out while I take care of my plans." One last blast at Alaric was so strong it flipped him over on his back. She then turned to me. I sighed with relief, now we could go. But the next thing I knew, my body flew against a tree, and I couldn't pull away from it. I was stuck to the tree as if invisible bands strapped me down. Grandmother stood in front of me and placed her hands on my chest.

"Grandmother, wha-" I tried to talk, but the breath was knocked from me as I felt a pull from within my chest.

"Oh, please, for once just stop talking," Grandmother said as she closed her eyes. Her hands glowed and grew warm, then hot, singing my shirt. The pull went deeper, and I could feel it down to my core. The harder the pull, the brighter Grandmother's hands glowed. All of a sudden, I understood what was happening. She was taking my magic into herself. Why? I couldn't talk, I could barely breathe. As I felt my magic waning and strength leaving me, Grandmother was pulled away. The heat in my chest immediately stopped, and I slumped against the binds holding me to the tree.

Alaric stood over Grandmother lying on the ground. She tried to stand, but he blasted her over and over. With one hand he shot a continuous stream of blue fire at her, holding her back. He flicked his free hand at me and the binds holding me to the tree disappeared. I slid to the ground, confused and weak. What was happening? Why was Alaric still attacking Grandmother when he could just grab me and disappear? Why was Grandmother taking my magic? I was supposed to be getting strong to protect us from him. Alaric was the one who was supposed to want my magic. But he hadn't made a move at me. If anything, he had taken me out of range of the actual fight.

Grandmother was standing, pushing back at Alaric's blue flame with her own red stream of fire. And she was gaining on him. I knew then what I needed to do. I summoned the magic that was left within me and pushed it all outward. The effort knocked me to my knees and once again, the world went black.

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I woke in someone's arms. A soft hand was brushing my forehead and a deep voice murmuring in my ear. I couldn't remember being held like this before, with such tenderness, and yet the touch was familiar somehow. My eyes opened and focused on the face in front of me. I was startled to see Alaric and pulled away.

He smiled sadly. "Oh, Ailey, I know you're confused. I need to explain everything, and I hope you'll give me the chance."

Wildly looking around, I searched for my grandmother. My voice didn't sound like my own when I asked, "Where-?"

"Serena has disappeared, but she's not gone for good. She stole you from your home and has been keeping you under her control with her potions." He sat back on his ankles.

"Sweetheart, she's not your grandmother. She only wanted you for your magic. You have no idea how much magic runs in your veins. I've been searching for you for years. To bring you back home."

"Who? Who are you really?" I asked quietly.

He flushed deeply. "I'm your betrothed."